**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 35**

**Episodes 4521–4660**

**Episode 4521**

**Xavier**

*Dammit.*

I really just wanted to dismiss Marissa’s suspicion that Blaine was at fault for Andrew’s escape—I had a prisoner on the loose, and I really didn’t want to have to deal with that kind of betrayal, too—but if Marissa was right about Blaine’s scent being on *only* Andrew’s door, then I couldn’t ignore the evidence. Apart from Marissa’s point, Blaine had been nothing but a pain in my ass since the council had forced me to take charge of him and the rest of the brain trust.

This was *not* shit I wanted to deal with, but it wasn’t hard for me to believe Marissa’s account. Werewolf senses were sharp—especially our sense of smell—and the nose didn’t lie.

“What would Blaine gain by helping Andrew escape?” I asked.

Marissa thought for a moment. “I suppose it could just be straight-up sabotage—an attempt to undermine your leadership. Let’s face it, you’ll look pretty stupid if the council rolls up and discovers that you’ve lost a prisoner.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Ava said, shaking her head.

“Why not? What do you think it is?” I asked curiously.

She shrugged. “I just don’t think Blaine’s that smart. I think it’s a lot simpler than that, and if he did let Andrew go, it’s because he’s jealous of you.” She met my eyes. “So, what do you want to do?”

I thought for a moment. “My first priority is to get Andrew back. He’s dangerous, and I don’t want him on the loose, and Marissa’s right—if the council comes back and finds out that he’s escaped, it’s going to make the whole pack look bad.”

“Which makes me wonder if that wasn’t Blaine’s plan all along,” Ava mused.

“You could be right,” I said testily, “but I can’t think about that right now. I can deal with Blaine later. Actually, would you two keep an eye on him? See if he tries to interfere with catching Andrew? If he does, then we’ll know for sure that he’s responsible, and even the council won’t be able to save his ass. It’s one thing to disagree with me, but it’s something else entirely to help an enemy escape.”

Donovan ran over to us. “Hey,” he said breathlessly, pointing through the trees. “I can see someone running up ahead.”

I pulled in a deep breath through my nose. Andrew’s scent was strong now, and I caught the bitter scent of fear mixed in with it. We were close, and Andrew knew it. He knew his time was running out.

I gestured for the Samaras to stop. “Stay back,” I told them. “I want to get this guy.”

Besides Knox, I was the only Alpha present, which meant it was my duty to take Andrew on. It would’ve been stupid to let a regular wolf try. Plus, the Samaras were all watching me, waiting for me to act, and I knew taking Andrew down would send a message to any remaining doubters that I was the right Alpha for the pack.

Anyway, since Andrew had escaped under my leadership, I was ultimately responsible—even if Blaine *had* set the Hackberry Alpha free.

Leaving the rest of the pack behind, I shifted into my wolf form and ran ahead, though Ava stayed close.

*What do you think Andrew would do if he got away?* she asked, speaking through the mind link. *Not that you’d ever allow him to get away*, she added quickly.

*I don’t know*, I said slowly. *Andrew said that he chose to follow Malakai and the Bitterfangs because he wanted more power, which means that he didn’t necessarily believe in Malakai’s “pure werewolf” bullshit*. I thought for a moment. *If Andrew is still power hungry, he might try to rebuild his pack, then gather new allies and go after the alliance. I really don’t know*. *His motivations are pretty hazy.*

*We really don’t know much about him*, Ava agreed. *Or the rest of the Hackberry pack.*

*But we do know that he can’t be trusted*, I said. *And he has to be stopped.*

*Absolutely*, Ava said. *No matter what his plans are.*

*I figure once we catch him, we’ll just let the council decide what to do with him. I mean, I’m no fan of the council, but in this case, I’d welcome their involvement.*

*At least it would take Andrew and the rest of the prisoners off our damn hands*, Ava said darkly.

*That’s exactly what I’m thinking*, I said. *I’m sick of babysitting.*

We both raised our heads when we heard something moving in the underbrush up ahead.

*He’s over there*, Ava said, her eyes following the noise.

*Ava, you stay back*, I told her. *I’m going to take this asshole down on my own.*

She gave me a level look. *And if you need my help?*

*Ava—*

*Xavier*, she said firmly.

I sighed. *If I need your help, I’ll let you know. But don’t hold your breath.*

Without waiting for her to answer, I charged ahead, diving toward the sound in the underbrush. As I shot into the thick growth of trees, I caught sight of him, tearing through the underbrush like a fucking idiot.

He must’ve been desperate, because even the newest changed werewolves knew better than to make that much noise when they moved through the woods.

I increased my speed to catch up with him, and had almost reached him when he did something that surprised the hell out of me—he turned to face me, like he was ready to fight.

The move was so unexpected that I didn’t have time to put the brakes on, and I barreled right into him. The impact was brutal, and we both slammed to the ground.

Andrew was already going crazy, fighting like a cornered, rabid animal. There was no strategy to what he was doing—he was just lashing out. He was acting so erratically, it almost made him more dangerous, but by dodging and weaving, I was managing to avoid the worst of it.

Behind me, I could hear and smell the rest of the Samaras approaching to watch. I could tell that the rest of the pack had shifted in anticipation of a fight, and was watching anxiously, eager to join in. No one liked that Andrew had escaped from our pack house, and I knew every one of them would’ve loved the chance to teach him a lesson.

*Back off!* Ava growled, and I heard her walking across the dead leaves on the frozen forest floor. I knew I could count on her to ensure that everyone respected my orders to let me fight Andrew alone.

But now that I knew everyone was watching, it was starting to feel like I was performing on stage or something. I knew I couldn’t disappoint my audience. Now, I *had* to take Andrew on my own.

Slippery as an eel, Andrew slid out from underneath me and batted at my head, trying to knock me out, or at least confuse me. But he was fighting wildly, and the blow glanced off my temple.

I fought back, dragging my claws across his face. Blood splattered the ground, and Andrew let out a pained yelp. While he was distracted, I kicked him with my hind legs and dropped him to the ground, then climbed on top of him and pinned him down.

*You’ve got to make some hard choices here, pal*, I told him, my heart pounding . *I’m going to tell you right now that you’re not putting up a good fight, and if you keep resisting, there’s no way you’re going to make it out of this alive.*

*Fine by me*,Andrew snarled. *Better to die fighting than be held prisoner like a dog.*

*Hey, if you want to die,* *that’s fine by me*, I said, fighting to hold down the struggling wolf*. I’d be happy to arrange that.*

Andrew growled and lunged at me. He caught the flesh of my front leg, ripping it open. Blood spilled, and I heard Ava growl and felt her pace closer, ready to intervene.

*Stay back!* I told her, not wanting her to face him head-on herself. *I’ve got this, Ava.*

But Andrew must’ve hit an artery or something, because blood was still pouring from my leg—and maybe that was what made Ava ignore me completely.

*You’ll pay for doing that to my mate*, she growled.

*I'll do the same to you, little Luna*,he replied, his wolf baring his teeth. *You’re no match for me.*

*Ava, don’t—* I started.

Ava ignored me. She leapt forward with a furious snarl. She landed on Andrew, managing to knock me over in the process.

*Dammit, Ava!* Why couldn’t she just listen to me for two seconds? I scrambled to my feet, putting pressure on my leg, which was still gushing blood. My pulse raced with anger—and fear—as I ran to her.

But I was too late. Andrew’s teeth were about to sink into Ava’s throat.

**Episode 4522**

I looked out at the driveway, and the yard beyond that, and the forest beyond that. My eyes were on the trees, but I wasn’t really seeing them. I was thinking about what Chloe had just told us, and how I didn’t like the sound of the three possible outcomes that would result from trying to break the sire bond. Well, I did like the first one, where the spell to break the bond was successful and Greyson and I lived happily ever after.

It was the other two that worried me.

I thought hard, trying to make sense out of what Chloe had just said, comparing the information with everything else I knew about the bonds. I remembered what Rowena had told me about her vision of the *due destini*, and how my mate bond with Greyson had looked out of balance. That hadn’t made any sense to me at the time, but now, I was beginning to understand.

“Chloe?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady and not sound as panicked as I felt. “Is it possible for this to end with Greyson having three mates?”

Greyson shot me a shocked look. *Three?* he mouthed at me.

“Three?” Chloe asked. “How would he have three mates?”

“Well, I’m his mate, so that’s one. And if things get messed up, Greyson’s sire bond with Elle could turn into a mate bond, so that’s two. And now I’m thinking there could be a third, unknown mate who was assigned to him when I died in the river. I’m just worried that—”

“Yes, you’re right—that’s possible,” Chloe said bluntly. “Your calculations make sense.” She was quiet for a moment. “Perhaps you two need some time to think things through. Besides, there is the matter of payment to be determined.”

As if the payment could be worse than the actual possible outcomes.

I bit my lip. I felt torn. It was obvious that the sire bond was wreaking havoc on Greyson, and it wasn’t doing our relationship any favors, either. But trying to break it would be incredibly risky. There was only a third of a chance that the sire bond with Elle would be broken and that Greyson and I would be fine. And those were only the risks we *knew* about. What if there were other, hidden risks?

I thought back to the black veins that had appeared on Greyson, Xavier, and me when I’d had Big Mac try to use magic to stop the *due destini* from forcing me to choose. There was just no way to be sure that something like that wouldn’t happen again. Or that we wouldn’t trigger something even worse.

And I’d had enough dealings with witches to be suspicious of Chloe’s offer. Was she really going to let us take our time to think it over before we decided what to do? That wasn’t like any other witch I’d ever dealt with—as far as I could tell, they only ever worked according to their own schedules.

Chloe made an irritated noise from the other end of the line. “Listen, I hate to be rude, but I really don’t have time for this—I’m in the middle of something over here. You think it over and get back to me whenever. I’ll discuss with my sisters what payment we’ll accept if you choose to go through with the spell.”

And with that, she ended the call.  
 “She hung up?” I asked, looking up at Greyson.

“That’s just what she does,” he said wearily.

“Well, you need to call her back.”

“Why?” he asked.

I shook my head. “We need to talk to her more. There must be other options.”

“Cali,” he said gently. “You know there *aren’t* any other options. We’ve tried to find them.”

I didn’t respond right away.

“I know you’re right,” I finally said, frustration threatening to overwhelm me. “But what are we supposed to do, Greyson? We don’t have any good options, here.”

He looked into my eyes. “We don’t have to do anything right away. We don’t have to make our choice right now. You heard Chloe—she said we could wait.”

“Yeah, but is that the right thing to do?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I just wonder if things will keep getting worse the longer we wait. The sire bond is clearly getting stronger,” I pointed out.

Greyson sighed heavily. “That’s true—I’m having some trouble with the bond. But I promise that I’ll be more aware of its influence on me, and I’ll fight harder.”

“I appreciate that, but…” I shook my head. “It’s not enough, and you know it. You’re the strongest person I know, and you’ve already lost yourself to the bond a few times. And so has Elle. It’s stronger than you’re giving it credit for.”

The anxiety I was feeling must’ve shown on my face, because Greyson stepped forward and took my chin in his hand, tilting it up so I was looking at him.

“Cali, I promise you now—I won’t let anything happen.”  
 I wanted to believe him and trust him and let him take the burden of this fear off my shoulders, but I knew better.

“I know you think that, Greyson,” I said, “but I’ve seen what the sire bond does to you. We have to do something soon.”

Greyson looked somber. “If I feel that things are getting unmanageable, I’ll arrange to have Elle go stay with the Blue Bloods until we figure out what to do. Okay? Physical distance seems to help.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, deeply reluctant. “You’ll send Elle away if anything else happens? You promise?”

“I promise,” he said seriously.

I sighed. “Okay.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“So, given everything we know now, are you willing to ask Chloe to try to break the sire bond?” Greyson asked, looking over at me.

“Are you?” I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. “I… I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I don’t think we need to decide anything right now. Why don’t we take advantage of Chloe’s offer and just be glad that she’s busy for the moment? Let’s just take a few days and think it over.”

I shook my head. “We really don’t have time, Greyson.”

He frowned. “Of course we do, Cali. We really just need—”

“No, we *really* don’t have time,” I repeated. “The council is on its way to us right now. They could be here at any moment.”

Greyson nodded, then looked out at the woods, his gray eyes hard as steel. “You’re right. They’re going to be here any time. I need to prepare the pack, make sure the prisoners are ready to be transferred.”

He headed into the house without another word.

I followed him, wondering if he was grateful for the change of subject. It was clear that he didn’t want to make a decision about the sire bond now. Chloe hadn’t set a time limit on her offer to help, but I just kept thinking about how drastically the sire bond had changed even just in the past few days, and how it would be stupid of us not to do something about it.

“I really think we should make some decisions,” I said, catching up with Greyson in the hallway.

“I don’t see the need to rush,” he said. “I really want to think this through, Cali. It’s a lot more complicated than I thought it would be.” He looked up the stairs. “Rishika!” he called. “Where are you—”

“Greyson,” I said, putting my hand on his arm to stop him. “Listen to me. We can’t just ignore this. No matter what, it’s not safe for you or Elle to be around each other anymore—”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Greyson said quickly, shrugging off my concern. He looked back up the stairs. “Rishika!”

“You can’t seriously believe that,” I snapped. “Nothing’s going to happen? How can you say that, after everything that *has* happened?”

He looked at me, and I saw the frustration in his eyes. “So what did you have in mind? Because when the council comes, my focus has to be on the prisoners, and the councilors are on their way—”

“This is what I’m talking about,” I interrupted. “Exactly this. This is why Elle shouldn’t stay here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The council is still after Elle. They’re still looking for her. It’s not safe for her to be here.”

A muscle in Greyson’s jaw twitched. “And I don’t know that the Blue Blood pack house is safest either. It’s not like it’s far from here, in the grand scheme,” he said, his voice tense. “You think we should just kick her out? Send her off into the woods to find her first pack? Because they don’t want her anymore.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, and you know it,” I shot back.

“So what *are* you saying?” Greyson demanded.

I gritted my teeth. “There’s only one place that’s truly safe for her.”

He narrowed his eyes, taking me in. “And where is that?” he asked, his voice laced with danger.

I took a deep breath. “You’re not going to like it.”

**Episode 4523**

**Xavier**

Moving on pure instinct, I charged across the underbrush at Andrew, who was about to rip into Ava’s throat. I wasn’t going to let that happen. Especially not after he’d insulted her like that. No match for him? We’d show him what a good match could do.

I slammed into the Alpha and knocked all three of us—Andrew, Ava, and myself—to the ground. It was one thing for this asshole to attack me, but to go after *Ava* like that was way too far.

I was furious as I snapped and bit and kicked, wishing to hell that Ava hadn’t joined the fight. I knew why she’d done it—she’d been defending me. She wanted to help me. She was my mate, and she loved me. She’d made that perfectly clear.

But it would’ve been easier if all of that weren’t true, wouldn’t it?

*I’ll handle Andrew*, I told Ava.

That’d been too close a call with Andrew moments ago. That couldn’t happen again. I wouldn’t let it.

Though truthfully, at this point, I wasn’t sure how easy that was going to be. I was still bleeding heavily, and Andrew was strong as a bull. He was a skilled fighter, too, and so desperate to escape it was giving him the strength of two wolves. But that could just as easily be his downfall—desperation led to mistakes.

Ava growled, but she did back off. With her out of the game for the moment, Andrew lunged at me again, sinking his teeth into my back leg and locking his jaw.

I howled with pain as his lethally sharp fangs ripped into my flesh, and Ava flew toward us again. *Fuck*. As much as I didn’t want her in this, I needed her. I had to accept that.

She jumped onto Andrew’s back, and when blood started to flow down his fur, I knew she was digging her claws in. He bucked, and Ava went flying, but she’d created enough of a distraction that Andrew was forced to release his hold on my leg.

He got to his feet and came at me again. But I was ready for him. Using his momentum against him, I stepped to the side as he charged and then slammed into his flank, causing him to trip over his own feet. When he crashed to the forest floor, I jumped on him, and—gritting my teeth against the pain of my own injuries—bit down on his neck.

My mind raced as Andrew’s blood rushed into my mouth, the taste salty and bitter. I knew I could end this all right now. And really, who would blame me for killing an escaped prisoner who’d attacked me and tried to kill my Luna, with our whole pack watching?

*Xavier!* Ava’s voice echoed in my head. *Xavier, stop! Can you hear me? Pull back! Don’t kill him.*

*Why not? The bastard deserves to die.*

*I know, but let the council take him off our hands.*

Her words made me pause, and I found myself really surprised by her commonsense approach to this situation—especially because, only moments ago, she’d been leaping at Andrew with bloodlust in her eyes, ready to kill him. But her advice to slow down wasn’t bad. As much as I wanted to rip Andrew’s throat out, there were other factors to consider, here. I’d probably be cleared of any wrongdoing eventually, but why deal with the consequences from the council? Ava was right—it was better to let them deal with this asshole, along with the rest of the prisoners.

My brother didn’t care about getting tangled up in the council’s political bullshit, but I had no intention of falling prey to it.

Andrew yelped and struggled underneath me. I still needed to deal with him, so I removed my teeth from his neck and replaced them with my paw, pressing down and cutting off his air. I kept him pinned as his struggles grew weaker and weaker, and when he finally lost consciousness, I let him go and stepped away. Then I turned to see the rest of the Samaras watching me carefully.

*Let’s drag this trash back to the pack house*, I said firmly.

I was still bleeding freely as I grabbed Andrew by the scruff of the neck and started to drag him back toward the house.

As I moved, I looked over and saw Blaine walking with the rest of the pack. I looked closely, but wolf expressions were hard to read, and I couldn’t tell if he was pleased that Andrew had been recaptured, or if he was worried.

After a mile or so, Andrew began to move again, and after another moment he took a deep breath, struggling back to consciousness.

*What the hell? Let me go!* he demanded.

I dropped my head, letting the Alpha’s face slam into a few jagged rocks before I spoke.

*Who let you out?* I demanded.

I felt Andrew tense, but he didn’t answer my question. So I bit down harder on his scruff.

*You’re lucky to be breathing at all right now, so I suggest you answer my question, because I’m not going to ask it again. Who let you out?*

*Nobody*, he finally growled.

*Try again.*

*Nobody let me out. I broke out by myself.*

I considered this. *Are you sure about that? You wouldn’t be trying to cover for Blaine, would you?*

*I don’t know what you’re talking about*, he snapped. *No one helped me. Is it so hard for the Samara Alpha to believe that someone could escape from his pack house, under his supervision?* He let out a derisive snort. *It was fucking easy.*

I’d heard enough, so I reared up and slammed Andrew into a boulder, knocking him out again.

That did the trick, and I was considering what he’d said when Ava caught up to me.

*Hey*, she said*. Did he wake up?*

*Unfortunately*,I said.

*Did he say anything?* she asked.

*Not much. I asked who helped him escape, and he said he did it on his own.*

*Really?* Ava asked, surprised.

We both turned and looked back at Blaine, who was walking behind us now.

*Does that mean that Blaine is off the hook?* she asked.

*I don’t know*, I said. *Andrew doesn’t have a lot of motivation to lie, or to cover for him, so I guess he is. For now. Unless we find other evidence to prove that he’s playing both sides.*

*I’ll keep an eye on him*, Ava promised.

We were quiet for a moment, then I asked the question that had been simmering away in my brain. *Why did you jump into that fight, Ava? You shouldn’t have done it. I could’ve taken care of Andrew on my own.*

*I know*, Ava said softly*. I just wasn’t thinking, X. You were bleeding. I saw you in danger, and my instincts just kicked in. I didn’t even think about it. You can’t blame me for that.*

I almost opened my mouth to argue that I could, in fact, blame her for that, but I stopped myself. I was thinking guiltily of Cali, and how I’d used that same excuse for situations where I’d rushed to her rescue. Why couldn’t they keep themselves *safe*?

*I’m not mad at you*, I said. *But next time you need to stay out of the way, okay?*

*I’m not going to agree to that, Xavier*, she said. *The whole pack was watching that fight. How would it have looked to them, to see their Luna do nothing while their Alpha was ripped apart? How could I stand by and let that happen? No fucking way.*

*Sometimes you might find that you like following my orders. Maybe next time*, I teased, glancing over at her.

She caught my eye. *And maybe next time you should answer my question, Xavier*.

Shit.

I was caught. I knew this was going to come back around. Ava wasn’t the type to just let things lie, and when she’d asked me if I loved her back at the house, I’d dodged the question. Andrew’s escape had been perfectly timed, but it had only granted me a stay of execution. Even then, I’d known that Ava wasn’t likely to just let the question go unanswered.

When I looked away from her piercing gaze, I realized we were approaching the pack house.

*Ava, now really isn’t the time to get into this*, I said, glancing down at the inert form of the Hackberry Alpha, lolling in my grip.

*Yeah, it never seems to be*, she said shortly. *It’s a very basic, very simple question. A yes or no question, actually. I’ll even repeat it, in case you forgot what I asked: Xavier, do you love me?*

I was cornered, and my pulse started racing even faster than it had done during the fight with Andrew.

*Ava—*

*Xavier, Ava*, Marissa called, jogging toward us.

*What?* Ava snapped, clearly annoyed at being interrupted again.

Marissa’s eyes were wide. *The council.*

*What about them?* Ava asked.

Marissa tipped her head toward the pack house. *They’re here.*

**Episode 4524**

**Greyson**

*You’re not going to like it.*

I felt a muscle twitching in my jaw. I knew exactly what Cali was going to say, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear.

“I think maybe the best option is to send Elle to the palace. I just think—”

“Stop,” I said, putting up my hand. “Just stop, Cali.”

“Greyson—”

“I’m not going to consider it. How is that any better than the Blue Bloods? It’s not,” I said. “Besides, Lucian is an absolute mess right now, and seeing Elle would only make things worse for him.”

Cali tipped her head and gave me a long look. “I wonder if that’s really it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you’re being honest with yourself, Greyson.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked her.

“Are you really worried about Lucian’s well-being, or does the idea of him being around Elle just make you jealous?”

“That’s ridiculous—”

“There are no more prisoners at the palace, so there’s no reason for the council to go there,” she pointed out, “which means that Elle would be well-hidden. We know Aysel would protect her at least, if it came down to it. She’d be safe there.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so—not after Lucian’s display last night.”

Cali sighed, sounded exasperated. “Well, it’s feeling like any idea we have, you’re going to shoot down,” she said.

“That’s not true,” I countered. “There’s always another choice. One that could work better.”

But even as I said that, I wasn’t sure if I actually believed my own words. There was *usually* another choice, but that didn’t seem to be true these days. And there didn’t seem to be any good options right now. The trajectory of the sire bond—that was growing stronger every day—didn’t seem to have any room for freedom of choice.

I passed a hand over my eyes. “I just wish…”

“What?” Cali asked.

“I wish we had more time. But I’m going to figure this out,” I said firmly, hoping that was true.

Cali didn’t look convinced.

“Well, I’d like to know when,” she said, crossing her arms. “Seriously, let’s talk timelines, Greyson, because you can’t keep putting this off. This issue isn’t just going to go away because you want it to.”

It was clear Cali was really upset about all of this, and I couldn’t blame her for that. I was, too. Just in a slightly different way.

I turned and looked out across the land, toward the trees. As I stared, I sifted through every step that had brought me to this moment. Moments like this made me wish that I’d never turned Elle. That I hadn’t let myself get talked into taking the huge step of turning a natural wolf into a werewolf. I’d had my reservations at the time, but I’d ignored them—and look where that had gotten me.

But there was no point in this line of thinking. There was nothing I could do to change the past.

“Greyson?” Cali asked, speaking into the silence between us. “What do you want to do?”

I turned to look at her. “I think I should talk to Aysel.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I could find out how Lucian’s doing, and whether Aysel thinks it’s a good idea for Elle to visit. If she approves, then I’ll send her right over.” I studied Cali’s face. “How does that sound?”

She searched my face. We were both trying to read the situation, and both failing.

Finally, she sighed. “That’s fine. But you can’t put this decision off forever. And—just a reminder—you’re in just as much danger from the council as Elle. Maybe it would be better if you’re not here when they show up. You might consider making yourself conveniently absent.”

“I don’t know—”

“Think about it, Greyson,” she interrupted. “If you’re not here and Elle’s not here, what are they going to do? You know the council. Cesaries and the others will probably be too lazy to pursue the issue any further.”

That made me smile. “You’re probably right about that,” I said. “But I’m not afraid to talk to Cesaries.”

“Do you really think—”

“I do,” I said gently. I knew she was just saying this to protect me, but I wasn’t worried. “Now that we’ve reached a deal with Ethaniel, the council won’t have any evidence that I turned Elle. Without his testimony to base their accusations on, they don’t have a leg to stand on.”

Cali took this in. “Yeah, that’s true, but Ethaniel’s still a prisoner here. If you’re counting on his silence, you’d better arrange to release him as soon as possible. *Before* the council gets here.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good point. I’ll do that as soon as I talk to Aysel.”

“I can take care of it,” Cali offered, but I shook my head.

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind,” she said.

“I really don’t want you involved,” I told her. “For your own protection, love. Trust me. I’ll deal with Ethaniel.”

Cali hesitated for a moment, then she shrugged.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Aysel’s number. She picked up after the first ring.

“Greyson,” she said. “What is it?”

“I was calling to see how your brother’s doing.”

She sighed. “Well, he was a pain in the ass last night, but I think he’s calmer today.”

“That’s good.” I glanced over at Cali, who was watching me closely. “I’m also calling to talk to you about Elle.”

“Elle?” Aysel was clearly confused. “What about her?”

“The sire bond is getting stronger,” I said. “We’re working on what to do about it to protect us both—along with our respective mate bonds—but we’re still figuring it out. It’s better when we have some physical distance between us, but I want her to be somewhere where she’ll be safe from the council, if they come calling. Do you think sending Elle over to the palace would be a good idea?’

“Oh,” Aysel said, clearly surprised. She hesitated. “It *might* be a good idea,” she went on slowly. “Lucian has been whining about not being able to see his mate ever since she left. And I do think he’d be happy to see her—even though he’s still upset about what happened last night.”

“He’s still angry?” I asked quickly. Lucian was erratic at the best of times, and I was definitely worried that Elle wouldn’t be safe around him.

“I won’t leave them alone together,” Aysel assured me. “I’ll be sure to supervise any visits myself.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling better about the idea. It was strange, considering our history, but I trusted Aysel. “Then I’m going to send Elle over your way. I’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

“Goodbye, Greyson.”

“Bye, Aysel.”

Cali watched as I ended the call and slipped my phone back into my pocket.

“Maybe I should go explain what’s happening to Elle,” she said. “I might be able to get through to her rational side, since there’s no sire bond between the two of us. I can do that while you deal with Ethaniel?”

I wanted to tell her no, but I fought the urge.

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. “That sounds fine.”

But it *didn’t* sound fine. It wasn’t fine at all. I could feel the sire bond fighting my decision to send Elle away, clawing at my chest. It hated the thought of putting distance between us—but I kept all that to myself. Cali had already been pushed to her limit.

Cali headed inside, and I followed. I watched as she started up the stairs to find Elle, then I turned and walked down the stairs to the basement.

Ethaniel glared at me as I opened his door.

“There you are,” he snapped. “What the hell is taking so long, Greyson? I thought we had a deal.”

“We do,” I assured him. “I just had to handle a few things first. But they’re done.” I looked the disgraced Alpha over. “Are you ready?”

He snorted, looking furious. “No, I’d rather sit here in this stinking jail cell for another couple of hours. Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Well then, let’s go,” I said, gesturing for him to get up.

I headed toward the stairs and motioned for him to go up first. I didn’t trust him enough to let him walk behind me.

“So,” I said, walking by his side as we reached the first floor. “Where do you plan on going from here?  
 He shot me an angry look. “I don’t see how that’s any of your damn business, Greyson.”

“I was just—”

“Listen,” he snapped. “I’m keeping your secret, okay? That’s all you need to know. You have nothing to worry about. Now just open that door and let me out of here.”

I sighed, going over to the door. Just as I was about to open it, there was a knock. I froze. Looking back at Ethaniel, I said, “Go out the back door.”

“What—”

“Go now before I fucking regret it!” I said.

Luckily, Ethaniel didn’t question me again. He took one more look at me, then, with a nod, he ran through the house. There was a knock again. Fuck.

I opened the door, and there was Cesaries.

“Good to see you, Greyson,” he said. “We have a lot to discuss.”

**Episode 4525**

I headed upstairs, glad that Greyson had trusted me to talk to Elle about the plan to send her back to the palace. I wished he hadn’t been so resistant to the idea of sending her away, but I understood why he was—and that it wasn’t just the sire bond. Lucian was often unpredictable, and last night had been epically bad. Elle was a Redwood, and it wasn’t wrong for Greyson to want to protect her. I just wished his inclination to protect her wasn’t tied up with the sire bond.

I knocked on Elle’s door. “Elle, it’s Cali. Can I come in?”

There was a pause. Then, “Yes.”

When I opened the door, Elle looked up at me from where she was curled into a ball, sitting against the headboard of her bed. Her eyes were red, and it was clear that she was upset.

The best approach with Elle was often just to be direct, so I took a deep breath and started talking.

“Elle, Greyson and I were talking, and we’re both concerned about the sire bond. Beyond that, we’re worried that the council might appear at any moment looking for you and asking questions we can’t answer. So we’ve decided that for now, it would be best if you go back to the palace—”

“NO!”

I stared at Elle, startled. “What?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m not going.”

I hadn’t been expecting that. “Why not?”

“Lucian’s a jerk,” she said. “And I attacked him. I know I did it because of the sire bond, but that doesn’t change anything. I just can’t go to him. The two of us are too dangerous together.”

“Elle,” I said softly, sitting down on the edge of her bed. “I get what you’re saying, but it’s also dangerous for you to stay away from him right now. The council is after you because of what happened to Helix, and we think they might be less likely to find you at the palace, since there aren’t any prisoners there.”

Elle looked at me with her big green eyes, then she dropped her head. “I’ve made a mess of everything.”

My heart went out to her—she just looked so lost.

“Hey,” I said softly, “it’s not your fault. The sire bond is really strong, and it’s making both you and Greyson do things you wouldn’t normally do—”

“That’s not it,” she interrupted.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I *chose* to kill Helix,” she said stubbornly. “The sire bond didn’t make me do that.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “But you were doing what you thought was the right thing.”

She looked up at me. “Do *you* think it was the right thing?”

“What?” I asked, taken aback.

“What I did to Helix. Would you have done what I did? If it was your friend? If it was Lola?”

“Oh, Elle.”

Her question was so sincere and so filled with pain that it made my heart ache. I wished I could give her some words of wisdom or comfort, but her question really had no easy answer. As annoying as Lola could be—case in point: the crew team debacle—I just couldn’t imagine a situation where I would willingly kill my best friend.

“Every situation is different,” I started carefully. “And we do what we think is best with the information we have available to us. And right now, you really need to think about what’s best for you and Greyson. If the council finds you, they’re going to take you away. They came hunting for you at the Vanguard palace during that banquet when we thought we’d beaten the Bitterfangs. And if you’re found here, it’s going to make it easy for them. But I guess they’ve likely already put two and two together anyway.”

She frowned. “What will two and two do together?”

Sometimes I forgot that certain expressions still had no meaning for Elle.

“Greyson turning you,” I clarified. “And then they’ll take him away, too.”

She took this in, frowning. “I want to think about this, though—going to the palace.”

I huffed, trying very hard to hide my frustration. “You don’t have *time* to think about it, Elle. The council’s on their way. If you’re going to go, you need to go right now.”

Getting to my feet, I looked around the room. I spotted a backpack on her desk chair, then started to stuff clothes into it. My heart was racing as I worked, and I was starting to worry that we’d already taken too much time.

“Cali,” Elle said, getting to her feet, “I’m confused by this. I belong to the Redwood pack; I chose to come back here on purpose.”

“I know,” I said shortly. “But going to stay with the Vanguards doesn’t change that.”

“My mate is a Vanguard wolf,” Elle said, looking deeply confused.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“So which pack am I supposed to be more loyal to?” she asked.

It wasn’t an unreasonable question, but I was more concerned about the time we’d already lost to this discussion. We didn’t need to be going on other tangents. Philosophical or otherwise.

“It’s not about loyalty right now, Elle, it’s about survival.” I shook my head. “We can sort the rest out later. You’re all packed. Grab your shoes.”

Elle shoved her feet into a pair of running shoes and followed me out into the hall.

We’d just reached the top of the stairs when I heard voices from the entryway. I paused—and it was a good thing I did, because that was when Greyson mind linked with me.

*Cesaries is here.*

I froze. *What?* *Are you kidding me?*

*No. I’m talking with him by the front door. Get Elle out of here*. His mental voice was level, but there was an edge to it, and it was clear that he was working hard to keep calm.

*How?* I demanded.

*You need to figure it out. Just get her out.*

I thought quickly. *I’ll take her around the back.*

*Be careful*, Greyson warned me. *I don’t know how many other council members are here.*

That was just great.

“Back up,” I hissed at Elle, grabbing her arm and pulling her away from the stairs. If we took even two steps downward, anyone in the entryway would be able to see us.

“What are we doing?” Elle asked, her voice at its usual volume.

“*Shh!*” I hissed. “Lower your voice!”

My heart was pounding as I tried to back away without making any noise. We could be quiet, but it was harder to mask our scents, and I was terrified that Cesaries was going to pick up Elle’s scent at any moment—if he hadn’t already.

I led Elle back down the hallway and to the east wing, where there was a set of stairs. They were rarely used, but I was glad we had them as I quickly ushered Elle down.

But just as I was about to walk into the laundry room, which would lead to a back door, I stopped. Greyson had said that he didn’t know how many council members were at the pack house. Cesaries could have come alone, but he’d come to fetch the prisoners, so I doubted it. Which meant there was a chance that his backup was waiting by the back door.

Pivoting, I pushed Elle back up the stairs and hurried along the hall, back to her room. I pulled her inside and shut the door.

I needed to think—and not to panic.

I moved to the window and looked down. Elle’s room was situated to the side of the house, away from the front door, the back doors, and another utility door on the far side of the house. I didn’t see anyone on the lawn below the window, and I doubted that the council would’ve told anyone to watch this side of the house.

“What’s going on?” Elle demanded.

“The council is here already,” I said. “We have to get out of the house without anyone seeing us. I need to make sure you get to safety, Elle. It’s important.” I looked out the window again. “But how are we going to get down?”

“I could jump.”

I looked over at Elle in surprise. “What?”

She shrugged. “I could jump down. If you let me shift, you can jump on my back. Then we could run through the woods and get to the palace pretty fast.”

I chewed my lip. I didn’t love the idea, but I didn’t see any other way.

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. “I guess so.”

I threw Elle’s backpack over my shoulder and pushed the window open. But when I really looked at the small opening, I shook my head.

“You can’t shift inside. The window’s not big enough. And I’ll never fit through on your back.”

“So you climb out, and I’ll shift on the roof,” she said.

I nodded and braced my hands on the window. Carefully, I climbed out onto the slanted roof, holding onto the window frame so I wouldn’t slip.

Elle followed me out, and as soon as she was on the roof, she shifted. She lowered herself down so I could hop on, but just as I started to scramble onto her back, Elle slipped.

“Oh god!” I screamed.

The pitch of the roof was steep, and we started sliding. I reached out for something to grab onto, but there was nothing there. We hit the gutters and spilled over the edge, falling into the bushes below with a thunderous crash.

**Episode 4526**

**Xavier**

Behind me, I could hear the pack start to buzz with anxiety. I shifted back to human, dropping the unconscious Andrew to the ground in front of me.

“Calm down,” I ordered, looking back at the pack. “Everyone needs to stay calm.”

Knox shifted back, too. “What’s the council going to think when they realize that Andrew escaped?”

“Fuck*,*” I muttered. “I’m sure they’re not going to think much of the Samara pack,” I added bitterly.

Ava shifted and stepped toward me. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” I wondered.

“The solution,” she said. “You go to the house to talk to the council. Leave Andrew with me.”

“What? No.” I shook my head. “I’m not doing that.”

“I’ll stay with her, Xavier,” said Marissa.

Donovan stepped forward. “Me too.”

The plan *was* more palatable if it didn’t involve leaving Ava alone in the woods with Andrew—though I still didn’t like it.

Ava must’ve sensed my hesitation, because she kept talking. “We can sneak Andrew back inside as the council collects the other prisoners. And by then, he’ll be fully healed, so there won’t be any signs that there was trouble with him.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay. That sounds doable. Thanks, Ava.” I motioned for the others to follow me toward the packhouse. “The rest of you—when we get there, let me do the talking.”

As we walked toward the house, I felt my nerves jangling. I wasn’t so much worried about Andrew as I was about the council. I knew Greyson was in hot water with them because of Elle, and I knew I had the option of selling him out to take the focus off myself and my pack. But I knew, despite our many problems, that I didn’t want to do that to him. I also knew that whatever happened to Greyson would affect the rest of the Redwoods, which meant that it would affect Cali, and she’d already suffered a lot as a result of my actions.

I glanced over at Blaine, wondering if I needed to remind him to keep his mouth shut. There was a chance that he hadn’t actually helped Andrew escape, but that didn’t mean I trusted him.

But I didn’t have time to say anything, because we were at the house and a council member was walking down the front steps toward us.

“Hello,” the man said. He was small, with bright red hair, a lot of freckles, and a round face that still managed to look severe. He was flanked by three other council members, none of whom said a word.

“Hey,” I said shortly.

“I’m Clifford—the council sent me.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I figured. I assume you’re here to collect the prisoners. They’re right in—”

“All in good time,” Clifford interrupted.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“First, I have a few questions for you.”

“About what?”

“About Greyson Evers.”

I stared at the guy, baffled. Well, baffled and nervous. I hadn’t expected to be put into this position.

At least I didn’t have to worry about the other Samaras spilling the beans. Not even douchebag Blaine would be able to throw Greyson under the bus, since Ava was the only one who knew about him turning Elle. And she wasn’t going to tell the council anything unless I asked her to.

Perhaps I didn’t want to admit that I truly loved her, but I did know that I could trust her. Ava was nothing if not loyal.

I cleared my throat and tipped my chin toward the house.

“Why don’t we go inside?” I suggested. “I’d like to clean up a bit. Get dressed,” I said, looking down at my naked form.

“Fine,” Clifford said, and he and the rest of the council members followed me inside. “Were you all out hunting?”

“Yeah, something like that,” I muttered, half to myself. I glanced at Josephine. “Would you mind staying with our guests while I run upstairs?”

“Of course,” she said.

With that taken care of, I sprinted upstairs. In my room, I shut the door and grabbed my phone off the dresser.

*The council is here. They’re asking questions. About you.*  
 I sent the message to Greyson and waited, but he didn’t respond.

I shrugged and tossed my phone onto the bed. Whatever. I’d done my part. If the council caught Greyson by surprise, that was on him. There was nothing more I could do to help.

I didn’t like the idea of this Clifford guy hanging around in my house, but the shower was probably the only opportunity I had to think. A plan was something I didn’t have right now, and I was running out of time to think of one. How was I going to get this guy off our backs? Off my brother’s? I finished up in the shower, knowing that I couldn’t delay things for too long.

Stepping out of the shower, I ran my hands through my hair. Why did Greyson have to get into this mess in the first place? It was a stupid, rhetorical question, but it was feeling more and more relevant. Surely we could’ve done something else—anything fucking else—than turn a real wolf to get rid of some humans. I went into the bedroom and pulled on a clean pair of jeans. I was searching for a T-shirt when I heard Ava’s voice through the mind link.

*What’s going on over there? Andrew is conscious again.*

*Are you okay?* I asked quickly.

*I’m fine. He’s just being a pain in the ass.*

*Okay, if you’re okay, then you need to keep him for a little longer.*

*Why? What’s going on?*

*The guy from the council wants to question me.*

*About the prisoners?* she asked.

*I wish. No, he wants to talk about Greyson.*

*Oh god, really? Why?*

*Hell if I know*, I said.

*Okay, we’re good here. Just… Be careful, okay?*

*I will*, I promised.

When I went downstairs, I looked for Clifford in the living room, but it was empty. I checked a couple of rooms until I found him and his goons in the study with Josephine. The council members were sitting on the couch, staring at Clifford, who was standing by the fireplace, sipping a drink. I recognized it right away—it was one of my better whiskeys.

I shot Josephine an irritated look, but she just shrugged. Later, I’d have to ask her why she couldn’t have given him the cheap stuff.

“So,” I said briskly, trying to communicate that I wanted this over with fast. “What can I do for you? Things are pretty busy around here, and I have pack business to attend to. And I’m sure you have otherthings to do, too.”

“Yes, of course,” Clifford said. He smiled, though the expression looked forced as hell. “And the council knows how busy the Alphas are, but the Samara pack must respect the council’s right to investigate when there is just cause to suspect wrongdoing.”

I snorted, completely unable to hide my disdain.

“Is that so?” I asked. “Because the council didn’t seem all that concerned when Malakai was out for blood.”

Clifford waved this question away like it was an annoying fly. “You know, Xavier Evers, I think you’ll find that it would be unwise for you to take such a confrontational tone with the council.”

“All right, then let’s just get to the point,” I snapped. “Why are you here? I don’t have the time or the inclination to kiss your ass, so let’s just skip the chit-chat.”

Clifford swelled up like a blowfish. “How dare you speak to me like that!”

I glowered at him. “Oh, believe me, I’d dare to do a hell of a lot more than that. Now, do you want to talk to me or not? You have questions about my brother? Let’s hear them.”

“I will decide when I—”

“I don’t think so,” I said, cutting him off. “I’ve got your prisoners in my basement, man, and that’s not ideal. I want them gone, so whatever I have to do to reach that point in this conversation, let’s do that.”

Clifford’s face had gone very red, making his whole head look like a radish. He took a deep breath, clearly trying to master his anger. His attempt was fairly successful, because when he spoke, he sounded reasonable.

“You,” he said, looking at the two attendants he’d brought with him. “Go take custody of the prisoners.”

“Josephine,” I said, glancing at her. “Go with them, will you? Keep an eye on things?”

She nodded. “You got it.”

Once Josephine and the council members had left, I turned to Clifford.

“Let’s do this,” I said flatly.

He gave me a hard look with his watery blue eyes. “Xavier Evers, are you willing to testify to the fact that your older brother, Greyson Evers, has defied werewolf law and turned a natural wolf?” He paused and took a deep breath. “Or do you wish to be sentenced to death alongside him?”

**Episode 4527**

**Greyson**

Cesaries and I both jumped when we heard the crash. It was loud, and it seemed to have come from the side of the house. Just what we needed right now.

“What was that?” he asked, looking suspicious.

I had no idea what the hell could’ve caused that sound, but the last thing I wanted was an investigation. I didn’t need Cesaries snooping around—not when there was a chance that Elle was still here. I had to keep him occupied and where I could see him.

The councilor narrowed his eyes at me. “Aren’t you going to go see what it was?”

“See what what was?” I asked, deciding to play dumb. I knew I had to stall, but I was scrambling.

Cesaries’s eyes narrowed even further. I didn’t think he was buying my act. “Are you telling me you didn’t hear that loud crash? The one that made you flinch?”

“Oh, that… Yeah, I heard it, but it’s just something that happens sometimes.”

“Is it now?” he asked, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

“Yeah, sometimes it’s the furnace, and sometimes it’s something else,” I said. This was quite possibly the stupidest thing I’d ever said. “I really need to check in about a new one—”

“Greyson!”

I looked over to where Rishika was striding toward us, looking sheepish. “What’s up?”

“Sorry about that noise,” she said, shooting me a knowing look. “That was me. I was cleaning up, and a chair fell over.”

“A chair?” Cesaries asked.

“See, it can be anything,” I said.

I nodded, grateful that Rishika had swooped in, albeit a second too late. But I was also worried. What *had* caused that noise? Because I was certain that it hadn’t been a falling chair.

Then, as if she’d heard my question, Cali’s voice came to me through the mind link.

*Sorry, Greyson. We slipped.*

*Are you with Elle?* I asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

*Yeah, she’s with me. We’re both fine.*

*Okay, get her out of here. You can explain the rest later.*

I turned back to Cesaries. “I didn’t know you were coming by. You really should’ve given me a heads-up. This isn’t a good time for me.”

“No?” Cesaries gave me a hard look. “And why not?”

“I’ve got business in Portland, and I’m already late.”

“Ah, yes. I see. Well, this won’t take long,” he said vaguely, without a word of apology for inconveniencing me. He gave me a false smile. “And this is council business, after all.”

I tightened my jaw. I knew I’d have to be careful, here. Despite the contempt I felt for Cesaries and the rest of the council, they still held a lot of power—and they knew how to wield it.

Cesaries cleared his throat. When I looked over at him, he was watching me expectantly, clearly waiting to be invited in. But I held my ground. I didn’t want him inside the pack house, where he’d be able to pick up Elle’s scent.

“Why don’t we sit down?” I said, gesturing to the chairs on the porch.

He didn’t look pleased with this arrangement—he was probably used to people dancing attendance on him wherever he went—but I wasn’t going to budge.

Finally, he took a seat and looked at me. “Frankly, Greyson Evers, I’ve been trying to talk to you for quite a while.”

I stared back at him. It sounded like he was angling for an apology from me, but I didn’t offer one.

“I’ve been busy,” I said bluntly.

“Oh?” he said, with feigned curiosity. “Busy with what?”

I held back a lot of choice words in response and took a breath. “Pack wars tend to be messy, and I’ve had a lot to deal with. In case you haven’t heard, we were at war with the Bitterfang pack.”

His eyes went hard. “I am well aware of this, as I’m sure you know. I heard that the Bitterfang Alpha was killed by Lucian of the Vanguard pack. Is this true?”

I gritted my teeth. “Lucian had help,” I said, omitting the fact that the little prince had barely contributed to the conflict. “A lot of it, actually.”

Cesaries heaved a gusty sigh. “Well, I suppose that’s all for the best.”

I resisted the urge to laugh in the guy’s face. “You know, I find it very interesting that you’re taking that position now that all the dirty work’s been done. Why didn’t you do something about Malakai at the summit? The war was brutal. A lot of wolves died—on both sides. And it seems to me that the council was only interested in turning a blind eye when Malakai was prancing around the summit, breaking every rule about non-violence amongst packs.”

“The council was unaware of this,” Cesaries said coolly.

I scoffed. “Give me a fucking break,” I muttered.

Cesaries gave me a long look. “Allow me to offer you some advice, Greyson—enjoy your victory. Your side won. The alliance Alphas are heroes. So don’t go looking for new fights.”

“That’s some great advice,” I snapped, “but the council could’ve intervened at any time. You were even in the area, right before the war started. But instead of doing anything to stop it, you sent two spies.”

Cesaries smiled blandly, and I felt my whole body tense. I clenched my fists, but I had to remind myself that no matter how badly I wanted to punch that smirk off his face, it would only cause more problems for me and the pack.

I cleared my throat. “Do you have questions for me or something? If so, Cesaries, go ahead and ask me.”

He sat back in his chair, apparently in no big hurry to do anything. “Well, we’re not just interested in you, Greyson.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“We are very much interested in Arielle—you call her ‘Elle,’ I believe.”

Every muscle in my body went tight at his words. I felt a muscle twitching my jaw, but I knew I needed to keep it together. No matter what, I had to come across as neutral.

“What about her?” I asked lightly.

Cesaries gave me a searching look, then chuckled to himself. “You’re very good, Greyson. But we already suspect that you’ve violated the council’s law against the turning of natural wolves.”

There was movement in the corner of my eye, and when I looked over, I saw a group of council guards in the driveway. Cesaries hadn’t come alone. I hadn’t even noticed them until that moment, but they were definitely moving toward the house.

My heart started racing.

*Tell me you got Elle out of here, Cali.*

I waited for her response, but none came.

As much as I would have liked a confirmation that Cali and Elle were safe, I was happy that Cali didn’t respond. That had to mean that she was out of mind link range, and Elle was almost certainly with her.

When I looked back at Cesaries’s hawkish face, it was with the knowledge that—even if the council took me—Elle had escaped. That was something.

But I needed to stall them a bit longer, just to be sure that Cali and Elle had enough time to get to safety.

“I’m curious,” I said.

“About what?” Cesaries asked flatly, frowning.

“About your suspicion that I’ve violated the law. What evidence do you have against me?”

Cesaries looked affronted. “We have evidence,” he insisted.

I laughed. “But what is it? Whatever it is must be circumstantial, at best. And I doubt the council—in all its wisdom—would base such an outrageous claim on flimsy evidence.”

“We will proceed with—” Cesaries began, but I cut him off. I was sick of listening to him.

“You just told me that I was a hero for defeating Malakai—who was a danger to every pack in North America, and to the council itself. I brought peace back to the packs of this area. Are you telling me that you and your buddies on the council are willing to throw around wild, baseless accusations and risk turning the packs who see you as a hero against you?” I shook my head. “Seems risky to me.”

Cesaries drew a deep breath, as though searching for the strength to speak civilly. “We hope it does not come to that, of course. After all, what we’re really after is the *thing* you turned.”

Hearing him speak about Elle made me want to lunge for his throat, but I fought the instinct down.

“Allow me to offer you some advice, Greyson Evers,” Cesaries said, leaning forward, a look of false friendliness on his face. “I believe the council will be lenient with you—as long as you cooperate with our investigation.”

I was flooded with anger and rage and the fierce desire to protect Elle from these snakes, so when I spoke, I was no longer able to regulate my tone.

“Cooperate, huh?” I snarled. “And if I don’t?”

**Episode 4528**

I was gasping for air—and not just because I was running. Elle and I were sprinting through the trees, yes, but I was having trouble breathing because I was terrified. The council was at the house, and I was petrified that they were going to find us before Elle and I were able to get away.

It was beyond lucky Rishika had found us in the bushes before the council had. After she’d pulled us out, I’d explained what was going on, and she’d nodded.

“I’ll handle this,” she’d told me. “You two just go.”

And we’d gone.

As we sped through the woods away from the house, my mind was on Greyson. I was worried about him, but he’d made it very clear that he needed me to look after Elle and to get her to the palace—and to Lucian.

As I ran, I accidentally knocked my elbow into my ribs and gasped with pain. I could only imagine the bruise I was going to have from hitting the ground after falling from the roof.

“Do you think we should go back?” Elle asked nervously, glancing over her shoulder.

“What? No! Why?”

“To see if Greyson is okay. I can help him. I can fight the council if he needs me to.”

I shook my head. “The best thing we can do right now is make sure you get to the palace.”

“But—”

“That’s what Greyson wants us to do—and you agreed to it, Elle,” I reminded her pointedly.

She sighed. “Okay.”

She shifted to her wolf form and lowered herself down. I clambered onto her back, wincing as pain shot through my side. As soon as I was up, I gave her shoulder a pat and she started running again.

“Take it easy, okay,” I said as she took off. “No jumping, okay? That’s going to hurt my ribs.”

Elle slowed down a little, but she was a fast runner even then, so it wasn’t long before we reached the edge of Vanguard territory.

“Stop before you get to the house,” I told her. “I want to talk to Aysel before you go in and make sure it’s safe for you.”

Elle stopped at the edge of the trees that surrounded the palace, and I gingerly dropped to the ground.

“Stay here. I’ll go test the waters,” I told her, then turned to walk to the house.

I knocked on the door, and a guard promptly pulled it open.

“I’m here for Aysel—” I started.

“It’s about damn time.” Aysel strode over to me, looking irritated. She’d apparently been waiting by the door, and she only looked at me for a moment before she started looking *past* me. “Where is she? My brother is expecting Arielle. You know he’s sensitive right now. I don’t want to keep him waiting much longer, Caliana.”

I bit back a few choice words. “She’s here.” I turned and gestured for Elle to come forward, then turned back to Aysel. “Are you sure your brother can handle this right now? We need Elle to be safe, Aysel.”

“My brother is coping right now, but yes, of course, Elle is safe here. You have my word,” she said. I wasn’t sure that made me feel any better.

“And you’re sure?”

She huffed. “Yes, Caliana.”

“Okay,” I said, hoping I wasn’t about to make a mistake. “I’ll send word when it’s safe to bring her back to the Redwood house.”

Aysel ignored my words and pushed past me. She stepped out on the porch and watched as Elle emerged from the trees and started toward the house.

With a sigh, I turned and walked down the steps. “We’ll talk soon,” I said to Elle as I passed her.

She nodded, then walked up the steps and disappeared into the house.

Alone, I looked around. I really wished we’d had a chance to plan this better. I had no car, and I wasn’t a werewolf, which meant the only way back to the house was a long walk through the winter woods. And that was assuming I didn’t get lost along the way. I knew the area pretty well, but I was significantly less familiar with the Vanguard land.

For a moment I considered calling for an Uber, but then I remembered that I’d forgotten to grab my phone before I’d tumbled out the window.

“Shit,” I muttered. I turned to look at the palace, thinking my best bet was probably going back and finding Armin. Maybe he’d give me a ride home if I asked him. But that probably wouldn’t look good to the council… Emerging from the woods was honestly probably the best option, and less weird, all things considered.

Just as I was considering my options, I heard something in the woods behind me.

My heart started pounding, my mind filling with images of the council, and escaped Bitterfang prisoners, and the million other scary things that could’ve been stalking me through the woods.

I turned and readied my magic, wondering if I should summon my shield. Was this a defensive situation? Or would it be safer to call my sword and get ready to fight?

Lacking the time to really consider my options, I opted for the sword. Just as my hand closed around its hilt, the noise grew louder, and a figure appeared in the shadows of the trees.

I swung my sword wildly, managing to slice a sapling in half in the process.

“What the hell, Cali!”

“Zainab?” I breathed.

“Yeah! *Zainab*. And you almost chopped me in half!” she said.

Heat rushed into my face. “I—I’m so sorry,” I stammered, mortified. I was so jumpy I’d nearly decapitated my friend. “Sorry. Really. What are you doing here?”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, at the moment, trying to stay alive. But I came because I saw you and Elle fall off the roof. Which was pretty epic. Not the smoothest escape I’ve ever seen, by the way, but it got the job done, I guess.”

“I guess,” I muttered.

“Anyway, I followed, because it was just the two of you, and I wanted to make sure you got here safely—and because I figured that you might need some help getting back home.”

“Oh,” I said, sighing with relief. “Yeah. Well, Elle’s in Lucian’s hands now, and I’m glad you’re here. I wasn’t sure how the hell I was going to get home.”

“You were for sure going to get lost,” Zainab said bluntly.

“I mean, you’re right, but you don’t have to say it like that,” I muttered.

Zainab laughed. “Okay, let’s get going.”

I thought she was going to shift, but instead she bent and grabbed two big handfuls of mud. Then she stepped toward me and—to my utter shock—started to rub it onto my arms and face.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, jerking away. The mud was freezing.

Zainab frowned at me. “I’m trying to cover Elle’s scent. It’s all over you. You didn’t notice?”

“No, I didn’t. And stop. I can do it myself,” I said.

“Okay,” Zainab said, putting her hands up.

With a sigh, I dropped down onto the ground and rolled, getting it everywhere. When I got back up, I wiped my eyes.

“Enough?” I asked.  
 Zainab laughed. “You look insane.”

I shot her a glare. “Let’s just go. This mud is freezing.”

Zainab didn’t argue. She shifted and let me climb onto her back. She sprinted through the woods, which hurt my ribs, but I was too anxious to get back and rinse off the mud to complain.

It wasn’t long before we reached the pack house.

“Stop here,” I said.

Zainab stopped, and I slid off her back.

“Did I cover Elle’s scent?” I asked her. “Can you smell it?”

Zainab leaned forward to sniff me, then shifted back to her human form. “I think you’re good.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

When we walked through the back door, I caught sight of my reflection in the glass. Zainab had been right—I did look insane. And the two of us clearly weren’t the only ones who thought so, because the eyes of every pack member in the kitchen were instantly riveted to me.

“What the hell happened to you?” Sage asked.

“I—fell,” I said vaguely. “I’m going to go shower.”

“Good idea,” Ravi muttered.

I walked quickly through the kitchen and was about to go upstairs when I heard Greyson’s voice.

It was coming from the porch, and when I looked out the window, I saw that he was sitting out there with Cesaries.

Deciding that the shower would have to wait, I took a deep breath. I stepped closer to the door, trying to stay quiet, hoping to hear what they were talking about, but I’d forgotten about super werewolf hearing, and my footsteps must’ve given me away.

Cesaries leaned forward. “Is that the Redwood Luna?”

Sheepishly, I opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

Both Cesaries and Greyson looked up at me with obvious shock.

“What happened to you?” Greyson asked.

“Oh.” I waved my hand airily. “You know. Broken hose, dirt patch. Long story.”

I looked out into the yard and noticed a group of council guards. As I watched, they started up the porch steps and moved toward Greyson.

“What’s going on here?” I asked, my pulse quickening.

Two of the guards stepped over to Greyson and pulled him up, gripping his arms.

“What’s going on?” I asked again.

Cesaries got to his feet. “He’s coming with us.”

**Episode 4529**

**Xavier**

I stared at Clifford for a long moment. Then I started laughing. He had to be bluffing or telling the world’s worst joke. Because there was no way he’d *actually* just threatened me.

But Clifford stared right back at me, his eyes dead and cold. It didn’t look like he’d ever told a joke in his life, so there went that theory.

I shook my head. I wasn’t about to die for my brother, but I also wasn’t going to stand by and let the council kill him. That was insane, and there was no way I was going to allow it.

“Is the council forgetting that Greyson led the alliance against the Bitterfangs—and all their allies—and defeated them?” I asked pointedly. “Malakai was a fucking menace, and a threat to every pack in the country. He was a threat to *you*, too, and you know it. So if the council had its head on right, you wouldn’t be here threatening Greyson—you’d be planning a celebration for him.”

I honestly couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. It felt strange as hell, and I was expecting a heartfelt fucking thank-you from Greyson for this full-throated defense when this was all over. But now that I’d gotten started, I was finding it hard to stop. The council had been pissing me off for a long time, and it felt amazing to finally unload.

“And I’ll tell you something else, *Cliff*,” I went on, narrowing my eyes, “if you try to take *me* out of this house, that won’t be a healthy choice for you.”

His dull eyes looked angry. “Is that a threat against the council?”

“It’s a fact,” I said flatly. “You won’t make it fifty feet before the full force of the Samara pack stops you.”

Clifford apparently hadn’t considered this possibility, and he hesitated, a look of uncertain flashing across his watery blue eyes. “I’m not here to take you anywhere,” he said, as though he hadn’t just threatened to do exactly that. “I’m only here to ask you some questions.”

But I was done with this. “I’ve got a better idea—why don’t you take your questions, and the prisoners, and get the hell out of my pack house?”

The uncertainty left Clifford’s eyes. “I should’ve expected this response from you.”

“And what response is that?” I asked, my voice almost taunting.

He looked wrathful. “It’s no secret that the Evers brothers share both a father and a contempt for the council—”

“You’ve got that right,” I muttered to myself.

Clifford paused but chose to ignore me. “But I’m warning you, Xavier, this is no small thing. The allegations against your brother are very serious.”

I scoffed, not bothering to hide my derision. “The allegations? Give me a fucking break. You’re talking about *suspicions*, at best. Don’t you realize that we can all see through you? You’re just out here to save face after you sat back and allowed the pack war to happen. You want to prove to the packs that the council is actually useful—”

“That is *enough*!” Clifford snapped, his face going red again. “If we discover that you’ve been hiding something from us…”

“What?” I asked when he didn’t go on. I took a menacing step toward him. “You’ll do what? Nothing? The same thing you did when Malakai was on the rampage?”

Clifford practically had steam coming out of his ears. “How dare you! Do you know to whom you are—”

“Save it,” I said, waving Clifford’s sputterings away. “I know to whom I’m speaking, and I don’t want to hear it. Aren’t you here to take the prisoners?”

“*Yes*,” he hissed.

“Then take them. Get them out of here already. Nobody here wants them, and I can’t guarantee their safety.”

Clifford shot a dagger-sharp glare in my direction, but he stepped toward the door. He paused as he reached it and turned to look at me. “It isn’t in your interest, or the interest of your pack, to make an enemy of the council. We can be your allies, you know.” His eyes glittered like ice. “Or we can be something far less agreeable.”

There was a knock at the door. Clifford opened it for Josephine, who looked past him to me.

“The prisoners are here,” she said.

“This is the last one,” Ava said, shoving Andrew toward Clifford. She shot me a look.

*Right on time*, I told her, nodding in approval.

*Of course.*

*Thanks for that*, I said, then turned back to Clifford. “I don’t know anything about what my brother has done, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t do everything in my power to work against you on his behalf.”

Clifford sneered at me. “They say that blood is thicker than water.”

“They do say that, yeah,” I said coldly.

“But you can still drown in it,” he added nastily. “Be careful, Xavier Evers. I have a feeling we’ll cross paths again.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, you could drown in blood. I could also rip their throat out at any time. What did it fucking matter? The council really needed to form a theatre troupe or something. They were so dramatic all the time. And, as a werewolf governing body, they were fucking useless. Their threats were basically empty to me, at this point.

I looked past Clifford to where Knox was hovering over Josephine’s shoulder, watching the scene play out.

“Knox, take a couple of Samaras and follow them out,” I told him, glaring at Clifford. “The prisoners are no longer welcome on Samara land, and I want to be sure that *everyone* leaves our territory.”

Knox nodded. “Let’s go,” he said to a couple of younger guys, and together, they walked the prisoners out, with Clifford—looking positively thunderous—bringing up the rear.

I followed them down the hall and out the front door. As I stood on the porch, watching them go, I felt a little of my anger draining away, only to be replaced with anxiety. I’d lost my temper, and I’d gone for Clifford pretty hard. I wondered if I’d pushed things too far. Clifford had been right about one thing—it was never a good idea to get on the council’s bad side. They were useless when it came to doing anything that actually benefited the werewolf community, but they were great at doling out punishment.

“You should just give him up.”

I looked over in surprise. I hadn’t realized that Ava was standing next to me until she’d spoken. She was watching the departing group with her arms crossed, her face smeared with dirt from the fight with Andrew.

“Greyson?” I asked. “Give him up? Are you serious? Where’s this coming from?”

She eyed me curiously. “I don’t get it, X. You’ve never had any love for Greyson. Why are you willing to go to bat for him like this? What’s with all the sudden loyalty?”

I thought about the question for a moment. “I’m not being *loyal*,” I countered. “He’s my blood. I didn’t choose to be his brother, but it is what it is. That blood connection is strong, regardless of what’s gone down between us.”

Ava took this in. “Even if it means risking your own ass?”  
 I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s an either/or situation. Giving my brother up to the council wouldn’t do anything to help us.” I gave her a sideways look. “It would only help you.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” she asked, looking offended. “How would it help me?”

“Because it would hurt Cali,” I said simply.

The blood drained from her face. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“Come the fuck on, Ava,” I interrupted. “I know you’re angry with me because I haven’t said that I love you. But do you know *why* I haven’t said it?”

She didn’t answer for a moment.

“Why?” she finally demanded, biting the word out.

“Because you treat it like a fucking *currency*!” I burst out, losing my tenuous grip on my temper. “If I turn Greyson in for you and hurt Cali, will you be happier? Or will you still be bitter because I’m not entirely yours?”

Ava rounded on me, her eyes hard as stone. “So you admit it! You *do* still care about her!”

I shook my head. “Fucking hell, Ava, I can’t believe you’re bringing this up again! How many times are we going to have to go through this before you just—”

“As many times as it takes,” she growled, glaring at me. “If you don’t want to answer my damn question—if you can’t bring yourself to say if you love me or not—fine. *Fine!* But there is something I need to know, and I demand that you answer me.”

I stared at her pale face, livid with anger. “*What?*”

She looked me square in the eye. “Are you only here with me because you’re under a spell?”

**Episode 4530**

Almost on instinct, my magic began to flow into my hands. I could almost feel it sizzling in my fingertips as I glared at the council guards holding Greyson’s arms.

“Get your hands off him,” I said coldly.

Cesaries gave me a condescending look. “Now, now, you shouldn’t interfere with council business.”

Fury ripped through me. “And you shouldn’t interfere with my Alpha,”

“Take it easy, Cali,” Greyson said, his voice low.

“No!” I shot back. “I’m not going to take it easy.”

“Cali—” Greyson started, but I ignored him.

“If you want to take my mate, then you’re going to have to get through me, first.” I thrust out my hand and shot a jolt of magic into the ground just off the porch, for emphasis.

It did the trick. The guards glanced nervously at each other, then released Greyson.

“*Well*,” Cesaries huffed, looking uncharacteristically ruffled, and maybe even a little scared.

I stood my ground. I hated to be so heavy-handed, but this had officially gone too far. I hadn’t just fallen off a roof in order to sneak Elle to safety only to have the council take Greyson instead.

Cesaries glanced at Greyson, the hard look back in his eyes. “I could force you to come, you know.”

He gestured toward the guards, who’d recovered from their moment of fear.

As the guards moved toward Greyson again, I tried to assess the situation, wondering where to aim my magic. I’d probably be able to take out the two guards, but they weren’t the only ones Cesaries had brought with him.

I was about to summon my shield when the front door opened behind me.

Ravi stepped outside and looked around warily. “Is there a problem here?”

Rishika stepped out from behind him and looked around, quickly assessing the situation. “I’m going to suggest that you think hard about this, Cesaries.”

He puffed out his chest. “I don’t know what—”

“You should know that the entire Redwood pack is united on this,” Rishika said, her gaze flinty. “Greyson is our Alpha, and we’re loyal to him. He led us to victory over a much more powerful and dangerous pack than the council and its guards.”

I looked at Rishika in amazement. I knew she was at least partially bluffing, here—a portion of the pack wasn’t even around at the moment. Elle was gone, Jay and Lola were off on their retreat, and there was only Torin—the other Fae were gone now as well. Big Mac had cut all ties with us. But Rishika was still telling the truth—the pack was unfailingly loyal to Greyson and would defend him even against the council. I was sure of that.

An icy wind blew around us as we stood on the porch, facing off against Cesaries and his council backup.

Cesaries narrowed his eyes. “I think you’re bluffing,” he said, though I could’ve sworn I heard a tiny edge of worry in his voice.

“You *think* so?” I asked. “But you’re not sure? Seems to me that you have to consider whether you’re willing to take that chance. Because it could be your last mistake.”

Without waiting for him to answer, I summoned my sword.

Greyson looked at me, then around at the other pack members who were stepping out of the house and onto the porch, forming a wall of support behind him.

Greyson turned to Cesaries, who was red as a beet. “It doesn’t look like I’ll be coming with you today,” he said mildly. “Unless you’re ready to fight my pack.”

Cesaries scanned the assembled pack members. Sweat was starting to bead on his upper lip, and when he huffed, it was clear that he was working hard to sound dismissive.

“This is all so unnecessary,” he muttered.

“I agree,” Greyson said, raising an eyebrow.

It took a moment, but his meaning finally sank in, making Cesaries glare. But he held up his hands, gesturing for the guards to stand down.

The guards on the porch took a step back, looking relieved.

“I have decided against taking Greyson in today,” he started, addressing the Redwoods and his guards, which made me roll my eyes.

*Yeah, I’ll bet you’ve decided against it, considering that you’d have to fight your way out of our territory.*

“But know that the council is *not* going to drop our investigation into this matter,” Cesaries added. “The allegations against you are very serious indeed, Greyson Evers, and are unlikely to disappear. I will give you one week to turn yourself in. After that time, if you have not chosen to come to the council voluntarily, I assure you that we will return.” His eyes glittered dangerously. “And we will return with enough guards to take your entire pack into custody.”

My hands curled into fists, and when I looked over at Greyson, his expression was hard as stone.

Deciding that he’d made his point, Cesaries smiled in a self-satisfied way and turned to leave. But he stopped at the top of the porch steps and looked back.

“Oh, one more thing,” he said. “Don’t try to hide Arielle. We’ll know if you do, and I don’t think you’re going to want to find out the consequences of it. Be smart, Alpha Greyson.”

No one reacted to that.

Cesaries looked to his guards. “Gather the prisoners.”

“Go with them,” Greyson muttered to Ravi, who nodded and led the guards inside.

After a minute or so, the council guards reappeared, leading the prisoners out of the house, sans Ethaniel. Hopefully he’d run fast and somehow crossed through half of Oregon by now and would leave thoughts of us—and Greyson—behind. We stood and watched as they walked down the steps, and it wasn’t until they were across the yard that I realized I was shaking.

Greyson noticed, too. He pulled me close, enfolding me in his arms, and I finally managed to take a deep breath.

“It’s okay, love,” he said quietly, rubbing my back. “We’re okay.”

I didn’t know if that was true.

“Okay!” Rishika shouted, clapping her hands. “Show’s over. Everyone inside. Let’s do something useful. I want you all downstairs.”

“What for?” Ravi asked.

“We have to start cleaning,” Rishika said. “The prisoners made a real mess.”

There were a few groans, but everyone started to shuffle inside.

“Thank you for the support, everyone,” Greyson called to them. “I’m just sorry you all got dragged into this.”

Ravi grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, you’re our Alpha. We’ve got your back. Anytime you need anyone, I’ll be there, man. If you just want some company, say the word and I’ll—”

“Ravi!” Rishika called sharply. “Quit stalling—those floors aren’t going to mop themselves. Make sure Lilac doesn’t almost use bleach again.”

“Shit, you’re right. That was almost a disaster,” he said before he headed inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

Greyson and I were left in silence, and I shuddered. “God, I didn’t realize just how tense I was. All I could feel was the adrenaline, but now that’s gone…” I pulled myself closer to Greyson and buried my face in his chest. “Sorry about the mud.”

“That’s okay, love,” he said with a watery chuckle.

I pulled back and looked up at him. “What are you going to do now? Cesaries made it pretty clear that they’re not going to drop this.”

Greyson bent and kissed me. “I’m going to find a way out of this, love.”

“I know, I just—”

“What you just did was so brave, Cali, and I appreciate it,” he went on. “But I don’t want you to worry about me.”

I nodded. “I know you don’t, but I *do* worry, Greyson. I can’t help it.”

He sighed. “I know.”

He held me close again and we were quiet for a moment, looking out at the now empty land beyond the house. When Greyson spoke, his voice was low.

“I’m going to call Chloe back,” he said. “She’ll do the spell to break the sire bond.”

My heart lurched. “Okay.”

“But in the meantime, the council knows that Elle’s not here. That’s good, but I don’t know how long we can hold them off from going on a huge hunt for her.”

“Oh, Greyson.” I looked up at him. “Then what are we going to do?”

He looked troubled. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m kind of running out of ideas, here. How many times can we avoid disaster?”

“At least once more,” I assured him. Then I paused, chewing my lip. “Lucian isn’t himself right now, and I don’t think he’s well enough to protect Elle. We have to do something.”

“I know,” Greyson said miserably.

I thought hard for a moment—and then it came to me. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?”

I smiled. “I know the perfect place to hide her that’s not the Vanguard palace or any other werewolf pack house.”

**Episode 4531**

**Greyson**

As Cali and I entered my bedroom to continue our discussion in private, Cali said, “So, the Kangarats are having a party, and—”

I paused and looked at her, frowning in confusion. “Wait, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Kangarats?”

“My new crew team—the Kangaroo Rats, but everyone calls them the Kangarats for short. I’ve been invited to one of their parties, and I think it’s the perfect place to hide Elle.”

“What? How is taking Elle to a human frat party a good idea?” I knew how those types of parties went down. It didn’t seem like a good place for Elle to spend her time—or Cali, for that matter.

Cali was clearly affronted. “They’re not frat boys, they’re college athletes. *Elite* ones.”

I held up my hands. “I stand corrected. But I still can’t see why that would be a good place to hide Elle.”

“I know it’s only temporary, but it would buy us some time with Cesaries. He might go look for her this instant, Greyson. There’s nothing to indicate that he won’t.”

Though, to be fair, I couldn’t stop picturing blaring music, badly executed keg stands, and handsy boys who’d had too much to drink. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go to it. I’d been to college parties, but never with anyone from a sports team. It seemed like guys in sports were intense in general, so I didn’t know how they’d be at a party.

“I don’t know Cali,” he said. “Temporary or not, it’s a risk.”

“But you know that the council will never in a million years think to look for her there, and I’ll be able to keep an eye on her,” Cali said. “Besides, she’ll probably enjoy it. Maybe it’ll take her mind off things.”

I still wasn’t convinced. “Putting Elle in the middle of a group of drunk college bros seems like the opposite of a good idea.”

“It won’t be like that,” Cali said dismissively. “The team trains all the time, so they won’t be getting super drunk. Besides, Coach Ludwig would never tolerate that kind of behavior.”

Cali was being naïve. No coach in the history of the world had ever *approved* of their team throwing beer-filled ragers, but the teams still had them. What made Cali’s team any different than the millions of sports teams who threw out-of-control parties like it was their life’s purpose?

“I don’t know, Cali,” I said uneasily. “I’m just not crazy about Elle hanging around that many humans. The council’s a danger for sure, but so is putting her in a situation like that. What if something happens and she loses control and shifts in front of everyone? You think you’d be able to handle that on your own?”

“Sure I could. I think I’ve proven that I’m a quick thinker. And Elle would never do that, anyway—she knows better,” Cali shot back.

“If she shifted, it would be an unpredictable, unintended reaction,” I said. “Elle’s under the influence of the sire bond, same as I am. We’re both unstable. Who’s to say if she’ll be able to keep her composure? Especially around a bunch of humans.”

Cali gave me a dismissive wave. “But isn’t that a good thing? They’re less likely to be all werewolf-y with them around. I know you’re skeptical, Greyson, but this is the right move.”

“Portland is the better option,” I pointed out. “She’d be spending most of her time in my apartment, not standing in the middle of a party. And *if* she decided to leave the apartment, she’d only come into contact with humans in passing—there’s a big difference between sending her to stay in a quiet apartment and throwing her into close quarters with a bunch of college boys. It just doesn’t seem like a good idea to me.”

“But she won’t be alone,” Cali said. “I’ll be there. I’ll protect her. It can be a temporary measure, and we can take her to Portland right afterward. I very much doubt that the council would show up at a college party—and if they did, they’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Cali—”

“Greyson, trust me on this,” she said firmly. “It’ll work. You have my word.”

I could see that Cali was determined to go this route. And the council *had* warned me not to try to hide Elle—bringing her to a party was hardly hiding her. There was a chance it would actually work, for a few hours at least, but it was still risky. Maybe Cali was seeing something that I couldn’t, and I trusted her. But trust wasn’t really the issue. I didn’t want Cali to get in over her head.

“Fine,” I said reluctantly. “We’ll do it. But you have to promise to let me know if you run into any trouble—no taking care of things on your own. I mean it, Cali. This is serious. If the council gets ahold of her, it would be bad. And if humans discover what Elle is, it would be worse. It would put the whole pack at risk—along with every werewolf in existence.”

Cali let out an exasperated sigh. “I get it, Greyson.”

“I just want to make sure you understand the stakes before you put Elle in an unfamiliar situation,” I said.

Elle was smart and had adjusted well to her life as a werewolf, but she’d never been in a room full of humans. And no matter what Cali said, I didn’t believe that there wouldn’t be at least *some* drinking going on. Humans didn’t have the tolerance that werewolves did, which meant they got drunk a lot easier, and they had trouble controlling themselves once they were.

“Of course, you have my word,” Cali said. “I won’t take my eyes off of her, and I won’t let anyone get too close to her. Anyway, I’m allowed to bring friends—I can bring some pack members along if you’re worried. I’m sure Ravi would love a party.”

I wished I could go with her. I was tempted to offer it up—not because I had a love for college parties, but because I’d be able to keep an eye on both Cali and Elle. But I didn’t really have any spare time on my hands, and it didn’t exactly sound like my idea of fun.

“Okay, we’ll get someone to go,” I said. “I have to contact Chloe about breaking the sire bond.”

Cali’s face fell as her enthusiasm took a hit. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to do that without me,” she said. “I know what I said, but I still can’t help but think that we’re playing a dangerous game, getting involved with those witches.”

“No, I’m not sure,” I said. “But we both agreed that we don’t have any other options, and we’re running out of time.”

“I know that… But what if something goes wrong and I’m not here with you? What then?”

I shook my head, feeling torn. “I wish you could be there, too,” I said. “But like you said, we have to do this for Elle’s safety.” She nodded, and I continued. “I also wish I could promise you that everything will be okay, but I can’t lie. It *is* risky. But if I don’t at least try to break the sire bond, it could spell trouble for both Elle and me.”

“Our mate bond could be severed,” Cali said, her voice quiet. “What would that mean? Would you stop loving me?”

I could see the distress on her face, and it broke my heart. I never wanted to see Cali in pain, for any reason. I locked her into a tight hug.

“I don’t love you because of our mate bond, Cali,” I said. “No matter what happens, I will always love you. There’s a reason why we found each other, and it isn’t because we’re mated. I think it was more like fate.”

Cali leaned into me. “I can’t imagine not being your mate.”

“Don’t dwell on that too much. It’s only one of the possibilities,” I reminded her. “I prefer to be a bit more optimistic about it.” I kissed her and slowly moved my lips to her ear. “I love you, Cali. I always will,” I whispered.

She looked up at me. “And I’ll always love you.”

I brought my lips to hers and kissed her hungrily, savoring the taste of her, the warmth of her mouth and soft press of her body against mine. I wanted to prove to her that I meant what I’d said, that my passion for her was too strong to waver, no matter what.

I pulled away and looked into her eyes. “I would hate for our mate bond to be broken, but even if that happens, I will always love you.”

Our lips collided again, our breath coming in deep gasps as things heated up.

Cali pulled back. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was breathless.

I’d just lifted Cali into my arms and started carrying her toward my bed when she splayed a hand on my chest, stopping me.

“Wait, Greyson. What if…” She hesitated. “What if things between us end up being totally different after this?”

**Episode 4532**

**Xavier**

Ava had just asked a very dangerous question—one that I wasn’t sure I could answer. I paused, considering how far we could take this conversation without putting ourselves in danger.

All I wanted was to scream out “Yes! I’ve been cursed by Adéluce, and I only left Cali to protect her!” But that wasn’t even the whole truth anymore. Things had gotten complicated since I’d been forced to walk away from my mate. My feelings for Ava were murkier than ever. Even if I’d had the ability to answer her question freely, it still wouldn’t have been easy to come up with a response.

*But I can’t keep dodging her questions. Ava’s not going to stand for it. I have to give her some sort of answer—something that will satisfy her enough to keep her from questioning me. She deserves that much, anyway.*

“I’m not under a spell that’s forcing me to be with you,” I said carefully. “That’s a crazy thing to ask.”

Ava sighed and nodded, visibly relaxing. “I’m happy to hear it.”

Relief rushed through me. Ava letting this subject rest was the safest thing for both of us.

“I do have a question for you,” I said. “Does your question have anything to do with why you wanted my blood, a while back? You acted weird when I asked you about that before.”

Ava scoffed. “No. That was all Cali’s idea. And Kira’s.”

I recalled asking Cali about it. In trying to find out if I was under some kind of spell, she’d come dangerously close to the truth. I had to make sure that Ava wasn’t headed down the same path—that wouldn’t end well for any of us.

“So why did you agree to collect my blood?” I pressed.

Ava shrugged. “Cali seems to know what buttons to push when it comes to my relationship with you. She made me question why you came back to me, why you made me your Luna. She implied that there might be some kind of magic at play… And at the time, I couldn’t disagree.”

I nodded as I took that in. “And do you still feel that way? Like there’s some… external reason why I’m still with you—magic or otherwise?”

Ava looked away. “I do sometimes fall into that mindset—thinking that one day I’ll wake up to find that you’ve abandoned me and gone back to Cali. But then I remind myself that the real insecurity at play here is Cali’s. You and I were mated long ago, and still are… Despite the occasional setback. We’re still together after everything, and that means something. I’m not going to allow Cali’s insecurities to affect me. At least not anymore.”

My head was spinning. I hoped that Ava was telling the truth, and that she was going to stop searching for an explanation for why we were together. Because if she kept poking at the truth, there was no doubt in my mind that Adéluce would punish her for it.

*I don’t think I’ll be able to handle it if anything happens to her because of my link to Adéluce. I have to do whatever I can to protect her.*

It was too bad that Ava stopping her investigation wasn’t going to do anything to assuage my guilt. I *was* under a spell. I wanted to be with Cali, but I couldn’t. And every time Ava or Cali began to suspect as much, it threw us all right into Adéluce’s crosshairs.

But all that aside, Ava’s explanation had also given me a greater understanding of where her head was at. Her insecurities were driving her need to hear the three words I was trying my best to avoid saying to her.

I leaned down and kissed her before she could ask me any more questions.

She wrapped her arms around me and leaned into the kiss before pulling back. “Remember, you told me that you were going to show me that you love me.” Ava looked me in the eyes. “And I need you to do that. Show me.”

I didn’t hesitate to press my lips to hers again. I smothered her mouth with mine and walked her back until I had her pressed against the side of the house. I pinned her there, as if trapping her would prevent her from doubting my feelings for her.

We were all alone. The others had gone inside after Clifford and his minions had taken the prisoners away.

“Show me,” Ava whispered against my lips. “Show me, Xavier. Show me how much you love me.”

The guilt I’d been feeling since the start of our conversation was immediately eclipsed by the primal need to have her. I wanted to lose myself in anything with the power to convince me that my conflicted feelings for Ava were real—at least real enough to reassure her, and to keep her happy and question free.

“Show me,” Ava whispered again.

“Like this?” I asked, ripping her shirt and exposing her breasts, sitting in the delicate pink lace of her bra.

I leaned down and dragged my tongue along the valley of her cleavage, then I reached into her bra and scooped out her breasts, squeezing them gently as I twirled my tongue against her nipples. Ava arched against me, her arms dropping to her sides as she gave her body over to my control.

I quickly undid my pants. “Turn around,” I said. “Put your hands on the wall.”

Ava did as I said.

I took a moment to admire her before I dug my fingers into her hair, tugging it gently to pull her head back so that I could kiss her. Then I released her hair and curved one hand loosely around her neck while I used the other to lift her skirt and yank her panties down, just low enough to give me access to her center. I nudged her legs apart with my knee.

“Show me how much you love me,” Ava whispered again.

“I’m going to show you.” I put my lips to her ear. “How hard do you want me to fuck you?”

I pulled my rigid length out of my boxers and trailed it from the top of her pert ass down to the slick, fluttering channel between her legs. I smoothed a hand up her back and pushed her top half forward.

“As hard as you want,” she moaned. “You know I can take it.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said. “Keep your hands on the wall. Don’t move them.”

Ava smiled at me over her shoulder as she planted her hands solidly against the house. I pressed the tip of my shaft against her pulsing, slick opening, my mind already hazy with a desire so strong, I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to contain myself once I was finally inside her.

Ava moaned, arching her back and sending her thick curtain of hair flowing down between us. I leaned forward and buried my nose in it. I loved the way she smelled.

*I don’t love her, I know that—I only love one person. But that doesn’t mean I don’t adore Ava. Because I do. More than I ever thought I would again.*

A grunt escaped me as I slid inside her, taking it slow. Fuck, if this didn’t feel good.

“Never scratch me like that again,” I said. The way she’d lashed out at me earlier still felt like a phantom wound. I snaked one of my arms around the front of her, and I wrapped my hand around her neck. When I lightly squeezed it, she moaned, melting in my arms. The power trip I’d been on earlier was returning. “Or this cock will never be inside you again.”

“It barely is now,” she countered sharply. Her heartbeat fluttered against my palm.

“Oh?” I threw the idea of gentleness to the wind and slammed in, all the way to hilt with no warning. I stayed like that for a moment, her body arching back against me. “What about now?”

She moaned in response.

“That’s right,” I said, starting to pull out. “Your pussy is *mine*.”

I teased her, filling her up and then retreating a few more times, only for her to slam back against me hard so that I was sheathed deep inside her again. Ava’s cries lit up the night air, and I didn’t let up after that. I continued my thrusts, her body rocking against mine. Keeping my hand on her throat, I slid my free hand between her legs, and dragged my fingers along her clit.

“Harder,” she said. “Please.”

With waves of pleasure whipping through me from head to toe, I slid free of her and then turned her around to face me. I slid my palm down her legs, then lifted her left thigh to hook around my hip. She groaned, reaching between us and grabbing my cock to put it back inside her. In one movement, I pinned her against the house.

“You want harder?” I was breathing hard and gritting my teeth, trying to stave off my climax. I let go of her arms to grab her hips roughly, my fingers digging into her skin. She gasped as I pushed into her, slowly filling her back up to the brim from the front. “Is this what you want?”

Ava whimpered, nodding as her hands raked down my chest, her nails teasing my skin. She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

I turned so it was my back against the house. “I want to watch you fuck me.”

Ava’s eyes met mine, and she lifted herself up, only briefly to grab onto my shoulders. Then she began to ride me; she rolled her hips against me, gliding up and down my cock, her serpentine body slithering against mine. I kept a tight lock on her hips, making sure each thrust was just as hard as the last. Hungrily, I dipped down to rake my teeth along her neck. Then she started pulsing around me, her orgasm coming on so strong that there was no mistaking it. I pressed a hand to her mouth, muffling her moans, fucking her harder and harder until I exploded.

I tried to keep my legs strong as she collapsed against me. I held her as we came against each other, the heat between us cooling in time with the dwindling spark of our climax. My lips found hers, her hands running through my hair as she opened her mouth to me.

Eventually I put her back down, her legs still shaking beneath her. I looked up to see if anyone in the pack had seen any of the show. Seeing no one, I brought my attention back to Ava, pushing her hair behind her ears.

“That was—” she started.

I grinned. “I know.”

She pushed against my chest, rolling her eyes. “Oh *please*.”

“You did say that a few times,” I joked. But then I saw something move in my periphery. I looked back up, immediately going rigid. It wasn’t something, but *someone*, out in the woods.

It was fucking Adéluce.

*Has she been watching us this entire time? Is that what she’s into now?*

I gritted my teeth as my pleasure was quickly overtaken by anger.

Ava twisted to follow my gaze. “Xavier, what is it? Is someone there?”

**Episode 4533**

“Things *will* be different between us,” Greyson said, after pondering my question for a few moments.

I pulled back as my stomach dropped. Had he seriously just admitted that? “What?”

Greyson leaned in and whispered, “They’ll only get better.”

I started to question him, but then he pressed his lips against mine to silence me with more kisses, and I decided to stop resisting. I was powerless against him. I did want things to be better. I wanted him by my side, to be safe, to be our Alpha.

To be my mate.

I moaned as his kisses grew more feverish and he carried me over to the bed, his tongue pressing deeper into my mouth.

*He can’t promise that things will be the same between us, and I know that. It’s possible that the witches’ solution will be worse than the problem, but I have to cling to the certainty that our love can withstand anything.*

Greyson laid me down gently on the bed and crawled on top of me, his lips never leaving mine. I lay underneath him and answered the heat of his kiss by opening my mouth wider, inviting him to take control. His lips were liquid warmth, and his tongue was just as insistent as his hands as he ran them up and down my body, slowly working me out of my clothes.

“You’re mine, no matter what,” Greyson said as he dragged my panties down my legs and threw them to the floor. “Tell me.”

He cupped my sex and slowly dipped one finger inside me.

“I’m yours.” I arched against him, my eyes shut as I relished the feel of his soft lips pressing kisses down my neck.

His hands glided under my ass, and he gently squeezed as he nibbled at my bottom lip, hard enough to drive me wild. He rolled over onto his back and pulled me on top of him so that I was straddling him. His gaze dropped to drink in the sight of my bare breasts before he covered them with his hands, gently rolling my pebbled nipples between his fingers. Pleasure jolted through me as he took one of them in his mouth.

He lifted his hips to grind his length against me. I loved the feeling of his hardness growing between my legs and pressing against me, hot and needy. Jolts of pleasure rocked my body, and I leaned down to cover his lips with mine. I rotated my hips and inhaled sharply at the feel of his erection against my clit. I increased the pressure, wanting more.

“I’ll never let you go,” Greyson whispered.

He gestured for me to rise up onto my knees, then he lifted his cock in his hands and used it to part my slick folds, slowly pivoting his hips so that his tip played at my opening without going inside. I pressed down against it, hungry to take him inside me. Giving in to my urging with a sigh of pleasure, he pressed his cock upward until he broke through and plunged inside.

I stopped him halfway, needing a moment to adjust to the delicious demand of his advance. Once I was ready, I drifted down to take him in completely.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Cali,” Greyson whispered. “You have no idea.”

I gasped as he tightened his hold on my waist, gently guiding me up and down his shaft.

Chills raced up and down my spine at the delicious pressure of his cock filling me to the brim until I was sure that I was about to come right then and there. His arousal continued to blossom in my depths, and I cried out in bliss. My body went slack. I submitted to him completely as he increased the pace of his thrusts.

Soon, I was too overcome with pleasure to keep up with his pace. Sensing this, he flipped me over onto my back. He drove into me, sending his cock plunging impossibly deep before he pulled out almost completely, only to slam back in with a loud grunt.

“I never want to lose this,” Greyson said.

He plunged in and stayed there for a few torturous moments.

I clawed at the sheets as a surge of ecstasy swarmed my senses.

“I don’t either,” I whispered.

He grabbed my legs and pushed them up so that my knees nearly brushed against my ears, letting him go deeper. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of him, the heft of his heavy form pressing down on me paired with the deep ache that lit up my body every single time he thrusted into me.

I dropped my head to the pillow and caught Greyson’s reflection in the mirror across from the bed. I loved the way he looked as he dominated me, his muscled abdomen flexing and relaxing with every move. Then he hooked my legs on top of his shoulders, sinking us even further into the mattress. The friction between us was making me delirious in the best way.

“I’m going to come,” I said as I felt pleasure building in my center.

“Me too,” Greyson grunted.

We gasped at the same time. He jerked against me as I came, his own orgasm taking hold. Greyson’s hips spasmed against my body, and he kissed my neck before taking my earlobe between his teeth and gently nibbling. I gasped for breath, my arms wrapped around his shoulders as I started to come down from the high.

He pressed a kiss to my temple. “I love you.”

We stayed that way for a long time before Greyson rolled over onto his back. I immediately moved to lay my head on his chest.

“I really wouldn’t mind if things stayed just like this,” I said. There was a chance that the alternative could be the exact *opposite* of this, no matter how much we wanted to believe that we could beat any negative consequences that might come our way once the witches cast their spell.

Greyson looked down at me in surprise. “Do you really want things to stay exactly the same?”

I paused to really consider my answer. “That’s not quite what I meant, I guess. I don’t want anything about our feelings for each other to change. That’s all.”

Greyson was silent for a while before he said, “That’s impossible. I promise to love you more and more each day.”

I laughed. “*That’s* impossible for me. I couldn’t love you any more than I already do.”

Greyson planted a kiss on the top of my head. “Well, I look forward to being smothered by your love, but it’s going to have to wait. I want to call Chloe so we can get the ball rolling.”

I sighed, unable to hide my anxiety.

*He’s told me over and over again that he’s going to do this, but should we have more reservations about it? Should we be more concerned about the payment? The possible outcome? Mate bonds are strong; is it really possible that they could sever it? Maybe we should wait for all of this…*

Greyson squeezed me tight. “It’s going to be okay. I promise,” he said, like he was reading my mind. “Just concentrate on keeping Elle safe. And keep those rowing boys far away from you—I don’t want to have to come and fight your entire team.”

I giggled. “I’ll make sure to stay by Elle’s side for her safety—and theirs.”

Greyson moved to leave, but I quickly tightened my hold on him to keep him next to me. “Are you sure you have to go now? Can’t you stay a little longer?”

“I wish I could, but I have no idea how long it’ll take the three witches to cast their spell—or even if they’ll be available. I want to get ahead of this. The sooner we take care of the sire bond, the sooner we can get our lives back.”

He gave me another kiss before he pulled away and started to get dressed.

“What if the witches need Elle to do their spell?” I asked, as he headed for the door. “Then what?”

Greyson considered that. “That’s a good question.” He pulled out his phone. “Why don’t I give Chloe a call right now?”

I watched as he dialed the witch and put her on speaker phone. She answered quickly, and Greyson got right to the point.

“Hi, Chloe, it’s Greyson,” he said. “I was wondering—would you need Elle to complete the sire bond spell?”

“No,” Chloe said. “We only need the one who turned her.”

I was somewhat relieved by that, though I hated that Greyson was going to go through the spell alone.

“Good to know,” Greyson said.

“So I take it you want to move forward with the spell?” Chloe asked.

“Yes,” he said. “And I’d like to get it done as soon as possible.”

“Great,” Chloe said. “My sisters and I will start our preparations, then we’ll come right to you. See you soon.”

**Episode 4534**

**Xavier**

Squinting my eyes, I tried to get a better look at whatever was lurking out in the woods, even though I already knew who it was. I wished that I were just seeing things, that it was nothing but the shadows playing tricks on me, but I knew better. The shadows gave way to the unmistakable shape of Adéluce. She’d been watching us.

I turned back to Ava, hoping to block her from seeing. I gasped when I saw that Ava was frozen in place, her beautiful eyes fixed on the woods.

I turned back to look at Adéluce, unable to suppress my rage. In a flash, she disappeared from her hiding place in the woods and reappeared right in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” I spat. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to grab her by the neck and squeeze until she was out of my life for good. Could I get close enough to do just that?

“I was just enjoying the show,” Adéluce said. “I guess I can kind of see why women are always fighting over you.”

I squeezed out from between Ava and the house, my rage building. “You’re sick! You just can’t leave me be, can you? You’re obsessed! You’re not satisfied unless you’re encroaching on every aspect of my life. You’ve already crossed the line a million times, but this is too much!”

Before I knew what I was doing, I lunged at her. With a lazy flick of her hand, Adéluce used her magic to stop me in my tracks.

“Need I remind you that I won’t tolerate another one of your attacks?” she drawled. “You’re fresh out of second chances. Next time, I won’t hesitate to end you. Then I’ll go after Cali and Ava, and you won’t be around to do anything about it.”

“You won’t kill me. It’s just an empty threat, and you know it. If you kill me, where else would you get your kicks from watching people fuck? Where else would you get your sweet revenge, huh?”

Adéluce smiled. “How funny. Are you really trying to shame me? I mean, how could I *resist* watching?” She waved a hand. “You’re doing it right outside, for anyone to see. Seems to me that you *want* people to watch. You love attention, Xavier Evers, let’s get one thing straight.”

“What do you want from me now?” I demanded. “I thought you wanted me to be with Ava? That’s what I’m doing, so what’s your problem?”

“Oh, I do want you to be with Ava,” Adéluce said. “And not only that, I still want you to declare your love to her, which I know you haven’t done. But the reason I’m here is because I thought you might need a little refresher on the rules.”

That was unsettling to hear. “A refresher? How could I possibly forget? You won’t let me.”

Adéluce stepped close. I wished I could’ve grabbed her, but I still couldn’t move. I never should’ve moved away from her in the first place. *Fuck!*

“Get the hell away from her!” I hissed as she reached out to stroke Ava’s cheek. “Leave her out of this, you bitch!”

“Watch your language, Alpha—I might slip and slit her throat, and it would be all your fault.” Adéluce leveled her evil smile right at Ava. “You know, for someone who can be so sharp, so cunning, your Luna has the sweetest blood I’ve ever tasted.” She looked at me. “I wouldn’t mind another taste. What do you think?”

“Leave her alone!” I snarled. “Or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll do what? Stand there and watch me like the useless piece of meat you are?” Adéluce’s smile widened as she backed away from Ava. “Anyway, I’m happy to leave your Luna alone. For now. I’m not here for her. I’m more interested in Cali.”

*What does she mean by that? What’s she up to now? Sending Ava into a coma wasn’t enough? Now she wants to hurt Cali, too?*

Adéluce circled me, stroking her chin. “Tell me, do you know where your precious Cali is right at this moment?”

“No,” I said. “Isn’t that how you like it? Me as far away and unconcerned with Cali as possible?” I was practically shaking with rage and worry. “What have you done with her?”

Adéluce smiled. “I haven’t done anything… Yet.”

I strained against the vampire-witch’s magical restraints, but it was useless. “Where’s Cali? Tell me where she is!”

“She’s at 3445 Trent Drive,” Adéluce said matter-of-factly.

I was sure I’d never heard that address before. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

What the hell was Cali doing there? And where was Greyson? The whole thing smelled like a trap, but if there was an ounce of truth to it… Fucking hell.

Adéluce reared back in mock surprise. “What? You don’t know? She’s having the time of her life at a college party. So many cute boys, and nobody there to protect her.”

I stayed silent, but I recognized the threat. How could I not? Adéluce was nothing if not predictable. Every few days, she appeared to make my life a living hell by tampering with the lives of the two women I cared about. She was right on schedule, and once again, I was at her mercy.

*Why doesn’t Greyson ever listen to me? I told him not to let Cali out of his sight, and now she’s at some party without him? I don’t get it. He finally has Cali all to himself, just like he always wanted, and he can’t be bothered to stick to her side even after I warned him to be careful?*

“You stay away from her,” I growled.

“Funny you should say that, since I’m tired of warning you to do the same. You’ve broken the rules too many times. Somebody has to pay—and it might as well be the one you love most. Maybe then, you’ll understand how serious this is.”

“If someone has to pay, it should be me!” I snarled. “Only a coward would keep going after people who don’t even know you exist! Who can’t even defend themselves!”

But it was too late. Adéluce was gone.

Ava’s hands were on me, and she was yanking me toward her. I was back where I’d started. “What is it, X? Did you see something? Is someone there?” She was still scanning the woods, but there was nothing there. “I swear, if Blaine or Zipper are out there spying on us—”

I shut her up with a kiss. I was freaking out on the inside, but I couldn’t let Ava know. She was too protective of me. If she got even a hint that something was wrong, she’d be on my back, trying to fix it. But there was nothing she could do about this. There was nothing I could do about it either.

*This is my life now—juggling the burden of keeping Ava and everyone else in the dark while simultaneously trying to maintain my sanity and damn near killing myself trying to save them from the danger lurking around every corner. They can’t protect themselves, and I can barely protect them either. I’m at Adéluce’s mercy. All I do is to throw people off her trail while trying to get ahead of her tricks. Even now, I’m kissing Ava because of Adéluce. My life isn’t my own anymore.*

Ava moaned and leaned into me, running her hands up and down my body.

I pulled away before things could get too heated again. “I thought I saw something, but I was wrong.”

I stepped away from her and quickly pulled on my clothes, then I started toward the porch.

Ava grabbed me. “Where are you going?”

“I have to go.”

I broke away from her and headed inside to get my keys, but Ava was hot on my heels.

“I’m not sure if I should be pissed off or worried. You can’t just fuck me, then cut me off like that. What the hell is going on?” she pressed.

I rounded on her and grabbed her by the shoulders. “I can’t tell you, okay?”

Ava stared at me in shock. “What’s *wrong* with you right now? Why are you acting like this?”

Ignoring her, I headed back outside. My world was blowing up, yet again.

I climbed into the car, the address Adéluce had given me burning at the front of my mind.

Ava was on the porch with her arms wrapped around her torso, just staring at me. Then she shook her head, going back inside. I knew she wasn’t happy with me.

Gunning the engine, I peeled out of the driveway. I was going to have to come up with an excuse for Ava. I knew that. But right now, all I could think about was Cali. It didn’t matter if I was walking right into a trap that Adéluce had conjured up. If Cali was in danger, that was enough for me, and the vampire-witch knew that. Cali was all that mattered. I had to do whatever I could to stop Adéluce.

*But what if I’m already too late?*

**Episode 4535**

Torin and I were on our way to the palace to pick up Elle. His boyfriend Kevin was going to meet us at the party—being an, unbeknownst to him, human shield—and Torin would be my backup if anything went wrong. But my mind was back at the pack house with Greyson. I desperately wanted to stay with him while the witches cast their spell, even though he seemed so confident that things would work out. I was having major second thoughts about this whole thing.

*Maybe he’s not as confident as he seems. Maybe he’s just putting up a front to protect me.*

“Do you think Artemis is already in the Fae world?” I asked Torin, desperate for a distraction. “She only left this morning.”

Torin nodded. “I have no doubt that she’s already made it there.”

“I hope she’s okay,” I said. “I wish I could talk to her.”

“It’s Artemis. She’s definitely okay,” Torin said.

As soon as we got to the palace, I knocked on the door and asked the attendant for Aysel, figuring that it might be easier to collect Elle with her help.

Aysel appeared seconds later, dressed in a silky robe and looking like she’d just woken up from a nap. “Cali, what a pleasant surprise! What can I do for you?”

“I’m going to a rowing team party, and I thought Elle might want to come. You know, get her out of the house for a bit.”

Aysel’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, a rowboat party sounds like fun!”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, hoping that she wouldn’t want to come. “Just a silly little college party.”

Aysel smiled. “Wait here a second, I’ll go get her.”

Torin and I watched Aysel go. I supposed it wouldn’t be the *worst* thing if Aysel came to the party, but she was a bit of a wildcard. There was no telling what would happen if she tagged along.

I was trying to think of a way to dissuade her when she reappeared with Elle by her side—and Lucian right behind them. I gasped, stepping away automatically. I thought he’d been locked up? Just then Armin appeared behind him, putting a strong hand on the Alpha’s shoulder.

“Caliana. I wish I could say it was nice to see you.” He rolled his eyes. “What’s all this about a party?”

He looked absolutely ragged, like he hadn’t bothered to put up his usual façade of perfection.

“I thought that bringing her along to the party might keep her safe from the council, at least for a little while. It’s not a permanent solution by any means, but, uh, it’s something?” I said. These days, I had no idea what might set Lucian off, so I wanted to tread carefully.

Lucian stuck his nose into the air. “If she goes, I go.”

Elle said nothing. She was glancing between us like she was waiting for us to resolve things without her input. I couldn’t blame her.

“Lucian, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said carefully. “This is a human party, so the fewer werewolves, the better.”

I looked at Aysel, hoping that she would back me up. Lucian needed to think about Elle’s well-being first, especially if he truly wanted to protect her. And after his freak-out, it probably wasn’t the best idea to bring him along.

“You don’t need to come,” Elle said, finally jumping in.

“Nonsense, my sweet,” Lucian said. “After our fight, I truly don’t want to let you out of my sight. You understand, don’t you?”

Aysel caught my eye and quickly turned to her brother, like she’d only just remembered that she should’ve been helping to plead our case. “Oh, no, Lucian, you shouldn’t go. I’m sure Elle will be fine. You and I should continue to mend our rift. With Elle off enjoying herself, it seems like the perfect time.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Fine, if you all insist. I realize that I may not be in the… the right state of mind to pose a worthy argument.” Lucian caught my eye. “But please, do promise that you’ll stay by Elle’s side the entire time. Don’t let her out of your sight. I wouldn’t want some filthy cretin to get any ideas.”

Before I could answer, Elle jumped in.

“Lucian, please,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I can take care of myself.”

“Fine, fine, that much I can count on,” Lucian said. He pulled Elle close and didn’t let go until she planted a kiss on his cheek. Elle rolled her eyes the entire time. “Don’t stay out too late, my forest rose.”

Aysel took Lucian by the arm and waved us goodbye before shutting the door.

“That was close,” Torin grumbled. “I thought they were both going to strongarm their way into coming along.”

“Lucian came pretty close,” I said as we all climbed into the car.

I pulled off down the palace’s long, winding driveway, and didn’t breathe easily until we made it out onto the open road.

“He’s so annoying!” Elle burst out. “Did you see how he was acting? It’s like he’s my father! I’m so happy to get out of there!”

“That has to be a lot to deal with,” Torin said sympathetically. “‘Intense’ doesn’t even begin to describe him.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Elle grumbled. “I know he’s my mate, but sometimes, I wish that he wasn’t.”

“*Sometimes?*” Torin repeated.

“Yeah. He’s okay overall, but sometimes, like right now… It’s too much.”

I hoped that the party would not only keep Elle safe, but lift her out of her obvious funk, too. Elle didn’t deserve to have Lucian throwing all his baggage at her, and now that I’d seen what she was dealing with, I was even happier that I’d managed to convince Greyson that Elle should come along to the party.

Half an hour later, we arrived.

Torin clapped his hands with glee as I parked the car. “I can’t believe it! My first college party! Do you think they’ll have Jell-O shots?”

“I don’t think it would be a college party if they didn’t,” I said, gagging internally.

“Kevin!” Torin shouted, racing out of the car as Kevin came walking up to the passenger side.

Elle started to get out of the car, too, but I stopped her.

“What now?” she grumbled. “I’m getting very good at sensing when someone’s about to lecture me.”

“I’m not going to lecture you,” I said quickly. “I just wanted to say that I really want you to have fun at the party, but we can’t forget the main reason why you’re here—to keep you away from the council.”

Elle’s expression softened. “I know. I *am* a little nervous. I’ve never been to a party like this one. Is it going to be anything like Lucian’s parties?”

I shook my head. “Uh… No. Not at all. It’ll be way better, I promise.”

I shuddered at the thought of going inside and seeing over the top decorations, naked people, and trays full of food that I’d never even heard of.

Elle smiled. “That’s good.”

“And we’re going to stick together in there, too.” I said. “So don’t worry about having to be on your own.”

I was a little nervous, too, about having to keep Elle safe. But I was also excited. Though I was still miffed at Lola for signing me up for college and getting me a scholarship for a sport I knew next to nothing about, I wouldn’t mind having a little fun, too. I just had to make sure that Elle felt supported and safe.

“Nice to see you both,” Kevin said, hugging Elle and me as soon as we stepped out of the car.

“I have a feeling that this is going to be an epic night,” Torin said as we made our way inside.

“The music is too loud,” Elle immediately said, grimacing. “Maybe it would be better if I just waited in the car.”

“And miss all the fun going on inside?” I said. “No. I promise that it’s going to be a good time.”

As soon as we entered, Bear rushed over and lifted me into a big hug. I gasped for breath, overwhelmed by his enthusiasm—and his strength.

The others came over, and we went through a quick round of introductions.

Kevin already seemed right at home. “Want to get a drink?” he asked Torin, taking his hand.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Torin said. They both disappeared into the press of the party.

Elle nudged me. “Why is that guy over there glaring at you?”

I followed her gaze to see who she was talking about. “Oh… Him. That’s Codsworth, and he’s pretty much always glaring at me.”

“Oh… Should I go rip his face off?” Elle asked.

“No. You can’t do anything like that here,” I said firmly. “This is a human party—and remember, they don’t know anything about werewolves, so just stick to being human, okay?”

“Okay,” Elle grumbled. “But let me know if you change your mind about the face ripping.”

I locked eyes with Gael from across the room, and he rushed over to greet us.

“Cali! I’m so glad you made it!”

“Thanks, Gael,” I said. “Oh, this is Elle.”

“Nice to meet you, Elle,” Gael said as he pulled a blindfold out of his pocket. Ignoring my protests and confusion, he tied it around my eyes and shouted, “Let the initiation begin!”

**Episode 4536**

Once my initial shock had waned, I burst out laughing as I tried to cover up the lingering anxiety. “You have to be kidding. Are you really going to haze me?”

I wasn’t joining a sorority; this was a rowing team. *They can’t be serious… Right?*

Gael didn’t answer. And when I heard the others gathering around me, I realized that they weren’t joking. They were really about to haze me.

“This isn’t funny,” I said nervously. “I thought we left hazing in the last century.”

I had no idea what they were planning, but whatever it was, I didn’t want it to happen. I needed to keep a low profile and stay by Elle’s side for the night, not get wrapped up in whatever they’d plans they’d dreamed up.

“Don’t worry, it’s just silly stuff,” Gael whispered in my ear. “Nothing dangerous or anything. Just go with the flow. I promise it’ll be over in no time.”

I nodded, feeling a little better.

“I don’t get it,” Elle said. “What are they doing, and why did they put that thing over your eyes?”

“It’s fine, I promise. Just stay calm, and don’t rip anyone’s face off!” I said, yelling to be heard over the music.

“What, is Elle some kind of serial killer?” Johnny joked. “Because if so, you should’ve warned us beforehand!”

I winced, realizing my mistake. I was just about to answer when Elle’s voice rang out beside me.

“No, I’m a werewolf,” she deadpanned.

I gasped and tensed up, but I relaxed as soon as I realized that everyone was laughing.

“She’s cool,” Gael said. “I like her.”

“I’m good, too—as long as she stays away from the face,” Johnny remarked, to another chorus of laughter.

*Thank god they don’t believe her… Greyson warned me to keep a low profile at this party, and what do I do? I yell orders at Elle about doing something very werewolf-like, and she says she* is *one. I have to be more careful.*

I grabbed Elle and leaned close enough to whisper, making sure that no one heard me this time. “Do *not* tell anyone what you are, don’t say the ‘W’ word again, and don’t worry about the hazing thing. I’ll be fine, okay?”

I was taking Gael at his word and hoping that this was going to be a pretty light round of hazing.

“Okay,” Elle said dubiously. “But I’ll be watching, just in case.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

“Humans are so weird,” I heard Elle grumble under her breath.

Someone grabbed me, and I was led away from the music. My ears perked up and a bit of my anxiety returned as the boys started chanting something in Latin. I had no idea what they were saying, but I was honestly pretty impressed that they knew Latin. I wondered if they were going to teach me their chant now that I was on their team.

*It might be cool to know Latin. I could impress Greyson with it.*

I snapped to attention as Gael’s voice quieted the room. “Worthy rowers, the time has come to welcome Cali into our ranks. Hold out your hand, coxswain!” he commanded.

Reluctantly, I held out my hand. I heard a round of snickers, and I tried to peek out from under the blindfold, but all I could see was my feet.

Somebody grabbed my hand, and I recoiled when it was dunked into what felt like a bowl full of slimy eyeballs. I tried to yank my hand away, but they held on tight and slowly began to move my hand around in the bowl.

*If this were a werewolf or witch party, I’d be worried that the eyeballs were real. But I think I remember from kindergarten that peeled grapes feel just like the real thing.*

Peeled grapes or not, the contents of the bowl still felt disgusting. I was already starting to feel a little uncertain about this whole hazing thing. If this was their opening act, I didn’t even want to think about what the main event might be.

“Gross,” I groaned, which brought on another wave of laughter. “How long do I have to keep my hand in here?”

“As long as it takes!” someone shouted.

“He’s right! And it is not enough to merely touch the eyes of the dead—you must eat them as well!” Gael announced.

There was another wave of laughter.

“I heard that eyeballs are good with hot sauce, but we don’t have any!” said someone whose voice I didn’t recognize.

*They’re all having way too much fun with this.*

“Do I have to?” I asked.

“You must!” Gael replied. “Or you shall suffer the wrath of the rowing spirits!”

Scowling, I forced myself to comply. I picked up one of the slimy balls, but then I jumped when someone slapped my hand.

“That’s not nearly enough! You must eat a handful!” Gael said.

I reached back in and picked up a big handful of the “eyeballs,” then shoved them into my mouth. Yup, they were grapes. Green ones, sweet and tart.

“And here’s something to wash them down with,” Gael said, handing me a cup.

I knew never to take drinks from strangers at parties, but these weren’t exactly strangers, and Elle would never let anything bad happen to me. I was absolutely certain that Elle really would rip someone’s face off if they pulled any dangerous stunts.

Bracing myself for the worst, I took a swig of a sickeningly thick substance and gagged. It smelled and tasted like bubblegum and cheese mixed together, and it was so sweet that I felt like I might throw up.

The boys cheered. “More! More! More! Drink more! Wash down the eyeballs!”

Not wanting to wimp out, I downed more of it. When I started to gag, I heard Bear’s voice as the cup was taken away from me.

“No point in making our new coxswain sick,” he said.

Next, I was guided to a chair and told to sit. Finally, the blindfold was ripped away.

I was surrounded by a bunch of grinning, excited faces, and I sighed in relief.

*I guess that could’ve gone way worse…*

And then I shrieked as I was hit in the face with a bunch of whipped cream pies. It got everywhere—my mouth, my nose, my eyes, and all over my clothes. I coughed and spat as I swiped the whipped cream off my face.

“And now that you’ve been properly creamed, it’s time for the tub of horrors!” Rodrigo announced.

*The tub of horrors? I don’t like the sound of that at all.*

“The tub of horrors? Really? We should do the hat of deceit next,” someone said.

“No, the tub of horrors!” Rodrigo insisted.

The argument kept going until a guy I’d never met before intervened.

“I think she’s had enough,” he said.

He came over and helped me to my feet, offering me a towel to clean off the whipped cream.

“Thanks,” I said, all too eager to wipe the mess off my face.

The guy draped a heavy arm around my shoulders. “I know what it’s like. I was hazed a few years ago when I joined the crew team. I have to say, they took it a little easier on you.”

“Fine by me,” I said as I wiped the last of the whipped cream from my face and neck, though my skin was still pretty sticky.

“It’s nice to meet you, Cali. I’m Carter. I’m a senior and not on crew anymore. I quit so I could focus on my pre-law curriculum,” he said proudly.

“Oh… Cool. Pleasure to meet you, Carter,” I said. I still felt a little out of sorts. So much had happened in such a short amount of time that my head was spinning.

“Do you need another shirt? The one you have on is covered in whipped cream. My room is on the second floor—you could change there if you want,” Carter offered.

I shook my head. “Thanks, but no, I’m fine. I think the shock of it was worse than the whipped cream itself. Don’t get me wrong, I love whipped cream, but I like it a lot better on top of dessert than on my face.”

Carter laughed, his arm still around me. “Even with the whipped cream, you have a killer smile. Why don’t I get you something to wash away the taste of that nasty drink? I brought my own seltzers—you can have as many as you want.”

I stumbled a little as he started leading me away from the others.

“I’m so glad you came tonight,” he said. “Everyone on the team said you were amazing, and it’s nice to see it for myself.”

*Whoa, wait a minute. Is he flirting with me right now?*

A sudden commotion drew my attention. I turned just in time to see Xavier pushing his way through the crowd. With one swift movement, he yanked Carter away from me.

I was in shock. “*Xavier?* What are you doing here?”

Carter glared as he jerked out of Xavier’s hold. “What the hell, man! Who are you, anyway?” he asked. “Are you her boyfriend or something?”

**Episode 4537**

**Greyson**

I was pacing in my room, wondering when the witches were going to show up. I wished that Chloe had been a little more specific about timing. For all I knew, she and her sisters weren’t going to show up for weeks.

*How long does it take a witch to prepare a spell? The timelines always varied with Big Mac and Kira. Sometimes it took a few minutes, other times it took days. But with three witches working together, it should go three times as fast, right?*

I thought back to my conversation with Cali, and how hard I’d worked to alleviate her worries. She didn’t want things to change between us, and I didn’t either. Despite the less-than-ideal circumstances, I finally had Cali all to myself. I could see her and sleep with her and kiss her anytime I wanted, without fighting Xavier for the pleasure.

It was heaven—save for the sire bond. It had to get rid of it, for Cali’s sake, and I was willing to put everything on the line to do so. Cali deserved better than a mate who went crazy over Elle at the slightest provocation.

*But what if I lose everything in my quest to break the sire bond? What if it ruins the amazing relationship we have? What if it breaks our mate bond? What if something else happens that we haven’t even considered?*

I knew that I couldn’t fully trust Chloe and her sisters, but I also didn’t believe that they would do anything to put me, Elle, or Cali in grave danger. There wasn’t any reason for them to hurt us, and they’d even helped me before. But this time they didn’t owe me a debt for saving their life…

Nevertheless, it was still pretty unnerving not to know how this whole thing was going to play out. The sisters were some of the most unpredictable witches I’d ever encountered, and in our world, “unpredictable” was pretty much a synonym for “dangerous.”

I stopped cold as my room started vibrating around me. The air seemed to take on a strange shimmer, and then the three witches appeared: Chloe, Posie, and Lauren, in the flesh. I’d expected to feel a little more dread when they showed up, but all I felt was hope.

*It’s almost over. I’m so close to getting back to normal. I can’t wait to go back to Cali feeling ten pounds lighter and with nothing to take on but the werewolf council.*

Even though I’d told Rishika and the others that I didn’t want to be interrupted, I’d made sure to lock my door. I didn’t want to explain what was going on, and I didn’t want anyone rushing into my room if they heard any strange sounds. I needed to handle this on my own, without anyone else getting involved and potentially throwing off the spell.

“I assume that Chloe explained our terms?” Lauren asked, getting right down to business.

“Yes,” I said. “I understand that there are three possible outcomes.”

The three sisters shared a look that gave me pause. Why did I always feel like I was way out of my depth whenever I was dealing with witchcraft? And being scrutinized by three witches at once made me feel uniquely helpless.

Lauren cleared her throat. “No, I’m referring to payment, so that might change your answer. Have you agreed to our *payment* terms?”

“Oh, Lauren, stop interrupting!” Chloe said. “Greyson knows how this works, and that we’ll be expecting some kind of payment… Though it wasn’t discussed in detail.”

“Well, that’s why I asked!” Lauren snapped.

“How much do you want?” I asked. “Or rather, what do you want?”

I immediately pictured Jay and his eyepatch. I wasn’t sure if I was willing or ready to give up one of my eyes… No, I was. It would be worth everything if the sire bond could actually be gone. I was willing to pay anything to get rid of the sire bond. I couldn’t be scared of something like that, not at this point.

“Tell him about Dolos,” Lauren said.

“Dolos?” I frowned. Why did that sound familiar?

Chloe sighed. “Dolos is our brother.”

“The asshole has something of ours, and he’s refusing to give it back,” Lauren snapped.

“He’s our brother, but Lauren’s right to call him an asshole, seeing as he’s such a twit,” Posie added.

“I’m partial to ‘piece of shit,’ myself,” Chloe said. “But they all work as far as I’m concerned.”

“I don’t understand what any of this has to do with breaking the sire bond,” I said.

“Obviously it has *everything* to do with it, Greyson,” Lauren said. “Dolos stole something from us—something important—and you’re going to get it back for us.”

“And if you don’t, then we won’t break your sire bond,” Posie said. “Simple as that.”

“So, wolf, do we have a deal?” Chloe was already extending her hand.

I put up both my hands. “Wait just a second. Slow down. I don’t have time to go on a treasure hunt. I have to break the sire bond before the werewolf council comes sniffing around again. If they get here and I’m not through with this bond, it’s going to cause issues, not only for me, but for my pack, too. They’ll take me, and I won’t have a chance to do this again. I can’t let that happen.”

Lauren waved a dismissive hand my way. “That’s hardly our concern.”

“We’ve named our price,” Chloe said. “Do you agree to our terms or not?”

*I hate being pressured like this, but honestly, what choice do I have? I knew they were going to ask for something, I just wish it was something I could give them right here and now.*

“I don’t even know what you want me to get from this Dolos guy.”

“Oh, Greyson, you need only ask. It’s an earring,” Posie said. She opened her hand to reveal a simple jade stud. “It looks just like this one.”

I leaned over to get a closer look. It didn’t look like much, but I imagined it had some kind of special power if their brother had stolen it from them and they were so hell-bent on me getting it back.

*I want so badly to tell them no, but if I do that, then I’ll be right back where I started—stuck with the sire bond. There’s no way out of this, as far as I can see.*

“Fine, I’ll do it,” I grumbled.

The sisters all clapped their hands in excitement. Money started changing hands between them, and I realized that they’d placed bets on whether I’d accept or not.

*That’s not a good sign. At least two of them were expecting me to say no. What don’t I know about this little mission?*

“Before I do this, I’m going to need a few details,” I said. “Where can I find your brother, and how am I supposed to get the earring back from him? I’m not about to get into a magical altercation with a witch. I’m a werewolf; we don’t exactly have the same skill set. And why don’t you three just get it yourselves?”

Another look passed between the sisters before Chloe spoke up.

“Dolos is a recluse,” she said.

“That’s putting it lightly,” Lauren added. “‘Hermit’ is more like it.”

“Same damn thing,” Posie said.

“Anyway, not only is he a *hermit*,” Chloe said, shooting Lauren a look, “but he’s paranoid as hell. He’d be suspicious if any of us showed up, and he’d definitely hide the earring somewhere we’d never find it.”

“But you? You’re a big bad wolf,” Lauren said. “Big bad wolves can be intimidating when they want to be, magic or not.”

“Though clearly not at this very second, since we’re not intimidated in the least,” Posie deadpanned.

“Exactly,” Chloe said, “but Dolos is another story. We think you can easily intimidate him into handing over the earring.”

“And it shouldn’t take much. On top of being a paranoid recluse, he’s a coward,” Lauren said.

“A big scaredy cat,” Posie added. “You shouldn’t have to worry about fighting him.”

“Okay, so all I really have to do is scare the ring out of him,” I said.

I was already mulling it over, thinking up a few ways to frighten him without making him so scared that he’d run away and force me to chase him. I needed this to go as smoothly and quickly as possible.

“Where’s his house?” I asked. “Is that where I have to go?”

“Sure, that might be a good place to start,” Lauren said. “He lives in London.”

I did a double take. “*What?* I can’t go all the way to London! I already told you—I don’t have time to waste, here!”

Posie smiled. “But you do have witches.”

The air vibrated and blurred. A blinding flash made me close my eyes, and when I opened them, I was standing alone in a dark room.

**Episode 4538**

“This is all just a big misunderstanding!” I planted myself between Xavier and Carter, hoping to defuse the situation before it spiraled out of control. “And besides, this man—Xavier—he’s not my—”

Xavier quickly threw a strong arm around my waist. “Boyfriend? That’s exactly who I am. I’m Cali’s boyfriend.”

I was stunned.

*Why would he say that? He’s been bending over backwards to make it clear that that ship has sailed, and now…*

Carter started to say something, but Xavier literally snarled at him.

Carter threw up his hands and backed off. “Sorry, man—she didn’t mention you. I never would have crossed any lines, or even thought about crossing any lines, if…”

He trailed off as he backed away and disappeared into the crush of the party.

The crew guys formed a circle around us, oohing and aahing before they started chanting, “Cali has a boyfriend! Cali has a boyfriend! Cali has a boyfriend!”

*What the hell? Why are they all acting like a bunch of kids? Are they really doing this right now? In front of everyone?*

I pinched the bridge of my nose, squeezed my eyes shut, and groaned, suddenly wishing that I was anywhere but here. Never in a million years would I have predicted that the night would turn out this way. I thought that the most embarrassing part of the night had already taken place—getting whipped cream smashed in your face in front of a bunch of strangers was right up there on the humiliation list—but this easily topped that.

*And what the hell is Xavier doing here—and claiming to be my boyfriend, no less? He has no right to present himself as any such thing. He lost that right when he left me to go shack up with Ava. I’m not his problem anymore—he made sure of that—so why is he here right now, involving himself in my life?*

I was trying to disentangle myself from him when Bear, Schmiddy, and Kayden surrounded us and started ushering us toward a closet.

“Don’t worry, this is all part of the haze-a-thon!” Schmiddy said.

Before I could stop them, they’d opened the closet door and shoved us inside. I heard the lock click, and then I was alone with Xavier.

Xavier licked whipped cream from his fingers, a frown pulling at his lips. “Care to explain?”

“Me, explain?” I shot back. I was pissed. “You’re the one who should be explaining. *Boyfriend?* How dare you call yourself that? You have no right to barge in here and threaten people! I didn’t ask for your help!”

“Would you rather have that other guy out there as your boyfriend? Did I block you from a new love connection?” Xavier inquired. “Don’t think my brother would’ve been happy to see you with some guy hanging all over you!”

“He was just flirting!” I huffed. “It was harmless. That’s what people do at college parties. Anyway, I can handle myself. I didn’t need you butting in.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Xavier asked, unfazed.

I was fuming. “Up until you showed up, I was having fun at a party! What kind of question is that?”

Xavier wiped more whipped cream off my neck, obviously a spot I’d missed, and gave me a skeptical look. “This is what you call fun?”

“What I call fun is none of your business anymore,” I snapped. “Besides, I have to get back out there. I can’t leave Elle alone—I’m supposed to be looking after her.”

I went for the door and started banging on it so the guys would unlock it, but Xavier grabbed my arm.

“Cali, slow down,” he said. “Wait just a second.”

I inhaled sharply at his touch, and my heart soared. Ignoring the surge of heat rising inside me, I shook myself free of his hold. “What? What could you possibly have to say to me?”

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I was puzzled. “Am I okay? What kind of question is that? Yes, I’m okay! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“So… You feel okay? Nothing weird?” Xavier was studying me closely, but I couldn’t read him at all.

“No, but you’re starting to freak me out,” I said. “Is there something I should be worried about? Is that why you’re here, claiming to be my boyfriend?”

This was all so out of blue… At least it seemed that way. But maybe something was going on, and Xavier had shown up to help.

“No, there’s nothing you need to be worried about at all,” Xavier said quickly. “I just—I had a premonition, and I wanted to make sure that everything was okay.”

I wasn’t thrilled to hear that. “A premonition? Since when do you get premonitions? And how did you even know where I was? Did Greyson tell you?”

Xavier shrugged. “That’s not important.”

I shook my head as I answered my own question. It must have been Greyson. No one else knew where I was. It wasn’t like I’d kept my plans a secret, but I hadn’t gone around announcing them, either—especially to anyone who would’ve run off to tell Xavier.

*So, Greyson told him where I was—but why would he want Xavier here? Is he worried about what might happen with the sire bond? Did he send him to protect me from something? Is he okay? Wouldn’t he come himself if he thought I was in danger?*

“Are you sure you’re feeling all right?” Xavier asked, interrupting my thoughts. “You look a little pale.”

“For the last time, *yes*!” I snapped.“I’m fine!”

I was tempted to shove him, just to get him to leave me alone, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. I was too conflicted to move a muscle. Too many thoughts were fighting for dominance in my head. I just couldn’t make sense of what was happening.

*Why did Xavier have to show up unannounced like this? Seeing him and knowing that he’s with someone else… It’s beginning to feel like torture. It would be better if I never saw him again. But no, that would be torture, too.*

I couldn’t deny that I’d liked hearing him say that he was my boyfriend, but it had been painful, too. A sad reminder that he *wasn’t* my boyfriend anymore—even though he was still my mate. Really, he was more Ava’s boyfriend than mine at this point.

“So you’re sure you’re okay?” Xavier asked again.

“I told you I’m fine! How many times are you going to ask me that? Will you just go home and leave me alone?” My longing for him was fueling my frustration.

Xavier took a step back. “I’ll leave you alone—I promise I will—but I’m not leaving the party. I can’t. Not until I know that you’re home safe. As soon as that happens, I’ll be out of your hair.”

My stomach lurched as he loomed over me, slowly boxing me into a corner. His warmth seemed to melt my cold demeanor, and I couldn’t take my eyes off his lips. He looked so sexy. So big and strong… So *Xavier*. I wanted him. I’d been without him for so long… How was I supposed to resist him when he was so close?

Once again, I snapped myself out of it.

“Stop!” I hissed. “You’re doing it again—sending me all kinds of mixed signals. I’m over it, Xavier! Just leave!”

I thought about the facts—well, the one that Kira had lived long enough to help prove. At least partially. Xavier’s weird behavior was due to some kind of spell. Whenever he acted like this, clearly displaying his affection for me only to flip a switch moments later and act like he hated me, it was all too clear that something was up. But why? To what end? Too bad I still wasn’t any closer to figuring out what exactly was going on with him.

*I can’t do this anymore. Spell or no spell, I don’t deserve to be jerked around like this.*

Gael’s voice filtered through the door. “Okay, sorry, you can come out now! We were just playing around!”

The lock clicked.

*Good. Now I can finally get out of here and get back to Elle and the party.*

I splayed a hand on Xavier’s chest and prepared to push him through the door, but before I could, I was suddenly overcome by a strong urge to kiss him. To rip off his clothes. To rip off *my* clothes. To present myself to him in the hope that bringing our bodies together might appease the fire that had been burning and growing between us since we’d been apart.

I jumped back in shock.

*Where the hell did that come from? I was seconds from losing control. I can’t let that happen. Especially not here.*

Xavier was watching me closely. “What is it?”

“Don’t you dare ask me if I’m okay again,” I snapped. “I am. It was nothing.”

I tried to step past him and make a break for the door, but he stepped to the side and blocked my path.

“Cali, I…”

We locked eyes. Before I knew what was happening, I’d pulled him into a kiss, and my hands were clawing at his clothes.

**Episode 4539**

**Greyson**

Disoriented and unsteady on my feet, I took a look around.

My eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and I was able to confirm that I wasn’t in any immediate danger… But I knew that could change at any moment.

Judging by the cobwebs and ancient-looking furniture covered in dingy sheets that most likely hadn’t been touched in years, I was in an attic. The air was musty and clogged with dust, and the floor creaked beneath my feet as I moved around to get a better picture of my surroundings.

*Is this some kind of vision? A dream? A nightmare?*

I took another step, and the floorboards groaned under my weight.

“Hello?” someone called out from the house below. “Is someone there?”

I froze. I was clearly in someone’s home, and I’d just been discovered. The element of surprise was now completely lost to me.

*What is this place, and how did I get here?*

Then it all came rushing back to me, and I realized that this had to be Dolos’s house. The three witches had blipped me here. There was no other way to explain it. I was a little miffed that I’d been blipped without my knowledge or permission—I was also grateful that I was here already. Maybe I’d be able to finish this mission a lot faster than I’d expected.

I heard the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs, and I braced myself.

*Great. I’m trespassing in a witch’s house. If I don’t play this right, I might scare Dolos into using magic to defend himself. I could probably get the jump on him before he caused me any real harm, but it’s not like I know exactly what I’m up against, here.*

“Dolos?” I called out. “Dolos? Can you hear me?”

The footsteps came to a sudden stop.

“Who’s there?” the voice demanded. “Tell me, now!”

“I need to talk to Dolos,” I said. “I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

There was a long pause before the footsteps started up again, moving up the stairs at a steady clip.

A light clicked on above me, and a door opened at the far end of the dusty room. A man’s head poked through. “Who are you, and what are you doing in my attic? This is private property. I didn’t put a sign up announcing that, but seeing as it’s *my* attic, I didn’t think I had to!”

I slowly raised my hands to show that I was unarmed.

“You’re right, this *is* your attic…” I hesitated, trying to think of a response that might calm the man down a bit. Deciding to improvise, I said, “I know I caught you by surprise, and I’m sorry about that. As for what I’m doing here… Well, I guess the easiest way to explain it would be to say that I came because I need a witch’s help.”

*I’m going to tell him the truth until it doesn’t work anymore. The witches said I might have to intimidate him, but hopefully it won’t come to that.*

Dolos narrowed his eyes as he took a single step into the room. “Oh, is that so? Who told you where I live?”

I took a step toward him and Dolos backed up, banging his head into the door frame.

I paused. “I really don’t intend to hurt you, Dolos. Can we just talk? I promise to explain everything.”

Still obviously wary, Dolos nodded slightly before disappearing back down the stairs, leaving the door open for me.

I approached the door and carefully moved through it before walking down the narrow staircase. Dolos was waiting for me at the bottom.

“My name is Greyson Evers,” I said as I descended the stairs.

Down here, Dolos looked way smaller and more frightened than he’d first appeared.

“I know who you are,” he said. “We spoke on the phone—but that still doesn’t explain how you ended up in my attic. What is it that you want from me? I don’t have any money, and my house is old and nearly falling apart.”

“I’ll admit that I do want something, but it’s something specific,” I said cautiously. I lingered a few steps above Dolos, not wanting to get any closer and risk freaking the man out. He was already skittish enough as it was.

“What?” Dolos asked, his eyes widening with fear. “What do you want?”

“Something that you took from your sisters,” I said.

Dolos’s expression turned startled, and then it quickly shifted to annoyance. “The earring? Again? Seriously?” He shook his head. “Wow.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know anything about it, except that your sisters really want it. I just assumed that it possesses some kind of magic that they want to get their hands on, or something.”

Dolos chuckled. “Nothing that exciting. It’s truly just an earring. A regular, run-of-the-mill, everyday earring. Nothing more, nothing less.”

*Why the hell would the sisters send me all this way just to pick up a plain old earring? Are they that obsessed with having the pair? This doesn’t seem right…*

Dolos gestured for me to follow him. “If all you want is a piece of jewelry, then I’ll hand it over—and you, Greyson Evers, can be on your way.”

Dolos led me down a long, narrow hallway lined with old portraits and dusty lights that didn’t quite permeate the darkness.

“Here, follow me,” he said as he opened a door and walked inside.

I followed him in, noting that the bedroom was somehow even dustier and more cobwebby than the attic. Clearly the man didn’t care to keep a clean house.

Dolos started to crack open a jewelry box on the dresser, and then he stopped.

“I have one question,” he said, not bothering to turn and face me.

I sighed. “What’s that?”

“Why did you agree to do this?” he asked. “If I had to guess, I’d say that my sisters have you up against the wall.” He chuckled again. “I love them, but they can be a real pain in the ass. And what’s worse than a pain in the ass?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Three pains in the ass!” Dolos dissolved into loud, dry, laughter.

*Oh no. Now I’m being subjected to dad jokes. This had better be worth it…*

“Funny,” I said with a small chuckle. “Actually, I’m just fulfilling my end of a deal I made with them.”

Dolos stopped rummaging through the jewelry box and finally turned to look at me. “Deal? What kind of deal?”

Deciding to downplay it, I spoke with the most nonchalant voice I could muster. “I just needed help with something. Your sisters agreed to provide that help.”

“For a price.” Dolos grinned. “I can’t blame you for being cautious—I wouldn’t trust a witch, either. I don’t know if you know this, but witches are notoriously shifty.”

“You don’t say?” I replied, wishing he would get back to digging for the earring. I wanted to get the hell out of here as quickly as I could.

“You know, that’s one of the reasons why I moved to London—to get as far away from my meddling sisters as possible.” Dolos looked me up and down. “But I guess I didn’t move far enough.”

He lifted something out of the jewelry box, almost reverently.

“My grandmother used to wear these earrings. She called them her good luck charm.” He let out a forlorn sigh. “I wanted them to keep them as something to remember her by, but my sisters wouldn’t hear of it. They took them from me. And, as you can see, I only managed to get one of them back. This one.”

He placed it in my palm, then folded my fingers over it.

*That was easy. Thank goodness. Now hopefully the sisters will blip me back so I can get this sire bond broken.*

“Why are you so willing to give it up now?” I asked, unable to help myself. “And so easily, at that?”

Dolos smiled. “Because I’m tired of having strangers show up in my attic looking for it. I’m a man who enjoys his solitude—and being scared half to death by footsteps in the attic every few months is no way for a peaceful man to live.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“I’m sure you can. I have to admit, you’re the nicest trespasser yet,” Dolos said solemnly.

“Oh, uh, thank you?” I said. I was itching to go. I had the damn earring, and I wanted to get it to the witches as soon as possible so we could get on with the spell.

“Hopefully now that you have the earring, my sisters will leave me alone once and for all.”

I nodded. “Thanks. And I hope so, too.”

I slowly opened my hand and was shocked to see that the earring didn’t match the one that the witches had shown me. I cursed under my breath and glared at Dolos, whose expression remained unchanged.

I extended my hand toward him, struggling to maintain my composure. “What the hell is this?”

**Episode 4540**

Stopping myself from wanting Xavier was no longer an option. Keeping myself from acting on my desires had quickly become an impossibility. And so far, it didn’t seem like Xavier could resist *me*, either.

He pushed me against a wall, sending a bunch of winter coats tumbling to the ground as our tongues met and our lips came together again and again. I clung to him, unable to let him go, not wanting to let him go, and quickly realizing that this was all I wanted in the world.

I yanked at his shirt, frustrated that I couldn’t get it unbuttoned fast enough. I couldn’t wait to touch his chest, to run my fingers along the deep ridges of his abs. I hadn’t felt his skin like that in so long…

His hands were all over me and I arched into his touch, desperate for him to explore every inch of my body.

“*Xavier*,” I moaned.

I felt like I was in a fever dream. I linked my arms around his neck and then jumped up and wrapped my legs around his waist. Xavier caught me with ease and held me as our kiss grew even more intense as he pushed me against the wall, holding me up. Soon, we were both out of breath and panting into each other’s mouths, but we still didn’t stop.

“Fuck, Cali, what are you doing to me?” he whispered. One of his hands plotted a course from my face down to my neck and shoulders before it plunged down to cradle my breast. He pushed it up and leaned down to nip me over my shirt and bra, then his lips were on mine again.

My head was spinning. I wanted him so badly that every inch of me was throbbing in time with my heartbeat. I hadn’t realized just how badly I’d been craving him until this very moment. It was *maddening*.

“What are we doing?” I asked, gasping for breath.

We both pulled away, and I looked into his eyes. The fire I saw burning there quickly spread, and our lips crashed together almost clumsily as I finally undid the last button of his shirt and pushed it down over his broad, strong shoulders. I gasped in pleasure at the sight of his naked chest, just as beautiful and toned as I remembered—maybe even more so.

*He wants me. I can see it in his eyes. I’ve seen that look a hundred times before.*

I looked at him, expecting to see that same look of passion in his eyes, but it wasn’t there. His gaze had gone dark in seconds flat.

He shook his head and gently set me on my feet. “Stop.”

*Is he really pulling this shit again? Burning hot, only to cool off a moment later? I can’t believe I fell for it again.*

“What?” I asked, blinking as I tried to regain some sense of self. “But you—”

“It’s not what I want.” Xavier shrugged his shirt back up onto his shoulders and was already buttoning it back up. “This isn’t why I came here.”

Frustration hit me like a ton of bricks, wiping away my desire. But not all of it. “Then why *are* you here? Why were you kissing me *back*?”

Xavier shook his head. “That was a mistake. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay, nothing else. And you are, so…”

He opened the closet door and stepped out.

I wanted to follow and tell him exactly how wrong he was, but I stopped myself.

*What the hell am I doing? What the hell was I* thinking*? What just came over me?*

I was embarrassed. I hadn’t come to this party to make out with Xavier in a closet like some horny teenager, but that was exactly what I’d done. And even now, I still wanted more.

*I just couldn’t help myself, simple as that. And I can’t even blame alcohol, since I haven’t had a single thing to drink except that nasty sugary garbage that Gael and the others made me choke down… Maybe that was spiked… But I doubt it. And I don’t feel tipsy at all.*

I took a moment to calm down, the hunger for Xavier slowly ebbing away to nothing. After I finally felt like I’d regained control, I exited the closet.

As soon as I emerged, I had to resist the urge to run right back inside. It felt like the entire party was looking at me.

Elle came walking over. “Why were you in the closet with Xavier?”

I was too flustered to answer. I wasn’t even sure what to say.

*Because I’m still so in love with him that I apparently threw all sense of logic out the window and had to kiss him? Because I wanted him to do whatever he wanted to me, just as long as he was touching me? Because apparently I just can’t control myself around him?*

I was relieved when Torin and Kevin came walking over.

“Did you know that there’s a swimming pool in the backyard?” Torin asked excitedly. “A couple of people are even swimming! This is a great party, Cali!”

“Really? A swimming pool? That *is* pretty cool,” I said, feigning interest.

“Yes, wanna see?” Torin asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Torin and Kevin pushed through the crowd, and I followed them numbly, scanning for Xavier.

*Is he still here? Was he even here at all? It’s starting to feel like the whole thing was a dream.*

But I knew that it wasn’t. I could still taste him, still feel the tickle of his hot breath against my neck, his lips on mine, his tongue plunging into my mouth, his hands on my thighs, the hard planes of his body pressed up against me…

*That was no dream.*

“Be right back—we’re going to go check out the snacks!” Torin said, taking Kevin’s hand and dragging him away.

I nodded distractedly as Elle and I stepped outside, only to be met with an explosion of water.

Cheers went up as Bear’s head breached the surface of an above ground pool that looked like it had only just been installed.

“Who’s next?” Johnny shouted through cupped hands. “Come on! Let’s all get wet!”

From above us, Patel shouted, “Watch out!”

I gasped as he flung himself from the third-floor balcony and belly flopped into the pool, sending another wave of water crashing over the sides to soak me and everyone else within a few feet of the pool.

More cheers rang through the air.

“You were right, Cali—this is nothing like Lucian’s parties. People are actually having fun,” Elle said, squeezing the water out of her hair with a grin.

Gael came walking over. “Cali! You finally decided to join us.” He motioned to the balcony. “You’re up next!”

I looked up at the balcony and then back at the pool, where absolute chaos was unfolding in the form of Bear and Patel wrestling and thrashing about in the water, sending even more of it splashing over the sides.

“I’ve already fallen off plenty of houses,” I said. “Besides, at the rate they’re going, I doubt there’d be any water left in the pool by the time I got up there.”

Then I saw the twins, Jayden and Kayden, appear at the edge of the balcony.

“Make way!” Kayden shouted. Then, in near perfect sync, they both leapt off the balcony and did a mid-air flip before they splashed into the pool.

“I don’t get it. Why is everyone jumping off the house?” Elle asked, shaking her head in confusion.

“They think it’s fun,” I said.

“Ooh! I want to try!” Elle said excitedly.

“No, Elle, that’s a bad idea.” I was supposed to be looking after her, not encouraging her to literally put her life in danger. Greyson would never let me hear the end of it if anything happened to her—and I didn’t want Elle to get hurt, either.

“But why? They’re doing it—why can’t I?” Elle pressed.

“Because they’ve probably done it a million times before, and…” I trailed off when I spotted Xavier across the way. He was leaning against the fence watching me.

I felt a sudden rush of desire and forced myself to look away.

Elle suddenly slipped away and dashed into the house.

“Elle! Come back!” I called.

But the werewolf was too damn fast. I sprinted after her just in time to see her jet up the stairs. Pushing myself to the limit, I raced after her, finally catching up to her on the third-floor balcony.

“Elle, I know it looks like fun, and I’m not saying that it isn’t, but it’s also really dangerous. You could get seriously hurt, or worse!”

Elle shrugged. “If I get hurt, I’ll heal!”

Panic surged through me. “No! Elle, that’s not—”

A chant reached us from down below.

“Lil’ Hart! Lil’ Hart! Lil’ Hart! Lil’ Hart!”

“Jump!” Johnny bellowed. “Do it! Come on, Cali! Do it!”

“Yeah! The water’s fine!” Patel shouted.

When I glanced over the railing, it looked like the pool was a million miles away.

“No way!” I burst out.

I was backing away when a sharp pain ripped through my shoulder. I shrieked, lost my footing, and toppled right over the edge of the balcony.

**Episode 4541**

**Artemis**

The woods were quiet, magic crackling through the air. Silence meant danger more often than not, but I didn’t feel anxious. I felt right at home while walking down the trail. Using all my senses to take in the scene, I kept my step light to maintain the quiet all around me. I knew how to expect the unexpected and keep my guard up.

I had arrived in the Fae world through the same tree that Adair had shown Torin and me during our last trip. Adair was nowhere to be seen now, though, and there was no evidence that he and I had fought anyone here. I might’ve erased the bounty hunters’ memories, but our party had still left traces behind. Someone must’ve come and cleaned up. That meant the incident hadn’t gone unnoticed, and I needed to keep that in mind. I doubted that it wouldn’t come into play later on.

In the Fae world, there were consequences to everything. Always.

Yet even if I felt watched—by the trees, by wild animals and creatures lurking—something about this felt so right. The air around me was charged, forcing my every instinct to remain sharp at all times, but I knew this place. I didn’t need to be safe to feel good. Growing up in the Fae world had taught me how to navigate this kind of existence.

I knew that I would never feel quite at home in the human world. And when I had felt welcomed there, it had more to do with the people around me than the place itself. I missed everyone so much already. I loved spending time with Cali and training with her. I enjoyed watching my mom water her flowers and Tom cook. I adored every moment I shared with Rishika. I had a great time with the Redwood pack, with Greyson as our leader.

But being—*existing*—in the Fae world was something else. It felt like this deep knot in my stomach had eased. I wondered if Rishika would ever consider joining me here to stay one day. The Fae world wasn’t exactly welcoming to werewolves, but I’d be by her side. Together, we would be unstoppable. And I could see her adapting to any place—she was easy-going and collected that way, whereas I was… decidedly not.

Perhaps she and I could one day be like those bicoastal couples in one of the human reality TV shows Torin liked to watch. Just less loud and argumentative with each other, obviously. Except Rishika and I could be a bi-realm couple and spend six months in the human world, and six months in the Fae world. That seemed fair.

If I weren’t about to be gone for… who knew how long.

She was right to suggest we break up.

I needed to find my father.

It didn’t make it any easier, though.

The trees thinned out as I moved forward, replaced by bushes and flowers. The sounds of bells ringing, people chattering, music started filtering into the quiet of the forest. I could tell there was a village up ahead. I took a deep breath and paused behind a thicket of bushes to change into clothes that would be more Fae-world appropriate. A tunic with a leather top coat.

I kept my leggings on, of course. No one was taking those away from me. I bet that Fae would pay a pretty penny if they realized how comfortable this type of trouser could be. Actually, importing leggings from the human world could be a viable business, if Rishika and I ever came to stay in the Fae realm. Just an idea for me to mull over when I had more time. When I had *her.*

Right now, I needed to start my search for real.

There was a loud cracking noise up ahead, like a small explosion, followed by bits of laughter.

I finished getting dressed and grabbed my things, stepping forward through the tall bushes. The village looked familiar. There were dozens of villages like this in the Fae world. They all blurred together in my head from my history as a bounty hunter.

Maybe I’d even been here before, collecting money for a completed job. At least that bastard the Kollector gave me some useful skills to work with today. Either way, this place should be neutral territory. No immediate or obvious danger in sight. But I knew that searching for my father was like looking for trouble every step of the way.

The feeling of having been here before lingered as I walked down the busy market street. The feeling of being watched remained. I kept my head low and my guard up while moving. The atmosphere smelled like spices, sulfur, and incense. The open-air vendors hawked their wares, everything from fabrics to food to live animals. I ignored them, until I came to a round-faced blacksmith’s counter.

There were three people in line before me to ask for his services. That was a good sign about the quality of his work. I had missed Fae-crafted weaponry, and my arrows—the physical ones—were in need of sharpening. I decided that this would be my first stop.

“What’s your business here?” the blacksmith asked when it was my turn. He was short and stout, with pale skin, a long yellow beard, and bright green eyes. His leather apron was greased up and charred, old scars on his forearms and coarse palms. A small feline animal—Cali would’ve called it a cat in the human world—was perched on a pillow, set on a shelf behind the blacksmith. Its shiny fur was black, its eyes a piercing blue.

Glaring at me, the creature hissed.

“She doesn’t like new faces,” the blacksmith told me apologetically. He tried to pat the little beast’s head, but the creature swatted at him, claws out. He shrugged. “Doesn’t like old ones sometimes either.”

“I bet she’s great for business,” I said in a dry tone. He barked out a laugh, and I dropped my arrows onto the table. “How much for sharpening?”

Inspecting the arrows, the blacksmith quoted me a price. It was fair, but I couldn’t resist bargaining with him for a moment or two. In the end, we met in the middle.

“When are they going to be ready?” I asked.

“Might take an hour or so,” he said. “There’s a tavern around the corner where you can wait.”

Taverns were goldmines of information, so this fit my plan perfectly. If anyone in this village knew anything about Kadmos, I might find out about them there.

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The sign over the tavern was large and rusty, the letters *TK* scribbled out into a smudge. The raucous noise from the inside bled out into the street, and I knew I was in for a treat. I was about to push the wide wooden doors open to pass through when there was a loud crash to my left.

A large man went flying through a glass window, landing on the street behind me with a thud. I grinned to myself. I’d missed this kind of unfiltered aggressive energy. The human world was framed by a sense of civility that felt fake most of the time.

Cali said that humans were kind at their core, but by looking at their news and at Torin’s reality TV shows, my impression of humans was that they lied a lot while hiding their true interests. In the end, money was their main driving force. Deception and exploitation ruled in both realms, but at least in the Fae world you wouldn’t be *that* surprised or hurt when someone acted like your friend only to backstab you in the end. You’d go straight for revenge.

Or you’d brush everything off and move along, just like the man lying on the street did.

He stood up, dusting off his knees as if nothing had happened. When he walked past me to go back inside, nonchalance overflowing, I laughed. This was the kind of entertainment I’d missed. I followed him into the establishment, taking in the scene. People were drinking, talking, laughing, shouting, playing cards, trading. I scanned the loud space for any suspicious faces.

The interesting part about that was that *everyone* in here seemed suspicious.

If I had felt watched earlier, now the feeling returned tenfold.

When I looked around, though, nobody was looking at me. Nobody paid any attention to me, but I stayed vigilant. I always did, anyway—it was like second nature by now. One hand in my pocket, gripping a trusty blade, I made a beeline for the bar and took a seat on a stool. The bartender, a large, imposing Fae with no hair on his head and no eyebrows, slid over to me.

In a gruff voice, he asked, “What do you want?”

“An ale…” I paused. “And some information if you’re willing to pass it on.”

The bartender gave me an appraising eye followed by a short nod. He busied himself pulling out a stein and filling it with a deep, amber-colored drink. I glanced around as he moved. Nobody was staring, but there was no way I hadn’t been noticed. New faces were never ignored.

I was counting all the weapons I had hidden on my person when the bartender passed the ale to me. Leaning on the bar in front of me, he asked, “What are you looking to learn?”

I stared at him dead in the eye. “What do you know about the Dark Fae, Kadmos?”

**Episode 4542**

**Xavier**

Cali tumbled forward, falling off the roof. My heart fell at the same time, dropping into my stomach just as my mate screamed. Before I could move or think, she landed in the pool with a huge splash.

My first instinct was to dive in and save her, but she knew how to swim. She would be fine, and causing a scene would probably piss Cali off even further. She already seemed frustrated and confused after what happened between us in that closet. After I’d let it happen *yet again*. My lips and skin still fucking burned where she’d kissed me.

And then a thought entered my head.

What if Cali *hadn’t* tripped?

What if Adéluce had pushed her into the pool to punish me for kissing my mate back?

I gulped.

*No.*

Everything was going to be okay. Cali had just lost her step. She was clumsy. It was just her thing. She was a good swimmer, and the distance between the roof and the pool hadn’t been too high. The loud cheer of her teammates told me that they did this dumb diving thing all the time without any problems. They screamed their approval of “Lil’ Hart.”

I doubted they’d call Cali “little” if they saw her with her glowing shield and sword that seemed to chop through anything.

I watched her form under the water, counting backward for her to resurface.

*Five.*

*Four.*

*Three.*

*Two—*

“Why’s she not out of the water yet?” someone asked.

The cheers had died down.

“Do you think she hit her head?” someone else said.

All my reservations flew out the window.

My wolf howled, the instinct to protect and defend rising, and I had to hold back from shifting. I ran forward instead, diving in to reach for her. The chlorine burned when I opened my eyes, but I could see Cali’s still form near the bottom of the deep end.

She had lost consciousness.

This had Adéluce written all over it.

My anger was so potent it felt dizzying.

I pushed forward with a strong stroke and made it to Cali. Wrapping my arm under hers, I pulled her up toward the surface. She weighed nothing, stayed unmoving. I mind linked, *Hold on, I got you.*

She didn’t reply.

Seconds later, I broke through the surface. Cali’s gasp of air brought such relief I thought I’d fucking laugh right then and there. She coughed and sputtered in my arms as I swam toward the edge, but that meant she was breathing. It was all I needed.

There was commotion all around, people shouting, and one of Cali’s teammates pulled her from my arms and onto the solid ground. I kept my eyes fixed on her as I pulled myself out of the pool. A crowd started to form around her, and I pushed through, calling, “Stop fucking hovering over her! Give her some space!”

When I got to my mate, she didn’t seem harmed. There was no blood on her head, and she was breathing.

“Cali,” I rasped, gripping her arms to pull her closer. “Are you okay?”

Her teeth were chattering, her eyes downcast. She looked lost, afraid, and she was shaking in her heavy jacket that now sopped with cold pool water. Nobody else who’d fallen into the pool had had such an extreme reaction. This, whatever was happening here, couldn’t be normal.

Fucking Adéluce.

“Someone get her a towel!” I barked, pushing her hair back from her face. “It’s fucking freezing out here!”

The tall South Asian guy that had helped me get Cali out of the pool handed me a towel.

“Should we call 911?” he asked anxiously, phone in hand.

“No,” Cali said in a broken croak. She was finally speaking. She was still shaking. “I’m— I’m just cold.” She stood slowly, with effort.

People were still talking, staring, but I focused on her only.

“We need to get you out of these cold clothes,” I said quickly, stepping behind her to pull the jacket from her shoulders. The cardigan she had underneath slipped off as well, and for a single beat, she stood there in her blank tank top, her shoulder exposed to me.

There was a bright red handprint on Cali’s shoulder.

What the *fuck*?

I grabbed the towel from the ground and covered it before anyone else could see. Gingerly, fearing I would hurt her, I twisted her around to face me. She looked up at me, and her lips were slightly blue. She still looked exhausted, like that single dive in the pool had drained all her life power. This could only be magic.

Fuck.

“We need to get you inside and warm you up,” I said.

She was too weak to protest when I picked her in my arms. Ignoring the raucous hoots of the crowd, I rushed inside the house and upstairs. Holding her tight against me, I kicked open a couple of doors on the second floor before I got to the bathroom.

“Everything…” Cali sighed against my neck, shivering. “Hurts.”

Fear left a bitter taste on my tongue.

“I know,” I said. Like a fucking moron. “Hang in there.”

I turned the shower on to a warm stream and settled Cali into the tub. What the fuck was I supposed to do now? What happened next? I glanced at the door—locking it would be futile. If Adéluce wanted to pay us a visit, nothing would stop her. I doubted she’d do it when there were so many witnesses outside, but that hadn’t stopped her from pushing Cali off the roof.

This had to be Adéluce.

I wanted to tear her apart.

“It’s quiet here,” Cali breathed in a whisper. I dropped to my knees next to the tub, rubbing down her arms to bring more warmth to them. Her eyes were droopy, but her shivering had subsided.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked. Again, like a helpless fucking moron.

She rubbed at her eyes before looking up at me. She blinked slowly, swallowing. Her hair was wet, plastered on her forehead. Her lips had turned from blue to that pale pink I always wanted to taste. And even though she seemed steadier, she still looked so drained it was terrifying.

“Better,” she said wanly. Then, in a mutter, “I almost forgot what it was like to have you save me.”

I wasn’t going to answer that. Because if I did, it would be to tell her I fucking adored her and hated myself for bringing her any harm. This was my fault, and I knew there was a chance that I was making things even worse by taking care of Cali, but I couldn’t just *leave* her like this. It was the whole reason I’d come here in the first place. I’d known that Adéluce was going to try something.

The mark on Cali’s shoulder was there to remind me how Cali and I had gotten here. How Adéluce had stolen Seluna’s ashes, how she’d forced me into this deal. And now Cali paid the price once again.

I wanted to claw my own skin off.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked again.

“It hurts,” Cali said with a grimace, her eyes closing. Her head tilted back, and my throat dried. I didn’t dare think what would happen if she lost consciousness.

I had seen Ava fall into a sleep that she couldn’t wake up from only recently.

“Cali, no, you can’t pass out,” I rasped. “Stay here. Stay with me.”

Cali’s eyes fluttered open again. She frowned. She looked exhausted, barely standing, in pain. She let out a whimper, a tear falling down her cheek. “My shoulder really hurts…”

“It’s going to be okay,” I lied. “I need you to stay awake—”

Cali let out a stuttering breath. “I want to sleep for a few minutes…” Her head started to fall backward, and I caught it with my hand before she made contact with the tile. My wolf was roaring in fury, my fear smothered under his rage before the two became one. The possibilities flying around in my head were all horrifying and fucked-up.

*I* was supposed to be Adéluce’s toy, but she took it out on my mates all the time. She took it out on Ava when she bit her and sent her into a coma. She took it out on Cali, but she hadn’t bitten Cali, so this couldn’t be happening. Unless… Could she force someone into a sleep without even biting them?

Was Adéluce about to send Cali into a coma, too?

Cali’s eyes were closed now. Could she hear me? She seemed pale, broken down, eyes squeezed shut, and lips parted.

“Cali, *please*,” I choked out, cupping her face, shaking her shoulder. “Please fight it. Please stay awake for me. If anything happens to you—” I couldn’t control the whisper that broke out of me. “If something happens to her,” I said, talking to Adéluce, “I’ll fucking kill you.”

Cali’s eyes flickered open, suddenly.

I froze.

Looking at me strangely, Cali asked, “What did you just say?”

**Episode 4543**

**Greyson**

The piece of jewelry in my palm gleamed. It was pretty, shiny. Absolutely useless. My eyes flickered up to Dolos. “This isn’t the right earring,” I said evenly.

“Oh? Is it not?” Dolos’s expression took on a saccharine quality that solidified the fact that he was fucking with me. “My apologies. Maybe there’s another one in here.” He turned his back on me, his small shoulders shaking in what had to be quiet laughter as he rummaged through the jewelry.

I got so angry I bit my tongue and tasted blood.

I dropped the earring on the floor.

The moment the metal touched the wood, a light vibration coursed through the small space of the attic. I wondered if this was the equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet.

The wizard stopped moving.

“I have no time for this, Dolos. Stop playing games.”

Slowly, Dolos turned to me. A sharp grin cut across his face, transforming his entire face. His jawline became sharper, his cheekbones higher, his hair shifting to a deep black color, falling over his forehead. His shoulders shook again, but this time they looked larger. He suddenly seemed and *felt* bigger.

What. The. Fuck.

Magic, that was what. They’d said I wouldn’t have to worry about this. They clearly underestimated their brother.

“Oh, dear…” Dolos’s teeth gleamed white in the dim light of the room, and now he was shaking all over. With loud, obnoxious laughter. *Mwahahaha* and all that. A huge cliché that I wanted to decimate right now.

“You didn’t really think that it was going to be that easy, did you?” His voice had changed as well. Much more familiar, with an air of certainty and arrogance that reminded me of the person I’d spoken to on the phone.

I *really* didn’t have the time for his bullshit.

“What do you want?” I asked, hands turning into fists at my sides. “Why are you doing this?”

Dolos smiled. “Because it’s fun? It’s in my nature? Because I feel like it? Any and all of the above? Would you ask a dog not to bark, a fish not to swim?” His smile faded, a gleam in his eye, as he stepped closer to me. “Or a wolf not to bite?”

“I don’t have the time for this,” I said. Again. “What do you want for the earring?”

“Oh no, Greyson.” Dolos snorted. “You’re ready to bargain already? Where’s the fun in that?” He started to circle me, appraising. “I almost feel bad for you. My sisters clearly sent you unprepared.” He came to stand before me again, tilting his head to the side. “Maybe they want you to fail?” He laughed again. “Not that it matters. This is just a game we’re playing.”

My life and happiness were on the line, and this guy was goddamn *playing*. My heart had been running wild for a while now, but now it beat so hard I could feel it all over my body. It was fueled by one thing, only.

Rage.

When I spoke this time, my voice shook with fury.

“Just tell me what you need me to do to give me the earning. I can’t leave this place without it.”

He gave me an innocent look. “Sounds to me like I’m holding all the cards here. Make sure you tell my sisters that if you see them again.”

*If*, he said.

Son of a bitch.

“I’m not just any wolf, Dolos. I’m an Alpha. People will come looking for me. Powerful people. You really don’t want to involve me in whatever bullshit you and your siblings have going on here.”

“You involved yourself by agreeing to act as my sisters’ little Postmates guy,” he said, laughing some more. “You should never trust a witch with—”

I was done listening. My wolf roared, pushing through, the shift starting from my hands, claws expanding. I raised a hand to swipe, ready to attack, when—

Pain pierced through me, and I was slammed back against the wall.

“Now, now,” Dolos said with a *tsk*. “We can’t have any of those wolf shenanigans, can we? Have to keep this playing field even.”

I grimaced, pushing myself to stand straight. “Is it even if you have your magic and I have nothing?”

Dolos rolled his eyes. “‘Even’ is relative, isn’t it? I have my magic, and you have…” He paused, frowning. “You have a point there.”

This fucking maniac was unbelievable.

“Good thing I don’t need to be a wolf to beat you to a pulp.”

I lunged forward. Dolos’s eyes widened and zeroed in on my fist as it approached his face…

Only to hit a plate of glass.

A mirror.

Dolos’s reflection.

It shattered, falling onto the floor.

“Are you fucking *serious*?” I said under my breath, looking around. The dull ache in my hand, the blood dripping from my knuckles, took a backseat when I realized what the fuck was happening.

“I’m always serious, wolf,” Dolos said with a sharp chuckle. “Welcome to my maze of mirrors!”

The name was apt. The attic was gone, and mirrors surrounded me. In each and every one of them, Dolos’s ugly grin mocked me. He gestured at the single opening in the circle of reflections, eyebrows arched. “Why, look! There’s an opening to the maze. How helpful is that?”

“So helpful,” I deadpanned, walking toward the reflection closest to me.

“Didn’t I tell you this would be fun?” Dolos grinned wider, teeth sharpening, his beady eyes zeroing in on me as I stalked over to him. “Just walk right through that opening, and you’ll find what you need on the other side.”

I smiled and said, “Go to hell.”

And then I smashed through his reflection.

Dolos’s laugh echoed.

“My, look at you!” another reflection said.

I smashed through that one as well.

“I’m glad to see you don’t play by the rules, wolf.”

Mirror by mirror, I broke the entire room down to the ground.

“It’s exciting to find a like-minded individual,” Dolos said.

There was one mirror left. The rest of them were shattered pieces of the floor, the air and space all around me dark and vacant. The only source of light was Dolos’s final reflection. He looked back at me with a sneer.

“Well?” he mocked. “What are you waiting for?”

I raised my bloodied hand to strike once more. I didn’t even feel any pain now. Only rage at the thought that this fucking horror of a creature thought that I had the motherfucking time for this. Had the sisters set me up? Or was I their last resort? Did they fear their brother? Was that why they’d sent me after him?

I couldn’t answer for certain.

I was trapped while time ticked by, while the council was looking for Elle, while Cali had to protect Elle and endanger herself. My pack was in danger, my life was in danger, and I was stuck here with this sick magical bastard that I wanted to rip to shreds.

But I couldn’t.

Dolos was the strong one, and I was the wolf who couldn’t become a wolf. The warlock was intrigued, though, at least. I could tell that as long as I kept playing and he saw me as something interesting, something *fun*, I would stay alive and perhaps find a way to escape.

When I raised my torn-up hand this time, it wasn’t to curl it into a fist and strike.

It was to smudge the blood over the glass of Dolos’s reflection. Over his face.

Over his grin that turned into a thin line.

“What are you doing?” he asked. He sounded both intrigued and annoyed.

“Imagining what you’re going to look like when I get my hands on you,” I replied calmly, using my bloodied fingers to paint over his throat.

He laughed once more. “How morbidly artistic!”

I swallowed the rage and moved along.

“Your sisters had a lot to say about you, you know.”

He paused. “What did they say?”

When I struck, it was with a calculated guess.

“That they’ve always been a unit, the three of them. That they’re stronger together, and they care for one another. But you?” I met his narrowed gaze. “You’re just the pathetic recluse who needs to steal an earring to get their attention.”

I punched the mirror, in the space between his eyes.

For the first time ever, a gasp echoed, joining the sound of shattering glass.

I didn’t know about my actions, but I hoped my words had fucking hurt.

Behind the final mirror, the jewelry box I’d seen earlier was placed on an illuminated stand, just a few feet away. I stepped forward before starting to run, running in the dark, reaching. But the farther I ran, the more I reached, I didn’t seem to be getting any closer to the box.

I paused, breathing hard, hands in fists once more.

How the hell did you escape a warlock who couldn’t be bargained with?

“Do you want to know what else your sisters said?” I asked, looking around the dark.

Dolos’s laughter echoed again. “Sorry, not falling for that again. A noble effort, though.”

My jaw clenched. “When are you gonna quit playing games?”

He chuckled. “Not sure. This is too much fun. But I think I know what’s going to be even better.”

There was a flash of light that forced my eyes closed for a second.

It was all it took for the space around me to turn into a beautifully ornate living room. There was a gold candelabra on a mantlepiece and two huge windows letting in light. My heart was beating so hard that my chest ached. Where the *fuck* was I? I ran to the window, expecting to see woods, a garden—something—but instead…

I was met with a pale void. A space that looked never-ending, wrapped up in a sheet of nothingness.

Where the *hell* was the light coming from?

I reached to touch the window, to open it, when suddenly, the sheet *moved*. It unfolded, gliding open to reveal…

An eye.

Dolos was a fucking *giant*, his massive eye looking down at me. Literally.

His laugh boomed through the room.

“Welcome to my dollhouse, wolf,” he said. “Good luck getting out of here!”

**Episode 4544**

My head felt muddled. There was warm water all around me, the porcelain of the tub cool on my back. I was in a bathroom—I knew that. Someone was with me—another thing I knew.

*Focus*, I thought. *I need to focus.*

It took me a second to remember what had happened.

*The searing pain in my shoulder… Falling into the pool… Everything turning black… And then…*

Xavier.

Xavier’s voice echoed in my ears.

I gasped, my eyes flying open to see Xavier staring at me. His eyes were dark bruises, fixed on my face. He looked angry, anguished. He’d just said… something.

I had no idea what.

“What did you just say?” I croaked.

He shook his head, squeezing my hands in his. He’d been holding them, I realized. Flashes of him caressing my face, my arms entered my head. My heart did a somersault, his touch warming up my cold skin.

But then, he let go.

The loss of him hurt, and then shame washed over me all over again.

*Why do I have to feel like this? Why can’t it just…* stop*?*

“Are you still hurting?” he asked gruffly.

I paused, assessing myself. “No,” I said. I sounded dubious. “Not anymore, at least. It was very sudden.”

“So you didn’t trip?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not exactly. I was startled by a pain in my shoulder. It felt like—like when the Seluna mark would hurt. But I don’t know why I would be feeling phantom pains again.”

Xavier’s scowl was deep. “Lean forward,” he said. “I want to check your shoulder to make sure.”

I nodded. I held my breath and moved closer, his scent overwhelming me. When I felt him run his fingers over my bare shoulder, I had to suppress a shiver. Biting my lip, I couldn’t help the thrill of electricity his touch elicited. My head was invaded by the memory of us in the closet just moments earlier. My stomach flipped, warmth spreading all over me.

*This is so beyond fucked up. I don’t even know where to go from here*, I thought. Desire and disgust were twisted in a ball inside my chest. *What the hell came over me? Why would I grab Xavier like that? If Greyson knew…*

What?

What would Greyson do?

Absolutely fucking nothing.

Greyson would feel betrayed and hurt, but he’d accept and understand, as ever. He would hate upsetting me even after I’d upset him, and despite everything, he would still love me.

Greyson was out there, fighting to break the sire bond so we could all be safe, and he and I could be together. Meanwhile, I was here, kissing Xavier.

*When the hell did I become so selfish? So self-centered? So shameless?*

Self-disgust hit so hard I winced.

“Cali?” Xavier asked. “Are you okay?”

When I met Xavier’s gaze, I wanted to weep. I knew that he was with Ava, and he’d been clear about his feelings, but… he’d definitely kissed me back. He looked at me like he wanted to kiss me right now. His mixed signals would kill me one day.

I thought that, in the end, this was probably how I’d go mad.

This boy could drive me mad.

It took effort to speak. “Is there anything on my shoulder?”

He shook his head, exhaling sharply before he sat back, taking his hands off me. “No. You’re good.” I could hear the relief in his voice, but the way he looked away from me felt purposeful. Like he was hiding something.

Unable to help myself for yet another time, I reached over to touch his face, forcing him to look at me. “You’re hiding something,” I said.

He shook his head, gripping my wrist to pull my palm away from his skin. “No. There’s nothing on your shoulder.”

“That’s not what I mean, Xavier,” I said. My voice was shaking. “All this time, you’ve been hiding something from me.”

He didn’t look at me. He dropped my hand and pulled away yet again, as if avoiding my proximity cost him nothing. His cold behavior right now made me question my reality, how passionate his kisses had felt earlier.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, getting up to his feet. “I’ll go get you some dry clothes. You should wait—”

“I’m not crazy,” I said sharply.

He paused, staring. “What?”

“I know there’s something going on with you,” I whispered. My voice cracked. “You came to this party to protect me. You kissed me back, Xavier, and now you’re withdrawing again. You can’t tell me that all this insane back and forth is fucking normal.”

His shoulders tensed. I watched as a familiar darkness came down over his face. It was like a wall between us. He took another step back, as if he had to get out of here. As if I was something he needed to escape.

*How did we end up like this?*

I knew how.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll bring the clothes.”

Without another word, he left the bathroom.

Without the distraction of his presence, I realized how badly my head was pounding. This whole thing was weird—the phantom pain, how I couldn’t swim after I hit the water.

*What the hell happened to me?*

Shaking my head, I turned off the water and watched it drain down the tub. Slowly, I rose to my feet, stepping out. My wet clothes weighed me down, sticking to my skin. I grabbed a towel and wiped myself down as much as I could before pausing in front of the mirror. I looked pale and tired, but I was unharmed.

I twisted around to see my shoulder in the reflection. There was no handprint there. But the pain I had felt had been real and all too familiar. Why else would I almost drown despite knowing how to swim? Why would I feel so groggy afterward? Why else would I have tripped and fallen into the pool from the third floor?

*The third floor… Shit!*

I had been on the third floor, looking for Elle.

*Good god, who knows what kind of trouble Elle could have gotten up to while all this drama was happening?*

I grabbed the towel again, wrapping it around my shoulders before running out of the bathroom. I had to find Elle—I had no idea if Elle would stay at the party without me telling her to stay. I knew she understood the risks as far as the council went, but Elle wasn’t very into being prudent. She could be reckless, and she had a tendency to run off and do whatever popped into her head.

*Who does that? Like, seriously?*

With a groan, I realized that there was a chance Elle had worked herself up to a frenzy in my absence. I ran out of the room, heading to the place where I’d last seen her. The third floor. Questions twisted in my head the entire time. What if she wanted to go confront the council? What if she wanted to go back to protect Lucian? What if she decided to go find Greyson to help him and make sure he was okay?

That last question made my stomach clench so hard that my breath caught. I paused at the stairs, leaning against the balustrade. I didn’t want to call this feeling jealousy. I’d gotten over that. Greyson was in danger while he was trying to do the spell and fix this entire mess, and I had taken over caring for Elle. I wanted to help her. I knew I could, and she was my friend. I wanted her to be safe.

I also wanted her to never touch Greyson again.

*Remember the potential outcomes, Cali*, a voice in my head said. *In one of them, Elle becomes Greyson’s mate. And when you asked the three witches if Greyson could end up getting three mates in total, they said that was possible as well.*

I refused to dwell on any of those thoughts. Because that?

That *would* drive me mad for sure.

Things changed, promises broke, Xavier was like a fucking hurricane, and he’d always been one. But Greyson? He was my one constant. The only one who always forgave and accepted me anyway.

*Who would I be without Greyson by my side? Without him being only mine? Without the certainty of his love?*

I could tell myself that I was a human, a Fae, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a fighter, a peacemaker. But above all else, I was a *due destini* mate. I was defined by my feelings. I was torn between two Alphas, and I had lost the one already.

*If I lose Greyson as well…*

No.

*NO*.

I couldn’t spiral right now. I needed to find Elle. Sucking in a breath, I started running up the stairs to the top floor.

“Elle!” I called. “Elle, where—”

A hand gripped my shoulder, the one that used to bear the Seluna mark, tightly. So tight that I cried out in pain.

“What the hell?” I gasped, and then I was spun around.

Elle was there.

She looked *enraged*.

“Elle!” I choked out, struggling out of her grip. “What’s going on?” I smoothed a hand over my shoulder. “You grabbed me so hard it hurt!”

Elle advanced toward me, her teeth bared.

I couldn’t help but take a step back. “Elle,” I said shakily. “What’s happening to you?”

Elle’s voice was low, ominous. “I know what you did with Xavier. You keep hurting Greyson. You don’t care about him. You don’t deserve him.” She let out a growl. “I’ll make sure you can no longer harm him.”

**Episode 4545**

**Greyson**

I was not going to panic.

But how, *exactly*, did one get out of a fucking magical dollhouse? Brute strength, which was the thing that defined any Alpha werewolf, wasn’t going to work here. I had known that already, though, hadn’t I?

Dolos wanted to play a game here.

He wanted the challenge. The intrigue. The *fun* of it. I was pretty sure that the only thing I could do right now was put up enough of a fight to keep this motherfucker entertained. Until I was given an opportunity to escape.

“What’s the matter, wolf? Are you scared?” Dolos laughed.

I looked up at his eye and said, “I’ve been through worse.”

I saw teeth through the window. Dolos’s grin. “Really? Do tell.”

“A few months ago, I tore my father’s heart out while it was still beating. He liked playing games, just like you do.”

The teeth vanished, same as the smile. I was done standing there. I had no idea what happened next, but instinct said to break into a run. I pushed the door open, moving from one overly ornate room to another, luxury all over. But the dollhouse had no end, and the empty rooms felt like a labyrinth I couldn’t escape.

My chest felt tight as I ran, a shortness of breath that wasn’t normal. Panic was a luxury I couldn’t afford, though. I needed to get back to the sisters and get them to do the spell. I needed to deal with the council, because if I didn’t come back…

They would go after Cali, wouldn’t they?

And I wouldn’t be there to protect her.

My focus slipped, and I stumbled over a thick carpet. I gripped the side of a sofa to steady myself, breathing in and out. Dolos’s voice thundered through the house. “Well? Keep moving!”

I didn’t respond. Maybe letting him talk was the way to go.

“I think you should try going through the blue door on the bottom floor, Greyson. That’s what I think.”

The door was up ahead.

“Do you see the golden detailing on it? Beautiful, is it not?”

The golden details were shaped like flowers. I wasn’t sure if Dolos would have a better time telling me the truth or lying to me here, though, so I took a gamble and headed toward the staircase, the second floor.

“Well, *well*.” The warlock chuckled. “You’re a stubborn piece of shit, aren’t you?”

“I prefer the term resilient,” I said under my breath, reaching the top of the stairs to find a door waiting for me. This one was blue, too, with golden details shaped like snakes. Flowers were better than snakes. But at this point, everything was upside down, so I twisted the knob and pushed through.

A light flashed, so bright I had to blink.

\*\*\*

When my eyes opened again, I was standing in front of a high-ceilinged elegant room full of people. I had a tux on. There was a glass of champagne in my hand, and I was already talking.

I was saying, “We’re here to celebrate my mother finally getting her happily ever after.” An awkward laugh spilled out of me, and I shook my head. “Sorry, I’m not so mushy usually.”

The crowd tittered with laughter, and I turned to see Sabine and Big Mac sitting at a table. The witch had a rare smile on her face. My mother was beaming at me, her hand placed over chest, her lips mouthing the words, *I love you.* And it was nice. It was nice to be happy.

It was nice to be loved.

“I want to wish my mother and her wife the most wonderful life,” I said, holding up my champagne flute. “I’m happy that they finally got here, after everything.” I turned to the room, smiling. “Everybody raise your glass to Sabine and Big Mac.”

“To Sabine and Big Mac,” everyone said, just as I spotted Cali among the crowd.

She looked beautiful in a yellow dress. Artemis and Lola were by her side, the three of them chattering and laughing. Her eyes met mine for a moment, and she offered a sweet smile, one of those that never failed to send my heart into a frenzy.

God, I loved her.

The rest of the pack was nearby, waving at me enthusiastically, one team. I waved back, smiling once more before it turned into a frown. Behind the pack was… Xavier and Ava? What were they doing here? Why would Sabine invite them? Why did they look so happy to be here?

Why did Xavier look at me like I mattered?

This was weird. Maybe attending the wedding was a way for us to mend bridges? I never thought I’d live long enough to see the day. I never thought I would live a long life in general, actually, since I spent the first half of my existence knowing that I would wake up to a beating.

“That was a toast right there! Hear, hear!” a familiar voice rang out. My chest went tight.

I never thought I’d hear that voice again.

I turned to find Silas in a suit, clapping for me, grinning.

Full of pride for me.

“This isn’t real,” I said.

A light flashed again.

\*\*\*

I opened the door to the Redwood pack house, taking a deep breath. It had been a damn long few days, but I finally got that fucking earring off that asshole warlock. The witches fixed the mate bond, and I could finally be happy. The place was quiet, so early in the morning that everybody was still asleep.

I knew that she would be waiting for me, though.

She had always been loyal that way. Unyielding. Always putting me first like I did with her. I rushed up the stairs, my whole body buzzing with anticipation. I couldn’t wait to take her in my arms, kiss her, touch her, tell her that everything was okay. That we could be together now, and nothing could break us.

We would be happy, finally.

We deserved it, I thought.

I made it to the bedroom door and flung it open. I saw her sitting at her vanity, brushing her hair. “There you are,” I breathed.

I reached forward, hand outstretched. My fingers burned with the need to grasp and hold tight. But before my palm could make contact with her skin, she turned around.

Elle.

Not Cali.

*Elle*.

Elle with her red hair and inquisitive eyes staring up at me.

She looked so beautiful it felt like a punch in the heart.

“No,” I rasped, stumbling backward.

This was wrong.

This was wrong.

This was wrong.

Elle squinted at me. “Is it, though?”

“This isn’t real,” I said, shaking my head.

A light flashed again.

\*\*\*

I was standing in the middle of Dolos’s attic.

It was an attic again, not a mirror maze or whatever the fuck. Dolos was here as well, arms crossed over his chest, a frown on his face.

“You’re no fun,” he said. “You keep breaking out of my traps.”

I breathed in. Out. In and out, and I quelled the rage.

And then, I kept on playing.

“From what you’ve told me, I thought you’d enjoy a challenge,” I said.

Dolos raised his eyebrows. “Not *that* much of a challenge.”

“This isn’t my first time going through this kind of mind trick bullshit, Dolos,” I said. “Your sisters might not have told me much about you, but it doesn’t sound like they said anything to you about me either.”

Dolos’s frown broke again. He snorted. “Touché. It seems that you and I may be at an impasse.” He started pacing, tapping his chin. “What to do, what to do?”

“You could just give me the earring,” I said calmly. “Then I’ll leave, and we will never have to see each other again.”

Dolos waved me off with a huff. “Don’t be absurd. We have great chemistry. Do you have *any* idea how hard it is to find a playmate who’s not boring?”

“A playmate…” I nodded slowly. “Someone to torture, you mean?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re so dramatic.”

The jarring thought that this recluse madman was actually *lonely* entered my head. I shoved it away before I snapped and tried to strangle him.

“I’m done here, Dolos. I don’t have the time for—”

The next time Dolos spoke, it vibrated through the room. “*WAIT*.”

I waited.

He stared at me before his eyes narrowed and yet another evil grin formed on his mouth.

Great.

“You break through my spells, and I cannot fight you with my fists, obviously. But you seem like a smart enough lad, and I am the most brilliant person I know, so…” He chuckled. “How about a little battle of wits?”

I *really* didn’t have the fucking time for this. But at least we were in the bargaining stage. Finally.

“What would a battle of wits entail, exactly?” I asked.

Dolos shrugged. “I’ll let you know after you agree. If you win, I’ll give you the earring.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Do I get to punch you?”

Dolos shook his head. “Nope. Your prize is the earring.”

“I’d really like to throw a punch in there as well.”

“Earring is all I can do right now, but you can come back at another time to discuss the possibility of a punch.”

I’d rather set myself on fire.

“Fine,” I said tightly. “I win, I get the earring. What happens if I lose?”

**Episode 4546**

Elle’s eyes were fixed on me as if I were a target.

Her hands hung at her sides, claws extended. Her low growl echoed, coming from deep within her chest. I’d seen her like this before. I knew what was happening. This wasn’t Elle. This was the bond between a werewolf and its maker.

When she took another step closer, I took one back. My throat was dry, tight when I whispered, “Elle, this isn’t you. This is the sire bond talking. You know I’d never hurt Greyson.”

“But you always do,” she said in a low hiss. “Always. I can *feel it*. I can feel him hurting because of you.”

Her words made all the air leave my lungs. “That’s not how—I don’t—” I shook my head, fighting to find the words. Fighting to calm her down in any way I could find. “Elle, Greyson knows I’m a *due destini*. He knows what that means when it comes to me and my feelings.”

Elle snapped her teeth, taking another step closer. “But you still hurt him,” she growled. “And you don’t care, because if you did, you would stop—”

“I can’t help myself!” I said the words loud enough that Elle paused. In a whisper, I repeated, “I can’t help myself. It’s a magical bond I can do nothing about. It’s fucking with my mind every second of every day, Elle.”

Elle’s eyes narrowed. “Greyson can’t help himself either when it comes to the sire bond.”

I choked.

“And you were jealous of him and me.” Another step closer. “You didn’t understand like he does. You made him feel bad about it. You don’t care about him; you don’t want him to be happy. You only care about *yourself*.”

“No!” I shouted. And this time, I didn’t move back. I stood there, staring at Elle head-on. I felt sick to my stomach. Because even if this was the sire bond speaking, Elle’s words cut so deep I felt like my heart would break.

It left me speechless.

“Xavier hurts you, and you hurt Greyson,” she went on in a low, harsh voice. “Round and round you go. The cycle needs to break. *I* will break it.”

Another step toward me, slow like the predator that she was. I realized that I might need to use my magic here to defend myself.

*This isn’t right! I can’t attack Elle! She’s just—*

She was just telling the truth. But it was more complicated than that. It had to be.

“Greyson would be more hurt if you killed me,” I blurted.

Elle froze. Her mouth closed, bare teeth hidden now. She frowned. “I… am not going to kill you.” She frowned harder. “I wouldn’t do that to Greyson.”

I took another step back, only for my back to hit a wall. “You wouldn’t do that to me either, right?”

I sounded unsure, and I hated it. Elle paused. The menace on her face had been replaced by confusion and anguish. She reminded me of Greyson in that moment, when he got lost in the sire bond, when he got under.

“Elle,” I started again, gulping. “Greyson would be devastated if anything happened to me, but I hope that *you* care enough about me to fight through this. We’re friends, right?”

This time, I took a step closer to her.

“Aren’t we friends?” I whispered.

Elle’s jaw was set. Her hands were still hanging by her sides, claws out, but she kept them there. She shook her head. Slowly, she said, “I do care about you. We’re… friends.” Her eyes glistened. “I don’t want to hurt my friends.” She gulped, a single tear running down her cheek. Her voice cracked. “I never wanted to hurt Helix.”

“I know,” I whispered, taking another step closer to her.

But the moment I reached over to touch her, Xavier’s voice echoed.

“What the fuck is happening here?”

Both Elle and I turned to see him rush up the stairs, heavy footsteps pounding. Elle was startled. She hissed, backing up. I was losing her again to the sire bond, and Xavier made everything worse by demanding, “Why does Elle have her claws out?”

Elle growled at him, snapping her teeth as I told Xavier, “Calm down. Right now.” I turned to her. “Elle, it’s okay. I know you don’t want to hurt me.”

Elle stared at me for a beat, her chest moving up and down, in time with her sharp breaths. She nodded. “I don’t.” She turned to Xavier swiftly. “Get Cali away from me.”

“No! I won’t let you—”

Xavier had already grabbed me, though. His grip on my arm was a vise as he pulled me down the stairs. “Let go!” I shoved him, but he wouldn’t budge, not even when I said, “I had it under control. Elle wasn’t going to hurt me! She was fighting it, she—”

Xavier whirled around to face me, his expression full of disbelief. “What the hell are you talking about? You can’t seriously fucking believe that, Cali!” he said. “You saw what happened with Dayton and Helix. I don’t trust that sire bond shit, and I’m not gonna let you get hurt again.”

His tirade, the passion behind it, the way he was still fucking grabbing me, left me light-headed. This wasn’t the cold man I’d seen before. This was Xavier. My Xavier. I allowed myself a beat to stare into his eyes, to breathe when he did, the two of us panting.

“You should go back to the Redwood pack house,” he said gruffly.

I glanced up the stairs. “I can’t just leave Elle here. I promised I would take care of her.”

Xavier shook his head, his face twisting into a glower. “Greyson wouldn’t want you to put yourself in so much danger like this. If Elle decides you’re a threat to her sire, she’ll attack. Or worse, she’ll fucking try to kill you like—”

“*No*,” I snapped, yanking my arm out of his grip. “Elle is my friend. She would fight the urge.”

“You may be fucking nuts and want to risk this, but I’m not gonna let you,” he snapped, thrusting something toward me. Dry clothes. He had said he would find some for me, and he came through. With all the commotion, I hadn’t even noticed him holding them. Sharply, he said, “Go ahead and change. I’ll get you out of here.”

The realization hit me like a wall of bricks.

“You’re worried about me,” I said with certainty.

Xavier’s guard went back the fuck up, but I’d seen it now. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You saved me from the pool, and you brought me dry clothes. You knew to protect me from Elle.” I gasped. “Is that why you showed up here? To make sure Elle didn’t lose control and attack me?”

“I’m not doing this with you again,” he said, and he goddamn *dared* make a move to turn his back on me.

I blocked his way, my eyes fixed on his.

*I’m not letting him go.*

I didn’t think I could.

“You keep ignoring my questions, Xavier,” I snapped. “How did you even know I was here? I know you’re hiding something from me. From all of us.”

He shifted on his feet, averting his gaze. “I’m done talking about this—”

“You never fucking *talk* about anything, Xavier!” I said, letting out a bitter laugh. “One second you tell me that kissing me was a mistake, the next you’re holding my hand and stroking my face in the bathtub, fussing over me. Which one is it?”

Xavier stared at me for a long beat. His silence was deafening, his dark gaze boring into mine like he wanted to look into my soul. I wasn’t the one hiding things here, though. And suddenly, the walls around him felt like a fortress.

“Aren’t you tired of asking the same pathetic questions over and over?”

I gasped at the harshness of his tone.

“If you’re reading that much into me making sure that you’re not gonna die, then you need to figure some shit out for yourself,” he scoffed, making a move to sidestep me.

“Stop fucking doing this to me!” I blocked his way again, grabbing the lapel of his jacket. “You kissed me back in the closet! I know you’re lying about something, you’re just—” I shook my head, taking in a sharp breath. “Is Ava blackmailing you?”

He let out a jeering laugh, gripping my wrists to push my hands off him. “You really think Ava can control me?”

The cruelty in his expression made me feel raw. Like he could strike with mean words at any moment, and I needed to be prepared. But I’d learned by now that this was how things went. I could fight him in my own way. Even if this was yet another mistake I’d make, I could fight *for* him and what we used to have.

My voice lowered, but it stayed even. “I have no idea what to think. But I know that the way you’re acting doesn’t match what you’re saying. It hasn’t for a while, and every time we’ve kissed since you left me, it feels real, Xavier. You told me you didn’t love me, you didn’t want me, you broke up with me, but we keep finding ourselves here, together. The only way any of it makes sense, any of your actions, is if some part of you…”

I paused, taking in his cold face.

“Some part of you still loves me, Xavier.”

I never saw it coming, but he winced at that, jarred for reasons I couldn’t begin to imagine. But just before his expression could close off again, I saw a flash of pain.

My breath caught. My heart thundered in my chest.

“You do, don’t you?” I whispered. “You still love me.”

**Episode 4547**

**Xavier**

I could not be listening to this.

Cali should not be saying this.

But I had led her to this point. I had pushed her to it. Me, with my saving antics, my hands and mouth that couldn’t stay the fuck away from her, with those damn dry clothes that I’d brought her. Yet another reckless token of care that I had stupidly hoped Cali wouldn’t notice, while I fucking *knew* that Adéluce had to be nearby.

What if she was listening to our conversation?

This was all it might take for the vampire witch to kill Cali. I had seen the Seluna mark on her shoulder, like a warning of what was to come. And after all the horror I’d felt when Ava had fallen into a coma, I had no idea how I would react if anything worse happened to Cali.

This needed to end. Now.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Cali,” I said, tossing the clothes to the ground. “You want to stay here with Elle? Fine. I’m leaving by myself. I don’t give a fuck.”

She blocked me, peering up at me as if she could see in my head. My stomach throbbed at the sight of her determination, like she had me caught now, and I needed to fess up.

She had me *trapped*.

“I want to hear you say it again.” Her voice was loud but shaky. “Look me in the eyes and say that you don’t love me.” She took a step closer, her gaze dropping to my mouth. “Say you don’t love me, and I’ll let you go.”

I couldn’t believe that she was here, still fighting for me. For us. Everything in me wanted to admit how much I needed her and wanted to be with her. But my love for her could be her death sentence, and she had no idea.

She was still going.

“I know I’m right, Xavier. You love me, but something’s holding you back. If Ava’s not blackmailing you, if Kira was wrong, and it’s not a spe—”

I didn’t let her say the word “spell.”

“*Stop fucking talking*,” I growled, cutting her off. I wanted to add, “for your own good,” but I couldn’t bring myself to utter the words. This conversation had been toying with too many of Adéluce’s rules for a while now, and it was only a matter of time. I had no more risks left to take.

“I need you to leave me alone,” I snapped. “I need you to forget about me, fucking quit me—”

“I’ll never quit you,” she rasped. “The same way you can’t quit me.”

I went rigid. The bravery in her face made my heart ache.

“I know you’re lying to me,” she said shakily. “I know why we always end up tangled up like this.” She looked up at me, a wild breathless smile on her face. “*You love me*, Xavier.”

I did.

And that was why she had to stop before it was too late. I had to stop her, and the only way to do that and penetrate her determination and belief in us was to bring up one thing.

Ava.

“Why would I want *you* when I already have a mate?”

Immediately, Cali winced.

Even if I killed Adéluce, was Cali going to forgive me for this? For any of what I’d done and said?

At least she’d be alive.

“Keep Ava out of this,” she said, her voice cracking. “This is about you and me—”

“There is no you and me,” I scoffed. “Ava is the one I chose. *She’s* my Luna. What *you* are is my obsessed ex who won’t take a fucking hint.”

Cali seemed to stop breathing. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. I had to stop myself from dropping to my knees and begging for forgiveness. When she opened her mouth to speak, I was so terrified of what would come out and how it would affect me that I charged forward.

I needed to shut this down. Now.

“I broke up with you for a reason, Cali. I told you how I felt back then, but you’re not listening, so I’ll have to remind you. Ava is perfect for me. I never have to worry about her—she’s strong. She’s the best Luna I could ask for. We’re partners, we’re equals, and I trust her with my life. I trust you with *nothing*, and you keep proving my fucking point. I know I would have to constantly be protecting you if you were in my pack, just like I did tonight when I pulled you out of that pool. Why the fuck would I want a mate who’s so *weak*?”

*I don’t mean it.*

Silence.

Cali’s face had drained of color.

And she looked… defeated.

Gone was her bravery, her fight, her belief in herself and us. I had torn it all down. Yet I still hoped so badly that she’d snap out of it and see herself for who she was. I wished for her rage and anger, for magic to crackle at her fingertips. I wanted her to fucking hit me, yell at me, shove me down with a powerful blast and put her sword at my throat while spitting out, *“How’s that for* weak*?”*

But she didn’t stand up for herself. She didn’t try to tell me again that I was lying about my love for her. And I wondered if, in the process of pushing her away to save her, I had managed to finally break *her*.

Where the fuck did we go from here?

“He hurt you again.”

Elle’s voice broke the quiet. I looked up to see her come down the stairs. She seemed much more like the Elle we knew, but sharper somehow. Imposing, commanding. In control of herself. It was like she had grown up in the past few minutes in ways that neither Cali nor I could understand. She took one look between us before grabbing Cali’s hand. Cali’s head hung low.

Why wasn’t she speaking? Was she in shock?

“I won’t let him hurt you anymore,” Elle told a still-silent Cali. She shot me a look that carried so much disdain and disgust, it mirrored the way I felt about myself. Then she turned to Cali again. “You shouldn’t be surprised, though. Greyson has obviously always been the superior Alpha.”

I fought not to flinch.

I watched as Elle took Cali with one hand and picked up the dry clothes from the floor with the other. Cali still had not spoken a word. And as I watched her go, a sinking feeling of dread came over me. I knew I’d had to do this, but now I hurt so badly I felt like I could fucking drop, right here, on the floor. I shouldn’t have pushed her—me—that far.

How the fuck would I live with myself now?

What if this was Adéluce’s game all along?

The vampire-witch had obviously wanted me to see the mark on Cali’s shoulder. But would she have put the mark on Cali if I hadn’t shown up at all? I hadn’t paused to consider that my absence could have been exactly what would’ve kept Cali safe. It was like Adéluce had driven me here on purpose, and like a useless asshole, I had done her bidding.

What if she had wanted to distract me all along?

What if her plan was something else?

What if she was… going after *Ava* right now?

I had to get the hell out of here.

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I drove through a red light and ignored the honks all around me. I had to get to the pack house ASAP. But above all, I needed to find a solution to this torture. This situation wasn’t fucking sustainable—the paranoia, the back-and-forth, the various degrees of cruelty I was forced to thrust upon both my mates.

I was going to fucking lose my mind if we went on like this.

“What an eventful evening,” a familiar, cold voice said.

When Adéluce appeared in the passenger’s seat, I nearly jerked the wheel out of the dash with a shout that turned into a growl. The car veered, but Adéluce flicked a finger, and my hands went straight, keeping us on the road.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I spat, seething.

Adéluce sighed. “You needed a reminder of what I can do, so I thought I’d show you tonight. That handprint looked so realistic, right?”

I wanted to tear my hands from the wheel and rip her head off.

“Never forget what I can do, Xavier,” she went on. “I could have left the ring in this world, and your little mate would have been pushed back to her deathbed, like before.”

“I did what you asked, okay? I was a fucking monster to Cali! I pushed her away, so leave her the hell—”

“You think you have any power here? Because you *don’t*,” Adéluce hissed, her face twisting into a grimace. “If you disobey me, I can kill either one of them. Cali or Ava. Tonight, it was Cali who needed to be brought down a peg or two.” She raised an eyebrow, shooting me a vicious grin. “Or maybe I just wanted to distract you, and my real plan was to go after Ava all along.”

Adéluce’s eyes gleamed in the dark. Like a predator’s.

When I spoke, I didn’t recognize my voice. “What did you do?”

“You’ll have to check for yourself. There’s always the chance that—” Adéluce laughed. “Ava is already dead.”

**Episode 4548**

I couldn’t believe Xavier would say those terrible things to me. Or, really, I could, because he had told me variations on that bullshit a million times before. None of this was new information. He didn’t love me, I was delusional, I was pathetic, I was weak, I was a burden, I was useless, Ava was better than me, blah blah fucking *blah*, again and again.

I didn’t believe he meant a word of it. Maybe I *was* weak for thinking that.

We had gotten into this fucked-up, sick pattern that I couldn’t help but notice. He would save me, or he would kiss me, and then he would say something horrible to break me down and humiliate me. This dynamic between us was so twisted that it could only solidify my impression about something being seriously fucking wrong with him.

*Otherwise… what? He’s right? He’s an abusive piece of shit who enjoys playing with me? Am I pathetic and stupid to care about him, still?*

Maybe I was, in a way. But he had saved me only minutes ago.

How the hell could I ignore that?

“What happens now?” Elle whispered. She squeezed my hand, her eyes searching my face. “Should we leave?”

I still needed to keep Elle concealed from the council, so we weren’t going to leave the party. Perhaps we could just take a seat somewhere and avoid any excitement, though.

“We’re not leaving. Let me change first, and we’ll see what to do next,” I replied.

A moment later, Elle and I were in someone’s bedroom. I locked the door and started changing in those damn dry clothes that Xavier had brought me. Xavier, who didn’t give a fuck about me, right? But he’d still shown up at the party to help me and protect me. How the hell did he even know I would be at this party? It made no sense!

*He’s lying to me. He’s hiding something. He has to be.*

Elle sat on the bed, watching me the entire time. Her expression was searching and worried at the same time, as if she could see my distress. I was glad that she seemed to be back to normal. But I knew I had to tell Greyson what happened tonight—how the sire bond had acted up, and Elle had turned on me after realizing I had kissed Xavier.

My stomach dropped at the thought, guilt rearing its ugly head.

*How can I tell Greyson what happened, when not even* I *can quite understand why I was so overtaken with Xavier in the closet?*

“Are you thinking about Greyson?” Elle asked, cutting through my thoughts.

I tied my wet hair up in a ponytail. “Yes.”

She nodded. My throat dried out at the memory of all the things she’d said to me earlier. It had been the sire bond speaking, but the fear and shame inside me remained.

*Do I… do I really deserve Greyson when I keep on hurting him?*

*Of course not. You don’t deserve either of them*,a dark voice in my head told me*. You don’t deserve anything but the* due destini *killing you like it killed Cassandra.*

My eyes felt scratchy.

“I hope the spell doesn’t put Greyson in danger. I hope he’s okay,” Elle told me quietly.

I reached for her hand, squeezing it in mine. “Me too.”

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The moment Elle and I stepped out of the room, Schmiddy jumped into my line of sight. “Lil’ Hart!”

Elle was startled, but I whispered in her ear, “It’s fine. He’s a friend.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “Why is he so happy?”

These crew boys were like a pack of golden retrievers, weren’t they?

Schmiddy clapped a hand over my back. “I’m so glad to see you’re okay, and even more glad that I get to tell you the good news!”

“Cali could use some good news,” Elle informed him seriously.

“Who doesn’t?” He grinned, eyeing her up and down. “Love the hair, by the way. Very Disney princess vibes. I’m—”

“I have a mate, and he likes to kill people,” Elle said with an air of indifference.

He blinked at her in alarm while I laughed awkwardly. “She’s joking. Dark humor. Ha ha.” I shot Elle a pointed look. She shrugged. “*Anyway*,” I told Schmiddy, “what are you talking about? What good news?”

He shook off the Elle weirdness and turned to me, raising his fist for me to bump. “You did it! You won hazing!”

I paused. “I… didn’t think hazing was something anyone could win?”

He chuckled. “Well, ya did!”

“Do I get a prize?” I asked, intrigued.

Schmiddy laughed. “Your prize is being my partner in a round of beer pong.”

The absolute last thing I needed right now was to play beer pong. “That pool dive wasn’t fun. I think my friend and I will just take a seat somewhere and chill.”

“*Chill?*” He gasped dramatically. “But you’re okay! I mean—you’re looking good! Great! Alive! You should totally play with us.”

“But—”

He took both my hands in his. “Cali, please. I need your help.” He gave me puppy-dog eyes, full-force. Suddenly, I felt bad for him.

*Oh my god… Am I so easily swayed?*

“Do you really need my help?” I asked.

He nodded pitifully. “Dude. I can’t do this without you.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

He grinned. “Awesome!” He glanced at Elle. “And don’t worry about your friend, she can partner up with Bear. We can play mixed doubles.”

Now I was definitely worried.

*Okay, this is gonna be fine*, I thought*. I* am *trying to be normal here, right?*

“What is beer pong?” Elle asked as Schmiddy led us to the table. He waved at Bear, shouting to him.

“It’s a drinking game,” I said.

“What’s a drinking game?” Elle asked. “And why don’t we play this at the pack house?”

I shook my head. “Honestly, as long as you don’t drink the alcohol, I think you’ll be fine. It’s just—”

“Hey, hang on a second,” Schmiddy cut in. “What’s the pack house? Is that a bar?” He turned to Elle, eyebrows arched. “Is there a cool bar that Lil’ Hart knows and she’s not sharing?”

Elle frowned up at him. “You are so loud and so happy. Why?”

Schmiddy paused before bursting out laughing. He turned to me. “I like her.”

This was getting out of hand.

“Did someone say mixed doubles?” For someone so big, Bear popped out of nowhere, startling both Schmiddy and me.

Elle looked at him with the most unimpressed expression ever. “Who are *you*?”

“Your beer pong partner, Bear.” He nudged her. “I guess you’re Lil’ Hart’s friend, Lil’ Red.”

Schmiddy snickered. Elle raised her eyebrows. “I can become very big, actually. Even bigger than you, Bear. Do you want to see?”

“She’s joking!” I squeaked, shooting Elle another look. She shrugged again. To redirect, I told Bear, “Schmiddy and I are going to take you and Elle down.”

Bear scoffed. “Ha, I don’t fucking think so.” He pointed between Elle and himself. “Big Red and I are going to *crush* you*.”*

“Big Red.” Elle repeated the nickname slowly, as if trying it out. She smiled a little, meeting my gaze. “I like that.”

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A few rounds later, I was… having fun. For real. Even Elle was bonding with the boys, laughing at their dumb antics and spitting her beer in a bucket. She was an excellent shot, of course. Maybe we both needed a break from all the werewolf drama. Doing some normal, fun, human things again had definitely made me feel lighter after an otherwise terrible night.

*Oh, Lola*, I thought, sighing. *I miss you so much. Thank you for sending my tape in for this school… even though me becoming a coxswain still makes no sense.*

A few months ago, the notion of me becoming a Luna wouldn’t make any sense either.

The thought made me wince. I waited for my turn to play, gulping down my drink while picking on my wounds. The horrible things Xavier had said earlier were a fucked-up mess, but there was a thread of truth to what he’d uttered. I probably *would* be a weaker Luna than Ava, and wasn’t that the very thing that I was afraid of?

*Does—does Greyson feel the same way? Does he think I would be a weak Luna? Issue with the* due destini *and choosing set aside…*

My chest panged at the thought of him. Here I was, having a good time, and Greyson was out there doing that spell. I couldn’t help the worry I felt. I shot a look at Elle across the beer pong table. She still looked fine, but I had seen earlier how concerned she was about Greyson as well.

*Please, let him fix this. Let him be safe. If anything happens to him…*

“Cali!” Torin’s voice interrupted my thoughts. I turned to see him standing behind me, eyes wide. Both he and Kevin were clearly disheveled, so I could guess what they’d been up to. At least someone was having a good time here.

“Oh my gods, I heard you fell into the pool?!” Torin started patting me down for injuries. “Are you okay? It’s so cold outside! Do you need any…” He paused, looking around, before his voice dropped to a whisper. “*Help?*”

“Thank you, Torin. I’m okay,” I said, pulling him in for a quick hug. Tentatively, I admitted, “Xavier was here. He helped.”

Torin gaped in shock. “What was Xavier doing here?”

I let out a bitter laugh. I still had no obvious answer to that million-dollar question. I opened my mouth to speak, when suddenly, another familiar face approached. Codsworth.

He spoke in a cold voice that matched his expression. “I need to talk to Cali. Now.”

**Episode 4549**

**Xavier**

*There’s always the chance that Ava is already dead.*

With those parting words, Adéluce disappeared.

I jammed the breaks and forced the car to a stop. Hands shaking, I grabbed my phone and called Ava. It rang and rang. No answer. I tried Marissa next. Nothing. Knox was the third option. He didn’t reply either. I went through the entire pack, and nobody, not a single fucking person answered their phone. This wasn’t normal.

I broke into a cold sweat.

Had Adéluce finally done it?

Had she moved a step beyond her threats and taken someone from me?

I shook my head.

No. No, it couldn’t be. How could she have done that without me feeling it? It was not possible. When your mate died, you knew. I had known the last time Ava died. I had fucking felt Ava’s life force break down—I had been the one to take it.

This was fucking sick.

But the fact remained: Ava and I were mates, and we were Alpha and Luna. There was no way she could die and I would not immediately know it. Unless… Could Adéluce have fucked with our bond in some way? Muted it? Adéluce was more powerful than I had ever imagined, so anything went. I was torn apart by all the horror scenarios in my head, and that was exactly what she wanted.

She wanted me panicking, terrified. Not sure if I was going to find Ava alive or dead.

What if I shouldn’t even be going back to the pack house right now?

What if I went home and found Ava’s corpse in our bed?

I was breathing so hard I thought my chest would crack.

“Fuck!” I let out a growl, punching myself over the heart. The pain barely registered, and I was still panting. Hyperventilating. It didn’t stop. I let out another growl, louder this time. Animal. I punched the inside of the car door, leaving a dent there before clawing at the side of my neck with a half-shifted hand.

My own blood dripped down my claws.

Ava. Dead. In our bed. That image popped into my head and fucked me up. Still heaving, I grabbed the wheel tight. If Ava died, I would have only Cali to protect. But I didn’t want my freedom this way.

Ava had to be okay.

My wolf growled at the possibility of her loss. He reminded me that if anything happened to her, it would be my fault, and who the fuck knew what he’d do then?

My wolf had left me once already when Ava died.

If she died again, why wouldn’t he do it once more?

And then?

Without my wolf, I would *never* escape Adéluce.

I started the car and pressed on the accelerator, racing back to the pack house.

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When the Samara house finally came into view, I brought the car to a screeching halt and got out before the engine died down. I ran toward the porch before realizing how quiet everything was. Nobody had responded to my phone calls, but it was late, so maybe they were sleeping. Maybe Adéluce fucked with the signal. Maybe she’d fucking gone apeshit, and I would walk in and find my entire pack slaughtered.

I had no idea if I was being paranoid, or if this was just the normal winding down of the house. Fear hit me once more, along with self-disgust. Was this who I was now? This fucking weakling who was too terrified to walk into his own home?

When I made it to the door and stepped inside, I heard nothing.

This couldn’t be right. It was too quiet.

“Hello?” I called.

Nobody answered. Stealthily, almost fucking terrified of what I would find, I started to creep up the stairs toward my room. My breathing felt tight again. Fear for the safety of my mate, of my pack, poisoned me from the inside out, and I felt like a coward. A useless piece of shit. Not an Alpha. Not this thing that Adéluce had forced me into being. I hated myself.

There was no blood anywhere, at least.

I made it to the top of the stairs, and the landing was empty. Everything could still be fine. Everybody was sleeping—it was just that. But then there was a loud creak to my right.

I shifted my hand into a claw and lashed out, going for blood.

“Xavier!” A cry of surprise. “What the hell are you doing?” Someone was flailing, backing up from me until they tripped and fell. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I saw Lilac lying on the floor, flailing, his legs still kicking like an upside down beetle’s. His eyes were wide as he stared up at me. “What the fuck is wrong with you, dude?” he hissed.

It was just Lilac. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hug him or punch him.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here visiting Perrie,” I said, inhaling sharply.

Under normal circumstances, I’d give Lilac a hard time for sneaking out of Perrie’s room. But right now, I didn’t have the time. The pack had to be okay, sleeping probably, if Lilac was out here roaming without a care in the world. But what about Ava?

She’d *never* sleep without me coming home. She’d be awake, waiting. And when I finally came in, she’d fake it.

Why the fuck hadn’t she answered her phone?

“Hey,” Lilac said, standing to his feet. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s fine,” I said curtly. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Worried? You’re the one who looks worried.” Lilac frowned. “You look like you just saw someone die.” His choice of words made everything even worse. He sniffed the air, his eyes widening when he looked at my neck. “Is that dried blood on you? *Your* blood?” He looked at my still-shifted hand, claws out. “Did you do that to *yourself*?”

“Just go home, Lilac,” I bit out, shoving past him.

“Okay, rude!” he called after me, huffing. “Don’t I get a ‘good night, Lilac’?”

When I flung my bedroom door open, it was empty. I held my breath.

“Ava?” I shouted. “Ava!”

No response. The bed was made. There were no weird scents in here, but my wolf was still ready to go feral. I couldn’t stop myself from checking the sheets. To make sure that not one drop of Ava’s blood had been spilled, not a single fucking—

The bathroom door cracked open.

“Xavier? What the hell are you doing yelling my name in the middle of the night?”

Ava stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her. Her hair was wet, her skin clean. Unmarred.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She frowned. “You’re acting so hot and cold, it’s ridiculous!”

It happened again, then. I started breathing so fast I felt like my guts were gonna spill out of my mouth. Ava’s look of irritation twisted to one of alarm.

“Xavier?” she whispered. “Are you okay? Did something—”

She never finished her sentence. I’d run up to her, wrapping my arms around her. I squeezed her tight enough that I could feel her heartbeat thundering against mine. She was safe. She was alive. When I breathed next, it was to take in her scent, nuzzle her cheek.

“Xavier.” She spoke against my neck, and I shuddered. She faced me, her eyes wide with alarm. “What happened? Why are you acting so—”

I kissed her hard. She let out a sound of surprise before leaning into it, clinging to me, but that was nothing to the death grip I had on her. She broke off the kiss to face me, but I still didn’t let her go. She cupped my cheek with one hand, pushed my hair back with the other.

“What happened to you? Where did you go?” she asked, her voice dropping to a tone that I’d rarely heard her use with anyone. Tenderness. She was tender with me like Cali used to be, and I deserved neither of them. I was fucking useless, a coward, someone’s fucking puppet, and I could seemingly do nothing to stop it.

What the hell could I do to stop Adéluce?

“What are you hiding from me?” Ava whispered, caressing my face with the back of her hand. “I know something’s wrong, Xavier. I can read you. You’ve been lying to me, haven’t you?”

Ava felt so warm against me. So good. I stared at her mouth. Her lips were red from the heat of the shower, her cheeks flushed. She was alive, full of life, and my wolf howled in triumph. I was so relieved at the sight of her that I didn’t know what to do with it. I hadn’t imagined that I could feel this way about her again. I had no idea that this thing between us had the potential to become real enough that its loss could tear me apart.

I stroked her cheek, resting my forehead against hers.

Staring deep into her eyes, I took in her scent and grounded myself.

And then, unthinking, I whispered, “I love you, Ava.”

**Episode 4550**

**Greyson**

Dolos licked his lips gleefully. This would be bad. *Of course* it would be.

“If you lose,” he said, “you’ll owe me a favor. No questions asked.”

Where did I even begin with the absurdity of this bullshit? The urge to maim kept rising. I’d attack if I weren’t certain that he could successfully use magic to evade.

“That’s not a fair deal. You know it’s not,” I replied, taking a step closer to him.

He took a step back. “When is life ever fair, Greyson? By the way, I can tell that you want to kill me right now and make it painful.”

I smiled. “What gave it away?”

Dolos snickered, delighted. First Lucian, now this guy. I was a maniac magnet, really.

“How do I know you won’t cheat so you can keep the earring and still get the favor?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

Dolos let out another laugh that pierced through my ears. “Damn, I knew you’d be fun, but I hadn’t realized how much fun. You have a real bright head on your shoulders, wolf.”

“You say that like you’re planning to chop it off and add it to your collection of trophies.”

His eyes flashed with greed. “Don’t give me ideas.”

“I think you would’ve decapitated me by now if you were going to do it, so let’s move on. How am I supposed to play this game with you when you’re holding all the cards?”

Dolos shrugged, inspecting his nails. “You just have to trust me.”

“Right,” I said flatly. “Because you’ve been so trustworthy during our short acquaintance.”

Dolos frowned. “That’s hurtful.”

“If you want us to keep having ‘fun’”—I put the word in air quotes, because *seriously*—“just give me a better reason to say yes to this game.”

Dolos’s smile turned wicked. He leaned forward, his eyebrows coming down low over his eyes. “I have the best reason for you to say yes. You literally can’t say no.”

I opened my mouth to tell him, “Fuck, no.”But I found that I couldn’t shape the words and get them out. This *motherfucker*.

I pushed down the fury and took in a steadying breath, shaking my head.

“You’re already cheating,” I said instead.

Dolos shrugged. “What can I say? I adore a good battle of wits. You cannot say no to me.”

“Are there any other rules?”

Dolos started counting on his fingers. “One, you cannot turn into your wolf. Two, you cannot say no to me. Three, you cannot leave until I say so. Four, you cannot punch me or otherwise physically hurt me. Five, in this house, we like chocolate chip mint ice cream over cookie dough, because we are not savages. We are men of intellect with beautiful lush hair, envied by many.”

“Right, of course.” I nodded, playing along. “Those are all the rules?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “For now.”

“Perhaps, then, I could politely ask you if we might refrain from playing?”

Dolos laughed once more, resting a hand under his chin. “My, my. This is why I like you, Greyson. Asking questions, trying to find a way around my rules. How interesting, you are.”

“Am I interesting enough for you to let me leave with the earring without any more bullshit?”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, no. Let’s get started.”

He snapped his fingers, and a table appeared in front of us. There was a bright-red cloth covering it, with three small lumps lined up in a row. I wiped a bead of sweat off my forehead. This was it. My only shot to get out of here without wasting any more time. The stakes were high—the council was looking for Elle, Cali was in the line of fire, the sire bond threatened to force chaos into my life.

I had to get out of here.

This better goddamn work.

“How is this a battle of wits?” I asked, gesturing at the table.

Dolos smirked. “You’ll see.”

He pulled the cloth away to reveal three identical versions of the earring that Posie showed me. My pulse accelerated, hands in fists as I leaned in to inspect them. On closer observation, there were tiny differences in each of the three earrings.

“What happens now?” I asked. I ignored how hard my heart beat.

Dolos waved a hand over the jewelry. “It’s simple. You have to pick whichever earring is the true match to the one my sisters want, and you’ll be free to go along with the earring. But if you choose wrong…” That by-now-familiar, sinister smile broke across his face. “You’ll owe me one favor. Whatever I want, whenever I want it.”

I raised an eyebrow.

He raised one back. “I’m aware the phrasing I just used was questionable, but you should keep your mind out of the gutter.”

How the actual hell on earth was this my life?

“This game is still unfair,” I said.

He snorted. “There’s no such thing as a fair game, Greyson. Someone always has more power.”

Shaking my head, I stared at him for a beat. I would never forget Dolos’s face. And one day—a year from now, two years, a goddamn decade or more—I would come back here prepared. I would figure out a way to make this witch pay for toying with me when everything I cared about was on the line.

“You’d better get to it, Greyson,” he said, smirking. “I thought you said you were running out of time.”

I let out something close to laugh, pushing down the anger. I couldn’t let my fury distract me. I had to focus on the earrings. Posie had shown me the other earring for a few short seconds only, so it wasn’t like I had been able to make out any specific characteristics. I forced myself to remember what else the three witches had done and said before sending me here.

They had called Dolos a coward.

They’d clearly undersold his abilities and cunningness, sending me here without any kind of ammunition. But “coward” was too strong a word to characterize someone who did not fall under the category. I ran my fingers along the earrings, one by one.

I didn’t know what to do.

So, even if time was what I didn’t have, I couldn’t help but stall.

Looking up at Dolos, I said, “You must be pretty worried about your sisters if you’re going to all this trouble to humiliate their…” I paused, pointing at myself. “What did you call me? Their Postmates delivery guy?”

He scoffed. “I’m not worried. Like I said, you presented me with the opportunity to have a little fun this afternoon. Once this is over, I will have a favor to cash out. Everything will, as ever, be coming up for me.”

“Why would someone like you need a favor from me?” I asked. “If you’re oh-so-powerful, you shouldn’t need me to do anything for you.”

Dolos’s expression sharpened. “It’s not about needing your help to do something. It’s about taking what’s rightfully mine as the winner of any game.”

I tapped my fingers on the table. “Do you enjoy acting so high and mighty?”

He gave me a calculating look. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Arrogance is tacky,” I said. “And in my experience, people who are full of themselves act that way because they’re overcompensating for something. Or hiding something.”

“Really?” His laugh was mocking. “What would *I* be hiding? I’m just a warlock who enjoys winning battles of wits, like this one.”

I eyed him. “I wouldn’t expect someone who’s a recluse to be such a fan of games.”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I would think that you’d be out there, in the world, finding new people to play with. Instead, you’re hiding in an attic like a loser who’s afraid of something.”

Dolos’s face went dark. I could swear his teeth grew longer, sharper.

But before I could speak again, he hissed, “*Enough*. Choose which one you think is real. Let’s end this once and for all.”

Whatever hints of weird homicidal banter had been going on between Dolos and me vanished. I knew I’d struck a chord with him. I had lost him, and right now, as I looked down at the earrings, I was at a loss. I couldn’t beat this guy’s magic, that was for certain, and I had no more time. I was going to have to pick an earring and hope for the best.

Looking at the three pieces on the table, I leaned forward again to inspect. They were all small and jade. One had a dotted pattern along its edge, the other was an oval, and the last was a clear circle. Dammit, *why* hadn’t I paid more attention to the thing?

I should have been ready for anything. I should have suspected something was going to go wrong when the sisters talked about Dolos like he was harmless. Could he have fooled them? Or did they know how dangerous he could be, so they’d sent me to do their dirty work? Could *they* be the cowards?

I had no time to contemplate their motives. Right now, I had to choose. I reached forward and wrapped my fist around the oval-shaped earring. The only sound in the room was the pounding of my heart. Looking up at Dolos, I asked, “Did I get it right?”

**Episode 4551**

“I need to talk to Cali. Now,” Codsworth said with a scowl.

“What about?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Codsworth glanced at Torin and Kevin. “It’s private business.”

“Fine,” I said, indulging him in the spirit of being teammates. “Let’s talk.”

What was the worst that could happen?

Codsworth led me to a quieter area outside, only to start shouting at me.

“I can’t *believe you*!” he said with a huff, throwing his arms up in the air. “You’re *here*! Having a *blast*!”

I blinked. “Uh, isn’t that what people are supposed to do at parties?”

He glowered. “You shouldn’t be here at all, Hart. You’re barely a part of the team. You haven’t even been on the water yet.”

“What are you even talking about?” I scoffed. “Everybody’s happy to have me here!”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t you get it? They’re just being nice because you’re the new, sparkly thing. The novelty will wear off soon enough.”

I couldn’t believe this bullshit. I’d known that Codsworth didn’t like me, but all this seemed excessive. It also felt like a little too much when I realized that he’d gotten all up in my space, towering over me as if to prove a point.

*Is this man child trying to… intimidate me?*

I couldn’t help it. I started laughing. This was just a normal, petty, dumb human fight. No witches involved, no werewolf wars. I laughed even harder, and Codsworth looked angrier than before.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he snapped. “Don’t laugh at me!”

My laughter evaporated, and I glared up at him like I could blow him up. Because I could.

“What the hell is wrong with *me*? What the hell is wrong with *you*, dude?”

“I—”

“You and your little hissy fit is the least of my concerns, Codsworth,” I said. “You’re rude and entitled, and to be honest, I don’t have time for this.” I made a move to walk past him, but he blocked my way.

He was smart enough not to touch me, at least.

“This isn’t a fucking hissy fit. This is my life,” he said sharply, pointing at his chest. “This is about the team’s future. I can’t believe I’m the alternate to someone who can’t even focus on what’s important.”

Codsworth had a problem with delivery for sure, but he kind of… did have a point there, right? This *was* his life, and rowing was part of it. He’d worked hard to become an alternate, and he seemed passionate about it. Whereas I was part of the team because Lola had woken up one day and chosen chaos.

Before I could feel too guilty about this, though, Codsworth added, “I can’t fucking wait for everyone wake up and realize how useless you are, Hart. You won’t last on this team, mark my words.”

I scoffed. “If you think I’ll just sit here and let you talk to me like that, you’ve lost your damn—”

“COPS!” a scream interrupted me. Both Codsworth and I jumped in surprise. “PARTY’S OVER!”

*Shit*, I thought. *I gotta get back to Elle, Torin, and Kevin!*

I also had to figure out where the hell to take Elle now.

“This isn’t over,” Codsworth told me menacingly.

Before I could ask him if he wanted to see the garden where I grew my fucks—he would find it empty—a semi-frantic Gael ran straight into us. “Cali!” He gave me a quick hug. “Thanks for coming!”

Codsworth turned green with envy. I ignored him and focused on Gael. “Thank you for inviting me. Almost everyone on the team is so nice.”

Gael paused. “*Almost* everyone?”

“COPS!”

More screams said that same thing, and then I heard sirens in the distance. Gael broke into a run, saying something about talking to me soon. He acknowledged Codsworth with a nod only. That was clearly not enough for His Horrible Majesty, but I wasn’t about to waste any more time with this asshole. Without another word, I walked off, feeling his eyes burn holes into the back of my head.

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Thank every god out there, I didn’t have to look too far to find Elle. She was still at the beer pong table with Kevin and Torin. I heard her ask Torin, “Do human authorities not like parties?”

“Cops don’t like anything that sparks joy,” Kevin replied to her. With a giggle, he added, “We should poison them all!”

So, Kevin was clearly a little tipsy. Or honest. Or both?

“Also half the people here aren’t old enough to drink,” Torin told Elle. “There are laws about that. People can’t drink and drive a car either.”

Kevin gave Torin a funny look. “You say that as if Elle has no idea.”

Torin chuckled awkwardly, and Elle looked thoughtful. “I spat out my beer in a bucket after every sip. Does that count?”

Before Torin could answer, I interrupted and told them we had to go. Grabbing both his and Elle’s hands in mine, I pulled them toward the exit. Kevin followed, and all four of us rushed outside with the rest of the partygoers. We slipped past the cops that hovered at the front lawn and power walked down the block where I’d parked the car.

And then I realized something.

“Shit, I’ve been drinking! I can’t drive!” I faced them. “Has anyone not been drinking?”

Kevin squinted at me. “*Define* drinking.”

Not Kevin, then.

“Is driving hard to do?” Elle asked. “I could try.”

*Hahahaha—*

*NOPE.*

“I can drive,” Torin said with a shrug. “I’ve seen Artemis drive. I can probably do it.”

Of course! Because imitating Artemis’s F1 driving would be a fantastic idea.

“You know what?” I said, shaking my head. “I think I’m fine to drive. At least I have a driver’s license, so—”

Kevin frowned, turning to Torin. “Wait, does Torin not have a driver’s license?”

Torin and I exchanged a loaded look. I knew he’d considered revealing his Fae identity to Kevin at some point, but this did *not* feel like the best time. As for me, I panicked and didn’t think before acting, which was rarely a good thing.

Throwing the keys at Torin, I blurted, “It’s fine. He’s fine!”

Torin did look fine, actually, as he took the driver’s seat. Was he pleased about this? I couldn’t even read him right now. Head pounding, I got in the passenger’s seat, and Kevin and Elle climbed in the back. Once all the doors were closed, nobody spoke.

“So…” Torin broke the silence. “What happens now? How do I start the car?”

“Oh, god,” I muttered, groaning. “Maybe we should just hide in the woods?”

Kevin laughed from the back seat. “Hide from what?”

“The consequences of our horrible life choices,” I said, and I was only half-kidding here.

Kevin laughed again. “You guys are too funny. I love it!”

I wished to be as oblivious as Kevin. He seemed to lead a wonderful, low-stress life.

“Don’t worry, Cali,” Torin said, shooting me a wink. “I was only teasing before.”

Without any fuss, Torin turned the car on, backed it out, and got on the road with no problems at all. I stared at him in shock.

*Is… is Torin a better driver than me?*

Definitely a better driver than Artemis. Or Lola.

“Where to?” Torin asked, glancing at Elle through the rearview mirror. His grip on the steering wheel tightened, and I knew what he was thinking. We had to find a new hiding place for Elle, STAT.

“Right.” I cleared my throat, reaching for my phone. “Let me check in with Greyson.”

Heartbeat accelerating, I called my mate. It went straight to voicemail.

*He must be in the middle of the spell. Is he okay? Will he be okay? What the fuck do we do in the meantime?*

“We should go back home,” Elle said.

Returning to the pack house wouldn’t be a wise choice until we knew that the council was gone entirely. No, I had to deal with this right now. I was the acting Luna, and it was my job to get this done, no matter what.

“Wait, what are we looking for?” Kevin asked, rolling his window up. The air had been hitting his face, and he seemed less tispy now.

Torin shrugged. “A place to hang out. The night is young.”

*Damn*, I thought. *Who knew my sweet, precious Torin could lie so seamlessly?*

“We should totally head to my house,” Kevin said with a grin, leaning forward to squeeze Torin’s shoulder. “My parents are out for the night, so it’ll only be us.”

That was perfect, actually. There would be no reason for anyone to connect Elle to Kevin.

“Sounds great, Kevin,” I said. “Thank you.”

I shot Greyson a quick text.

*Heading to Kevin’s with Elle and Torin! Hope everything’s okay with the spell. Please call me when you can. Love you.*

When I typed out the last two words, I felt a pang in my chest.

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“Shit,” Kevin said as we rolled up the mansion’s driveway. “All the lights are on. My parents must be back early. I didn’t know they would be.”

“*Early?*” Torin squeaked.

Kevin gave Torin an apologetic look. “Would you be okay with meeting them tonight?”

“Tonight?” Torin sputtered. “I’m not ready! I didn’t even bring a gift!”

“What kind of gift were you going to give them?” Elle asked Torin.

“I don’t know!” Torin flailed his arms around. “I’d bake a cake or make tiramisu! Cheesecake! Brownies! All four!” He gasped, turning to Kevin. “Are they vegan?”

“Oh, come on, you never needed to bring a gift,” Kevin said with a grin. “They’re gonna love you anyway.”

I agreed with Kevin. Not only because I desperately needed a place to hide Elle, but also because I could not see anyone hating Torin. We headed inside, and Kevin and Torin led the way while all four of us trotted down the mansion’s many fancy hallways. Torin’s jitteriness got better once Kevin took his hand and kissed his cheek.

*Awww!*

“That’s nice. They’re nice together,” Elle mused, eyeing the two. I grinned, nodding.

*Thank god for Kevin*, I thought. *As long as we stay here, everything will be okay. Elle is going to be safe and—*

Torin froze at the entry to the sitting room.

Kevin said, “Hi, everyone!” The surprise in his voice upped a notch. “And look who’s here! I didn’t know you’d be here tonight.”

My mouth dropped open in shock when Kevin moved out of the way.

Sitting on the couch before us was Kevin’s uncle, Dick Wigbert.

**Episode 4552**

**Xavier**

Ava’s eyes were wide. “Do you…” She was at a loss for words. “Mean that? Why did you—I—” She gulped. “*You love me?*”

Three words. She said them because I had uttered them first, speaking them into existence. Before I could tell myself that I’d misspoken, she kissed me hard. Her mouth crashed against mine, and I fought to wrap my stupid head around what had just happened.

I told Ava I loved her.

I’d fucking done that, and now, I kissed her back like I couldn’t get enough. What the fuck was wrong with me? How did I end up telling Ava I loved her when Cali was the one who owned my heart?

I cared about Ava, yes. Only moments ago, I’d almost lost my damn mind with worry when I thought that Adéluce had hurt her, but…

Love?

I’d blurted those words to Ava before, but that had been different—she was dying. Right now, she was alive, in my arms, her mouth hot against mine. Her fingers ran through my hair, pulling me close like she ached for me. Like she loved me too.

She had loved me for so long.

My “true love’s kiss” had woken Ava from her coma, after all.

Had I been a fool in denial all along?

She was the one to break the kiss. She was breathing hard, a soft smile on her lips, her happiness so obvious it made my head hurt. How could I ever tell her I didn’t love her when it made her glow like this? Did I fucking *want* to take it back?

I was so confused.

“I never thought…” She sniffled, chuckling a little as she stroked my cheek. But when she took in my expression, her face fell. “Wait…” She paused. “Are you saying this because of our fight earlier?” Her grip on me loosened. She let go. “Are you trying to placate me?” she asked, stepping away from me as if my proximity made her head murky.

But maybe that was just me, and I was projecting here.

I needed the space.

“I’d never do that to you,” I said, sitting on the bed. I sounded gruff. Fucking *emotional*. I sounded unlike myself when I knew I had to keep my shit together despite the million conflicting emotions going on inside me.

But there was one thing I needed to clarify first.

“I hope you don’t think I’m the kind of person who would lie about something like this just to distract you, Ava,” I said.

She shook her head, her eyes widening. “No, of course not! I—” She tightened the towel around herself. She was naked underneath, but her expression was what made *me* feel naked. She appeared to be hopeful, hesitant, and intimidated all at once. She seemed innocent, young, like she used to be. Like *we* used to be.

It hurt to look at her right now.

“I need you to be honest with me here,” I said hoarsely. “What are you thinking right now?”

Ava gulped. She took a few steps closer to the bed and halted before me. I thought she would take a seat next to me, but she stood there instead. Still hesitant. Breathing deeply, she wrapped her arms around her chest and looked at her feet.

“I’m insecure about us,” she said quietly. “You know that. I know that. It’s nothing new. I wish there was a way to turn it off, to stop myself from feeling like you’ll run away from me any second now, but I guess…” She sighed. “I guess I’ve always been terrified that I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

My throat dried out at the sight of her like this, so vulnerable. My fingers itched to reach out and touch her, pull her to sit down next to me on the bed. But then she took a step back. She took another deep breath and looked at me. Her gaze was glistening.

“I know what I did and how much I’ve hurt you. I’ve hated myself for it ever since. After coming back from the dead, all I’ve wanted is to repent.” She sniffled, wiping a tear when it dropped down her cheek. Her voice broke. “I never thought you’d feel anything but hatred when you looked at me, Xavier.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. We only stared at one another. I felt like she was ready to break at the seams. My wolf whined, urging me to comfort her.

If I told her I loved her, it couldn’t have been a lie.

Could it?

I reached forward, taking her hands in mine. The contact made my insides tremble. I wished I didn’t need to say anything else. That I could avoid and evade and ignore my damn feelings as ever. But this felt like the moment of no return, and I was compelled to poke at old wounds. Just to see if they could bleed again.

“I did hate you for a long time,” I admitted. I could take nothing back now. “You are my mate, but no one has ever hurt me as much as you have, Ava.”

This time when the tears started falling, Ava didn’t wipe them away.

“We were so young. And you took this good thing we had, something we’d built together, our mate bond, and made it so fucking ugly it turned into a monster.”

Ava’s inhale was sharp. She flinched, pulling away. I didn’t let her. Tightening my hold on her, I pulled her down to sit on the bed next to me. When she spoke, it was with a softness I had never heard before. “I know. You’re right, Xavier.”

I *was* right.

I’d killed Ava after she had killed my mother and everything that had been good about us. And yet here I was, sitting with her in the bedroom that we shared, in the Samara house, with the pack that we had built from the ground up. And when I told Ava I loved her just moments earlier, it felt natural.

It was all so fucked up but true.

Ava held all my firsts. First kiss, first time, first love. Killing Ava had killed a piece of me as well, and Cali was the one who’d brought me back to life. I had opened up to Cali. I’d found myself and my wolf again. I had wanted to be a better man for her, someone Cali could be proud of, someone she could love.

Someone who would never hurt her.

And now, here I was.

Hurting Cali, and loving Ava.

Did I love her?

Did I truly love Ava after everything? Was that even possible?

“We can’t erase the past,” I said. The words felt raw. My chest ached, heart beating fast.

Ava was rigid, as if ready to bolt. Or ready to stop me from bolting. I wasn’t sure which. But when her gaze flickered up to meet mine again, the pain of our history took a back seat. Ava had come back to life and fought to gain my trust again tooth and nail. She stared at me like she loved me in a way so desperate it could challenge every power out there.

I couldn’t look away from her.

It felt bittersweet.

“We’re not those people anymore,” I said quietly. “We’re not kids. Things have changed between us, and we’ve—”

“We’ve built something new together.” Her voice was a breath. “Right?”

I didn’t stop myself from nodding. She was telling the truth.

Glancing around the room, Ava said, “We have our home. Our pack. We have each other’s backs.” She squeezed my hand. “You can trust me again, Xavier. Right?”

How could I not trust her?

She was all I had.

“This feels…”

Ava waited for me to finish. The hope in her face was staggering.

“Good,” I said. “This feels good.”

She exhaled at the sound of my admission. Her gaze was dark, almost hypnotizing in its focus. My wolf settled down finally, as if something had locked into place. The air between Ava and me felt palpable, charged with the soaring energy of our mate bond.

When Ava leaned closer, it felt like I was winning something back—a piece of me that I’d lost for so long. I kissed her, and it felt different somehow. She tasted sweeter. Her scent was richer. Her touch on my face felt like a brand, scorching through my skin to leave a mark.

Every second of this moment was definite, resolute in its intensity. This deep-rooted feeling took hold of me and wouldn’t let go. No matter what my heart wanted or what my mind screamed for, I could no longer deny that *this* was in my nature.

Kissing Ava right now felt as real as the words I had uttered only moments ago.

*I love you.*

Three words that signaled the ruination of so many promises, the end of an era. A brand-new path opened up for me, but I had no idea where it was going.

And I wasn’t sure if I wanted to find out.

**Episode 4553**

**Greyson**

I held the earring in my hand while holding Dolos’s gaze. His expression was blank. My heart pounded with every ticking second as I waited for his reaction.

And then, his face cut into a sharp grin.

“Oh dear,” he said. “You lose.”

His words fell like a brick on my head.

I… lost?

I couldn’t lose. That was not an option. The stakes were too high. My life as I knew it was at risk. I had to get the earring, or the sisters wouldn’t help me with the sire bond. I would have to find a way to fix this, to bribe this fucking madman and get what I wanted, otherwise—

“Relax, Alpha,” Dolos said with a chuckle, his voice cutting through my thoughts. Meeting his gaze, I closed my fist. I squeezed the earring I’d chosen, the wrong one, hard enough that it pierced the skin of my palm. Dolos noticed. He smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s all going to be okay.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Dolos opened his hand and presented it to me with a flourish. There was an entirely different earring sitting in his palm. The realization hit me in the head like a fucking hammer. If I was angry before, now it reached a point where I was ready to bite his hand off.

“The right earring wasn’t among the ones on the table from the beginning,” I said, realizing.

I was shaking with rage.

Dolos laughed. “To be frank, you had such a promising start that I expected more from you, Greyson. You should’ve thought outside the box.”

“I should’ve expected you would try to trick me,” I said, my voice cold. Because the worst part was that Dolos was right. I should have expected this.

I had been outplayed.

“Exactly. You knew there would be more to the game, but you still took me at face value.” His sigh was condescending. “It was a little disappointing to see you lose so easily, let me tell you that. I thought I’d finally found someone interesting enough to play with.”

And just like that, I snapped.

I didn’t care if I couldn’t shift, I didn’t care if this warlock was more powerful than me. I lunged forward, my sole focus on his neck, how I’d grab and break it. Though of course, Dolos raised his hands, and I froze right there, in front of him.

I was no match for him.

But I could still speak.

“I bet you feel brave hiding behind your magic,” I mocked, “but like you said, I’m a stubborn son of a bitch. I don’t give a fuck how much time it will take, I swear to you I will find a way to escape this hellhole and spend the rest of my life figuring out a way to destroy both you *and* your sisters.”

Dolos blinked at me. Then he started laughing. “Oh, wow! Dramatic much?”

My brain was boiling inside my head. “You have no idea.”

Dolos smirked. “I’m going to give you the earring, Greyson. Relax.” He snapped his fingers, and I unfroze. I was still so furious I felt like clawing his skin off, but I realized I needed to focus here.

“I lost,” I said. “Why would you give me the earring?”

Dolos shrugged. “I can be magnanimous when I want to be.” He tossed the earring to me. I caught it, eyeing it for a beat before turning my hand into a fist. “I want you to remember my generosity when I call you for my favor. How about that?”

My eyes narrowed on him.

He snorted. “My, you sure can hold a grudge, huh?”

“I can see why your sisters don’t like you,” I deadpanned.

Dolos sneered. “I like to think it’s because they’re afraid. They sent you, after all, instead of coming themselves.”

I had thought of that possibility earlier. It made everything ten times worse. When I didn’t speak, Dolos smiled. “Anyway, I am going to send you back now. But not to forget, I will be coming for my favor whenever it pleases me.”

Before I could speak, everything turned black.

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In the blink of an eye, I was back in my room at the Redwood pack house. The three sisters stood in front of me. Posie anxiously asked, “What happened? Did you get the earring?”

Chloe looked impressed. “I’m surprised Dolos sent you back. We thought we’d have to find a way to get you.”

Lauren huffed, reaching for my hand. “I can see you’re holding something—give me that earring!”

I took a step back, glaring at her. She glared back. “What the hell are you doing, Greyson?”

“Oh no,” Posie said, gulping. “He’s mad at us!” She turned to her sisters. “I told you he’d get mad!”

I realized I needed a moment or two before speaking, otherwise I’d fucking go off on them for sending me into a snake pit unprepared. Starting a full-on fight wouldn’t be wise, seeing as I still needed the witches’ help for the damn sire bond. And it was three against one anyway.

I would not get out of here alive.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my palm slowly and held out the earring to Lauren. She snatched it and put it on. The effect was immediate—a shimmery veil dropped over Lauren before dissipating.

“What was that?” I asked, forcing my voice to stay even.

“It’s a necessary amplifier,” Chloe said. “It helps the three of us focus our talents.”

“Oh.” I paused. “I suppose I should thank you for sending me into a lion’s den for something important enough.”

“You’re welcome,” Posie said, offering a nod.

“He’s mocking us, sis,” Lauren told Posie dryly. Posie frowned while Chloe chuckled.

“You lied to me,” I said sharply, looking among all three. “Your brother is far from a coward, and now I owe him a favor. It better not come back to bite me in the ass.”

Chloe crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you threatening us, Greyson?”

“Of course not,” I said flatly. “Pissing off a person who’s far more useful as an ally instead of an enemy would be a stupid thing to do during a time of crisis. Don’t you think?”

Chloe narrowed her eyes at me. Posie bit the nail of her thumb nervously. Lauren just scoffed and said, “Can you please calm down, wolf? You were never in any real danger.” Looking me up and down, she added, “While our brother isn’t the best, he certainly knows a good tool when he sees one.”

I swallowed down my anger and the million threats and curses that threatened to emerge.

I had to prioritize here.

“I’ve fulfilled my side of the bargain,” I bit out. “We should get on with the spell.”

“We’ve been prepping, so we’re ready to start now.” Chloe gestured at a series of symbols marked out on my bedroom floor. “Go ahead and lie down there, in the middle.”

The moment I did as instructed, my entire body went still.

*Here we go again with the freezing bullshit.*

“I can’t move,” I said between gritted teeth. “What is this?”

“It’s okay,” Posie said. “You’re not meant to move. It’s for everyone’s safety.”

Great. That wasn’t worrisome at all.

“Try to relax,” Chloe said with a grin. “This will be a unique experience, I promise!”

That sounded like a threat, so I did not dignify it with a response. I watched as the sisters each chose a point around me and got to their knees. They started chanting in a language I didn’t recognize, and I looked around at them and up the ceiling. At first, nothing happened.

But then I felt something building inside me.

My chest started to burn, and then there was a sharp pang of pain with every beat of my heart. I felt something crawling up my throat, a thing that felt alive. I started to choke, gagging.

What the hell was going on?

I fought to cough, to spit it out, whatever the fuck it was, but the gagging and choking got worse as the thing slithering up my throat reached my mouth. It moved around in there, the texture thin and fibrous, like the feeling of a strand of hair wrapping around my tongue.

Only multiplied by a thousand.

Fuck. This. Shit.

“We need his mouth open!” Lauren yelled. “Now!”

My mouth was shoved open by invisible hands, and spools of what looked like bloody red thread started falling out while I sputtered and choked. I could hear my wolf growling inside my head, wrapped up in distress, the threat of what was happening to my body dangerous enough to jar him. Suddenly, even if I had been forced into a frozen position, my chest and head heaved, breaking through the immobility.

“Greyson! You need to relax!” Posie yelled. “You’re endangering the spell!”

I fought to listen, to force my wolf to listen, but I couldn’t stop shaking. I was choking while it felt like my insides were liquifying and spilling out of me. Nausea, disgust, and pain were wrapped into one. Oxygen felt scarce.

I just wanted to breathe again.

I’d better not fucking die today. That was all I asked.

“We have to hurry!” Chloe said. “He’s finally ready—let’s begin.”

**Episode 4554**

My heart was beating a mile a minute. What on earth was Dick Wigbert doing here?

*He’s Kevin’s uncle, Cali!* I reminded myself.

Couldn’t Dick have been the type of uncle who didn’t talk to his family? He certainly had the makings of a black sheep, only without the redeeming underdog qualities. The man was a billionaire and one experiment-gone-awry away from becoming a supervillain. He’d had his memory wiped—courtesy of Artemis—but how long did that kind of thing last?

Kevin’s mom was an elegant and imposing blonde lady, probably in her sixties, dressed in a blue sheath dress that probably cost as much as my entire wardrobe. His father was short and plump with a mustache. Kevin had his twinkling blue eyes.

While Kevin’s father welcomed us, Dick offered a big smile to Kevin. “Your parents and I decided to have a drink here tonight.” He turned to Kevin’s mother. “Isn’t that right, sister?”

She smiled. “Last-minute change. A happy coincidence, because now we get to meet your new friends, Kev-Kev!”

“Kev-Kev?” Elle mouthed at me, her eyebrows scrunched up.

I wanted to elbow her but refrained in case anyone noticed. Instead, I plastered a smile on my face as Kevin introduced Elle and me to his parents and his uncle. Dick’s beady little eyes flickered between Elle and me. His smile faded slightly, and he squinted. “You two young ladies look very familiar. Have we met before?”

*Oh, god… Is the mind-erasure magic about to wear off? What do we do?!*

I had no choice but to play along.

“Definitely not. I mean, we’d remember,” I told Dick before Elle could speak. “I do recognize you from the family portrait, though.”

“Ah, yes,” Kevin’s dad said, snorting. He took a hit off his electric cigarette. “Making Kevin sit through that painting was a nightmare,” he added, puffing out the smoke in a perfect *O*.

Kevin scoffed an answer while I grabbed a fascinated Elle’s elbow before she could reach forward to touch the damn smoke ring. Looking among them, I added, “*Anyway*, it’s so wonderful to see you all in person. We adore Kevin, and we’re glad to meet his family.”

I hoped I wasn’t overselling this, but we needed to at least try and act normal. Speaking of which, Elle hadn’t said a word. I turned to her, eyebrows raised pointedly. “Right, Elle?”

“Kevin is nice to all of us. I like him,” Elle said earnestly. It was a good enough comment to push the conversation along. Kevin said something about us making him blush, and then he pulled a fidgeting Torin forward, wrapping an arm over his shoulder.

“I wish I’d known you guys were going to be home tonight so we could have prepared a little, but…” Kevin tapped Torin’s chest with his index finger. “I’m really happy to introduce you all to my boyfriend, Torin.”

Torin looked bashful and flushed as he shook everybody’s hand. Thankfully, both Kevin’s parents and even Dick greeted him enthusiastically and seemed excited to meet him. I was very glad for my friend and grateful for the distraction. Dick’s focus was on Torin entirely now, forgetting about Elle and me. But for how long? I didn’t want to find out.

*We should figure out a way to get out of here ASAP!*

Watching the scene unfold before me, I noticed that Dick seemed normal while interacting with Torin and Kevin. I wondered how much Kevin actually knew about Dick and all his shady businesses. My guess was nothing.

*Okay, but how long is this love-fest going to last? I have a brand-new werewolf to hide here!*

Thankfully, Kevin came to my rescue.

“This has been great, but we shouldn’t keep you guys from your business,” he said. “My friends and I are going to hang out in the pool house.”

Kevin’s mom raised an eyebrow. “We get it, honey. You kids don’t have to bore yourselves with the old people all night.”

Kevin rolled his eyes, shaking his head before leaning in to give his mom a kiss on the cheek. Everybody laughed, and I held my breath while following Kevin, Torin, and Elle toward the door. I could feel Dick’s eyes on us, and I didn’t like it one bit.

*It’s fine, Cali*, I told myself. *He doesn’t remember anything. Of course not. This is nothing to worry about!*

I worried so damn much. It got even worse when Kevin’s mom took him aside the moment we exited the sitting room. From what I overheard, her voice sounded calm but firm. “I understand that you want to spend time with your friends, sweetheart,” she told Kevin quietly, “but your uncle isn’t here very often. I expect you and your friends to come sit with us in a little while.”

Oh, great.

We needed to get the hell out of here *yesterday*.

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The second we set foot in the pool house, Kevin started tidying up the chaos that was his sitting room, apologetically rambling about the mess. While that went on in the background, I whirled toward Torin. My eyes were wide, full of meaning. “We should probably leave soon, though. Right?”

Torin paused, staring at me. “Right. We should?”

I couldn’t believe Torin didn’t realize this was an emergency. I obviously couldn’t cite Dick as the reason for our departure—not while Kevin twirled around us like the sexy duster from *Beauty and the Beast—*so I had to get inventive here.

“We need to leave, because the… *pizza* is here.” I said the first thing that came to mind.

Torin frowned in confusion. “What pizza? What are you talking about?”

I glanced over at Kevin while he fluffed up his pillows and lowered my voice. “You know…” I leaned closer to Torin. “The *evil* pizza.”

Elle frowned. “How is pizza evil?”

I realized that my pizza metaphor was atrocious, truly one of my worst, but I decided to stick to it with the cold determination of an overconfident hustler. Glancing over at a whirling Kevin, I hissed, “The pizza is evil because it’s shaped like a dick, Torin. A. *Dick*.”

Torin blinked. Then he gasped in realization. “Right!” He shot a look at Kevin, who was shoving a bunch of scuba diving equipment under his bed. “Does the… pizza… know that we’re here? Or who we are?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. But we should go because I’m allergic to pizza, and I’m getting a migraine anyway.”

Elle’s befuddled frown had deepened, her gaze ping-ponging between Torin and me. Cutting in, she said, “But I thought you loved pizza, Cali. Didn’t we just have it the other night for dinner?”

Torin waved a hand at Elle before tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Actually, we might be overreacting here. Didn’t your sister take care of the pizza’s memory? It’s also a very old pizza that could be naturally forgetful, so there’s that to take into consideration.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Kevin popped up on us, a little breathless after his frantic cleaning.

“Dick pizzas,” Elle told him. “But I don’t understand what they’re saying.”

Kevin, bless his heart, looked so confused. I regretted everything.

But then, he burst out laughing.

“Oh my god! Pizza shaped like a dick, like at a bachelorette party! I love that—you guys are hilarious!” He linked his arm with Torin’s before his enthusiasm suddenly dimmed. “It’s probably a special order, though, right? I don’t know if we can get that tonight. Maybe if we were in New York or L.A., but—”

I opened my mouth to speak, and hopefully stop the madness, when I felt my throat dry up. I coughed, scrunching up my face. Wrapping my palm around my neck, I coughed again.

“Cali,” Torin said, alarmed, “what’s going on?”

“It’s like”—another cough—“like there’s something caught in my throat.”

Elle’s expression was sympathetic. She patted my back. “Hairball?”

“Here you go!” Kevin shoved a water bottle in my hand. I drank some and cleared my throat a few times, but it didn’t seem to help. Then a sudden wave of nausea hit me.

“I don’t feel well,” I said. I meant it.

*What fresh hell is this? Don’t tell me it’s the flu! I don’t have time for normal human things right now!*

“We should head out,” I told Elle, and she nodded.

Kevin looked sad. “Aww, I’m so sorry. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, thank you,” I said, shaking my head while Torin eyed me with unguarded suspicion. I could tell he wondered if I was making this up, or if it was part of our genius pizza ruse.

“I’m really not feeling well,” I told Torin. “I think I might have had a little too much beer to drink at the party. I don’t usually drink, so it probably upset my stomach.”

“I’ll go grab you a Gatorade,” Kevin said. But before I could wave him off, there was a knock at his door.

“Kevin, there you are,” Kevin’s mom said once he answered. Her expression was friendly, but there was an edge to it. Like she was the kind of woman who didn’t hear the word *no* often. “Your uncle wants to invite you and your guests for further conversation,” she said with a smile. “Get some young blood into the room.”

My stomach dropped.

*Dick wants to talk to us? Why? I do* not *like this!*

Kevin sighed. “Sorry, Mom. It’s late, and my friends were just leaving, so—”

“Oh, please, I will not be hearing such nonsense. The night is young!” She walked into the room, taking both Kevin’s and Torin’s hands in hers. Looking around at us, she declared, “You are all coming with me.”

**Episode 4555**

**Xavier**

Ava was kissing me.

I was kissing her.

And damn it all to hell, but I could not call any of this a lie.

Cali’s face, her devastation from our earlier fight, popped into my head, and the sudden pain in my chest made me gasp.

I broke off the kiss with Ava.

She stared at me, panting. She could see me slipping away, and there was no way she’d allow that to happen. Oh, no. Ava had me now. She had me locked the fuck down, and she wasn’t about to let go.

“Say it,” Ava whispered against my mouth. “*Please*, say it again, Xavier.”

Her breath came out short, harsh, and hot. Her voice was low and shaking. When she met my gaze, I could see the need there, the fucked-up desperation. I alone had the power to soothe her. I had power over her, and she over me.

*But Cali . . .*

No.

I’d already lost Cali, hadn’t I? I wasn’t about to do the same with Ava. I had to give this to her. I had to give this to myself, because I goddamn craved the truth of it. For the first time in forever, all my second thoughts and fears about this thing between Ava and me took a back seat. Ava’s touch forced it away. Her face. The way she trembled and waited for me to repeat my confession.

My surrender.

“I love you, Ava,” I said. The second time felt easy. The words rolled off my tongue like they’d been waiting. Fuck me, but the way she smiled right then took my breath away.

This was happening. It was as real as it could get. It needed to be.

Ava was all I had at this point.

When her hands twisted into the hem of my shirt, pulling at it, I let her. I helped her take it off and leaned in for another kiss. I thought I’d go slow, indulge myself. I thought that this could become a new ritual between us from now on; I would tell her that I loved her, she would be happy, and then I’d fucking gorge myself on her happiness like the greedy son of a bitch that I was.

Ava had other ideas.

She was the greedy one when she pushed me back on the mattress. She ripped the towel off her body and straddled my hips, both of us groaning at the contact. I gripped her hips tight, tight enough to leave a bruise, but she just grinded on me with a breathy moan and leaned closer. Her hands shaking, she touched my face, my bare chest. She whispered, “I love you more than anything. I’d fucking die without you. Don’t ever forget that, Xavier. *Please*.”

“Please” again. That was what she said. And my goddamn throat was tight, my eyes felt weird, as if they wanted to mirror the way hers glistened. I could wonder what the fuck was happening right now, but that would be bullshit, because I had a pretty good idea what it was. I needed to let the two of us live this wretched moment that felt so good I could tear myself apart over it.

I was tearing myself apart, and I desperately enjoyed it.

What a damn fool I was.

“I know,” I whispered, cupping her cheek. “I know, Ava.” I kissed the tear under her eye, then her cheek. I kissed her again and flipped us over, hovered over her. I bit and licked down her throat, her chest, her trembling stomach. She arched up to me and whimpered, saying my name. It all felt so familiar—her hot skin, her trembling thighs, how wet she was, how she opened up for my tongue and fingers. It was all the same, but not really.

Because I felt differently.

I felt like I couldn’t stop.

Like I would kill and burn the world down if anything came between us right now.

I didn’t stop after Ava came. I pushed her over the edge three times more, till she was convulsing and her nails dug into the back of my neck and drew blood. And when I sat up, wiped my face, and grabbed her thighs to pull her toward me, a feeling took over me that felt raw. Dark but so intense that I couldn’t resist.

The moment I sank in, she keened. I shushed her with a kiss, grabbed her hands, and pinned them over her head before staring deep into her eyes. Forehead to forehead, Ava and me, we looked at each other. Her eyes were wet at the corners. My thrusts were slow and deliberate, and she was breathless. When I spoke against her mouth, she shuddered.

“Your turn again,” I whispered. “Say it.”

Another one of her tears spilled. I licked it as she shakily said, “I love you, Xavier.”

“Again.”

“I love you so fucking much.”

“Don’t stop,” I rasped, picking up speed, fucking her into the mattress. She clung to me and said those three words over and over. Against my neck, muffled in my mouth for me to taste. Her body was heaving underneath me, hot and slick all over, pushing me over the edge. My every muscle seized. I came inside her, teeth in her shoulder, close to her Luna mark.

“I love you, Xavier…”

I never stopped thrusting. I was not able to. Nothing could pull me off her right now.

Greedy son of a bitch.

“You’re mine,” I rasped against her lips. “You love me, and you’re fucking mine.”

She said yes again and again. I pinned her there, grinding into her, my full weight crushing her. She wrapped her arms and legs around me so tight it felt suffocating.

It was fucking perfect.

“I need you like this…” I rolled my hips, quivering. “Just like this.” I rested my forehead against hers. “I’m not letting go.”

“Don’t let go,” she breathed. Her expression was open, raw. Fearless, mean, spiteful Ava, I couldn’t believe she could feel so different in this moment. Only for me, she could be like this.

How the fuck could I not love her?

Nobody was allowed to touch her. Nobody was allowed to harm her.

She could never die again.

She was all I had.

“Say you love me again,” I said.

This time, I might have been the one begging.

When she whispered the words, I shattered inside her once more.

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We fucked so many times that I lost count. By the end of it, Ava’s head rested on my shoulder, her breathing even as she slept. She looked satiated, content. I stared at her, and *I* was content. After so many days of anguish, I was stunned I could still recognize such a positive feeling. But it was here.

It was strong enough to nudge me into sleep, when a noise interrupted the quiet.

My phone was buzzing on the nightstand. I carefully disentangled myself from Ava, hiding a smile when she reached for me even in her sleep. Gabriel’s name flashed across the screen, so I had to answer. What the fuck was he doing calling me at this time anyway?

I grabbed a pair of sweats to put on quickly and grabbed my phone before stepping outside the room. I didn’t want to wake Ava up. The moment I answered, Gabe’s voice boomed through. “Dude! What took you so long to answer?”

“It’s the middle of the night, fuckface,” I scoffed quietly. “What’s going on with you? Miss me already?”

He laughed. “We just got to our motel and have a little bit of down time, so I thought I’d check in with you. Are there any updates on your… situation?”

Gabe’s question penetrated through the cozy cloud that I’d been walking on for the past few minutes. “Situation” meaning Ava nearly goddamn dying because of Adéluce. My stomach throbbed.

“Right,” I said, clearing my throat. “No updates. I’m still working on it.” I glanced at the bedroom door, my heart pounding. “I won’t let anything happen to Ava, though.”

There was a sudden quiet from the other end of the line.

“Gabe? Are you there?”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice had dropped. “Just thinking that there’s something different in the way you said her name just now.”

“Are you seriously analyzing me over the phone?” I scoffed.

“I’m not,” he said. His tone sounded uncharacteristically serious. “I just… I know I gave you a hard time about this Ava and Cali stuff, so I guess I take it back.”

I paused. “Take what back?”

“I’m man enough to admit when I was wrong, X,” Gabe said simply. “I underestimated your relationship with Ava. Now that I took a minute to process, all that ‘true love’s kiss’ business seems legit, man. It’s obvious you have true feelings for her. Things look much more clean-cut than they used to.”

I went rigid. I was *obvious*? Things were *clean-cut*?

A wave of nausea hit me.

Even if I did love Ava, she had never been a free choice. Not with Adéluce lurking, not when I loved Cali, too. Not when Cali owned my heart and had saved my life a million times just by existing. I glanced at my bedroom door, where Ava slept contently, and cold sweat broke all over my body.

What the fuck had I just done?

**Episode 4556**

The Somers’ parlor room could only rival Lucian’s, and that said a lot. My one complaint was that the couch I was sitting on was very hard and uncomfortable. No, scratch that—I didn’t have *one* complaint. I had a million of them, and they kept piling up the more time we spent in this place.

Dick kept staring between Elle and me, which didn’t help matters any.

“Torin, you must tell us everything!” Kevin’s mom tittered. “Kevin never brings his boyfriends home. He must be smitten with you!”

Kevin shot Torin a shy look. “I guess I am.”

Dick grinned in a way that was way too friendly, if you asked me. “How did you and Kevin meet, Torin?”

Torin looked like he wanted to hide under the—very uncomfortable—couch. Kevin looked equally bashful as he awkwardly chuckled. “Actually, uh, we met on Tinder.”

Kevin’s dad squinted at him. “What sort of establishment is that?”

Torin sputtered, “It’s an app. On the phone.”

Kevin’s mom seemed delighted. “But yes, I know this! It’s like when you have a pen pal, right?”

“What’s that?” Elle asked.

“*Anyway*,” I said, squeezing Elle’s hand to cut her off. “I feel like this was supposed to be a family reunion, right? We don’t want to intrude.”

“Bah! Nonsense,” Kevin’s dad said, waving a hand. “We love meeting Kevin’s friends. Isn’t that right, dear?” he asked his wife.

She nodded vividly. “Of course, dear. Isn’t that right, Dick?”

Dick nodded as well, mirroring her eager expression. “Of course!”

If I didn’t know any better, I would have called Dick Wigbert an adorable old man in this moment. But I did know better, so when he pinned me with his gaze, my stomach twitched. I wanted to get out of his gaze.

“Cali, is it?” he asked.

“Yep,” I squeaked.

“What it is that you do, Cali?” he asked. Was it me, or did his earlier jolly expression seem a little fake now? Was that a shrewd look in his eye? The catastrophic possibilities flooded my brain.

*Has Dick remembered everything?! Is that why he asked for us to come here and talk to him? Is he playing a twisted cat-and-mouse kind of game with us? Why, this devious evil raisin of an old man! Should I simply blast him and run away?*

I decided that perhaps that would not help with Kevin’s parents liking Torin, so I refrained. Fighting to keep my voice even, I finally said, “I’m in school right now.”

Dick seemed to approve. “Ah. That’s great to hear. What do you major in?”

Before I could spiral after realizing that I had never chosen my major, Torin stepped in. “Cali just joined the crew team at Central Cascades University,” he said. “We’re all really proud of her. She’s the best.”

Dick’s eyes widened in excitement. “Crew team! I loved crew as a boy. Tell me everything! You have to be the coxswain, right?” His reaction seemed disturbingly genuine, and I couldn’t believe this was happening. Dick Wigbert and me, talking about crew. Who would’ve thought?

*Not me!*

My stomach flipped, and I wasn’t sure if this was nerves or the nausea I’d felt earlier. Before I could open my mouth to offer a reply and try, yet again, to get us out of here, there was a knock behind us.

“Ahem, excuse me, ma’am?” The Somers’ butler, because they had one of those, hovered by the entrance. “There is someone at the door asking to see a Ms. Caliana Hart.”

My stomach did another one of its uncomfortable somersaults. Overall, I’d consider this night a pretty bad one, full of annoying surprises. Who the fuck would wait for me at the door? At Kevin’s house? The only person who knew we were here was Greyson!

“Who is asking for her?” Torin spoke up, clearing his throat.

“It is a man called Ravi,” the butler offered in that same official tone. “He apologized for dropping by unannounced, but he has been having issues with his phone.”

“Could he not find a charger?” Elle asked, frowning.

I ignored her and let out a sigh of relief. This was great news. It all made sense, actually—Greyson must have sent instructions with Ravi on what we should do next.

“I know Ravi!” Kevin told his parents and uncle with a grin. “He’s very attractive. And so nice.”

We were truly all so lucky that Kevin viewed our pack as a funny group of friends that just did odd things sometimes.

“We’ll have to go see him.” I stood up, pulling Torin and Elle with me. “He’s our roommate, so it must be important if he came all the way out here.”

Kevin’s parents told us to, of course, go ahead. Dick, for his part, didn’t say anything, and he didn’t look menacing as Elle and I exited the room.

*At least there’s that…*

“The gentleman is waiting for you in the main foyer,” the butler said, leading us forward before excusing himself. I could see the silhouette of someone up ahead, leaning against a table with a massive flower arrangement on it, but there was something off about their frame. Ravi’s dark hair wasn’t as short, and this person was wearing a brown suit.

*Wait a second… Why would Greyson send Ravi to come find us instead of texting me back? Elle was right, why wouldn’t they charge their phones…*

Before I could open my mouth to say any of that, Elle tensed next to me.

“Smells wrong,” she whispered.

My heart was going a mile a minute. “Wrong?”

Elle grabbed my hand tight. “Not like Redwood.”

Just then, the man in the suit turned around to face us.

Cesaries’s grin was self-satisfied. “Hello there.”

The council had found Elle.

*You had ONE JOB, Cali! Protect Elle! And now look what happened!*

No. This wasn’t over. I wasn’t going to let them take her. How the hell would I be able to face Greyson afterward? There was no way I wouldn’t put up a fight here. Stepping in front of Elle, I said, “What do you want?”

Cesaries glared at me, glancing at Elle. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“How did you find us?” Torin asked in a sharp voice. So unlike him.

Cesaries peered at us. “It was easy enough.” He focused on me. “Did the Redwoods really think they could elude the council forever?”

“You’ve been incompetent at many things, including stopping a couple of wars that led to bloodshed,” I said in a low voice.

Cesaries’s anger was obvious. Walking closer, he bared his teeth at us. But Torin whispered, “We’re in a human’s home. Don’t forget that.”

Cesaries bit out a scoff, looking around. “I’ll admit, hiding among the humans was somewhat impressive. It limited our ability to interact. But in the end, it didn’t matter.”

He moved closer, his eyes fixed on Elle.

“The council’s main obligation is to keep the supernatural world off the human radar, right?” I muttered. “If you take one step closer, I will scream, and every human in this place will come to my aid.”

I was bluffing, obviously. The last thing we needed was Dick Wigbert sticking his nose into our business. Unfortunately, Cesaries saw through my bullshit.

“You will not be doing that, Caliana. It would be best if you followed me outside right this instant and we get this over with.”

“Get this over with?” Torin asked, his eyes flashing purple. “How?”

“We will make all the wrongs right. The Redwood Alpha defied us when he hid the turned wolf. And now he’ll face the consequences for bringing this…” Cesaries shot Elle a look full of disdain. “This *creature* to life.”

Elle was shaking with fury next to me. I feared that she would shift and all chaos would break loose. I gripped her forearm, hoping that would calm her, and focused on Cesaries.

“Why do you think I’d let you get away with taking my friend?” I demanded. “I showed you what I could do earlier, and now, I have two of my friends with me. It’s one against three—there’s no way you can win.”

As if on cue, the front door opened, and two more council members walked into the foyer, wearing similar sardonic expressions.

Cesaries glowered at me. “You were saying?”

My chest felt tight, anxiety climbing inside me. Torin and I exchanged a look—we both knew we couldn’t do actual magic to fight them off in the middle of Kevin’s mansion.

“There will not be a fight tonight,” Cesaries said. “You and your comrades will come with us peacefully.” He glanced at Torin. “That way, your human companions will stay safe and sound.”

Torin flinched at the threatening undercurrent in Cesaries’s tone. At the same time, Cesaries’s two lackeys moved toward Elle, their faces ominous. Before I could speak or decide to blast them to oblivion and damn it all to hell, a guttural noise echoed in the room.

“Leave my friends alone!” Elle growled.

She had partially shifted.

**Episode 4557**

**Greyson**

Thin, fibrous, vein-like ropes spilled out of my mouth and spread across my chest like long, wet tentacles.

Now *that* was a vision I never thought I’d behold.

“Greyson, stop choking!” Chloe scolded. “Breathe through your damn nose!”

My wolf was threatened, growling inside my head. I fought to listen to her and make a conscious effort here. Breathe in, breathe out. Stop choking and shaking.

“We need to fortify the freezing spell,” Lauren said. “He’s fighting through it. Stop fighting, Greyson!”

I wasn’t doing it on purpose. My wolf was freaking out, but I had to chill. This was just another day at the office for me. I was the Redwood Alpha. I should be used to this kind of fucked-up bullshit.

This did take the cake, though.

I never thought I’d sign up for body horror, but here we were.

“Is there always this much blood?” Posie asked, a hint of alarm in her tone.

Real helpful, Posie.

“I believe so,” Lauren said seriously. “Now that the threads are on the outside, we need to find the right one.”

I lay there, fighting to breathe through my nose. I could feel the weight of the threads against my chest while the three witches hovered over me. It was as if I were on a mad scientist’s operating table. It was a good thing they’d fortified the freezing spell, because when Lauren reached forward and ran a finger along one of the blood-soaked threads, I felt like shuddering violently in repulsion.

I couldn’t move, but I could feel everything.

Lauren’s fingers skittered across the threads, but somehow I could feel her slippery touch all over me, inside me, gliding across my veins and organs. It was the most invasive and gut-churning experience I’d ever had, and that said a lot.

“Greyson?” Chloe waved a hand in my face. She was talking to me, and I forced myself to refocus. “I need you to pay attention now, okay? Blink once if you hear me.”

I blinked once.

“Each one of these threads represents a connection to someone in your life,” Chloe explained. “Every single connection you’ve ever made as an individual is in here. We just need to find the right thread, the one connecting you to Elle, and then we can cut it.”

“Are you having any luck finding it?” Posie asked Lauren, her expression agitated.

“Nope,” Lauren said, still going through the threads as if she were picking out her favorite to sew something with.

Ignoring them, Chloe told me, “Unfortunately, because of the nature of the sire bond, it’s going to look almost indistinguishable from the one that represents your mate bond with Cali. So we need to be really careful while exploring here.”

“It’s taking you too long!” Posie told Lauren, waving her hands. Instead of listening to Chloe’s instructions to be gentle, she dug her fingers into the bloody mess of threads that lay against my chest. She grabbed at them and tugged.

Immediately, I retched.

My wolf howled. I was convulsing, the instinct to curl into myself, protect myself at the forefront. I couldn’t control my body anymore. I was in survival mode with my guts literally spilling out of me.

“Stop moving!” Chloe yelled. “You’re making this too difficult!”

I wanted to scream at her to do a better job with the fucking freezing spell. Dolos had had no problem immobilizing me earlier. Then again, he hadn’t tried to rip something out of me, so the stakes and fucked-upness factor were decidedly higher here. My wolf had no idea what the fuck was happening. He only knew this felt unnatural.

“We need to put him to sleep,” Posie rasped, her hands shaking as she grabbed my wrist and pinned it on the floor. Chloe did the same with my other wrist, and Lauren’s expression was dark as she looked down at me.

I fought to speak, but all that came out were more choking sounds. I lay there, shuddering and gagging. I could not tell them that I didn’t want them to put me to sleep—I had to be awake for this damn nightmare and see what’s going on.

“Do it,” Lauren told Chloe, and then—

Chloe whispered something in my ear.

Instantly, my eyelids started to droop.

*You can’t make me fall asleep. I won’t do it*, I felt like screaming. Maybe I did scream, somehow. Because when my wolf roared inside my head, Posie’s nails dug in my wrist.

“Stop fighting it!” she yelled. “You’re making it worse!”

“Just let the magic take you away!” Chloe’s earlier casual demeanor had turned frantic now. “It’ll all be over when you wake up. Trust us!”

Trust them? *Trust them?* They were fucking mutilating me. The least I could do was watch while they did it. As if she could hear my thoughts, Lauren peered down at me with dark, furious eyes. When she spoke, her voice was hushed and laced with anger.

“If you don’t pass out right now, we might accidentally sever every connection you’ve ever made. Is that what you want? You’ll be adrift, nonexistent.” She leaned closer to me, her tone lowering. “You’ll be all alone, Greyson. Forever.”

Alone.

I used to be alone.

I had been alone for so, so long.

“All alone,” Lauren repeated in a whisper, only this time she accompanied the words by pressing her thumb between my eyebrows.

The last thing I saw before everything went dark was the glimmer of her jade earrings.

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I was alone again.

But that didn’t make me sad this time.

I started bouncing on the balls of my feet the moment my father’s second left the room. I felt like jumping up and down. This was going to be the best. Day. Ever. My dad had kept his promise, and I was going to see my little brothers today. We would all train together, and that practically never happened.

Xavier and Colton stayed together, and I was alone.

That was how things worked.

But if I could prove to my dad today that I was good enough, that I could train hard enough, maybe he’d let me come over again. Maybe he’d even let me have dinner with my brothers, or we could watch a movie. I wondered if they had any toys, any Legos or action figures or other cool things. My dad had thrown mine away, said I was too old for them now that I’d turned ten.

He had to be right.

Father was always right, and I was lucky that he would spend time with me today. He was super busy, and this didn’t happen often, so when it did, I had to be on my best behavior. I wanted him to like me, to see that I was trying really hard. Maybe, one day, he would like me as much as he liked the twins.

Today was going to be the best day ever.

The door to the room opened, and I grinned.

“Dad?”

Instead of my father, though, I saw Marlene. She was my brothers’ mother. She was very pretty, and she always smelled like cake. I had seen her hug Colton and Xavier once, and I wondered what it would feel like if she hugged me.

I could count all the hugs that Silas had ever given me on one hand.

“Greyson, hi,” Marlene said, gesturing for me to follow her. I did, and she squeezed my shoulder. It felt nice. It felt even better to hear her say, “Look at you! You’ve gotten so tall.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She chuckled. “And so polite! My little beasts could learn a thing or two from you.”

My cheeks felt hot. Marlene was the best. I looked around, hoping my dad had heard her say that, when I noticed that the living room was empty.

“Oh, right,” Marlene said, her expression turning apologetic. “I’m sure you were expecting Silas, but he’s been called away.”

My stomach turned into a knot.

“But don’t you worry at all, okay? You’ll still get to train with Xavier and Colton.” Marlene squeezed my shoulder again. That, along with her words, made me feel better.

This could still be the best day ever.

“Okay,” I said.

She smiled, waving a hand. “Come along now. Let’s go find them.”

My dad had set up the backyard for training, and Colton and Xavier were already at it. Their two small wolf forms flew at each other.

“Boys!” Marlene called. “I have a surprise for you!”

They both shifted back to human, turning to their mother. They both grinned when they saw me and ran toward me, shouting my name. Patting my shoulder, Colton said, “What are you doing here?”

“Dad never lets us spar with you,” Xavier said, clapping his hands together.

His words confused me. Sparring? Father never said anything about sparing. At ten years old, I was bigger than both my brothers. I could hurt them if we sparred. Maybe I shouldn’t be worried, though. I had fought Xavier and Colton before…

Hadn’t I?

“Incoming!” Colton shouted.

He shifted back into his wolf form and lunged at me head-on.

He looked like a threat, and my wolf roared. Without thinking, I shifted fully and snapped my jaws at Colton. But what was I doing? This was a spar, not a real fight. I shouldn’t be going for blood! I didn’t want to do this!

But Xavier didn’t know that, and he attacked.

His jaw closed around my throat. He wanted to hurt me, even if we were brothers.

I would never hurt my brothers. I wanted to spend all my days with them.

I hated being…

*Alone.*

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I woke up to Lauren’s voice and the feeling of violently throwing up. Blood. I could smell it, taste the iron bitterness of it in my mouth. There was sticky wetness all around me, dripping across my throat, my lips, my chest and arms.

And then, there was Lauren’s voice again.

“Fuck! He’s choking on his own blood!”

**Episode 4558**

I grabbed Elle by the arm, pulling her back. “You can’t shift!” I hissed in her ear. “We’re in Kevin’s house, and Dick’s here. That man is the last person who needs to find out that werewolves are real… again.”

We stared at each other, and Elle’s rage-clouded eyes cleared. Her shifted hand turned back. She was panting as she fought to rein it all in.

“Calm down,” I whispered. “We should—”

“What are we supposed to do?” Elle asked, gulping. She looked over at the council members. Torin, in the politest way possible, had been distracting them, offering one reason after another as to why they should let us go.

“You should discuss this with our Alpha,” Torin was saying. “I am certain there’s some sort of protocol for this kind of thing.”

Cesaries scoffed, “*I* determine the protocol here, Fae.”

Torin shook his head. “I’ve seen on TV that humans have warrants if they want to pick someone up. What’s the equivalent for werewolves?”

“Your Alpha broke the law when he”—Cesaries’s answer was muddled in my ears.

I focused on Elle instead, who said, “We can’t let these people win. It would hurt Greyson.” She grabbed my shoulder tight. “We can’t let them hurt Greyson.”

I felt sick to my stomach, looking around the foyer. This kind of luxurious house would have to have a surveillance system outside, but I sure as fuck hoped there were no cameras inside the mansion. Or if we were being watched right now, that Elle’s shifted hand had been obscured enough. Either way, we couldn’t risk exposure and defend ourselves while the Somer family was just a few feet away. What if the council killed them to maintain secrecy?

*There can’t be any more blood on our hands.*

“Enough of this!” Cesaries said loudly, snapping his fingers for his lackeys to step forward ominously. Their eyes were fixed on Elle.

“Let them take you outside,” I whispered in her ear. “At least when we’re out of here, we’ll be able to fight without endangering Kevin. I’ll tell you when to break free.”

Elle nodded, and a beat later, the council members grabbed her by the arms and pulled her away from me. Torin reached for my hand. He whispered, “We need to get out of here with minimal fuss. We can’t endanger the Somers. Kevin *has* to stay out of this, Cali.”

My friend and I had had the same thought.

As the two of us rushed outside behind Elle and her captors, slipping past the snoozing security guard at the gate, I realized we hadn’t told Kevin goodbye.

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The spotless suburban street was quiet. The next mansion was a quarter of a mile down the road. I looked up to see three destroyed surveillance cameras as we paced down the sidewalk. The council must’ve done this. At least they had made themselves useful for once.

Up ahead, the three dark figures of the council loomed over Elle’s small frame.

She looked so vulnerable.

Cesaries paused walking, then. He turned to face me.

“Don’t make this worse on yourself, Caliana. Go home.” He glanced at Elle, whose head was hanging low. “Seems like your little pet has lost its fight anyway.”

Furious, I screamed, “Now, Elle!”

Elle’s head snapped up. She growled and launched herself to the side, shoving one of her captors hard enough that he toppled over a bush. I raised my hands and blasted Cesaries and his other lackey, and they both went flying.

Torin turned to Elle and me, his eyes wide as he shouted, “RUN!”

We all bolted. When we returned to get our car from the Somers’ driveway, the formerly sleeping security guard gave us a funny look. Ignoring him, we ran to the car. I didn’t let Torin drive. If there was a sobering event, it was this one. I slid behind the wheel while Torin got in the passenger’s seat and Elle ducked in the back. The tires screeched loudly as I peeled out of the driveway and onto the open road.

“What happens now?” Elle asked me, breathing hard.

*How am I supposed to know?!* I wanted to shout. But I refrained. It wasn’t her fault I was a shitty Luna who’d almost let her get caught.

*Fuck.*

“It’s going to be okay,” Torin said. “We just need to—”

A pair of headlights appeared behind us. Elle growled. “The car is black. It’s them!”

Torin gasped. “Are we in a car chase right now?” He turned to me, his mouth dropping open in shock. “Is this like the movies?”

*Oh my god…*

I wanted to start laughing. Maniacally. I was not exactly the most equipped for driving an SUV under extreme conditions, but I wasn’t about to tell either of them that. They probably already knew.

*Great. This is great. JUST FUCKING—*

“They know where I am now, so hiding doesn’t make sense anymore. We have to get back to the Redwood pack house,” Elle said. “At least then we’ll have enough people to face them.”

Elle was right. *Shit*. I was supposed to be the acting Luna, but it was Elle who had made the best point she could’ve right now, and I was grateful for it. Nodding at her words, I stepped on the accelerator, and the distance between us and Cesaries’s car increased.

“Yes, yes, that’s it!” Torin yelled. He opened the window, shouting into the wind, “Suck on that, you stupid werewolves!”

I was so shocked by Torin’s unprecedented use of swear words that I burst out laughing. Elle grinned at me through the rearview mirror. “It’s gonna be fine,” she said. “As long as Greyson is okay, he will—”

A horn blaring from my right made me jump, the light from another car blinding me at the same time. I screamed in shock and fear, my reflexes kicking in at the last minute. I turned the wheel before a silver car could slam into us, evading the attack like a pro.

*Holy fucking shit! Did that just happen?!*

Stepping on the gas to gain ground on our chasers, I shouted, “Oh my god, did you see how I did that? Oh my god! Oh my freaking—”

“This *is* like the movies!” Torin clapped his hands excitedly. “I didn’t know you were such a phenomenal driver!”

My laughter was hysterical. “I didn’t either!”

“They’re coming again!” Elle screamed.

This time, I wasn’t fast enough. The silver car slammed into us, driving the SUV off the road and into the woods. I was shaken, panting, my head empty of every other thought except the fact that I needed to stop this car before we crashed. With a cry, I pressed on the brake as hard as I could, and then—

The car skidded to a screeching halt.

*FUCK!*

I jerked forward with the abruptness of it, the seat belt digging into my shoulder. I groaned from the pain, from the surprise. Hyperventilating, my chest and head aching, I turned to the other two. “Is everyone okay?”

Elle wiped blood from her brow. “We’re fine.”

“We’re not fine,” Torin said, his words curt, sharp. He pointed out the window. “Two cars just pulled up.” He turned to me, gulping. “How do we play this?”

I didn’t know how far Cesaries might go. He could hurt Elle. He could kill her without trial. I expected anything at this point. Greyson would be devastated if anything happened to Elle. *I* would be devastated.

“We can’t let them take her,” I said shakily. “We have no idea what they could do to her.”

Torin’s eyes were sharp. “We won’t let them touch her.”

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Seven council members surrounded us. Seven muscular men who shifted into wolves and roared. Elle followed, growling at them. I stepped in front of her and raised my hands.

“You can’t have her!” I screamed, sending off a blast.

Three of them fell back while a fourth evaded and charged straight at Elle and me.

Torin shoved a hand forward, and the wolf he pointed at dropped, yowling in pain as bloody spots appeared all over his fur. I looked away from what I knew would be a massacre. Breathing so hard that my chest ached, I eyed Torin’s face.

There was anguish there—like there always was when he used his power this way. But he didn’t back down. I knew he hated the person he became in these moments, but right now, it felt like he hated these wolves more.

“Cali!” Torin shouted. “Protect Elle!”

I snapped out of it and turned to Elle just as another council member, a large grey wolf, pounced on her. She clawed at his neck and roared, but he had her pinned down. She bit at his side and escaped, but just then, the three wolves I’d blasted were up and ready to fight again.

Two of them surrounded her.

*We’re outnumbered. We’re done for.*

But I couldn’t give up.

Another wolf appeared before me, snapping its teeth, claws ready. Channeling my shield, I blocked his attack and sliced through him to get to Elle. I didn’t pause to see how much damage the sword had done. I didn’t pause to see why the three wolves behind me, those that Torin was fighting with, were howling like tortured animals.

“Elle!” I screamed when the same large grey wolf from earlier sank its teeth into her shoulder. Our eyes locked, and hers were full of pain.

I raised my hands to blast him the hell off her, when—

I felt a sharp pain at the back of my head.

And everything went black.

**Episode 4559**

**Xavier**

“Xavier, are you listening?” Gabe’s voice sounded murky through the phone. His words were still ringing inside my head. He’d said that I had true feelings for Ava. That I was obvious.

I needed to end this call right the fuck now.

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing hard. “I’m here. It’s just that everyone’s sleeping so I gotta keep quiet.”

Gabe snorted, grumbling something about the Samaras needing their beauty sleep like a bunch of old folks. I wrapped up the call as fast as possible without him realizing that I was freaking the fuck out. The second it was over, though, my entire body felt itchy. When I looked down, my skin was unmarred, but I felt like I had just broken out into hives.

What the fuck had I just done?

I’d told Ava I *loved* her.

The hallway started to feel too small, walls closing in. I needed to get the hell out of here, right now. I needed to run, clear my head. At least try. Holding my breath to stop myself from dry heaving like a damn loser, I moved quietly down the stairs and outside. I took off my sweat pants, threw them on the porch swing, and shifted.

When I took off into the woods, I could finally breathe.

The forest was cold around me, but I felt hot all over. My blood was boiling, hot flashes hitting my chest like punches. I was spiraling in a way that would make Greyson shake his head at me with a huff, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stop myself.

The weight of my choices had come crashing down on me.

I’d told Ava I loved her, and now she knew it.

Now, she fucking *felt* it.

I had done exactly what Adéluce asked me to do, participating in her twisted game like some idiot child who didn’t know any better. Adéluce got what she wanted, and I’d fallen right into her trap while *knowing* it was one.

How could I be so fucking stupid?

So *useless*?

When Adéluce had first pushed me into her web, I had never imagined that things would turn out like this. I never considered where Ava fit in the equation. I would have never expected to fall in love with her again while I still loved Cali.

Was this what it was like for Cali when she thought of Greyson and me?

This sick anguish, this ache that wouldn’t go away as I thought of them both?

How did I end up like this?

Was this some kind of karmic punishment?

No. This was all Adéluce. She knew how much this would hurt me, and she had pushed me all the way until she got what she wanted. My highs were high but the lows got even worse. Telling Ava I loved her, feeling that connection with her, only to feel guilty now. Saving Cali and feeling useful and good about it, only to then have to push her away and watch her face crumble. I was in hell, torn in the middle. This was torture.

This had to be exactly what Adéluce wanted it to be.

What was the next stage of her fucked-up plan?

I couldn’t even imagine. I didn’t dare imagine. But I was certain that it wouldn’t be over any time soon. Adéluce was just starting to have some real fun with me. I was her puppet. I hated myself for it. I hated myself for loving two women at the same time. I felt like I was betraying both of them and I couldn’t stop.

Adéluce wasn’t going to let me stop.

I could sense it, I knew in my gut that she would want more from me, but I had no idea what. Did being in love with them both and admitting it mean that they both were in more danger now? What would Adéluce ask from me next? What could she do to them just to punish me?

That last question had me slipping on the snowy ground.

My wolf landed with a thud and a grunt, and I growled low in my chest. I pushed myself to move faster, even if I knew I couldn’t go far enough to escape. My frantic thoughts matched my frantic run, as more questions flooded my brain, burning holes through me.

I told Ava I loved her, and it had to be true. But if it were true…

Could I ever really and only be in love with Cali again?

Could things ever go back to how they used to be?

My head started aching when I realized that this wasn’t just about me—this was about the *due destini* as well. Even if I had broken up with Cali, even if I acted like a piece of shit toward her, I had never rejected her. The way I felt about her ran so deep that no amount of lies I said could break it. But now, I didn’t have feelings for Cali only.

There was Ava as well.

Could my confession of love for Ava impact the *due destini*? Could it hurt Greyson and me? Above all, could it hurt Cali? There was no playbook for what to do after my first mate came back from the dead and I fell back in love with her. I was still in the *due destini* with Cali and my brother—what did that mean? The questions landed one after the other, forcing my breaths to come out short. Running free was only an illusion. I was backed into a corner, forming questions without any answers. I had no one to turn to.

I might’ve been in love with two people, but I had never been so alone in my life.

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There was no point in running anymore. I was still restless, still fucked up, and nothing could fix that. I could only wait and see when that damned vampire-witch would appear next.

When I got back to the pack house, I shifted back to human. My head felt heavy with thoughts, my stomach nauseated. Shaking off the feeling, I made my way to the front porch when I suddenly heard two people arguing, almost shouting, on the other side of the house.

What the fuck?

I grabbed my sweatpants from where I’d left them on the porch, put them on, and headed to the backyard. I recognized Lilac’s and Blaine’s raised voices and cursed under my breath. This was the last thing I needed right now. What the hell were these two doing out here in the middle of the night?

When I got there, Blaine was in Lilac’s face. “Get the fuck out of here! This is trespassing!”

Lilac growled, and I noticed that his hand was shifted. For good reason, too. Did this bastard just call Lilac a fucking trespasser?

“Hey!” I barked, shoving between them to tear them apart. “What the hell is happening here?”

“This damn moron attacked me!” Lilac snapped, glaring at Blaine. “I was just going home!”

“I thought you were going home earlier,” I said. “What are you still doing here?”

Lilac got this shifty look on his face. “Well, Perrie told me to come back to her room after you left. I couldn’t say no to her, you know?” He cleared his throat, his cheeks flushing as he poetically added, “The night was young, as are we.”

I turned to Blaine. “That still doesn’t explain what the hell happened. Why did you attack Lilac? Why did you talk to him like that?”

Blaine shook his head, scoffing. “I saw a credible threat, Xavier. And after that Andrew shit, I wasn’t about to let something else go wrong in the Samara house.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. All my anger and frustration from earlier returned tenfold, focusing on this goddamn stupid fuckface whose neck I wanted to wring.

“Have you lost your mind?” I snapped, pushing him back. Away from Lilac. “A credible threat? This is fucking Lilac!”

Blaine huffed. “I didn’t recognize him at first, and he—”

“You didn’t recognize his scent?” I growled. “Lilac’s been over a dozen times! Everybody in the Samara knows this kid. How fucking useless are you?”

The second I said that last sentence, Blaine got this ugly look on his face. Sneering, he said, “That’s rich coming from you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I spat.

“You calling me useless when you’re an Alpha who can’t even control prisoners and needs his Luna to save him.”

Now, I was seething.

“How fucking dare you turn this on me when you’re the one who’s really to blame for Andrew escaping?” I demanded, grabbing Blaine by the collar. His eyes widened.

“Xavier—”

I cut him off. “*You* let Andrew go, and now you’re attacking our allies? A *kid*?” Shaking, I spat out, “Fuck the council, fuck whatever I’m supposed to do to keep you here, Blaine. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t banish you right now.”

**Episode 4560**

**Greyson**

I lay there on the floor, like a patient on an operating table, while the witches yelled at each other.

Posie said, “Shit, I think the spell we used was too powerful for him!”

Chloe said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but the earrings were probably overkill? We pushed things too far. Something is wrong.”

Lauren snapped, “Both of you, shut up and focus. We can do this.” She looked down at me, her eyes intense. “I will find the right connection thread and cut it.” Her voice dropped, and she reached toward the threads again. “All you have to do is lie there and…”

The intrusive feeling was back while Lauren worked. She touched through the bloody mess, and the repulsive sensation echoed through my body. I could feel fingers along the inside of my chest, my esophagus, the roof of my mouth.

I felt like I wanted to pass out again just to avoid this sick fuckery.

How much longer was she gonna keep poking around my insides?

As if answering my question, Lauren spoke up.

“I need help,” she told her sisters in a voice that was uncharacteristically shaky. “It’s taking too long.”

“Fortify the freezing spell,” Chloe told her. She glanced at me. “He’s gonna need it.”

I dreaded what came next.

And then, all three witches dipped their hands into the threads falling from my mouth.

If I felt disgusted before, now pain was thrown into the mix, like a string had been tied around my heart and someone was goddamn tugging. The urge to lurch, thrash, and escape the sensation hit me, and my wolf howled in fury and now, fear.

He was afraid.

I was afraid.

“I have something!” Posie shouted suddenly, her eyes wide. Lightly, she pulled one of the threads free, raising it up to the level of her face. It was pale red, glowing faintly. She held it as if it were something precious, something rare, and I wondered how the fuck such a small, disgusting thing could carry so much meaning in my life.

“I’m touching it as lightly as I can,” she told me, “but you still might feel some discomfort.”

I’d laugh if I could. Discomfort? I felt a tightness in my chest that fucking hurt like hell. And then, just a moment later, something else tugged inside me, and Lauren bellowed, “I found something, too!” She separated it from the rest and cradled it gingerly.

The thread was nearly identical to the one Posie held.

“So which one is it?” Chloe asked, looking between them. “Which one is the mate bond, and which one is the sire bond?”

My eyes widened, and I wished I could speak right now. I wished I could fucking shout. They didn’t fucking know which thread was which? They didn’t have a spell for that? What the actual hell was I supposed to—

“Don’t worry, it’s fine!” Posie said in an anxious way that did nothing to appease me. “I’ll do some chanting to figure out which is which.”

She handed the strand over to Chloe, and then closed her eyes, mumbling in that same strange language from earlier. I watched, both transfixed and full of dread, as the threads in Chloe’s and Lauren’s hands started to glow bright.

And brighter.

And brighter.

And brighter, until—

They sparked like two live wires. A collective scream escaped the witches. The glow had turned into a spark, the spark turned into a fire, and suddenly there was orange and red on my chest, dancing, wicked flames licking at the threads while agonizing pain burst through every inch of me.

It started from my heart.

The witches screamed at each other.

And screamed.

And screamed.

Until—

“Greyson! Close your eyes!” Chloe yelled.

I was scared enough to do it.

I couldn’t see now, and the rest of my senses took the spotlight, one by one.

The air smelled like sulfur and blood.

The wooden floor under me felt hard and cold.

The noises all around me grew louder till there was only one into focus. The sound of sharpened metal. They must be readying their tool to cut the thread.

The thread that signified my connection to someone I deeply cared about.

They were about to cut my sire bond.

Or… my mate bond.

I held my breath and wished so hard that they hadn’t picked the wrong thread. It was crucial for my life, my happiness that my mate bond with Cali would stay intact, strong as ever. I couldn’t even imagine living without her. I vowed to myself, right here, right now as the pain burst through my every vein, that even if everything went wrong today, I wouldn’t let Cali go.

I would still love her, no matter what.

Mate bond or no mate bond, Cali was my choice.

What we had transcended everything.

I held onto that feeling of love for Cali and focused on it, eyes squeezed shut while every other one of my senses was on overdrive. There was the sharp sound of scissors opening—

And closing.

The thread had been cut.

The pain was searing agony, stabbing through my heart like it wanted to slice it in half.

I passed out.

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When I blinked my eyes open, everything was fuzzy before it cleared. The three witch sisters were still kneeling over me. Chloe let out a sigh of relief. Was she *smiling*?

“I told you we didn’t kill him,” she told Posie, nudging her.

Posie sniffed a little. Lauren rolled her eyes. “Of course we didn’t kill him. Everything’s fine. We knew it would be fine.”

“Let me just…” Posie waved a hand over my chest. “Clean you up a little.”

She snapped her fingers, and I sat up slightly. My white T-shirt was spotless again. No blood. No scent of blood anywhere either.

Did I dare to feel relief?

“Thanks for—” I cleared my throat. Fuck, my mouth felt dry.

“Here,” Lauren said, offering me a cup of water.

I gulped the water down quickly, feeling much better immediately. I asked Lauren, “You had that ready for me?”

She shrugged. “That kind of spell traditionally gives people dry mouth. We offer a full service here.”

I finished off my water and looked between them. “But… Did it work?”

Posie bit her lip, chuckling nervously. “Well. Something definitely happened because we cut one of the threads.”

I stared at her. “I thought you did your little chant thing and figured out which thread was which.”

Sighing, Chloe cut in, “You need to keep in mind that each situation is different. I did tell you the various outcomes in your case before you agreed to do this with us, and you accepted the risks. Remember?”

I did. And the risks had been too many. Accidentally searing my mate bond with Cali, accidentally turning my sire bond with Elle to a mate bond, having three mates in total, some other outrageous nonsense I couldn’t focus on enough to remember.

Everything went where magic was involved.

“I hope you don’t regret this. Now it’s too late.” Lauren gave me a serious look. “Whatever we’ve done, regardless of the outcome, is irreversible.”

I swallowed. Hard. “I hope you got it right, then.”

“Do you want more water?” Posie asked.

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“How are you feeling?” Chloe asked, eyeing my face. “You look a little… not good.”

“He looks great for someone who hung out with Dolos and then had his guts spilled out,” Posie grumbled defensively. Was she offended on my behalf?

I’d laugh if this whole situation weren’t so weird and jarring.

“I’m not sure how I feel,” I admitted. “There’s a lingering sense of unease and nausea.”

“Those are just side effects. They’ll go away soon enough,” Lauren said, waving a dismissive hand. “The key here is what happens to you when you think of Cali or Elle.”

I paused.

I thought of Cali first.

I tried to focus on the image of her face, her smile, when suddenly…

A loud crashing noise came from downstairs.

“Shit!” Chloe jumped up. “What was that?”

“Sounds like someone smashed the front door open,” Lauren said with mild interest.

With Posie’s help, I got to my feet. Wobbling slightly, I walked toward my bedroom door, then out to the hallway. The sounds of quick footsteps coming up the stairs echoed, and I called, “Who’s there? Anyone hurt?”

Torin and Cali turned onto the landing, both of their clothes disheveled and bloody. There were tears running down Cali’s cheeks. The sight of her anguish hurt like a sucker punch.

“Greyson!” She ran up to me, and my first instinct was to open my arms for her. She fell into my embrace, sobbing. I shushed her, holding her tight, kissing the top of her head.

“It’s okay, I’m here,” I whispered, facing her. Tucking her hair behind her ear, I asked, “Are you hurt? What happened?”

Fresh tears dripped down Cali’s cheeks. “We lost her, Greyson. The council took Elle.”

**Episode 4561**

**Greyson**

I held Cali tight, stroking her hair and running a hand up and down her back to calm her as she apologized over and over again.

“I tried to protect Elle, I really did,” she said. “I never meant to let them get her! I’m so sorry, Greyson. I let you down!”

She began to sob, her body trembling against mine.

*I hate to see her this way, but I just* knew *that taking Elle to that frat party was a bad idea. I let them both out of my sight, and now Elle’s been taken, and Cali and Torin could’ve been seriously hurt trying to protect her. But I don’t want Cali to blame herself for this.*

“Shh, Cali, it’s okay,” I said. “You didn’t let me down.”

I gently pulled away and held her at arm’s length, crouching a bit so I could look her in the eye. I was doing my best to calm her down so that I could find out exactly what had happened, but at the same time, I was silently freaking out myself.

A distraught Torin caught my gaze. “We tried, but there were too many of them. They just kept coming.”

“We did our best to fight them off, I swear, but it wasn’t enough,” Cali said. “I wasn’t fast enough, or powerful enough.”

“Cali, stop beating yourself up,” I said firmly. “I doubt it was your fault. I’m just glad you’re safe—and I wish you hadn’t been forced to protect her from the council. I hate that you were in that kind of danger.”

“But I’m fine,” Cali said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “It’s Elle who’s in trouble. What will the council do with her?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but Cesaries has made it pretty clear that he and the council consider Elle to be a danger to us all. That doesn’t bode well.”

If nothing else, the council always did whatever it could to uphold the safety and traditions of werewolf kind. If they truly believed that Elle was a threat to our future, then there was no telling what lengths they’d go to when it came to punishing her for my mistake.

Cali’s eyes widened in alarm. “So are they going to come after you, next? *Again?*”

“Probably. I’m surprised they’re not here already,” I admitted. “Though that might be because they don’t want to take on the entire pack yet. That wouldn’t look good to the other packs, and image is everything for the council.” I cursed under my breath and turned away from everyone, doing my best to keep my emotions in check. “Just stop blaming yourself, Cali—I was the one who signed off on you taking Elle away. It would’ve been safer if I’d just kept her here.”

Cali sniffed and inhaled a stuttering breath. “So, what do we do now? Maybe we should organize a rescue party and try to free Elle from the council.”

I whirled around to face her. “Slow down, Cali. Taking on the council directly would be a mistake. I’m going to start by contacting Cesaries directly to see what they have planned.”

I wasn’t confident that the council leader would be keen on answering any of my questions, but I was starting to realize that our options were very limited.

“Greyson, I really am sorry,” Cali said. “I convinced you that she’d be safe at the party, and look what happened.”

“It’s okay, Cali. If anyone’s to blame, it’s me. I should’ve stayed with Elle, but I was too focused on getting the witches to remove the sire bond. I should’ve listened to my instincts not to let you go to the party.”

Cali’s expression switched from anguish to surprise. “So they cast the spell? What happened? Did it work? Did they hurt you?”

“It was awful,” I said, deciding not to go into detail. A chill raced down my spine at the memory of the strange threads, the sharp pain, and all the blood. “And I still don’t even know if it worked. I’m trying to figure it out, but that’s going to be difficult with Elle in the council’s hands. There’s no real way for me to test it, or to ask Elle if she felt the bond breaking.”

I thought back to the conversation the witches had had while trying to locate the correct thread—the arguing and the uncertainty. They hadn’t seemed as confident about the spell as I would’ve liked, and that worried me more than I wanted to admit to Cali.

I sighed, trying to figure out the best way to explain. “It’s possible that the witches cut the wrong thread. They didn’t seem all that sure about which thread was which.”

Cali’s expression shifted to worry. “So does that mean that they might have severed *our* bond?”

*I knew that her mind would go straight there—mine did the same thing. I have to assure her that everything’s okay… At least until we figure out what to do about Elle.*

“I wondered about that at first,” I said, “but I don’t think so. Because as soon as the council took Elle, the first thing you did was come straight to me. That has to mean something.”

Cali looked skeptical.

“Cali.” I lifted her chin and kissed her. “I’m telling you this so that you know what’s going on, not so that you can worry about our bond. I love you, and at the end of the day, isn’t that all that matters?”

*But the witches warned me that if they cut the wrong bond, it’s irreversible. It can’t be fixed. I just have to trust that I would know if my bond with Cali had been cut… Wouldn’t I?*

Ravi and Rishika came running in.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked, glancing between me and Cali. “We heard the door slam.”

I was happy for the interruption. I wasn’t really in any position to put Cali’s mind at ease when I didn’t actually know what had actually happened to my bonds. For now, all I could do was hope that the witches had gotten it right.

“Elle was taken by the council,” I said. “Cali and Torin tried to fight them off, but they couldn’t. Elle’s gone.”

I paid close attention to my emotions as I spoke, hoping they’d give me some indication of the status of the sire bond, but I couldn’t tell. I was angry at the council and worried about Elle and eager to spring into action and save her, but that was all normal—I would’ve been worried if anyone from the pack had been taken.

“Maybe we could go to the council and demand her release,” Rishika suggested.

“I agree,” Cali said. “We’ve taken on worse than the council. They’re so ineffectual, it probably wouldn’t even be that hard,” she added, rolling her eyes.

“I’m with Cali,” said Ravi. “We need to show the council that we’re not just going to let them kidnap our pack members. We need to put them in their place.”

“And I can use my magic to break in and shield us from the council if they try to stop us. And if anyone gets in my way—”

“Take it easy, Cali,” I interrupted. “I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself.”

I was taken aback by Cali’s sudden enthusiasm to fight. It wasn’t like her at all, and she was grossly underestimating the council. They were a lot of things, but they certainly weren’t pushovers—not when it came to the things they actually cared about.

“Storming the council’s headquarters is a bad idea, and I stand by that,” I said. “We might succeed in freeing Elle, but the council wouldn’t just sit back and let us get away with it—believe me. They’d bring the full force of their authority down on the Redwood pack. They’d want to make an example out of us.”

“But Elle’s a Redwood, and she deserves our help!” Cali said.

“I know that,” I said levelly, “but we still have to be smart about it. Challenging the council directly is a bad move. Trust me on that.”

“I still think it’s the best thing to do,” Ravi said. “Catch them by surprise, use force the way the Redwoods know how. It’s what they deserve.”

As Cali and Ravi kept discussing strategy, Rishika caught my eye.

“I’ll do whatever you think is best,” she told me.

“I appreciate your loyalty,” I said, “but I think it’s best to limit the number of people who interact with the council on this. We don’t want to make this any worse than it already is.”

Cali turned an exasperated gaze on me. “We can’t just do nothing.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting,” I said. “The only reason that the council had its sights set on Elle in the first place is because I turned her. Then she killed Helix while under my watch. I think it’s best that I go and turn myself in before they try to take me themselves.”

**Episode 4562**

*Did he really just say that he’s going to turn himself in? I must have misheard him. There’s no possible way he can think that’s a good idea!*

“Turn yourself in?” I demanded. “Are you *crazy*? Why would you do that? What good would it do? The council might just kill you and call it a day!” I shook my head at him. “I won’t let you do it.”

Greyson’s reply was firm but quiet, as if he’d already made up his mind. “Right now, it’s the only way I can see to solve this game of cat and mouse. If I turn myself in, at least I save all of you some trouble.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe that. If Torin and I had brought even a couple more people along to the party, we would have wiped the floor with Cesaries and his goons. We can fight them, we *want* to fight them—”

Greyson took me by the shoulders. “Cali, I have no doubt that you did all you could to protect Elle, but the council took her anyway. If they want to come for me next, I’d rather turn myself in than risk them coming here and putting the pack’s lives in danger. We’re fresh out of a pack war, I will not throw the Redwoods into another battle that could cost them their lives.”

“But what about *your* life?” I demanded. “You’re our Alpha! What happens if they just take you and sentence you both to death?”

I couldn’t believe that Greyson was seriously considering this. The council didn’t deserve the grace he was trying to show them.

“Cali, you’re missing one key thing here,” he said. “This isn’t the pack’s fight, or yours—it’s mine. I caused this mess, and I’ll be the one to suffer the consequences. And I’m not convinced that those consequences will be death. I’m hoping that if I turn myself in, the council will look on me a little more favorably during their sentencing.”

I scoffed. “Please, Greyson. Cesaries is going to do whatever he wants. I doubt that anything you do will influence that.”

I’d seen the council in action, and I didn’t understand them at all. Nothing they did ever seemed to have any rhyme or reason. Greyson’s assumption that they’d spontaneously develop a sense of morality was ridiculous.

“Fine, then how about a compromise?” Greyson countered. “How about if I agree to talk to Cesaries in neutral territory—like at Three Devils Point? Or wherever they want to meet. At least if I’m willing to talk to them, they won’t take me into custody until we talk. I might be able to convince them otherwise.”

I sighed. I wasn’t keen on that, either. “I don’t know… I just don’t trust Cesaries. Who’s to say that he wouldn’t agree to meet you there and then ambush you? Seems risky.”

“I know, it’s a possibility. I don’t trust Cesaries either, but I think it’s the best I can do,” Greyson said. “Right now, the council thinks that I defied them by trying to keep Elle hidden. Maybe I can try to atone for that by doing this by the book.”

I was suddenly buzzing with energy and starting to feel like if I didn’t do something, I’d burst. It was frightening, this strange urge I felt to take on the council. It was making me jittery. Maybe it was just leftover adrenaline from the fight, but I couldn’t be sure.

*I have to calm down. I’m no good to Greyson like this. There has to be a way to protect him and appease the council at the same time…*

“I was so worried about losing you during the pack war, and we’ve been through so much.” I said. “I just can’t let you put yourself in Cesaries’s hands. We both know that he has very few principles. I just wish I could blast him!”

I heard the nervous energy in my voice, and I could tell that the others did, too.

“You seem very worked up,” Torin said. “You sure you’re okay?”

I huffed. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Torin didn’t look convinced. “Cali, I don’t think you realize how amped up you are right now. Maybe you should try to rest—especially after what happened with the pool.”

Greyson arched an eyebrow. “What? What are you talking about? What happened with a pool?”

Torin turned to him. “Cali fell from a third-floor balcony and landed in a pool. Xavier had to jump in and save her. Then we went to Kevin’s and ran into Dick Wigbert—”

Greyson rounded on me. “*What?* Why didn’t you tell me any of this? Dick Wigbert? Seriously?”

I shot Torin a look, wishing he hadn’t said anything. I’d intended to tell Greyson everything, but with Elle being taken, it just didn’t feel all that important anymore.

“Sorry,” I said. “I guess with everything going on, all that other stuff just slipped my mind. It’s no big deal, really.”

“It sounds like a huge deal, Cali. What happened tonight?” Greyson pressed. “Tell me everything.”

I shrugged. “Torin already told you most of it. Dick didn’t even remember me, so it’s nothing to worry about.”

“And what about my brother?” Greyson asked. “What does any of this have to do with Xavier?”

“None of the Dick stuff has anything to do with him,” I said quickly. “I fell into the pool at the party, and I have no idea why Xavier was there, but he was, and he pulled me out.”

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but I jumped in first.

“I’m fine now, Greyson. I promise,” I said. “Not a scratch or a bump or bruise on me. I fell into the pool from the balcony people were already jumping from and got a little freaked out, that’s all. Nothing to get all worked up about.”

Greyson was just staring at me, and I wondered if he believed me. The truth was, I still couldn’t remember all the details. But then I remembered the closet kiss, and heat pooled in the pit of my stomach as I relived it. I turned away, too ashamed to look into Greyson’s eyes after what he might’ve considered a betrayal.

*I still just can’t figure out what came over me. Why it suddenly felt like I’d explode if I didn’t kiss Xavier immediately. But in that moment, it was all I wanted—to feel his soft lips on mine and the comforting strength of his arms wrapped around me.*

Then it hit me—what if all the weird stuff that had happened at the party was due to the three witches cutting my mate bond with Greyson? I hadn’t been able to explain my behavior at the time, but maybe there was an explanation that I hadn’t considered. Greyson had asked me if I’d felt anything to suggest that the witches had cut the wrong bond, and I’d told him no—but what if I *had* felt something and just failed to recognize it?

*Would that explain why I was so overwhelmingly drawn to Xavier? Why I wanted him so badly? Why he was suddenly all I could think about?*

I thought hard, trying to make sense of it. I always wanted Xavier—I’d never stopped, not even after he’d left me for Ava. But there in that closet, it had felt like I’d lost all control. Like nothing mattered but Xavier. It was like a switch had been flipped.

“Greyson, what can we do to test our mate bond?” I blurted out, starting to panic.

Greyson looked thrown. “What? Why are you asking me that now? Did something happen at the party that’s making you doubt our bond?”

“I don’t know… I just want to be sure,” I said, then an idea suddenly popped into my head. “I’m going to mind link with you.”

I wondered why I hadn’t thought of it sooner. The mind link was the quickest and easiest way to test our bond.

*Greyson, can you hear me? Please tell me that you can!* I mind linked to him, my eyes riveted to his.

Greyson looked back at me expectantly. “Okay, just tell me when you’re going to mind link.”

My heart started to race. “What? You—you didn’t hear me just now?”

“No,” Greyson said flatly. “Try again.”

*Greyson, can you hear me? I’m mind linking with you right now.*

Greyson shook his head. “Did you just mind link again, because if you did—”

“Wait, maybe I’m doing it wrong,” I said. My voice was high with panic. “Just a second.”

I closed my eyes and really focused before reaching out to him once more. *Greyson, it’s me. Can you hear me?*

Greyson looked like he was concentrating, too, but then he shook his head forlornly. “I can’t hear you, Cali.”

“Oh no. I-I can’t believe this.” I looked into Greyson’s eyes, tears already forming in mine. “Greyson, the witches broke our mate bond!”

**Episode 4563**

**Xavier**

“I *dare you* to convince me not to kick your ass right out of this pack!” I hissed at Blaine. “Especially when nothing would bring me more pleasure.”

Blaine puffed up, trying to sound cocky. “You wouldn’t dare cross the council. They sent me back here, and I’m your responsibility. If you defy them, they’ll punish your ass!”

I laughed. “Wow. It must really be hard for you, being this stupid.”

“I’m not stupid!” Blaine snarled. “And for the last time, I didn’t let Andrew go! You’re the one who’s stupid if you believe otherwise!”

Blaine bumped his chest against mine, but I didn’t budge, and he bounced back like he’d hit a brick wall.

I let a slow, menacing smile spread across my face as I advanced on Blaine until I’d cornered him against the house.

“Watch your tongue,” I said. “If you say anything else I don’t like, I might just have to put you somewhere the council will never find you.”

We stood there glaring at each other until Lilac suddenly cleared his throat. “I should probably be getting back home. Later!”

With that, he turned and scampered off. I’d been so focused on Blaine that I’d completely forgotten that Lilac was there, but him leaving was for the best. Blaine was really getting under my skin, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I was going to be able to refrain from pummeling him into the ground.

I leaned close to Blaine. “It must suck to know that you’re only here because of the council—but even the council can be persuaded to change their mind. They might agree that you’re not meant to be a member of the Samara pack. That you’re not meant to be a member of *any* pack. You don’t belong anywhere, which makes you a liability. And what do you think the council does with liabilities?”

Blaine’s face creased with worry before Ava’s voice rose up behind us.

“What’s going on here? X, you good?”

I released Blaine, just as Ava joined us.

“Nothing’s going on here,” I said casually. “We were just having a little chat. So, Blaine, do you have anything to add? Anything you’d like to share that might keep me from throwing your ass right out of here?”

Blaine glared at me, but said nothing. Without another word, he went inside.

Ava was staring at me. “So… You going to tell me what that was really about?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Just Blaine being a dick, as usual.”

Ava sighed. “What else is new? But why are you letting it bother you? You’re usually good at letting his bad behavior roll right off your back.”

I gritted my teeth as I watched him through the window until he disappeared from sight. Deep down, I knew that Blaine wasn’t the problem. I was still working my way around the fact that I’d told Ava that I loved her. Blaine had just happened to cross me at a bad time. But I couldn’t exactly explain that to Ava.

*Sorry, Ava. I told you that I love you, but I didn’t mean to, and now I’m taking it out on Blaine because he’s an easy target. I was damn near about to beat him up because I don’t know what to do with my feelings.*

I wished I could reset everything that easily, but there was no way in hell that I was even going to try. To tell Ava I loved her only to immediately take it back would shatter her. And I wasn’t even sure that I *wanted* to take it back. Why would I? Something had compelled me to say it—I couldn’t deny that.

*Maybe I said it because it’s the truth. Do I really love Ava? It just came out so naturally—I barely even realized I was saying it. That means it has to be real, right?*

But even if that were true, I just couldn’t fully admit it to myself. If I really loved Ava, what did that mean for me and Cali? How could I love Cali and Ava at the same time? Was that even possible?

“You should get some rest,” Ava said, pulling me out of my ruminations. “If you’re letting Blaine get to you that easily, then you must be tired.” She hooked her arm through mine. “Why don’t we go back to bed?”

I let her lead me back inside, but as we went upstairs, my worries about Adéluce re-emerged.

*I never should’ve gone off and left Ava behind the way I did. It was selfish of me. I’m going to have to be more careful. And as for Cali, if I leave Ava to check on her again, then I’ll be leaving her at risk. As much as I hate the idea, I’m going to have to leave Cali in my brother’s hands from now on.*

Just the thought of it turned my stomach. Had it really come to that? Was I going to have to concede Cali to Greyson? Was I going to have to let her go completely and focus all my attention on Ava? The woman I’d just proclaimed my love to?

Fuck, what a mess.

Ava pulled me down into bed and snuggled against me. I wrapped my arms around her, liking the feel of her, the closeness—and the fact that here, I could protect her from Adéluce. The vampire-witch couldn’t possibly have anything to say about this, so maybe she’d leave us alone for a while.

*But I don’t want any of this. I never did. All I want is Cali. I went to that party to protect her, even though it was just a trap. But dammit, I’d do it all over again. I don’t feel any different about Cali. I never will. Only now, I’m finally starting to feel the same connection with Ava. I never thought that would happen, but it’s obviously the way things are, now.*

I was starting to understand more and more what Cali had been going through all this time with the *due destini*. She loved me and Greyson both, and that fact sometimes threatened to tear her apart. Now, I knew how she felt. Was I going to be able to navigate my way through this new wave of feelings? Was I going to be able to deal with loving two women at the same time?

I closed my eyes.

*For now, Ava’s safe. That’s all that matters. She’s right here in my arms, and Cali’s back with Greyson. There’s nothing else I need to worry about. I can finally just get some sleep.*

But my hopes for sleep were dashed when I opened my eyes to see that I was no longer in our bedroom. It took me another second to realize where I’d ended up.

The Duquette house.

Adéluce was seated at a long wooden table, watching me and looking as pleased with herself as she always did.

I sighed and took in my surroundings, fighting off a wave of dread. The Duquette house was just as I remembered it—a run-down, dilapidated mess. A thick layer of dust covered almost every surface, the fixtures were old and barely working, and the windows were so dirty that I couldn’t even see outside.

I turned to Adéluce with a forced grin. “Maybe you should spend less time following me around and more time cleaning this shitty house of yours.”

Adéluce smiled. “Insult me all you want—nothing will ever change the pleasure I feel in watching you squirm. You have no idea how much joy it brings me.”

“I can guess,” I spat. “Obviously more joy than owning a house that *doesn’t* resemble a trash can.”

“Tell me, Xavier, what’s it like?” Adéluce asked.

I rolled my eyes. “What’s *what* like? Just come out with, whatever it is. I’m not in the mood for your stupid games.”

Adéluce’s smile widened. “I want to know what it’s like to love two people at the same time.” She stood up and walked toward me. “It must be painful. Difficult. Maybe even unbearable.”

I watched as she circled me, taking me in from head to toe. I wanted to knock that smug smile off her face, and then stomp her flat on her filthy floor.

“I heard you tell Ava those three magic words,” she said. “I had a feeling you wouldn’t be able to resist.”

I was pissed. “Yes, you heard me. So what? I did exactly what you wanted, but you’ve still brought me here to your awful house to look at your awful face. I don’t want to banter with you like this is some fun rivalry. I want to get back to Ava, and as far away from you as I can get.”

Adéluce didn’t reply for a long while, and I spun around to face her. She was leaning against one of her dilapidated doorjambs, still staring at me.

“Cut the shit, Adéluce,” I said flatly. “Why am I here? What the fuck do you want from me now?”

**Episode 4564**

I was freaking out. It was bad enough that I’d kissed Xavier—that I still hungered for him even now, that I couldn’t stop thinking about him—and now I really was worried that the witches had severed my mate bond with Greyson.

Our mate bond had seemed so fragile lately… Maybe what had happened with Xavier had been too much for it to take.

*If that’s the case, will Greyson ever forgive me? Will I ever forgive myself?*

“Don’t panic,” Greyson said. “There could be any number of reasons why we can’t mind link—reasons that have nothing to do with our mate bond.”

But I was hardly listening. All I felt was guilt and shame. How could I have been so selfish?

“This is all my fault,” I burst out.

“What? How can it be your fault? Cali, there’s no way—”

“I kissed Xavier tonight. I don’t have an excuse. I… I just couldn’t help it.” The words poured out of me quickly, then I snapped my mouth shut and waited.

Greyson didn’t need to say a word. I *felt* the hot flash of his anger, and for a moment, I wondered if I was wrong about the bond. If I could feel his emotions this strongly, maybe our mate bond was still intact. Maybe the time I’d spent with Xavier hadn’t broken our bond after all—but now Greyson knew about it, and I couldn’t take that back.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” I said. “It just… happened. I completely understand if you’re angry with me.”

Greyson rolled his jaw and looked away. “Of course I’m not happy about it. But there’s nothing new here, is there? We’ve been dealing with this sort of thing ever since we found out about the *due destini*. I won’t blame you—I refuse to blame you—but I *am* concerned. And if I’m pissed at anyone, it’s Xavier.”

Greyson walked away and looked out the window. I heard him curse to himself.

“I hate that he’s doing this to you,” he said. “Pushing you and pulling you whenever he feels like it, taking advantage of your mixed feelings every chance he gets.” He turned to face me. “Did he at least give you an explanation?”

“No,” I said. “In fact… Well, he was pretty cruel afterward. As usual.”

I thought back to how he’d pushed me away and refused to take things further, even when I’d tried to insist. It was kind of embarrassing to think about how desperate I’d felt in that moment.

“Are you serious?” Greyson snapped. I felt the rush of his anger returning. “Why do you keep letting him do that to you? Why do you keep kissing someone who treats you that way? Someone willing to do this kind of thing over and over? What, are you hoping that one of these days, he’ll actually treat you with respect after you give in to him? Why do you keep putting yourself through this, Cali?”

“I don’t know!” I burst out. “I wish I did! I think it’s our mate bond. Regardless of how Xavier treats me, the bond still has power.”

It sounded weak, even to my own ears, but it was the only explanation I could think of. Xavier had left me, but it wasn’t like the strength of our mate bond had diminished, even a little. After what had happened at the party, it almost felt like it had gotten *stronger*.

Greyson shook his head. “Mate bond or not, you can still choose to step away, Cali. Even when I’m compelled by the sire bond, I can fight it. I can make decisions. I know it’s not the same, but at the same time, why are you refusing to even *try*?”

Greyson had a bitter smile on his face, and the sight of it made me feel sick to my stomach.

“I’m sick of you running into Xavier’s arms the first chance you get and then leaving *me* to pick up the pieces after he’s shoved you away,” he said. “It’s not fair to me.”

Greyson looked like he was going to say something else, but then he simply turned and headed for the door.

I ran to grab his arm. “Wait, where are you going?”

“You need to figure this out,” he said. “I can’t do it for you.”

He gently pulled out of my grasp and left.

I watched him go, too stunned to go after him again. I was devastated. I almost wished that I hadn’t told Greyson about the kiss… But that had never been an option. He deserved to know the truth.

*But what* is *the truth? What’s really going on here? Why can’t I control myself when I’m around Xavier, even though he keeps playing with my emotions?*

I took a moment to really think, trying to piece together the chain of events that had led to me kissing Xavier in the closet. I thought about the uncontrollable urge I’d felt to kiss him, to be with him… Was Greyson right? *Could I* have tried harder to fight back? To push those overwhelming feelings away? To stop Xavier from putting me in a vulnerable spot, only to be so cold to me afterward?

God, why did fighting seem so impossible? Maybe it was because of the imbalance in the *due destini* that Rowena had told us about… Or maybe I was just looking for an excuse, because I simply didn’t have the willpower to deny Xavier when he was so close to me.

*Whatever the reason, I know one thing for sure—I’ve made a complete mess of everything. Greyson’s angry with me, and I can’t blame him for it. It was one thing for me to fall into Xavier’s arms when we were actually a couple, but now I’m just betraying Greyson, and hurting us both in the process.*

I collapsed face down onto my bed, fighting tears as I realized the gravity of what I’d done. I’d hurt Greyson. Again. He deserved so much better from me—and I deserved better, too.

*And I’m more than capable of doing better—so why can’t I? Why can’t I resist Xavier? Ever?*

I climbed under the covers and pulled them up to my chin, too overwhelmed and exhausted to go through the motions of getting ready for bed. I stared up at the ceiling, wishing it were possible to wake up from the nightmare I’d created for myself.

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A short while later, I woke with a start. My heart was beating fast, and I looked around, feeling disoriented. I heard laughter and talking coming from downstairs, as well as the tinkle of soft music. It was a surprise to hear so much activity when the pack house wasn’t anywhere near fully occupied.

I went downstairs, following the sounds, and was stunned when I looked through the window and saw a wedding taking place in the backyard.

“What? Who’s getting married?” I muttered to myself as I went out onto the porch.

Everyone was there. Rishika, Ravi, Lilac, Sage, Zainab, and the others were milling around, laughing and talking and drinking as a band played on a portable stage.

*This must be Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s wedding! But where’s Greyson?*

I searched the crowd for his face, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

*What’s going on? He was supposed to be my date. Is he so upset with me that he isn’t even going to sit with me? Is he seriously hiding from me?*

The music suddenly changed, and everyone turned to face the altar.

*Wow, what are all these Samaras doing here? Most of them don’t even know Big Mac and Mrs. Smith… And Big Mac definitely wouldn’t have invited them. What’s going on here?*

I even spotted Colton and Maya sitting among the guests. Nervously, I looked around for Xavier, but I didn’t see him, either.

*Where the hell is he?*

Then I spotted Ava, standing at the altar and looking absolutely stunning. And standing right beside her in an impeccably tailored suit, looking like a million bucks, was Xavier.

*What the hell is going on here? Is this their wedding? It can’t be…*

My knees went weak, and I collapsed into an empty chair in the last row. I was seconds away from hyperventilating, and I kept counting to ten over and over in an attempt to calm myself down. Xavier and Ava were about to get married. This was my worst nightmare.

“Welcome, everyone, to this joyous event,” Gabriel—the officiant—announced. “We’re here today to watch Ava and Xavier join together in matrimonial bliss. These two have had a long, interesting journey, but it brought them right here to this spot, preparing to make a commitment that will last for a lifetime.”

There was a smattering of clapping and words of agreement.

Gabriel waited for it to die down before he continued. “Ava and Xavier have prepared their vows—but first, if there’s anyone here who objects to their union, please speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

I jumped out of my seat. “I do!”

**Episode 4565**

**Xavier**

“*Answer me!*” I roared, seething with anger.

It felt like I was seconds from losing it completely. But it wasn’t like I could actually appeasemy anger the way I wanted to—namely by choking the life out of the vampire-witch and putting an end to this awful period of my life once and for all. No, all I could do was wait and see what else she had in store for me.

“How much longer are you going to play this game?” I asked her. “Aren’t you getting bored?”

“Not at all,” Adéluce said as she dropped back down into her seat and sipped from her mug of tea. “I’m not sure that I can commit to a timeline—I’m having way too much fun. Honestly, Xavier, sometimes it feels like I might be able to keep this up forever. Torturing you is just that satisfying.”

“No,” I snarled. “I won’t accept that. I’ve done everything you’ve asked—I’ve even fallen in love with Ava, for fuck’s sake!”

“I know,” Adéluce said happily. “I heard you proclaim your feelings for her with those three magic words—”

“Go FUCK yourself!” I shouted.

White hot anger spiked through me, and I lunged for Adéluce for the hundredth time, but she remained out of reach and completely unfazed.

I thought back to all my failed attempts at attacking her. I’d only managed to get my hands on her once, and it hadn’t worked out very well for me, but my anger was so explosive that I just couldn’t stay calm around her. If there was even a sliver of a chance that I might be able to catch her off guard, I had to keep trying.

*One day, it’ll work*,I told myself. *I’ll get my hands on her, and she won’t be quick enough to stop me. I just have to keep trying. She’s going to die, and I’m going to be the one to kill her. I just have to bide my time.*

Adéluce narrowed her eyes at me, like she was reading my thoughts. She probably *was* reading my thoughts. “I’m getting tired of warning you about your temper, Xavier. It’s unbecoming—not to mention hazardous for your health. Put a hold on that hostility. I didn’t bring you here to fight.”

“Then why *am* I here?” I demanded. “You keep pushing me and warning me that you’re going to do something, so what is it? What are you going to do? Whatever it is, let’s just get it over with.”

“What do you mean, Xavier?” she asked. “I’ve already done it. Didn’t the Seluna mark make its grand reappearance on your beloved Cali’s shoulder? How did that make her feel, by the way? I bet it hurt. A lot.”

I was about to lunge for her again, desperate to make her pay for putting Cali through that, but then a thought occurred to me.

“You know?” I asked. “You’re right. Why *am* I getting so worked up? There’s no point. You might hurt Cali and Ava, but it’s obvious that you’d never kill either of them.”

Adéluce cocked her head. “Oh? Why would you think so little of me?”

“Because if you kill Ava or Cali, the game’s over. I won’t be forced to choose between them, to constantly feel torn and stretched thin trying to protect them both. That’s what you love most, isn’t it? Watching as I’m forced to decide between Cali and Ava, over and over again? Forced to choose which one of them to save from your tired little schemes? Without the thrill of watching me rip myself in two, your miserable life would be a lot less entertaining.”

Adéluce threw her teacup against the wall, and it shattered into a million pieces. “You think you’ve got me all figured out, wolf, but are you really willing to take that chance? For all you know, their deaths—and yours, for that matter—might be my grand finale. Don’t underestimate me. You’ll regret it.”

She stepped close to me again, and a familiar paralysis took hold of my body. Once again, I was reminded of just how powerless I was against the vampire-witch. I’d faced plenty of opponents in my life, but Adéluce was something else altogether.

“Here’s what you fail to realize, Xavier,” she said. “I can kill either or both of them and leave you stuck in perpetual grief—that way, I’d be able to entertain myself by constantly reminding you of what you’ve lost. Not to mention the way you’d blame yourself for their suffering. Incidentally, how long do werewolves usually live? Even better—how long does it take for a broken heart to heal? A hundred years? An eternity? Or maybe I could just kill you and be done with it.”

I clenched my teeth. “If you do that,” I said tightly, “your fun and games will be over. And if you kill Ava or Cali, you’ll have to pry me out of the spirit world to stop me from bringing them back.”

Adéluce stroked her chin. “Now that’s an interesting challenge. I might take you up on it sometime.” She smiled. “But do be careful, Xavier. Don’t forget how easily I was able to get to Cali and burn her with the Seluna mark. Who knows? My next punishment might be far worse. It would be smart for you to remember that, next time you find yourself alone with Cali.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” I shouted, but then Adéluce held up a hand and my voice shriveled up in my throat.

“Ah, ah, ah, Xavier—I absolutely hate excuses,” she said. “My orders were clear as day. And despite your constant claims that you’re doing what I ask, you aren’t. Not really. Because if you were, you wouldn’t have found yourself locked in a closet with Cali tonight. Tell you what—if you start obeying my orders and actually stay the hell away from Cali, then I won’t be forced to kill anyone in order to break your heart… I won’t have to crush you like a bug, either.”

*What does she mean by that?*

I was about to ask when I heard the sound of music playing.

*What is that? Where the hell is that music coming from?*

I blinked, and then I was no longer in the Duquette house. Instead, I was standing in the Redwood backyard. There were people everywhere, dressed in formalwear and sitting in rows of chairs.

*What is this, a wedding?*

I turned to see that Ava was standing right beside me, and she looked positively radiant. It was a welcome sight after being forced to look at Adéluce’s ugly face.

“Wow. I’m surprised that Big Mac and Mrs. Smith invited us to their wedding,” I whispered to Ava. “I guess I’m kind of honored, though.”

Ava looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “What are you talking about? This isn’t their wedding!”

“What? It has to be. Who else would be getting—”

Suddenly the music got louder, cutting me off. Everyone rose from their seats. Ava nudged me, and I stood up, too.

“Wait, so if it’s not Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, then who *is* getting married—”

“Shh!” Ava said, pressing a finger to her lips. She turned to face the altar, and I followed her lead. A bride was standing there, her face obscured by a veil. There was a groom, too, but his back was to me and I couldn’t see who it was.

I kept trying to see the bride’s face, but I couldn’t see over Colton, who was standing in the row in front of me with Maya by his side.

*What? Why are* they *here?*

“Everyone, please be seated,” Torin said.

“What? Torin’s officiating?” I said.

Ava shot me a look and I shut up, but I kept trying to catch a glimpse of the bride and groom.

“At this time, I’d like to ask for the bride and groom to face each other and prepare to say their vows,” Torin said.

When the bride and groom finally turned, I felt like I’d been punched in the gut.

*It’s Greyson and Cali. Is this really happening right now? They’re getting* married*? Over my dead body.*

I jumped up.

“Stop!” I shouted. “That’s enough! Stop it now! This shouldn’t be happening! It’s not right!”

Adéluce’s laughter rang in my ears as Ava shook me awake. I tossed and turned, still partially caught in the dream, watching Greyson and Cali pledging their lives to each other.

“X, wake up! You’re having a bad dream,” Ava said. “And talking in your sleep—loudly.”

“I was?” I asked groggily, still reeling from the image of Greyson and Cali gazing lovingly at each other as they stood at the altar.

Ava smoothed a sweat-dampened tendril of hair off my forehead. I took a breath, letting her presence start to calm me down. “Yes, you were,” she said. “What’s up with you having a nightmare about Adéluce?”

**Episode 4566**

Gasps rang out as everyone at the wedding turned to look at me. Mutters of surprise and distaste filtered through the crowd. Colton and Maya were laughing, which didn’t surprise me in the least.

Ignoring everyone, I charged toward the altar, determined to stop this farce of a wedding between Ava and Xavier. There was no way I was going to sit back and let the man I loved marry the woman I hated, the woman that didn’t deserve him. Xavier was mine. I couldn’t just let him slip right into another woman’s arms—especially if those arms belonged to Ava.

Gabriel looked at me in confusion. “What are you doing, Cali? Nobody actually takes that objection thing seriously! I only asked because it’s traditional! Sit down and let me get on with the ceremony!”

“I don’t care, and I won’t sit down. This wedding is a joke!” I hissed. “There’s no way in hell I’m going to stand by and let this happen! *No way in hell!*”

Marissa, who was one of Ava’s bridesmaids, stepped toward me and reached to pull me back. Without even looking at her, I hit her with a blast of magic, sending her flying into the rows of guests with a piercing scream.

I let my magic crackle in the air. “I’m stopping this wedding, and I dare anyone else to try to get in my way!”

I felt wild with anger, but these were desperate times, and I was more than willing to resort to desperate measures if it meant stopping Xavier from making a horrible mistake.

“What are you doing?” Xavier demanded. “This is my wedding, and you’re ruining it!”

“What am *I* doing?” I burst out. “What are *you* doing? Marrying Ava? Why would you marry the woman who murdered your mother? You don’t even love her!”

The guests were in an uproar. I barely cared, too focused on Xavier and Ava, standing there looking at me like the perfect image of love. But I knew better. I knew that this couldn’t be allowed to happen. Xavier would be miserable with Ava as his wife.

There was no doubt in my mind that everything I’d said was true. This was all just an awful lapse in Xavier’s judgment, and I needed to make him see that before he ruined his life and married the wrong woman. I had to make things right.

“You’re my mate, Xavier, and you love me!” I said. “And I get it, you’re a little confused because Ava returned from the spirit world and knocked the *due destini* off balance. It’s making you believe that you actually love her when that couldn’t be further from the truth! You don’t love her. Not since she betrayed you so terribly!”

“Cali, you can’t just—”

I lifted a hand, cutting Xavier off as I turned my attention to Ava, who looked like she was trying to kill me with her eyes. “Ava, you’ve tried everything in your arsenal, but it isn’t going to work. He still loves me. He will never love you. Get that through your head!”

Ava stepped up to me, her eyes flashing angrily. “Oh, is that so? Then tell me this, Cali—if he loves you so much, then why is he marrying me? Why aren’t you standing up here at this altar with him?” She let out a throaty laugh as she held up her hand and shoved her giant engagement ring in my face. “Why aren’t you sporting this rock?”

I slapped her hand away. “You’re a manipulative *bitch*! You always have been, and you always will be. Xavier sees through you, just like I do—he’s just too lost in your lies to see the truth. But I’m going to make sure he realizes that you aren’t right for him. He will never marry you!”

“You’d better shut your mouth,” Ava said icily, raising a hand like she was getting ready to slap me.

I took a quick step back and let her have it, blasting Ava back into Gabriel and sending the flower encrusted wedding arch crashing over onto the bridesmaids.

The guests reacted with a mix of cheers and jeers.

I turned back to Xavier, who looked horrified. “Is this really what you want?” I asked him desperately. “To marry Ava?”

Xavier’s eyes were cold as he looked at me. “Yes, it’s really what I want.”

Without another word, he rushed over to help Ava up. He lifted her off the ground and brushed her off, then pulled her into an embrace. He didn’t even give me a second glance. I felt like I’d been kicked in the face.

*I can’t believe this. He’s pretending to care about Ava when he knows that I’m the only woman he loves. Why would he do that? Why would he allow himself to get so caught up in a lie? He’s supposed to be with me!*

Greyson spun me around to face him. “What’s *wrong* with you? Why are you disrupting my brother’s wedding? Have you completely lost it?” He turned and glanced at the guests. “This is actually embarrassing, Cali.”

I pulled away. “How is this any different than you suddenly marrying, I don’t know, Maren?!” I asked. “Are you seriously okay with watching your brother throw his life away by marrying Ava?”

Greyson shook his head slowly as confusion crept across his face. “I don’t understand why you feel this way, Cali. Xavier and Ava are already mates—he made her his Luna, for shit’s sake. Getting married seems like the next logical step. The only one who’s shocked here is you—and the guests, who are definitely wondering what the hell you’re doing.”

“It’s *not* the next logical step!” I shot back. “In fact, it’s the most illogical thing I’ve ever seen, and based entirely on lies. Is that really what you want for your brother? A relationship built on lies?”

Greyson’s mouth tightened into a straight line. “I don’t know, Cali. You’re getting way too upset about this, and it’s kind of strange. This wedding shouldn’t matter to you. In fact, none of this would matter if you’d just put an end to this ridiculous saga and choose me.”

I sat bolt upright in bed. Sweat was pouring off me, and I was gasping for air. I jumped out of bed and bolted for the stairs.

*I have to stop the wedding! I have to! Xavier’s making a huge mistake! I have to make him see that he’ll be ruining his life if he marries her.*

I made it to the top of the stairs before I realized that it had all been a dream—or a nightmare. I let out a shuddering breath and tried to collect myself.

*Dream or not, it still felt damn good to blast Ava. The memory of watching her fly through the air is the only thing bringing me pleasure right now. That part was more like a wonderful dream than a nightmare.*

But I couldn’t just go around blasting people—not even in my dreams. No matter how amazing it felt. No matter how much the person deserved it.

As the echoes of the nightmare began to fade, I realized that Greyson wasn’t around to comfort me like he usually was. I remembered our fight—or rather, the way he’d walked out on me after I’d told him about my kiss with Xavier. I wondered if I would’ve been as upset as he was if our roles had been reversed, and he’d told me that he’d kissed Elle.

Probably.

Maybe I owed him a bit more sympathy. Greyson always gave me the benefit of the doubt, and it was possible that I’d taken advantage of that by telling him about the kiss so… flippantly, and then expecting him to just be okay with it. How *could* *he* be okay with that? Especially when it kept happening over and over again. Especially when Xavier and I weren’t even together anymore.

*Greyson so rarely gets mad at me. He’s always so understanding and supportive, no matter what. I can’t expect him to always be that way—especially this time, when my actions obviously hurt him.*

I was overcome by a wave of guilt. I had to fix this. Now.

A snippet of Greyson’s words from the nightmare came floating back to me.

*None of this would matter if you’d just put an end to this ridiculous saga and choose me.*

He’d said similar things to me before—that he wished I could just choose him. Was that why he was so upset now? And could I blame him? He was the one standing by me, the one who’d never left me, and yet here I was, chasing after Xavier time and time again even though he’d made it abundantly clear that he didn’t want anything to do with me.

I had to see Greyson. I had to apologize and do whatever I could to make things right. Greyson didn’t deserve to feel like he wasn’t important, like I somehow wanted Xavier more than him. That wasn’t true, but after what I’d done, I was going to have to prove that he meant everything to me.

*I have to make sure that he knows just how much I love him.*

I ran to Greyson’s bedroom and eased the door open, but the room was empty.

“Cali?”

I turned at the sound of Rishika’s voice.

“If you’re looking for Greyson, you’re too late,” she said. “He already left.”

**Episode 4567**

**Xavier**

“What are you talking about?” I hissed, as if Ava saying Adéluce’s name out loud would make any difference to the vampire-witch. I sat up out of her arms.

Truthfully, silence was the last thing I wanted from Ava right now. If I could somehow tell her what was going on without *actually* telling her, maybe she’d be able to help me bring this never-ending nightmare to an end.

Ava had already said Adéluce’s name—how hard would it be for me to nudge her down the path to what was truly going on with me? Then maybe she’d be able to help me bring the vampire-witch down, since it was becoming painfully obvious that I wasn’t capable of doing it on my own.

*But what could Ava even do against Adéluce? She’s no match for her. Adéluce has had me in a chokehold for so long… And I doubt she’d hesitate to end Ava, if push came to shove—she’s made it clear that she has no qualms about killing her or Cali.*

No matter how much I wished that this could’ve been my opportunity to expose Adéluce, I knew that nudging Ava toward the truth would be too dangerous.

Now wasn’t the time. Adéluce had literally just given me another warning, which meant I’d have to tread lightly and keep dealing with all of this on my own until I could figure out a way to destroy her without getting Ava involved.

Ava rolled her eyes. “I know the mind can play tricks on you and all, but why would you suddenly have dreams about a dead vampire-witch has-been like Adéluce?”

I had to choke back a bitter laugh.

*If* only *she were dead… But I really can’t believe this—obviously I screamed Adéluce’s name out loud when I screamed it in my dream. How could I have been so careless? How could I have put Ava at risk like that?*

But I couldn’t really blame myself for that, could I? I didn’t have any control over what I dreamed, or what I said or did while I was asleep. Besides, I couldn’t rule out the possibility that the dream had just been some weird, lie-filled power play on Adéluce’s part.

But now that Ava was asking me about Adéluce… There was every possibility that it might open up another can of worms and piss Adéluce off even more.

Despite how long this had been going on, I still had no idea how much Adéluce watched me. I had my suspicions, but there wasn’t really any way for me to know for sure. Maybe it was sometimes, maybe it was most of the time, or worst of all, maybe she was *always* watching me. If that were the case, that meant that she’d heard what Ava had just said and was probably on high alert.

I forced a nonchalant laugh. “I have no idea… How am I supposed to explain what my brain serves up while I’m asleep?”

“True, but I still think it’s weird,” Ava said stubbornly. “It’s not like anyone’s been talking about Adéluce, so why now? Why would she of all people be on your mind? What’s in that subconscious of yours, X?”

I wished that I could explain that waking up screaming Adéluce’s name paled in comparison to the nightmare that had led up to it—during which I’d watched my brother marry Cali.

*Seriously—it isn’t enough that Adéluce has to stick her nose into my waking life? She has to flex her muscles in my subconscious as well?*

Unfortunately, I couldn’t explain any of that to Ava. All I could really do was lead her as far away from the truth as possible.

“I don’t have a clue what made me dream about her. I don’t even remember what the dream was about,” I lied. “Ask my subconscious some other time.”

“Okay,” Ava said, wrapping me back in her arms and kissing me. Slowly, I leaned down back into her lap. “I’ll hold you until you fall asleep again.”

Ava stroked her long, graceful fingers through my hair. I snuggled against her, feeling something close to contentment. This was exactly what I needed… But it still wasn’t enough to get rid of the unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I did my best to get back to sleep, but I felt so guilty for lying to Ava, even though there was no question in my mind that Adéluce would hurt both of us if I allowed Ava to continue down this road.

But what I *really* felt guilty about was kissing Cali. Cali was the one who’d initiated it this time, but I’d barely fought her off. In fact, I’d enjoyed it. At least until I’d come back to my senses and realized that it was just the type of thing that Adéluce would punish Cali for, or even Ava.

*I’d never be able to forgive myself if either one of them got hurt because of my actions. I have to exercise more self-control when it comes to Cali. I love her and can’t help but steal whatever moments I can with her, but those moments are only going to come back and bite me in the ass. They already have, in lots of different ways.*

I considered telling Ava about my kiss with Cali, but the truth would only hurt her—and I was done hurting her deliberately. If anything, I wanted to protect her. The same way I’d wanted to protect Cali.

*Walking this balance between loving her and feeling what I do for Cali is damn near impossible.* I would do anything to protect either of them. I knew that. Even if Cali hated me while Ava loved me, I would never stop doing what I could for either of them.

I couldn’t believe I was actually acknowledging my feelings for Ava. And not just feelings—*the* feeling. Love. The four-letter word I’d never thought I’d say to Ava again.

The very idea of it was still so hard for me to comprehend. How had it happened? When had I fallen for Ava so hard? She’d killed my mother. She’d ripped away the one person who would always love me, no matter what. She’d betrayed me and sided with her pack. Had she truly changed enough since then? Would we ever have reached this point without Adéluce’s intervention? I had no idea, but I did know that it certainly never would’ve happened so quickly.

When Adéluce had first ordered me to fall in love with Ava, it had seemed so ridiculous. I’d never thought the day would come, and now that it had, I realized that I’d been on the road to the feeling for a long time. Love couldn’t appear overnight, after all.

But even acknowledging and accepting my feelings for Ava did nothing to change how strongly I felt for Cali. I yearned for her, desired her, couldn’t stop thinking about her no matter what I did, and no matter how much stronger my feelings became for Ava. I needed Cali in my life. Every single time I laid eyes on her, I was reminded of how badly I missed her.

I wondered what would happen if I stopped fighting Adéluce. What if I was able to do what Cali did and love two people? Was that something that was possible? Or just another way to torture me?

*Just being able to be with Cali again would be what I want, but that would bring me dangerously close to being happy. And that’s not what Adéluce wants. She wouldn’t make it easy—she’d probably make it impossible.*

Ava sighed as she laid her head on my chest. She trailed her fingers across my stomach and pressed a kiss to my skin that sent shivers up my spine. Yes, I loved Ava. I didn’t know when it had happened, and I was still reeling from the realization, but that didn’t make it any less true.

We both jumped when my phone started ringing.

“Who the hell is calling so late?” I muttered, half to myself.

*I’m not in the mood for any more bullshit tonight. I’ve had my fill.*

Reluctantly, I picked up the phone and was surprised to see Cali’s name on the screen. I answered the call, very aware that Ava was now sitting up and watching me.

“Hey, Cali, what’s up?” I said, trying for casual.

A cloud passed across Ava’s face, but if I didn’t know her so damn well, I might not even have caught it.

“Xavier!” Cali was crying, and my heart rate immediately sped up. The wolf in me was rearing his head, snarling, ready to make whoever made Cali cry like this pay in blood.

*Oh no. It’s finally happened. My worst nightmare has come true. Adéluce has made her move against Cali to get back at me for everything I’ve done wrong…*

“Cali, Cali, calm down and take a breath,” I said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Cali’s sobs continued, but her voice finally managed to break through them. “Xavier, I need your help!”

**Episode 4568**

**Greyson**

I was on my way to Three Devils Point to meet Cesaries, but all I could think about was Cali.

After she’d confessed to kissing Xavier yet again, I’d left. At the time, it was the only thing I could’ve done, even though I’d known that walking away would hurt Cali.

I was unhappy that I’d let Xavier come between us again, and frustrated that this argument had reared its ugly head *again*.

Sulking in my room hadn’t seemed even slightly appealing, and so I’d decided to do something about Elle instead. Not only was it a good distraction, but I was sure of at least one thing—it wasn’t the sire bond driving me to save her. I wanted to save her because it was the right thing to do.

*Above all else, I’m Elle’s Alpha. I’m the one who turned her, for better or worse. I made a promise to her father to protect her, and I have to fix this and get the council off our backs. I’d do the same for any other member of the pack. Sire bond or not, I have to sacrifice my safety for the pack. There’s no other option, or else they’ll be under the microscope of the council too. This sort of thing is what being an Alpha is all about.*

My phone was buzzing like crazy in my bag—all likely calls and texts from Cali—but I ignored it. I was still too upset to talk to her. Aside from that, I knew that she’d try to talk me out of meeting with Cesaries. She wanted to keep me safe, and I understood that, but there were some things that I just had to do as an Alpha. Cali didn’t get it, and I didn’t expect her to.

*I hate that she’s probably panicking right now. I know I shouldn’t have walked out on her, but what else was I supposed to do? Pretend I’m okay with her getting jerked around by my asshole brother? Pretend I’m not disappointed that she still isn’t strong enough to stop it from happening?*

How many times was I expected to just look the other way as she and Xavier shared one of their passionate moments? Their behavior was a slap in the face to me—and to Ava, if I really thought about it. Whenever they fell into each other’s arms, Cali and Xavier didn’t seem to think about anyone but themselves.

Despite my own feelings, I knew I’d been more than understanding when it came to Cali and the *due destini*. But just how much was I supposed to endure? When was I allowed to see it as a betrayal rather than something that Cali just couldn’t control? When would it be reasonable to ask her to take responsibility for what she and Xavier kept doing, time and time again?

Or was this how I was meant to feel because of the *due destini*? Was this just to torture us, in the end?

And that wasn’t all. I was still worried about the three witches’ spell, too. There was a distinct possibility that they’d made a mistake and severed the wrong bond. What if my mate bond with Cali really had been cut?

Cali and I couldn’t even mind link, which was a really bad sign.

*That’s why I have to go through with meeting Cesaries. Not only will it be a step toward freeing Elle, but it’ll give me and Cali some time apart to cool down. You know, as long as my plan doesn’t go sideways.*

Rishika and Ravi had both offered to accompany me, but I’d refused. I didn’t want to get any more of the pack wrapped up in what amounted to my personal problems with the council.

This wasn’t the Redwoods’ fight. This was one of those times when I had to make a distinction between what the pack should get involved in and what boiled down to my business as an individual werewolf whose ill-informed decision that had thrown him right into the council’s crosshairs.

And no matter what, I couldn’t just abandon Elle. I was responsible for her, and I’d chosen to turn her, which meant I had to deal with the consequences, however dire.

My phone buzzed again, and I didn’t even have to look to know that it was Cali. I wondered if I should finally answer and tell her something—anything—that would ease her mind. But I wasn’t sure if that was possible. After all, there was a good chance that Cesaries was about to take me by force. That was the reality of this situation, and there was no getting around it or sugarcoating it.

*And no matter how much I don’t want to admit it, even to myself, I’m still upset with Cali. I might say something I’ll regret and make things worse between us. It’s better that I handle this alone. We can talk after I cool down a little…* If *the council doesn’t throw me in jail before we get the chance.*

Even though it pained me to do so, I ignored the call again. That was just the way it had to be, at least for now.

I slowed to a stop as I caught the scent of the council on the breeze. They were here, and it was officially too late to back out—if I could smell them, they could most definitely smell me.

I stopped a short distance away from our agreed upon meeting point and scanned the area for possible traps. I’d told Cesaries that I wanted to talk, but that I had no plans to turn myself in. I’d also warned him not to try anything, or there’d be a bloodbath. But at the same time, Cesaries had Elle, which meant he also had a massive ace.

Cesaries had agreed to my terms, but I knew that in the heat of the moment, the situation could shift in seconds. He might have initially agreed to my terms but experienced a change of heart a moment later. Anything was possible, and I had to be prepared.

*I’m going to have to bluff my way through this. That’s the only way for me to come out on the other side of this as a free man. And it’s the only hope I have of somehow securing Elle’s release.*

I shifted back to human, then quickly put on the clothes I’d brought with me in the bag. I took a look at my phone, which was buzzing yet again. I wasn’t surprised to see Cali’s name on the screen. I silenced it, shoved it into my pocket, and made my way to the meeting point.

Cesaries and the council had built a sort of campsite, and a small fire was burning. Cesaries stood as I approached, and I saw some of the other council members reacting as I came into view.

To his credit, Cesaries gestured for them to back off. I wanted to take that as a good sign, but I wasn’t about to let my guard down yet.

Cesaries offered me his hand. “Hello, Greyson. I’m glad that you agreed to come—”

“I didn’t come here to exchange pleasantries,” I interrupted, ignoring his hand. “Before we go any further, I’m going to need to see Elle. Alive.”

Cesaries flashed me a smile. “Oh, come now, Greyson. Do you really think we’d do anything to Elle without a trial? Do you think so little of your council?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Really, Cesaries? Nothing the council has done recently can be described as fair. Take Helix, for example. You sentenced him to death without any *mention* of a trial. Who’s to say you wouldn’t pull the same thing this time around?”

Cesaries’s smile faded. “You can see her.”

He turned and led me through the camp to a trailer that had been hitched to the back of a pickup truck.

“Are you seriously keeping her in there?” I demanded, horrified. “You’re treating her like an animal!”

Cesaries rolled his eyes. “Greyson, please. She *is* an animal. You should know that, since you’re the one who turned her. Wild wolves areanimals, aren’t they? Or are you going to argue with me about that, too?”

I balled my hands into fists, working overtime to keep myself from socking the smug look right off Cesaries’s face. There were a lot of council members in plain sight, and there were probably even more hiding in the shadows. I had to play it cool.

“Let her out right now so that I can talk to her and make sure she’s okay,” I said evenly.

“Very well,” Cesaries said. He gestured to a few guards, and they quickly unlocked the trailer and swung the door open so that Elle could step out.

“Greyson!” she cried out as she rushed into my arms. She held me close and whispered in my ear. “You shouldn’t have come here. They’re planning to kill you!”

**Episode 4569**

**Xavier**

I was terrified that my instincts were right, and Adéluce was punishing Cali for what had happened tonight. Apparently, burning Cali with the Seluna mark was just the beginning, and the vampire-witch had even more torture up her sleeve.

*And it’s all my fault. I should’ve stayed as far away from Cali as I could. But how could I have done that when Adéluce outright threatened her? Adéluce knows as well as I do that if there’s even a chance that she’ll hurt Cali, I won’t be able to stay away. That’s why she gave me the address in the first place.*

I’d raced to that party to protect Cali because I’d been scared that Adéluce was going to attack her. But then I’d made things worse by allowing Cali to kiss me. And, as if that wasn’t enough, I’d rescued her after her tumble into the pool. Adéluce had warned me to stay away, and I’d done the exact opposite—just as she’d intended.

*I pushed my luck too far this time, and now Cali’s paying the price. How could I have been so stupid?*

But then I realized that Cali wasn’t talking about being hurt at all—she was talking about Greyson.

“He’s gone! And I don’t know why he’d go all by himself,” Cali said. “He can’t just go there and expect everything to be okay, just because he wants it to be. That’s not how they operate!”

Ava rolled her eyes. “What is it now?” she asked, loudly enough that I was sure Cali heard her.

I held up a finger to Ava, who rolled her eyes again and let out a loud sigh.

“Cali, you need to slow down and start at the beginning,” I interrupted when Cali just kept going on and on.

Cali paused to take a few shaky breaths before she started again. “Greyson’s turning himself in to the council! Earlier tonight, he mentioned meeting Cesaries at Three Devils Point.”

“*What?* Why would he do something that stupid?” I demanded. If this wasn’t such a serious problem, I might’ve laughed at how idiotic it was.

Greyson didn’t always make the best decisions, but turning himself in to the council had to rank as one of the worst. Cesaries and his useless council had made it very clear that they had it out for Greyson—why the *hell* would he deliver himself right into their hands?

“He’s doing it because Cesaries took Elle, and Greyson thinks submitting to the council might be the only way to get her out,” Cali said. “He wasn’t open to going after the council with force—he thought that would end badly. He said going to talk to Cesaries man to man would be better. I told him not to do it, but he ran off when my back was turned.”

Ava nudged me. “What’s going on?”

I covered the phone’s mouthpiece. “My idiot brother just turned himself in to the council to save Elle.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “That was stupid.”

I nodded. “Yes, yes it was.”

I uncovered the mouthpiece.

“Okay, so what do you expect me to do?” I asked Cali. “Greyson’s a big boy—he can make his own decisions. In fact, he’s always made it very clear that he knows exactly what he’s doing and doesn’t need my input. Why should I go tearing after him when all he’d do is tell me to mind my business?”

I didn’t mean it—not really. But why the fuck was Greyson being so incredibly stupid? This was impulsive, even for him. And to leave Cali in a state like this? Something definitely wasn’t right.

“I know Greyson makes it seem that way sometimes, but that’s not true, Xavier,” Cali said. “He values your opinion, and he listens to you. You’re his brother, and if you get ahold of him and tell him how stupid this is, if you can convince him to go about this another way—”

“Wait, wait, slow down, Cali,” I said. “What about the pack? Why wouldn’t that house full of people be the first resource you turn to? Greyson likes them a hell of a lot more than he likes me.”

Ava was nodding in agreement.

Regardless of the issues I had with the Redwoods—or rather, the issues they’d had with me since I left—they were strong fighters. If Cali managed to convince Rishika that Greyson had made the wrong decision, she’d stand the same chance as me at talking him down—in fact, it would probably be a lot easier for her.

“No, that won’t work,” Cali said. “No one in the pack’s going to argue with him! He’s their Alpha! He told them that he wants to take care of this on his own, and they didn’t even try to stand in his way.”

“And why didn’t *you* stop him anyway?” I asked. “None of this needed to happen. Your opinion matters to him more than anyone else’s.”

Cali hesitated for a few seconds. “Because we had a fight.”

I could hear the sadness and desperation in her voice, and I felt bad for her. But Ava was right there next to me, and for all I knew, Adéluce was somewhere in the room, too, waiting to see if I was going to defy her again. I couldn’t do anything to put Cali at risk. I had to be smart about this.

“What did you argue about that was so bad that you couldn’t talk to him about something like this?” I asked.

There was another pause before Cali said, “I think you know.”

I immediately thought of the kiss and sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

I looked at Ava, hoping that she hadn’t heard Cali’s end of that particular exchange. Ava was smart. She would easily put two and two together, and I wasn’t in the mood for her wrath tonight.

Speaking of, Ava was starting to get annoyed. “What the hell is going on?”

Rather than answer, I repeated my question from before—mostly for Ava’s benefit. “So what is it that you want me to do, Cali? This sounds like Redwood pack business. Better yet, it sounds like *Greyson’s* business.”

“But I don’t know who else to ask! And he’s your brother! You fought the Bitterfangs together, and you worked together to take on Silas and the revenants. I know you won’t turn your back on him. I know you two have your issues, but you care about him, and he cares about you.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

Cali was right. And for once, the problem at hand didn’t have anything to do with Adéluce, so my getting involved wouldn’t result in any horrible consequences—at least not from the vampire-witch.

“Tell her you’re busy,” Ava said impatiently. “It’s the middle of the night.” She ran her hand down my chest suggestively.

*Stop*,I mind linked to Ava. *I can’t.*

She looked taken aback. *What do you mean, you can’t?*

*Greyson and Elle are in trouble, and Greyson’s my brother. I can’t just ignore that, no matter how much I want to.*

Ava rolled her eyes and flopped back down on the bed. “Lucian’s Elle’s mate. Why not have him deal with it?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” I said. “But I still need to see what I can do. Lucian might be eager to help Elle, but there’s no love lost between him and Greyson. He might go save Elle and then do whatever he can to throw Greyson under the bus.”

And, personal stakes aside, I was no fan of Cesaries and the council. Not after the way they’d ignored us when we actually needed them. They’d been absent not only during our fight against Silas and the revenants—which had had the potential to threaten all of werewolf kind—but during our fight against the Bitterfang army, too.

The council was so eager to get involved now, but whenever we really needed them, they were nowhere to be found. I welcomed the opportunity to fuck up their plans.

I sighed. “I’ll take care of it,” I told Cali. “But in the meantime, please don’t go after him on your own.”

“I promise I won’t… As long as you keep me posted,” she said. “Thank you, Xavier.”

There was an awkward silence. I thought about telling Cali more, or trying to reassure her, but I knew I couldn’t take the risk. Not with Ava sitting right there glaring daggers at me, and Adéluce lurking who knew where.

I ended the call without another word and called Aysel.

“What?” Aysel said sleepily.

“Hey, we have a problem,” I said. “Apparently, Elle was snatched by the council, and now Greyson’s gone after her to save her. So could you go get your brother?”

“Lucian’s sleeping,” Aysel snapped. “Plus, aren’t I the current point of contact?”

“I don’t care if the princeling is getting his beauty sleep—wake his ass up and tell him to get to the Samara pack house ASAP. I’m sure he’ll be eager to get moving once you tell him that his mate’s in danger.”

I ended the call and started to get out of bed, but Ava splayed a hand on my chest, stopping me. I was always surprised by her strength. Cali certainly wouldn’t have been able to keep me pinned to the bed, unable to move.

“I’m not letting you do this,” she said.

“I don’t think I need your permission,” I shot back. “You’re either in, or you’re out. Which is it?”

Ava slowly removed her hand. “This isn’t about permission. I’m offering to help. I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 4570**

I stared down at my phone in shock. Xavier had ended the call so abruptly. He hadn’t even bothered to say goodbye. Was he still that pissed at me about the kiss? I still couldn’t explain it—to him or to Greyson.

*I can’t think about that right now—especially when he’s the one who started acting like I was poison ivy and practically bolted from the party. If anything,* I *should be the one who’s mad at him! He was totally into that kiss, and then a switch flipped, and he wasn’t. The guy keeps giving me emotional whiplash, and I’m sick of it. He can’t kiss me and then insult me and expect I’ll be fine with it.*

But now wasn’t the time to get caught up in all that. The only thing that mattered was getting Greyson back safe and sound. I was just happy that Xavier had agreed to go help him. Whatever was going on between Xavier and me would just have to be addressed later.

But in the meantime, I didn’t think I’d be able to just sit and wait around for Xavier to call and update me about Greyson. What if he got so wrapped up in things that he forgot to get in touch? God, what if he just decided not to call me at all? That was definitely a possibility, since he’d been so cold during our call just now. It was obvious that I wasn’t the priority for him that I used to be.

I decided to call Lola. If anyone would understand what I was going through, it was her. I hated to interrupt her couple’s retreat with Jay, but this definitely qualified as an emergency. I needed her to reassure me that Greyson would be okay, and that Xavier would be able to help his brother solve this problem—even if she hated Xavier’s guts right now.

I dialed Lola, but she didn’t answer. She didn’t respond to the text I sent right afterward, either. Disappointed, I was just about to toss my phone on the floor and curl up in bed and pout, but then I was startled by a sudden knock on my door.

*Could that be Greyson? Maybe he’s already back! That would be amazing.*

But my hopes were dashed when Rishika’s voice drifted through the door. “Hey, it’s me. Just checking to see if you’re all right.”

“Come on in,” I said.

Rishika opened the door and lingered in the doorway for a few beats before she came in and sat on the bed beside me.

“Hey, I know you’re upset about Greyson going to meet Cesaries,” she said. “I thought I’d stop by to check on you… And to make sure you’re not planning to go after him, if I’m being honest.”

“I’m not,” I said. “At least not right this second. But yes, I’m pretty upset about it, I’m not going to lie. I’m worried, and also embarrassed that Greyson didn’t even bother to tell me… Though I can’t say I’m surprised.” I sighed. “We had a pretty bad argument.”

Rishika nodded sympathetically. “I know how it is. I didn’t want Artemis to go to the Fae world, but she went anyway.” She took a deep breath and looked down at her hands. “It majorly sucks.”

“I know—you and I are both on the same page about that. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about Artemis leaving on her own, either.”

I’d wanted to go with her, but she’d insisted that I stay behind to look after the pack.

“Even though I’m still upset about it, I know that both Artemis and Greyson are doing what they feel is right,” Rishika pointed out. “And as much as I wish that I could’ve joined Artemis, I also understand that nothing I could’ve said would have changed her mind.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath as all sorts of feelings washed over me. “No one was going to stop her,” I said as I replayed our last conversation in my head. “She’d already made her mind up.”

Rishika nodded. “Exactly. And I’m forcing myself to realize that Artemis needs to do this for herself. I imagine it’s the same for Greyson… At least, that’s the impression I got. Believe me, I don’t like the idea of my Alpha going into the lion’s den, either, but I have to respect his decision.”

“I know,” I said, perhaps a little bitterly. “And you’re right about it being a lion’s den. I just don’t trust that Cesaries will let Greyson walk away from this. Why would he? The council was already looking for him, and now Greyson’s basically gift-wrapping himself for them. I just don’t get it.”

Rishika nodded in agreement. “I argued with him, then offered to join him—so did Ravi—but once Greyson refused, I knew that was it. He’s our Alpha, and we have to respect his decisions—and trust that he’s strong enough and smart enough to handle himself.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” I said, “I really do. But what am I supposed to do? Just sit around and wait for him to come home? What if the council decides to lock him up forever? Or worse?”

Just the thought of that was pure torture. I wished he’d just answer the phone and let me know that he was okay, but it was clear that he was either too busy or too mad to talk to me.

“I get it,” Rishika said. “Sitting here doing nothing just feels… wrong. But I know that you trust Greyson. Even though you two had an argument, I doubt that’s why he left without running his plan by you first.”

“Really?” I asked hopefully. “You don’t think he left me out of the loop because he’s upset with me?”

Greyson had been so hurt when he’d left earlier that I’d just assumed that his decision to run off without consulting me had been made at least partially out of spite.

“No, I don’t,” she said, shaking her head. “You know Greyson’s not like that. I think he left without telling you because he knew that you would’ve fought him on it. And that you would’ve tried to convince him to let you come along.”

I nodded—Rishika was definitely right about that.

“Wow. I think you hit the nail right on the head. When did you get so smart?” I joked.

Rishika smiled. “Since I fell for your sister—I guess it kind of rubbed off on me. Being with her taught me a hell of a lot about relationships. You know, all the give and take and compromise stuff.”

Rishika was being so honest and open with me, and it was nice to be able to talk to someone about this, especially when I was feeling so lost.

“You know,” she continued, “I thought I was in love once before, but we had all these trust issues that eventually doomed us. We couldn’t get past them. But with Artemis, there’s a mutual trust that I never thought I’d experience. It makes me happy to know that I’m actually capable of trusting someone completely.”

A look of sadness flashed through Rishika’s eyes. She quickly looked away, obviously trying to hide it.

“Rishika, are you okay?” I asked. She was going out of her way to comfort me, but she was obviously dealing with some difficult emotions of her own.

“I’m fine…” She paused for a moment. “It’s just that… the break is getting to me.”

“Shit, yes, of course it is,” I said, reaching for her hand. “Artemis told me before she left…”

“Yeah, just all this talk about how much I trust Artemis is getting to me. I mean, that hasn’t changed—I still trust Artemis more than I’ve ever trusted anyone,” she said, sighing. “But I’m just so damn *worried* about her, despite everything… And she’s only been gone a day.”

“I mean, of course you’re worried,” I said. “You didn’t break up because you wanted to. You did it because you felt it was what you had to do so she could go into this mission headfirst—which is really romantic, by the way.” She gave a small smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “It just means that you love her. I think that’s a good thing.”

Rishika looked up at me. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears, which she quickly wiped away. “You’d let me know if you heard from Artemis, wouldn’t you?”

I pulled Rishika into a hug. “Absolutely. I’m worried about her, too, but I know that I have to trust her. I keep telling myself that she survived fine on her own in the Fae world before we even knew about each other. The Fae world is Artemis’s domain. She’ll be okay. I know that. But trust me—if I hear from her, I’ll tell you.”

A sleepy-eyed Torin appeared in my doorway. “Hey, sorry to interrupt, but Ava’s downstairs asking for you, Cali. Actually, ‘demandingto see you’ would be the more accurate description.”

“Really?” I shot up from the bed, hoping that nothing had happened to Xavier.

I hurried downstairs, Rishika hot on my heels. Ava didn’t bother to hide her annoyance when I found her at the front door.

“Finally! What took you so long?” she hissed. “Come on, you’re coming with me.”

**Episode 4571**

**Greyson**

*They’re planning to kill you.*

I fought not to visibly react to Elle’s whispered words as I stepped away from her, but they were crashing through my mind like a wrecking ball. I wished I could’ve just dismissed them as nonsense, but that would’ve been naïve. Elle was telling the truth, and I couldn’t even bring myself to be surprised. I’d known this was coming. There was something lethally useless about the council, and I’d known for a while that they wanted to kill me. They wanted to punish me, to use me as an example to discourage anyone else from crossing them. They’d wanted to make an example of Dayton for turning Helix, but they’d decided to spare him, so now they were going to use me as their “don’t turn natural wolves or else” poster boy instead.

Looking down at Elle, I was surprised to see that she seemed… calm. Well, maybe not *calm*—she was tense, and clearly scared—but she wasn’t reacting as wildly to this information as I might’ve expected. She was her usual loyal, protective self—and sticking really close to me—but that was it. There were no signs that this turn of events was making her act irrationally or dangerously.

Checking my own feelings, I realized that while I definitely felt the need to protect her, it was a steady, Alpha-style feeling of responsibility—*not* an unignorable pull to shield her from any and all possible threats. There was no trace of the wild impulsivity that had caused me so much trouble lately.

So what did that mean? Had the sire bond actually been broken?

I felt around in my head, trying to figure it out, but I wondered if it was too early to tell if the sire bond was still in place. But my reaction—or lack thereof—did give me a sense of hope.

One of the council members cleared their throat, and I glanced over. I’d spent more than enough time on self-reflection—it was time to refocus on the immediate threat.

“How do you know they’re planning to kill me?” I whispered to Elle.

She angled her head toward me before she replied, so Cesaries couldn’t see her speaking. “I heard them talking about it earlier,” she breathed. “Cesaries said he thought you coming here to talk was the perfect opportunity to take you.”

“Dammit,” I muttered.

“And I heard the guards talking about your death sentence. You need to leave now,” she whispered, looking up at me with her deep green eyes. “While you still can.”

“I have no intention of being taken, Elle,” I murmured, watching as Cesaries walked away and out of my line of vision. Wherever he was going, it probably wasn’t going to be good for us. “I don’t trust Cesaries in the slightest, but it certainly wouldn’t reflect well on the council if the world found out that they’d betrayed a respected Alpha.” I shook my head. “No. I don’t think they’d do it. Who would ever trust them again?”

Before Elle could say anything more, a guard walked over. “Get up,” he said sharply.

“What?” I snapped.

The guy was unfazed. “You’re wanted,” he grunted. “Cesaries, Clifford, and Clarice want to talk to you.” He glanced at Elle, a hungry look in his eye. “To both of you.”

Elle leaned in close again. “Be careful,” she said quietly. “If it looks like they’re going to try something, I’ll fight so that you can escape.”

“I hope it won’t come to that,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t want you risking yourself to save me.” If anything, it should be the other way around—sire bond or not. I *was* her sire, after all, and her Alpha.

The guard gave another grunt, which I thought we were supposed to interpret as, “follow me,” and then he led us to the council’s tent.

Cesaries looked up when I walked in, a smug smile on his face. “Well, Greyson?”

“Well what?” I snapped.

He made an irritated noise. “I hope you’re satisfied. You can see that Arielle has been treated fairly.”

“*Fairly?*” I repeated. “How is locking her up in a trailer like a wild dog *fair*?”

“She’s a criminal,” Clifford said pompously, looking down his nose at Elle.

I snorted at this, not bothering to hide my derision as I glared at him. “Why? She’s done nothing wrong, broken no laws.”

“Let me remind you of the one called Helix,” Clarice said imperiously. “Do you not call his murder a crime?”

I ignored her. “You’re being shortsighted, Cesaries,” I said sharply.

He raised his eyebrows. “Short-sighted? And why is that?”

“Okay, fine—Elle killed Helix, I’m not going to deny that. But it’s to your advantage that she did.”

“And why is that?” he asked, still looking smug.

“She only did what you were going to do anyway—or what you wanted to do. She got it done, and you didn’t have to stain your hands with Helix’s blood,” I said. “Come on, think about it. If you’d killed him, other werewolves outside of the Northwind pack might’ve blamed you for rushing to such a harsh sentence. She saved you from that political mess.”

Cesaries’s expression turned hard. “Rules are rules, and they were put into place for a reason.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, anger making my pulse pound in my ears. “It seems to me that the council only likes to apply rules when it suits or serves the council.”

The man seemed to swell with anger. “How dare you—”

“Do I really need to remind you all about the Bitterfang war? The blood has barely dried,” I exploded, glaring at the assembled council. It didn’t escape me that even in the middle of a bloody pack war, they’d never done anything to prevent the destruction of our packs at Malakai’s hands.

“Of course you do not need to remind anyone—” Clifford began, but I spoke over him.

“Because you”—I glared at Cesaries—“and the rest of the council did absolutely nothing to stop Malakai’s violence at the summit, or the pack war that violence sparked. If anything, you staying silent gave him permission to continue.”

The silence that followed my outburst was deafening. Cesaries took a deep breath, clearly trying to keep his cool.

“I suggest you think hard about your own position, Greyson Evers, before you begin casting such a critical eye on the council,” he said. “And let me remind you that the matter at hand has nothing to do with the council at all—or the Bitterfang pack.”

I sneered at him. “Yeah? Then what *is* it about?”

His nostrils flared. “A violation of our rules and traditions.” He turned to look at Elle. “I know you were turned from a true wolf, and that Greyson is your sire—”

“Where’s your proof?” I demanded. “This rule is new, enacted because of Dayton and Helix. It’s not as if this has been around for centuries, and I’m blatantly in violation. No, you’re doing this because you feel like it.”

Cesaries clicked his tongue. “It matters not when the rule was created, Alpha Greyson, but that you’re in violation of it.” Then he gestured to one of the guards, a move that immediately put me on edge.

Elle bounced on the balls of her feet and glanced around nervously, looking a little like a trapped animal. I put my hand on her arm, trying to comfort her.

This—again—felt like a normal response. It was something I would’ve done to Rishika or Sage in a similar situation, not a gesture fueled by some irrational need to protect her.

A guard dropped a sheaf of papers in front of Cesaries, who immediately turned his attention to them. I took the opportunity to take a good look around the tent.

I spotted a couple of guards posted on either side of the door, and I thought fast. If things started to look really bad, Elle and I could break through the rear of the tent and sprint into the woods.

The guard Cesaries had sent out returned, dragging a bound and beaten Ethaniel.

Next to me, I felt Elle tense.

Cesaries turned to Ethaniel, looking thunderous. “You! Point to the one who broke the werewolf creed and created a sire bond with the true wolf now known as Arielle!”

I glowered at Ethaniel. We’d had a deal, for fuck’s sake. He couldn’t do this.

Ethaniel shifted his gaze away from mine, then raised a shaking finger to point at me.

The betrayal made me sick to my stomach, but I fought to keep my expression disdainful.

“There!” Clifford crowed.

I rolled my eyes. “That hardly proves anything.”

“How can you possibly say that? He pointed right to you—”

“Ethaniel’s word is hardly gospel,” I snapped. “Him pointing at me isn’t evidence.”

Cesaries’s eyes glittered dangerously. “He is an Alpha—and as you well know, the word of an Alpha is sufficient to convict.”

“I don’t think—” I started, but Cesaries was done listening.

He turned to his guards, who had already started to surge forward. “Take him!”

**Episode 4572**

**Xavier**

I paced up and down the living room, glancing out the window approximately every fifteen seconds. It wasn’t helping me be less stressed. If anything, it was making it worse. I was waiting for Lucian and Aysel to arrive, and for Ava to come back with Cali, and I was feeling edgy as hell.

I had a lot of reasons to feel anxious, but I was particularly nervous about Ava’s errand. I knew it hadn’t been the best idea to send her—she was bound to be gruff with Cali, and I knew Cali wasn’t exactly comfortable with her—but it couldn’t be helped. I needed to be here when Lucian arrived, and I couldn’t have just called Cali and asked her to head over alone. I wasn’t about to risk having her come unprotected—though how far Ava would be willing to go to protect Cali was a question I had no answer for.

Though I’d actually sensed a change in Ava after I’d finally spilled those three magic words to her—and hadn’t tried to take them back. She’d been different since then, like that ever-present chip had been removed from her shoulder—and that chip had always been distinctly Cali-shaped.

The sheer fact that Ava had volunteered to go fetch her told me that something had changed inside of her. I had no illusions about what Ava wanted—she’d always made it very clear. As cocky and self-serving as it sounded, I knew she wanted me. And now she had me. Maybe Ava didn’t see Cali as a real threat anymore because I’d reciprocated her feelings.

That was something to think about, but—as always—my bigger concern was Adéluce. She was a vindictive monster, and I was acutely aware that I’d just orchestrated a situation in which my two mates would be alone together, which could easily prove too tempting for the vampire-witch.

My hand twitched toward the phone in my pocket—I was already fairly desperate to call Ava and see if they were making their way back—but I balled it into a fist. There was a chance they were in the woods by now, where there was no service. And if I didn’t get an answer, it would only make me more anxious. I was just starting to take that thought on a panic spiral when I saw a car pull up in front of the house. I stepped quickly to the window and looked down to see Aysel and Lucian step out of their chauffeured car.

*Shit.*

If I’d been expecting a new and improved—and more functional—Lucian, I was sadly disappointed. Lucian stood in front of the car for a moment, looking around bemusedly, like he didn’t totally understand what he was doing here. He was wearing a pair of sweats—expensive-looking sweats, but sweats all the same—and a T-shirt, which was just plain bizarre. He was unshaven, which was maybe intentional, though I hoped he wasn’t trying to grow a beard to look more mature. I doubted a Santa beard would solve any of Lucian’s problems.

He looked like a mess, but as I stared at him through the window, my thoughts weren’t on what he looked like—I was far more worried about his attitude. I needed to know if he was going to be an asset or a liability to the Greyson and Elle rescue plan.

Lucian and Aysel walked up the porch steps, and Lucian was already glaring when I swung the door open.

“What am I doing here?” he snapped. “I demand to know. My sister”—he shot a cold glare at Aysel—“refused to tell me.”

I couldn’t help but notice that while Lucian sounded annoyed, his voice was different. It seemed to lack that privileged bite it had always possessed in the past.

I looked at Aysel, but if I was hoping for any insight into Lucian’s mental state, I was disappointed again.

She just shrugged. “I brought him here like you asked.”

“Yeah, I did ask,” I started. “But—”

“*Why am I here?*” Lucian demanded.

I waved them into the house. “Why don’t you sit down?”

When we were all installed in the living room, I launched into the story.

“Greyson went to the council to talk, and I think he might be in danger,” I said.

Lucian looked at me in silence for a moment, then snorted with laughter. “Okay?”

“*Okay?*” I repeated incredulously.

“Okay? And why should I care about that?” Lucian asked.

“What the hell is your problem?” I snapped, stepping closer so I towered over him as he sat on the couch. “You should *care* because my brother went to talk to the council about Elle.”

This caught Lucian’s attention, and he looked up quickly. “Arielle? My little forest rose?”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” I said irritably.

“What’s happening with her?” he demanded.

I sighed, wishing that Lucian wasn’t always so predictably selfish. “The council took Elle into custody and are probably planning to execute her, if their history is any indication.”

Lucian stared at me, shocked. “What? How can—*What?*”

I shook my head. “I know you’re upset about all the sire bond shit between her and my brother, but you have to make a decision now, Lucian. If you have any feelings for Elle, you need to get past all that other bullshit. You have to put your ego aside and help us get them out. Now, can I count on you to help?”

Lucian stood up and puffed out his chest. “Of course you can count on me. How can you even wonder? The council has gone too far. How dare they lay hands on my precious forest rose? Come, Xavier,” he said briskly. “What are we waiting for?”

And without waiting for an answer, he began to strip off his sweats, getting ready to shift.

“Hey!” I grabbed his arm. “No, Lucian, not yet.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

I rolled my eyes. “We’re still waiting for the troops to assemble. We need all the help we can get.”

“Who else are you expecting?” Aysel asked.

“Ava’s bringing Cali,” I told her.

This made her smirk. “You sent one mate to fetch the other? How…” She gave me a good once over. “*Progressive* of you all.”

I glared at her. “Well, we don’t need you to hang around, Aysel, unless you’re actually planning to be useful.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked huffily.

“It means that you can take off unless you’re planning on doing more than just primping and posing,” I said shortly.

Aysel managed to look wounded. “Everyone knows that I’m a great fighter, Xavier, and if you think you can just—”

“Go, Aysel,” Lucian told her.

She gaped at him. “What?”

“You should go back to the palace,” he said.

“But… Why?” Aysel asked, looking floored.

“You need to be there to take charge while I’m gone,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. “So, exactly what I’ve been doing while you pout and pose in your velour tracksuits.”

And with that, she whirled around and stormed out of the house.

Through the window, I saw her get into the car—slamming the door behind her—before it sped away, throwing up gravel as it went.

I was still looking out the window when Ava emerged from the woods with Cali on her back.

I blinked when I saw them, feeling suddenly light-headed. It almost felt like I was hallucinating.

I walked outside and down the porch steps to meet them, Lucian trailing behind me.

Ava stopped on the lawn, and Cali slid off her back. She shrugged off a small backpack and handed it to Ava as she shifted back to human. She pulled out jeans and a T-shirt and tugged them on.

No one had spoken yet, and I found myself standing stock still, glancing between them as my brain whirled. I was just so confused and unsettled—how could I possibly love *both* of them?

Cali didn’t meet my eyes—like she was deliberately trying to avoid them. She walked over to Lucian with a smile. “Thanks for coming, Lucian.”

Ava tugged on a pair of running shoes and—fully dressed—she moved to stand next to me.

I forced myself to look away from Cali and smiled down at Ava. “Thanks for doing that,” I said, brushing a kiss across her lips.

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “Oh, you know me, X—anything for the greater good.”

She was acting dismissive, but I knew that was just for show. That was a big change from even a few weeks ago. I’d asked her to bring Cali to me—there was a time in the not so distant past when she would’ve tried to fillet me for even asking.

I took a deep breath and looked at Lucian and Cali, who were both watching me. Cali’s face was set, but I could see anxiety flickering in her eyes.

“We have to hurry,” she said briskly. “What’s the plan?”

**Episode 4573**

**Greyson**

The guards were charging toward me. I shoved the closest one, and he flew back with a surprised yelp, slamming into another guard in the process. The two of them toppled like bowling pins.

A moment later, Elle and I had both shifted.

At the sight of two wolves eyeing them with what had to be a scary amount of menace, Cesaries and the other council members took a step back. The guards had shifted now, too, and Cesaries waved them forward, creating a wall between himself and me.

I couldn’t even bring myself to be surprised. I’d always known the council members were a bunch of spineless cowards—it was clear they had no intention of fighting me man to man.

There was a big part of me that longed to change that. I wanted to get my hands on Cesaries so I could teach him a lesson he wouldn’t forget—but I also knew that would easily backfire.

No, I needed to focus, and my immediate need wasn’t revenge. If that were the case, I would’ve gone right for Ethaniel and made him pay for his betrayal—even though it was clear from his battered face and body that his treachery hadn’t come easily. The council’s guards had clearly beaten the hell out of him to get him to talk.

Grinding my teeth, I charged in, focused solely on getting Elle and me the hell out of this situation. I went into attack mode, my vision tunneling down as I threw one wolf out the tent by the scruff of his neck before taking down another who was going straight for Elle.

Cesaries was clearly panicking, waving his arms as he ordered his guards around. “Stop them!” he shouted. “Do something!”

I bit down on the leg of the wolf I’d just pinned. He yelped in pain as I threw him roughly aside.

Elle was taking down wolf after wolf, and it wasn’t long before I looked around and realized that we’d taken them all down. Cesaries was no longer protected. He’d only had a small number of his guards in the tent with him, and now they were down for the count. He knew it, too. He stared me down, and finally, I saw Cesaries shift. His wolf was huge, his fur a mixture of tan, brown, and white.

If he wanted a fight, I could give him one. The council had taken Elle not just for her so-called crime against Helix, but also because they’d known I would come for her. I’d be willing to fight Cesaries or any of the council members to get her back.

*Don’t be a fool, Greyson*, Cesaries said as he stepped toward me. The other council members shifted, baring their teeth.

I wasn’t about to back down. Not when there was so much riding on this. I took a step toward Cesaries, ready to fight him when suddenly a lightning strike of pain exploded at the base of my skull. Pain engulfed me for half a moment, then everything went black.

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When I woke up, I blinked in confusion. It took a moment, but as I stared up at the plaster ceiling, I realized that I was inside. And not just inside—I was in the bedroom of my apartment in Portland.

I turned my head, expecting it to hurt like hell from the blow that had knocked me out—but there was no pain. And, even better, Cali was lying next to me in the bed.

She smiled as I looked over at her, then leaned in and kissed me. “How’s your head?”

I stared at her in wonder. “It feels fine,” I rasped, still sleepy and deeply baffled. “Why are you asking?”

She just smiled again. “I’ve been looking forward to spending the weekend with you, you know,” she said, avoiding the question. She sighed and looked around the bedroom, where morning light was streaming in through the windows. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“Yeah,” I said bemusedly. “I guess I never thought we’d actually get the chance to get away like this. I’ve wanted it, too, but pack bullshit keeps getting in the way.”

Cali looked back at me. “For the next few days, *nothing* is going to get in our way.” She smiled. “It’s just the two of us.”

The doorbell buzzed, and she looked up.

“That must be the food I ordered,” she said. “I got waffles and omelets. I thought that sounded good.”

“Yeah, great,” I said, still feeling dazed.

Cali threw back the covers and stepped out of bed. “I’ll get it. You just stay here—you’re going to need to be rested for everything I’ve got planned,” she said, looking back at me with a wicked smile.

I chuckled, even as heat flooded my body. I was still confused, but as I watched Cali throw on a robe and walk out the bedroom door, all I could think about was how much I loved her.

I lay back on the bed with a sigh, tucking my hands behind my head and looking at the patterns created by the sunlight as it played on the ceiling. This was what I’d always wanted—Cali and me, alone together.

I heard front the door opening in the living room, and then muffled voices. I was just starting to get hungry for breakfast when Cali reappeared in the doorway, a puzzled look on her face.

“Greyson?”

“Where’s the food?” I asked, throwing back the covers.

She shook her head. “No food. There’s a woman at the door claiming to be your mate.”

I grinned. “There is a woman at *this* door who *is* my mate,” I joked, figuring she was still being playful.

But then I realized that Cali wasn’t smiling.

“Greyson—”

She was interrupted by the sound of pounding footsteps coming toward the bedroom. A moment later, a woman I’d never seen in my life burst into the room and pushed past Cali.

“Greyson!” she shouted, scanning me frantically.

I jumped to my feet. “Who the hell are you?”

The woman frowned. “I’m Elle.”

“Greyson!”

I opened my eyes again to see Elle’s face—her *familiar* face—leaning over me.

“Greyson? Are you okay?” she asked anxiously.

I stared up at her for a long time, thoroughly confused. I was disoriented, and it took me longer than it should have to get my bearings. But when I did, I realized I was in the council’s prison trailer with Elle.

I tried to sit up, and the shockwave of pain from the back of my head nearly made me throw up.

“Oh god,” I moaned. I reached for the source of the pain and felt blood starting to crust in my hair. “What the hell happened?”

“You were knocked out by the council,” Elle said. “And after that, we were both captured and brought here.” She glanced around the filthy trailer.

Realization dawned—I’d only been dreaming about Cali, and the mysterious woman claiming to be my mate. I was glad that at least that part hadn’t been real.

But the true nightmare of my actual situation became clear when I managed to sit up and realized that both Elle and I had been shackled.

I sighed as I looked down at the heavy metal clasps around my wrists and ankles. I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised. Not after what had just happened. After that, Cesaries wasn’t going to take any chances.

Elle helped me move into a more comfortable position. “Are you okay, Greyson?”

I only grunted in response.

“Do you think you’re well enough to try to get out of here?” she asked nervously.

“I’m well enough, but I don’t think we’re getting out anytime soon.”

Elle rattled the chains attached to her wrists. “We just have to get out of these.”

I shook my head as I eyed the thick metal. “I’m an Alpha, Elle, and I don’t think even *I* can break them.”

Astonishingly, Elle’s eyes lit up. “You don’t have to.”

“What are you talking about?”

She coughed, then leaned over and spat something into her cupped hand.

“Is that a *key*?” I asked in disbelief.

She nodded, clearly pleased with her own cleverness. “I stole it.”

“From who?”

“From one of the guards, while they were bringing us in here,” she said.

“You’re a genius, Elle,” I said, and took the key.

It took some twisting around, but I managed to unlock my own chains, then Elle’s. When we were both free, we stood, glad to be able to move freely—even if it was only around the trailer.

We stepped toward the trailer’s small window and looked out. I couldn’t see anything, but I knew there were guards nearby.

“How do you know for sure?” Elle asked when I said as much, looking around. “I don’t see anyone.”

“I can smell them,” I said softly. “They’re there.”

Elle chewed her lip. “So how do we get out of here?”

Stepping back from the window, I looked around the small space. Then I glanced up, and I actually managed a half-smile.

“I know what to do.”

**Episode 4574**

“Well?” I asked again. “What’s the plan?”

Xavier shook his head dismissively. “There *is* no plan—”

“*What?*” I gasped out. Honestly it should’ve been something I expected, but I was hoping to god that Xavier had something in mind.

“—other than to go to Three Devils Point, find whatever the council is using as a holding cell, and get Greyson and Elle the hell out of there,” he finished.

Okay, so there was *something.* It made me feel better for a second, then it passed. It did sound like the only logical move, but I wasn’t sold. Would that plan be enough to actually work?

“But we can’t just go out there and expect to figure it out as we go,” I said. “We need a strategy.”

“What kind of strategy?” Ava asked, an edge to her voice.

“How are we going to convince Cesaries to let Greyson and Elle go?” I asked. “That’s the part that definitely isn’t going to work.”

“You’re right, we can’t,” Xavier said shortly. “We won’t be able to convince Cesaries or the rest of the council of anything, and we’re not going to waste our time trying. It’s been clear for a while now that the council’s got it out for Greyson and Elle. They’ve been targeting them, enforcing rules for them that don’t seem to apply to anyone else. But at this point, that’s neither here nor there. My brother was stupid enough to turn Elle, and now Cesaries and his circus clowns are determined to make them both pay.”

“Greyson wasn’t being stupid when he turned Elle,” I snapped. “He did it to protect the pack, and because it was what Elle really wanted. She wasn’t happy being a true wolf.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Honestly, it doesn’t really matter, and I don’t really care. No good deed goes unpunished. Greyson’s goodwill has landed him on death row, and now *I* have to rescue him.”

“This is all very illuminating,” Lucian said, with a touch of his old haughtiness, “but it doesn’t change the fact that we’re wasting time standing here talking.”

I looked over and took a good look at Lucian. He was naked—a reality I could’ve done without—but he also looked only slightly better than he had at his “Execution Eve” when he’d been acting so strange. He definitely hadn’t been himself. He was part of a very small band of rescuers, so I really hoped he was going to be able to keep it together.

“I don’t think we need to get so technical about this,” Ava said. “We’re getting bogged down, here. We don’t need a blueprint. As I understand it, the plan is that we bust in, kick some council ass, grab Greyson and Elle, and run—right?”

Xavier shrugged. “That pretty much sums it up.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. I wished there was more to our master plan. I’d obviously use my magic if I needed to, but I really wished our only plan wasn’t to burst in, guns blazing, and hope we won. I would’ve preferred to go in *Ocean’s Eleven* style with a plan in place, even if parts of it ended up being guns blazing…

But I knew Xavier wasn’t wrong about Cesaries. With him, attempts at diplomacy only ever had a fifty-fifty chance of success—at best.

Xavier looked at Lucian and me. “Okay, Ava and I are going to go talk to the pack for a second before we leave.” And with that, he and Ava turned and walked into the house.

I watched them go, thinking again how strange it was to see the two of them like that—like a team. They were walking into *their* house, where they lived together—like a regular couple.

The pain I felt at the sight hit deep in my belly and ached in a way that never really went away, but I couldn’t think about that right now. I couldn’t let it distract me.

Lucian looked over at me. “I know you typically favor a softer approach, Caliana, but please know that I fully plan on killing anyone who tries to prevent me from rescuing my Arielle.”

His eyes blazed with a dangerous light as he spoke, and I took an instinctive step back from him, unsettled by his anger. He’d always been a wildcard in his own way, but this was reminding me just how unhinged he could be. It was an old side to Lucian I’d hoped never to see again.

“We’re not just going in there for Elle,” I reminded him. “Greyson is there, too. What about him?”

“I don’t care about the Redwood Alpha,” Lucian snapped.

He was angry, and I knew exactly why.

With a sigh, I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Listen, Lucian, you’re wrong about Greyson. I know the thing with Elle and Greyson and the sire bond has always been upsetting to you, but there’s more to it than you think.”

“Like what?” he asked shortly.

“Well, for starters, did you know that in addition to going to Three Devils Point to try and rescue Elle, he also put himself at risk by trying to break the sire bond with a spell?” I crossed my arms over my chest and eyed Lucian levelly.

Lucian clearly had *not* known this—he was obviously surprised. “No, I— I had no idea. Did it… Did it actually work?” he asked. “Has my forest rose finally been freed from the bond?”

I didn’t answer right away. The wind picked up and blew around us as we stood in front of the Samara house. I looked up at the grey sky and thought about how many times I’d asked myself that very question.

“I wish I knew,” I said heavily.

I knew Lucian was only capable of thinking about himself at the moment—hell, maybe he was *only* ever capable of thinking about himself—but I had to admit, the sire bond bothered me just as much as it bothered him. He and I were in the same position—I just wasn’t losing my shit the way he was. Part of me wondered if I should lie and tell him that the bond had definitely been broken, so at least he’d be able to focus on the rescue mission. But that seemed risky. If I was wrong and Lucian found out, he’d dive even deeper into this crazy state he was in.

“What do you mean?” Lucian pressed. “Is it broken or is it not?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. Then I slowly added, “We *think* the spell worked, though.”

Lucian took this in, then nodded slowly. “Well, that is… interesting. Maybe you’re right, Caliana. Maybe I will reconsider my opinion of Greyson.”

“Yeah, I think it might be for the best,” I said dryly, thinking about how much Greyson had done for Lucian and his pack during the Bitterfang war. “Anyway, it will benefit the Redwoods and the Vanguards if you stop blaming Greyson for everything.”

Lucian didn’t have a chance to respond to that before the front door opened and Xavier and Ava walked out of the house. They made their way down the stairs, and Ava looked at Lucian and me.

“Okay,” she said briskly. “Let’s go.”

She shifted, and Xavier did the same. Lucian followed their lead a moment later, then—to my relief—bent down so I could climb onto his back. I had *not* been looking forward to riding to Three Devils Point on Ava’s back. The trip to the Samara pack house had been excruciatingly awkward. And painful. I suspected that she’d deliberately run through thick growths of trees so the branches would whip at my face and claw at my clothes, just to make the ride as uncomfortable as possible for me.

But at least she hadn’t been able to talk to me while she was in wolf form.

I pulled myself onto Lucian’s back, and we set off into the woods at a run. I knew we were all feeling the same urgency, and everyone moved quickly toward Three Devils Point. Riding with Lucian was new to me, and I was trying to figure out the best way to keep myself on his back when Xavier mind linked with me.

*I’ve got it*, he said. *I’ve picked up Greyson’s scent.* He veered to the left*. We need to go west.*

My heart pounded as Lucian moved to follow the trail that Xavier was breaking through the thick underbrush. The sky was still stubbornly grey, which made the woods seem even darker than normal.

*He’s close*, Xavier said, and I saw a break in the trees up ahead and knew we were approaching a clearing.

When we entered it and I looked around, my stomach sank. It was immediately obvious that we’d already lost the element of surprise.

Cesaries was waiting in the clearing, and he didn’t look even remotely surprised to see us. He walked toward us, flanked by a group of guards.

I knew I should’ve been afraid, but anger replaced the fear in my heart as I glared at him.

“Where is he?” I demanded.

Cesaries’s expression darkened menacingly. “You’ve come looking for Greyson? It appears you’re too late.”

**Episode 4575**

**Greyson**

I led the way as Elle and I sprinted through the woods, away from the council and the prison trailer and Three Devils Point. As we ran, my mind raced, wondering if I’d done the right thing, if I’d made the right decision at that last fork, and if this escape attempt was even going to work at all. Mostly, I was really wishing we had a witch with us, or anyone else with the ability to mask our scents. It was cold, which meant there was nothing to smell in the woods but the scents of other animals, and I figured we didn’t have much time before the council checked the trailer and realized we’d escaped. They’d be coming after us soon.

That thought made my stomach clench into a tight ball, but there was nothing I could do about it. I just had to keep moving and put as much distance as possible between us and them.

I really wished I’d had time to plan this escape better—or at all—but everything had just happened in a rush. When Elle had revealed that she’d stolen the key to the shackles, I’d been relieved, of course, but I’d immediately begun to worry that the guard she’d taken it from would realize it was missing—I’d had to act quickly.

Looking around the dingy little trailer, I’d spotted the outline of a ceiling panel that looked like it didn’t quite fit. I’d put Elle on my shoulders and told her to push, and she’d discovered that the panel had been fitted into the ceiling to cover a skylight. The skylight had been harder to get through—its opening mechanism had been rusted shut—but Elle had gotten the job done. I’d given her a boost up and out, then pulled myself through. After that, we’d dropped to the ground, slipped into the trees beyond the trailer, and shifted.

Now, we reached a thick crop of trees and paused for a moment. I looked around, trying to get my bearings.

*Elle, you should head west*, I said, nodding to the left*. Run in a confusing pattern until you reach the stream, then follow it before you go straight to Portland. Whatever it takes. I’ll send someone in the pack after you as soon as I can.*

I was hoping it would be close to impossible to track her once she reached the stream, but I didn’t say so. I didn’t want to tempt fate. The council would surely go looking for her at the pack house or the Vanguard palace, but we just needed to buy a little time first. If we could get any of it. Portland would be the safer bet. At least if she started on her way to Portland, she could have a bit more of a head start…

*I’ll get a message out to the pack and the others will protect her. I’ll get Rishika or Ravi to take one of my cars and meet her in Portland. Then I’ll figure out how to have them protect her there. Or in California. All that matters is that Elle gets as far away from here as possible where the council won’t be able to find her.*

Elle looked at me with her big green eyes. *What about you, Greyson?* *Where are you going? Why don’t you come with me?*

I shook my head. *I’m going to go the other way.*

*Why?*

*So I can lead the council hunters away from you. It’ll buy you some time—which you definitely need. Just promise me that you’ll run as fast as you can, okay? Avoid humans the best you can.*

Elle’s eyes went wide with surprise. *No!* *No, Greyson. I’m not going to leave you.*

The strength of her reaction worried me. Did that mean the sire bond *wasn’t* broken? And—if it wasn’t—which bond had the witches actually cut?

Elle was shaking her furry head. *No, I won’t go. I’m staying with you, Greyson. We’ll fight the council together if we have to.*

*Elle, that wasn’t a request*, I growled. *That was an order. As your Alpha, I’m ordering you to go.*

*No*, she said stubbornly. *I’m not going anywhere without you.*

I let out a frustrated huff. *Elle, is it the sire bond that’s making you do this?*

*No! I mean—I don’t know. What I do know is that this isn’t something I* have *to do. I’m not leaving you because I don’t* want *to. There’s a difference.* She was quiet for a moment, like she was thinking about what that difference might be. *I don’t feel the same connection with you that I did before, but that doesn’t mean I’m just going to run away and leave you to fight on your own. I wouldn’t do that to anyone in the pack—least of all my Alpha.*

I was relieved to hear her say this. Her acknowledgement of the change in her feelings was another sign that the sire bond had really been broken.

*I know what you mean*, I told her. *I don’t feel the same way about you either, but that doesn’t mean we don’t still have a connection. We do, and we always will—it just won’t be the same as the sire bond, and it won’t be like a mate bond, either. But I turned you, Elle. Nothing will ever change that, and we’ll always be connected.*

She nodded. *I know. And I’m glad*.

I was about to reply when I caught a scent on the wind. It was the council. They were coming—hunting us, just like I’d known they would.

I turned to Elle, who was still looking at me with wide eyes. *This is it, Elle.*

*Greyson?*

*This is your last chance to leave. Just go west to the stream, and it will take you to the pack house. When you get there, tell Rishika—*

*No, Greyson*, she said firmly. *No*.

There was a look in her eyes that told me I wasn’t going to be able to change her mind, no matter what I said.

*Okay*, I growled. *But we’ve got to move.*

Leading the way again, I moved deeper into the woods to the west, hoping we’d be able to reach the stream and mask our scents before the council found us. Though, as I ran, I realized that I might’ve been wrong to tell Elle to follow the stream toward the pack house. That was too obvious a choice. Maybe it would be better to do the opposite and head upstream, away from the house.

I went over my knowledge of the area. I couldn’t think of anywhere we might be able to hide, but I figured heading upstream was still worth a shot.

We moved through the thick underbrush as quietly as we could, and I abruptly realized that the council hunters were getting closer. I could hear them coming, now—they were taking no pains to stay quiet. And why would they? They weren’t hiding. But they *were* closing in.

*Fuck*, I thought to myself.

In moments like this, it was difficult to think clearly about next steps. It was nearly impossible not to second-guess everything I’d just done. I shouldn’t have stopped running to argue with Elle. That mistake had cost us. I should’ve just made a quick decision and kept going.

I did some quick calculations in my head. I was an Alpha, and I had more than enough strength to take on the council or their guards. It might be a difficult, hard-won fight, but I knew I was capable of it. At the very least, I knew I’d likely be able to outrun them if I did get a head start. But Elle—as strong as she was—wasn’t as fast as me. She wouldn’t be able to outpace them. But I wasn’t going to leave her behind. The thought was unimaginable, sire bond or no sire bond.

I lifted my nose and inhaled deeply. There were other werewolf scents coming from up ahead, so I veered to the left. Then I sniffed the air again and found more scents. It had to be the council. Fuck. After repeating the pattern once more, I realized there were scents coming from every direction.

We were totally surrounded.

I stopped running and turned to Elle. *It’s looking like we might have to fight our way out of this*, I told her.

*I understand, Greyson*, she said quietly. Then she stood next to me and waited, trusting and loyal as always.

My heart raced as every noise drew my attention. Elle was just as twitchy.

Finally, Clifford emerged from the trees, wearing a satisfied smile. *Bastard*.

“Greyson Evers!” he called, his voice bouncing off the trees. “There you are. If you try to run again, there will be consequences.”

I growled, deep and menacing.

Clifford’s face reddened, but he didn’t back down. “If you attempt to escape the council’s custody again, your Luna will be charged with your crimes!”

**Episode 4576**

My heart sank like a stone. I struggled to breathe as I stared at Cesaries, standing in front of us.

We were “too late”? What did that mean?

Had the council actually *killed* Greyson?

As that thought echoed through my brain, there suddenly didn’t seem to be enough oxygen around me. I felt like I’d been slapped across the face, but then… Wait. No. That couldn’t be right. If something had happened to Greyson, I would’ve felt it. Wouldn’t my mate bond have alerted me somehow?

*Shit, my mate bond.*

That was assuming my mate bond with Greyson was still intact after the witches’ spell…

My mind reeled, but when Lucian crouched down, I recognized the signal and slid off his back onto the cold ground. Then he, Xavier, and Ava all shifted back to human.

“What has the council done with my brother?” Xavier demanded immediately, his tone hard and threatening.

Cesaries opened his mouth to answer, but Lucian spoke first.

“Where is Arielle?” he spat, taking a step toward the leader of the council.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Cesaries said, his voice infuriatingly calm.

“What?” I snapped. “You don’t know where they are?”

He shrugged. “I honestly don’t.”

Nothing he was saying made sense, and every word made my anxiety grow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Stop playing games, Cesaries,” Xavier snarled. “That’s not what we came here to do. Tell us what we want to know.”

Cesaries gave the four of us a cool once-over.

“Now, now,” he said, his tone so patronizing I felt my proverbial hackles rise. “Xavier Evers, I don’t think you or your little band of warriors is in any position to make demands. But rest assured, Greyson and the abomination he created will be back soon.”

“Back?” I asked, as Lucian twitched next to me, clearly enraged by Cesaries’s degrading epithet for Elle.

Cesaries sighed heavily, as if this whole ordeal was simply an annoying inconvenience for him. “Yes, *back*. We had both of them in custody, of course, but then Greyson made the foolish decision to escape.”

“Not so foolish if he actually managed it,” Xavier noted, glaring at Cesaries.

His mean little eyes narrowed. “Don’t you worry—my guards are out hunting and are likely on their trail as we speak. There’s nowhere they can hide. We will find them.”

“Dammit,” Xavier muttered. He shook his head, looking furious as he turned to Ava. “If I’d known Greyson was planning to escape, I wouldn’t have bothered to come after him.”

I shot him a hard look and mind linked with him. *Stop. Cesaries* *is right—there aren’t a lot of places to hide out here. They’re being hunted right now. We still have to help them. We can’t let the council recapture them.*

Xavier glanced at me, but before he could reply, Cesaries turned to a woman who’d just walked out of the trees.

“Clarice, there you are,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you. Have the guards located Greyson and the wolf yet?”

The woman—Clarice, apparently—shook her head. “No, it doesn’t appear that they have.”

My heart lightened just a little as she spoke. At least they hadn’t been captured yet. Maybe that meant they were actually going to get away.

Then, almost as if she could sense my hope, Clarice kept talking. “But don’t worry, Cesaries. My guards will get the job done.”

Cesaries nodded, but he said, “Perhaps we should form a backup plan, just in case.”

I had no idea what kind of backup plan he had in mind—until he turned to me with a wicked smile.

“We will take Greyson’s Luna hostage,” he announced.

I took an involuntary step back before reason could overcome my fear. Belatedly, I summoned my magic and raised my hands, but Xavier spoke before I could blast anyone.

“Over my dead body,” he snarled.

Cesaries’s smile widened, making him look deranged. “As you wish, Xavier Evers.” He turned to Clarice and waved her forward. “Get the Redwood Luna, kill the others.”

“Take them!” Clarice bellowed at her guards, who were already closing in.

I inhaled sharply as the world began to tilt beneath my feet. I felt dizzy; was this really happening? Did they just order to *kill* some of us? No… I couldn’t let that happen to anyone here. There had to be a way out of this!

Next to me, Lucian shook his head. “I’m going after Elle,” he said, and then he shifted and sprinted away, disappearing into the woods in an instant.

Damn. That wasn’t good. Now we were one fighter down. I understood where Lucian was coming from, but he seriously couldn’t have stayed to help us? For at least five damn minutes?!

Xavier and Ava shifted as the guards lunged. One went after Xavier, and he met him halfway, their bodies colliding in midair. Ava didn’t wait for her guard to get close—she just leapt at him, teeth bared.

I conjured my shield and used it to knock back two guards as they raced toward me. This threw them off, and I conjured my sword without even having to work for it. It was as though my body already knew what it needed and how to get it. In this moment, I was very glad that I’d worked so hard to learn to control my magic.

A guard was heading for Ava as she struggled with another one, so I used my shield to push him back. Meanwhile, Xavier was ripping into a guard, clearly trying to make his way to Cesaries. As I batted the guard away, knocking my shield into her repeatedly, I acknowledged that it felt supremely weird to be defending Ava… But it also made sense. She didn’t need to be here at all, and yet she was. She’d come to help save Greyson and Elle. I suspected that she was here out of loyalty to Xavier more than anything else, but that didn’t matter—in this moment, we were on the same team.

One of the council guards let out a tremendous snarl and rushed me. I swung my shield toward him, but I wasn’t fast enough. I was a second too late, and the wolf came smashing into the shield at full speed. Thankfully, the shield protected me from his teeth, but we both went flying and crashed to the ground.

My shield disappeared on impact, which freaked me out. I was suddenly defenseless, scrambling on the ground with a council guard. I had to get away. They wanted to capture me and use me as bait for Greyson, and I wasn’t going to let that happen. I *couldn’t* let it happen. If the council took me, Greyson would do anything to free me. He wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice his own life in exchange for mine.

I was *not* going to let that happen. I had to fight my way out of this. Hopefully Lucian would reach Greyson and Elle before the council guards.

As I scrambled away from the guard, who was still trying to get back to his feet, Ava’s yelp of pain drew my attention. Another one of the council wolves had bitten her, and he was still attached to her leg.

Xavier roared with outrage and started toward her, only to be knocked back by a massive black wolf.

It was up to me, then.

I raced to Ava, grabbed her attacker’s fur with both hands, and yanked as hard as I could. He didn’t budge, but a blast of magic flowed through my fingers and into the wolf’s body, shocking him with what must’ve felt like thousands of volts of electricity.

The wolf gave a pained cry and fell back, releasing Ava.

Whimpering, Ava looked down at her bloody leg. At the same time, the wolf I’d just shocked prepared for another attack.

“Hell no!” I shouted, raising my hands for another blast.

But before I could do anything, an arm slid around my neck and shoulders and grabbed tight. Then I was jerked back a few paces.

“HELP!” I screamed, stumbling to get my feet back underneath me. “Xavier! Ava! Help!”

Xavier whipped around. He threw off his attacker with a burst of strength and was about to lunge toward me when I heard Cesaries’s voice right next to my ear.

“Stop!” he snapped. “Xavier Evers, I suggest that you stop right there.”

Cesaries was out of breath, but his hold on me was strong, and he sounded as threatening as I’d ever heard him sound.

I fought against his hold with everything I had, but he was freakishly strong.

I stopped squirming when his other hand came up and I felt something cold being pressed against my neck. Xavier and Ava both froze at the sight of it, and I didn’t have to see it to know what it was. It was a knife.

“Not one step closer,” Cesaries said, his voice lethally quiet and controlled. “Move, and I’ll kill her.”

**Episode 4577**

**Xavier**

When I saw the blade being pressed to Cali’s throat, I froze. The day was grey, and the sky was filled with clouds, but the knife in Cesaries’s hand was so lethally sharp, I could see the edge glinting, even from a distance. Cesaries was a coward and a weasel, but when I looked into his small, mean eyes, I knew he wasn’t bluffing. It wasn’t difficult to do the math—Cali wasn’t a werewolf, and somehow, I doubted the council leader had much love for the Fae. Given how dismissively he’d spoken about Elle, I had to assume he didn’t have time for anyone who wasn’t a born werewolf.

And Cali knew the stakes, too. Her eyes were wide with fear, and I could see that her breath was coming fast. Her life was in danger, and she looked absolutely terrified. It killed me.

Cesaries had warned me not to move, but I had to chance it—I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing. I was starting to feel like I was about to crawl out of my skin. Paying close attention to Cesaries’s every move, I took a glacially slow step forward. I had to get the knife away from him, but was there even a good way? The smallest movement from Cesaries could cut her, and even though it seemed like they didn’t want Cali dead so they could use her against Greyson… It didn’t sit well with me that they probably didn’t care if she did end up hurt, either way.

*Don’t*, Ava said.

*What?* I asked distractedly, my head spinning with fear and panic.

*Don’t try anything, Xavier. If you want Cali to survive this, listen to Cesaries.*

I was taking this in when Cali’s mind link joined Ava’s in my head. *Xavier, just go find Greyson. Don’t worry about me.*

I ground my teeth. This was all happening so quickly, but I needed time to think. So I started stalling.

“What do you want in exchange for her?” I demanded, looking at Cesaries.

He huffed in an irritated way. “How many times must I repeat myself to you people? I’ve already told you, Evers—I want Greyson, and I want his wolf. I want them back here, in my custody where they rightfully belong, so they can answer for their crimes. That is all. Once they are secured, I will release…” He glanced dismissively down at Cali. “This one.”

I growled low. I fucking hated hearing Cesaries talk about Cali like that.

Hearing the warning sound, Cesaries narrowed his eyes. “I will release her—unless, of course, you do something foolish.”

*Xavier, stop*, Ava said again. *Just do what he says. We* just *managed to build the Samara pack back up to something close to respectable. Do* not *blow it all right now by turning the council against us.*

*What do you* expect *me to do?* I exploded, anger and fear coursing through me*. I can’t just walk away. You know what will happen—he’ll kill her. I can’t just leave her at that asshole’s mercy.*

*You don’t have to*, Ava said.

*What are you talking about?* I demanded.

She sighed out loud. *Just do what Cesaries says.* Whatever *he says. Say you’ll go find Greyson and Elle and bring them back to him. Whatever. We find a way to leave, and then we figure out how to get Cali back.*

I hesitated, thinking about her plan. I couldn’t help but wonder if Ava was being sincere about wanting to come back for Cali. Even with the changes I’d noticed in her recently, this was still Cali we were talking about, and Ava was still Ava.

But I also knew we didn’t have much of a choice, here. It wasn’t like we could come up with a rescue-and-escape strategy while Cesaries and his guards were watching out every move. And if I so much as looked like I was thinking of attacking, Cali would die.

I hated it, but I knew what I had to do.

“I’ll back off,” I ground out, holding up my hands. “But I want your word that Cali won’t be harmed, no matter what happens with Greyson and Elle.”

*Xavier!* Cali cried. *What are you doing? Please don’t say that. Don’t abandon Greyson! Don’t trust Cesaries. He wants to kill them both.*

I looked at Cesaries, fixing him with a hard stare.

He eyed me intensely for a moment, then nodded. “Fine. I give you my word.”

“Your word?” I repeated incredulously.

“Yes, my word,” he said haughtily. “Both as a werewolf with Alpha blood and as the head of the werewolf council.”

A bitter laugh burst out of me. “That’s just a bunch of meaningless bullshit.” I shook my head. “But I guess I’ll have to accept it—for now.”

What other choice did I have?

*Xavier, think of Greyson*, Cali pleaded.

I glared at Cesaries, trying to ignore Cali’s increasingly desperate voice in my head.

“If anything happens to her,” I said, glancing pointedly at Cali, “I personally guarantee that you’ll be sorry. If she is harmed in any way, your reign as the head of the council will come to a very abrupt, very bloody end. Do I make myself clear?”

I must have, because Cesaries went pale and Clarice stepped forward, her eyes flashing dangerously.

“You should be careful how you speak,” she said angrily. “Or someone will have to teach you to be more respectful of your leaders.”

I spat on the ground at her feet. “No one’s going to teach me a fucking thing. My respect has to be earned.”

Then I looked past Clarice’s furious face to where Cali stood, still wrapped in Cesaries’s tight, menacing embrace.

*I’m coming back for you*, I said, holding her gaze.

*Xavier—*

I turned to Ava. “Let’s go.”

She nodded, and together we shifted, turned away, and raced into the woods.

My mind was reeling as I ran, barely even paying attention to where I was going. Twice, I almost got myself tangled in the underbrush. Turning my back on Cali and then running away from her while she was being held captive felt like the most unnatural thing in the world, and I hated myself for doing it. I couldn’t quite believe I’d actually left her in that asshole’s hands.

It felt *wrong*—like I’d somehow made a choice to be with Ava, and that had required me to leave Cali behind.

I took a deep breath of the cold air, sharply scented with pine. I felt like scum for leaving her behind, but I meant what I’d said—I was going to go back for her. No matter what.

Ava ran ahead of me, leading the way while I fought to get my bearings.

She glanced at me over her shoulder and slowed, letting me catch up until we were running side by side. *I know that was hard, X, but it was the right thing to do. The Samaras have to come first.*

*Cali’s my mate*, I snapped automatically, but as soon as I said the words, I regretted them. It was the wrong thing to say, I knew that, but it was also a fact. A fact that both Ava and I knew, but had seemed to be less of an issue as of late. In Ava’s eyes, I’d renounced Cali, when, of course, I hadn’t actually wanted to.

*Learn to keep your mouth shut.*

Ava’s eyes narrowed, and she slowed even more. *So am I. And I’m also your Luna. Cali is a Redwood. You are a Samara.*

I didn’t have a response for that, so I picked up the pace a little. She was right, of course, but I’d been born a Redwood. My blood would always be Redwood.

Cali would always be my mate.

The trees flashed by in a blur as we sprinted through the woods, and thoughts were running through my head just as quickly.

*I have to wonder if your reasoning on this is just an excuse to let Cali die*, I said, giving Ava a sideways glance.

*I’m just stating the facts as I see them*, she said, her voice hard. *I’m not suggesting that we leave Cali forever, but you were there, Xavier—it was pretty obvious what would’ve happened if we’d tried to grab her. Leaving Cali so we could make a real plan was the best and only option. But I also want you to think about what’s at stake here. Xavier.* Everything *that’s at stake. Because it’s more than just Cali’s life.*

*What are you talking about?* I demanded.

*We didn’t come here to save Cali.*

*What?*

*We came to save Greyson. Remember?*

I thought about this for a moment. She was right, and we’d gone to confront the council knowing the risks involved. But that didn’t change anything. I’d made Cali a promise, and I intended to keep it. I was going to go back for her. I might’ve come out here to save Greyson, but now that Cali needed me, maybe I’d be able to do both.

I glanced at Ava. *Let’s go find Greyson, before Cesaries does.*

**Episode 4578**

**Greyson**

I looked at Clifford for a long moment, letting his words ring through my head. They were going to punish *Cali* for my crimes?

I had my doubts about the actual weight of this threat. There was no way the council could accuse Cali of turning Elle—she wasn’t even a werewolf. Nor could they accuse her of sharing the sire bond.

“What the hell are you going to charge her with?” I asked incredulously. “Being Fae? That’s not a crime, even by the council’s bullshit rules.”

Clifford made a dismissive noise. “There’s plenty we can charge her with.”

“Like what?”

He narrowed his watery eyes. “Off the top of my head? Knowingly helping Arielle evade the council. And being fully aware of the crimes you committed and therefore complicit in those crimes.” He raised an eyebrow. “Need I go on?”

Looking at Clifford’s smug face, one thing was perfectly clear: the council was willing to manufacture charges and use them to punish Cali. This was exactly the same kind of justice they’d employed when they’d turned a blind eye to the Bitterfangs’ aggression, and it infuriated me.

I glowered at Clifford. “I know what you’re doing, and when this is all over, I will personally see to it that every member of the council—yourself included—is exposed for the corrupt frauds that you are.”

Next to me, Elle was snarling, barely restraining herself from attacking Clifford. I knew how she felt, but I had to think. This wasn’t the moment for rash decisions.

I looked at the guards Clifford had with him and did some quick math in my head. I knew I’d be able to eliminate Clifford—as a higher-up on the council, I had a feeling he would be a strong fighter, but so was I. I could take on Clifford or anyone on the council itself—that I knew. But even if I killed him, there were still more than enough guards to overpower Elle and me.

I still wasn’t sure how to proceed, but I felt too exposed in my human form, so I was about to shift when the underbrush to the east rustled. We all looked over as a wolf burst out of the woods, running so fast he was barely more than a blur.

Holy shit—it was Lucian. And before anyone could react to his sudden appearance, he leapt at one of the guards.

I shifted, only to be sprayed with the guard’s blood as Lucian killed him. It had taken less than half a second. I stared at him for a shocked moment—I’d never seen Lucian look as vicious as he did right now. I’d been there when he’d killed Malakai, and even then, he hadn’t looked this savage. His eyes were blazing with a crazed light, and the guard’s still warm blood was dripping from his jaws as he turned his rage on the man standing next to him.

Apparently, this was the signal Elle had been waiting for. She sprinted to her mate, then launched herself at another guard. She made quick work of him, and he was dead before his body hit the forest floor.

Pandemonium ensued, with some guards running toward the fight and others beating a hasty retreat. I ignored them all and focused on Clifford, whose smug smile was suddenly absent.

He was looking around the clearing with an expression of pure fear, and slowly backing away.

There was a part of me that really wanted to go after him, but I had to prioritize, and the weak little council member was hardly a threat at this particular moment. So I shifted my attention to one of the guards. He’d been standing behind Clifford, farther into the woods, and was now charging into the fight. He was so laser-focused, it was easy to loop behind him, catch up, and lunge at him from behind, sinking my teeth into the back of his neck. This brought him down immediately, and we both rolled with the momentum. He was already starting to bleed, but he scrambled to his feet, snarling and biting, shaking his head in an attempt to throw me off.

It worked, and I lost my grip, sliding off his back. But I wasn’t done. I went at him again, aiming for the front of this neck this time. He lashed out with his claws and slashed my face. Blood immediately started to stream down my neck, but I didn’t let the searing pain stop me. I lunged for his neck, latched on, and yanked with all my might.

His blood filled my mouth, but I didn’t let go until he stopped fighting back. Then I let his body crumple to the ground.

I stepped over him and flew at a guard who was charging at Elle while her back was turned.

This one, I caught by the leg. I only slowed him down, but it was enough, and Elle turned around in time to lunge forward and throw him onto his back. Then she ripped into his abdomen, making his guts spill out over the icy ground. They steamed in the freezing air.

Behind us, Lucian was snarling, and I turned to see him fighting a large grey wolf. They were moving so fast I could barely see what was happening, but I assumed they were both landing hits, because the fight was punctuated with snarls and yelps and flying fur as their heated breath formed a white cloud above them.

I was about to jump in to help when Lucian let out an unhinged snarl, reared back, and bit down on the grey wolf’s neck with massive force. The grey wolf’s yelp was cut short when it fell to the ground, still as a stone. Lucian had severed its spine.

I stood there, panting, looking around, trying to figure out what was next, but then I realized we were alone. Lucian, Elle, and I were standing in a circle, looking around the clearing, and we were alone. We were battered, covered in blood, and surrounded by the bodies of dead wolves, but we were alone. We’d done it. We’d annihilated the council’s soldiers.

I shifted back to human and looked around again, trying to assess our situation rationally.

Next to me, Elle and Lucian shifted back as well.

Lucian threw his arms around Elle. “You were amazing, my darling forest rose. So brave, so strong. The way you fight is like a dance. I would’ve loved to sit back and watch. I could not be prouder of you. I’m so sorry for ever doubting you. You must forgive me, darling. I don’t know what I’ll do if you don’t…”

As he kept rambling, I had a sudden realization—during the course of that long, dangerous fight, I hadn’t felt pulled toward Elle. I’d watched her back like I would’ve done for anyone else, but not with the kind of focused attention I’d come to expect when we’d been compelled by the sire bond. I’d treated her like an equal. Like a normal pack mate.

I’d been hesitant to accept it, but now I had to believe it—the sire bond was gone.

That was good. That meant that I had a piece of bargaining power, though I didn’t suspect they were taking too kindly to losing some of their attendants.

“Greyson. *Greyson!*” Lucian shouted at me.

“What?” I asked, looking over at him.

“I want to bring Arielle back to the palace with me,” he said.

I looked at him for a moment, finally processing the ramifications of his presence. “Wait, why are you here? How did you know where to find us?”

“I was with Xavier, Ava, and Cali,” he said. “We went to the council to look for you and Arielle.”

My blood ran cold. “Cali? She’s here? Where?”

Suddenly, Lucian couldn’t quite meet my eyes. “I left her and the others to go after Arielle—”

“Are you fucking *kidding* *me*?” I demanded. “You *left* them? How could you?”

His eyes narrowed. “My first priority will always be my mate.”

I swallowed down the bitter taste of fear in the back of my throat. I couldn’t help but wonder if there was more to Clifford’s threat to charge Cali than I’d realized. Did they actually have her in custody?

My stomach tightened at the thought. I knew I had to think clearly, so I tried to shove down the panic I was feeling. One thing was certain—I was going to have to go back to the council campsite.

I turned when I heard something stirring in the trees behind us. Someone—or something—was approaching, and I was about to shift when Xavier and Ava emerged from the trees.

I looked at them in confusion. “Where’s Cali?”

“Cesaries is holding her hostage,” Xavier said tightly. “He won’t release her unless you and Elle go back.”

I shook my head. “They can forget about Elle. Lucian?” I said, turning to him. “Get her away from here. Make sure she’s safe.”

“What are you going to do?” Elle asked.

“I have no choice,” I said grimly. “I’m going to turn myself in.”

**Episode 4579**

My head was spinning, and I kept taking deep breaths as I tried my best not to throw up. Whatever the council had injected me with to keep me from using my magic was going to make me hurl. And what was that about, anyway? When did werewolves start using so many damn drugs?

I was on the ground, which helped me feel slightly less nauseous, but also way too vulnerable. I didn’t know what was going to happen next, and I wanted to be upright for it, so I took a deep breath and tried to stand.

It almost worked.

The space around me lurched and tilted sideways. I thrust a hand out to steady myself against the wall and almost toppled over again when I realized the council guards had put me in a tent, and the walls I was trying to grab were made of cloth.

“Oh god,” I muttered, swallowing hard. *I’m not going to throw up. I’m not going to throw up…*

When I closed my eyes and focused, I managed to steady myself without the help of a wall. And as I did, I heard the low voices of the guards standing outside the tent.

Dammit.

I took a steadying breath and looked around, trying to assess my surroundings. The tent I was in was small, barely big enough for one person, but it was tall enough for me to stand. I’d seen a trailer, earlier, and I had to wonder why they hadn’t put me in that. Maybe they felt that—without my magic—I wasn’t enough of a threat to warrant the trailer treatment. I tried to summon my magic, but it felt like reaching into an empty barrel, and when I did feel a flicker, it quickly fizzled out before it could get anywhere near my fingertips.

Okay, that wasn’t great, but I wasn’t about to lose hope. There was no reason to despair. I’d fought werewolves before I’d even known I had magic. And even after, it had taken me a very long time to learn how to control it. So it wasn’t like I was completely defenseless. I could still fight without my magic.

Though, it had to be said—having my magic sure would’ve made things a lot easier.

I rubbed my eyes. At least I didn’t have to worry about Xavier. I knew he would’ve stayed and tried to free me, but the last thing we needed was for him to be captured, too. If that happened, then there’d be no one left to go looking for Greyson and Elle. I didn’t love being held by the council, but it had been the only option.

I just hoped that Xavier had gone after Greyson and Elle immediately. I was pretty sure that was what he would’ve done. I wasn’t too sure about Ava, though. I couldn’t quite decide what Ava’s preference was—and if she wouldn’t be happy to just let the lot of us die at the council’s hand. That way, she’d have Xavier all to herself, just like she’d always wanted.

I gave my head a hard shake. It wasn’t fair of me to think like that—even if it *was* about Ava. She was the one who’d brought me to Xavier tonight, after all.

There was a rustling noise outside the tent that pulled me from my thoughts. An instant later, the tent flap flew open and Cesaries stepped inside. The first thing I noticed was that he looked upset. The second thing I noticed was that Clarice was standing just behind him, and just behind *her* was a council guard.

I looked at them curiously for a moment, my muddled brain trying to figure out what all of that could mean, but then the guard stepped forward and grabbed my arm. A moment later, he was pulling me outside.

I tried to yank my arm out of his grip—not that I thought it was actually going to work, but I figured I might as well make things as difficult for them as possible. Why shouldn’t I? I could still feel the slice on my neck where Cesaries had held that knife to my skin. He’d left a small but painful cut behind, and I wasn’t likely to forgive him anytime soon.

I hadn’t come here intending to kill anyone but, truth be told, I was beginning to warm up to the idea. I’d never considered myself bloodthirsty, but recent events were making me reassess a few things.

The guard led me across the clearing to a chair, then pushed me toward it. “Sit.”

I didn’t want to comply, but I was really dizzy and felt like I might pass out, so I sat.

Cesaries moved to stand in front of me, looking grave.

“What?” I finally demanded when he didn’t speak.

He frowned at my little outburst but took a deep breath and finally spoke. “Caliana Hart, I request that you admit that Greyson and the wolf you call Arielle share a sire bond.”

My lip curled. “Screw you.”

This wasn’t the response he wanted, and his piggy little eyes narrowed dangerously. “You’ll want to be very careful, Caliana. I want you to answer me, or you might regret it.”

He was watching me closely, and somehow I knew that this was some kind of test, so I didn’t look away. I set my jaw, putting on a mask of false bravado. I was worried as hell about his threats and what might be coming my way, but I wasn’t going to let Cesaries or anyone intimidate me.

I shrugged dismissively. “Why do you think I know anything about sire bonds? Because I don’t. Never even heard of them. Are they like stocks? I’m not that into finance.”

Cesaries didn’t look amused. “You’re very funny, Caliana, but you don’t fool me. You know exactly what I’m talking about. You are Greyson’s mate, after all. And a *due destini*.”

“So?”

“*So*, I have no doubt that you have also been affected by the sire bond.” His gaze swept over me, like he was trying to read me. “It must be terrible for you. It must be wreaking havoc on your bond with Greyson.”

I stared right back at him, willing my eyes not to give away how right he was. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you’re lying,” he said smoothly. Then he glanced over his shoulder and gestured to one of the guards. “Give me the staff.”

My stomach knotted into a tight ball as the guard stepped forward and handed Cesaries an ornately engraved staff with a glass ball at the top that reflected the light every which way, like a prism.

“Are you going to beat me with that?” I asked, still trying to sound brave.

“No, of course not,” he said. “Nothing so brutal. What do you take me for, Caliana?”

Considering the fact that I was vastly outnumbered and he was holding a staff, I kept the answer to that question to myself.

“You might not believe it,” Cesaries continued, “but this is going to hurt me a lot more than it hurts you.”

Somehow, I doubted that, though I kept that to myself as well.

“What’s the staff for, then?” I asked.

When he looked at me, his eyes sparkled, and it was clear that he was enjoying this moment immensely. He seemed sadistically delighted to have this kind of power over me.

“This staff is made of *pure* iron. Not a drop of anything else,” he said, looking up at that thing. “Much like silver is for werewolves, iron is a material that is… *unpleasant* for the Fae. Isn’t that right?”

I didn’t answer him. What could I say? *Yes*, *pure iron affects me, Cesaries, and it hurts like hell*, *too. You’re going to do absolutely nothing with that information, right?*

He tutted and shook his head. “I truly wish I didn’t have to use this, but can you blame me? If you refuse to cooperate, I really have no other choice. My hands are tied.”

This was another lie, but before I had a chance to respond—or even a chance to brace myself for what was coming—a guard stepped forward and grabbed my hand. He held it up, and Cesaries pressed the staff firmly against my palm.

I was immediately jolted by a shock that rocketed through my whole body, making every inch of it explode with pain. I could’ve been screaming, I could’ve been silent—I really had no idea if I’d made any sound at all. The next thing I knew, Cesaries lifted up the staff and looked down at me.

I was breathing hard, there were tears in my eyes, my mouth tasted like metal, and my ears were ringing. My hand throbbed. My whole *arm* throbbed, like it had been crushed between two cars. The pain was still so intense, I could barely see straight.

Cesaries cleared his throat, and when I looked up at him, he gave me a small, terrifying smile.

“Now, Caliana,” he said. “Are you going to tell me the truth about Greyson, or do I have to do that again?”

**Episode 4580**

Pain was still echoing through my body, though I was fighting to keep it off my face. This wasn’t good. Cesaries knew I was Greyson’s mate and believed that I was his Luna—he had to know how this was going to pan out.

I gulped down a breath before I answered. “You know there’s no way I’m going to say anything to incriminate Greyson.”

Cesaries tutted and shook his head, feigning sadness. “I was truly hoping it wouldn’t go this way, Caliana. I was hoping you weren’t going to be so reckless. I really don’t like doing this.”

But his eyes flashed with dark glee as he gripped the staff tighter.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah? Then I’ve got an idea—if it bothers you so much, you should stop. I’d hate to see you upset.”

“No,” he said, trying to mask his smile, “I don’t think so.”

I shook my head, and, in the process, realized that I felt a little less light-headed than I had in the tent. The ringing in my ears had stopped, and though my arm hurt like hell, I didn’t feel nauseous anymore. What was that about?

I wondered if it had anything to do with the iron staff. Was the shock of the iron neutralizing the anti-magic drug, somehow? My heart beat hard as I considered that possibility, and what it could mean. If I touched the staff again, maybe I’d be able to burn the drug away completely and free my magic—but it would come at a price.

I took a deep breath and looked up, meeting Cesaries’s eyes.

“Go ahead,” I said with as much conviction as I could muster. What I was asking for was going to hurt like hell, but I pushed forward. “Give it your best shot.”

And then, without even waiting for Cesaries to act, I reached out and gripped the staff.

This jolt made my teeth slam together and was so powerful I was nearly blasted off the chair. My eyes began to water, but just as the pain was about to reach a crescendo, Cesaries jerked the staff away.

His mouth was moving—he was speaking, saying something I couldn’t hear. The ringing in my ears was too loud. But after a moment, the ringing began to quiet. At the same time, I felt a familiar tingling in my fingers. Excitement coursed through me—my magic was returning. It was surging inside me, just below the surface, ready to be unleashed.

“How *dare* you, Caliana?” Cesaries was blustering. “That is not the way we do things. There is an order—”

I looked up, locking eyes with him. “You’re not going to want to do that to me again.”

He looked surprised, and a little put out. “Do that *to you*?My dear, you were the one who grabbed the staff. *I* was willing to show you some mercy,” he added sanctimoniously.

I ignored this and looked past him at Clarice, who was standing by, looking bored. That seemed odd to me, but torture was probably just another part of her daily life.

Then there was the guard standing behind me. I could hear him breathing.

I looked around the clearing but didn’t see anyone else moving around. It looked like it was just the four of us. I wondered if all the other guards had been sent after Greyson and Elle.

This situation was spinning even further out of control, and I knew if I was going to make a move, it had to be now.

Thinking fast, I surged to my feet. I stumbled a little, feigning dizziness. I thrust out a hand toward the guard and leaned against him.

“I order you to sit back down, Luna of the Redwood pack!” Cesaries said, looking outraged. “I’m not done with you yet, Caliana—”

Ha. Well, I wasn’t even the real Luna of the Redwood pack anyhow, but not like I could bring that up, could I? Knowing the council, they would just figure out a way to make that a crime. I needed to get out of here. I shot a blast of magic straight into the guard, who flew backward like he’d been hit by a truck.

When he hit the ground, I rounded on Cesaries and Clarice, who were both staring at me blankly.

“You might not be done with me,” I hissed, “but I’m sure as *hell* done with you.”

I focused all of my magic and then blasted it toward Cesaries. He flew backward, crashing into Clarice. They both toppled to the ground together, and council members quickly turned to them. It became a moment of chaos as they scrambled back to their feet, their eyes set on me.

“Get that Luna!” Cesaries bellowed.

While they were still trying to regain their balance, I took my shot, blasting them both again. As satisfying as it was to hear their shocked cries of pain, I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep this up much longer. My arms felt so heavy, I could barely hold them up. When my magic was at full strength, I felt invincible—like nothing could touch me. Right now, I felt the opposite.

The magic I was expending was sapping my strength, so I knew I had to act fast. I took a parting shot at Cesaries and Clarice—trying to make it as strong as possible—then I spun around and sprinted into the woods, hoping to disappear before they recovered.

But even as I ran, I knew I was at a huge disadvantage. I had magic, but I wasn’t a werewolf—on my best day, I wouldn’t even be able to outrun the weakest one. And this was not my best day. At the moment, all my body wanted to do was curl up and take a nap.

I kept running, though, because napping wasn’t an option. If they caught me, it wasn’t going to be good news. I’d just attacked two council members. That was going to be added to the list of crimes for sure.

At least I’d burned the council’s drug out of my system, though the pain from the iron was still making me wince as I ran. But I fought through it. What choice did I have?

My body felt tired and heavy, but I kept running through the trees, jumping over fallen logs and fighting my way through the brush. Branches and thorns tore at my clothes, but still, I pushed on. Stopping wasn’t an option.

I finally paused when I reached a stream and looked around, wondering which way to go. My heart was beating ridiculously quickly, and I was panting so hard, I could barely think.

Then I heard something moving behind me. I spun around with a sort of primal scream and sent out a blast of magic at whoever was approaching.

Ava went flying backward and landed in the icy stream.

“*Cali!*”

Greyson, Elle, and Lucian emerged from the trees and ran toward me. Xavier ran to Ava and grabbed her hand, helping her out of the stream. He shot an angry look at me, then turned to see if Ava was okay.

“I’m so sorry, Ava!” I said, horrified. “I didn’t know it was you. I just heard something coming, and I reacted.”

Ava didn’t answer, just wiped the water out of her eyes and glared at me.

“Cali, are you okay?” Greyson asked, rushing to my side. “Oh god, are you hurt?”

“Yeah, *I’m* fine, Greyson, thanks for asking,” Ava said bitterly.

“I’m really sorry, Ava,” I said, then turned to Greyson. “Am *I* okay? Greyson, I’ve been so worried about you. Where have you been? I’ve been so scared for you and Elle. Tell me what’s going on! Cesaries said—”

“I know, I know,” Greyson said, “But we got away, and now—”

“Hey, folks, let’s save the tearful reunion for later, okay?” Xavier said tersely. He scanned the woods, which—for the moment—seemed quiet. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

My stomach dropped as Cesaries stepped out from behind a stand of trees. Of coure he’d come after us himself. He still looked red in the face from my own assault on him and Clarice. He stared me down, his eyes narrowing as his gaze then flicked to Greyson.

“This is over, Alpha Greyson,” he said. “Guards!”

At his command, a stream of new guards seemed to pour into the clearing. I wasn’t a master strategist, but even I knew there were too many to fight. Greyson and Xavier shifted, standing alongside me as Elle and the others followed suit. I took a deep breath and summoned my sword and shield.

“You’ll have to come get us first!” I shouted.

Cesaries looked uncharacteristically flustered. “This has gone on long enough!” he said sharply. “I’m tired of your nonsense, Fae Luna, and I will tolerate no more of it. We will hold a trial, and if your Alpha is found guilty, he will be sentenced to death.”

**Episode 4581**

“You’re coming with us, Greyson Evers,” Cesaries snapped. “Right this instant!”

“You’ll need to come and get him first,” I said loudly, stepping in front of Greyson. Raising a hand, I summoned my magic, a yellow glow spilling through my fingertips. Turning to the guards, I declared, “*I dare you*.”

*I’ll kill anyone who tries to take him from me*, I thought.

For Greyson, I would do anything.

The guards felt it, too. They glanced at one another nervously, and that seemed to infuriate Cesaries further. “What are you waiting for? She is nothing but a child!” He pointed at Greyson. “Seize him!”

I channeled my sword when I heard Greyson’s voice in my mind, like a conscience. *Stop*, it said, making the hair on my nape rise. *There’s no point. There are too many of them, love. This is too much of a risk.*

*No! This is his life!* I kept my shield angled toward the enemy and turned sideways to face Greyson. My chest heaving, I told myself, *I won’t let them take him!*

I was ready to throw myself into battle when suddenly Greyson shifted back to human.

“Stop!” I said. “What are you doing?!”

“Even if we stop them this time, it will only delay the inevitable, love. I need to deal with this situation once and for all.” Greyson looked calm, but I could feel the gravity of his words, and I just… I needed him to be safe.

Shit shit shit, this wasn’t how this was supposed to go.

“Listen to your Alpha, Ms. Hart,” Cesaries said in his nasally, condescending tone.

I ignored him. A frantic feeling bubbled up inside me, tearing through my chest. “I can’t let them,” I whispered, shaking my head. “They can’t do this to you!”

“Cali.” Xavier’s voice cut through. My eyes flickered to his.

*My brother is right*, he mind linked. *Don’t start a fight you can’t finish with the council. We are outnumbered.*

I looked around, tightening my grip on my shield, on my sword. How dare Xavier use our mind link like this for something so important? My eyes burned as I realized that nobody was going to join me in defending Greyson. They all saw this for the lost cause that it was.

“Is this what you want?” I asked Greyson.

He nodded. I felt trapped.

*I have no choice here, do I?*

The moment I dropped my hands and my magic dissipated, the guards came forward. My chest ached as I stepped aside for them to take him. Three of them grabbed him all at once, and he looked stoic but dignified. He told me, “It’s going to be okay.”

My cheeks felt itchy. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

“Don’t drag him like that!” I shouted at the guards, wiping my tears quickly. “He’s not a wild beast!”

“I’ll go with Greyson,” Elle spoke up.

I froze.

“Elle, *no*,” Greyson said.

But she turned to Cesaries, her head held high. “I will follow Greyson. You should take me, too.”

Lucian gasped. “My forest rose! No!”

“They were going to take me anyway,” Elle told Lucian. “Better to let them now and get it over with.”

I watched with a twinge of a feeling I couldn’t categorize. Elle allowed the guards to grab her and pull her behind Greyson.

*She’s sticking by him when I couldn’t protect him…*

I shoved the thought away. I ignored it, much like Cesaries and the rest of the council members ignored me when I told them how unfair this was. We walked through the forest and back to camp, and I tried to plead my case for Greyson, while Lucian did the same for Elle.

“This cannot keep going. It’s absurd!” He huffed. “I will vouch for Elle—you have to release her!”

Elle was not released.

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The moment we got back to the campsite, the guards locked Greyson up in a trailer.

“I’m joining him in there,” I told Cesaries. “I’m his Luna. He’s my mate and my Alpha. I’m *not* letting him spend the night all alone.”

Cesaries eyed me up and down with disdain. “You are very loud for such a small person, Ms. Hart.”

I didn’t know about loud, but I was five seconds away from absolutely losing my shit and blasting everything in the vicinity. I felt too much, all at once, more anger than person. I was shaking with it, my hands in fists, my jaw clenched as I fought to stay civilized. Only for Greyson’s sake and to get what I wanted.

“I need to stay with him.” My voice lowered. Not because Cesaries had called me loud, but because otherwise I’d scream. “You have to let me. *Please*.”

Cesaries scrutinized my face for a beat.

Then, he sighed. “Fine. The council is a civilized organization. I see no harm in allowing you to spend one last night together.”

My blood ran cold.

*Last night? Is he implying there won’t be another night? What the* fuck*?*

“Of course, as long as you agree to let the guards confiscate your cell phone,” he concluded, offering a cold smile. I didn’t say anything. As if on autopilot, I gave the guard my phone and walked toward the trailer. Once I got to the door, though, I couldn’t help myself.

“What do you mean ‘one last night’?” I asked Cesaries.

He paused. Then, he crossed his arms over his chest. “Figure of speech, dear.”

I was *not* his fucking dear.

“I need your reassurance that the trial will be fair,” I said, voice still low. “Otherwise, I’ll start to think that you have some sort of personal vendetta against Greyson.”

Cesaries gasped indignantly. “Of course it will be fair! All our operations are characterized by dignity and transparency.”

This much hypocrisy was too hard to swallow, but I had to. I couldn’t risk him forbidding me from seeing Greyson. In the end, I calmly said, “I assume that’s the kind of reputation you want the council to maintain. I look forward to a fair trial tomorrow.”

I felt Cesaries’s glare on my back as the guards unlocked Greyson’s trailer. The interior was narrow. It looked clean. It smelled like nothing, which I took as a good sign. A tiny sink and a toilet were situated in one corner, an air mattress with a blanket on it right across. Greyson was in the middle, pacing in the tiny space.

The moment our eyes locked, I said, “I’m spending the night.”

He pulled me into his arms. I breathed in his scent, holding him tight. My eyes burned with unshed tears. But then they were falling, and I felt useless.

*I’m so useless.*

“Hey. It’s gonna be okay.” He cupped my face, making me look up at him. “I’m glad you’re here, love. I can’t believe they let you stay.”

“They pride themselves on being civil and considerate. It’s such a joke.”

“Thank you for staying. For fighting on my behalf before. That was a true sign of a Luna.”

“But I didn’t even do anything,” I said bitterly.

“A true Luna knows when it’s time to retreat,” Greyson said. “I would’ve never forgiven myself if something happened to you while you tried to rescue me.”

I slid my hand up his neck, to his cheek. “You have nothing to forgive yourself for. How many times have you risked your life to save me?”

“Cali—”

“I still think we should figure out a way to get out of here,” I whispered, looking around. “I have no faith that the trial will be fair, Greyson.”

“The sire bond is gone. Did you see the way Elle was earlier? Neither of us went haywire, and that’s just more proof in our defense. It’s gone.”

I swallowed. “It’s not factual proof, though. I think the only way to be sure is to have the three witches testify in court that they did the spell to remove it. Or to do a spell in front of everyone and say that they can no longer see the bond.”

“I don’t think we should bring Chloe and her sisters into this,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “I don’t trust them enough for that.”

“Okay,” I said, letting out a slow exhale. “So we need a witch we can trust. I want to say Big Mac, but considering how she’s been lately, maybe it would be better to ask Rowena. I know she can do the spell.”

Greyson’s expression was soft, reassuring. It made my heart ache. “We’ll talk about that tomorrow. But remember that finding proof falls on the council as well, love. They are the ones making the accusations, so they need to prove the sire bond is there. Which they can’t do, because it’s gone. I can feel it.”

I gulped. “Are you sure?”

“I used to feel out of control around Elle. That’s gone. And this is just a show trial, to demonstrate that the council still has relevance.”

“How are you so confident about this? All I can think about is what’s gonna happen if they win.”

Greyson shook his head. “All evidence will point to my innocence. I will be released, so please try to calm down. Are you sure you don’t want to go back to the pack house?”

The moment he uttered the words, I wrapped my arms around his torso so tight my muscles ached. “I’d rather fall into a lake with radioactive sharks than leave you right now.”

He let out a rumble that was close to a laugh. Looking up at him, I whispered, “I love you, Greyson.” I went on my tippy-toes and kissed him. “So much.” I said the words against his mouth and kissed him again. I kissed the corner of his mouth, his jawline, then his cheek. My lips felt tingly where I touched skin, and the sensation left me breathless.

When I faced him again, his eyes were dark.

“Me too, love,” he said, his hands dropping to my waist. “And if this is our last night together, we might as well make the most of it.”

I smacked his shoulder. “Greyson! Don’t joke about things like that!”

He wasn’t laughing, though. One moment he stood there, the next he’d pulled me to him, kissing me full on the mouth. It was overwhelming, his emotion overflowing and powerful, all Greyson.

*He isn’t joking, is he?*

No matter what happened tomorrow, both Greyson and I knew that the danger was real. As real as this moment between us and the frantic way I kissed him. I ached for him. I felt wound up tight, ready to jump out of my skin, suffocated in my clothes. I wanted to peel everything off, feel him close, all over me, inside me.

He wasn’t safe, but at least he was with me.

Breathing hard, I said against his lips, “Let’s make this night count.”

**Episode 4582**

**Xavier**

“Xavier, keep it together!” Ava hissed, grabbing my arm. “You can’t start a fight right now! That’s not going to help Greyson.”

*Greyson*.

He was a pain in the ass, but he was my brother. I couldn’t let these fuckers do whatever the hell they wanted with him. Only *I* was allowed to make his life difficult. End of story.

“I’m not letting them get away with this,” I told Ava with a huff, yanking myself from her grasp. Without another word, I turned and marched toward Cesaries’s tent. When I stormed into it, the council head—*dick*head—looked up at me from his desk with an air of boredom.

“What is it this time, Mr. Evers?” he asked, his tone dripping with disdain.

I looked around the space. It was luxurious, neat to the point of obnoxious. I would’ve loved nothing more than to trash everything in sight. I was pretty sure it showed in my face when I glared at the asshole.

“*Release my brother*,” I growled.

Cesaries leaned back in his chair and folded his fingers together. Raising his eyebrows, he said, “It is admirable that you’re standing up for the Redwood Alpha. Albeit naïve.”

My hands turned into fists at my sides. “Naïve? Who the fuck do you think you’re speaking to?”

Cesaries’s cold expression shifted to something sharper. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his desk. “Who do you think *you’re* speaking to? Have some respect for those older and smarter than you, *boy*.”

I saw red.

“Listen here, you—” I had barely taken one step before I felt someone’s hard grip on my shoulder. I felt nails, extended, digging into my flesh. It was a warning, along with Ava’s voice in my head, which said, *Keep your shit together, Xavier! The Samaras depend on you!*

She was right. No matter what, I couldn’t lose it. I stood there, panting, fighting to control my anger. Cesaries glanced at Ava with a sardonic smile. “Ah. Seems like the Samara Luna knows how to stop you from making a grave mistake. You’re lucky she’s always had a good head on her shoulders.”

Gritting my teeth, I glared at Cesaries. “You’re the one who’s making the mistake here. If the council does anything to harm my brother, I will hold you responsible.”

Cesaries’s eyes narrowed. “You should think carefully before making threats against the council. It wasn’t long ago that the Samaras were in complete disarray.” He shot a pointed look at Ava. “I’m sure you agree with me on that. Don’t you, dear?”

I was ready to tell him that I’d rip out his fucking tongue if he called her “dear” again, but Ava’s nails dug even sharper into my shoulder. In a cool tone, she said, “We were in an unfortunate position, yes. But Xavier’s hard work has made the Samara pack whole again.”

“Yes, of course,” Cesaries said with a wave of his hand. “Though, in theory, he was allowed to take up that position because we brought no objections. It would be a shame for the Samaras to lose the council’s support at such a critical juncture.”

I scoffed. “The council wasn’t very supportive during the pack war with the Bitterfangs. Or when Silas was parading around, slaughtering people left and right. Or when an actual fucking demon wreaked havoc in our area.”

Cesaries’s expression remained flat. “We had to remain neutral. For the greater good.”

“No,” I spat, pointing at him. “That was for your own good, because you’re a bunch of cowards!”

“Xavier,” Ava said sharply, pulling me back. She locked eyes with a stone-cold Cesaries and said, “Excuse him. He’s upset. It’s his brother we’re talking about.”

At the same time, she mind linked me, *Stop this right now. We need to go back to the pack house and figure out what the hell we’re supposed to do.*

“Quite right,” Cesaries said in a lower voice as Ava pulled me toward the tent’s exit. “But what I understand here is that Xavier does not realize that if Greyson is found guilty, the Redwood pack would be in the same position that the Samaras were in before. Without an Alpha.”

Ava froze by the exit. I did the same.

“What are you getting at?” I asked.

Cesaries’s smile looked like a grimace. “It’s no secret that you wanted to be the Redwood Alpha. Perhaps you will get your chance sooner rather than later. With Greyson gone, it would be very easy for the Redwood pack to be absorbed by the Samara pack. With the council’s blessing, of course.”

Even Ava stiffened at those words. She stared at Cesaries. “You speak as if you’ve already decided on Greyson’s guilt.”

“Exactly,” I snapped. “It’s like he’s fucking obsessed with Greyson and has some sort of personal vendetta.”

Cesaries’s eye twitched, so I knew I had hit a nerve. Outwardly, though, he continued playing his part, speaking in a mild tone. “I am only exploring one of the possible outcomes. A smart Alpha is one who can anticipate.”

It dawned on me, then. Cesaries was dangling the Redwood leadership in front of me like a carrot. He was trying to lure me into shutting the fuck up by showing me what I stood to gain with Greyson out of the way.

It made my stomach lurch.

“I don’t need your advice,” I said tightly.

I let Ava lead me out of the tent. Part of me wanted to go back inside and rip Cesaries’s head off. Although, I also realized that if Greyson was found guilty and sentenced to death, I could have Cali all to myself. But that wasn’t going to happen either way, because Adéluce would never let it happen. My brother’s death would change nothing for her. As long as she lived, there was no path for me to take back to the Redwood pack, to Cali.

I hated thinking about the possibility of Greyson dying, anyway. Because as much as it would be useful to have Greyson out of the way, I knew that Cali would be devastated. As for me, despite my fucked-up relationship with Greyson, I would most likely regret not doing everything I could to save him.

*Most likely.*

Those two words gave me pause. What the fuck was “most likely” supposed to mean?

When Greyson had thought that I was dead, he’d seemed devastated.

Yet here I was, contemplating, weighing the pros and cons of his death as if this were a game of chess instead of my brother’s life.

Could I be as soulless as Adéluce claimed?

As selfish?

My stomach lurched again with guilt.

“What would happen to the Samaras if you did take over the Redwood pack?” Ava asked quietly.

“Greyson’s not going to die, and I’m not planning to take over the Redwood pack,” I said simply.

“But what if you have to?” Ava pressed. “What if he *does* die? We need to consider all possible outcomes.”

I sighed. “If I were to take over the Redwood pack, it would be absorbed by the Samara pack. The Samaras would be fine. I’d still be their Alpha.”

Ava squinted at me. “Have you *thought* about this before?”

“No,” I snapped. “I just—”

Ava interrupted. “You think the Redwoods would be okay with you taking over? Wouldn’t they be pissed at you for not succeeding in preventing Greyson’s death?”

I could see Lola screaming in my face that I hadn’t done my best to save Greyson. That I had let him die just so I could take over his reign. That I was nothing but an opportunistic bastard. A parasite, not an Alpha.

Was I?

“I’m done talking about fucked-up hypothetical situations, Ava,” I said in a low voice. Looking around to make sure we weren’t being watched, I said, “Let’s just go home and figure out what the fuck we’re gonna do. I doubt the council will give Greyson a fair trial, so—”

“What about Cali?” she asked. “What would become of her if Greyson died and you took over the Redwoods?”

My jaw clenched. “There’s no point in discussing any of this. I’m not about to fall for Cesaries’s bullshit.”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “It may not all be bullshit. With Greyson gone, Cali—”

“I need you to stop talking about Cali,” I declared.

Ava’s tone was sardonic. “So I shouldn’t mention how she literally attacked me earlier, right?”

I groaned. “Are you fucking serious? You know Cali wouldn’t do that. It was a mistake.”

Ava peered at me. “Is that what you want to believe?”

“It’s just the truth.”

Ava didn’t look convinced, but she finally dropped it.

*Let’s go home and figure out a plan to save my brother*, I mind linked.

Thankfully, she didn’t offer any more objections. She nodded, shifting into her wolf.

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I spent the entire run home forcing myself not to think about what Ava and I had discussed. When we got back to the pack house, I shifted back to human just as Marissa came outside.

“Lucian’s in there,” she said. “He’s waiting for you.”

“We should throw him out,” Ava said after shifting back as well. “He’s nothing but a pain in the ass.”

I wasn’t about to disagree with that, but now I was curious to see what he wanted.

“What’s happening, Lucian?” I asked once we stepped into the living room.

The princeling stood. Peering at me, he said, “I know how to get Elle and Greyson out of this.”

**Episode 4583**

**Greyson**

When I’d said to Cali that everything would be okay tomorrow, I believed it. Or at least, I wanted to believe that once the council saw that the sire bond was broken, they would let Elle and me go. Without it, there was no reason to punish anyone.

I knew that the three witches’ spell had worked.

I could feel it, and I needed Cali to believe it, too. I wanted to ease her worries, give her confidence, make her feel good. I wanted to be Cali’s, only, without any fights or insecurities. She and I still couldn’t mind link right now for whatever reason, but I had no doubt that our mate bond was intact.

I felt it in the way she kissed me and clung to me, whimpering in protest when I broke it off to breathe. She kissed down my neck, then ran her hands through my hair. The heady urgency in her movements charged every inch of me. When I lay her down on the small air mattress, she didn’t let go, just spread her legs and pulled me on top of her.

“I have to feel you,” she rasped, tugging on my shirt. “Everything off, *please*.”

She didn’t have to say it twice. She didn’t have to say “please” either, but she seemed set on it, repeating the word along with my name. I fucking loved it. She was writhing under me, grabbing and breathless as I undressed her next. I kissed down her collarbone, her chest and abdomen, the taste of her skin as intoxicating as ever. I felt nails on my shoulders again before her touch slithered up to my nape and in my hair.

And then, she tugged.

I hissed, looking up at her. It hurt a little to see her like this. Frantic. Wild. Unlike her usual self. But it also felt so fucking good to be needed that I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.

“I want you here all night,” she whispered, taking my hand to slip it between her legs. “I want to feel you in the morning.”

She didn’t say things like that, normally. But it was still all her—this disarming honesty that made me shake for her. She was so wet I had to bring my head down for a lick, a taste, but she didn’t let me linger. She’d said she wanted me, skin to skin. When I gave that to her, she felt so good I thought I’d shatter on the first thrust.

The moment I sank in and grinded down against her, she broke into a full-body shudder. It was immediate and staggering, shocking me. Her chest was heaving, her eyes closed tight, every muscle in her abdomen and thighs jumping. She wouldn’t stop whimpering, arching up, grabbing at me. Shushing her moans and shaky breaths, I started moving again, a smooth glide that had me trembling.

Over and over, I said, “I’ve got you, love. I’m right here.”

Cali kissed every word as it came out of my mouth.

“I love you so much, Greyson,” she rasped, locking her legs around my waist while biting at my neck, and I was a fucking goner. I broke over her, letting my weight fall on her like she asked. I didn’t make a move to withdraw. I knew she wasn’t going to let go.

Her hot breath was in my ear as she said, “I will never let anyone take you away from me.”

And in that moment, in the dark, in her quiet, determined declaration, I knew I was loved.

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When I woke up the next day, it was with Cali in my arms. It hurt to think that I’d have to let her go soon. Her warmth and scent, the sight of her like this made an ache grow inside me. I knew there was a chance I might not see her again like this for a while.

I was confident in our story, in the sire bond being broken, and in me keeping my head on my shoulders. Literally, I was counting on not getting decapitated. But if the council wanted to fucking lock me up and drown me in bureaucracy, I could see it happening.

I heard activity going on in the council camp. Cesaries must be organizing the trial with the same enthusiasm he’d use to set up a gala. After Cali had fallen asleep, I had thought about my options. My best bet was to do what we’d discussed: have a witch come and show the council that the sire bond was broken.

I wanted that witch to be Big Mac.

Up until a few days ago, I’d thought that Big Mac, Sabine, and I would become a family. But things between the witch and my mother weren’t good right now, and I didn’t know if that family was still a possibility. But that didn’t change the fact that Big Mac was the most skilled witch I knew, and I trusted her. Reaching out to at least ask for her help was worth a shot.

“I can hear the wheels turning inside your head,” Cali said in a sleepy mumble. Her eyes slowly opened, and she stared up at me. Her hand slipped from my bare chest up to the side of my neck. Last night’s urgency lingered in her touch, and I swallowed.

“I’m okay,” I said, leaning in to kiss her. I started from her chin, then moved to her jaw, trailing kisses down her neck. She smelled so fucking good. I hated the idea of parting from her right now. Her breath caught when I licked her collarbone. I smirked against her skin, and then—

She huffed.

“I know what you’re doing.” She moved back, covering my mouth with her palm. She looked uncharacteristically stern. “You will not be distracting me, Greyson Evers. What have you decided to do today?”

I raised an eyebrow. She proceeded to remove her hand from over my lips. I took it and placed it over my heart.

“Can I ask you for a favor beforehand?” I asked.

“Anything,” she said, her voice quiet. There was a breathless quality to it that made my ego stand ten feet tall.

“Regardless of how the trial goes, I want you to promise me not to use your magic to fight the council.”

And now Cali frowned at me. Gone was that dreamy look. She was all business when she said, “Absolutely not.” She sat up, grabbing her bra from the pile of clothes, then her shirt. She started getting dressed, flailing at the same time. “I will blast them all to oblivion! I don’t care if they capture me or drug me or whatever, I will not go down without a fight. I will—”

I grabbed her hand just as she bent to put on her socks. “Cali.”

“Don’t *Cali* me,” she said defensively, taking a seat back down to put on her shoes.

I sighed. “I hope that you will eventually see the danger in fighting while you’re outnumbered—”

“As if!”

“—but in the meantime, I wanted to ask you something else. Can you call Sabine, let her know what’s happening, and ask her to ask Big Mac to testify about the sire bond?”

Cali paused, looking a little alarmed. “Big Mac’s still MIA, Greyson. She’s ignoring everyone from the pack. What if she says no?”

I swallowed. “We know other witches. Rowena, for one. We can ask one of them if we have to. But… I want it to be Big Mac. I think, as upset as she is about everything right now, that she won’t refuse this.”

Cali sighed, but she agreed. After getting dressed, she knelt down beside me and said, “Okay. I’ll go reclaim my phone, call your mom, and get this done.”

I leaned in, brushing my lips over hers. “Please don’t worry too much.”

Her tone was sarcastic. “Sure. I’ll get that fixed pronto. Super easy for me to turn off.”

I snorted, shaking my head. Her expression smoothed over. She leaned closer, kissing me again, caressing my cheek. Her tenderness was precious to me. Unlike anything else.

“I love you, Greyson,” she muttered. “I promise I’ll be right by your side.”

I didn’t doubt her for a second.

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The guards let Cali leave before locking me back up. I got dressed quickly, and then I started to pace in the tiny space.

I really hoped Big Mac wouldn’t say no to helping me. I knew she was upset, but was she upset enough to put me in danger? I’d been about to become her stepson. I shook my head. No, I had to believe she would come through for me. Even if it was for one last time.

I didn’t know what Big Mac would have to do to show that the sire bond was broken, but I didn’t think it would be anything she couldn’t handle. I just wished I didn’t have to worry my mother about this.

*But who knows?* I thought. *Maybe initiating this interaction between Big Mac and my mother will push them out of this weird standstill.*

“… ready,” I heard someone say right outside the trailer.

A moment later, the door opened.

Cesaries came in. He was wearing a dark blue suit and the expression of someone who thought they were better than everybody else. He was followed by two council guards.

“Greyson,” Cesaries said. “A fine day, isn’t it?”

“Exceptional,” I deadpanned.

Eyeing me coldly, Cesaries gestured to the guards. “Put silver handcuffs on Mr. Evers, men. It is time for his trial.”

**Episode 4584**

“What do you mean you can’t find my phone?” I demanded.

The guard kept rummaging through a duffel bag, huffing. “Stop yelling. I swear I put it in there.”

Gasping in offense, I wagged my index finger at him. “You’re the one who’s yelling! I need my phone right now!”

Okay, maybe I *was* yelling now.

“Will you quit making a fuss if I let you use *my* phone?” He pulled his cell out of his pocket and, after looking around, held it out to me. “As long as you don’t tell Cesaries.”

Taking a deep breath, I tried to rein in my annoyance. With a smile, I said, “I can’t use your phone, because I don’t know the number of the person I want to reach off the top of my head. So really, it would be ideal if you gave me *my* phone back.”

I looked at him expectantly. He just shrugged.

My fake smile slipped. “Well, looks like I’ll have to go *all the way* back to the Redwood pack house to do what I need to do. So… Can I borrow your car?”

The guard blinked at me. Then he let out a humorless laugh. “Is that a joke? It’s not a very good joke, but—”

“It’s not a joke,” I cut him off, glaring. “This is serious. A man’s life is at stake.”

The guard shrugged again. “Not my problem. Your Alpha broke the rules.”

I wanted to blast this guy to oblivion. I couldn’t travel to the pack house by foot. It would take forever. With Greyson talking with Cesaries at this very moment, I was certain that time was of the essence. I had to fix this right *now*.

“If you do not give me your keys right now,” I said, “I will be ratting you out to Cesaries about losing my phone. How about *that*?”

Cesaries semi-hated me, so he probably wouldn’t give a damn, but whatever. I could bluff.

He gaped at me. “You wouldn’t!”

I laughed. Probably a little evilly. “*Try me*.”

His horrified expression slipped into a neutral one. “I don’t actually care,” he deadpanned. “You think the leader of the werewolf council cares if Caliana Hart lost her phone?”

My anger boiled, and now I did start yelling for real. “*You* lost it! And now the least you could do is let me borrow your car.”

“No,” was all he said.

I saw red. I did not have time for this. I would just have to run as fast as I could to the pack house, and hopefully, by the time Big Mac got here, it wouldn’t be too late.

I took a step, about to head off, and then I heard my name. I turned around to see…

Xavier. Walking toward me.

“Cali?” he said again. “What’s happening right now?” He glanced over at the guard. “What’s going on with my brother?”

“Xavier,” I breathed in relief. Seeing that he was here to help Greyson made my heart pang. It was a big change from the early days after learning about the *due destini* curse. I didn’t think Xavier would’ve helped Greyson open a jar of pickles back in those days. Not that he’d need help with that, but—

“So… What’s going on?” he repeated.

I gulped. “Right. Well, Cesaries is talking to Greyson right now, and I need to call Mrs. Smith. Can I use your phone?” I glanced at the guard. “Someone can’t find mine.”

“Just did,” he said, handing it back.

I snatched it away from him, tapping on the screen, but it was… dead.

“Dammit, it’s dead. Xavier, can I use yours?”

Xavier handed over his phone immediately. “I’m going to find my brother. Where’d they lock him up?”

I pointed to the trailer, and Xavier headed off in that direction.

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“The council has taken Greyson,” I told Mrs. Smith over the phone. It was news I wish I didn’t have to deliver.

Her exhale was sharp. “Where are you?”

“At Three Devils Point. The council has set up camp and—”

“I’m on my way,” she said, her voice determined.

“Wait, uh, there’s something else… Can you bring Big Mac with you? We really need her to testify that the sire bond between Greyson and Elle is broken. I—” My throat closed up tight. My voice lowered to a whisper. “I don’t see another way for Greyson to get out of this.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. When Mrs. Smith spoke again, her voice quivered. “MacKenzie is not answering any of my texts or calls.” She sniffled, and my heart ached for her. “I don’t know what to do, Cali. She’s just shut me out entirely.”

I winced. “I’m really sorry, but Greyson asked for this. If she won’t answer the phone, then we’ll just have to go to Big Mac’s house and talk to her. For his sake.”

After a moment, Mrs. Smith agreed to meet me at Big Mac’s house. But the moment we hung up, I realized that I had no way of getting there on my own. It was the same issue I had before when I thought I’d have to sprint to the pack house—it wasn’t realistic. Despite my new status as a college athlete, I was not at the point where running for miles straight was within my capabilities.

I absolutely did not feel like dealing with that asshole guard again, so I figured I would call Mrs. Smith back and ask her to come pick me up.

“This is bullshit, and you know it!” Xavier shouted, and I turned to see him storming out of a different trailer from the one they’d kept Greyson in. “You can’t keep railroading my brother. I won’t—”

Someone shut the trailer door in Xavier’s face. He growled and reached to grab the door. Probably to throw it open and tear one of the guards a new one for their disrespect.

“Xavier!” I shouted.

He spotted me. He kicked the trailer door, then walked toward me. Ignoring the way my heartbeat accelerated at his proximity, I realized that he could be the solution to my problem.

“I need you to take me to Big Mac,” I told him, handing over his cell. “I have to convince her to come do a spell and prove to the council that the sire bond is broken.”

He frowned, looking away. “Right. I don’t think I can do that. With you.”

My longing was replaced by fury. “What do you mean? You said you’d help Greyson! Why are you here, then? He needs us, Xavier.”

Xavier finally looked back at me. He sighed—deeply—and said, “Fine.”

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Xavier was in wolf form, and I clung to his neck as he raced through the woods. It was hard not to remember how we used to do this all the time, but I pushed the thought away. When he jumped over a stream, I realized something.

*Is Ava still upset with me for blasting her into the stream?* I asked cautiously.

Xavier mind linked back, *She’ll get over it. I know you didn’t mean to.*

The question itched to come out. *Will she be angry that you’re helping me?*

*I’m not helping you, Cali*, he said. *I’m helping my brother.*

There was a coldness to his words that hurt. Xavier always made me hurt lately. This wasn’t anything new. I wanted to shake him, demand answers for yet another time. I wanted to ask him if he was aware that he was under a spell—something that kept him away from me. But Kira had warned me that there could be consequences if I asked about the spell directly. I had almost slipped in the past and mentioned it.

*I can’t do that again.*

I couldn’t take the risk and do it right now, anyway. I refused to keep obsessing over Xavier while Greyson’s life was at stake. Whatever spell Xavier was under—if he was really under one—could not carry more weight than the possibility of Greyson getting executed today.

When Big Mac’s house came into view, I shut down every other thought. I was glad the witch hadn’t used a cloaking spell to hide her home. I hopped off Xavier’s back, and Mrs. Smith waited for us on the front porch. Her face was strained, her eyes puffy. I wished I could hug her, do something to help her feel better.

“How is Greyson?” she asked, reaching for my hand. “Have they hurt him?”

Xavier spoke before I could. “They’ve cuffed him and plan on starting the trial this morning. We have to hurry.”

Mrs. Smith glanced at the front door. “MacKenzie is still not speaking to anyone. I’m not even sure if she’ll talk to us.”

Right at that second, the door flew open. An angry Big Mac appeared, glaring at Mrs. Smith. I couldn’t believe this was the same woman who used to look at Mrs. Smith adoringly.

“I’m not talking to you,” Big Mac told her gruffly.

“You don’t have to,” Mrs. Smith replied in a quiet voice. “But will you help my son?”

**Episode 4585**

**Xavier**

Big Mac remained silent while Mrs. Smith spoke.

“I know you care for Greyson, like he cares for you,” Mrs. Smith said, her eyes pinning the witch. “No matter what has gone down between you and me, or however you feel about the Redwood pack and the Bitterfang war, you can’t stand there and tell me that you don’t give a damn about my son.”

The two of them eyed each other. The tension was thick in the air. Big Mac’s face was unreadable, but Mrs. Smith’s expression held only fierceness. I knew she’d do anything to help Greyson. My mom would’ve done the same thing for me in any situation. She’d helped me recover Plum when I was in the spirit world. She had always loved both me and Colton so much.

But we weren’t in the spirit world right now, and there was nothing I could do to bring my mother back. I would always miss her. Days could go by without me thinking about her, but then suddenly, this intense feeling of loss would hit me right in the damn chest.

Did Colton feel the same way? Did he think about Marlene?

Greyson had his mother by his side right now, and I hated the pang of envy I felt. Greyson had spent his childhood suffering Silas’s abuse, and we all knew about Mrs. Smith’s horrific past with Silas, but I wasn’t able to stop myself from comparing our current situations and feeling jealous. Focusing on myself, yet again.

*Selfish son of a bitch.*

“You don’t have to plead your case for Greyson,” Big Mac told Mrs. Smith, finally. “You know I’ll help him, no matter what happens between the two of us.”

Mrs. Smith gulped. “Thank you, MacKenzie.”

Big Mac looked at her curiously. “I know he’d come to my rescue in a heartbeat if our roles were reversed.” She glanced at me. “Despite everything, I even went over to Xavier’s to help Ava, of all people, when she was in a coma. Did you really think I wouldn’t help out *Greyson*?”

Mrs. Smith crossed her arms. “I didn’t want to assume, given the circumstances.”

Big Mac clicked her tongue. “We can discuss this without an audience,” she said before stepping inside the house.

Mrs. Smith glanced at Cali and me before heading inside as well.

“At least she’s going to help?” Cali said, exhaling in relief. There she was, always trying to put that positive spin on things. “I knew she would.”

I nodded. I was about to follow them into the house when Cali reached for my arm, pulling me to the side.

“Maybe we should give them a little time alone,” she told me. “There’s obviously a lot going on between the two of them right now…” She glanced at me, then away quickly.

I studied her. She looked pale, worn out. Worried. It made my heart ache and at the same time fucking race when I realized she was touching me.

I couldn’t comfort her like that, not right now. As much as I wished I could.

Quickly, I yanked my arm out of her grasp, and her face fell. She had that same look earlier when I’d hesitated before allowing her to ride on my back here. I had taken a big chance there, with Adéluce always lurking to see if I was following her orders to stay away from Cali, but I’d felt like I hadn’t had a choice.

Greyson needed our help.

I doubted Adéluce would care about that.

Once more, I couldn’t explain any of this to Cali. I could only keep confusing her, hurting her, even if that was the last thing I wanted. It was either that or taking the chance that Adéluce would punish her to punish me.

Clearing my throat, I took a step back, away from her. “I’m only here to help my brother. Let’s not make it about anything else.”

Cali’s face twisted. “I thought you knew me better than that. I’m here for Greyson, too. I wouldn’t have bothered you otherwise.”

Right. Because she wouldn’t have asked for my help otherwise, if it hadn’t been about my brother. And why would she have? I’d been nothing but a hot-and-cold dick to her. It was Adéluce affecting me, it was me being me. I didn’t fucking know anymore. I believed that she cared for my brother so deeply it was something I didn’t even want to comprehend fully.

I *knew* it.

But I could’ve sworn I’d seen yearning in her face earlier. Same thing when she’d ridden on my wolf’s back. Same thing the night of the college party, when Greyson had been off breaking the sire bond, risking his life once more, and Cali had been focused on me. She had kissed *me*.

And I’d loved every second of it. I hadn’t wanted to stop it. If it had been up to me, I would’ve fucked her in that closet until she begged to have me back. I’d become insatiable for her—I wanted more of her. I dreamed of her lips on mine, my hands on her body. I yearned for us to be together again, desperate for it. And so did my wolf, despite everything with Ava, despite everything with Adéluce.

I needed to stop these feelings for Cali. All it would do was put her in danger with the vampire-witch. The more I felt, the more dangerous things would become. Ava had been attacked by Adéluce once, and Cali had been threatened.

I would never forget that I hadn’t gotten to Ava in time to protect her.

I couldn’t put Cali in a situation where I might be too late again.

I cleared my throat and didn’t look at her, trying to maintain a cool demeanor. “We should see if Mrs. Smith and Big Mac are ready to go. We don’t have much time.”

She was about to say something, but I turned away, heading to the door. Helping my brother meant causing an even worse strain between Cali and me, but I had to do it. I watched Cali approach the house and knock. My body was so on edge, and I didn’t know if it was because of Adéluce or from being so close to Cali.

Just as Cali reached the door, Mrs. Smith walked out, wiping tears from her eyes. I took that as my cue to join them. Cali rushed forward and gave Mrs. Smith a quick hug.

“What happened?” Cali asked, gulping. “Did she change her mind about helping?”

“No,” Mrs. Smith said, sniffling. “She’s just… I don’t know.” She shrugged helplessly. “She’s gathering the items she needs to do the spell for Greyson’s trial.”

Cali nodded anxiously. “Great! Should I, uh… Maybe I should go inside and help her pack?”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “Best not to bother her. We should go to the council. MacKenzie will meet us there.”

I was about to suggest that Cali ride on Mrs. Smith’s back. But I didn’t get the chance—Mrs. Smith said, “I need to see Greyson before the trial starts.” She shifted and quickly took off, running full speed.

I was about to call her back when I stopped myself. If I made a big deal about carrying Cali, there would be questions. Questions I couldn’t answer. Feelings I couldn’t feel. Either way, I had no choice. I couldn’t just leave Cali here. I shifted without a word and allowed Cali to climb on. I wished I could enjoy the feeling of her on my back, her arms tight around my neck.

With every step, I worried that Adéluce would strike at any moment.

*Hold tight*, I told her and picked up speed.

Feeling her weight on me was so right, but I couldn’t help the twinge of guilt. I shouldn't be thinking of that. Not only was it dangerous considering Adéluce, but it also wasn’t fair to Ava. The truth of the matter was, I was in love with two women, and I couldn’t favor one without hurting the other. I really understood the hell that Cali had been going through with the *due destini*.

I fucking hated it.

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When we reached Three Devils Point, I let Cali climb off my back and shifted back to human. Getting dressed, I told her, “Be prepared for anything.”

“Oh my god—” Mrs. Smith’s choked voice startled me. “Greyson!” I looked up to see Mrs. Smith gazing ahead, breaking into a sprint toward the clearing. Cali and I rushed behind her, and I realized what Greyson’s mother had just seen.

Greyson and Elle were both shackled with their arms stretched between poles.

I had never seen my brother like this.

My stomach dropped.

“Cesaries!” Cali shouted, marching toward the platform the council leader had set up for himself. “Release them at once!”

The arrogant man scoffed at Cali, making my fucking blood boil. “Again with this, Ms. Hart? Why would we ever do that?”

Cali glared up at him, seething. “We can prove that the sire bond is broken!”

**Episode 4586**

“You talk about civility, but putting Greyson and Elle in shackles is barbaric!” I marched toward my mate, but two guards blocked my way. I whirled toward Cesaries, seething. “This is humiliating! Greyson’s the Redwood Alpha—he deserves better than this horrific treatment!”

I paused, breathing hard, only to realize that the council hadn’t said a word so far. From his position on the elevated platform he’d set up for himself, under the heavy shade of a tent, Cesaries sat back in what looked like a makeshift throne. Very “bloodthirsty Roman emperor” of him.

And then, he said, “Did you just admit to the council that Greyson and Elle share a sire bond?”

Murmurs broke out among the rest of the council members sitting around Cesaries’s table.

And I broke into a cold sweat.

*Shit, what did I just do?*

My wide eyes met Greyson’s severe face. He offered a slight shake of his head while Cesaries added, “That is all the more reason to have this abomination tied up before she can wreak havoc.”

More murmurs from the council. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. “Elle is not an abomination!” I pointed at my friend. “Look at her! She’s not even resisting right now, even though Greyson is in danger! Doesn’t that prove that there’s no sire bond?”

Cesaries sneered. “So what you said earlier was not a truthful slip of the tongue?”

“I only meant that I can prove that there *is* no sire bond,” I said, fighting to recover. “That this whole trial is a waste of time and energy.”

“That is exactly what the trial will determine,” Cesaries said coldly. “And I—”

“*Let me speak with my son*.”

I flinched at the growl in Mrs. Smith’s voice. Cesaries paused, and now everyone turned to her. She stood in front of the same two guards who’d blocked my way toward Greyson and Elle, her stance threatening.

Her glare moved from them to Cesaries. She looked imposing and ready for anything. “I’m his mother. Let me through.”

Cesaries wrinkled his nose. But then he sighed and waved a hand at the guards. “Let her approach.”

A moment later, Mrs. Smith was before Greyson. Her hands were on his face, his shoulders, patting him down as if checking for injuries. I heard him say, “I’m okay,” and Mrs. Smith looked like she was ready to cry or burn something down.

My voice shook with anger. “How the hell is any of this fair?” I asked Cesaries. “How is putting both Greyson and Elle on display like this helping with anything? You’re just enjoying yourselves at this point!”

Cesaries scoffed. “You say that as if we have a personal vendetta against the Redwood Alpha!”

“You said it yourself,” Xavier snapped.

I flinched. For a moment, I’d forgotten that Xavier was here. When I turned to him now, I saw Ava standing next to him. She’d quietly arrived. My stomach dropped at the sight, and I looked away.

“When this trial is over, Ms. Hart, I doubt that anyone will call it a waste of time,” Cesaries said. “The council exists to maintain order.”

“I thought you existed to stay neutral,” Xavier challenged.

Cesaries peered at Xavier. “Careful, Samara Alpha.”

I spoke up, redirecting the attention from Xavier. The last thing I fucking needed right now was him getting shackled as well. “You said that the trial would be fair,” I repeated to Cesaries. “Instead, you’re treating Greyson and Elle as if they’re already guilty. The shackles need to go.”

Cesaries gave me a cold look. “This is the way things are done, Caliana. I wouldn’t expect a half-Fae like you to understand our ways. What you should be more worried about is how you’re planning to prove that the sire bond doesn’t exist.”

I gulped, swallowing my tongue. Should I say anything more right now?

*Probably not. Don’t utter a word until Big Mac makes an appearance, Cali.*

“I will prove it when the time is right,” I said, trying to seem confident. “In the meantime, before the trial starts, you need to allow us to speak with Greyson and Elle. You *promised* their treatment would be fair. Will you honor that?”

Cesaries rolled his eyes. “Very well, then. You may approach them at your own risk.” He shot a look at Greyson and Elle. “You never know when the sire bond might make them attack someone.”

“If I wanted to attack anyone, I would’ve done it by now,” Elle said bluntly.

I swore I heard one of the guards—was it the asshole who’d lost my phone earlier?—laugh. Cesaries ignored both him and Elle. Straightening to his feet, he said, “The trial should start soon. I and a few other members will be discussing things in private for now.”

Clarice gestured for Cesaries to follow her, but I stopped paying attention to them. I whirled around, making a beeline for Greyson and Elle. My first instinct was to check on Greyson, but I saw that he was still quietly talking with his mother. The sight made my throat constrict. I decided to give them a minute and went to Elle instead.

She looked… annoyed.

“Where is Lucian?” she asked. “Why isn’t he here?”

I opened my mouth to speak but realized that that was a very valid question. I was surprised Lucian hadn’t been here since the crack of dawn, banging on Cesaries’s door. Looking around, I said, “I have no idea where Lucian is.”

“He’s always all, ‘my forest rose’ this, ‘my precious pearl’ that, and now he’s not here?” Elle scowled. “I don’t like that.”

“But you like being called his ‘precious pearl’?” Ava asked. I turned to see her walking toward us, right next to Xavier. *Always* by his side.

Thrusting her chin up, Elle told her, “Why not? It’s better than being called ‘baby.’ I am not an infant.”

Ignoring this entire ridiculous debate, Xavier turned to Elle. “Lucian told Ava and me last night that he had a way of helping you and Greyson.”

I paused, processing.

*Lucian’s solutions are hit or miss—usually miss.*

“What kind of way?” I asked.

Ava shrugged. “Lucian was vague about it, something about doing some research.”

I frowned. “Research? What we need is to get Greyson and Elle out of here. We don’t have time for one of Lucian’s schemes.”

“Lucian told us to do all we can to stall the trial. He wants us to buy him time,” Xavier said, his eyes flickering between Ava and me.

*What is he thinking when he’s looking at us both?*

No.

I could not care about that right now.

“I’m not sure anyone will be able to stall Cesaries,” I admitted, “but I’m willing to try. Hopefully once Big Mac shows up, there will be no need for Lucian to do anything.”

Xavier nodded, averting his eyes from me. Ava stared at him. “Did you decide if you’re going to accept Lucian’s offer?”

“Wait, what offer?” I asked.

“Lucian said that if the council finds Greyson guilty, Lucian will go after the council. He asked for the Samaras to join the Vanguards.”

I was confused. Or in denial about what that would mean. “What are you talking about? Join for what?”

Xavier’s gaze met mine. “Lucian is ready to challenge the authority of the council. He wants to fight them.”

My mind started racing. This didn’t sound like the equivalent of me fighting the council with my magic and helping Greyson escape.

*This sounds like—*

“Is Lucian proposing starting a full-fledged coup of the council?” I hissed.

“That sounds like him,” Elle noted.

My palms grew sweaty, and my heart raced.

*No way! No fucking way.*

“What did you tell him?” I asked Xavier, fighting not to start shouting.

“I didn’t give him an answer. I don’t want to align the Samaras with someone as unstable as Lucian,” Xavier said.

I gulped.

*But what if the council* does *find Greyson guilty? What if they sentence him to death? How far am* I *willing to go? Should I talk to Lucian about this?*

I put a pin in that thought for now. Taking a deep breath, I told Xavier, “None of this will matter if Big Mac can show that the bond doesn’t exist. Then the council is going to have to release Greyson.”

“What about me?” Elle asked.

Before I could reply with something reassuring or tactful, Ava spoke up.

“You could be cleared of being a threat, but you might still face charges for killing Helix and denying the Northwind their so-called justice,” she told Elle in a blunt tone that reminded me of Elle herself.

Elle scowled. “Makes sense.” She glanced at Greyson. He was still speaking with Mrs. Smith in hushed tones. Shaking her head, Elle added, “Greyson won’t let them hurt me, though. Lucian won’t either.”

Her certainty was a good thing. Reassuring. But I still couldn’t help but notice that she put Greyson’s name first there.

*That doesn’t mean—*

No. The sire bond was gone. If it weren’t, both Greyson and Elle would’ve lost their minds trying to protect each other by now.

“Don’t do anything extreme right now, Cali.” Xavier’s tone was a warning. “And definitely don’t agree to anything that Lucian proposes. You know he’s a liability.”

“I won’t do anything,” I said.

*For now*, I mentally added.

All I knew was that I was ready to go to hell and back if it meant saving Greyson’s life. Nobody was going to take him away from me.

*And that’s that.*

A witch’s spell was the key to all of this. I looked around the clearing, toward the woods. Big Mac still hadn’t shown up, and my anxiety kept climbing.

*Where the hell is she?*

**Episode 4587**

**Greyson**

No matter how hard Cali tried to hide it, her face always said it all. I didn’t need to mind link with her to know what was happening inside her head. I could see her growing more and more upset while looking up ahead, at the tree line.

Big Mac was nowhere to be seen.

“MacKenzie will be here,” Sabine spoke up again. If I could read Cali, my mother could definitely read me. “Whatever feelings she has toward me won’t get in the middle. This is about you, Greyson. And she wants to help you.”

My mother’s words should’ve been comforting, and they were to some extent—Big Mac did like me, after all, if only a little bit—but something else struck me harder. My hope of them getting back together for real, bonding over this entire situation didn’t seem like a possibility.

I felt a smidge pathetic, like a kid in a movie trying to cook up scenarios to get their divorced parents to reunite. But my mom deserved to be happy. Big Mac deserved to be happy. They used to make each other happy. They had to find a way to get back to that again, and then I would be happy, too. I was going to work on it.

Even while Cesaries wanted to send me to the guillotine.

“What happened between you and Big Mac?” I asked quietly. “This can’t just be about the Bitterfang war.”

My mom shook her head. “Please, Greyson. Let’s focus on what we’re going to do to fix this,” she said, tracing a hand over my shackles. “The sight of you chained like an animal makes me sick.”

I nodded, dropping the subject.

“Right,” I said. “It would be best if I stayed alive.”

Sabine winced. “Do *not* joke about that.”

“Even if Cesaries throws a fit, once Big Mac proves that there is no sire bond, the council will have to release me,” I told her. “It only makes sense.”

Her eyes flashed with anger before she glanced over at the council’s tent. “Since when does the council care about logic?”

“That’s a good point, but—”

“I won’t let them hurt you,” she whispered, reaching up to cup my cheek. Her voice was raw. “I’m not going to let them take my son away.”

She looked fearless, determined. Her eyes were glistening, and my heart drummed. I hadn’t felt this kind of protectiveness from a parent… really ever. Never as a child. It felt nice, and I wanted to relish it…

But not if it meant her putting herself in danger.

“I don’t want you fighting anyone on my behalf,” I said. “What happened with Elle was my decision. You had no part in it.”

Sabine wiped her eyes quickly, her sadness taking a backseat. “You’re my son. Of course I’m part of this.”

I thought about holding back, but I saw no point to it. She had to know.

“I won’t be able to live with myself if something happens to you,” I said.

Sabine rested a hand on my shoulder. Her voice dropped. “I can’t have history repeat itself, Greyson. No matter how hard I tried, I was not able to protect you from Silas. But Cesaries isn’t half the danger that Silas was.”

I felt a pang in my chest at her words. “I don’t want you to feel like you owe me something or like you failed me. That’s not how it was.”

She gave me a bitter smile. “How was it, then? I should’ve died protecting you back then, but I was young, useless, so pathetic that—”

“I can’t listen to you speak about yourself like that,” I interrupted. It was true. I felt sick to my stomach. I knew she could tell, because her stance immediately changed.

Her expression softened. “Okay. I won’t.”

My eyes stung, and I looked away. I tugged on the chains. “I’m sorry you have to see me like this. I would’ve run, but I felt like that would be a coward’s move. It would only delay the inevitable.”

“You’re right,” she said. “That is how it would’ve played out.”

I glanced over at Cesaries’s tent. “I am determined to play their game by their rules and prove how massively they’ve messed up in their own court. It seems like the most peaceful solution.”

“We did just come out of a pack war…” Sabine trailed off.

“Exactly. The last thing we need is another war.” I glanced at Elle. Cali was still with her, talking to her quietly. “I also feel responsible for Elle. She doesn’t deserve any of this.”

“She doesn’t,” Sabine agreed. “But you don’t either. You always do what you feel is right, Greyson, and I’m proud of you for it.” She leaned in to kiss my cheek and hug me. I allowed myself this moment of solace in her arms.

I imagined what it would feel like to be young again, just a kid, and have her hug me like this.

“There’s one thing I need you to remember, though,” she said in my ear. “I have to do what feels right, too.” She faced me. Her voice was a whisper. “And as a mother, that means protecting my son. No matter the cost.”

I paused, processing the implications of her words. What did she mean by that? Was she planning something without telling me? My gut throbbed, alarm spreading all over me. But before I could question her further, a large bell echoed across the clearing.

Every werewolf in the vicinity cringed.

“The trial will be starting shortly,” Cesaries announced. “Guards, move the visitors into their designated area, and deal with the prisoners!”

Before the guards could get to Cali, she rushed over to me and gave me a kiss on the lips. “I’m right here,” she whispered. “I love you. We’ll fix this.”

I trusted her with my life.

A moment later, six guards herded Cali, Sabine, Xavier, and Ava to the side of the platform on which the council had taken their seats. They went after Elle and me next. To my surprise, they unshackled us. Had Cali’s protesting worked? I’d take it.

The guards started to lead us forward, to stand before the council.

“How are you doing?” I asked Elle in a mutter.

She glared over at Cesaries as he conversed with Clarice. Her nostrils flared. She looked like she wanted to tear him into pieces. “The council should pay for what they’re doing to you,” she said. “You’re a good man, a good Alpha, and they’re nothing but a bunch of cockroaches.”

Even though Elle’s newfound use of a metaphor was no doubt the result of hanging out with the master of Purple Prose, Prince Lucian of the Vanguards himself, I couldn’t help but appreciate it. Even feel pleased that she was so protective of me. But then I hoped to hell that it wasn’t the sire bond that made Elle feel like this—or our whole defense was going to go up in flames. I chose not to think about that.

I stood there, next to Elle, with the guards on either side of us as we waited for this thing to start. Big Mac wasn’t here yet, so I knew I had to stall when Cesaries gave me the opportunity. I set my ears on Cali and Sabine, who stood just a few feet away, and I could hear them talk about the exact thing.

“Where is she?” Cali was anxious. “What’s taking Big Mac so long? Should you call her?”

Calmly, my mother said, “If MacKenzie said she’s coming, then she will come. She would never go back on her word.”

Cali started to bite her nails. “But what if something happened to her? What if she—”

“Cali,” Sabine muttered, removing Cali’s hand from her mouth. “Please. Have a little faith.”

The same bell that sounded earlier rang again.

I winced once more, watching as the council members settled themselves in their seats around a large table on the dais. Cesaries was back on that tacky chair, which seemed to perch him higher than the rest.

“The trial has now officially started,” he announced. His gaze was pinned on Elle and me. “Greyson Evers, Alpha of the Redwood pack, and Arielle, member of the Redwood pack, you are both accused of participating in the turning of a natural wolf to a werewolf and are therefore currently bound by a sire bond. Sire bonds are a threat to the werewolf community because they cultivate violent, uncontrollable, feral behavior in both the sire and the turned wolf. They are an abomination, and we cannot let them exist if werewolves are to live in harmony.”

The council staff offered murmurs of approval. Their hypocrisy really took the cake here. Where the fuck was the council when Malakai and the Bitterfang pack threatened the werewolf community’s harmony? Cowards.

A few feet away, Cali scoffed, rolling her eyes. Probably thinking the same thing I was.

“Do the defendants care to address the tribunal?” Cesaries asked.

This was my opportunity to stall.

“We will soon be proving to you that you’ve made a mistake,” I said. “The charges against Elle and me are baseless, and the number one exhibit of evidence is the fact that neither Elle nor I have been acting feral. If you recall, Helix had displayed signs of that sort of behavior, which was how you caught him.”

There were murmurs among the council table.

“Bottom line, if your case against Elle and me is framed by a so-called sire bond that could wreak havoc, it has no substance,” I said. “There is no danger present.”

The council members shot us looks of disapproval. Cesaries said, “I look forward to seeing if the charges are baseless or not.” He turned to Elle. “Does the wolf have anything to add?”

I opened my mouth to continue stalling, but Elle spoke up immediately.

“The only thing I am guilty of is being a good pack member and for showing loyalty to my Alpha,” she said defiantly. “If that is a crime, go ahead and punish me.”

Cesaries narrowed his eyes at her. “Be careful, girl, or we just might do as you wish.”

This was not going well.

I opened my mouth to defend Elle when there was a sudden rustle of wind. No more stalling needed, because Big Mac blipped right before the council. Her spine was straight, her head held high, her face as sharp as ever.

She was here to help me, and I was flooded with relief.

As for the council, they were shocked.

“What is the Redwood witch doing here?” Cesaries demanded.

“I am *not* the Redwoods’ witch,” Big Mac corrected. “I work independently—”

Cali stepped forward, cutting Big Mac off. “She’s here to prove that there is no sire bond.”

The council broke into a chaos of whispers.

“Absolutely not. I will *not* allow that,” Cesaries snapped. He pointed at Big Mac. “Guards! Remove her!”

**Episode 4588**

I was so fed up I felt like I was about to start screaming like a banshee.

*Cesaries thinks I’m loud? This asshole has seen* nothing *yet.*

“You said this would be a fair trial!” I shouted. “Why won’t you let Big Mac testify? Fair trials have experts and witnesses, and she’s both!” I took another step forward. Two guards brought their spears down in front of me. That didn’t stop me from glaring at Cesaries.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Big Mac beat him to it. “If the guards value their ability to shift, they’d better not enter my personal space.” She turned to Cesaries, her gaze sharp. “I came here to testify, not fight. But if it’s a fight you want, I’m more than ready.”

The guards immediately froze. As if in sync, they all turned to Cesaries at the same time, reminding me of a pack of dogs who’d spotted a squirrel.

This would’ve been funny if it weren’t so fucked.

“You didn’t answer my question, Cesaries!” I called. “Why don’t you want Big Mac to testify?” I turned to the guards. “She’s not someone to mess with, so it’s your own necks at risk if you get any closer to her.”

Behind me, I heard Ava mutter, “Is it wise for Cali to be getting all up in their faces like this?”

Thankfully, Xavier didn’t answer. Because if he had, I would’ve turned into an exploding ball of Fae magic and fury.

“Ms. Hart,” Cesaries said with an air of impatience, “since you seem to have appointed yourself *the very loud* voice of defense, and you seem to know so much about all this, can you please explain why she”—he pointed at Big Mac—“is here?”

I clenched my jaw hard enough it hurt.

“We already told you,” I said, hands in fists at my sides. “Big Mac will use her witchcraft to prove that there is no sire bond between Greyson and Elle.”

“This is true, then?” Cesaries asked, eyes narrowed on Big Mac.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Big Mac’s tone was flat. “Why else would I be at a werewolf council trial? It’s not my idea of a fun day out.”

Cesaries scowled, turning to mutter with the rest of the council members. At times like these, I wished I were a werewolf so I could hear what they were saying. But no—me being a werewolf wouldn’t be enough to get us out of this situation. I’d already used my magic on the council, and it would be a bad idea to do it again. I just wanted them to back off and leave Greyson *alone*.

“The council and I agree that Big Mac is not a reliable expert,” Cesaries said, cutting through my thoughts. “She is a member of the Redwood pack and is therefore biased.”

“*Again*, I am not a member of the pack,” Big Mac said. “I work alone.”

I started to shake. With rage. “Are you kidding me?” I demanded. “Like this whole trial isn’t already rife with bias!”

Cesaries glared at me. “Caliana, be quiet, or I’ll have you cuffed!”

“On what charges? Telling the truth? Also, didn’t you just say I’m Greyson and Elle’s defense attorney or whatever? I’m supposed to ask questions like these!”

Cesaries looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel.

“My spells show no bias,” Big Mac said coldly, redirecting the attention to her.

The grimace that Greyson made put a dent in my anger. I empathized there. Big Mac might not have officially been a Redwood, but her fiancée was, and Big Mac had always sided with us. If she wasn’t an official member, she was at least an honorary one.

“The point still stands,” Cesaries offered with a condescending wave of his hand. “We have no way of knowing if you would tell the truth.”

Big Mac’s eyes flashed with fury. “Are you calling me a *fraud*?”

*Oh, shit.*

The air smelled like gunpowder suddenly. Before Cesaries could answer, Mrs. Smith stepped forward, next to me. The guards didn’t stop her, not like they’d done to me.

That was offensive, but anyway.

“I know my son,” she said, her head held high. “His reputation in the werewolf community is that he is an honorable Alpha who keeps his word. You have to listen to MacKenzie—she can show you that the charges against Greyson and Elle are baseless.”

Cesaries’s face was cold. “As moving as it is to see a mother’s plea, I refuse to accept your witch’s testimony. And that’s final.”

Big Mac glowered at him. “I’m not the Redwoods’ witch. Nobody owns me. I have a free will of my own. Do you understand?”

Cesaries rolled his eyes. “Fine then. A witch who is affiliated with the Redwood pack. Better?”

Big Mac didn’t say a word to him. She turned to Mrs. Smith. “What do you want me to do, Sabine?”

*Not that anyone’s asking me*, I thought, *but if I were asked, I’d say that I would love for Big Mac to turn the entire council into frogs. Or cockroaches, like Elle said earlier. That might make things a bit more manageable, no?*

“I want to make an offer,” Greyson spoke up before his mother could.

Cesaries eyed Greyson. “Proceed.”

“I will tell the council everything you want to know, if and only if you let Elle go and drop all charges against her,” he said. “You’ll have my full cooperation every step of the way.”

My head was pounding, a headache coming. Or was it already here? Definitely already here, because my brain felt like it was ready to explode at the implications and consequences of what Greyson had just said.

*What is happening? What is he doing? They want to* kill *him. He can’t just keep handing himself over to them.*

I so badly wished I could mind link him right now.

“I’m willing to consider that,” Cesaries said. He looked like a shark who’d smelled blood in the water. “But I won’t release Elle until I have a chance to hear what you have to confess.”

“It’s not a confession,” Greyson said. His voice was imposing, even. “It’s the truth.”

“Greyson, don’t. They haven’t agreed to—”

“I have to, love,” he said, looking at me. *Shit, he’s really doing this.* My stomach dropped as Greyson cleared his throat loudly before speaking up. “As I was saying, I will be telling you the truth.” He stared at Cesaries. And then, he announced, “I turned Elle into a werewolf. It seems it’s not a secret any longer.”

Everyone among the council broke into gasps and whispers.

My heart beat so fast I thought it would break. They would kill him for this. The council and Cesaries had given no indication that they wouldn’t. They hadn’t even promised to let Elle go. No, I couldn’t stand by and let this happen.

I moved forward, but the guards blocked my way again. “You can’t just—”

“I have nothing to hide, Cali,” Greyson told me. His face was blank, the epitome of composure, but I could see the fire in his eyes. He turned to Cesaries again. “The reason I turned Elle was to protect not just the Redwood pack, but all werewolves.”

Cesaries peered at Greyson. “What do you mean?”

“I assume you know of Richard Wigbert, or Dick, and LIPS. Anyone in power who cares about protecting werewolf kind would.”

Cesaries’s jaw clenched. “Of course I know about LIPS. Do you honestly think the council wouldn’t know about the organization that sticks its nose where it doesn’t belong? What about it?”

“Seems like you don’t know enough,” Greyson said calmly. “Because when Dick Wigbert and LIPS discovered the existence of werewolves and threatened to go on a killing spree, you did not step in. Yet again, the council remained in the shadows, and the Redwood pack had to deal with the dangers presented on our own.”

Cries of offense broke out among the council, but Cesaries remained unmoving.

“What does this have to do with anything?” he asked coldly.

*He’s not even denying being useless…*

“My own mother was shot by Wigbert,” Greyson said. “So I had to find a solution to the human problem, and fast. I turned Elle in exchange for cooperation from her true wolf pack to lead LIPS away from our territory.”

Cesaries looked skeptical. “And did it work?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Have you heard about Dick Wigbert roaming around werewolf territory recently?”

Cesaries’s mouth twitched. “Touché. But that doesn’t mean our existence was not compromised anyway; therefore—”

“My sister helped also,” I said loudly. “Dick Wigbert doesn’t remember anything about werewolves. She used her Fae magic to wipe Dick’s memory.”

The council’s reaction was louder than ever. Shock, awe, and outrage—intense enough that Cesaries had to call the other members to order. Finally, he turned to Greyson.

“There’s a very easy way to prove whether or not you are telling the truth, Redwood Alpha,” he said, his voice dripping with menace. He gestured to his guards. “Light the fire.”

**Episode 4589**

**Xavier**

The guards lit up a fire pit a few feet away from Greyson and Elle. Raging flames, unnatural and orange, immediately shot up into the sky.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Cali yelled. “Are you going to burn Greyson at the stake? For telling you exactly what you want to hear?”

I wanted to wrap my arms around her and tell her that everything was going to be okay, but that would be a lie. Were they actually going to burn Greyson as if this were a witch trial? That would be fucking ridiculous. I definitely wouldn’t mind throwing a few of the council members in before they got their hands on Greyson, though.

“I beg your pardon?” Cesaries asked Cali, looking baffled.

“You’re not burning anyone,” I said, moving forward. “Shut this whole thing down. *Right now*.”

Cesaries looked between Cali and me as if *we* were the crazy ones. “The fire isn’t for Greyson. Don’t be absurd!”

“And how are we supposed to know that? Then what is it for?” I demanded. “I don’t imagine that the trial is going to turn into a BBQ.”

Cesaries rolled his eyes. “Will everyone stop assuming the worst? Frankly, it’s insulting to our honorable institution.”

Big Mac arched her eyebrows. “Your *what*?”

I snorted.

 Cesaries huffed. “I called in the fire to help Greyson’s statement. That is all.”

“If you want to do anything to help Greyson, set him and Elle free,” Cali declared. “Or at least honor his request and set Elle free. He did what you asked him to do!”

“I can’t do that, and you know it,” Cesaries said, rubbing his temples. “Now, if you could just stop making a fuss—”

“A *fuss*?” Cali laughed. “Fighting for my mate’s life isn’t a *fuss*, and I wouldn’t be doing any of this if the council would just listen to any of us.” She turned on the guards that blocked her way to Greyson. “If you touch him, I will use my magic again!”

*Xavier, she’s getting out of control, and we’re all gonna get in trouble*, Ava mind linked. *You have to do something.*

Ava was right.

*Cali*, I mind linked, *you’re taking it too far. We don’t want the council charging you with whatever bullshit as well.*

She turned to glare at me now. *I’m not going to watch my mate be burned alive, Xavier!*

I had to fight off a flinch. *My mate.* Months had passed by, but I still hadn’t gotten used to Cali calling Greyson that. I knew I would never accept the fact that she loved my brother. It was more obvious than ever right now. Cali’s protectiveness toward Greyson seemed to have overwhelmed every other emotion inside her.

Earlier, before we’d arrived at Three Devils Point, I had felt that while Cali was working to save Greyson, her attention still felt split between us. But in this moment, that notion looked like pure bullshit.

Right now, she was *all* about Greyson.

And fuck me if that didn’t hurt.

My brother could die, I was with Ava, and I was still fucking *jealous*.

Shame burned inside me, right along with the fire in the pit. The tower of flame suddenly grew even taller, sparks and ash flying. Mrs. Smith gasped, stepping forward, as if to break into a sprint toward Greyson. But she didn’t have to, because Greyson wasn’t going to get burned at the stake.

Someone else walked *out* of the flames: a familiar-looking tall and lean male figure, dressed in dark green clothes.

“Ah, there he is,” Cesaries said. “Charon! Welcome. Perhaps you have a muting spell for one Caliana Hart?”

Charon laughed, as if he and Cesaries shared the same exact horrible sense of humor.

Ah right, this piece of shit. I remembered him. Aysel had gone to him to put a spell on Greyson, and it’d become a whole thing.

“You will do no such fucking thing,” Greyson snapped, his eyes flashing as he pinned Charon with them.

“What the hell is that warlock doing here?” I asked Cesaries.

Cesaries waved me off, keeping his attention on Charon. “I’m glad we could agree to terms, my friend.”

Charon smiled. “Me too.”

“Xavier,” Cali whispered, turning to me. “This man *kidnapped* me! He hurt Kira—he can’t be trusted!”

I didn’t need a fucking reminder.

“We never agreed to have Charon attend this trial,” Greyson spoke up. “He is an enemy of the Redwood pack. If anyone’s biased, it’s him.”

“Exactly,” I added. “We need you to send Charon back to the stone you found him under, Cesaries.”

Cesaries rolled his eyes. “That’s not going to happen.”

Cali went rigid. She looked… Well, I’d never seen her so furious. And that said a lot, considering all the shit she’d been through.

“You didn’t tell me all these people would be here,” Charon said to Cesaries. “I’m not liking their energy.”

Cali seethed, lifting up her sleeves. “I’ll show you bad energy, you goddamn—”

“Cali!” Greyson called her name.

Cali was breathing hard, her eyes fixed on Greyson. He shook his head at her, and she bit her lips like she wanted to scream. Their eye contact made my insides feel acidic, so I looked away. I couldn’t have Ava suspect my jealousy.

It wasn’t fair to her. None of it.

Focusing on Cesaries only, I said, “Either you explain to us what’s happening right now, or the council may face something far worse than a pack war.”

Cesaries shrugged. “You wanted a witch to prove that Greyson and Elle are not bound by the sire bond. I present you with a warlock who has agreed to verify the status of the sire bond. It is as simple as that.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “You expect us to believe Charon? He’d sell his own mother out for a couple of bucks—if he ever even had a mother to begin with.”

“He probably sprang up from a pile of manure like a shit tulip,” Greyson deadpanned.

Charon had the fucking gall to be offended. “See?” He pointed between Greyson and me. “They hate me for no reason!”

Cesaries ignored Charon. He said, “The council deemed it necessary to provide their own witch. Surely, you and the others must realize the need for an unbiased opinion in these matters.”

Cali suddenly burst into life again, her rage back in full force.

“UNBIASED?!” She threw her hands up and the two guards in front of her jumped and scrambled out of her way, likely thinking she was going to use magic. “You and Charon are lying right in our faces! You are—”

Before I could step in, Mrs. Smith grabbed Cali’s arm. She said, “Calm down. Do it for Greyson,” and Cali deflated once more. For Greyson’s sake. I tore my eyes away from her, pushing away the jealousy. It wasn’t like I wanted anything to happen to my brother, I just couldn’t handle—*this*. Cali, like this.

For *Greyson*.

In the background, I heard Greyson say, “I agree to allow Charon to do his spell.”

Cesaries’s face twisted into a mocking grimace. “I don’t need the defendant’s approval. I am the one with the power here, not you, Greyson Evers.”

“People who have power don’t have to say they have power,” Elle suddenly spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at her. She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I read that in a book.”

Cesaries took a deep breath and turned to the dipshit warlock. “Go ahead, Charon. Settle this once and for all.”

Charon puffed up his chest. Big Mac, who’d stayed silent this entire time, muttered, “Fraud.”

Charon paused, swiftly turning to her. “You have a problem with me?”

“Yes,” Big Mac said sharply. “I think you’re a—”

With the guards out of the way, it took Mrs. Smith only a second to reach Big Mac. She cut her off, tugging on her arm. The two locked eyes, and that was enough for Big Mac to stop. Even though she looked fucking *livid*.

Nobody spoke as Charon stepped toward Greyson, waving his hands around in a way he probably thought was dramatic and mysterious. To me, it looked like he was trying to catch a fly. And now *I* was getting pissed off.

*Don’t even fucking think about it*, Ava mind linked, grabbing at my arm.

I turned to her. *This is so ridiculous—*

*I’m not going to let you put the entire Samara pack at risk over some stupid spell!* Ava mind linked. She looked indignant. *Let’s see what Charon comes up with first before jumping to conclusions*.

*What I would like to do is jump on Charon and rip his throat out before forcing Cesaries to eat it*, I snapped.

Our mind linking was interrupted by Charon’s loud thrashing around. If he was trying to catch a fly before, now he looked like a drunk octopus on a fucking stroll at the bottom of the sea. His eyes were closed, and he mumbled what had to be actual gibberish under his breath.

I wanted him dead on principle alone.

Suddenly, a puff of smoke erupted behind him. The fire snapped and crackled, changing colors—green, purple, gold. What the actual fuck?

Charon opened his eyes. Pointing at Greyson, he turned to Cesaries and announced, “I detect the presence of a sire bond!”

**Episode 4590**

**Greyson**

I was stunned. My mind was racing.

If the sire bond was there… *Fuck.*

Was it possible that the three witches had cut the wrong bond? Was that why I couldn’t mind link with Cali? Was I fooling myself believing that coming to Elle’s help wasn’t anything more than an Alpha’s responsibility? Had it been the sire bond all along?

Fucking hell.

“We do not accept Charon’s spell,” Cali said, breaking the silence that had fallen among everyone. This time, her voice was even. I could still see the anger in her, but now it was more controlled. She looked like a lioness, and my heart ached at the sight.

Could I have really lost my mate bond with her?

But other than mind linking, nothing had changed between Cali and me.

If anything, I felt more desperately connected to her than ever.

“We do not care what you accept or do not accept, Caliana,” Cesaries said. “The test has been performed, and that means—”

“Charon is in your pocket,” Cali interrupted. She’d been shaking with rage earlier, but now her hands were fists at her sides, her spine rigid. “Of course he will tell you whatever you want to hear. For a price.” She turned toward Charon. “How much did they pay you?”

Charon dared to gasp like he was hurt, the fucking weasel. “What are you talking about? That’s so offensive! I’m just a warlock; my magic has no favorites.”

Cali’s patience seemed to be hanging by a thread.

She wasn’t the one to snap first.

“I’ve had enough of this!” Big Mac declared, breaking away from Sabine’s grasp. She marched up to Charon, who stumbled backward to avoid her. “Do you seriously think you can fool me, you fraud? Where the hell did you learn that spell? You have no idea what the fuck you’re doing!”

Chaos broke out.

The council was arguing among themselves, Ava and Xavier were arguing between themselves, Cali spewed insults at Charon, Sabine tried to calm her down, and Cesaries grabbed a tiny infuriating fucking bell and rang it, shouting, “Order! Order!”

Elle had her ears covered, breathing fast.

“It’s not over yet. Don’t lose hope,” I whispered. She swallowed, nodding. I felt the urge to take her hand in mine, to comfort. But I didn’t know if that was because of the sire bond, or because she was simply a new werewolf in a chaotic world, and I’d promised her dad to protect her.

“The council accused me of being biased! And what was your solution?” Big Mac pointed at Charon. “You brought in this charlatan. Do you have any idea how many mistakes he made?”

The council broke into gasps. Clarice said, “Mistakes?”

“Of course.” Big Mac scoffed. Then she brought up her hand and started counting. “He did not use any earth-binding herbs, his ridiculous fucking dance routine was straight out of the mating rituals of a peacock, his—”

“Hey!” Charon shouted. “I’m a terrific dancer! I’m also a warlock, trained in the dark arts!”

I couldn’t believe this was really happening.

But, thankfully, now that Big Mac was outraged, I had a lot of hope that the sire bond was actually broken, and Charon’s spell had been bullshit.

Big Mac barked, “I’ve just gotten started with you. Interrupt me again and find out what happens.”

“—so you can’t stand there and say that there’s no issue here,” I finished.

Charon glared at me. “I can’t believe you guys are treating me this way! I’m well-respected!”

“Who could possibly respect you? All you do is backstab everyone!” Cali said. She was all in defending me, and the worry I felt for her was mixed with heaps of pride. Pointing at Charon, she told Cesaries, “This warlock is a liar, and you’re fools if you believe a word he says.”

Charon huffed. “I don’t have to put up with this!”

“Yes, you have to,” I told Charon before eyeing Cesaries. “If you consider legacy alone, Charon is a devious trickster, whereas Big Mac is one of the best living witches of her time. Logically speaking, Big Mac is far more reliable to perform this spell.”

Cesaries’s face turned red. “You can’t simply expect me to disregard my source, Greyson. Charon was someone I hired after painstaking research! I know he’s capable, and by insulting him, you are insulting *me*.”

“Thanks for defending me, but I’m done here,” Charon said, huffing. “I will expect the payment immediately.”

In the blink of an eye, he blipped away.

Clarice said, “Cesaries, perhaps we should consider—”

“Nonsense!” Cesaries seethed. “Did you see how Charon performed that spell? It was impeccable! And of course the sire bond is still there—things like that don’t just vanish!”

While the council argued among themselves, Cali argued with Xavier and Ava, and I looked out at everybody, I realized that I was, quite simply, fucked. Why the hell did I ever think Cesaries would listen to reason? The man’s ego was bigger than the moon. He’d rather die than admit he was wrong about something.

Served me right for hoping to find justice among these fucking morons.

“Greyson?” Elle whispered. “What are we going to do?”

I opened my mouth to at least try and reassure her. But right now, I had no idea.

“I’ve had it with this bullshit,” Big Mac said, cutting through my thoughts. Her voice was loud enough to cover every other argument. She stepped in front of the council and said, “If you want to see whether or not there is a sire bond, I will show you exactly how the spell is done.” Dropping on her knees, she pulled the bag from her back and laid out the items needed.

My heart started racing. I looked at my mother. Her wide eyes were fixed on Big Mac.

“Wait!” Cesaries barked. “What are you doing? This is not allowed!”

“No,” Big Mac snapped, gesturing at her things. “This is what it looks like when someone casts a real fucking spell.” She glared up at the guards. “Go ahead, try to stop me.”

The guards recoiled.

Cesaries glowered. “I cannot simply allow you to do what you wish! This is my court!”

“And this is what I came here to do today,” Big Mac said. “I will prove the charges are false and get this over with.”

“You said that you are not a Redwood,” Cesaries said, “so why are you willing to do this?”

Big Mac paused. Her body was tense. I realized that this entire time, she had not looked at me once. Right now, she didn’t look at my mother either. I didn’t know what to think about her behavior. I wanted to believe that she *did* give a damn about me.

She told Cesaries, “I am here because I believe in truth. Besides, I hate seeing a witch do a shitty job.”

Cesaries didn’t have the time to reply. And I didn’t have the time to see my mother’s reaction to what Big Mac had said—or to feel any disappointment.

Big Mac raised her hands.

The air crackled with magic, and I felt something pulling at my chest. Like a string tugging on my heart. Charon’s spell had felt like a tickle in comparison.

“We got this,” I whispered to Elle. “Trust Big Mac.”

Elle nodded and squeezed her eyes shut.

Big Mac continued crushing herbs and muttering, and the tugging in my chest intensified. I sure as hell hoped that I wouldn’t have to go through the horror of what the three witches had put me through last time. I’d probably have nightmares over those moments for weeks on end—the pain, the gagging, the fiber-like texture of those threads in my throat, the choking.

Big Mac’s spell only focused on my chest so far.

The sensation wrapped around my heart, getting sharper, accompanied by a drumming in my ears, a rhythm that followed the beat of Big Mac’s low chanting. I looked over at Elle. Her eyes were still closed, her brows scrunched up. Was she feeling this same sensation? Was she hurting, too?

I could handle the pain.

I could, but my insides were being pulled, and my hands were shaking uncontrollably.

“Big Mac, this is hurting him!” I heard Cali’s voice in the background. She’d come closer to me, no guards stopping her. Her eyes were glistening when our gazes locked. She made a move to touch me when Big Mac barked, “Do not touch him, Cali!”

Cali stepped back, wincing. Her face was the picture of concern and care. She looked so beautiful in that moment, her emotions so meaningful to me. I knew that no matter what, I would always love her.

Through clenched teeth, I told her, “I can handle it. Anything if it will reveal the truth.”

Cali placed her hand over her heart, sniffling.

Suddenly, Big Mac’s chanting got louder.

The drumming in my ears grew louder, too, the tugging pain in my chest keener. I squeezed my eyes shut and felt a rumble burning through me. No, not a rumble—a *growl*. My wolf was threatened. He was snarling, trying to fight whatever was happening inside my body, to protect what was his. My wolf felt like something was being stolen from him.

Behind my closed eyes, images flashed.

Elle, when I first saw her in the woods.

Elle, when she told me she missed her father.

Elle, when she kissed me and didn’t know what it meant.

Elle, when she returned to the Redwood pack house, abandoning the Vanguards.

Elle, all these distant, fading memories of her that drifted away, and then—

My wolf howled, the sound tearing through me like a piece of flesh.

Before I realized it, I had half-shifted, my hands extending into claws.

“Greyson!” Cali stumbled back in shock.

“What the hell are you doing?” Xavier was here—when had he gotten by my side? He looked at me like I had fucking lost it. Maybe I had, because my wolf was roaring, looking over at the council and needing to tear them apart. My wolf wanted to call this spell off, call everything off, stay just as he was.

I fought to keep control, to shove down these instincts, to stop him from taking over.

Elle stood next to me, trembling, her eyes still closed…

Till they sprang wide open, right along with her mouth that let out a gasp.

I did the same, because suddenly—

The pain vanished.

I was gasping for air, shifted back fully to human. I was dizzy, leaning on Xavier, on Cali. Stroking my cheek, she whispered, “You’re okay. You didn’t lose control.”

Big Mac’s expression was blank. She climbed to her feet, dusting off her clothes. Turning to Cesaries, she said, “Call off your trial. There is no sire bond.”

**Episode 4591**

My heart suddenly felt about a million pounds lighter. I knew we weren’t out of the woods yet, but I still grinned to myself. I was overjoyed at Big Mac’s words—we were lucky that she’d come at all. Greyson had been so sure, but I’d had my doubts about whether the sire bond between Greyson and Elle had really been broken by Chloe and her sisters. But now, Big Mac had verified it. I knew I could trust what she said. That witch had never lied to make anyone feel better in her life.

But… that still didn’t explain our mind link problems. Why couldn’t Greyson and I communicate through it? If the three witch sisters had only interrupted the sire bond, then what was interfering with the mate bond? How long would it be like this?

I didn’t have an answer for that question—and so far, no one else had been able to provide one—but I was hopeful there was an explanation to be found somewhere. Mostly, I just was hoping that it would work itself out… Unless Big Mac had learned something during her spell and was going to drop that bomb on me later.

I gave my head a hard shake. No. I couldn’t think like that. Right now, I had to be positive, otherwise we’d never get through any of this.

I looked over at Cesaries and the rest of the council. “You saw the magic that Big Mac performed. You saw the effect it had on Greyson, so you have to acknowledge that it was real. And you heard her conclusion, too—there is no sire bond, therefore the council has no choice but to drop all charges against Greyson and Elle.”

Cesaries looked unsettled. He turned to the other council members, and they started speaking in hushed voices.

Rolling my eyes at them, I turned to Greyson. I was ready to throw my arms around him—we’d just gotten a major win!— but he didn’t look nearly as enthusiastic as I felt. That confused me. How was he *not* happy? Big Mac had come through for us.

“Everyone!” Cesaries said loudly. He cleared his throat. “We have heard the testimony of this witch,” he said, eyeing Big Mac, “but I regret to inform you that the reliability of your star witness has been called into question by certain members of the council—”

“What?” I demanded. Was he seriously trying to backtrack from this? “Why?”

Cesaries gave me a narrow-eyed look. “It does not escape our notice that this witch has plenty of reasons to manufacture a result the Redwood pack would desire.”

Big Mac looked like she was about to explode with fury. “How *dare* you imply that I would lie about this? How dare you question my methods!”

“Look,” I said, speaking quickly—I didn’t know how much longer we had before Big Mac started cursing people. “Whether or not you’re ready to believe Big Mac, you have to admit that Charon’s results—and *his* reliability—are just as questionable. Which means that you should give Greyson and Elle the benefit of the doubt. Isn’t that how legal decisions are supposed to be made? The burden of disproving the existence of the sire bond shouldn’t rest on them, right?”

Cesaries waved this away dismissively. “Perhaps that’s how things work in a human courtroom, Caliana Hart, but this is the werewolf council. We are not bound by human law. We are bound by werewolf tradition.”

I ground my teeth. I was sick of listening to Cesaries’s pontifications, so I turned to Big Mac.

“We should stop wasting our time trying to reason with these idiots,” I said in a low tone. I honestly didn’t know why I was still trying. “I’m ready to just start blasting them. Between the two of us, I think we could take the whole council down and free Greyson and Elle. What do you think?”

Big Mac scowled at me. “What do I think? I think that sounds like a very bad idea—like most of your ideas, for the record.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but then Cesaries spoke again.

“We have heard enough from the accused,” he announced pompously. He looked at Clarice. “Clarice, please step forward and present the *facts*.”

“Give me a break,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “What the hell do they know about facts?”

Clarice wasn’t close enough to hear me, and she started talking. “It is very simple, really. Greyson Evers admitted to members of this very council just moments ago that he turned the true wolf known as Arielle.”

“Which wasn’t a *crime* until you made it one *recently*—” I began, but Cesaries put his hand up.

“We will have order,” he said coldly. “Or I will have you removed.”

I fumed in silence as Clarice went on.

“We also know that Dayton—the Alpha of the Nightshade pack—committed a similar blasphemy when he turned a true wolf that came to be known as Helix. The result of this foolhardy action was that Helix was bound by a sire bond that made him so dangerous that he was driven to murder Evan, a werewolf.”

I balled my fists at my sides. I’d known they were going to bring this up, but it still sucked to hear.

Clarice droned on. “The facts of what happened next are undisputed. Arielle killed Helix, and then the accused—Greyson Evers—nearly killed Ethaniel. The sire bond has pushed them both to violence. As evidence for this, we have Ethaniel’s sworn testimony and the verification of the sire bond from the warlock Charon.” Clarice took a deep breath. “Based on these accusations and the accumulated evidence, the accused should be found guilty of all charges.”

There were nods of agreement from the council members, which only fanned the fire of rage that burned in my stomach. Elle hadn’t even killed Helix because of the sire bond, it was because the council was going to let the Northwinds do it. But I guessed that technicalities didn’t matter to them at this point.

Yet, I couldn’t help myself.

“This is ridiculous!” I snapped. “This whole trial is a sham! It’s not a trial—it’s just an excuse for you to come after Greyson. If you were even remotely interested in the truth, you wouldn’t base your entire case on the confession of a backstabbing, vengeful Alpha like Ethaniel! A confession you clearly beat out of him, by the way. And you wouldn’t be relying on the findings of a rent-a-witch like Charon, either! This whole thing is bullshit!”

I’d officially gone too far. Cesaries’s face had turned a terrible shade of purple, and it looked like he was actually swelling with fury.

“I will not tolerate this kind of insolence!” he bellowed. He gestured frantically to a guard. “Seize her! Remove her from this hearing!”

I clutched my sword and my shield, and when the guard came toward me, I brandished the sword menacingly.

“Do it,” I said coldly. “Seize me. I’d love to see you try.”

“Cali,” Greyson said quietly. “Back off.”

But I ignored him—I was done playing nice. This whole thing was a freaking joke, even if I was the only one willing to say so. And if Big Mac wouldn’t help me, then so be it. I’d just have to take the council on my own. One thing was for damn sure—I wasn’t going to let them execute my mate to satisfy their need for vengeance.

Anger as powerful as any drug was coursing through my system, so when I felt a hand on my shoulder, I whipped around and reared my sword back, ready to attack. But it was Xavier.

“What?” I snapped.

“Put your magic away,” he said quietly.

“No!” I retorted stubbornly. I was sick of playing nice with the council.

His eyes were locked with mine. “Cali, think,” he said, speaking so quietly that only I could hear him. “If we’re going to make a move against the council, this is not the way. We need to plan it out, coordinate it—not fly off the handle because they pissed us off.”

I didn’t put my weapons away, but I did hesitate.

Xavier seemed to take this hesitation as agreement and nodded. He looked over at Cesaries. “Let’s strike a deal.”

“A *deal*?” Cesaries repeated, his voice heavy with disbelief. “What kind of deal, Xavier Evers?”

“You call off your watchdogs, and Cali will promise to play nice.”

I glared up at him. I hadn’t promised anything of the sort. But Xavier ignored me, keeping his eyes trained on Cesaries.

“Well?”

Cesaries gave me a mean look. “I am warning you, Caliana Hart—I will not tolerate another outburst. This is your very last warning. One more word from you, and you will be *removed.*”

I glared right back at him.

He looked away first, turning to the rest of the council. “Enough of this nonsense. I will hear no more. We have heard enough evidence from both sides. Now, it is time for the council to discuss what we have heard. We will deliberate and render a verdict.”

**Episode 4592**

**Xavier**

Honestly, a big part of me wanted to do exactly what Cali had threated to do. I’d overheard her speaking to Big Mac, and I was of the same mind—I wanted to attack the council, free Greyson and Elle from this sham of a trial, and get the hell out of here.

I was sick to death of this absurd show trial. It was serving no purpose other than humiliating Greyson and giving each council member a chance to air their grievances. I had nothing but contempt for the council and their ever-changing interpretations of werewolf justice. It always seemed to change to suit the council.

But Ava had made a good point, and I couldn’t ignore it—doing anything crazy here would jeopardize the Samara pack, and right now, we couldn’t afford to do that.

Which left me feeling like I was being torn in half. I couldn’t just sit by and watch as my brother was railroaded like this. No matter how complicated our relationship was, I hated just watching helplessly as the council raked him over the coals.

I looked over to where Cali was standing next to him, speaking quietly. I looked at Greyson’s face and was surprised to see that he looked remarkably calm—a lot more relaxed than I would’ve been, in his position. If I’d been shackled like that, I would’ve been doing absolutely everything in my power to break the hell out of those damn chains.

This got me thinking, and I wondered if I should call the Redwoods to come and help break Greyson free. The Redwoods had pledged their loyalty to him, after all, not to the council. Maybe I could call Rishika and explain the situation to her. She’d be able to coordinate a rescue party. That way the onus to save Greyson’s ass wouldn’t fall completely on the Samaras.

I knew the Redwoods would come if I called them—that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that I didn’t know if we had enough time to wait for them.

I ran a hand through my hair as a terrible thought occurred to me—everything would be so much easier if I just let the council have Greyson. Cesaries hadn’t been wrong when he’d said that without Greyson, the Redwoods would be vulnerable and looking for a new Alpha.

There was an ache in my belly, like my body remembered how long I’d wanted very thing that to happen, so that I could take over the pack.

But no matter how tempting it was, I knew it would never work. As long as Cali was still a Redwood, I had to leave the Redwood pack behind, otherwise Adéluce would punish us all.

I also knew I couldn’t abandon my brother like this. Cali and pack politics aside.

I shifted my gaze from Greyson to Cali, who had a steely look on her face. She’d been pushing back against everything the council had been saying, and I couldn’t help but admire how hard she was fighting for Greyson. She was ready to take on the council alone. She was single-minded in her attempt to fix this mess.

It wasn’t unlike the way she was trying to help me. Only in my case, there were hidden dangers she couldn’t possibly be aware of. But she was fighting with the same spirit. It was clear she was never going to give up fighting for Greyson.

Would she ever give up on me?

My heart ached at the thought. Logically, I knew it would be so much better for her if she *did* give up on me, but I also knew that would crush me. As unbeatable as Adéluce felt, I just couldn’t give up hope that I was going to figure out a way to beat her. She had to have a weakness. She had to mess up sometime.

I balled my hands into fists as I pushed those thoughts away. I had to put all of that on hold. Right now, I had bigger fish to try. Right now, I had to find a way to help Greyson out of this fucking mess.

I looked over at Greyson. It made me so fucking pissed to see him chained like that. I wondered if I felt that way because he was my brother, or if it had more to do with how much I hated the council. Because I *really* hated the council.

Wracking my brain, I looked around the clearing. There were guards everywhere, which—supposing we were actually able to get Greyson and Elle free—meant that any chance of escape without a fight was fairly remote.

I remembered that Lucian had asked me to stall the council’s deliberation. I’d almost forgotten about that, because I tended to ignore anything Lucian said. I had very little faith in any plan cooked up by the princeling, but what choice did I have? I had no other ideas and no other options, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

So, steeling myself, I stepped toward Cesaries.

He looked up warily. “Yes, Evers? Do you have something to say?”

I stared him down. “Yes. There’s something that needs to be taken into consideration before you render a verdict.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Oh? And what is that?”

I didn’t know. I’d started talking before I’d formed a plan, and now my mind was reeling as I tried to think of something—anything—to say to him. “It has to do… with the Samara pack.”

Ava moved to my side. Her expression was neutral, but she shot a quick glance at me. *What the hell are you doing, Xavier?*

*I have no idea*, I admitted.

*So what are you—*

*I need to stall them.*

Ava paused for a moment. *This is going to backfire, Xavier. I know it is.*

*Listen to me*,I said sharply. *I want you to think of Nolan. If your brother were still alive, and in this position, wouldn’t you do everything you possibly could to save him?*

Ava didn’t answer, but she flushed at the question.

*Hell, even the shrimp’s trial was fairer than this shit show*,I added, to really drive the point home.

Ava was quiet for a moment. A cruel wind kicked up, blowing through the clearing. It carried the scent of snow, and I glanced at the sky, wondering if it was going to storm.

*I just hope you know what you’re doing*,Ava finally said. *Because you’re walking a fine line, here.*

Cesaries was glaring at me now. “*What* does this have to do with the Samara pack?” he asked tersely. “The matter does not seem to concern your pack in the slightest. I demand an explanation for this.”

I thought fast. “The council, in their *infinite wisdom*,” I said sarcastically, “forced the Samara pack to take on Knox, Zipper, and Blaine in the hope of rehabilitating them into upstanding citizens. Remember?”

“I do,” Cesaries said in a warning tone. “But I fail to see what that could possibly have to do with—”

“Blaine is proving to be problematic,” I said.

“And that’s not to say that we haven’t tried,” Ava said, easily falling into step with me. “Xavier has done everything he can to fix things with Blaine. We’ve all tried our best to help him adjust, but nothing seems to be working. He’s proving to be a dangerous liability.”

“Well, that is unfortunate,” Cesaries said, looking between Ava and me in confusion, “but I fail to see what it could possibly have to do with these proceedings. Care to enlighten me?”

Shit. I wasn’t prepared for this. Hell, I wasn’t prepared for *any* of this. We’d kind of stumbled into this conversation blind, and I was afraid that Cesaries was about to catch on.

I glanced over at Ava, but she gave me a small shake of her head, indicating that she had nothing.

“While it might not seem connected,” I said, speaking quickly, “it is. In that… Well, it *does* cast some doubt on the wisdom of the council’s past verdicts, and raises the possibility that they could be mistaken again.”

Cesaries glowered at me, but he didn’t have a sharp retort ready, which I took to mean that I was at least giving him something to think about.

But then he shook his head, like he was trying to rid himself of an annoying fly. “No. None of that is remotely relevant to the case at hand.”

Okay, I was out of ideas. I wasn’t sure what else I could say. I’d fired my last shot across the council’s bow, and it had missed the mark.

No matter what Lucian wanted of me, I was out of reasons to stall.

“If there’s nothing else,” Cesaries said sharply, “perhaps you would deign to let us continue.”

My phone buzzed before I could answer, and I looked down at the incoming text message. It was from Aysel, and what it said made my stomach clench.

*My brother is on his way. No matter what, just keep stalling!*

**Episode 4593**

“What is Xavier doing?” Greyson asked, peering over my shoulder.

“What?” I asked, turning. Xavier and Ava were talking to Cesaries, but they were too far away for me to hear what they were saying. “I don’t know.”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m not sure if Xavier is going to be able to control his temper,” Greyson said. “He hates Cesaries.”

“He’s not the only one,” I grumbled. I shook my head. “I really lost it back there. I’m sorry, Greyson. I don’t want to make this situation any worse for you, but I’m just so infuriated by the council, and they make me think so irrationally. I don’t get what they’re even *doing*. And talking to them is like trying to talk to a brick wall. Why won’t they listen to reason from any of us?”

“That’s just the council being the council,” Greyson said. He sounded tired and defeated. “This isn’t looking good, love.”

I looked up at him quickly, alarmed by the hopeless note to his voice. Before, he’d been fairly sure that the council would exonerate both him and Elle once they heard the facts. But now, he looked grim, and seemed a lot less confident.

Stretching onto my tiptoes, I pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Hey,” I said quietly, “I’m not giving up, and neither should you. Okay?”

He nodded. “Okay. Thanks, love.”

“Okay,” I said firmly. “I’m going to go see what Xavier is up to. We probably don’t need two wildcards at play, here.”

“Probably not,” Greyson agreed.

I turned and walked over to where Xavier and Ava were standing with Cesaries.

“—and it’s completely irrelevant,” Cesaries was saying as I approached.

“How can you say that?” Xavier demanded.

“The council represents the werewolf community in these lands, Xavier Evers, as well you know. We are well-respected and have a strong record of making decisions for the good of all wolfkind.” He shot a glance at me as I approached. “Caliana Hart, you stay back. I want you at a safe distance, or I will call my guards. The only reason I haven’t already tossed you back onto Redwood land is because of your relationship to the accused. Now,” he huffed, “if you will all excuse me, Ihave official business to conduct.”

And with that, he turned his back on all three of us and went back to his hushed conversation with the other council members.

I turned to Xavier and Ava. “Okay, what was that about? What was completely irrelevant?”

Xavier shook his head. “I don’t even know—I was just making shit up. It probably *was* completely irrelevant, but I’m not about to tell Cesaries that he was right.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I’m just trying to stall.”

“Why?”

“Hell if I know,” Xavier said, “but apparently, we need to keep stalling the council. Lucian is on his way with something that’s supposed to help, but I’ll believe that when I see it. It’s hard to rely on anything the princeling says.”

He was right about Lucian, but I was desperate for help and ideas, and if Lucian was getting ready to show up and offer either of those things, I was willing to wait for him.

“Okay,” I said slowly, “If we need to stall, I can try to help.”

Ava shook her head. “If you try anything, Cesaries will have you thrown out. Which might not be such a bad thing.”

She’d *attempted* to say that last part under her breath, but didn’t look concerned that I’d heard her.

But I ignored the dig. I didn’t have time to deal with it. Instead, I looked around, hoping an idea would jump out at me.

The campsite clearing was nearly empty except for us, the council, and the guards. But then I caught sight of Mrs. Smith on the far side of the clearing, standing with Big Mac. Their heads were bent together, and they were speaking quietly.

Neither of them looked particularly happy. I was just glad to see them talking—though it was a shame that this sham trial was the thing that had brought them back together.

I walked toward them, thinking I’d check in to see how they were doing and ask if they had any ideas about how to stall the council.

“—and he’s your son, Sabine. You need to do everything you can,” Big Mac was staying gravely. “You might not succeed, of course, but you have to try. If you don’t, I know you’ll regret it.”

“Mrs. Smith, Big Mac, we need to stall the council to give Lucian a chance to show, so if you have any ideas—”

“Not now, Caliana,” Big Mac snapped, shooting me a quelling glare. “Can’t you see we’re in the middle of something here?”

“No! I mean yes, it’s just that Lucian—” I stammered, but both women ignored me. Great, thanks.

“You’re right, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said firmly. “You’re absolutely right.”

And then she turned on her heel and marched toward the council.

I was so shocked, I did nothing but stand there and watch as she approached them. She paused before she reached them, taking a moment to wipe the tears from her face and compose herself, then she tapped Cesaries on the shoulder.

The leader of the council eyed her the same way he might’ve looked at a cockroach that had just knocked on his door. “Yes?” he asked coolly.

Mrs. Smith took a deep breath. “I know most of you,” she said, glancing around at the council members, “and most of you know me. And if you haven’t met me directly, you’ve probably enjoyed my white chocolate mocha at one time or another.”

This had an unexpected effect—at the mention of her mocha, I saw multiple council members light up.

I frowned, totally confused. Mrs. Smith had marched over there to talk to the council about her *mocha*? What the hell was going on?

But Mrs. Smith hadn’t finished talking. “But there are many things that you as a council don’t know. For example, you don’t know a thing about the man you’re accusing today.” She looked over at Greyson, still bound at his wrists and ankles. “You know him as the Alpha of the Redwood pack, but I know him as my son.”

The council members were silent as they listened.

“Greyson has risked his life countless times to save not only his own pack, but members of other packs. He fought Ryker, the Manus Cruentae, his own father, Letifer, the demon Seluna, and most recently Malakai—an enemy no one else even wanted to acknowledge, for fear of what he would do.” Mrs. Smith clenched her hands at her sides. “Silas might be Greyson’s father, but the apple fell very far from the tree when Greyson was born. He and Silas share no resemblance in body or spirit. All these things I’ve mentioned, Greyson did because he was looking out for the good of his pack, and for all werewolf kind. You likely didn’t even hear about all of those things, because Greyson doesn’t do anything for praise. Because of Greyson, the Alpha of the Vanguard pack has a mate in Elle, and we have a good pack member who fights alongside us for the right to be a Redwood wolf. Her inclusion in our pack has been entirely positive, and that’s more than most can say.”

I stared at Mrs. Smith, completely awed. She was speaking with so much power and poise, every eye in the clearing was on her. Even the guards were watching her.

“Doesn’t everything I’ve just mentioned count for something?” she went on. “Especially if the sire bond is broken, as MacKenzie has proven? Doesn’t my son’s good work count for *anything*, in the grand scheme of things?”

There were tears in my eyes. I’d been able to feel the love Mrs. Smith felt for Greyson in every word of her speech.

Cesaries cleared his throat. “Thank you indeed, Mrs. Smith, for your eloquent defense of your son. And while we acknowledge that Greyson’s good deeds are admirable, no werewolf is above the law.”

I tried to swallow down my snort of derision. It was incredible to hear Cesaries say that.

“That’s interesting,” I said, walking over. “Because the law you’re talking about was enacted *after* Elle was turned. In fact, it was announced after the summit—”

“Silence!” Cesaries snapped at me.

*If I could blast him with my magic again…*

Xavier appeared at my side. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

Cesaries took a breath to recover himself. “Be that as it may, we will continue our deliberations *without further interruption* until we reach a verdict. Which we will stand by.”

“They’re innocent!”

We all looked in the direction of the sudden shout.

An instant later, Lucian burst out of the trees, breathing hard. “They’re innocent! Both of them. And I can explain why!”

**Episode 4594**

**Greyson**

I watched as a naked Lucian sprinted into the clearing, and I felt my hope fade. I knew Cali was holding out hope for a miracle, but I sincerely doubted that the princeling would be able to pull that off. Given what I knew about Lucian, he was probably going to make things worse, no matter what he said.

Despite what I’d told Cali, I was losing hope. Early in the trial process, I’d managed to hold onto some hope that reason would prevail. But things weren’t looking good, and there was no telling how the council was going to react to Lucian.

I’d been trying to convey a sense of confidence to Cali, but there was no getting around it—I was losing my conviction in our ability to make it through this.

How could I not? Cesaries was being completely unreasonable. He was refusing to accept any evidence or testimony that—under normal circumstances, and during a fair trial—would’ve exonerated me.

I wondered if I should try to prepare Cali. I didn’t want her to be blindsided if this didn’t end up going my way.

“What do you think Lucian is planning to do?” Elle asked me, watching her mate carefully.

“I have no idea. I was hoping you might have a better guess,” I admitted. “Maybe since Cesaries let my mother speak for me, he’ll let Lucian speak for you.”

Cali walked back over to me, her expression grave.

“What’s going on?” I asked, though I could see that whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

She took my hand. “Cesaries is refusing to accept any more evidence.”

“So what does that mean?”

She took a shaking breath. “They’ve already begun their deliberations.”

I looked over to where Lucian was talking to Cesaries. Cesaries was shaking his head, but apparently, Lucian was refusing to be fobbed off.

“I *insist*,” he said stubbornly.

At that point, Armin emerged from the trees—Lucian hadn’t come alone. Behind Armin was that guy Fredo, who I recognized from the victory celebration at the palace. He’d been tasked with writing and then reciting a rather horrific epic poem, if I recalled correctly. Armin’s arms were filled with scrolls and books, and I couldn’t help but wonder if Lucian was planning to fight the council or just bore them to death.

But then a number of other Vanguard wolves emerged from the trees, and Cesaries looked at them. He pursed his thin lips, then turned back to the rest of the council members. They spoke quietly for a moment, then Cesaries nodded and turned back to Lucian.

“We have decided to allow you to present your argument before the council, Lucian of the Vanguard,” Cesaries stated, with his usual ostentation.

I wasn’t particularly inclined to smile, but in that moment, I came close. The council—and especially Cesaries—was always anxious to avoid anything that threatened them directly. The sight of the Vanguard wolves pouring out of the forest must’ve made them nervous. *That* was why they were letting Lucian present his argument—it certainly wasn’t because they wanted to make sure they had all the facts of the case.

Lucian nodded, then turned to Elle. He walked toward her, his eyes widening with horror as he took in the chains around her wrists. He whipped around to glare at the council members. “I am *outraged* that you have accused my precious forest rose of any crime at all—other than the crime of stealing my heart.”

*For god’s sake…* I tried not to roll my eyes.

“Arielle and Greyson are both innocent!” Lucian declared.

*We know that, get to the part about proving it!*

Cesaries waited for a moment, clearly expecting Lucian to go on. When he didn’t, the council leader raised his eyebrows. “I assume you have brought us some sort of evidence to support these assertions—something other than your glowing endorsement of the accused.”

Lucan gestured to Fredo. “Yes. I have brought with me my esteemed legal scholar. Not only that, Fredo is a historian and published poet.”

“Impressive,” Cesaries said with an insincere smile.

“Fredo has been hard at work, researching the charges you have brought against my mate and her Alpha.”

“Researching *what*, exactly?” Cesaries asked, looking discomfited by the idea.

“Researching whether there is any legal basis for the charges you have brought against them,” Lucian said.

I groaned. If the epic poem I’d heard was any indication of Fredo’s scholarship abilities, I might as well just ask the council to execute me now. That poem had been brutal.

Cesaries waved a dismissive hand. “There is no need for any outside legal advice, Alpha Lucian. Every member of the council is well-versed in werewolf law, of course. We are the ones who *create* that law, after all. I doubt we’ve overlooked anything.”

I couldn’t believe Cesaries had the nerve to be so fucking pompous and certain of his own rightness.

Lucian must’ve felt similarly, because he shook his head. “With all due respect to the council, I must beg to differ.” He turned. “Fredo! Come!”

Fredo and Armin hurried toward their Alpha. When they reached Lucian, Fredo took a weathered, leather-bound volume from the stack in Armin’s arms.

“Yes,” he murmured, opening the book to a marked page. “This, right here.”

I squinted, trying to see the title of the book he was holding. I couldn’t help but feel intrigued by this new approach. I wasn’t about to get my hopes up, but I was curious about what Lucian was planning.

Lucian pointed to the book. “The law concerning the so-called ‘crime’ you’re referring to in this case was actually written long ago before your own ruling was made. During ancient times, when werewolf society was far more savage, and our kind more ruthless.” He looked over at Fredo. “Go ahead.”

Fredo cleared his throat and peered down at the book. “The text is in arcane English. It is readable, but requires some interpretation, so I will translate as I read. It will be rough, of course, but I believe the message will be accurate.” He cleared his throat again. “*Should a true lupine be transformed, it will be*…” He paused, frowning, then his expression cleared. “Ah, yes. *It will be at the direction of its Alpha, and its Alpha alone, to decide the fate of the true lupine, should the individual in question be too*…” He paused again, clearly struggling with the word. “*Should the individual be too overzealous*.”

This dry passage had an unexpected effect on the council. They frowned, bent their heads together, and began to whisper among themselves.

I stared at them in shock. I couldn’t believe it—there was a chance that Lucian had just saved our asses. *Lucian.* Nothing was certain, of course, but at the very least, his old book seemed to have shaken up the council. They were discussing what they’d just heard, and that was better than nothing.

I glanced up at the grey sky. This was *not* where I’d planned to end up—held against my will as I underwent a sham trial before the council. But for the first time in a while, I allowed myself a moment of hope that I might still make it out of this bullshit.

Cesaries pulled away from the knot of council members and glared at Lucian. “We wish to see the text.”

Fredo quickly stepped forward and handed the old book to Cesaries, who accepted it and looked down, reading the text. I watched his mouth shape the words. Then he turned toward the rest of the council, showing them the book.

Cali was smiling. “This is it. This is really it. I can’t believe Lucian did it, but he did. The council can’t lie their way out of this—it’s right there in their own stupid laws.”

The council was still poring over the book. It was annoying that they were taking so long when the resolution seemed blindingly obvious, but that was just the council. They made a meal out of every little bit of bureaucracy.

Lucian paced in front of them, watching them closely. As time passed, he got increasingly agitated. He glanced back at Elle, then again at the council, who seemed to have begun to argue.

“You have spoken long enough!” Lucian burst out, his patience apparently having reached its limit. “This council can see the law written in that book, clear as day. As you did not go about the proper way of establishing your own law to replace the one of old, you have no choice but to release Alpha Greyson and my mate.”

Cesaries looked at him irritably. “We will make our decision when we have finished speaking, Lucian. We still have to deliberate on this matter—”

This was clearly not what Lucian wanted to hear, and he growled. The sound seemed to act as a signal to the Vanguards, and even more of them stepped out of the woods and toward the council.

“Either you release them now,” Lucian said icily, “or *I* will.”

Cesaries now turned around fully and gave Lucian a hard stare. “Alpha Lucian of the Vanguard pack, are you threatening me?”

**Episode 4595**

Lucian stepped toward Cesaries. The Vanguard wolves spread out behind him, looking like they were getting ready to attack. The council guards were reacting, too. They moved closer to the action, ready to defend the council.

Shit. This wasn’t good. The tension in the air was so thick I could feel it swirling around in the wind, and I was starting to worry that all hell was about to break loose.

This was all the council’s fault. Why couldn’t they just admit that they’d been wrong to start this witch hunt?

“It’s like they know they’re wrong, but they’re digging their heels in and refusing to admit it. Why don’t they just own up to it?” I muttered to Greyson.

He glanced over me in surprise, then laughed bitterly. “Cali, I thought you had a better read on the council than that. They’ll never admit to being wrong about anything. They think that being publicly mistaken would tarnish their sterling reputation.”

“Well, I’m not just going stand by and watch this all go to hell,” I said.

I looked over at Lucian, who was locked in a stare-down with Cesaries. Lucian had gone to all this trouble to prove Greyson and Elle’s innocence—the least I could do was support him. Still, part of me had been surprised by his sudden appearance. Maybe I’d underestimated him, but I hadn’t expected him to come through for us like this.

“I’m going in,” I said quietly.

I’d already started moving toward the confrontation when Greyson grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Don’t get caught in the middle of this,” he growled.

“I won’t,” I promised. “I’m not planning on getting caught at all.”

He gave me a long look. I could see the anxiety behind his eyes, but eventually, he nodded and released my arm. “Okay.”

I stepped toward Lucian and Cesaries, but just as I did, a few Vanguard wolves started shifting. Moments later, the same number of council guards shifted, too.

Okay, so that wasn’t great.

I walked past Xavier and Ava, who were in the middle of a whispered argument. At a glance, it looked like Xavier wanted to join Lucian and Ava was objecting.

“I am warning you all!” Cesaries declared, looking around. “You will *stand down*! Stand. *Down!* Do you hear me?”

No one did seem to hear him, and his warnings fell on deaf ears. All around me, the rest of the Vanguard pack members and council guards shifted, and then both groups charged.

I stepped back with a gasp and looked around at the erupting chaos.

This was bad—really bad. I’d hoped that cooler heads would prevail, but that didn’t seem likely at this point. I’d also hoped that the threat of fighting would be enough to knock some sense into Cesaries and get him to back down—or at least put his sham trial on hold. But none of that had happened. It was clear that the council was just as willing to fight it out as the Vanguards were.

I couldn’t help but find this extremely ironic. The council had refused to lift a damn finger to fight in the war—or to do anything to prevent it—but they were clearly champing at the bit to sacrifice their guards in the name of this rigged hearing.

I gritted my teeth, my fury rising once more. I *loathed* the council’s hypocrisy, and it had never been so fully on display as it was right now.

Magic flowed through my body, tingling in my fingers. I took a deep breath as I fought for control.

“Cali!” Greyson yelled. “*Cali!* Come back here!”

I could hear him, and I knew he was worried, but I wasn’t going to back down. Not now. I had to do something. I had to stop this before more people were hurt by the council’s ridiculous decisions.

Raising my hands, I loosed a huge blast of magic at the ground. A sonic boom hit my ears as the magic shot into the earth, halfway between me and the council.

The ground shook with the impact, and a handful of werewolves fell to the ground.

Cesaries looked around, his eyes flashing with fear. “What was that? Where did that come from? Who did that? Announce yourself!”

I glared at him. “Who do you *think* did that?” I yelled. “And I’ll *keep* doing it until the fighting stops. Only next time,” I added, narrowing my eyes, “my aim might not be so good.”

My heart was hammering, and I was fighting to look tough, even though I was so scared I could barely breathe. I was praying that Cesaries would fall for my bluff. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to bring myself to really blast him, even though I knew it would probably feel fantastic in the moment.

“This is *your* fault!” I yelled at him, gesturing at the fighting, at the bleeding wolves. “All of this is your fault. You never should’ve let this happen!”

“*I* didn’t let this happen,” Cesaries protested. “It was the Vanguards who did this—”

“Bullshit!” I snapped. “This is happening because the council is refusing to listen to reason. You’re refusing to accept *iron-clad proof* that your ‘charges’ are nothing but false allegations. You say you want proof? We’ve given you proof! What more do we need to do to convince you?”

Cesaries looked uncomfortable. “I’m sure I don’t—”

“Greyson has been nothing but a good Alpha for his pack, leading them to victory over any number of enemies who would’ve threatened every pack in the country if he hadn’t taken them down,” I said. “He has done *nothing* to deserve this level of scrutiny—this level of persecution.”

“And werewolf law is clearly on our side,” Lucian added, pointing to the old book. “My historian has done extensive research on the authenticity of this text.”

Clifford had been looking down at the book in question.

“He’s right,” he said to Cesaries. “This does seem authentic.”

I stared at Clifford, stunned. *I’d* known that Lucian’s historian was right, but I hadn’t expected anyone on the council to admit it.

“Of course it is,” Lucian said, swelling with pomposity. “That ancient text has been in my family for generations! Now! I demand that Arielle and Greyson be released immediately. The law dictates that they must be!”

Cesaries looked at him, then at Clifford, then around the clearing. He looked conflicted, like he’d been backed into a corner and wasn’t sure how to get out.

“The council must still deliberate,” he said stiffly. “Everyone needs to back away. Give us space!”

I turned away, shaking my head in disgust. The council was going to deliberate? Deliberate *what*, exactly? Probably the best way to save face.

I walked back over to Greyson.

“Well? What do you think?” I asked. “I think we might have a decent chance of getting you out of here, now.”

I wasn’t exactly feeling relieved yet or out of the woods… But we had to have a real shot now, right? Lucian had had some pretty solid evidence, and literally *everyone* here was against them. Couldn’t they read the damn room?

But Greyson still looked grim. “I really wish you hadn’t used your magic like that, Cali.”

I bristled, not shocked. “I know, but you saw what was going on, Greyson. I had to do *something*. It worked, too, in case you didn’t notice. And Lucian was right—either the council obeys its own law and releases you and Elle, or there’s going to be blood spilled here today.”

“Cali—”

“I’m not eager for another war—a coup, whatever you want to call it—but you saw what happened out there.” I jerked my head toward where the Vanguard wolves and the council guards were still standing, staring at each other. No one was fighting at the moment, but they were all ready to go at a moment’s notice. “Everyone here is ready to fight. And the truth is, Greyson, we tried it your way, and it didn’t work. Maybe it’s time for you to accept the fact that justice was never going to prevail in this situation.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. His gaze left mine and focused somewhere above my head. He suddenly looked distant and a little lost, and I regretted my words.

“I admire your dedication to diplomacy, Greyson, and normally you know I’d be fully behind you. But… this is the werewolf council we’re talking about,” I said. “They don’t operate like rational people. You *know* that. And there may come a point when we have to do things my way.”

Greyson looked at me again. “And what exactly is *your* way?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could say a word, Cesaries stepped away from the knot of council members.

“We have an announcement!” he bellowed, and everyone in the clearing turned to him. “We have reached a verdict!”

**Episode 4596**

The council had reached a verdict.

My heart started pounding at Cesaries’swords. Okay, so they’d reached a verdict, but I had no idea how to feel about that.

I took a deep breath, trying to force myself to feel optimistic. The council had been presented with compelling evidence. Big Mac had proven that the sire bond didn’t exist anymore. Lucian and his researcher had proven that their own laws dictated that Greyson and Elle should be released. And—failing all that—I’d just threatened to blast them into next week if they kept going the way they had been. How could they possibly find Greyson and Elle guilty? No respectable group of arbitrators ever would.

Still, I flexed my fingers, feeling my magic tingling through them. I wasn’t convinced that the council contained even one respectable arbitrator. And, one way or another, I was prepared to protect Greyson from the council and their guards if they decided to ignore the facts.

Glancing around the clearing, I did a quick risk assessment. There were a lot of council guards, but with the Vanguard wolves, Lucian himself, and Xavier—if he actually decided to fight—I was pretty sure we’d be able to take them on. Obviously, that outcome came with a lot of risk, and I knew that fighting the council would most likely have repercussions—but, by the same token, I really couldn’t see how this situation could get much worse than it already was. If the council found Greyson and Elle guilty, they’d probably try to kill them—it didn’t get any worse than that.

My magic crackled within me, and I felt myself preparing to make good on my threat to Cesaries, if push came to shove. It didn’t matter if Greyson didn’t like it. I would do what I had to do to protect him. I wasn’t some damsel in distress anymore. I was a Fae with magic—magic that I would continue to use if they kept threatening my mate.

But I *really* hoped I wouldn’t have to act again. The risk really wasn’t lost on me, and I didn’t like fighting when it was avoidable—and this whole situation had been completely avoidable from the very start. We were all in this mess because the council—and Cesaries in particular—had painted us into a corner without giving any thought to an exit plan. They’d gotten all worked up about this one non-issue, and now, they couldn’t seem to find a way to back down. And we were all paying the price.

Cesaries turned to the gathered crowd. He cleared his throat, trying for what was probably meant to be a dignified air. I hated him too much to ever think of him as dignified. “These have certainly been unusual proceedings. Never in the council’s long and storied history have so many obstacles been encountered in the process of reaching a—”

“Enough bullshit,” Xavier snapped, cutting off what certainly would’ve been an excruciatingly long wind-up. “Just tell us the verdict.”

Cesaries looked highly discomfited by the interruption—it was clear that he’d had a speech prepared and had intended to use it.

I balled my hands into fists. I was angry, too, but I was really hoping that Xavier wasn’t about to lose his temper.

Though when I looked around the clearing, I saw anger on everyone’s faces—save, of course, for the council and their attendants. It was obvious that everyone gathered who wasn’t in the council or affiliated with them was fed up with Cesaries and all his bullshit pomp and circumstance.

As we had a right to be.

Cesaries must have realized this as well as he frowned. “In any case,” he said, looking more uncomfortable by the minute, “after careful deliberation, the council has failed to reach a unanimous consensus on the charges. The decision is split.”

This statement was met with an immediate reaction by all of us.

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“A *split decision*?” Xavier asked. “That’s not a fucking option!”

“I won’t stand for this!” Lucian bellowed, red in the face.

“Does that mean we have to go through this whole farce all over again?” I asked. Ugh, I did not want to do that! More of this back and forth bullshit with the council ignoring everything we said.

Cesaries didn’t seem to hear any of us. He was waving his hands, trying to silence the crowd. “Quiet! Quiet, I say! What this means is that Greyson Evers and Arielle are going to be put on notice.”

I frowned at him. “What the hell are you talking about? *Notice?* Is that a thing?”

Cesaries didn’t even look at me. “They will be released, but any more infractions from either of them will result in swift and decisive action from the council.” He looked at the guards standing near Greyson and Elle. “Release the accused. The hearing is over.”

I stared at Cesaries, then around the clearing, stunned. It was over? Actually *over*? But what in the world did it mean, to be put on notice? What was the council’s non-decision going to mean for us?

Greyson strode toward me and wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tight.

“What does this mean?” I asked quietly, my mouth against his neck.

“It means this is over. We’re done. We can go,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

I pulled back so I could look at him. “But what does it mean that you’ve been put on notice?”

Greyson shook his head. “Nothing. It means nothing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s another classic council maneuver. It’s just a meaningless move to allow them to get out of this bullshit they’ve created without further embarrassment.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s dumb as hell, but I’ll take it.”

“But what is—”

“I imagine it’s kind of like being put on probation in the human world,” Greyson said. “But this version has no teeth.”

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

“Okay,” I said, trying to suck in a calming breath. “Okay. Well, we’re going to have to celebrate this.”

Greyson grinned at me, but before he could say anything, Mrs. Smith ran over to him and pulled him into a hug.

“I’m so happy,” she whispered tearfully.

“Me too,” Greyson admitted with a smile.

I looked over at Big Mac, who’d followed Mrs. Smith but was standing back, looking surprisingly emotional.

Wait—was that a *tear*? Something was definitely glistening on her cheek. I wanted to ask, but I didn’t dare.

I stepped away from Mrs. Smith and Greyson, who were still talking quietly. I wanted to give them some privacy.

Xavier walked over to me. “You must be pleased that Greyson’s escaped execution.”

I looked up at him. “I am, and I think you’re just as pleased, though you’re too proud to admit it.”

Xavier looked surprised for just a moment, but then he shrugged. “I suppose I am. I’d hate to lose the opportunity to kill him myself.”

I wasn’t in the mood for this, and I glared at him. “Not funny.”

“I disagree.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re happy—just admit it, Xavier.”

Xavier shook his head. “When hell freezes over.”

I ground my teeth. “God, why are you so stubborn? Why can’t you just admit you’re glad that Greyson’s going to be okay? And if you’re not glad, then why were you so ready to fight for him, back there? I saw you, and you were ready to throw down—”

“You should just let this go,” Ava interrupted.

“What?” I snapped.

She gave me a long look. “Leave it be. You’ve gotten everything you wanted—let it be enough.”

Everything I wanted? My gaze drifted back to Xavier’s blue eyes. Ava was wrong about that—I hadn’t gotten *everything* I wanted. But I wasn’t going to let that ruin this victorious moment.

Cesaries was walking toward us, and I looked over as he approached. Maybe hell had frozen over and he was going to offer some kind of apology for all the bullshit he’d just put us through—though if that was the case, I had no intention of accepting it.

“Caliana Hart, I would like to speak to you,” he said stiffly. “*Alone*.”

“I don’t know…”

I wasn’t all that interested in having a private conversation with Cesaries about anything, but he ignored my hesitation and grabbed my arm, leading me away from Xavier and Ava.

“I graciously ignored the fact that you disrupted council business,” he hissed into my ear as he led me away. “And the fact that you used your Fae magic to threaten me and the council.”

“What?” I asked, baffled and scared.

His eyes were flashing with anger as he pulled me into a small stand of trees, then stopped and glared at me. “Allow me to make one thing very clear, Caliana Hart—I am on to you.”

“You’re *on to* me?” I repeated stupidly.

His eyes narrowed. “Greyson may be your mate, but you are *not* a true Luna.”

**Episode 4597**

**Greyson**

My mother was hugging me tightly, simultaneously crying and trying to keep herself from crying.

“I’m just so relieved,” she kept saying. “Before the council ruled in your favor, my heart was beating a hundred miles an hour.”

I allowed myself a smile. “Of course they ruled in my favor,” I said, though I had to admit, I was still feeling shaky. “You never should’ve doubted.”

My mother didn’t smile back. “Greyson, I was so scared.”

“That I’d be found guilty?”

“Of course, but I was more scared that there was going to be a fight. None of us need that right now,” she said, shaking her head. “That was a *lot* of tension.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. Cali had been the first among them. She’d been ready to fight for me, which had brought me a plethora of mixed emotions. I glanced over at her. The last time I’d checked on her, she’d been talking to Xavier and Ava, but now—to my surprise—she was standing with Cesaries.

I frowned, wondering what the hell *that* was about. Was it possible he was offering an apology for his shit behavior?

The thought made me nearly laugh out loud. It seemed incredibly unlikely that Cesaries would ever apologize to anyone.

Big Mac walked over to me.

“I’m never going to testify at another council hearing,” she informed me with a scowl. “That went entirely the way I expected it to, and it was shit.”

“I’m really sorry about that,” I said. “I know that was a nightmare. I appreciate what you did for me, and I’m sorry the council didn’t treat you with more respect.

Big Mac didn’t answer me directly. She muttered something under her breath, so low that the only word I caught was *Charon*, then she turned to my mother. “If you’re done here, I can blip you back to the pack house if you want.”

“I would love that. Thank you, MacKenzie,” my mother said softly. “Would you give me just a few moments more with Greyson?”

Big Mac nodded stiffly and stepped away, but I didn’t miss the longing look on her face as she turned away from my mother.

“So?” I asked, turning back to my mom. “How are things between you two? Any softening?”

My mother shrugged. “Well, we’re talking, so that’s a good sign.”

“Of course.”

“And she did come to defend you,” she added.

“That’s true.” I smiled. “I hope someday I’ll be able to claim all the credit for bringing the two of you back together with my criminal trial.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she chided, but I saw a twinkle in her eyes as she gave me another hug. “I’m going to go with MacKenzie now.”

I nodded. “I’ll see you later, Mom. Be safe.”

“You too,” she said, then she went to join Big Mac.

I turned back to Cali and Cesaries, but just as I started to make my way toward them, Lucian and Elle stepped in front of me.

“Greyson, is it true?” Elle asked.

“Is what true?”

Elle glanced around, then leaned in close, lowering her voice. “Is the sire bond really broken?”

I looked over at Cesaries to make sure he was still a fair distance away, then I nodded. “Yeah. I trust Big Mac, and she seemed very sure. Besides, haven’t you noticed a change in the energy between us? I definitely have. I don’t feel the same connection as before. I don’t feel like I’m constantly on the edge of losing control.”

Elle nodded. “Yes, I suppose I do feel different, too. Not so out of control.”

She spoke quietly, and for a moment, I had to wonder if she was sad about the broken bond. It had connected her to me since she’d been transformed—perhaps the loss was harder for her than it was for me.

“I’m thrilled that it’s gone,” Lucian said firmly. “That bond was nothing but trouble.”

“Thank you for doing that research and bringing the law to the council’s attention,” I said. “That seemed to be the most compelling—”

“There is nothing I wouldn’t have done for my Arielle,” Lucian interrupted stiffly.

“Yeah, of course,” I said.

Lucian looked a little uncomfortable, which was unusual for him. “I would also like to apologize to you, Greyson, for my recent behavior.” He cleared his throat. “Especially for my behavior at the party. I… Well, I let my jealousy get the best of me, as I’m sure you know. And for that, I am sorry.”

I stared at Lucian, surprised. I honestly hadn’t thought he was capable of saying the word “sorry.”

“I appreciate that, Lucian,” I said. “And to be honest with you, I understand how you were feeling. Between the sire bond and your mate bond with Elle, we were both acting out over things we couldn’t really control. It was all a bit of a tinderbox.”

“Yes,” Lucian agreed, and Elle nodded.

“I’m glad that the sire bond is broken, too,” I said. “I think it’s going to be the best thing for all of us, going forward. We’ll be able to make better decisions, without being motivated by outside forces.”

“Right,” Elle said quietly.

I looked down at her. “And now that you have control, Elle, I hope you’ll take advantage of the opportunity to do whatever you want—*exactly* what you want, without anyone trying to make the decisions for you. This is what I’ve always wanted for you, and for a while there, I wasn’t sure if it was ever going to be possible.”

She looked up at me, her blue eyes wide.

My heart went out to her. She was a good girl, and I wanted what was best for her. I wrapped my arms around her in a friendly hug.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” I asked her. “Isn’t this why you wanted to be turned?”

She nodded her head against my chest. “Yes, it was one of the reasons.”

Lucian puffed out his chest. “And I think I have some idea of what the other reasons were,” he said with a sly smile.

I rolled my eyes. It was incredible—the moment Lucian behaved in a way that was almost human, he just had to remind me that some things never changed.

As annoying as it was to see Lucian standing there preening like a freaking peacock, there was something comforting about it, too. I knew now that I’d always be able to count on his support—but that support was going to come with the whole Lucian package.

“Well, my dearest forest rose,” Lucian said, pulling Elle to his side, “what would you like to do now?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we should celebrate!” he said with a smile. “We should do something to commemorate our victory over the council. How would you feel about a party—”

“*No!*” Elle and I shouted in unison.

“No party,” I said firmly.

“No, absolutely not,” Elle agreed.

Lucian looked crestfallen. “No? No party at all?”

Elle and I shook our heads.

“Perhaps another time?” he asked hopefully.

I didn’t answer, because over his shoulder, I saw Cali step away from Cesaries and walk toward me.

“Excuse me,” I muttered to Lucian and Elle, then I moved to meet Cali in the middle. “Glad to see you. You know I can only take so much Lucian, and I was reaching my limit. What’s up?”

“Greyson…” Cali trailed off, looking pale and drawn—like she’d just gotten some bad news.

“What’s wrong? I saw you talking to Cesaries. Was it about—”

“He knows.”

I looked down at her, confused. “Cesaries? What does he know?”

She swallowed hard and cast a furtive glance over her shoulder at the council leader, who was still watching her. “He knows I’m not a real Luna.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my heartrate ticking up.

“He just knows,” she said. “He knows I’m your mate, but not a real Luna. I don’t know what he plans on doing with that piece of information, but this is Cesaries we’re talking about, so I don’t think he’s going to use it to write me a valentine. Actually, I’m pretty sure he just threatened me.”  
 “What did he say?” I asked quickly.

“Nothing overt,” she said, shaking his head. “It was more how he said it. The threat was there, but it was an undercurrent—nothing was actually said.”

I looked over at Cesaries and shook my head with disgust. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it. I think he’s all bark and no bite. He proved that today, didn’t he?”

Cali hugged herself as a chilly breeze blew through the clearing. “Why is he the head of the werewolf council anyway? He isn’t a good leader. Does he just have dirt on everyone?”

I sighed. “Probably. He’s pretty terrible, and that affects every wolf in this area. Honestly, if I didn’t have a pack to run, I’d probably challenge him and become the new council head.”

Cali’s eyes lit up. “Wait, really? You could do that?”

**Episode 4598**

**Elle**

“—and if you really don’t want a party, I completely understand, my forest rose,” Lucian said quietly. “Though I do think an accomplishment as momentous as this deserves the kind of party only *I* can throw. But if you would really rather not, I think we should still find a way to celebrate. This is all very exciting. Maybe we could just have a quiet dinner together at the palace?”

“Yes, maybe,” I said distractedly. I was really only half-listening to him. My thoughts were elsewhere, and I kept stealing glances at Greyson, who was talking to Cali.

My thoughts were a whirlwind—whenever I looked at him, I felt a mixture of confusion and joy and a strange sorrow. Even though the sire bond had been so destructive, it had nearly driven both of us mad, it had also connected us in a way I didn’t feel with anyone else. It had kept us together, and in each other’s hearts and minds.

It was strange, because even though I knew it was a good thing that it was gone, I kept wondering what I had lost now that the sire bond had been severed.

But I didn’t want to think about that. I didn’t want to dwell on what I’d lost. Greyson wanted me to be able to do whatever I wanted, and that was what I wanted, too. But how was I meant to figure out what that was, exactly?

Should I think about what I gained from the loss of the sire bond instead?

I finally noticed the silence around me and looked over at Lucian. He had stopped speaking and was now looking at me in a strange way.

“What?” I asked. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “I was only admiring you, my sweet forest rose. I was only thinking about how lucky I am to have you as my mate.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it—I just liked the way that sounded. I used to wonder if Lucian was really Alpha enough for me, but that had been a long time ago. A lot had happened since then, and my opinion of him and his abilities had shifted as he’d proven himself—both in battle, and in quieter moments like the trial.

Added to that, he’d shown me that he was willing to apologize when he did something wrong, and to admit it when something was his fault. Those were all important traits in a mate. I knew this from speaking to Cali and to Lola, and from reading articles about healthy relationships in the magazines I’d borrowed from Lola.

“You apologized to Greyson, Lucian, and I feel like I should apologize to you as well,” I said. “For attacking you.”

Lucian shook his head. “I think it would be best to put all of that behind us, my love. I myself have already forgotten about it. I was acting irrationally. You were right to do something about it.”

But I suspected that he was lying, because when he looked at me, I saw sorrow in his eyes.

“I will admit that before we met, my darling, I had nearly given up hope,” he said. “I believed I would be forced to resign myself to living my life without a mate to call my own.” He shook his head, looking somber. “The idea would’ve been laughable if it hadn’t been so tragic. And then I saw you, and something inside me changed. I… I became a better man because of you. Which wasn’t easy, because I was already so vastly superior to my peers in every way possible.”

The wind in the clearing blew up, lifting the dead leaves from the ground and swirling them through the air. It seemed impossible that just minutes ago, I was being held by the council, facing execution, and now I was listening to Lucian profess his love—to me, and also slightly to himself.

Lucian took my hand, his eyes bright and shining as he looked at me. “Elle, can I kiss you?”

I thought about this for a moment. I liked it when Lucian kissed me. It made me feel warm inside in a way I still wasn’t used to. I liked it even when he was in the process of saying all those flowery things about himself.

“Yes,” I said.

Lucian smiled. He stepped closer and leaned down, pressing a kiss to my lips. One hand went around my waist, and the other cupped my cheek. His hold on me was light, and that—combined with the pressure of his lips—made me feel like I was floating.

He pulled away, and my lips felt strangely cold without him.

I looked up at him. “Will you kiss me again?”

“Of course,” he murmured, pressing his lips to mine again.

The warmth inside me spread—not like a fire, but like sitting in the sun on a warm day. Comforting and sweet and edged with a strange kind of hunger.

“Arielle,” Lucian said softly, “you will make a wonderful princess. And one day, you will be my Luna queen. Would you like that?”

“I do like the sound of it,” I admitted. I’d been raised the daughter of an Alpha; I understood power and the responsibility that came with it. What I didn’t understand was Lucian’s prince role and what that meant. Plus, there was something else to think about… “But would I have to leave the Redwood pack for good, if I became your Luna? Would I have to leave Greyson?”

Lucian took a deep breath. “Yes, you would,” he answered honestly. “You would have to make a choice, my precious forest rose, and that choice would hopefully be for forever. You have chosen to live in two worlds of late, with me as your mate and the Redwoods as your pack. But if you chose to move toward the future I speak about, you would have to make a clean break. Not that I’m pressuring you in any way,” he added quickly.

“No, of course not,” I murmured.

“I just wanted to make it clear that you would have to join the Vanguard pack if you chose to become a princess, and my Luna,” he said. “It’s something I hope you want at some point.”

I nodded slowly, struggling to absorb all this information. I’d gotten a lot better at sorting through information since I’d been turned—at the beginning, I’d struggled to understand just about everything. But even now, when I was given a lot of new information, I still had to take my time to understand it all.

I tried to process everything Lucian had just told me—choosing to be with him would mean leaving my friends and my Alpha. The idea of it felt strange and awful to consider.

But I shared a mate bond with Lucian. I knew I did—I could feel it tugging at me. And I couldn’t just ignore that. It had been overshadowed by the sire bond, which had muddied the waters where my loyalty was concerned. But now that the sire bond was gone, I wanted to spend some time exploring the mate bond and what it meant to me. Before, I’d always been aware of it, but I’d resisted it. Now, I wanted to understand it. It just felt like something I needed to do.

“My prince,” Armin said quietly. He bowed his head at Lucian, then at me. “My apologies for interrupting, but I wondered if I could send the Vanguards back to the palace now that the danger has passed. Unless you still have need of them?”

“No, I have no need,” Lucian said. “You may send them back.”

“And Fredo?” Armin asked. “Is he needed here?”

“No, he can go back as well. You too. Go and tell Aysel what happened. Tell her of our splendid victory over the council,” Lucian said, looking proud.

Armin nodded. “Yes, my lord—I will do just that. Thank you.”

“And tell Aysel how we trounced—”

I grabbed Lucian’s hand and started pulling him across the clearing.

“My dearest, where are we going?” Lucian asked, clearly surprised.

I didn’t answer him.

“Is something wrong, my forest rose? You seem troubled. If you tell me what’s bothering you, I will try to help.”

I still didn’t answer. He was going to find out what I had in mind soon enough.   
 “Elle—”

“Elle?” Greyson asked, turning as I marched toward him. “What’s going on?”

“My mind is made up,” I announced.

Greyson frowned. His gaze went from me to Lucian, then back to me again. “Your mind’s made up about what?”

Cali—who was standing next to him—frowned as well. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to live with the Vanguard pack,” I announced.

“Oh.” Greyson looked surprised. “Is that really what you—”

But I didn’t wait for him to finish, either. “I’m going to live with the Vanguard pack for good.”

**Episode 4599**

I stared at Elle in surprise. She was going to go live with the Vanguards again? And for good this time? I hadn’t expected this—especially not now, just as we were about to leave Three Devils Point.

“Is this really what you want, Elle?” I asked her warily. She *seemed* sure, but it didn’t hurt to ask. Plus, Lucian hadn’t been on his best behavior lately. That said, he had just made a huge grand gesture to show the error of his ways by coming to Greyson’s aid… “You want to go to the Vanguard palace and leave the Redwood pack forever?”

“Yes,” Elle said firmly.

“And no one talked you into this?” I asked. “*Some* people,” I added pointedly, glancing at Lucian, “can be quite insistent.”

“No,” Elle said, shaking her head. “Lucian didn’t talk me into this. No one talked me into this. It was my idea.”

I wasn’t completely sure I believed her, but I turned to look at Greyson. “How do you feel about this?”

Greyson shrugged. “Yeah, it makes sense.”

I was shocked to hear him say that. I already knew the sire bond had been broken—Big Mac had proven that once and for all—and I was relieved about that, but I was also surprised by Greyson and Elle’s reactions. I’d expected things to change, of course, but maybe not quite so fast. And I definitely hadn’t expected them to become so… *indifferent* to each other.

Lucian clapped his hands and looked around with a cheerful look on his face. “Well, in keeping with the good spirits generated by my forest rose’s good news, I would also like to invite the alliance to rejoin the Vanguards!”

Greyson raised an eyebrow at Lucian. “Hang on, *you’re* inviting *us*?”

I nearly rolled my eyes. This was so typical of Lucian.

“Youquit the alliance, Lucian—you didn’t kick the rest of us out,” I said bluntly. “If anything, you’re going to need an invite to get back in.”

Lucian waved this idea away dismissively. “Oh, Caliana, please be serious. Of course the alliance would want the Vanguard pack back within its ranks. After all,” he added smugly, “do I need to remind you who among us finally defeated Malakai?”

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “You know, Lucian, I’ve seen a lot of sides of you today, and I’m going to give you a piece of advice—stick to the humbler version of yourself whenever possible. Do that, and the alliance will welcome you back.”

Lucian huffed but didn’t protest, which I took to be a good sign.

Elle turned to me. “Cali, are you mad that I’m leaving the Redwoods?”

“What?” I asked, stunned by the question. “No! Elle, of course I’m not mad. How could you think that? If this is what you want, then I’m so happy for you. And I’m so glad that you’ll get to be able to be with your mate all the time.”

This was all true, of course. But I couldn’t help but wonder if part of my pleasure was wrapped up in the knowledge that Elle would be leaving the Redwood pack—and getting away from Greyson once and for all.

This was a troubling thought, and I didn’t like that it had occurred to me. I loved Elle. I’d been there when she was changed. I’d seen her grow in so many ways, and I thought of her as a good friend. But at the same time, it was hard to ignore the memories of the jealousy I’d experienced when Greyson had been caught up in the sire bond madness with her. I knew it was over, and it felt completely wrong to still harbor that jealousy, but I couldn’t deny its existence. And—worst of all—I was well aware that any lingering resentment was completely misplaced. Neither one of them had been responsible for the things the sire bond had forced them to do.

But it was also hard to ignore the bitterness of the thoughts that occurred to me whenever I thought about their bond.

But even with all those thoughts racing through my head, I *was* sad that Elle had decided to leave us forever, and I pulled her into a hug.

“I just want what’s best for you, Elle,” I said truthfully. If that was Lucian in the end… Color me surprised. Happy, but surprised.

Lucian held out his hand, and Greyson shook it.

“I’ll speak to the other Alphas in the alliance,” he said. “We’ll talk about bringing the Vanguards back in.”

“Yes,” Lucian said, nodding. “Very good. Thank you, Greyson Evers.” He looked over at Elle. “Well, my forest rose?”

“Well what?” Elle asked, with her usual obtuseness.

“Shall we go to your new home? I want to share this wonderful news with Aysel and the rest of the pack. They will be overjoyed!”

Elle nodded. “Yes, we can go.” She turned to me again. “My things, from the pack house—”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said, giving her another hug. “I can bring everything over to the palace.”

“There will be no need for that,” Lucian said briskly. “I can send Armin to gather Arielle’s belongings.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fine—”

“And it really isn’t necessary, anyway,” he went on.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I plan to take my darling on a shopping spree for an entirely new wardrobe, appropriate for her new life,” Lucian informed us all, smiling benevolently at Elle.

“Oh, that sounds nice,” I said. I looked at Elle and squeezed her hands reassuringly. “And you’re always welcome at the Redwood pack house, Elle. Come back anytime, okay?”

Elle nodded. “Yes, thank you, Cali.” She looked up at Greyson. “And thank you, Greyson.” She paused for a moment. “Goodbye.”

We watched her walk away, shoulder to shoulder with Lucian. It was strange, knowing that she was leaving us for the last time. It felt final—and it probably was.

“Greyson,” Xavier called, walking over to us. “What’s going on?”

“With what?” Greyson asked.

Xavier nodded toward Elle’s retreating figure. “What did you do to make Elle go back with Lucian?”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted. “She said she wanted to go. It was her idea. She wanted to be with her mate.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced, but I couldn’t help but notice the small smile on Ava’s face. It looked slightly smug.

“It’s always nice when the right people end up together, isn’t it?” She looked up at Xavier. “Don’t you think so, X?”

Xavier shot a look at me, then turned to Ava. “Let’s go.  
 “Hey, Xavier,” Greyson said. “Thanks again for coming down here and… Thanks.”

Xavier shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m sure you’d do the same.”

“Thanks to both of you,” I said, glancing between Xavier and Ava. Her dig hadn’t been lost on me, but I wasn’t going to let it get to me—not now, when things were looking so good.

“Okay, let’s go, too,” Greyson said as Xavier and Ava walked away. “I’m ready to get the hell out of this place and never come back. If I never see a member of the council again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Amen to that,” I muttered.

Greyson took my hand, then led me through the council’s campsite and into the woods.

“It’s over,” he said, looking down at me. He looked lighter, and his eyes were shining again.

“I know,” I said. “Thank god.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips, then shifted to his wolf form. He lowered his huge grey body, and I climbed on. It felt so good and so right to be on his back again, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling the warmth from his body sinking into me.

He turned in the direction of the pack house and took off, sprinting through the trees, clearly relieved to be free.

I loved traveling like this with Greyson. I could feel the movement of his muscles as he ran, and I held on tight. I was enjoying the ride, treasuring it ever more than usual, reveling in the relief of being together and free. I’d been so scared during that sham of a trial. I’d been trying to stay positive, but I’d really started to worry that the council was never going to release him.

And I was so glad that Elle was free, too. I was excited about this new chapter of her life. But I still felt guilty about how happy I’d been when she’d told us she was leaving the pack house for good.

I sighed. There was no point in dwelling on it. Feelings were feelings, and I couldn’t beat myself up for experiencing them.

And on the plus side, I *did* have Greyson all to myself, now.

When got to the pack house, Greyson slowed to a stop. He crouched down again, and I slid to the ground.

He shifted back to human form and looked around. “It’s good to be back. It’s been one hell of a day.”

“You can say that again,” I said with a nervous laugh.

He took my hand as we started toward the house. “And now that the sire bond is broken, we can try to get back to our regular life.” He shot me a sideways glance. “Whatever that is.”

That made me laugh, but as we got closer to the house, something else occurred to me—something that had been bothering me for quite some time.

“Hey, if the witches really did break the sire bond, then what’s going on between us?” I asked, looking up at him.

He frowned. “What do you mean?”  
 “Why can’t we mind link?”

**Episode 4600**

Greyson stopped walking and turned to me. He pulled me close, and I was immediately aware of the fact that he was naked. His body heat radiated through my clothes, and I had no objections to our proximity. I needed this closeness, this embrace, especially after… well… *everything.*

“Love, I don’t know why our mind link isn’t working,” he admitted. “I know it’s a little strange that we can’t access it, but I’m not worried.”

“You’re not?”

He shook his head. “And you know why?”

“No,” I said quietly.

“Because mind link or not, I know how I feel about you. I know we’re bonded, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

My heart fluttered as he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. They felt searing hot in the cold air, and I drank them in, opening my mouth and letting his tongue run along mine. I felt carried away by the feeling of him, and I loved it. I needed it. I wanted to let myself be pulled under by the sensation of his body against mine, but something was still bothering me.

I pulled away and looked up into his grey eyes. “Greyson, I love you, and I know you love me, but that doesn’t mean I’m not worried about the mind link. I can’t just blow it off.” I shook my head. “I just keep thinking about everything that’s happened to me—the Seluna mark, the headaches, the visions, all of that stuff. One thing I’ve learned since becoming a *due destini* is to pay attention to things like that. Anything out of the ordinary can mean something.”

Greyson took this in. “You’re right, and I want you to feel good about everything involving us,” he said. “Maybe we can talk to Big Mac about it. If we want answers, we’ll need to ask *someone*, and I’m not really wild about involving the witch sisters again if I can possibly avoid it.”

“Yeah, I want to avoid asking them, too,” I said. “But Big Mac seemed pretty mad after the trial. Do you think she’ll agree to help?”

Greyson shrugged. “Who knows with Big Mac? But it probably won’t hurt to ask. We can head over to her place tomorrow and talk to her about it,” he said, then he shook his head. “Come on, let’s go inside. You’re cold.”

When we walked into the house, we were met by most of the pack, who had gathered in the living room.

“They’re back!” Sage shouted when we walked inside, making everyone cheer.

“How’d it go?” Ravi asked.

But before we had a chance to answer, the door opened behind us, and Lola and Jay appeared in the doorway, bags in hand.

“Oh my god! You’re back!” I said, shocked.

Lola grinned at me. “You seem disappointed to see us. We can leave again if you’d prefer?”

“Of course not,” I said, laughing as I pulled her into a hug. “I just wasn’t expecting you. I’m so glad you’re home!”

Greyson was being drawn into the living room as everyone pelted him with questions about the trial, so I pulled Lola a little ways into the hallway to speak more privately.

“How did it go with Jay at the couple’s retreat?” I asked.

She smiled again, looking purely happy. “It was really great. Jay was really understanding about everything, and it was so nice for it just to be the two of us, without having to worry about any of the pack stuff that’s always going on.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“You should think about trying it with Greyson,” Lola said. “It was great to just be away for a while. So, what’s everyone been up to around here? What did we miss?”

I blew out a breath. “I’m not sure where to begin.” I thought for a moment. “I guess I’ll just start with the day that you went away.”

“Okay,” Lola said slowly, suddenly looking wary.

I leaned against the wall and started talking, telling her about everything that had happened since she’d been gone. It was *a lot*.

By the time I got to the trial, Lola’s eyes were blazing with fury.

“Are you *kidding* me?” she demanded.

“I wish,” I said, shaking my head. “It was such a mess.”

“I would’ve torn Cesaries to pieces if I’d been there,” she said fiercely.

“Maybe it was better you weren’t, then,” I said. “It was kind of a delicate situation.”

She still looked furious. “I’m never going to forgive the council for all the shit they’ve chosen to ignore—god, they didn’t even do anything when I got fouled by the Bitterfangs during the game at the summit!”

“Oh, this was so much worse than that, Lola,” I said grimly. “I was ready to blast every last one of them straight to hell. I should’ve done it, too.”

“Agreed,” Lola growled.

I glanced around and saw that Greyson was speaking with Torin.

He looked at me and—catching my eye—waved me over.

“Excuse me, will you, Lola?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll go put these away,” she said, lifting her bags.

I walked over to Greyson and Torin.

“Hey, Torin,” I said. “What’s up?”

“I was just telling Greyson that Big Mac is here,” he said.

“She’s *here*?” I asked, surprised.

Torin nodded. “She’s upstairs with Mrs. Smith.”

“Wow, okay,” I said, struggling to process this information. “Well, *they’ve* made up really fast…”

“They’re probably just talking,” Greyson said. “But either way, it’s a good sign.” He grabbed my hand. “Let’s go talk to Big Mac now.”

I hesitated. “Well…”

“What?” Greyson asked.

“I’m just wondering if now might not be the best time to bother them,” I said, remembering how Big Mac had snapped at me for interrupting them during the trial.

“But if we don’t ask her now, I know you’re just going to keep stressing about the mind link,” Greyson said.

He was right, and I couldn’t argue with that. I’d been really disheartened when Greyson had said he wanted to wait until tomorrow to speak to Big Mac. But now the witch was right here in our house, so it did make sense to take advantage of the opportunity.

But as we walked upstairs and down the hall toward Mrs. Smith’s room, I started to have some doubts about the wisdom of our plan. And when we reached the door, I stopped short.

“What is it?” Greyson asked.

I looked at the door. “What if they’re busy? You know… making up for lost time,” I said, eyeing Greyson significantly.

He hesitated, then reached up and knocked lightly on the door.

“Come in,” Mrs. Smith called immediately.

I was more nervous to enter than I would’ve thought, and I didn’t know what to expect on the other side of the door, so I was relieved to see the two of them sitting on the edge of the bed. They were sitting close together and seemed to have been talking.

Greyson opened his mouth to ask Big Mac for her help, but I quickly spoke over him.

“We just wanted to make sure that you both made it back okay,” I said.

Big Mac eyed me warily. “And why wouldn’t we have made it back?” Then her eyes narrowed. “Why are you really here, girl?”

I did some fast calculations in my head. She was being curt, but she was always curt, and she hadn’t bitten my head off, which had to mean she was in a good mood. A *relatively* good mood—it was all relative when it came to Big Mac—but that meant it was now or never.

I took a deep breath. “We came to ask about the sire bond magic that you did at the council hearing. You really did see that the bond was gone, right?”

She nodded. “I did. But, for the record, having the sire bond severed was a very stupid thing to do.” She glared at Greyson. “That kind of magic is very complex and can spin off in all kinds of unknown ways. It was a dangerous risk.”

“I know that,” Greyson admitted, “but I had to do something. The sire bond was ruling my life.”

My heart was beating fast. I was almost afraid to ask the next question, but I knew I had to. Even if the answer was devastating, I had to know it.

“Did you notice anything else when you did the spell?” I asked.

Big Mac stared at me. “Like what?”

This was it—my worst fear. For a moment, I hesitated, wondering if it would be better not to know the answer. I hated that Greyson and I didn’t have the mind link, but maybe I’d be happier not knowing why.

But no—that was the coward’s way out.

I pulled in a shaking breath. “Did you notice anything wrong with our mate bond?”

“Your mate bond?” Big Mac repeated blankly.

I nodded. “Has that been cut, too?”

**Episode 4601**

Big Mac shook her head. “I didn’t bother to take a really good look at your mate bond during the spell, but no, I didn’t notice anything particularly unusual.”

I glanced at Greyson, feeling helpless. “Then why isn’t our mind link working?” I asked Big Mac.

Ever since Greyson and I had discovered that we were mates, our mind link abilities had served as a barometer for the state of our bond. It was unsettling to know it wasn’t working properly—even if the mate bond itself was still intact.

Big Mac shrugged apologetically. “I didn’t see anything wrong with your bond, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t need healing. Mate bonds are like anything else—stronger than say a non-supernatural relationship, but they can get worn down, damaged, frayed, all of the above…”

I wasn’t used to Big Mac answering my questions so directly and easily, and it was kind of unnerving. Honestly, it almost felt like she was about to drop a big bomb on us. If it could do all of those things on its own, could it break? I thought that mate bonds were unbreakable—freaky witch magic that no one should attempt set aside.

Maybe she was being nice because she was about to move to the other side of the world to get away from us for good. Or perhaps she was going to announce that this was the very last time she was going to help us. Or maybe she was just about to unleash on us with more vitriol than ever before.

But when I really thought about it, I realized I only felt weirded out because I wasn’t used to Big Mac being so… agreeable. Typically, she peppered her comments with insults and reminders of her annoyance. But now, she was being so *nice*. Which was made even more surprising by the fact that she’d left the Redwood pack house in a way that suggested she didn’t want anything to do with us anymore.

“What do you mean, our mate bond needs healing?”Greyson asked.

Moments later, a familiar irritated frown settled onto Big Mac’s face. It was actually kind of a relief that she was back to treating us like airheaded morons.

She glared at Greyson. “Surely you haven’t forgotten the idiotic spell you allowed those witches to perform on you? The one where they put their grimy hands all over your bonds? That wasn’t natural. *That’s* what I mean. You let those sisters pull your bonds out of your body and fuck around with them.” Big Mac shook her head. “Like I said, it was a tremendously bad idea.”

I frowned. “But the damage is reversible, right?”

I didn’t know what I’d do if our bond never recovered. Mind linking gave my relationship with Greyson a level of intimacy that I’d come to rely on. Not to mention how useful it was when we needed to share information privately.

Greyson took my hand and squeezed it.

*I might not be able to hear his voice in my head, but I can still read him. That hasn’t changed, thank goodness. He’s telling me that we’re going to be okay. I hope he’s right. I* knew *that subjecting our bond to that spell was a bad idea—and I hate that I was right. Hopefully we can fix it.*

Big Mac softened slightly. “I think you can fix it, yes. The two of you have a very strong connection.” She glanced down at our clasped hands. “Some might even say that you’re disgustingly in love.”

“Thank you?” I asked.

Big Mac gave me a strange look before turning back to Greyson.

“Your mind has just experienced a traumatic event, Greyson. The spell those witches performed on you shouldn’t be taken lightly. Manifesting physical representations of a person’s bonds is tricky work, and not something any witch should decide to do on a whim—nor should any werewolf,” she added, giving Greyson a pointed look. “It takes years of study to get something like that right, and from the looks of it, those witches didn’t hone the skill as much as they should have. There’s a reason why most witches aren’t interested in casting such a risky spell—it’s too much pressure. You’re working with what should be unbreakable and tinkering with it. Not to mention the fact that most of us live and die by our reputations.”

“So, what now?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac sighed. I could tell we were seconds away from being dismissed.

“The only thing you can really do is wait. It’s going to take time for your bonds to settle back to where they’re supposed to be.”

Next to me, Greyson tensed. I knew he didn’t like being passive. He wanted to do something, to fix this, to force our bond back to its former state with sheer force of will, but it didn’t look like that was an option this time.

“Are you sure there’s nothing else you can do?” I asked Big Mac.

She heaved a loud sigh and rolled her eyes. “You asked, I answered. I’m sorry it wasn’t the answer you wanted, but it’s the only one you’re getting. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” She gestured to the bedroom door.

“Thanks,” I said.

Greyson and I left, letting Big Mac and Mrs. Smith get back to reconciling. At least something good had come out of this.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked me. “I know today’s been rough. Honestly, I’m impressed that you’re keeping it together so well.”

“I’m good,” I said. “Honestly, I should be asking how *you’re* doing. You’re the one who went through the worst of it. Being held by the council must have been hard. And I know you feel as off-kilter as I do, with our mate bond acting all shaky.”

Greyson shook his head. “I’ll admit that it’s been a rough couple of days. I hate that there isn’t an easy answer for how to fix this—beyond just waiting.” He grinned. “But at least we know being ‘disgustingly in love’ will help.” He laughed. “Big Mac didn’t seem all that impressed, but I’m happy to know that you think it’s cool that we’re so gross.”

I laughed, and Greyson leaned down to kiss me. I melted into the kiss and pressed myself against him. I was glad that the glitchy mate bond hadn’t taken away our passion or our ability to touch. We’d been through that before, and it was a hell of a lot worse than not being able to mind link.

I pulled away and looked him in the eye. “I suppose it could’ve been worse in the end. I’m glad we don’t have to do anything big or dangerous to get the mind link back. We just have to wait. I’m not the most patient person sometimes, I know, but I can do that.”

Greyson pulled away. “Now that all of the council and sire bond stuff is behind us, I want to get back to normal with the rest of the pack. I feel like I’ve been so wrapped up in all the other stuff that I’ve let my Alpha duties fall by the wayside.”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’m sure that Rishika will be happy to have you fully back in the fold. And I’m definitely ready to get back to that, too, so whatever I can do to help, just let me know.”

Greyson smiled. “I definitely will, but for now, I’m going to go find Rishika. See you later!”

He gave me another kiss, then headed off. It was good to see that he was so excited about getting back to normal pack business. Being there for the pack was important to Greyson, and now that the sire bond had been broken, the council had been dealt with, and we knew that our mate bond was intact, he’d finally be able to focus.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see a text from Gael.

*Hope you had fun last night! Sorry it got busted! Your boyfriend was cool, too. Here are some pics we took. So glad to have you on the team!!*

I laughed and started swiping through the pictures. My eyes were closed in a bunch of them, which was kind of lame. But, despite the craziness of the night, I definitely looked like I was having a good time. So did Elle.

One photo in particular caught my eye. It featured Xavier pulling me out of the pool. He looked every bit my strong, capable knight in shining armor—even though he’d acted like an ass only moments later—but he wasn’t what I was looking at.

My eyes wide, I zoomed in on the pic. Peeking out from under my collar, I recognized the edges of a shape that I would never forget, as long as I lived.

*Shit… Is that the Seluna mark?*

**Episode 4602**

My heart started pounding a mile a minute, and I could already feel myself hyperventilating. I kept zooming in tighter and tighter on the picture, wishing and hoping that I wasn’t seeing what I thought I was seeing. My mouth was dry, and my throat felt tight. I was starting to worry that I was about to faint.

*That can’t be the Seluna mark! Seluna is dead—I killed her. And Xavier and Greyson went through hell to get her ashes to the demon world. This can’t be happening! Dammit, I can’t go through that again—the stress, the pain, the lack of control over my own body, my own* mind.

I rushed into my bedroom and then into the bathroom, yanking off my shirt as I went. I twisted around to look at my back in the mirror and let out a huge sigh of relief. There was nothing there. No redness, no handprint, no nothing. Just like that, I started to relax.

I put my shirt back on and looked at the photo again. I zoomed in and shook my head in confusion. There was definitely *something* there. I remembered feeling that familiar pain after Xavier had pulled me out of the pool, but it just didn’t make any sense. The pain had been there, but I hadn’t felt any of the other symptoms of an active Seluna mark—and I definitely hadn’t seen any signs of Seluna herself.

Then I remembered Xavier saying that he’d come to the party to find out if I was okay. Had he known something? Maybe he’d rushed over to the party because he’d found out that Seluna might have come back to wreak havoc on my life again. He’d definitely acted strangely at the party… Maybe that was why.

The last time the Seluna mark had taken over my life, Xavier had done everything in his power to help me—so if she wasin the picture again, why wouldn’t he have told me? If he’d known there was even a *chance* that I was being affected by the mark again, wouldn’t he have given me some kind of warning? Why would he choose to keep me in the dark about something like that?

*Xavier couldn’t have known. We’re in a weird place right now, but I know that he still cares about my safety. He’d do everything in his power to help me if the Seluna mark came back. He wouldn’t just leave me to fend for myself.*

I fell back onto my bed. Nothing about this was adding up.

Unfortunately, there were a million things that could’ve led to Xavier showing up at that party. There was no reason to think he’d appeared because of Seluna—especially when Xavier hadn’t done anything to indicate that that was the case.

Besides, unless Seluna was alive or her ashes weren’t actually in the demon world, she couldn’t possibly be targeting me again. And both of those scenarios were impossible.

Weren’t they?

I needed to get a second opinion on this, even though it was probably nothing. It *had* to be nothing. But I still needed to know for sure. I wasn’t going to be able to function until I was certain that I didn’t have to worry about Seluna. Deep down, though, I knew there was no way she was still alive—or any version of alive that would allow her to continue her reign of terror.

We’d worked hard to get the ashes back to the demon world. It was almost impossible to enter that realm—I highly doubted that the ashes had somehow made it back to the human world. We would’ve known if that were the case, wouldn’t we? I would’ve sensed something more than just a fleeting brush of dread.

Not to mention the fact that Seluna never would’ve let us win the Bitterfang war if she were still around. She absolutely would’ve killed me by now. I was sure she wouldn’t have wasted the opportunity to take advantage of the rift between me and Xavier and somehow use her otherworldly influence to throw me into harm’s way. Given half a chance, she would’ve stopped at nothing to murder me.

For what felt like the millionth time, I zoomed in on the picture Gael had sent. Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, but the mark… It was definitely there. It couldn’t have been anything else.

I got up and went to find Lola. She would help me work through this. I knew she wouldn’t hesitate to tell me if it turned out I was just seeing things. She always gave it to me straight—even when I didn’t want her to.

I made my way to Lola’s room and found my friend sitting on her bed, unpacking her things. She looked up as I came through the door and immediately stopped what she was doing.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost… Which, knowing this pack house, is actually a very real possibility.”

I handed her my phone. “Not a ghost, exactly, but close. Look at that picture. Do you see anything strange in it?”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Of *course* Isee something strange! Why is Xavier pulling you out of a pool at a *frat party*?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what I wanted you to look at.” I took the phone and zoomed in and pointed at my back. “Do you see that?”

Lola squinted at the screen. “I guess I see a little redness at the edge of your collar. What, did you get scratched or something? It’s not a hickey, is it? Cali, *tell me* Xavier didn’t give you that hickey—”

“No! It’s not a hickey! I think it’s the Seluna mark!”

Lola scoffed. “What? Why would that thing show up again out of the blue?” She shook her head and narrowed her eyes at me. “Seems more like you’re trying to distract me from the fact that you were at a frat party with Xavier. Which is surprising, because I know that’s not his scene. Not to mention the fact that it’s a frat party that you, for some reason, did not *invite* *me* *to*!”

“Lola, it wasn’t a frat party,” I said. “In fact, it was a party thrown by the crew team that *you* signed me up for *without telling me*! How could you do something like that without consulting me?”

Lola didn’t even have the decency to look the slightest bit ashamed. She just shrugged. “I knew you were worried about paying for school, so I got you a scholarship. What’s the big deal? Scholarships are for people who need the money, right? You’re a person who needs the money, so I secured it for you. Most people would be thanking me.”

“But I don’t even know the first thing about playing crew!” I said, exasperated.

Lola laughed. “Neither do I, but I’m pretty sure you don’t say ‘playing crew.’”

“That’s not the point!” I retorted. “Quit deflecting! I want to know how you deep-faked me into the video that you used to get me on the team!”

“That doesn’t matter, Cali,” she said. “What matters is that I got you the scholarship. You’re all set for school. You don’t have to worry about money, and I’ve inadvertently given you a social circle to hang out with while you’re studying. Now there’s no excuse for you not to go back to school, if that’s what you want.” Lola shrugged. “Problem solved—and you didn’t even have to do anything. Aren’t you lucky to have a friend like me?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “We’ve veered so far off topic! This isn’t about the crew team or the party or any of that. This is about the Seluna mark appearing on my body again. We went through so much to get rid of it—I don’t even want to think about the implications of it being back again. Could it have something to do with why Xavier’s been acting so weird?” I glanced down at the picture and shook my head. It felt a little crazy to even think. “There has to be a connection, doesn’t there?”

I ran my fingers over the phone screen, lingering on Xavier’s handsome face. When I glanced up from my phone, I caught Lola eyeing me strangely.

“Do you hear yourself?” she asked. “Like really, *really* hear yourself?” She shook her head and stared at me with something very close to pity.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I demanded. “And, of course, I can hear myself! What are you trying to say?”

Lola frowned. “Look, girl, I love you, you know that,” she started. “But what I’m saying is that you’re clearly looking for connections that aren’t there. This is desperation, Cali, and enough is enough. You need to get this through your head: *Xavier isn’t yours*. Not anymore. What is it going to take for you to accept that?”

**Episode 4603**

**Greyson**

I found Rishika outside, overseeing Charlie and Violet while they worked on the yard. It was starting to come together, and it *almost* looked like we hadn’t fought a literal battle on the lawn.

Rishika nodded at me as I joined her. “Glad to have you back—and in one piece, too.”

“Glad to be back.” It really was good to be here without the threat of the council and the uncertainty of the sire bond hanging over my head. It felt like I could finally get back to the things that really mattered—namely, ensuring that the Redwood pack was successful and thriving.

“Is it over?” Rishika asked, an uneasiness in her tone. “Everything with the council?”

“It is,” I said. “They shouldn’t bother us anymore, at least about the Elle situation. Big Mac helped us prove that there was no sire bond between me and Elle, but the council, as usual, wasn’t convinced. I ended up having to admit that I turned her. Believe it or not, in the end, Lucian used an old legal text to prove that the council had no real grounds to punish me.”

“Wow, Lucian was actually useful for once?” Rishika asked. “I never thought I’d see the day where he solved a problem for you rather than creating one. I guess people really can change.”

I laughed. “Yes. I’m shocked, too. He even agreed to rejoin the alliance. He’s still Lucian through and through, but he’s actually being decent for once. I guess that’s why I wasn’t too upset when Elle decided to rejoin the Vanguards. For good.”

My calm response to Elle’s decision had been the strongest proof yet that the sire bond was actually gone. Lucian’s assistance with the council had made it a lot easier to see Elle leave with him. It felt good to have been released from something that had exacted so much control over me. It was also good to know that Elle was happy with Lucian, which was all that really mattered.

“That’s what she wanted?” Rishika asked. “To leave our pack and go with Lucian?”

“Yup, her decision,” I said. “If she’d shown even a shred of doubt, you know I would’ve encouraged her to rethink things. But it’s what she wanted. Lucian’s her mate, after all.”

“Good,” Rishika said. “If she’s happy, I’m happy for her. But I have to say, I don’t like the idea that the Redwoods almost lost their Alpha without anyone in the pack knowing about it.” Rishika’s expression was strained. “This pack deserves to know if its leadership is under threat, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “Of course, and fair enough. It all just happened really quickly, and everything’s fine now. Nothing to worry about.”

“But what if it hadn’t ended so well?” Rishika pressed. “What would’ve happened then? Cali hasn’t gone through the ritual to become our actual Luna, and we don’t really have a strong hierarchy in place. What would’ve happened to us if you’d been executed?”

The weight of Rishika’s questions landed heavily on my shoulders. I didn’t have an answer for her, though I knew I owed her one. Part of my responsibility as Alpha was to make sure that the pack would be okay if something happened to me. I’d been so wrapped up in the Bitterfang war, and then the sire bond and the council—not to mention all the problems and battles that had come before all of that—that I hadn’t had a chance to sit down and really figure that out.

And if I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that my preferred successor was Xavier. The Redwoods knew him, and he cared about the pack almost as much as I did, even though it didn’t always seem that way—especially lately.

*Despite everything that’s happened, Xavier is really the only person I’d trust to take over. He’s strong, has good instincts, and wouldn’t hesitate to make the necessary sacrifices for the sake of the pack. There’s no one else who’d do as well in my place.*

The realization was jarring, and not one that I wanted to share with Rishika just yet. Since Xavier had left the pack, he’d lost a lot of respect within our ranks. Rishika was just as skeptical as the others, and I was worried that she’d doubt me if I brought up Xavier right now.

Colton had the lineage to take over, but he wasn’t really leader material, nor had he ever expressed any desire to lead a pack of his own. Not to mention the fact that he was off with Maya somewhere, starting a family. Which was still a shock to me. I’d never imagined in a million years that Colton would become a father. Maya probably had her hands very full.

“You’re right,” I admitted, glancing at Rishika. “And I’ll make sure to build a plan for us. I never want the pack to feel like they don’t have a safety net.”

Rishika nodded. “Good idea. If the day ever came when someone had to take your place, I’d want it to be someone that the whole pack trusts completely. Someone who’d carry on the Redwood ideals and respect everything that you’ve built. You should have someone specific in mind, just in case. The Redwood pack has made a few very powerful enemies—the kind who won’t hesitate to exploit any vulnerabilities the moment they appear. If the worst ever happened, we wouldn’t be able to afford even a moment of confusion about who’s in charge.”

“You’re right again,” I said. “I’m glad you told me all this—I appreciate your perspective. I’ll put something into place.”

Rishika had been holding down the fort, making sure I could concentrate on the council and the sire bond problem without worrying about the state of the pack, so her advice was invaluable.

*Xavier has always wanted to be Alpha of the Redwood pack—though that might’ve changed, now that he has a pack of his own. The only thing I would never allow would be my pack being absorbed into the Samara pack, or taking on their name. The Redwood pack has to stay the Redwood pack, no matter what.*

Maybe it wasn’t even worth broaching the subject with my brother. But if it weren’t Xavier to take over, who would it be?

I would have to think more about it. I wanted to talk to Cali about this, too. She wasn’t my real Luna yet, but she still needed to be involved in decisions as important as this one. I valued her input, and I knew there was a chance she’d have a few strong opinions of her own about what to do if the worst ever happened.

Instinctively, I reached out to Cali via mind link before I remembered that I couldn’t do that right now. Frustration flooded through me.

“I need to go talk to Cali,” I said to Rishika.

“See ya,” Rishika said, her attention already back on Violet and Charlie, who were now filling huge lawn bags with piles of dead leaves and sticks.

*This whole “just wait for our mind link and mate bond to heal” approach just isn’t going to work for me. I can’t deal with our mind link being broken like this. There has to be a way to speed up the healing process!*

I shoved through the front door, and there was a yelp from the other side.

“Whoa there, speedy,” Torin said, rubbing his elbow. He’d just been reaching to open the door.

*Wait! Torin’s a healer!*

“Hey, Torin,” I said. “Can I talk to you about something?”

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of this before. Torin could be the key to Cali and me getting back to normal.

“Of course!” Torin said cheerfully. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know if you know this, but I had an… experimental spell cast on me to break the sire bond with Elle, and my mate bond with Cali was damaged in the process. Because of that, our mind link abilities aren’t working. I asked Big Mac about how to fix it, and she said that it would heal by itself in time, but I’m wondering—is this something your healing magic might be able to address? I don’t want to just sit around and wait.”

Torin looked thoughtful. “I’ll admit that I’m not familiar with the specifics of werewolf mate bonds—never had any reason to be—but I also think that anything that’s broken can be healed.”

“That’s great,” I said. “Any ideas on how we might do that?”

My frustration had already given way to hope.

“Hmm, let me think…” Torin frowned in thought for a few moments before his face lit up. “Have you ever tried meditation?”

I arched an eyebrow and shook my head. “Meditation? Really?”

“Really,” Torin said firmly. “I think it would be a great way to speed up the healing process.”

“Well, okay then,” I said with a shrug. “Honestly, I’m willing to try anything. Will you help me?”

**Episode 4604**

**Xavier**

Ava and I were arriving at the Samara pack house. The run back had been quiet, and I was glad for it. I had a lot on my mind. Mostly, I was doing my best not to think about how I’d just been around Cali and Greyson, and under such tense circumstances. Still, I was glad that Greyson was okay and that everything had worked out.

*I don’t want to think about becoming the Redwood Alpha or winning Cali just because my brother died. That’s not the way I’d want to get Cali back, if I ever had the opportunity. She’d be devastated if anything happened to Greyson.*

The idea made my stomach twist.

Ava and I shifted back to human before we walked into the house.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Ava told me. “Wash this crazy day off my skin. You joining?”

I shook my head. “No, I want to check in with everyone.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “All right, suit yourself,” she said. “But you know you have to let go of that tension you’re holding sooner rather than later, X. You know, *rest*?”

“Sure,” I said dismissively. “At some point.”

She left, and then I went in search of coffee. As I approached the kitchen, I heard voices coming from inside. I immediately picked up on the stressed note in Knox’s voice and slowed to a stop, not wanting to interrupt just yet.

“I know that you’re my friend, Blaine, and that’s never going to change. But you have to stop acting out—it’s not making your life any easier. Xavier’s our Alpha now, and you have to fall in line. That’s just the way things are. We’re part of the Samara pack, and that means that we have to listen to Xavier. Period.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little proud. The Knox of a month ago would never have said anything like that—especially not to one of his cronies. It made me feel good to know that we’d been able to repair what had been so broken between us.

I knew I was doing a good job with the Samaras. I was building something important, something that would last. Now, it was a pack that would make an impact—and already had. When I’d taken over the pack, it had been a shell of its former self. Now, we were only getting better, and I had no doubts that soon, we’d be as strong as any other pack in our territory.

*I can’t let the fact that Adéluce forced me into this life take that away from me. The Samaras are doing well because of my choices—choices that I made* in spite of *Adéluce’s antics. Truthfully, my success with the pack is probably a slap in Adéluce’s face. Maybe that’s one of the reasons why she’s been so rabid about getting back at Ava and Cali, lately.*

I finally stepped into the kitchen, interrupting Knox and Blaine. Blaine tensed as soon as he saw me, but I held up a hand to stop him before he could speak. I had something to say, and I didn’t want him to say anything that would make me change my mind.

“I know things got heated between us, Blaine,” I said. “There was stuff going on that had nothing to do with you, and I took it out on you. I shouldn’t have done that. I can be hotheaded, and I own that, but I need you to cut me a little slack. Whatever you think, I’m not out to get you. I want this pack to be strong, and that means I want you to be strong, too. You’re part of this pack. I want you to know that you have a place here. An important one.”

*And I also want you to know that if you continue to cross me, I’ll make you wish you were never born. But I don’t need to add that. Hopefully he knows it by now.*

I forced a smile as Knox grinned and shoved at Blaine’s shoulder. “See, man! I told you it would be fine!”

Blaine didn’t look at me as he spoke. “It’s all good,” he muttered. “I like being part of the pack… And I’ll try not to be such a dick from here on out. It’s been a little weird moving from one Alpha to another, but I’ll try to be better. Really. I want to see the Samara pack do well.”

I let my mouth stretch into a full, genuine smile. I didn’t know how I’d expected him to respond to my olive branch, but this was the perfect outcome. It was never good to have discord within a pack, and I was happy that I was finally taking steps to remove it from mine.

“That’s all I can ask of you, man. To try.” I looked past the two men and focused on the coffee pot. “Now all I need is a cup of coffee.”

I said a silent thank-you when I saw that a fresh pot had been brewed. I poured myself a cup and raised my mug at Knox and Blaine as I passed them by. “I’ll leave you two to it.”

I jogged upstairs and into Ava’s and my bedroom. I felt really good about how that had gone. It was no secret that pack politics could be extremely fraught, and that infighting had the capacity to destroy a pack from the inside out. I’d been in the throes of a power struggle with Greyson just before I’d left the Redwood pack, and I knew firsthand that conflict like that could go on for a long time with no solution in sight. I didn’t want that for the Samaras, and I didn’t want to fight with Blaine. I wanted to focus on more important things.

*Like building up this pack even more. I’m so proud of what it’s already become. The best part is that it’s only the beginning. We’re going to do great things, and that’s going to be even easier now that we’re all officially on the same page.*

I didn’t hear the shower running as I slipped into our room, so I knocked lightly on the bathroom door. “Hey, you okay in there?”

“Why don’t you come in and find out?” Ava called.

I grinned and opened the door to find Ava lounging in the bathtub, strategically placed bubbles covering all the good parts. Well, almost all of them. I lingered in the doorway and took her in. My gaze caught on her breasts floating in the water, partially covered with suds. I also took a moment to admire the way her dark hair trailed down her back before disappearing into the water.

“What happened to a shower?”

Ava lifted her foot from the water and pointed it at me. “Changed my mind,” she said. “Did you change yours, too?”

I grinned and set my coffee cup on the counter. Then I stripped and stepped into the hot water. I sighed with appreciation as I settled in, slipping into the space between Ava and the back of the tub so that once I was seated, she was flush against my chest.

I wrapped my arms around Ava and pulled her close, feeling both comfortable and truly content.

Ava sighed and laid her head back on my shoulder before running a finger idly up and down my arm. “You did well today.”

“I know,” I replied.

Ava laughed. “You’re so full of yourself!”

“You know me,” I said cheerfully. “If I don’t toot my own horn, who will?”

“You’ve got a point there,” she said. “Anyway, I know that I pushed you a lot today, but you were right. If my brother had been in Greyson’s place, I would’ve done whatever I needed to do to get him out. Just like you. I admire how hard you fought for Greyson—especially since the two of you aren’t always on the best of terms.”

I pondered her words while I let my hands run lazily up and down her body. I liked the feeling of her slick skin, and I couldn’t ignore the tickle of arousal I felt as my hands navigated her soft curves.

“I wouldn’t say I *fought* for Greyson,” I said. “I just didn’t want that batshit council to win. They don’t deserve to feel like they’ve done anything right—ever.”

Ava laughed. “You really hate them.”

“I do. They’re useless. Never around when you need them most, but definitely always there to remind you of what you’re doing wrong. And it’s dangerous for an entity like that to have that kind of power. That’s why I went so hard at them—it wasn’t because of Greyson.”

Ava turned to look at me, and it felt like she could see right through me. “Whatever your reasoning, you saved your brother today. I’m proud of you, X.”

I grinned. “Oh? I don’t suppose you want to *show me* how proud you are?”

“And how would I do that?” she asked, her husky voice dripping with flirtation.

I felt my grin turn wolfish. “Surprise me.”

**Episode 4605**

Lola started massaging her temples, as if this whole situation was giving her a headache.

“If you ask me—and you pretty much did—it’s clear that you’re fixating on this handprint thing as a way to get back with Xavier. What I *can’t* understand is why.” She shook her head. “Why would you spend so much time thinking about Xavier when he’s acted so terribly? You and Xavier are toxic now, so why don’t you just let him go? Get on with your life? You still have a fantastic mate—one who’s actually here and always good to you, I might add. Quit obsessing over the guy that can’t even be bothered to give you basic respect.”

I reared back from Lola as if she’d slapped me. I was used to her direct approach, and I normally loved that she never pulled any punches, but this was extreme, even for her.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this!” I burst out. “Do you really think so little of me? That I’d make up something terrible just to get back with Xavier? How can you of all people just dismiss me like that?”

A flash of hurt crossed Lola’s features. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, let me finish,” I snapped. “I want you to hear what I’m saying and really believe me. This isn’t about my feelings for Xavier. I know that he didn’t treat me well when we broke up—or afterwards—and that he said some really horrible things to me, but I still care about him. That’s never going to change. And I think he cares about me, too. In fact, I *know* he does.”

The kisses we’d shared over the last few weeks jumped into my mind, but I didn’t focus on them—the way Xavier always acted afterward basically canceled them out, anyway. Also, I didn’t want to present them to Lola as proof of our lingering connection. Kissing Xavier and blurring the lines between us wasn’t a good idea—especially when it hurt Greyson so badly. But I didn’t need Lola to throw that in my face, either.

“You’re right—Xavier might not want to be with me anymore,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean that we aren’t still important to each other. That we don’t still matter to each other. Lola, I came to you because I really need your help with this. Why can’t you see that?”

She looked stricken. “I never meant for you to think that I was dismissing you. I just…” She paused for a moment. “I was only ever worried about you. Please try to see it from my perspective, Cali. This guy treats my best friend like crap, and my best friend is all torn up over him, thinking that it’s what she deserves. That’s not okay with me. I don’t ever want you to think that this is the kind of behavior you should accept.”

*She’s right—Xavier’s hot and cold behavior has really taken a toll on me—but I can’t just write him off. Even if that’s exactly what I* should *do. But I just can’t. Not yet. Not until I know what’s really going on with him.*

I sat next to Lola on the bed and rested my head on her shoulder. “I know you were just trying to be a loyal friend. If the situation were reversed, I think I might’ve said the same thing to you.”

From the outside looking in, my situation with Xavier *did* look toxic—I had to give her that. But it didn’t feel that way when Xavier and I were together. Even when he snapped at me… I just never seemed to take his harsh words all the way to heart.

Lola laughed. “I hope so. If Jay ever talks the type of shit that Xavier does, you have my express permission to teach him a lesson.”

“I will, I promise.” I sighed. “I know you’re being a loyal friend, but…” I hesitated. “I have a lot to tell you about recent developments with Xavier.”

Lola sighed. “Not surprising. I guess we haven’t really had much time to talk lately.”

I laughed. “Understatement of the century.”

“Okay, then tell me all about it,” she said. “I’m all ears, and I’m ready to give you any advice I can.”

I sighed. “Honestly, there’s so much to tell you, I’m not even sure where to start. I guess the biggest thing is that before Kira died, she told me she had suspicions that Xavier might be under some kind of spell. She was able to prove it, too.”

Lola reared back in shock. “Wait a minute—Kira figured out that Xavier is under a *spell*? But what does that even mean?”

“That’s just the thing—I’m not sure. Kira died before we could really dive into what it meant, but before the war escalated, Kira, Ava, and I—”

“What?” Lola burst out. “You worked with *Ava*? Man, I really *have* missed a lot. I fall out of the loop for one second, and you’re ready to replace me with your ex’s new girlfriend?”

I laughed and gave her a playful swat. “That’s not quite it, but we did find a little common ground. The one thing Ava and I can agree on is that we both want Xavier to be safe. Though our definitions of ‘safe’ might be a little different.”

Lola nodded. “I’m sure that’s true. You and Ava have different definitions of a lot of things.” She started shaking her head in disbelief again. “Sorry, I’m still stuck on the fact that you and Ava worked together. I didn’t *remember* getting any notifications that hell had frozen over…”

“Stop, I know it’s crazy,” I said. “But it’s not like anything came of it. We didn’t find what we were looking for. Kira tried a spell to get more details about what might be affecting Xavier, but all she did was confirm that there was *some* sort of magic at play. But that isn’t really useful, since we can’t find out who’s behind it, or even what the magic’s effects are.”

“That sucks,” Lola said. “You worked with evil Ava and didn’t even get anything out of it.”

“I know,” I said gloomily. “And right after we came up short, Ava decided she was done trying to figure it out. And now, with Kira gone… I have no idea what to do, or how to find out what’s really going on with Xavier. I can’t stop thinking about the possibility that he’s really in danger. I know I might seem obsessed with him, but really, it’s just concern.”

Lola nodded. “Okay, I’m starting to get it.”

“I’m glad. Even after everything that Xavier and I have been through, you have to understand why I want to help him. Even though we’re not together anymore, he’s still my mate. That means something to me, even if it doesn’t mean anything to him—though I don’t actually think that’s the case.”

“I totally understand,” Lola said. “You two have a lot of history, and your connection’s still there, for better or worse.”

I nodded. “And besides—wasn’t Xavier your friend, too?”

Lola nodded. “He was, you’re right. I cared about him a lot. But you’ll always come first, no matter what. When Xavier started acting like an ass, I had to distance myself from him. That was the only way I could really be there for you.”

“And I appreciate that, Lola, I really do,” I said earnestly. “I’m so glad that we’re finally talking this out. I’ve been wanting to bounce it all off of someone for so long… And, of course, I can’t really get into this with Greyson.”

“For obvious reasons,” Lola finished, nodding. “If I were Greyson, I definitely wouldn’t want to hear you talking about Xavier with this kind of… attention to detail.”

I sighed. “I know, and I’ve tried to spare him. It’s just that the last few weeks have been so hard. And with all the losses of the war…”

Jacqueline’s name hovered unspoken between us, and an unmistakable cloud passed across Lola’s face. I sensed that she wasn’t in the headspace to talk about that right now. I hoped that her retreat with Jay had at least brought her a little more peace on the matter, though I was sure it would take a long time for her to really heal.

“Whatever you want to do, Cali, I’m here for you, and I’ll support you,” Lola said. “No judgment, no comments, no analyzing—I’ll just be there as a shoulder to cry on, or an extra set of hands if you need something done.”

I squeezed Lola’s hands in mine. “Thank you. But I already have an idea about what to do next.”

Lola arched an eyebrow. “Uh-oh.”

I shot her a look.

She put up her hands. “Oops, my bad. I said no judgment, didn’t I? Okay, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to do what Kira told me *not* to do because it might be the only way,” I said. “I’m going to ask Xavier about it.”

**Episode 4606**

**Xavier**

Ava moved to face me in the tub and kissed me deeply, her tongue twisting softly into my mouth. I pulled her tightly against me, squashing her breasts between us, and swirled my tongue with hers, reveling in the taste of her.

At the same time, I dipped a hand below the surface of the water and gently slid my finger along her folds until I reached her clit. She moaned and bucked, sending some of the bathwater sloshing over the sides. She spread her legs wider, and, seeing my cue, I dipped my finger inside her and held it there while she shuddered against my hand.

“How about another?” I asked, before dipping another finger inside. She shuddered and spasmed as I slid them deep, my thumb playing against her clit.   
 “Xavier,” she moaned softly. She began to roll her hips against my hand, fucking herself on my fingers. She ran her wet hands through my hair, pulling as her breath quickened.

She opened her heavy-lidded eyes and gazed down at my erection, the tip of which had come between us. She reached down into the water and wrapped her long, graceful fingers around it, and then it was my turn to groan as she slowly slid her hand up and down my cock.

“*Fuck*.”

“Do you like that?” she purred. “I thought you didn’t want to rest?”

I fell back against the tub, subtly jerking my hips in time with her strokes so now I was the one in control again as I fucked her with my hand. My eyes drank in the sight of her breasts as I quickly pumped my fingers in and out of her.

I leaned forward, taking her hardened nipple in my mouth. “Resting”—I swirled my tongue around her skin—“is”—I grabbed at her other breast with my free hand, dragging my mouth along her skin to tease the other nipple with my teeth—“overrated.”

Ava gasped, leaning forward so that her lips brushed my ear. “I want you inside of me.”

“Funny, because that’s exactly where I want to be,” I said, taking my fingers out of her. “You ready for me?”

“Yes,” she said. “I can’t take this ache anymore.”

I grabbed her hips, lifted her up so that she was hovering just above my tip. I held her hips tightly, keeping her upright even when she tried to sink down onto me herself. She huffed, frustrated and pulled at my hair. I couldn’t be too cruel—I had to give her what she wanted. What we both did. Slowly, I brought her down onto my cock, plunging deep inside her until we were both gasping against each other.

Once I was fully sheathed in her fluttering warmth, we stayed that way, almost completely still, until I pulled her close and kissed her. She clenched around me, and her tongue dove deep into my mouth and stayed there, like she was mimicking my cock, pulsing deep inside her.

I began to guide her hips up and down my cock, the water sloshing between us. She braced her hands on the sides of the tub and took over, increasing her speed and rolling her hips against mine. Waves of pleasure sent a spray of goosebumps across my flesh as she swirled her hips, a wicked smile playing on her lips. Since she was taking care of our pace, I kept my hands busy, first palming her breasts and playing her delicious pink nipples between my fingers, then trailing a hand down between her legs and smoothing my thumb over her clit.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” I asked, dragging my mouth up her throat before placing a hard kiss on her lips. “I can’t wait to feel you come.”

Once more, I leaned down and took one of her nipples between my lips, then dragged my tongue against it. “Turn around.”

Shaking, she did as she was told, and I helped guide her by the hips, staying inside her the whole time. The sensation of her relaxing and flexing around me as she moved sent waves of pleasure coursing through my body. I pushed her forward so that I could admire her ass, shining with soap suds and beautifully round, and then I lay back to watch myself slide in and out of her.

Then, I took the wet rope of her hair in my hand and tugged it, pulling her back to lie against me. I rested one hand on her hips to hold her flush to my thighs, and the other curled around to cup her breast. I jerked up against her, driving my cock deeper. until a high-pitched cry exploded from her mouth.

“I *said*, I can’t wait to feel you come,” I said as I slid the hand on her hip between her legs to circle her bundle of nerves.

“*Xavier*,” Ava panted.

I obliged, jerking my hips up hard. I braced myself with one hand and reached around with the other to palm and knead her breasts. Then I dropped that hand down and, once again, took the tight bud of her clit between my fingers.

She tightened around my cock, which meant she was close. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her tightly against me, then I pivoted my hips around, swirling the tip of my cock in her depths until her moans cut through the air.

“Fuck, I’m coming!” She ground her hips hard against mine.

The sound of her pleasure paired with the sudden pressure around my cock was too much to handle, and my own climax started just behind hers.

“Fuck, Ava,” I grunted, thrusting even harder into her, not stopping as pleasure overtook the both of us. “I fucking love you.”

I gripped her jaw, pulling her face back so that I could reach her mouth. Her tongue met mine, and we slowly flicked the tips together as my orgasm kept coming, renewed by how tightly her body was holding on to me.

“*Fuck*, I love you,” I panted out. It was like I couldn’t stop saying it. I’d lost the filter.

Ava collapsed against me, and I stayed inside her, still twitching from the aftershocks of one of the most extreme orgasms I’d ever experienced with her.

I let out a happy sigh and kissed her again. I could tell by her flushed skin that she’d enjoyed it just as much as I had. It felt so good to just let go and live in the moment.

“You really are something, aren’t you?” Ava said breathlessly.

“I could say the same about you.”

She pulled away and moved to get out of the tub, and I was close behind. I felt refreshed and rejuvenated, like the stress of the day had completely melted away.

*I can’t believe how easy it is to tell Ava that I love her now. It’s surprising. And it doesn’t feel like I’m just slipping back into an old habit, or anything like that. This love is new. Different.*

*A problem,* a voice inside me said.

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist. Ava was already heading back into the bedroom, and I called her name.

She turned back and looked at me with a question in her eyes.

“I love you,” I said. “Just wanted to say that while—”

“—while you weren’t inside me?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I guess.”

Ava smiled. “I’ll never get tired of hearing it. I love you, too.”

Suddenly, her mouth turned down, and she lifted a hand to her head.

“Ava? What is it?” I asked. “You okay?”

Just like that, the pleasant flush disappeared from her skin, leaving her looking pale. Her eyes had a hazy look that definitely hadn’t been there a few moments ago.

She shook her head, reaching for the wall to stabilize herself. It looked like she was about to collapse. “I don’t know, just a little head rush. I’m sure it’s—”

But before she could finish her sentence, she stumbled again. I was at her side in an instant.

“Ava, what’s going on?” I demanded. “What’s happening? You have to tell me so I can help you.”

Ava’s eyes started to roll back in her head, and I wrapped my arms around her, holding her up so that she wouldn’t slump to the ground.

“Ava? Ava! Talk to me!”

*This can’t be Adéluce, right? She wouldn’t do this right now...*

And then I remembered that Adéluce interfering at this exact moment was completely on-brand. I’d been so happy, had felt so completely content with the way things were—Adéluce would never have missed such a perfect opportunity to send everything crashing down, just to cause me pain.

Carefully, I laid Ava down on the bed and placed a hand on her cheek. “Ava? Come on, baby. Answer me. You’re okay, right? Are you okay? Come on, Ava, talk to me!”

Ava’s eyes fluttered open.

“Thank fuck! Are you okay?”

She stared at me blankly. “I remember everything.”

**Episode 4607**

**Greyson**

“Follow me,” Torin said, pushing me back outside. “Whenever I want to meditate, there’s a place in the woods I like to go. I found it not too long after I got here.”

Curious, I followed him. He took me a little ways into the forest, and I was surprised when we came across a wide ring of mushrooms. I’d thought I knew these woods like the back of my hand, but I’d never seen this before.

“Wow, did you make this?” I asked.

Torin shook his head. “No, I found it.” Then he laughed. “Fae have a knack for these things—our connection to nature always leads us to amazing natural phenomena that give us peace. This is a great place to feel centered.”

I nodded. “I don’t have the slightest idea what any of that means.”

I was trying to keep an open mind, but when people started talking like Torin was now, I usually checked out. It wasn’t that I didn’t know peace, but for me, peace was knowing that my enemies were dead. So overall, I was feeling pretty peaceful at the moment—even though I was a little stressed out about the mind link issue.

Torin smiled. “It’s okay if you don’t understand. We’ll get there, don’t worry.”

He sat cross-legged on the ground and gestured for me to sit across from him. “Join me; you need to create a connection with the earth.”

“Sure,” I grunted.

I sat down and tried my best not to fidget. I’d never been one for meditation. And right now, sitting in the middle of the woods with my eyes closed, I was trying to… what? I didn’t actually know what I was trying to get out of this right now, but I needed… *something.*

“Okay, the first thing you need to do is relax and close your eyes,” Torin said. “Focus on your breathing.”

I tried to obey his instructions, but concentrating on my breathing was way harder than it sounded.

“I can’t stop thinking,” I said, frustrated. “Isn’t this meditation stuff supposed to help me stop thinking? If so, it’s not working.”

“What are you talking about?” Torin asked calmly. “Mediation isn’t supposed to stop you from thinking, but it *should* help you refocus what you’re thinking about.”

I shook my head. “What does that even mean?”

Torin didn’t answer my question. Instead, he said, “Tell me about the spell the three witches put you through.”

“Okay,” I said. “Um, they formed a circle and made me stand in the middle, and then they started chanting stuff that I definitely don’t remember clearly enough to repeat. Shortly after that, I went under, and then it was over. Oh, and they pulled these strings out of my mouth—bloody strings that represented my bonds—and I felt like I was going to be sick.”

Torin winced. “That sounds intense—and I appreciate the details—but I still think you might be leaving some things out. I don’t want a report of what the sisters did—I want to know what you were thinking about during the spell. How did it feel? What sensations were rising in your body? Were you afraid? Hopeful? Anticipatory?”

I frowned. “I don’t know. I guess it felt…”

I trailed off, not sure how to continue. I kept trying to grasp how it felt so I could explain it perfectly to Torin, but it was difficult. I hadn’t really thought about how it *felt*—at least not mentally. I supposed it had felt strange. It had felt like I might’ve been making a big mistake. I’d been a little scared, too, but not enough to make the witches stop.

Torin sat there patiently, waiting for me to find the words.

I sighed and really tried to consider the emotions I’d dealt with. “Well, it was terrifying, to be honest. My initial instinct was to say it was scary, and that’s true, but it was more than that. ‘Terrifying’ is a better word. I had no idea what was going to happen. And then when I went under, I ended up reliving an old memory. One that I hadn’t thought about in a long time.”

I paused as the memory flooded my brain once again. I felt a chill, and a bad feeling dropped into the pit of my stomach. I considered telling Torin “thanks, but no thanks,” and that I’d figure things out without meditation, but Torin spoke before I could say a word.

“Don’t be scared, Greyson,” he said. “And don’t run away from it, either. Keep going. I feel like we’re almost where we need to be. Just trust the process.”

I still didn’t speak right away. There was something about revisiting that memory that felt strangely awkward. I’d never thought I’d have to share it with anyone—I’d had no plans to ever even describe it out loud. But now Torin was asking me to tell him all the gory details, and I didn’t know how I felt about that. I didn’t know if the memory was something I needed to share.

*I suppose I should try to be clinical about this. Torin said he might be able to help, and I’ll kick myself if I don’t see this through. I just need to disconnect from the emotion of the memory and talk it out. It might actually be good for me.*

“Okay, here goes,” I muttered, then I raised my voice so Torin could hear. “When I first arrived at my dad’s place when I was a kid, I had to spar with Xavier and Colton. Silas forced us, of course. He always did that—pitting us against each other. We got pretty brutal, and Silas was always cheering us on and insulting us if we did badly, praising us when we hurt each other. It was ugly, and I’ve tried for years to forget it ever happened.”

Torin nodded. He had a sympathetic look on his face, but thankfully, I didn’t see any pity. I didn’t think I’d be able to deal with that.

“That had to be pretty jarring,” he said. “Do you think about your childhood a lot?”

Before I could stop myself, I bit out a vehement, “*No.*”

Torin jerked back a little, but then a look of understanding crossed his face. “Why do you think that is?”

That was an easy one. “Because it wasn’t a happy childhood. There’s no point in rehashing it in my head all the time, going to such a dark place. It’s the kind of thing that’s best forgotten. I mean, it wasn’t much of a childhood in the first place—calling it that implies that I felt like a child. I didn’t. I never really got a chance to be a kid, which is why I left the second I could. It’s why I—”

I cut myself off.

Torin leaned toward me. “What were you about to say?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s why I always felt so guilty about my brothers. I just feel like I left them behind, even though I knew they were going to go through all the same bullshit that I went through.”

I winced as a fresh surge of memories whipped through my mind—from the beatings to the yelling to watching my dad terrorize anyone and everyone around him.

My voice took on a pleading note that I couldn’t quite stifle. “But now my brothers know why I made all my choices. Why I came back and killed the members of the Redwood pack who were planning to kill Xavier and Colton. Every choice I made, I made it to keep my brothers safe. Even though they never knew it.”

Torin nodded. “I think that must be really hard to think about, especially when it doesn’t seem like the relationship you have with Xavier and Colton is as strong as it could be.”

I nodded, but I couldn’t find my voice to speak. After everything the three of us have been through because of Silas, it would’ve been nice to be able to relate to each other better, to commiserate and support each other when the memories got to be too much… But Xavier and Colton probably didn’t want to talk about that stuff any more than I did, let alone discuss it like we were sharing fond memories.

“I think I know how you can move forward, now,” Torin said brightly.

I leaned forward. “Tell me.”

“To heal your mate bond with Cali, I think you have to go back,” he said. “I know it will be hard, and I know it’s probably the last thing you want to do, but it’s necessary. It sounds to me like those witches stirred up some unresolved issues and added a few tears to some other bonds besides the sire bond and your mate bond.”

“So, what does that mean, go back?” I asked.

“It means that you need to heal your earliest relationships,” he said. “Reach out to your brothers. Fix things—with both of them.”

**Episode 4608**

“Cali, do you really think that’s a good idea? Do you know *why* Kira told you not to ask in the first place?” Lola asked. “Knowing Kira, she probably had a really good reason to warn you against it.”

I knew that, but we were running out of ways to figure this shit out.

I shook my head. “I think it was mostly because we didn’t know *whose* magic was influencing Xavier, and asking him directly might’ve put him in worse danger. But he’s already in danger, and right now we can’t do anything else to help him… So as far as I’m concerned, it’s worth the risk.”

Lola nodded. “I guess that makes sense. There don’t really seem to be any other options—save for leaving Xavier to figure this out on his own, which I know you won’t do.”

“No, I won’t,” I said. “I can’t just abandon him. If I leave Xavier to figure this out on his own, he might never get to the bottom of it. He needs me—he just doesn’t know it yet.”

Lola nodded. “Uh-huh… Have you talked to Big Mac about this? Does she think it’s a good idea?”

I shrugged. “Yes, and she didn’t want to get involved. I didn’t want to push it. Things are already precarious with her and Mrs. Smith and the rest of the pack. These days, I’m afraid that if I push too hard, Big Mac will leave and never come back.”

“She *does* seem more on edge than usual, lately…” Lola sighed. “I don’t know, Cali. It just still seems like you’re taking a big risk if Kira said not to ask him outright, but I suppose you’ve thought hard about it. You care about Xavier, and you want to protect him. But I do think you might do better with backup from a witch, just to be safe.”

I squared my shoulders and stood up. “No. I’m going to do this myself. I can handle it.”

“You don’t have to do it alone—we’ll do it together,” Lola said. “I know I was skeptical before, but I really do understand now why you feel such an obligation to Xavier. He’s important to you, and even though he’s been acting like a major ass lately, that doesn’t mean I want him to be in any trouble.”

I smiled appreciatively and took Lola’s hand, squeezing it once before I let it go. “Thanks. I’m so happy to have your support. I just know that if I can figure out exactly what’s going on with him, I can help fix it. Xavier’s smart, and I have a feeling that he knows more than he’s letting on. I’m just going to have to get him to talk.”

Lola picked up my phone from the bed and handed it to me with an expectant look.

I looked at her blankly.

“Aren’t you going to call Xavier?” she pressed. “No time like the present, right? Plus, I know you. The sooner you call him, the sooner you can get on with your life.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “But I can’t do it while you’re watching me!”

I didn’t know how Xavier might react to the question I had to ask him, and I definitely didn’t want an audience for it.

“In that case, you should go get a little privacy in your own room,” Lola said. “But you have to come back and fill me in as soon as you’re done. Now that you’ve told me exactly what’s going on, I’m invested.”

“You got it,” I said.

Suddenly feeling nervous, I rushed to my room and shut the door behind me. I leaned back against it and took a deep breath before pulling up Xavier’s number and hitting call. The phone rang a bunch of times before going to voicemail.

*It figures that he wouldn’t just answer the phone. Nothing in my life is ever easy…*

I frowned. Maybe he wasn’t near his phone. I decided to try one more time, and called again. Same thing—a few rings, then voicemail. I listened to the automated message as my disappointment grew. I’d been so motivated to finally talk to Xavier and get to the bottom of things, and now I couldn’t even get ahold of him. It was frustrating.

I hung up without leaving a message, but then I immediately wondered if maybe I should have. There was a chance he was busy and I wouldn’t be able to catch him anytime soon. At least if I left a message telling him that I had something important to discuss, he might prioritize getting back to me.

*I’ll try one last time. If he doesn’t pick up this time, I’ll leave a message.*

I hit the call button, and the phone rang a bunch more times. I expected Xavier’s voicemail to pick up again, so I was startled when his furious voice came through the phone.

“*What?* What do you want?”

I shrank back from his harsh tone but decided to plow ahead—though I couldn’t help but think about how different things had been when Xavier and I were together. It wasn’t like I expected a pleasant “hello” or anything, but it wasn’t like I was the plague. At least it seemed like he’d unblocked me—I’d thought he’d had me blocked before since messages hadn’t sent. Was that progress? Or was that an admission that sometimes we did need to communicate, whether he liked it or not?

It was still shocking just how much things had changed.

“I was just calling to ask you something,” I said in a small voice.

I heard him take a deep breath to calm himself down. “I don’t have time for that right now. I’m in the middle of something. I have to go.”

Moments later, I heard the phone drop onto a hard surface.

“Xavier?” I said. “Are you there?”

No answer.

It took me a moment to realize that he’d forgotten to end the call. I could hear his frantic voice in the background. I knew that I should’ve hung up, but instead, I strained to hear what he was saying. Any insight I could get into what was going on with him right now would be helpful, even though I was a little nervous about what I might hear.

I realized pretty quickly from the tone and timbre of his voice—along with the urgency—that he was talking to someone. And then I heard Ava’s name, clear as day.

“Please, Ava, I love you!”

Then the line went muffled and then dead.

My breath caught in my throat, and I had to pull in several deep, deliberate breaths to keep from choking. My phone slipped from my hands and fell to the ground.

What was going on? Were they arguing? *It doesn’t matter.*

Shocked didn’t even begin to describe how I felt. There was a hell of a lot more going on than simple shock—the words “appalled” and “devastated” came to mind.

Xavier had just told Ava that he *loved* her. How had Ava done that to him? How had she gotten him to say it? Had she tricked him, somehow? Was that why she’d been so reluctant every time I’d asked for help to find out what was wrong with Xavier? Because she was working toward getting him to say the three words he’d just uttered?

Then I heard Greyson’s voice in my head, telling me that Ava had woken up from her coma because of true love’s kiss. It had been right in front of me the entire time, but I’d refused to see it.

A hysterical laugh escaped my lips, and I wrapped my arms around myself and doubled over. I stared at the floor, both seeing and not seeing.

*Everything about this feels… How did Greyson put it? Absurd. This feels absurd. Unreal. Fake. Like a nightmare.*

I’d heard it with my own ears. Xavier had told Ava that he loved her. Did that mean it was true? That he really was in love with Ava? That the branch of their bond was just as strong as the one that Xavier shared with me? That there was nothing that made me any more special than Ava when it came to the mate bonds Xavier shared with us both? How could that be true?

*Or maybe… Maybe now, his bond with her is even stronger.*

Lola’s words echoed in my head. She’d said I was manufacturing problems and fanning the flames on these issues with Xavier because I was still in love with him, because I couldn’t come to terms with the fact that he’d moved on. I’d vehemently denied that accusation, but maybe she was right.

*Maybe I was just* hoping *that there was some reason for his decision to leave me when in reality, there’s nothing influencing him at all. I just wanted it to be something horrible so that I’d never have to admit that Xavier might actually be in love with someone else.*

A tear slid out of my eye and rolled down my cheek. I couldn’t avoid it anymore—it was time to acknowledge the truth. Xavier was in love with Ava, and that changed everything.

**Episode 4609**

**Ava**

I was feeling really good about the state of my relationship with Xavier. It was still pretty surprising that we’d come this far after everything we’d been through. We’d just won the war against the Bitterfangs—for real, this time—and we were celebrating our victory together. As Alpha and Luna. As a team.

It was still so hard to believe. Xavier had hated me—truly hated me—and there had been a time when I’d thought we might never find common ground again. But now, we were way past that. We were together. *Really* together. I’d fantasized about getting Xavier back from the moment I’d returned from the spirit world, and now it was finally a reality.

I hadn’t felt this connected to Xavier in a long, long time, and I was so happy—*grateful*—that we’d finally reached this point. We were successfully running the Samara pack together and figuring out where things really stood between us. It hadn’t been easy with Cali still lurking in the background, but it was starting to feel like Xavier and I would be able to get through anything—even a mate who refused to let go.

I’d always put her in her place if she tried anything.

I was on my way to the bar with a warm feeling in my chest. Xavier had asked for a drink, and I was happy to get one for him, even though I’d teased him initially and told him to get it himself.

I sighed. Everything just felt… *right*.

A cool, unfamiliar voice interrupted my warm, glowy thoughts. “Excuse me?”

I spun around and saw a woman I didn’t recognize. She was tall, with piercing eyes and a regal bearing. Her hair was long and secured in a large bun at the base of her neck, but her demeanor struck me more than her physical appearance. There was just something off-putting about her face—almost like she wasn’t really looking *at* me, but *through* me.

I didn’t say anything. I just waited, wondering what she wanted.

“It’s so wonderful to finally meet you face-to-face, Ava,” the woman said, her words colored by a thick southern accent. I didn’t know enough about the south to be specific about its origins, but it definitely wasn’t local to the Pacific Northwest, that much was for sure.

“What are you talking about?” I asked the woman, curious and a little suspicious. I didn’t have the slightest clue who she was. Why on earth was she happy to “finally” meet me? Either way, I didn’t like her tone. I went on the defensive, feeling my wolf ready at any moment.

The woman smiled, but there was no kindness there. The smile was sharp and scary—almost a leer. Her mouth opened wider, revealing a set of fangs.

*Shit, now I get it. She’s happy to meet me because she wants to drain me dry.*

Before I could move, the woman lunged forward and wrapped me in a steel-strong vice grip.

I screeched and twisted and turned in the woman’s hold, trying my hardest to break free.

*How could this have happened? How could I have let my guard down enough to get overtaken by a* vampire*?* *What’s she even doing here? How’d she get so close without any of us picking up her scent?*

The woman’s sharp, thin fingers jabbed into my arms like knife points, holding me tight. I snarled and started to shift, but something stopped me. I gritted my teeth and tried again, but I couldn’t. *What is she doing? What vampire has this ability?* I panicked. This was just like Big Mac’s spell. Without my wolf, I felt helpless.

I paled as the woman’s grip tightened on my arms, and then it dawned on me—this woman was more than a vampire. No vampire had ever been able to stop me from shifting. This woman was a witch, too. The only one I’d ever heard of was dead.

I wrenched and twisted in her hold, knowing that there was no way I could let her get to the Samaras—to Xavier. I had to stop her right here and now so that she couldn’t hurt anyone else. I had to fight… But *how*?

I jerked forward as hard as I could. Even though I couldn’t shift, I could still fight. To my relief, I managed to wrench free, but I didn’t immediately jump into attack mode. Instead, I took off into the woods and hoped she would follow.

*I just have to get her away from the lake house, away from Xavier and the others, and then I’ll take her out.*

It was taking everything I had not to collapse out of sheer terror. I could feel the vampire gaining on me, getting closer and closer but not quite reaching me. I had a sinking feeling that I was being toyed with—that if the vampire-witch really wanted to grab me again, she’d just reach out and do it.

“Stop running!” the woman called out from behind me. “You should be thanking me! I’m the reason you have all of this! I’m the reason you got your one true love back! You wouldn’t have any of this without me!”

I stumbled, and the vampire-witch crashed into me. We both crumpled to the ground.

*What the hell does* that *mean? What does she know about Xavier?*

I twisted around with my claws out and tried to slash at the woman and shove her away from me at the same time, but she was too strong. She easily dodged my attack and then leapt on top of me, pinning me to the ground.

She grabbed my hair, using it to yank me to my feet.

“Ow! You bitch!” I screamed. She’d already ripped out a chunk of my hair, and I winced at the searing burn.

I struggled against the vampire-witch, but it was useless. I might as well have been paralyzed. I still couldn’t shift, and in human form, I was no match for a vampire-witch hybrid. The only way I’d be able to beat her was with my wolf, and right now, my wolf couldn’t have felt any further away.

The vampire-witch grabbed me by the throat and pulled me back toward the lake, quickly eliminating the distance that I’d managed to put between her and the lake house.

My heart was beating a mile a minute. The closer we got to the lake, the stronger Xavier’s scent became. He was still there—and close.

*I can’t let her see him. I have to protect him at any cost. He’s the Samara Alpha, and we need him. If our positions were reversed, he’d do anything to keep me safe.*

I wanted to call out to him, tell him to run and to take everyone with him, but my throat felt like it was full of cement, and I couldn’t get a single word out.

The vampire-witch dragged me through the tree line, and I spotted Xavier standing not too far ahead of us. He had his back to us and he was tense, almost like he already knew that something was wrong.

*I have to warn him! I have to speak!*

But the vampire-witch had done something to keep me from talking.

I tried to break free again, but I realized that my body was stiff and unresponsive—she’d frozen me completely.

The woman’s voice was loud in my ear as she called out to Xavier, who whipped around to face us. What surprised me most was the look on his face—a mix of recognition and horror.

*What the hell is going on here? He knows her! I can see it all over his face. She surprised him just now, but he knows her.*

That was the last thing I thought before the vampire sank her fangs into my neck, setting off a blaze of pain that spread to every corner of my body.

I screamed.

I tried to fight against her again, but suddenly, Xavier’s voice was in my ear.

“It’s going to be okay, Ava,” he said. “I promise. I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here by your side.”

It took me a fraction of a second to realize that I wasn’t in the forest anymore—or rather, I wasn’t lost in that memory of being in the forest anymore. I was back in our bedroom, and Xavier’s arms were wrapped tightly around me, not the vampire-witch’s.

I felt a surge of relief, but that was quickly eclipsed by the memory of what I’d experienced that day, out in the woods. But what I remembered clearer than anything else was that look on Xavier’s face. He’d known exactly who my attacker was.

“You knew,” I said.

Xavier frowned in confusion. I flinched away when he moved to smooth a tendril of hair behind my ear.

“What? What did I know?” he asked.

“You knew who it was—the vampire-witch who attacked me. You *knew*.”

Xavier’s face went pale, but he didn’t deny it. Anger flashed through me. He was all but verbally confirming it.

“You recognized her,” I started, “and you didn’t tell me?!”

**Episode 4610**

I dropped down onto my bed and threw my arm over my eyes. If Xavier really was in love with Ava—and from the sounds of it, he definitely was—did that mean he didn’t love me anymore? Was there actually some truth in some of the harsh things he’d said to me when we broke up?

*No. I just can’t stomach the thought that he really hates me enough to treat me that way. I still believe that there’s something making him act so cold toward me. There’s no way he really hates me. Why would he? Aside from the fact that there’s no real reason to hate me, I’m his mate!*

I twisted over onto my side and stared blankly at the window, but my mind was brimming with frantic thoughts.

*Lola really was right about everything. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. She said I was desperate to find an excuse for Xavier’s behavior, and she was right. I’ve been looking into things and reading into the little moments we’ve shared far more than I should have. How could I have been so stupid?*

Inevitably, my mind went back to the few kisses Xavier and I had shared—the ones that had felt just like old times. When I stopped to think about it, I realized—with no small amount of humiliation—that all of those kisses had happened because I’d pursued Xavier. I’d gone after *him*, not the other way around.

Even last night, at the party, he’d said over and over again that he was only there to make sure I was safe, and then what did I do? I blew up our interaction in my head and turned it into way more than it actually was. But I’d felt the connection between us, our mate bond… Hadn’t I?

I was the one who’d pushed to take things further. I was the one who’d all but climbed him like a tree when Gael and the others had locked us in the closet. At the time, I’d thought he was just as into it as I was, but in the end, he’d practically shoved me away.

I hated the idea that all of those times, he’d only been reacting to me. And if what I’d just heard was true and Xavier was actually in love with Ava… Did that mean I had to just *make peace* with that? That I had to accept that he’d moved on?

*No. I won’t* accept *it. I can’t. I guess I’ll just have to… make peace with my new reality? The reality in which my mate is in love with another woman, and I’ve been throwing myself at him for weeks even though he’s not interested in me?*

I stifled a miserable sob. God, this *hurt*. How was I supposed to recover from this? It was like reopening a wound.

I jumped at the sound of a knock on my bedroom door, then Lola’s voice filtered through. “Just checking in—it’s been a few minutes, and I’m hungry for an update! Did you get through to Xavier?”

I sighed. “Come on in.”

I didn’t even bother getting out of bed. That would’ve required the kind of strength I just didn’t have at the moment.

Lola took one look at me and said, “Phone call went well, I take it?”

She was trying her best to lighten the mood, but my head was full of Xavier’s voice, telling Ava that he loved her. He’d answered the phone without even a shred of regard for my feelings, and then he’d turned around and professed his love to another woman. How much more evidence did I really need?

*Oh no. It’s real. I don’t mean as much to him anymore. He’s truly moved on to Ava, and I can’t blame some stupid magical influence for that, now, can I? It’s just the way he feels.*

I opened my mouth to fill Lola in on the details, but the first thing that came out was my voice cracking. Then the tears came. I was crying in earnest, now, and as soon as Lola realized how distressed I was, she came over to lie down beside me on the bed.

“It’s okay, Cali. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. He’s not worth it,” she said, stroking my back.

“Don’t say that right now,” I said. “It’s really not helping.”

“Okay, I get that.” She paused for a moment, still rubbing my back. “Maybe it’ll help to talk about it? What exactly happened on the call?”

“I don’t know if I can say it.” The thought of telling Lola that I heard Xavier say he loved Ava made my stomach turn. If I repeated it, it made it true. It made it a fact that other people knew about, not only me… I looked up at her and swiped the tears from my cheeks, though more immediately arrived to replace them. “I’m just thinking that you were right the first time. You know, with what you said about me spending way too much time thinking about Xavier? You were on to something. I was just too deluded by my love for him to see it.”

Lola didn’t say anything. She just pulled me close and stroked my hair. When she finally did speak, it was to ask, “Is there anything I can do? Want me to go over to the Samara pack house and rip him to shreds? Because I absolutely will. No questions asked.”

I smiled despite myself. “No. I don’t want that.”

But then I took a moment to really think about it. Was there anything that Lola *could* do? But I couldn’t think of anything specific that she could do to stop the hurt, which only seemed to be getting worse. Telling her still wasn’t something I felt I could do.

“There’s nothing you can do,” I finally muttered. “Just keep being here with me. Keep backing me up and seeing this through with me. That’s all I want.”

Lola nodded. “I think I can do that.”

“And… maybe you could get me a cup of tea?” I asked in a small voice.

She was already starting to get up. “Of course I can. Whatever you need, I’ve got you, girl. I’ll be back in five minutes, okay? Don’t move. Just relax and cry it out if you need to—as much as you want. There’s no shame in crying over something like this.”

She slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her.

I wasn’t actually sure that I even wanted any tea—I really just wanted to be alone. I was still struggling to process what I’d heard, and, more importantly, what it meant for Xavier and me.

If Xavier really was in love with someone else, I wasn’t the only one who was going to be affected. I was a *due destini*. What did it mean when one of the people involved in the *due destini* curse not only took themselves off the board, but fell in love with someone else entirely? How did that work? I couldn’t remember ever reading about anything like that in the texts I’d found.

*And even if he’s not in love with me anymore, I’m still in love with him. More than ever, it feels like. I can admit that because I know it’s true. And why wouldn’t it be? Nothing’s changed on my end. I still love Xavier, and I still want him, even though it’s clear that he doesn’t want me.*

What was wrong with me? Why did I have to be so fucking delusional still?

Xavier had been my first in so many ways. How was I ever going to get over him when I had so many amazing memories of him? When he’d played such a major role in making me the person I was today?

My heart was breaking again. I didn’t want to let him go. I didn’t know if I *could* let him go. This was a mate bond we were talking about, wrapped in *due destini* and a relationship with someone I cared about. Someone I would do anything for. How was I supposed to just let that go?

And it wasn’t like Xavier being in love with Ava meant I was free to officially choose Greyson. It didn’t work that way. It wouldn’t be fair to him—especially when I was still so in love with his brother. At this rate, I had to wonder if I’d *ever* be able to choose. Xavier’s behavior was all but pushing me toward the other branch of my *due destini*—toward Greyson—but I still just couldn’t take the leap, even though the choice seemed to have been taken right out of my hands.

*I can’t decide. Even knowing of the depth of Xavier’s relationship with Ava, even though he’s shunned me time and time again, I can’t decide. What does that mean for me? Is madness inevitable?*

At that point, another ugly realization hit me.

What if I was already starting to lose my mind? Was that why I’d imagined the Seluna mark? Was the madness already here?

**Episode 4611**

**Greyson**

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s possible to fix things with my brothers. It’s a nice thought. A really nice one. But it’s also just a fantasy.”

Maybe if I’d stuck around instead of taking off, things would’ve been different between us—but hindsight was twenty-twenty. My brothers had every right to resent me, and I didn’t think there was a damn thing I could do about it.

“There has to be something there,” Torin insisted. “Why else would Xavier have stepped in to help you with the council?”

“He came to my defense because he had his own vested interests. That’s all,” I said. “Besides, he made it pretty clear where he stands. He doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

I thought back to my conversation with Rishika. Despite our rift, I still thought Xavier would be the best candidate to take my place as Redwood Alpha if anything ever happened to me.

Not that I had any idea how that would work. Xavier was a Samara now—their Alpha, even. He couldn’t be equally loyal to two packs.

*But who else would I choose, if not him?*

Colton had checked out a long time ago. And even if he hadn’t, it wasn’t like he and I were close enough that I could throw such a massive responsibility onto his shoulders. We had no relationship whatsoever. We barely knew each other, and I suspected that was because Colton was still influenced by my misguided infamous reputation.

I sighed. “It would take a miracle to get the three of us together.”

“Well, I happen to love miracles,” Torin said, ever the unflappable optimist. “But I also think that you’re just making excuses. You can’t fix this if you don’t try. Relationships don’t heal themselves—you have to put in the work.”

“Do you think the same thing applies to my mate bond with Cali?” I asked. “Will the mind link not heal itself without some kind of action on my part?”

My mind started spinning at the possibility. If my connection to Cali relied on my being able to connect with my brothers, then I was doomed. Torin saw the no-doubt obvious dismay on my face and reached out to pat my shoulder.

“I know it’s a lot for you to think about, but what have you got to lose?” he asked. “If you fail to connect with your brothers, then things will stay as they are now. But if you succeed…”

He spread his arms as I wondered about the possibilities. Torin made a great point—I really *didn’t* have anything to lose.

“It would be amazing if I could somehow forge an actual relationship with my brothers,” I admitted. “We’ve never been close, but I’d like to change that. Not that I have the slightest clue where to start.”

“You don’t have to do anything about your brothers right away,” Torin said. “You can start with meditation, which I think will help a lot.”

I nodded. “Okay, let’s give it a shot.”

I closed my eyes and settled my breathing until the inhales were as long and steady as my exhales. Sitting perfectly still, I listened to the sound of Torin’s voice as he led me into a place of solitude inside my mind.

“Think of a place where you can be absolutely alone. Absolutely free,” he said in a pleasing monotone. “There’s nothing to do. Nothing to see. All there is is this place and you.”

Torin droned on, but his guided meditation was no match for my overactive mind. My thoughts bounced from one idea to another and then back again.

I thought about Cali and our shattered mind link. I thought about what a monumental task I had ahead of me, trying to connect with Xavier and Colton. I thought about the council, and Elle and Lucian, and everyone in the Redwood pack.

There wasn’t a single worry that didn’t make an appearance in my head as Torin tried to get me to relax. My breathing started to speed up until the sound of it was louder than Torin’s voice.

He stopped guiding me.

“Are you thinking?” he asked.

I opened my eyes. “How could I not be? You gave me a lot to think about.”

“Well, *dwelling* is the opposite of what you should be doing,” Torin said. “You need to clear your mind. Easier said than done, I know. Just try to let the thoughts come, let the thoughts be, let the thoughts go. Should we try again?”

I shook my head. “I appreciate your help, but there’s no way that I can do that. This whole meditation thing isn’t for me. I’ve never been one to sit around and wait for things to manifest. I prefer to take action. I need to do something.”

Torin looked disappointed. I’d tried to do this his way, but if I resigned myself to just sitting with my thoughts, I knew I’d go crazy. My mind was going to keep spinning until I got up and did something about it.

“I understand,” Torin said. “So, what do you think your first step is going to be?”

“I’m going to start by taking your advice,” I said. “I think you’re right about reaching out to my brothers. I’m going to give Colton a call.”

Torin’s eyes lit up. “That’s an excellent idea!”

He watched me expectantly, clearly waiting for me to pull my phone out and call my brother. I didn’t do it, waiting for him to take the hint that I didn’t want him to listen in. After a few more awkward beats, I sighed.

“I’d prefer to talk to my brother in private,” I said. “I hope you understand.”

Torin looked ready to protest, but then he nodded and got to his feet.

“Please let me know how it goes,” he said.

“Sure,” I said.

Torin started to go, then he turned back. “I agree with Big Mac. You need to focus on your connection to Cali. Now that all of this council drama is over, you should try to spend more time with her.”

I smiled. “I don’t think I’ll have any trouble doing that. Thanks, Torin.”

“Any time,” he said, then left.

As soon as I was alone, I called Colton. It wasn’t until I held my phone up to my ear that I realized I had no idea what I was going to say. I considered taking a few minutes to sort out my thoughts, but it was too late to hang up. The phone was already ringing.

“Did you butt dial me, or did someone die?” Colton asked, in lieu of a greeting. “Is Xavier okay?”

I grimaced. We were already off to an awkward start. It struck me that I had never called my younger brother just to check in. We’d only ever spoken due to dire circumstances, and it showed.

“Uh, no. Xavier is fine, and nobody’s dead,” I said.

“Okay, then why are you calling me?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. “I, uh, I just called because I wanted to know what’s up. Uh, I mean, I want to know how you’re doing. How’s it, uh, going?”

I winced at how stupid I sounded. Colton probably thought I was under some kind of spell. He took his time to reply, and I had to wonder if he’d hung up on me.

“Right. Listen, I’m pretty busy right now,” he finally said.

A baby was crying in the background, and I also heard what sounded like Maya shouting for Colton. He covered the phone and yelled back that he’d be right there. It sounded like utter chaos.

“Yeah, it sounds like it,” I said.

“Yup,” Colton said. “Anyway, tell Xavier to stop being a little bitch. Whatever it is, just figure it out. Okay, I gotta go. The babies are crying.”

*“Babies.” As in, multiple? What?*

“Wait, did you say *babies*?” I asked. “You and Maya had more than one?”

Colton snorted. “Haven’t you ever heard of twins? Gotta go.”

He hung up as I stared out into space, slipping into a mini state of shock. I knew that Colton and Maya had been expecting, but nobody had ever mentioned that they’d been expecting twins.

It made me realize just how disconnected I was from Colton. We were so distant that we might as well have been estranged.

*Torin’s right*, I thought.

It didn’t matter that Colton wasn’t an active member of the Redwood pack. We were brothers, and we had to do better. *I* had to do better. I had to do whatever it took to get to know my brother—just because we’d never been close in the past, didn’t mean we could *never* be close.

But it would take a lot of work to build something out of nothing. I knew that.

Before I got to work on being a better brother to Colton, though, there was something that I wanted to do first. I wanted to spend some more time with Cali. Mind link issues aside, I was eager to spend time with her that didn’t revolve around us solving a life-threatening problem.

And I knew exactly what we could do.

**Episode 4612**

**Xavier**

A massive sense of relief washed over me when I realized Ava was recovering from whatever had come over her. When she’d fainted, I’d immediately thought that Adéluce was doing something to punish her. I was happy to see that Ava wasn’t under a spell, or suffering from some other kind of malicious intervention.

But my relief was short-lived.

Ava had come out of her fainting spell having somehow uncovered the truth. I was freaking out about her accusation and doing my best not to let it show. Keeping my breathing even, I looked her straight in the eye as she tried to get a read on me.

Ava was right, of course.

I *had* recognized the vampire who’d attacked her that night. I knew it was Adéluce. I’d known all along, but I’d kept it to myself. I couldn’t tell Ava the truth—not then, and not ever.

For her own good, I had to lie to her. I hated it, but I had no choice. If Ava found out what had really happened that night, the consequences could be dire.

Trying to keep my game face in place, I cleared my throat and stalled for time. Ava was too smart for my own good. If I slipped up, she would know, and she’d never trust me again.

“What do you mean?” I asked as I scrambled to think of a valid excuse.

“You know exactly what I mean,” she said, doubling down. “You know who attacked me, but you never said anything.”

I shook my head. “I have no idea who attacked you. Why would you think that?”

“I saw it on your face,” she insisted. “I saw that flicker of recognition when you saw her—you knew who she was.”

Of course I fucking did, but I wasn’t going to admit that to Ava.

“What? You saw what on my face? When?” I asked.

“Just now, in my memories,” Ava said. “When I passed out, I went back to that night and I saw your face, Xavier. You knew her.”

My anxiety ratcheted up even higher, but I kept my cool. Ava’s suspicions stemmed from a memory. No—a dream about a memory. Which meant it might not be too difficult to make her question what she saw.

“Well, your memory of that night is wrong,” I said. “How can you accuse me of something based on what you saw in a dream? If I went around accusing people of what I saw in *my* dreams, I wouldn’t have any friends left.”

I finished my light joke with a smile, but Ava was having none of it. Her eyes narrowed, and I could’ve sworn she was reading my thoughts.

“You’re lying to me,” she stated. *Fuck.* “Why?”

It was already hard enough to keep the truth from her, and her accusations were starting to piss me off. It annoyed me that she was refusing to let this go, and it hurt that she was trusting a dream more than me.

But I knew that I didn’t have any right to be angry. Not with Ava right now. She was right about everything. Her dream was telling her what I refused to. It was telling her the truth.

While I wrestled with my morality, my wolf was going crazy. It felt like I was being torn in two directions: tell my mate the truth and go from there, or keep lying to her and hope she lets it go.

*If only it were that simple*, I thought.

The only reason I wasn’t telling Ava the truth was because the truth would put her life in danger. It was dangerous for her to be questioning me about that night. To be questioning about Adéluce.

*I have to be careful.*

I took a slow breath. “I think you had a dream that you’re mistaking for an actual memory. But think about it. It doesn’t make sense. If I knew who’d attacked you, then wouldn’t I have had the entire pack hunting them down? Wouldn’t I have made them pay for what they did to my mate? Can’t you see that what you’re saying doesn’t make sense?”

It was a risky play, but it was all I had. I had to convince Ava that our bond was more credible than her dream. She had to believe that there was just no way that I’d let any harm come to her. She was my mate, and that meant something.

Ava said nothing as she studied my face. I used every bit of self-control that I had to make my expression look sincere. I had to look like I was being truthful—even though it was tearing me apart inside.

I hated lying in general, but I especially hated lying to Ava. It made me feel terrible. If it hadn’t been for her, I never would’ve become Samara Alpha. She’d done so much for me, but I was actively deceiving her. Instead of acting like her mate, I was making her question what she knew to be true. I was fucking gaslighting her.

Adéluce was surely delighting in the misery that I’d created for myself and Ava under her command. No spell or attack could ever inflict the amount of damage that I was inflicting on us.

I waited for Ava to speak, unsure if I’d convinced her of anything. Not that I needed to. All I wanted was to plant a seed of reasonable doubt. If Ava was unsure, then she would continue to trust me.

*At least* she *didn’t recognize Adéluce. But why would she? She never met or interacted with her. She’d only ever heard what happened after the fact.*

I was too afraid to even consider what would’ve happened if she had known who she was. It was best not to think about it. It was lucky she didn’t.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ava sighed. “I need to get some rest.”

Her words weren’t what I wanted to hear. Adéluce aside, I wasn’t sure why Ava had fainted, and I didn’t want to leave her alone.

But I could tell that being around me was pissing her off. She glared at me like she was waiting for me to protest, just so she could lay into me. Realizing that it was best to pick my battles, I leaned down to kiss her. She put a hand on my chest and pushed me back.

“Go lie to someone else,” she said.

Though I wanted to argue with her, I thought better of it. Ava was convinced that her dream had been a memory, and there was nothing I could do about it. I clenched my jaw to make sure my mouth stayed shut, then stepped out of the room.

Worry started to set it the second I made it downstairs. I had to do something, but I had no idea what.

But before despair could truly rear its ugly head, my phone started to ring. I was surprised to see Colton’s name on the screen, and I answered immediately. Maybe he’d be able to lighten my shitty mood.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“So, I just got the weirdest call from Greyson,” he said. “Is our dear older brother having a stroke, or is he at that age where he does weird shit?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I asked. “Did he say why he called?”

Colton laughed. “He sure did. He said he wanted to see how I was doing. Since when does Greyson care?”

Normally, I would’ve agreed with Colton. But given what Greyson had gone through recently, I could understand why he might’ve wanted to reach out to his brothers—or at least one of them.

“He’s been through some rough shit lately,” I said. “Maybe he’s feeling like he needs family or some shit like that.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Colton said, then he put the phone down.

In the background, I could hear a baby crying its head off. I grimaced as I realized that I’d never bothered to send Colton and Maya a gift. Then again, Colton hadn’t even bothered to tell me that the baby had arrived.

*Some family…*

“And I’m back, sorry about that,” Colton said.

“That sure is one noisy kid you’ve got,” I said.

Colton groaned. “Multiply that by two.”

“What?” I asked blankly.

“Maya had two buns in the oven,” Colton said. “Twins. Orion and Lyra.”

“Well, shit, dude. Double congrats, then,” I said. “I’m happy for you two.”

“I guess the twin gene must be strong on our side of the family, or however that crap works,” Colton said. “So, when are you and Cali going to be blessed with two noisy babies of your own?”

The easygoing mood I’d started to settle into evaporated the moment I heard Cali’s name. Colton wasn’t the only one who hadn’t bothered to keep his family up-to-date with his personal affairs.

“I, uh… we…” I said, then cleared my throat. “Cali and I aren’t together anymore.”

“What? What happened?” Colton demanded, not bothering to hide his shock.

“I—uh. I’m with Ava now,” I said.

“What the *fuck*? Are you fucking serious, man?” Colton snapped. “Ava? The same Ava who murdered our mother?”

**Episode 4613**

As soon as I heard Lola jogging downstairs, I leapt off the bed and rushed into the bathroom. I got in front of the mirror and pulled my shirt down to see if the mark was there… Which was easier said than done. I struggled to find a good angle where I could see that particular spot on my shoulder. When I finally found it, I examined my shoulder closely. I was relieved to see that there was still a faded Luna mark there, and even more relieved to see no sign of the Seluna mark.

*But still…*

I ran into the room to grab my phone and stared at the picture again. There was definitely something there, but maybe it wasn’t bad. It could’ve been a shadow or something. It could even have been Xavier’s shadow.

It was a reasonable explanation, but deep down, it didn’t sit well with me. I knew what the Seluna mark looked like. It was something that had been etched into my brain—much like it seemed etched into my shoulder in the photo.

I stared at the picture again and zeroed in on the spot in question. It could’ve been a shadow, but what were the odds of a shadow taking on the shape of a Seluna mark?

Despite squinting each eye twice and making my phone so bright that it could have been seen from space, I couldn’t make the picture any clearer. There was no way to know what was actually there and what was just a random shape.

I gritted my teeth and stifled the urge to groan. It was so frustrating, not knowing one way or the other. But I was also terrified of finding out the truth.

*What if… What if somehow, the Seluna mark really has come back? What if everything we did to get rid of her ashes wasn’t enough?*

The thought was ridiculous. There was no way that I could still have the mark. It made no sense. The ashes had been returned to the demon world. The curse was broken. Xavier had sworn to me that it was over. I trusted him.

Or at least, I had trusted *that* Xavier…

Despite the trouble between us, I knew without a doubt that he wouldn’t have lied about that. Not about something as dangerous as the Seluna mark.

I thought about calling him to see if he could figure out what I was seeing in the picture, but immediately disregarded the idea.

I didn’t even want to *think* about what I’d overheard when I’d called him earlier.

Instead, I went back into the bathroom and looked at my other shoulder. There was nothing there, but there was definitely something in the photo. Ugh! Why couldn’t I figure it out?

As I squinted at my back in the mirror, I heard the bedroom door opening. I stepped out of the bathroom just as Lola walked in with a mug of tea in her hands. Not wanting to make a fuss, I adjusted my shirt and gave her a weak smile.

Lola frowned. “Still looking for ghosts? We just checked for the Seluna mark a few minutes ago. Did you think it would magically appear when our backs were turned?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “I just can’t make any sense of this.”

“Then let it go,” Lola said. “Stop trying to make sense of it and just give your brain a break.” She handed me the tea and led me to the bed. “It still needs more time to brew, but maybe it’ll help clear your head.”

“Thanks, but that’s going to take more than tea,” I said gloomily.

I set the tea down on my nightstand and sighed. Lola meant well, but there was no way I was going to be able to stop thinking about the mark. Was the picture showing us something that we couldn’t see with the naked eye? Was it some kind of vision? A premonition?

Or was it something else entirely? Something worse?

“Do you think I’m losing it?” I asked Lola.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think I’m going crazy?” I asked. “Am I seeing things that aren’t there because I’m losing my mind?”

Lola stared at my stricken expression, then started to laugh. She reached out and rubbed my shoulder.

“How would *I* know?” she asked. “You’ve always been kind of out-there, right?”

I glared at her.

“I mean that in the best way possible,” she added hastily. “But what’s normal for you isn’t what I would call normal in general. But, you’re still, like, normal. Mostly.”

“Please, stop,” I said, holding a hand up. “And just promise me that you’ll warn me if I start to act strange… Well, stranger than usual.”

“Cali, I think you need to cut yourself some slack,” Lola said. “Not only are you a *due destini*, which is tough enough all on its own, but you’ve dealt with so much traumatic shit that it kind of makes *sense* that you’re seeing things.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Your life has been a total nightmare recently, thanks to the Bitterfang war and all that crap with the council—not to mention the very long list of shitty stuff that happened before they even entered the picture,” Lola said. “This is probably all stress-related. You should just do what Jay and I did—take a little break from all the pack drama. Get away for a while and pretend none of it exists. Jay and I had a great time, and I’m sure you and Greyson would, too.”

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. Moments later, it opened, and Greyson stepped inside with a steaming mug in his hands.

“I heard you weren’t feeling well, love,” he said. “I made you a cup of your favorite tea.”

He held it out to me with a smile that collapsed the second he saw my first mug of tea on the nightstand. Lola stifled a smile.

“Thank you,” I said.

I took his mug and set it down next to the first. If nothing else, the steam from all the tea was going to make my room a bit less dry.

“I was wondering if we could talk,” Greyson said.

We both turned to Lola, who took the hint as quickly as we gave it.

“I have to go check on the thing and make sure it still does stuff,” she said, getting up.

She was halfway out of the room before she turned back to look at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “A little break.”

I nodded, and Lola left. Greyson gave me a look.

“What did that mean?” he asked,

I told him about Jay and Lola’s retreat, and how they’d both appreciated the time away. It sounded amazing, but the idea of getting away from my problems seemed like a fairy tale.

Greyson smiled. “I was thinking exactly the same thing. Maybe we could help our mate bond heal by spending time together, away from all of this. I was planning a big getaway for us, before life got in the way—maybe now’s the perfect time to go.”

My smile felt forced. While I wanted to spend time with Greyson, was it really the best time to get away? Obviously, I wanted to heal our mate bond, but what about the phantom Seluna mark? What if it wasn’t just a random shadow, or a stress-related hallucination? What if I needed to do something about it?

Lola’s words came back to me. She was probably right—I was more than likely giving in to all the stress I’d been feeling. I *had* been through a lot, and going on vacation would definitely do me good.

And the fact that I was so freaked out about Xavier telling Ava that he loved her was all the more reason for me to go. The shock of hearing him say those words was giving way to the kind of pain that made my heart hurt.

Lola and Greyson’s suggestion to get away was a good one. But how would I be able to enjoy spending time alone with Greyson when I was so consumed by thoughts of Xavier?

*Should I just tell him?* a voice inside asked.

Oh good god no. Because that would go over well. No, no way.

But keeping it all inside was just going to drive me crazy. I’d never be able to figure this out alone, but… Telling Greyson would be cruel.

Greyson walked over and knelt in front of me. He took my hands and stared into my eyes. My heart was racing, like it always did when he looked at me like that—but right now, it was racing for another reason, too.

“I can tell that you have reservations about going on this trip,” he said. “I’m surprised, I’ll admit. I thought you would’ve jumped at the chance to go somewhere. So… I have to wonder if there’s something going on.”

I bit my bottom lip.

“You know that you can tell me anything, Cali,” he said, giving my hands a squeeze. “Whatever it is, I’ll help however I can. Do you want to talk about it? Be honest.”

I pulled in a deep breath, then slowly let it out. “Would you want to talk about it if it’s about Xavier?”

**Episode 4614**

**Xavier**

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?” Colton demanded. “What the hell is wrong with you? Did you confuse your balls with your brains? Did you get abducted by aliens and they replaced your head?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose as Colton continued to rail at me. Even with the phone held away from my face, his screaming still made my ear hurt. For a second, I thought about putting him on hold.

Not that I was surprised by his reaction. Colton wasn’t wrong—Ava *had* killed our mother. While he had every right to freak out about my revelation, he had to give me a chance to explain. I needed to tell him that things were different.

“If you just give me a chance to explain—”

“Don’t even fucking try to explain, man,” Colton said coldly. “Don’t make excuses, and don’t try to make this anything other than what it is. You are in a relationship with the woman who *killed* our mother in cold blood. You’ve lost your goddamn mind.”

“Colton, just—”

“Why would you go back to her?” Colton demanded. “And why didn’t you tell me?”

I sighed. “Because I knew you’d be pissed.”

It had been a cowardly move on my part, but I already had my hands full with personal drama, and I hadn’t wanted to add it. And I hadn’t wanted to add to his, either—not when I’d known he was about to become a father and was dealing with god knows what with Maya. I’d decided it didn’t make sense to stress him out by telling him that I was back with Ava.

Not that my reasoning would’ve changed his reaction to being kept in the dark.

“You got that right,” he said. “I’m fucking pissed. You still should have told me.”

I bristled at the authority in his voice. “Oh yeah? Well, there’s plenty of shit you haven’t told me, either. Like having twins. What, were you going to wait until they turned twenty-one to fill me in?”

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Colton ground out. “Fuck, man. *Ava?* Really? What about Cali? I used to walk into a room and you were fucking her, practically all hours of the day.”

“Okay, that’s exaggerating.” But very “my brother” to say.

“You *love* her, Xavier. What’s going on?”

The guilt felt like acid in my veins. I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to keep my voice from giving away how I felt.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Aha,” Colton said dubiously. “Oh, hold on a second.”

He set his phone down again, and I heard him tending to the babies. Whatever he was doing seemed to calm them down. I heard Maya’s voice in the background, too.

My brother was lucky. He had one mate, and they had two babies already. And what did I have? A hot mess of a personal life and a guilt-ridden heart.

I loved Cali, but I couldn’t be with her. It just wasn’t in the cards for us. Not right now, and maybe, after what I’d done and said, never.

But I knew now that I also loved Ava, but she was currently supremely pissed off at me—and with good reason.

Everything in my life was complicated, and there wasn’t a single person I could turn to for advice. Nobody would understand.

When Colton got back to the call, he sounded less enraged.

“So, what other surprises have you been keeping from me?” he asked. “Please tell me that Ava isn’t expecting your baby.”

“Absolutely not,” I said.

For a second, though, I had to wonder if Ava had fainted because she was pregnant. It was one of the symptoms, along with irritability. I glanced at the stairs, then shook the thought out of my head. There was no way that Ava was pregnant. She would’ve told me.

“You sure? I thought I’d heard something about a baby; you know how word can travel,” Colton said. “If it’s not you and Cali, then could it be Greyson and Cali? Lola and Jay?”

A knot the size of my fist formed in the pit of my stomach. I knew there’d been that rumor going around the Redwood house because of Lola, who’d lied about it being Cali… Was that what Colton had heard about?

But it *was* a possibility for Cali and Greyson to get pregnant. They were mates, and it would be perfectly natural for them to want to have a child, but…

I couldn’t go there. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

“I doubt Cali is pregnant,” I said, with as much conviction as I could muster.

“Hm, then who could it be?” Colton asked, and then he chuckled. “Big Mac?”

We both laughed at that.

“I’m pretty sure that none of the Redwoods are having a baby, man,” I said. “It’s just an old rumor.”

“I guess you would know, seeing as you live there and all,” Colton conceded.

I grimaced. He’d stumbled onto another update that I’d failed to give him.

“Yeah, I don’t live there anymore,” I said. “I’m with the Samara pack.”

“You’re what?” Colton asked.

“And… I’m their Alpha,” I said.

Colton swore another blue streak, so loudly I was suddenly sure that his kids’ first words would be just as colorful.

“What the hell?” he snarled. “Last I heard, you were dying to push Greyson aside to become Redwood Alpha! What happened? Did you—”

“Well, technically *you* should still be a Redwood, too,” I retorted. “What happened there?”

“I couldn’t stay,” he said easily. “Maya’s the new Alpha of the Grimcrest pack.”

It was my turn to be floored. “Seriously? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Colton snickered. “Must have slipped my mind. But I guess that makes us even. Well, not really. Maya didn’t kill our mother.”

“*Colton*,” I said, a growl rising in my chest.

“And Cali might be small and annoying, but she didn’t murder our mother either,” he added. “Maybe you guys can try to work it out?”

“Colton, stop,” I said. “Things are different now. Ava’s not the same person she was. I know it doesn’t make sense to you, but I promise you, it’s not like it was before.”

“Of course it is, and of course she is,” Colton said. “Once a snake, always a snake.”

I couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. I’d felt the same way, not too long ago. I’d been hell-bent on revenge, desperate to make Ava pay for her betrayal. It was still hard sometimes, reconciling the woman who’d murdered my mother with the person Ava had become.

But things with Ava really had changed. And so had my feelings for her. I knew Colton’s opinion of her would change if he took the time to get to know her. If I could get over the grudges of the past, then so could he.

“Maybe you should come visit the Samara pack,” I said. “Spend a little time with Ava and get to know here as she is now.”

Colton snorted. “I think I’d much rather kill her than spend time with her.”

“Come on, man,” I said. “Do it for me.”

“I’ll think about it, okay? Best I can do,” Colton said. “I don’t think that I can just leave Maya with the twins. They’re a lot to handle.”

“In that case, why don’t you, Maya, and the babies come and visit?” I suggested. “Come and hang out with us. If things don’t work out and you still hate being around her, then you can leave whenever you want.”

“What if I decide to stick around and make sure she pays for what she did to our mother?” Colton asked.

His threat was laced with menace, but I knew he was just testing me. He wouldn’t go as far as killing Ava. If he did, the repercussions would be horrific. No, my brother was just being an ass.

“Will you put Maya on the line?” I asked. “I want to find out how she feels about her mate inciting a pack war.”

He laughed, if a little reluctantly. “Fine. I’ll talk it over with her. Maybe we can make it over there sometime soon.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Thanks for being open-minded about this. It means a lot.”

There was another long pause. The twins were still babbling in the background, so I knew my brother was still on the line. Was he about to deliver some bad news?

“Man, what the hell happened to you?” he asked, sounding utterly perplexed. “Like, shit. I go away and all hell breaks loose.”

I chuckled mirthlessly. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have gone away.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Anyway, I’ll talk to you later. Let you know what my Alpha says.”

“You do that,” I said.

We ended the call, and I leaned against the wall as I tucked my phone away. I’d made major progress with my brother and should’ve been feeling great. Instead, the knot in my stomach felt like it had doubled in size.

I was overcome with a sense of dread. It felt like I’d just set my own destruction in motion. As I thought about it, I realized that I might’ve made a massive mistake by inviting Colton to stay.

Ava was upset with me because she was convinced that I’d lied to her about Adéluce. She was right, but I had to keep trying to make her think she was wrong.

Colton was upset with Ava because… Well, she’d fucking killed our mother, and Colton didn’t need any more reasons to hate her.

Adéluce was upset with me and trying to hurt everyone who cared about me. Colton was my twin. That could easily put him in her crosshairs.

Given that emotional bingo card, was my invitation to Colton only going to throw more gas on the fire?

*Am I about to make things even worse?*

**Episode 4615**

**Greyson**

Cali’s question brought a frown to my face. Xavier’s name was the last one I wanted to hear her say. I meant what I’d said to Torin about wanting to mend things with my brothers, but that didn’t mean I was eager to hear my mate talking about her *other* mate.

Cali’s fingers slipped from my grasp as she leaned away from me. I did my best to keep my jealousy at bay. There was something on her mind, and I didn’t want to add to her stress. Better to let her speak than to drive myself crazy with assumptions.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, genuinely confused. “How does Xavier have anything to do with my wanting to spend more time with you?”

Cali looked away, acting like she regretted bringing him up in the first place. She sighed. “It shouldn’t, but…” She trailed off.

I sighed. Usually, I could read Cali, could guess how she was feeling. With our mate bond being damaged at the moment, things felt different. I still loved her, of course, but I felt… disconnected from her to a degree. I hated it.

But we hadn’t come this far for me to let anything get in the way of our bond.

If Cali was concerned about Xavier, then I would hear her out. It wouldn’t do either of us any good if I shut her down. I knew she wouldn’t tell me on principle, but I also knew she wouldn’t stop thinking about my brother until she worked out whatever was bothering her about him.

*Always him*, I thought bitterly.

“Does this have anything to do with your suspicions about Xavier being under some kind of magical influence?” I asked.

*Or are you still looking for some external reason to explain why my brother left you*?

My heart went out to her, though. Her pain was my pain, but it was doubly hurtful for me—I had to watch my mate ripping herself to pieces over someone who’d left her.

“That’s part of it, yes,” Cali admitted. “I mean, Kira confirmed that there really is magic at play. She wasn’t making that up.”

I put my hands up. “I didn’t say that she was. But even if he *is* under a spell, then it doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with him leaving you.”

Cali nodded, her expression a portrait of pure misery. “Xavier loves Ava.”

*Wow, he does? He* loves *her? How does Cali know that?*

I could tell that it hurt her to admit that. It was clear as day to anyone with eyes that Cali was still waiting for Xavier to come to his senses. He’d been everything to her, and then one day he’d just up and left. I’d never understand why my brother had done it, but I wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

I just wished that Cali would stop longing for someone who’d decided not to be with her. More than anything, I wanted her to stop hurting herself in the process.

“How do you know?” I asked. “Because of that so-called ‘true love’s kiss’ that woke Ava up from her coma? There’s no logic behind that, love. There could be a ton of other reasons why—”

Cali cut me off with a wave of her hand. Her eyes were shiny as she stared into mine. I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and hold her until all her pain was gone, but instead, I just sat there uselessly.

“I heard Xavier say it,” Cali said, her voice wavering. “He told Ava that he loved her.”

My eyes widened with shock. “When did you hear that?”

“I decided I would ask him directly about the magic Kira detected—we need some kind of lead, and I feel like we’re totally running out of what to do,” she said. “So I called him, but he was too busy to talk. He must’ve answered accidentally because he told Ava… He told her how he felt while I was on the line.”

*Xavier, you idiot…*

But as much as I wanted to rage against my brother, I couldn’t really blame him for what Cali had heard. Based on what she’d told me, Xavier probably had no idea that she’d still been on the line. I didn’t think he’d be cruel enough to do that to Cali on purpose, even in an attempt to get rid of her. It had probably just been a stupid mistake on his part.

Cali took a few deep breaths as she tried to keep herself together. I rubbed her back and murmured comforting words. All the while, a part of me wondered if Xavier’s admission was ultimately what Cali had needed to hear.

My own selfish desires aside, Cali clearly needed closure. Though she and I were mated, she hadn’t been able to let go of Xavier. She couldn’t understand why he’d left her for Ava. But after that call, Cali finally got it. Xavier was in love with Ava, not her. She had to let him go.

As awful as it was, this whole ordeal would probably be good for her, in the long run.

I held Cali for a while before she finally pulled back. She wiped the tears from her face and tried to give me a smile.

“I’m sorry, Greyson,” she said. “I didn’t want to say anything to you.”

*I can tell*, I thought.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said. “I understand.”

Or at least, I was trying to. I was doing everything I could to be understanding. Cali was hurting, and I had to be there for her, even if it was hard for me to accept the fact that she was hurting because she was yearning for another man.

*God, I wish she could just forget about him already.*

Being with Cali made me happier than I ever could’ve imagined. Mate bond aside, I simply couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. I loved her. But she and I were never truly alone—the shadow of my brother always seemed to hang over us, tainting every happy moment.

I wished that she would forget about him and focus on me. I wanted her to place a little value on the fact that I’d been by her side the whole time, even while Xavier was tearing her heart to pieces. No matter how many times he let her fall, I was always there to pick her up.

But, despite my frustrations, I knew I couldn’t force Cali to stop caring about Xavier any more than I could force her to forget him. Still, I wasn’t without hope. Thanks to Xavier’s carelessness, Cali finally knew for sure why he’d left her, and the Redwood pack. He was still in love with Ava—just like he’d said he was during his big breakup speech.

If Cali could come to terms with that, then… Would she finally be ready to choose me? That was the hope.

But the thought alone wracked me with guilt. I couldn’t help it. I wanted her to be with me because she *wanted* to be, not because she felt like I was her only option. I wanted her to love me as fiercely and as unceasingly as she loved Xavier.

Maybe it was time to admit that Cali and I would never have a true mate bond—not while she kept hoping that Xavier would come back to her. But that phone call had led to a devastating revelation—but one that filled me with hope.

If my brother was truly in love with Ava, did that mean he no longer loved Cali?

She sighed, and I pulled her back into another tight hug.

“I know you have a lot on your mind,” I said. “But I think Lola’s right. We should spend some time together, away from all of this. We should give our mate bond a proper chance to heal.”

Cali gave me the same hesitant look as before, when I’d first mentioned a vacation. I took her hands.

“I’m not pressuring you,” I said. “I just wanted to put the idea out there.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I promise I’ll think about it. I just need to sort a few things out first. Is that okay?”

“It’s an open-ended offer,” I said. “Whatever you decide is okay with me.”

“Thank you,” she said.

I leaned in to kiss her sweetly, then told her good night. I left her bedroom but paused in the hallway outside. I wished there was something I could say or do to get her past this latest Xavier drama, but unfortunately, Cali was going to have to figure it out on her own. I only hoped that she’d agree to go away with me. I was sure that if we took some time to get away from things, it would help her sort out her feelings.

On my way downstairs, I walked past my mother’s room. Impulsively, I knocked on her door and opened it when she called me in. She smiled the moment she saw me.

“I spoke to Colton earlier,” I said. “Did you know that he and Maya had twins?”

“Really?” my mother asked, then she grinned. “Maybe having children will force Colton to grow up. He can’t be a frat boy forever.”

I laughed. “Only time will tell.”

Just as I was about to head out, I noticed that my mom was packing a suitcase. I frowned. She hadn’t mentioned a trip.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to be staying at MacKenzie’s house,” she said.

I was stunned. It felt like I was being bombarded with unexpected news.

“Are you moving in with her?”

**Episode 4616**

The ceiling fan spun above me, the individual blades blurring together as I watched them go around and around. It would be good to have a life as simple as a ceiling fan’s: one purpose, no deviation, and—most importantly—no feelings. Unfortunately, I’d been born with a heartbeat and was therefore doomed to have emotions. I didn’t *want* to spend the rest of the day feeling *anything* because of Xavier and Ava.

Logically, I knew it wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t something to spend my energy on. Besides, it was something I should’ve known already. Xavier had said he was leaving me for Ava. But leaving me because he was having sex with her was very different than him *loving* her.

As I lay there on that bed, I was trapped in a web of visions featuring the two of them. Together.

I shouldn’t have been so hyper fixated on them—I knew it was wrong, especially with Greyson in the picture. Even now, I hated that I’d said anything to him. But I wasn’t a good liar, especially not to him.

I thought of the way he’d asked for me to take a trip with him, and the guilt boiled up within me. Greyson had been pretty upfront about not wanting to pressure me into going away with him, but I could also tell that the trip meant a lot to him, and that if I didn’t go, he’d be disappointed. Under normal circumstances, I obviously would’ve been thrilled—alone time with Greyson was an absolute gift.

Of course, these weren’t normal circumstances. When were they?

Everything would’ve been so much easier if I could just accept the fact that Xavier was with someone else. He was in love with someone else. That he was in love with *Ava*. There was no ignoring or denying it.

And the icing on top of it all was I’d actually been legitimately dumped. Completely, undoubtedly dumped. It wasn’t a conspiracy; it wasn’t a game. No, I’d just been naïve to think it was any of those things. Talk about embarrassing. I knew that was just a part of life—everyone gets dumped—but I’d never imagined that Xavier would do it to me.

How could I possibly spend quality time with Greyson with *that* hanging over my head? Sure, I could be there physically, but mentally, I’d be on another planet, and that wouldn’t be fair to Greyson.

Then again, wouldn’t simply being around Greyson cheer me up? It would be a lovely, happy distraction from the numbing pain of having my heart ripped out. At least the half that belonged to Xavier. The other half of my heart was Greyson’s. That was the entire problem.

But healing Greyson’s and my wounded mate bond and figuring out how to mind link again was most likely exactly what I needed. But if I agreed to go, ended up having a depressive flare up, and spent the entire trip wallowing in misery, then I’d ruin everything.

I didn’t want to do that to Greyson. Why should he suffer when the problem had nothing to do with him? I was the one who’d had my feelings hurt. I was the one who’d heard my ex telling another woman that he loved her. Sure, I might have been the instigator for those kisses, but it takes two to tango…

No, that was exactly the kind of thinking that was causing problems for me. Regardless, the problem wasn’t going to be solved by staying in my room—and I didn’t think anyone was going to stop by to bring me more tea. I was going to be peeing on the hour at this rate.

I stepped out of my room and immediately heard Greyson talking to Mrs. Smith. I couldn’t make out everything that was being said, but I caught bits and pieces—something about moving? I popped my head into Mrs. Smith’s bedroom and was startled to see her filling up a suitcase. Greyson was standing next to her. They both turned and looked at me when I entered, both of them immediately reacting to my no-doubt stunned expression.

“Now, Cali, please don’t jump to any conclusions,” Mrs. Smith said. “MacKenzie and I are just going up to spend some time at her place.”

My mood perked up slightly, though I remained cautious. “Does this mean you’ve made up?”

Mrs. Smith looked at me sternly. “Cali, what did I just say? I told you to not assume anything.” But not a second later, a smile crept across her face. “Though things are definitely looking up.”

“Ah, I’m so happy for you two!”

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s separation had broken my heart—I’d been hoping that they’d find a way to get back together. I saw Greyson smiling out of the corner of my eye—he was clearly thrilled about this sudden turn of events and was enjoying my excitement. Then I remembered that Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had been talking after the council had acquitted Greyson. Conversation could be so powerful—problems rarely just worked themselves out, especially relationship problems. Patching up the cracks took time, effort, and care.

Maybe Greyson was right—maybe going away together would give us a chance to talk, clear our heads, and sort things out. But would bringing all my Xavier problems along for the ride only ruin things? I couldn’t just get over those issues, but I also couldn’t keep them with me.

I was knocked out of my train of worrisome thought by the sound of someone coming up the stairs.

“Ready?” Big Mac asked, walking into the bedroom.

“I’m just finishing up,” Mrs. Smith replied as she zipped up the final compartment of her suitcase and patted it for effect. “Well, I suppose I’m off.”

She approached Greyson with a warm expression and gave him a big hug. Then she walked over to me and did the same. Once the goodbyes were wrapped up, Big Mac blipped them both away. It was silent in the room for a few moments as I stood staring at the place the two of them had been standing.

I turned to Greyson. “You must be relieved that those two are figuring things out.”

“I think it’s a great first step,” he said, smiling softly. “Perhaps they don’t need to cancel the wedding quite yet.”

“Life always seems to have a way of steering us back on course,” I said.

“It does,” he said. “So, should we head downstairs and—”

“Wait,” I interrupted.

Greyson looked at me with those beautiful eyes I could so easily get lost in.

“Let’s go away together,” I said.

A wide grin spread across his face. “You mean it?”

I nodded.

“You have no idea how much this means to me, Cali.”

“Before you get all excited, though, I just want to say that I can’t guarantee I’ll be the best travel companion,” I said. “There’s just a lot on my mind that’s—”

“I know what’s going on,” Greyson said. “You don’t have to pretend or hide anything from me. I just want to be there for you, no matter what you’re going through. We’ll deal with whatever comes up together.”

I smiled at him. “So, where did you want to go again?”

Greyson sighed. “Maybe instead of having a neat little plan you know all the details of, I could surprise you?”

“Wow, such a rebel.”

“Only if that’s what you want, of course,” he said quickly. “The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable. I know you’ve already got plenty to stress about, and worrying about a surprise may be too much—so just say the word and we can have a nice, simple trip.”

“No, no, a surprise would be great.”

I was loving this change in Greyson’s mood, especially since I was the one responsible for bringing it down earlier.

“Okay, great!” He was so excited—it was kind of adorable. “I promise to make the surprise special. You deserve nothing but the best—we’re going to do this right.”

Greyson hurried off to start planning, leaving me feeling more excited than I had in a while. I was about to walk into the kitchen when Lola grabbed me by the arm, scaring me half to death.

“Geez, Lola—give me a heart attack, why don’t you?” I clutched my chest, trying to catch my breath.

“Sorry, I didn’t think I’d startle you that bad,” Lola said.

“No, no, it’s fine,” I said. “I was just, uh, a bit distracted.”

“Well, are you ready to go?”

The same warmth I’d felt when Greyson had said he wanted to surprise me made a reappearance, and I smiled gently. “Yeah, I am. But how did you know that I agreed to go on vacation with Greyson?”

“Greyson?” Lola looked confused. “What? No—the CCU orientation kickoff stuff is today, and I don’t want to be late. We have to go. Right now!”

**Episode 4617**

**Xavier**

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation I’d had with Colton.

I even tried to steer into it, attempting to work through the conversation and reach a solid conclusion about everything we’d talked about, I only got myself more lost in the labyrinth of my thoughts. It was like I was trapped in my own personal hell, where nothing existed except that conversation.

It was wildly unsettling that my twin brother hadn’t told me he’d had twins. Colton and I used to be really close. Sure, we’d drifted apart over time, but I hadn’t realized we’d reached a point where he didn’t feel the need to share such important news with me. And even if we *had* reached that point, didn’t the years we’d spent practically joined at the hip count for anything?

Plus, at the end of the day, no matter how tight our relationship was—or wasn’t—we were still family. Twins, no less.I knew I didn’t really have the right to be this angry, that I really should’ve been remorseful, but I was choosing to stick with anger. Mainly because Colton had been a dick and so dead-set against my relationship with Ava. If he hated her as much as it seemed, I could only imagine what was going to happen when he realized that I’d made Ava my Luna, too.

*That’ll go over great.*

I lingered outside our closed bedroom door, trying to come up with a plan that would make her less annoyed at me, but I was too distracted to think properly. Every jumbled thought in my head was mixed up with anger. I was far too upset to come up with a reasonable strategy to appease Ava—I’d probably only make things worse. It would be better if I just walked away, cleared my head, and then came back to talk to Ava when I was of sound mind. But that in itself was frustrating, too.

After everything that had happened, I should’ve been happy—ecstatic, even. We’d defeated the Bitterfang army, I’d helped Greyson with the council, and even douchebag Blaine was starting to come around. By all counts, Ava and I should’ve been celebrating, enjoying each other’s company as Alpha and Luna. But instead, she was angry and hurt and deeply pissed off at me, and I was trying to figure out how to make everything better—all without actually retracting the lie that had pissed her off in the first place.

Instead of trying to force the issue with Ava, I walked away from our bedroom door and went outside. The fresh air provided a shot of relief and I felt better, but I knew it wouldn’t last long. I needed a proper distraction. I needed to recharge. Obsessive worrying wasn’t going to solve any of my numerous problems—it would only create *more* worry and confusion.

Instead, I just needed to forget everything for a while.

I hopped on my motorcycle and roared away from the house without hesitation, trying to put as much distance between me and the pack. In a matter of minutes, the cold air was blasting my face as I gunned the engine around the bends and dips in the road.

Even out there, underneath the open sky, flanked by the looming, yet friendly trees that made up the forest around me, my thoughts kept returning to Colton—this time, my brain chose to obsess over the rumor he’d heard, about someone in the Redwood pack being pregnant. Looking back, I should have asked more questions—the most obvious of which being, “who the hell told you that?” It seemed like strange, surprising information for Colton to have, yet I’d hardly questioned it. Why hadn’t I pressed him further?

Perhaps I’d been was so overwhelmed by possibility of it being *true* that I hadn’t really processed the wider implications of the rumor’s sheer existence. I ran through my mental list of Redwood pack members, thinking of possible pregnancy candidates. I just kept coming back to Cali, though, which was unsettling and just plain awful.

Shit. I’d come out there to forget about my problems, but apparently, they’d decided to come along for the ride. Then again, I *was* the one who kept returning to the image of Cali’s sleek brown hair and hypnotizing hazel eyes…

But could Cali really have decided to have a baby with Greyson *right now*? It didn’t seem plausible, but the thought still had me feeling incredibly bitter. If Cali really was pregnant, that most likely meant she’d been thinking about it long before I’d broken up with her.

*No, it can’t be true… Just Colton hearing old gossip.*

My ride took me past the Rockaway Diner, where Ava had stayed and worked for a while. The reminder of Ava immediately shoved my brain toward the idea of having a baby with her. There was no doubt in my mind that I loved Ava, so picturing the two of us starting a family together shouldn’t have been hard, but it just felt… wrong. Like what I was trying to imagine went against some natural law. Maybe it was because for so long, I’d only ever imagined having children with Cali. That felt right.

My mind was an absolute trainwreck. I’d come out on my bike to clear my head, but instead, I’d muddled it even more. I had no idea what to do. There just didn’t seem to be a path I could take that would satisfy everyone. I loved Ava, of course—and she was my Luna, which meant everything—but Colton’s maybe-revelation about Cali had hit me like a truck.

How the hell was I supposed to handle this?

The first thing I needed to do was find out the truth: was the rumor based on fact, and it so, was it about Cali? If it *was* true, then I had to admit that the odds seemed to be in Cali’s favor on this one.

There were quite a few Redwood couples. The next one that came to mind was Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, but I highly doubted that they were the source of that particular rumor—plus, the last time I’d checked, they weren’t even together. In that same boat was Rishika and Artemis, as well as Sage and Zainab. That left Charlie and Violet, Lilac and Perrie, Ravi and Marissa, and Adair and Tabitha… But at least two of those I would’ve heard something about. There was also Jay and Lola. They’d been together for a while, but… I couldn’t possibly imagine that Lola was ready to have kids—if that pregnancy scare a while back was any indication—but accidents *did* happen. It could’ve been any of them, really.

Of course, there was no denying that out of all the coupled-up Redwoods, Jay was the best equipped to be a parent, so there was still a faint possibility that the rumor was about him and Lola. I’d be thrilled for Jay if this turned out to be the case (for a number of reasons ranging from selfish to unselfish), but it still seemed pretty unlikely. Artemis and/or Rishika were also a possibility, but they hadn’t been together that long…

I stopped myself. What the fuck was I doing? There was no point in speculating. All I was doing was worrying over something that was out of my control—and that probably wasn’t even true, for all I knew. Like Colton had told me: it was just a rumor. Nothing was set in stone. Until I talked to Cali, I wouldn’t know the truth. The problem was, I *couldn’t* talk to Cali—she’d only get pissed at me, and there was no telling how Adéluce would react.

The more I thought about it, however, the more certain I was that there had to be *some* basis for the rumor. This kind of buzz didn’t just appear out of thin air. And Colton wouldn’t have lied to me. Unfortunately, all signs seemed to be pointing to the pregnancy being real—but who was pregnant?

I passed the turnoff for the cabin where Cali and I had once spent a romantic weekend together, which only made me think about her soft skin, and the way her lips sent voltage pumping through my veins. Oh, the power of time—one minute, you’re professing your love for someone, and the next you’re going in circles trying to figure out how to make things right with someone else. Permanence was a myth.

Suddenly, I realized my muscle memory was taking me toward the Redwood pack house. It would’ve been so easy to just keep going all the way to Cali and ask if she was pregnant. But… Why would I?

I slowed the bike down and brought it to a stop on the side of the road. I’d told Ava that I loved her, and I’d meant it—now, I needed to start proving it. The first step in doing that would be putting her first. If Cali was really having a baby with Greyson, then that was their business. I’d find out when I found out.

I turned my bike around and sped back toward Ava, determined to fix things.

I only hoped that I still could.

**Episode 4618**

**Artemis**

Time had become irrelevant. All that mattered was the pub I was watching from across the alley. Hours could’ve passed—days, even—and it wouldn’t have made a bit of difference to me.

On any other day, under any other circumstances, I probably would’ve given up by now, but this was the final lead I had to follow up about Kadmos’s whereabouts. When I’d first arrived in the Fae world, I’d collected several promising pieces of information, just by talking to the patrons of a tavern. As it turned out, simply mentioning my father’s name was enough to get people talking—almost like he was a celebrity. I’d heard stories about the battles he’d fought in, the people he’d killed, and—most importantly—the people he’d associated with. I’d been so excited to start tracking down the leads I’d dug up, but every one of them had turned out to be a waste of time.

If this final name didn’t pan out, I’d have to start all over again, and that was the last thing I wanted—even though I’d always known that this would be a difficult mission. And part of me definitely regretted coming alone.

I missed Rishika terribly, and our breakup still hurt. It made sense to do it, I knew that. But the way I thought of her minute by minute… My instinct sometimes to turn, expecting her to be there… It was difficult. I’d never had someone like her before, not who I’d fallen in love with. Not who I’d fully committed to.

Someone who I wanted back, but life had other plans.

Bringing her into the Fae world would’ve been an insanely dangerous mistake. Werewolves stood out here, and they made people nervous. But even if Rishika *had* been a viable option, I still wouldn’t have brought her. This was something I had to do by myself—loneliness and regret were unavoidable byproducts of that fact. Everything had its drawbacks. My gut had told me all along that doing this alone was the right move, and I’d learned a long time ago to trust my instincts without hesitation.

Still. The thought of her potentially moving on hurt. I had to not think about it and focus on the task at hand.

Finding leads. Finding my father. Finding out who I really was.

I kept staring at the pub. The place was old enough to have seen far more history than I had—the dark wood walls had been worn smooth with age, and the green trim of the large front windows was peeled and scuffed.

For me, the place was nothing but a point of interest. Maybe in the past, I’d have noticed it and stopped in for a quick drink, but things were different now.

As I continued my stakeout, my mind wandered to Cali this time. I still felt horrible for leaving her—she’d gotten really torn up about it—but she would be okay. She was in a good place. Better than when I’d first met her, so I was trying not to beat myself up too much for it. I was sure that the end of the war alone had helped her immensely. Besides, if I’d delayed this mission any longer, I was fairly certain that some new drama would’ve popped up and prevented me from going.

It was now or never.

The pub’s oak door swung open, and I tensed, clearing my head of anything that wasn’t the situation at hand. A man walked out into the alley, and the description of the person I’d been told to look for came flooding back to me—tall man, dressed in earthy colors, probably smoking a pipe… Which meant that this was probably the person the blacksmith had told me about.

The man kept walking down the alley, and I fell in behind him, making sure to maintain a safe distance and blend into scattered groups of pedestrians.

My target stopped at a basket weaver’s stall and perused the man’s wares. I slid into the crowd that surrounded a vegetable stall nearby, attempting to blend in. I didn’t think the man had noticed me, but I still needed to be careful. One wrong move and it was all over.

After examining a few baskets, the tall man thanked the weaver, then kept walking for a while before he turned into an alley. I hung back for a few seconds before I followed him. The moment I set foot in the alley, the man froze for a moment, then suddenly whipped around to face me.

“You’ve been following me,” he stated, unsheathing a dagger from his belt. “Why?”

“Take it easy. I just want to talk—there’s no need for violence,” I said, not wanting this interaction to go south before I got what I wanted. “Are you Photokes?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s asking?”

I discreetly palmed my own dagger, just in case.

“I’m looking for Kadmos,” I said, ignoring his question and getting right to the point.

Photokes’s eyes flashed with fear. He started to back away nervously, stumbling a little on the uneven cobblestones. “I… I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

*Bullshit.*

Before I could say another word, Photokes turned his back on me and burst into a sprint. Taking this as a fairly solid indication that he did, in fact, know my father, I hustled after him—there was a chance this man knew where Kadmos was, and I wasn’t about to let him get away.

Despite the man’s incredibly long legs, I managed to gain ground on him. It was clear that he wasn’t used to being chased—unlike some of the people I’d encountered in my work as a bounty hunter—and my compulsion to find out what he knew was giving me a fantastic energy boost.

Just as I was about to catch him, he jerked to a halt and whipped around to face me, thrusting out his hands. I was hit by a blast of magic that threw me into a wall, knocking the wind out of me. I slumped to the ground, gasping for air and fighting to collect myself as Photokes started running again. Nothing felt broken, but I was definitely rattled. Still, a little run-in with a wall wasn’t going to stop me—not when I was this determined to get what I wanted.

I surged to my feet and threw my dagger at him. It caught on his pants, pinning them to the ground. In turn, it sent him crashing down.

And I hadn’t even needed to use any magic.

I marched toward him. “Like I said, I just want to talk.”

Breathing hard, Photokes scrambled away from me like a crab, staring up at me with a mixture of confusion, fear, and resentment. “Who are you?”

“Just tell me what you know about Kadmos, and I won’t hurt you,” I said. “I’m not interested in that. If I had been, you’d be bleeding in a number of places right now.”

The man shushed me violently and glanced up and down the alley. “Don’t say that name! And it’s a little late to promise not to hurt me, don’t you think? I hope you realize that on any other day, I’d be the one standing over *you* right now.”

“Quit dodging the question and trying to save your ego,” I snapped. “What do you know about Kadmos? Tell me now. I’m getting less patient by the minute.”

Photokes shushed me again, tensing with obvious anxiety. “That name will bring nothing but death if you continue to speak it!”

I leaned over him. “Apparently I haven’t made myself clear,” I said. “I’ll bring death to *you* if you don’t start talking. Now tell me what you know.”

Photokes was still breathing heavily. “I’m sorry. I just… I need to be cautious. And *you* need to be more discreet.” He got to his feet and took a second to gather himself. “If I answer any questions about… about the man to whomyou’re referring, I’ll be killed.”

“No one will ever hear that you talked to me—you have my word.” I paused for a moment. “Can you at least verify that Kadmos is alive?”

I barely managed to finish my sentence before Photokes lunged forward and pinned me to the wall.

“What did I *just say?*” he hissed. The way he glared at me was the strangest blend of sharp aggression and sheer terror. “I told you, that name is a *death* sentence!”

Good gods, this guy was useless, wasn’t he? Before I even had a chance to shove Photokes away, a man appeared behind him, hauled him off me, and pressed him against the very wall he’d just been using to pin me. Then the stranger held a dagger to Photokes’s throat, making him freeze, and leaned in close to his ear.

“I think you should answer the lady’s question,” he said quietly.

I was stunned. I knew that face. I knew that *man*.

I had to get the hell out of here.

**Episode 4619**

I was really hoping that Greyson had offered to come to orientation with Lola, Jay, and me because he *wanted* to, not because he felt he had to. I’d feel bad if it turned out he was only coming out of a sense of obligation, especially since I was most likely taking him away from something he could be doing at the pack house.

Still, I had to admit that I was glad to have him with me, regardless of why he’d decided to come—I always felt safer and more comfortable when we were together. Meanwhile, Lola wanted Jay to come simply because she wanted all the other students to be envious of her hot guy—she’d told me so, verbatim.

As we got out of the car and started walking toward the meeting point for orientation, I noticed that Lola was wearing Jacqueline’s daylight bracelet. She didn’t *need* to be wearing it—that was one good thing about being a werewolf-vampire hybrid. Abruptly, it dawned on me that Lola’s sudden determination to go to college probably had something to do with Jacqueline’s own unfulfilled wish to attend. For Lola, going back to school was probably a way to honor her friend—and the distraction of classes and coursework had probably seemed appealing, too.

“This campus is kind of nice,” Greyson said, sounding legitimately impressed. “The trees are lovely—and the quads are freaking huge.”

“You’re glad you came, then?” I asked with a smirk—it looked like I didn’t need to feel guilty about his reasons for coming along, after all.

“Absolutely,” he said. “And I get to spend the day with you.”

“It’s too bad I probably won’t see sunlight for most of my time here,” Lola said.

“Why’s that?” Greyson asked.

“Lola’s a computer science major,” Jay said. “She’ll be too busy frying her corneas staring at screens to go outside and play Frisbee in the quad.”

“Ah, that’s too bad.” Greyson turned to me. “What’s your major going to be?”

I hesitated, then I sighed. “I was considering majoring in Communication in Minnesota, so I took some of those intro classes with my gen eds, but I didn’t really like it.”

“Couldn’t you always switch if you wanted to?” Greyson pressed. “To something you’re more interested in?”

I shrugged. “I guess so, but I’m only here because Lola decided I needed to be, not because of some secret career aspiration.”

Lola snorted. “Well, not to sound like a helicopter parent, but you should probably decide if you’re switching soon. It’s not like being a Luna comes with insurance and a regular paycheck.”

“She has a point, Cali,” Greyson said. “At this stage in life, it’s important to think of the future. The better prepared you are, the better off you’ll be.”

I scoffed. “Excuse me Mr. Life Coach, but the last time I checked, being an Alpha pays about the same as being a Luna.”

A.k.a. a big fat nothing.

“Yes, but I invested the money I earned when I was a Rogue, and now I live off the profits,” Greyson countered. “I’m not just burning through my savings—I’m using the money I have to make even more. I’m totally set, and so is the pack.”

“Okay, so why can’t I just do that?”

Lola laughed. “You need money to make money, Cali. Besides, what do you know about investing?”

“I could learn,” I said sheepishly. “There are plenty of books and apps and YouTube videos about that kind of thing. It can’t be that hard.”

“You could switch to finance,” Jay suggested. “More work, but that way, you could learn how to make money.”

I sighed. “Yeah, but I suck at math, so that probably isn’t the best idea.”

Jay laughed. “Let me get this straight—you openly suck at math, and yet you think you could learn how to invest large sums of money?”

I shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a confident trader, or whatever they’re called.”

Jay shrugged helplessly. “Well, I suppose calculators exist for a reason.”

“It doesn’t even matter,” I said gloomily. “I doubt I’d have time for a super intense major like that. Thanks to Lola, I’m going to be spending a lot of my time learning to be a coxswain.”

Greyson wrapped me up in a big hug. “And you’ll be the sexiest coxswain ever.”

I blushed in Greyson’s arms, feeling a bit embarrassed—though I’d have been lying if I said I didn’t appreciate the compliment. Greyson had a way of making me feel amazing with even the tiniest gestures or compliments.

We entered the building where orientation was being held, and were ushered into an auditorium by a bunch of overenthusiastic volunteers. We found a group of open seats and chatted for a while until the president of the university walked out onto the stage. The rumbling chatter quickly died down as the president took her place in front of a podium. She greeted the new students, then immediately launched into a clearly rehearsed script about how amazing the university was, followed by a presentation about the different majors on offer.

Worry started gnawing at my stomach. There was no ignoring it—I was going to have to choose a major, and soon. But what was I even good at? What was I passionate about? The only thing that came to mind was being a basically-Luna. I wished there could’ve been a major for *that*.

I started trying to make a mental list of things I liked to do, but I couldn’t come up with a single relevant activity. I liked using my magic, but that wasn’t something I could even talk about at school, let alone study.

Greyson leaned close to my ear, apparently having realized what was going through my mind. “Maybe you need some time to think about it? There’s nothing wrong with that. Besides, if the worst happens and you choose something you don’t end up liking, you can always change your major. It might be a bit difficult, but I know you could do it.”

I looked up at the academic calendar on the big screen behind the president. I had two weeks to choose my major. Greyson was right—two weeks was plenty of time. Still, I was definitely feeling a bit envious of Lola. I wished I could’ve been more like her. She’d always known that she wanted to study computer science—and she was good at it, too. It had to be nice to have a passion like that.

After the orientation presentation, we filed out of the auditorium and into the lobby.

Lola threw an arm across my shoulders. “Hey, maybe you’ll get so good at crew that you can become a coach or something.”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t amused.

Lola mercifully changed the subject. “Where’s that club fair the president was talking about?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And if I’m being honest, I’d rather not go.”

“Oh, come on,” Lola said, elbowing me lightly. “It’ll be fun!”

“It’ll be crowded and congested and boring,” I retorted.

“Oh, quit being so negative,” she said. “Clubs are super fun! I want to see what they have here.” Without waiting for me to reply, she pointed in the direction of a steady flow of students. “I think it’s this way. Come on, let’s go!”

No one objected, the three of us all aware that doing so would only be a waste of breath. Once Lola had something in her head, she stuck to it and didn’t let anyone get in her way—even when it came to something as simple as attending a university orientation’s club fair.

The hall we ended up in was packed with tables, displays, and people. So many people. Club representatives sat behind their booths, passionately flagging down anyone who made eye contact, putting on their biggest smiles to lure people in. I was beyond overwhelmed, and I found the overzealous club members unreasonably agitating. I wanted to get out of there more than anything, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to convince Lola to leave. The only thing I could do was swallow my discomfort and play the role of best friend and “interested” potential club recruit.

We checked out a few clubs here and there—all depending on what Lola was into, of course. Not that I had any opinions on the matter. As I zoned out at one booth while Lola asked the club president a million questions with Jay and Greyson standing by nodding blankly, I heard my name being called over the sounds of the bustling crowd. I turned around to see Gael waving at me from another booth a few yards away.

Greyson followed my line of sight. “Who’s that?” he asked.

I swallowed nervously, but I supposed now was as good a time as any to rip off the Band-Aid—it was time for Greyson to meet my crew teammates.

“That’s Gael,” I told him. “He’s on the crew team with me.”

We were making our way over to say hello when I noticed Codsworth standing next to Gael, staring at me disdainfully. I was about to warn Greyson and give him a quick overview of my relationship with Codsworth and our little “rivalry”—but then Codsworth got the first word in.

“Cali.” He smiled evilly. “Don’t you already have a boyfriend? Who’s this guy?”

**Episode 4620**

I felt like I was going to be sick.

Of *course* Codsworth had brought this up, the conniving little shit. He’d been at the party, he’d seen me with Xavier, and he loved making me miserable. I knew I shouldn’t have let him get in my head—and so freaking *quickly*, too—but he’d succeeded, and he knew it. That stupid smirk on his face made that extremely obvious.

God, I wished I could just reach over the table, grab him by his stupid shirt, and fling him across this stupid club fair. In two seconds, he’d made me feel worse about every shitty thing in my life. I really wished I hadn’t brought Greyson along to orientation. I’d thought it was a good idea, but I hadn’t even thought to account for the possibility of running into Codsworth. How could I have been so stupid? If there was any constant in my college life to date, it was that Codsworth would be there to ruin everything.

Greyson smiled at Codsworth, but it was was far more threatening than cheerful. “I’m Greyson. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And that other guy you met? He was just pretending to be her boyfriend because of jerks like you who always seem to feel the need to bother her. Cali needed a shield—though I can promise you, she knows how to protect herself without one.” Greyson leaned in close to Codsworth and suddenly seemed to be studying him like a museum exhibit. “You do seem like the type of guy who likes to stir up trouble for no good reason. If you keep it up, you might end up creating more trouble than you can handle.”

Greyson moved in even closer, right up to Codsworth’s ear. There, he whispered something to Codsworth that I couldn’t make out, despite my best efforts. Judging by the way all the blood drained out of Codsworth’s face, however, I assumed it wasn’t an invitation to go get ice cream.

Greyson stepped back with a grin and squeezed Codsworth’s shoulders. “It was great meeting you, man—I look forward to seeing you in the upcoming races. I’ll *definitely* be keeping an eye out for you.”

He slapped Codsworth on the arm, causing him to wince, but my teammate was still able to squeak out an awkward, “Nice to meet you! I’ll see you around!”

Greyson and I were about to walk away when Gael stopped us.

“Oh, wait!” he said. “I’m not sure what clubs you’ve already signed up for or are interested in, but you should totally think about joining our pickleball club.”

For the first time, I actually took a good look at the booth that Gael and Codsworth were manning.

“Oh, maybe!” I replied, not really sure what to say but still wanting to be respectful. Codsworth might’ve been have been an asshole, but Gael was nice, and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Any other day, I might’ve given pickleball a chance, but right now, I just wanted to get out of there.

Gael appeared to sense my lack of interest, but at least he didn’t call attention to it. “Well, either way, I’ll see you at practice Monday morning!”

I groaned, remembering our coach’s warning not to be late. But really, if he didn’t want us to be late, he shouldn’t have scheduled practice at such an unholy hour of the morning—and on a Monday, no less! He was practically setting us up to disappoint him. Maybe that was the point. He was probably doing this to test our “will to succeed” or whatever, but I’d never bought into stuff like that. There was nothing wrong with sleeping in a little, as far as I was concerned.

“What did you say to Codsworth?” I asked Greyson once we’d put enough distance between ourselves and the pickleball booth.

Greyson shrugged. “Nothing.”

I didn’t buy that for a second—especially given the fiery-yet-calm expression he’d had on his face throughout his entire “conversation” with Codsworth.

“Did you *threaten* him?” I asked.

“Is it so wrong for a man to stick up for the woman he loves?” Greyson asked innocently.

“No, of course not,” I said. “But what did you say to him?”

Greyson stopped walking and leaned down to whisper in my ear. “I told him that I was a werewolf, and that I’d eviscerate him at the next full moon.”

I lurched back in shock. “You’re kidding, right?”

Greyson just shrugged and started walking again. “I don’t know. Can’t really remember.”

I grabbed his arm. “Greyson, what did you really say? You have to tell me. I have to be on the same team as Codsworth—I can’t have things between us getting all weird and intense, no matter how much I dislike him.”

Greyson laughed. “Relax, love, you have nothing to worry about. I highly doubt Codsworth is ever going to bother you again. That guy is—”

Before Greyson could finish his thought, a group of students rushed us and forced fliers into our hands, not even asking if we wanted them.

The girl in charge of the group shoved another copy of the flier into my line of sight, so close that I could barely read it.

“Have you seen this girl?” she asked.

I looked down at the flier of paper in my hands and realized it was about a student who’d gone missing. This group was looking for anyone who had any relevant information. I studied the photo, but I didn’t recognize the girl—and neither did Lola and Jay, who joined us a few seconds after the group of students.

“I’m sorry, I wish I could help,” Lola said. “What’s going on?”

“She hasn’t been seen since Thursday, and the school seems to be dragging its feet—it’s like they don’t care at all,” said the girl in charge. “We want action. We want accountability. We want her found.”

“Gosh, that’s horrible,” I said sincerely. “I’m sorry we couldn’t be of any help, but I promise we’ll keep an eye out.”

The students nodded gratefully and moved on.

Greyson stared at the flier for a few more seconds, then looked at me. “So, tell me again why you’re attending this school?”

“Yeah,” Jay added. “This isn’t really the most auspicious start to the semester.”

“Don’t worry, Greyson,” I said. “I have my magic—like you told Codsworth, I can look after myself. Besides, we don’t even know what happened to that girl. Maybe she just got homesick or something.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You can’t seriously be that naïve.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It’s a possibility.”

“Believe that all you want, Cali.” She turned to Greyson. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on Cali. As long as I’m around, she’ll be safe.”

“Lola, I don’t need help,” I said, a little huffily. “I can handle myself.”

Greyson kissed me, then slung an arm across my shoulders as he addressed Lola. “I agree with Cali. She’s one of the strongest people I know—this school has nothing on her.”

“How sweet,” Lola said, with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Now, can we please focus on the real issue: I need something to eat. I didn’t have time to grab anything before we left the house, and if I don’t get some food in me soon, we’re all going to have a problem.”

“I’m fine with whatever, as long as it’s not campus coffee,” Jay said. “There’s no way I’m having that. It’s probably worse than what Lola makes.”

Lola playfully punched Jay in the side. “Hey, my coffee isn’t *that* bad.”

“Eh,” Greyson and I said in unison.

“Oh, no, not you guys, too!” Lola burst out. “You really can’t trust anyone these days. Not even your closest friends.”

“Lola,” I said solemnly. “I love you, but your coffee is one of the worst things my tastebuds have ever encountered. It tastes like a muddy puddle that got run over by a tractor trailer fresh from a manure run and then spat in by fourteen rats.”

“Gee, thanks for sugar coating it!” Lola huffed, crossing her arms. “Fine. We are all entitled to our own opinions. Why don’t we try this café I know? It’s right off campus, and it’s got good coffee, I promise.”

“Then lead the way,” Jay said.

We headed off, Lola and Jay leading the way while Greyson and I walked a few steps behind them, holding hands.

Even though I still didn’t know what Greyson had said to terrify Codsworth, I was grateful to have someone like him in my corner. He might’ve come across as overprotective, to some, but I found it comforting to know that he was always ready to step in if things took a turn for the worst. With everything that had been going on lately, having a rock like Greyson meant the world to me.

Still, part of me worried that he might’ve gone too far with Codsworth. For a guy like him to turn that shade of white, what Greyson had said must’ve been intense. I really hoped I’d be able to get Greyson to tell me the truth, later. I needed to know.

“I can’t imagine how that missing girl’s friends are feeling,” I said as we stood at a crosswalk, not far from the café. “That must be such a terrifying thing to go through. I don’t even know what I’d do if one of you guys just disappeared like that.”

“Looks like that girl isn’t the only missing person in town,” Lola said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She pointed at a flier that had been taped to a nearby electrical pole. On it was a picture of a man with a warm, goofy smile, and above it was the word “MISSING.” The flier was requesting information regarding the whereabouts of the man in the picture—a pizza delivery driver. My heart sank.

“Do you think the two disappearances are connected?” I asked.

**Episode 4621**

“The pizza guy’s name is Tobias,” Lola said, reading the missing person flier. “He was last seen leaving for a delivery. The customer claimed they never received the order”—Lola turned to me, eyes wide—“and Tobias never returned.”

I gulped. “You really think this is related to the missing student girl?”

Lola nodded seriously. “This place seems too small for random coincidences.”

“That’s something Lola’s learned from *CSI* and *Law & Order*. Those are always reliable sources,” Jay said. I wasn’t sure if he was teasing or not, but Lola offered another solemn nod.

I turned to the flier again, staring at the guy’s face. He was so young, just like the girl. “These kids’ parents, their siblings and friends—they must be so upset.” I looked up at Greyson. “I wish there was something we could do.”

“This is a tragedy, I know,” he said. “But I don’t think you should do anything if it means putting yourself in danger, Cali. And while werewolves have their issues with violence, humans can be even more dangerous.”

A shiver ran through me. “I’m not so sure about that… I’ve seen what happens in a pack war.”

“What’s definitely the most dangerous is having to deal with a werewolf crisis *and* dangerous human situations at the same time,” Jay said, speaking up. He looked between Lola and me. “Which could always happen, so both of you should stay out of humans’ business.”

Lola grumbled her yes. As for me, I knew that both Jay and Greyson were right.

Still, before we walked away to head to the café, I took one last look at the picture of Tobias. I tried to store it in my memory in case I happened to see him somewhere.

*I hope he’s okay.*

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The café was so crowded it took us a while to find a table.

“How nice is this?” Lola clapped her hands together. “Look at all the students studying, doing their assignments. They are so *normal*.” She turned to me with a smile. “This reminds me of Mrs. Smith’s café in Minnesota.”

The thought made me a little homesick. I wished my parents and sister were here.

*I wonder how Artemis is. How long till she finds Kadmos? Will she ever find him? What if she never does and keeps wandering around the Fae world?*

The question was too upsetting to linger on, so I shook it off. Greyson helped by distracting me with a kiss and asking what I wanted to drink. After he and Jay sauntered over to place our orders, Lola asked, “How do you feel about going to school again?”

I raised an eyebrow. “What you’re forgetting is that going back to school was your idea, not mine.”

Lola scoffed, “What would you even do if you weren’t going? Hang out at the pack house all day?”

“It’s not like Greyson and I have ever had the time to hang out, Lola. There’s always a crisis.”

“There’s no crisis now,” Lola said. “So you need to get inventive. I love the pack and all, but there’s more to life. You need to have new experiences, do exciting things!”

I arched my eyebrows. “What’s so exciting about college? We’ve done it before, if you recall. When I think about it, I remember endless assignments, all-night studying, and anxiety over grades. I have enough anxiety about other things now, thanks very much.”

“Oh, come on, look around!” She pointed with her hand. “People are working together, there are parties all the time—we’re going to have fun.”

“If your idea of fun is getting up every day for morning crew practice at the crack of dawn, then why didn’t *you* sign up for it, Lola?”

She snorted. “Me? I don’t know anything about crew.”

I had to laugh. “Neither do I! Obviously!”

“Oh my god, can you quit being so grumpy?” Lola scoffed. “I want the easygoing Cali back.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “The one who did whatever you wanted all the time without any complaints?”

Lola smirked. “Exactly.”

“Five a.m. crew practice killed that Cali. She’s gone,” I deadpanned.

Lola snorted. “And people call *me* dramatic. If you hate it so much—”

“I don’t…” I paused. “Hate it. It’s a challenge. And you do know I love those.”

Lola grinned. “Atta girl.”

Greyson and Jay returned with our orders, then. Greyson sat down next to me in the booth. “Careful with that,” he said, sliding my tea in front of me. “It’s hot.”

I thanked him. He looked at me fondly and shot me a smile before taking a sip of his own tea. This was such a normal, peaceful moment between the two of us that I wanted to take it and put it in a box for safekeeping. For a beat, I *did* think about how lovely it would be to hang out at the pack house all day with him.

*Greyson wouldn’t be there to spend time with you, Cali*, a voice said in my head. *He always has pack stuff to do. Also, your entire personality and life* shouldn’t *revolve around a boy!*

That was the cold hard truth.

Lola’s phone buzzed, cutting off my thoughts.

“Ah, I nearly forgot!” she exclaimed. “There’s a presentation we’re supposed to attend in the main lecture hall. We’d better hurry, or we’ll be late.”

I would prefer to sit here, relax, and snuggle up to Greyson. But would Lola budge after putting something in her mind? Of course not.

“You were never this intocollege when we were in Minnesota, Lola,” I said. “What happened to you?”

“I changed,” she said, her expression serious. “I’m, like, mature now.”

I turned to Jay, trying not to laugh. He shrugged. “If she says so.”

Greyson shot me a look, like, *Who’s gonna tell them that she’s the same old Lola?*

I shot one back, like, *Hah, not me!*

See? We didn’t even need mind linking right now.

“*Anyway*,” Greyson said, clearing his throat. “I wouldn’t mind seeing the campus. My mate’s gonna be spending a lot of time here, so why not?”

I sighed, turning to Lola. “What’s the lecture on?”

Lola gave me a smile so big it was alarming. “You’re gonna love it!”

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“Welcome, everyone,” the professor said. “I am Dr. Stephen Horowitz, and my presentation today is going to be about the history of Oregon!”

*History? Of all things?*

“Ordering a decaf tea was a huge mistake,” I murmured to Greyson. “There’s no way I won’t fall asleep during this thing.”

“You can lean on me if you wanna nap,” he said, smirking.

I snorted. “My hero.”

“I try,” he said in my ear. The gruffness in his voice made my skin tingle. It started from my ears that had probably turned beet-red and traveled down my body.

When our eyes met again, I wanted to touch him. Hug him. Like, right now, hardcore hugging, squeezing and everything. I also wanted to rub my face against his neck like a cat marking its territory.

*Totally normal, right?*

I settled for taking his hand in mine under the desk.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Greyson muttered as the professor set up his slides. “Who knows? You might even find this interesting.”

\*\*\*

Greyson was right, actually. The presentation *was* interesting. Dr. Horowitz was a stocky white man with a snowy beard. He reminded me of Santa, and he spoke loudly and energetically enough to keep my attention. He started by talking about the natural history of Oregon—how it was formed, the volcanoes, lakes, and all those things.

And then, he segued into his area of expertise.

“Cryptozoology,” he said officially after writing the word on the whiteboard. Underlining it three times, he added, “The study of the unknown, of legendary creatures!”

“Like Bigfoot?” someone called out.

The classroom broke into snickers, but the professor remained calm. “A great example,” he said. “Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, mermaids, vampires, and—of course—werewolves.”

There were whispers among the students, a little bit more snickering. But they were all listening, their attention captured.

“This ought to be good,” Greyson whispered, snorting.

“No, this is really interesting,” I muttered. “I hadn’t realized there was an actual area of study about all these things!”

Before Greyson could reply, Dr. Horowitz’s voice got even louder. “Oregon is a land rich in myths and legends, and there is a reason for that. Entities that exist right in the middle of what is natural and what goes above nature have roamed these wild woods for eons now, claiming these mountains as their own. This particular creature has terrorized settlers for generations. Some say it’s only a matter of time before it returns…”

He pressed a button.

The slide changed, and the doctor bellowed, “The Great Cryptid of the Cascades!”

I gasped when I saw the beast in the photo. Even if most people snickered again, I thought I heard a couple of yelps that leaned more toward surprise, and maybe even fear.

*Wow… what* is *that thing?!*

My eyes wide, fixed on the creature—this sort of huge dark blob. It could either be huge, bigger than most people like something out of Godzilla… or, for all I knew, it was the size of a dog. I leaned in closer to whisper in Greyson’s ear. “Have you ever heard of this thing?”

**Episode 4622**

Greyson’s voice dropped further. “There have been rumors of all kinds of creatures, most of which are nonsense.”

I glanced at the slide. “But what about this one? What if it’s real?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “I think it’s a very real way for this guy to generate interest for his class. I’ve never even heard of the Great Cryptid of the Cascades. It’s not a thing.”

My voice was both a mutter and a scoff. “I never thought that supernaturals were a thing either before Lola tricked me into signing up for that dating app. Since then, I’ve had to deal with heaps of supernatural creatures—werewolves, witches, vampires, Fae, and the list goes on and on.”

“Touché,” Greyson said. “But unless there is some actual proof, I’m not ready to buy into…” He eyed the slide. “Whatever *that* is.”

The students were told that there would be guided tours of the campus after the doctor wrapped up the lecture. But I wasn’t done here.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Greyson, marching toward the podium with a bounce to my step. I was fired up, a little too loud when I said, “Hi!”

Startled, Dr. Horowitz looked up from his papers so quickly that his glasses almost fell off. “Oh, hello! Miss—”

“Caliana Hart,” I said. “I really enjoyed your lecture. Sounds like cryptozoology broadens people’s horizons in ways that the average person could never imagine.”

He broke into a smile, stroking his white beard. “That is a keen observation, Ms. Hart. If you have an interest—”

“I could major in cryptozoology?”

If the doctor smiled before, now his whole face lit up. “Of course! I enjoy nothing more than guiding bright minds through the exciting, mysterious journey of creature study. You have no idea what’s out there, Ms. Hart.”

*Oh*, I wanted to scoff, *but I really do.*

Dr. Horowitz started rambling excitedly, talking about the initial lineup of classes while pointing everything out in the list he’d given me. He waved a girl over, then, and introduced her to me as Torrance. I’d seen her assisting him during the entirety of the lecture.

She was wearing jeans and a cypress green jacket, a leather cuff on one wrist, and leather boots. She was cute and looked like any other student. Definitely not the kind of person I’d have expected to come say, “You should join the Cryptid Critters club. We are committed to the discovery of supernaturals.”

I blinked at her. “*Committed*?”

“Super committed,” she said. Her voice dropped. “We know that creatures like werewolves, vampires, and ghosts are out there, in this very town. Heck…” She looked around the room. “Maybe in this very classroom.”

I almost choked on my own spit.

*Oh my god! She knows?*

I needed to stop being paranoid.

*She can’t know, Cali! CHILL!*

“I’ll definitely think about it,” I said, chuckling awkwardly. “Thanks so much!”

\*\*\*

While the student tour we had joined moved on, walking through the green, Greyson and I stayed a few feet behind to talk. After making sure nobody was listening, Greyson said, “Cryptozoology, then?”

“Yep,” I said. “Much more interesting than Communications, wouldn’t you say?”

His tone was teasing. “Do you really need to study what you already know, love?”

“I think that’s the fun part,” I admitted. “It won’t be as hard.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You should keep in mind that humans don’t really want to believe supernaturals are real. They think of us in terms of nightmares.”

“I’m pretty sure I met at least two people who believe in us in that lecture hall,” I said.

Greyson snorted. “The majority never believes those who believe. Which is actually a good thing. The less they know about us, the better.”

“Do you think I should keep track of what they know?” I asked, pondering. “It might be useful in keeping us safe.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said. “You’ll be—”

“Like a double agent,” I said. My voice was tinged with glee, and I didn’t hate that for me at all.

Greyson chuckled. “I like seeing you like this.”

“Like what?”

He paused walking, smiling down at me. “Excited, fearless. Confident in yourself. It’s beautiful.” He brought my hand to his mouth, kissing the top of it. “You’re always beautiful.”

My face got all warm, and it had nothing to do with the sun. For a moment, I forgot what we were supposed to do next, but then I heard Lola’s voice up ahead. “There they are!” She broke off from the group and trotted over to us. “What are you two doing staying so behind? The guide just said we’re heading over to see a mathletes competition!”

“Ugh, do we have to?” I grumbled. “I *do* hate math.”

“What are you talking about?” Jay scoffed. “It’s going to be epic!”

Greyson gave Jay a funny look. “*Epic*?”

I stared at Greyson. Hard. Again, no mind linking necessary for him to get the hint.

“You know what?” he told Jay and Lola with a smile. “I think Cali and I will do our own little tour for now. We’ll join you two later, okay?”

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“Is this part of the tour?” I asked Greyson as we walked down the hall. He paused in front of an empty classroom and pushed the door open.

“More like the main event.” He smirked, pulling me inside with him. Walking backward, he led me toward a desk and leaned against it.

“You have my attention,” I said, my pulse picking up speed when he rested my hands on his chest. I’d never get over how good he felt. How the cords of muscle there trembled under my touch, how his heart pounded. It made my throat dry up, my breath pick up.

He noticed.

With a wicked smile, he asked, “Have you ever made out in a classroom?”

The memory of Alex and me in high school in a science class popped into my head. He’d told me he was working on a kissing potion and wanted to try it out. I’d told him that I had a cold and a tongue ulcer.

*Safe to say, there had been no kissing!*

“Nope,” I said. “Never. It’s…” I looked around. “We could get caught.”

Greyson eyes locked with mine. “You’re right. That would be bad.”

I swallowed hard. I remembered earlier, when he’d said he would let me nap on him during the lecture. And after that, when he called me beautiful. And now, I could feel his heart drum, and he smelled so good, and the way he looked at me made me feel like I could break and flutter away in pieces.

All I could think to say was, “Maybe… you could keep an ear out to see if anyone’s coming?”

He smiled again, looking so satisfied it bordered on scandalous. Leaning in, his breath fanning my cheek, he muttered, “I could do that, love. If that’s what you want. Anything you want…”

I didn’t know if it was what he said or how he said it, but I felt hot and sweaty and like my entire face had caught fire before it spread all over me. He was teasing me, shameless about it, and I couldn’t keep up.

*I want to, though…*

So badly, I wished I could be bold like he was. And this was more than being bold, too. This was him reaching to connect with me after what had happened between us earlier. And I trusted Greyson enough to be bold with him.

I asked, “Is making out in a classroom different than anywhere else, then?”

He brushed his nose over my cheekbone. “I could teach you…”

I held my breath and pushed myself some more. “Professor Evers, is it?”

I had expected him to laugh at my little quip, but that reaction wasn’t what I’d hoped for. I needed him to look at me like he wanted to devour me, and when it worked, I felt triumphant.

*Look at him*, I thought. *I did that to him.*

“My girl’s such a quick learner,” he rasped. He sounded *proud*, and I was melting. He cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing my jaw, my chin. My lower lip. He leaned closer, his gaze fixed on my mouth as he whispered, “My lesson starts with a kiss…”

I parted my lips, and he kissed me, deep, relentless. He grabbed me by the waist at the same time to turn me around. My feet left the ground. He settled me on the desk and came to stand between my legs that parted only to lock around him. He shoved a pile of books to the floor, pushed me back on the desk, and hovered over me.

The ache I felt started from his mouth on mine, then glided down as his hand moved under my shirt and dipped down between my legs, to my arching hips that sought the friction between our bodies. His every brush against me pushed little whimpers out of my mouth and into his. It made me feel drunk, clawing at him, protesting when he broke our kiss to breathe.

*Don’t stop*, I thought. *Tell me more.*

I thought those words, or maybe I said them out loud. I must’ve, because he muttered in my ear, “I could teach you how to come just like this, over your clothes. Hard, fast, easy. Do you want that, love?”

I nodded in the crook of his neck, breathing hard. He slid his hand down between us, between my thighs, over my jeans. My hips almost flew off the desk when his palm pressed down right there. He kissed me to stifle the moan that escaped when—

My jacket pocket vibrated.

*Goddammit!*

“Shit,” I choked out. “It must be Lola looking for us. Or someone from the pack, or my mom—”

Greyson withdrew, adjusting himself as he said, “See who it is.”

My whole body screamed when I sat up. With shaky hands, I reached for my pocket, huffing. “This better be an emergency!”

Greyson’s laughter was gruff, and it made my skin burn.

But then I saw who the text was from.

*Are you still here?*

Gael was messaging me. Definitely didn’t expect that. Frowning, I replied, *I am. Everything okay?*

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

“The crew captain,” I said. “I’m not sure what he—”

Another text landed.

*Come to the boathouse. We’re giving a demonstration and need our coxswain ASAP!*

**Episode 4623**

**Xavier**

I was speeding back toward the Samara pack house. I knew I had a few fires to put out here. Fixing things with Ava was at the top of my list, followed by finding out if Cali was pregnant. With my brother's baby. My stomach rolled at the thought.

I wanted to dismiss the possibility. To not even think about it as a plausible situation. Colton was not known for paying close attention to anything, not even gossip, so maybe this was one of those situations where he heard a rumor and circulated it without figuring out if it was true or not.

But now I couldn’t get it out of my head, regardless.

If I didn't get to the bottom of this, it would break my brain. Probably my heart, too. I could feel it.

But Ava needed to be my number-one worry right now. I had to clear things up with her. I hated it when she got mad at me. I couldn’t afford to lose her. Driving in the fast lane to get back to her was not fast enough for me. There were ice patches here and there on the road, and I made sure to avoid them.

But when I rounded a corner and swerved to avoid yet another patch, the bike skidded. I heard a pop in the front tire, and the wheel suddenly vibrated. I lost control and used my feet to keep the bike from falling, employing supernatural strength to guide it to a stop.

“What the fuck?” I said under my breath, examining the tire. It had a nail in it. I looked around. What the hell was a nail doing out here? I couldn't help but wonder if Adéluce had something to do with this. What would she even gain from it, though? A flat tire seemed beneath her. She was capable of doing much worse to me.

She was capable of torture.

But then again, maybe the nail was just yet another petty way to bother me.

It wasn't the nail itself that pissed me the fuck off right now, though. It was the fact that Adéluce was consuming my thoughts yet again. Jaw clenched, my anger rising, I led the bike off the road. I knew I would have to come back for it later. Right now, though, I couldn’t stall. I needed to speak to Ava. She was my Luna. She had to be a priority. I had to remind myself that before doing something stupid like showing up at the Redwood house and demanding to speak to Cali.

I stripped off my clothes, shifted, and broke into a run for the rest of the way back to the Samara pack house.

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The thing about trying to make up with Ava was that I’d done it a million times before. It never got easier, even if I knew she would forgive me. She had forgiven much worse. I had to make sure to appear genuine here, but the problem was that I had no idea how. I couldn't admit to her that I had recognized Adéluce. Literally, I couldn't physically admit that.

The only solution seemed to be to keep lying and hope that she would eventually believe me. I would probably be able to distract her, one way or another. With a kiss or two. Ava would have a much harder time rejecting me if our bodies were involved. If I got her into bed and put my mouth between her legs before fucking her brains out, I doubted that she would care about anything else. For the moment, at least.

It was grounding to know that we would always have that connecting us despite any fight. Did it make me feel a little dirty to use sex that way? Maybe. But it was what it was, and above all, I needed to maintain Ava's safety.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on our bedroom door. She wasn't there when I opened it, though. She had told me she wanted to rest, so where was she?

“Where is Ava?” I asked Marissa after heading down to the kitchen.

She shrugged. “Haven’t seen her. Thought she'd gone out with you.”

My throat dried out. Where the hell was she?

One of the worst things about Adéluce was that if I didn’t have my mate right next to me, I couldn’t help but imagine horrific scenarios about what the vampire-witch could do to her. That went for both Cali and Ava.

I cursed under my breath and reached for my phone, ready to call her. Marissa asked, “What did you do to upset her this time?”

“Who says I upset her?”

Marissa snorted. “Please. It’s a pattern by now.”

“It was just a misunderstanding. I want to talk to her.” Ava’s number went straight to voicemail. I had to stop myself from throwing my phone at the wall. Jaw clenched, I turned to Marissa. “Do you have any idea where she might have gone? Did she tell you anything?”

Marissa narrowed her eyes at me. “I don’t. But you better not screw things up with her. The pack is finally coalescing, accepting you as their Alpha. Don’t give them a reason to doubt you right now.”

“I don't need leadership advice,” I snapped. Marissa loved to push buttons, didn’t she?  “This has nothing to do with any of that.”

She snorted. “You’re wrong. Anything that happens between Alpha and Luna matters to the pack. And you should remember that actions have consequences.”

I wasn’t about to dwell on what Marissa was saying. Even if she had a point, I was already juggling too much right now. “I don’t have time for your philosophical BS, Marissa,” I told her, walking away. “I need to find my mate.”

\*\*\*

I picked up Ava’s scent and realized it led toward the woods. She’d left her clothes under a tree in our front yard, so I was certain that she had shifted and started running. Probably to blow off some steam. If anyone knew about that, it was me.

“Can I join you?” Knox asked just as I was about to shift and follow Ava’s trail.

I groaned internally. The last thing I needed right now was to drag Knox into this. He’d ended up being way too chatty for my taste, and I was not in the mood for his questions and existential angst or whatever. I had enough shit to deal with already.

“I got it. I’ll find Ava and bring her back.”

“But I could really use a run,” Knox persisted like a puppy I couldn’t shake.

“The woods are huge,” I snapped. “You can run anywhere you want, just not with me.”

Knox blinked at me as if I had just kicked him. He mumbled something that I couldn't make out before turning and storming back inside the house like a moody teenager. Because he *was* a moody teenager. I huffed, Marissa’s words from earlier coming back to me. I probably hadn’t helped myself by treating Knox like shit, but fuck it. I would deal with it later.

One crisis at a time, damn it.

\*\*\*

Ava’s scent was easy to follow. My wolf was attached to her—he’d be able to find her amidst the chaos. I still had no idea what the fuck I was gonna tell her, but I hoped that my being naked and her being naked would equal the usual result and I would be able to avoid more questions.

A little bit of time had passed since our fight, so she must have cooled off enough by now to remember what mattered. And that was her and me giving in to our wolves and fucking in the dirt like animals. And that I loved her.

I should probably start saying that to her more. It would help my case. Good thing I actually meant it. I could feel my chest ache at the thought of her not forgiving me right now. I was thinking what kind of an excuse I should start with when I heard water in the distance.

The river came into view. The waterfall connected to it was steep. I looked around for Ava. She had to be here. Her scent was strong, not muddled by anything. She must not have dived in yet. I took a few steps forward when I heard leaves crunching up ahead. Ava emerged from the trees, coming to stand by the edge of the falls.

What the actual fuck was she doing? She was a werewolf, yeah, but there were sharp rocks at the bottom of the waterfall that were tricky to avoid. You had to be careful here.

“Ava!” I called. “Stay back!”

She turned to look at me, her expression unreadable. Her eyes, though, told me everything I needed to know. She was still furious. She was still hurt.

My wolf howled. My heart was pounding so hard at the sight of her standing there at the edge that my chest hurt. When I said, “Ava, stop!” she turned her back on me.

And then she jumped down the waterfall.

**Episode 4624**

“A demonstration?” I hissed at Greyson, holding his hand so tightly in mine it had to constitute a death grip. “How can I demonstrate what I don't know?”

“That is a very good question,” Greyson said calmly.

I shot him a glare. “You’re not helping.”

He pressed his lips together. If he started laughing right now, I was going to be *very* mad. He was not supposed to laugh. He was supposed to tell me that I would pull this off perfectly without making any mistakes. He was supposed to indulge my every madness without any criticism. Ever. That was what he was supposed to do, and he’d better get to it, before I—

“Hey!” Lola dashed toward Greyson and me. We’d been walking across the quad and toward my personal guillotine. Meaning the boathouse. “We’re heading to the river to watch; we heard about the crew demonstration, and I knew I had to be there to cheer you on!”

Lola’s happiness made me ten times more stressed out and irritated.

*This is all her fault! My best friend! Betraying me!*

“This is going to be a disaster, and you’re going to live the rest of your life knowing that you are the one who lit the match of my destruction, Lola,” I said darkly.

Jay blinked at me like I was insane, which I probably was, but Lola just grinned wide. “Oh my god, I totally love this new ominous vibe you have going on. Like, you being grumpy is boring, but ‘ominous’ I can get behind, you know? Interesting character development.”

I turned to Greyson. “Take me far away from here before I do something I regret.”

Still pressing his lips together—he’d really better not laugh—Greyson said, “Cali, you can do this. You—”

“But I don’t know the first thing about being a coxswain!”

Greyson shook his head, resting a hand on my shoulder. In that usual, comforting tone of his, he said, “You did study crew online. Don’t you remember the basics?”

I gulped. “I mean, I do understand what I’m supposed to do. Keeping the boat on course, making sure the crew is in sync—but I’ve never actually tried it in the water.”

Greyson stared at me. His voice was even, serious. “If anyone can figure it out, it’s you. I believe in you, love.”

And there he was. My supportive mate, indulging my bullshit right and left and still somehow believing in me. Without laughing. It was truly remarkable, and it was enough to get me going right now.

“Thank you, Greyson,” I said quietly.

“Of course.” He caressed my cheek. “Besides, it’s just a demo. It’s not like you’ll be racing. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

\*\*\*

When we arrived at the boathouse, a large crowd had already gathered to watch. Whatever little confidence Greyson had built up in me vanished.

*Great! More people to watch me fail!*

“Cali!” Gael spotted me in seconds. The man had the eyes of a hawk. “Hurry up and get your ass over here!”

I turned to Greyson. “Should I just tell him I don’t know what I’m doing?”

He pressed his lips together again. “I think you're selling yourself short, love. I know you will get the feel for it. Sometimes, when you do something tough, you have to dive in headfirst.”

*I hope that doesn’t happen literally*, I thought, heading over to my teammates with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I fought to plaster a smile on my face as they swarmed me like a pack of puppies.

“Hart!” Schmiddy grinned. “Where you been?”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, nudging me. “We thought you chickened out!”

Gael laughed. “Who, Hart? Never. She’s small but mighty.” With a huge smile, he turned to look at me. “Right?”

All three of them stared, expecting me to embrace my supposed greatness.

*What am I supposed to do? Tell them I’m a fraud and see the disappointment in their faces? They will be crushed!*

Before I could lie, Codsworth spoke up. His usual disdainful expression made me want to kick him in the shin. “You better not blow it, Hart.”

Bear chuckled, pulling me into a side hug while gesturing at Codsworth. “Don’t pay attention to him. Seems like he wakes up on the wrong side of the bed every day.”

“Empty beeeddddd,” Johnny was singing in the background, “empty liiiifeeee, Codsworth is all alooooneeeee, no date in siiiighhhtttttt!”

While *that* was happening, and everybody was cackling, and Codsworth was scowling at them, I asked Bear, “Where’s Coach?”

 “This is just a demo, so Coach isn’t coming. The twins couldn’t come either, so Codsworth is joining along with Schmiddy.”

Schmiddy patted my shoulder. “This is gonna be epic. I know you’re gonna push us to the limit, Cali.”

I smiled tightly. “I’ll try.”

At the same time, I was screaming inside my head.

\*\*\*

When we went over to the dock, the smaller of the sculls was already in the water. Its size intimidated me, though I doubted that it being bigger would have made much of a difference. Everybody was talking all around me while I tried to focus on getting in the boat without exploding from anxiety.

And then I realized something.

“Where are the life jackets?” I asked.

Codsworth rolled his eyes. “There aren’t any. Don’t you know how to swim?”

“I do, but wouldn’t it be safer if there were life jackets?” I looked at the river. It was very dark and full of horrors. Probably.

“Cali, come on,” Gael said, chuckling. “It’s fine. I’ve been rowing since I was old enough to hold an oar, and I’ve never seen a boat capsize.”

Well, that seemed like a unique and not universal experience.

I glanced back at Greyson and co. Lola waved at me enthusiastically, Jay smiled, and Greyson gave me a nod. I wished I could mind link him to ask him to get me out of this. But earlier, he seemed to believe in me despite it all.

*That has to count for something.*

“Hey!” Codsworth barked. “What are you doing? Waiting for a formal invitation? Get in!”

Ignoring him, I carefully stepped into the boat, trying to do my best not to wobble.

“Yes, Cali! You got it!” Lola shouted her support, and I couldn’t help but smile a little. She gave me a thumbs-up while the others took their seats. I made a move to turn around, but then I remembered I was supposed to be facing the boys. That was perhaps an important thing to keep in mind.

*Hah, I’m fucked! Wait, what’s this?*

I spotted a round thing in front of me, right before my seat, and realized that this had to be the cox box. It was supposed to monitor the stroke rate; it was equipped with a stopwatch, and it had a microphone attached to it. I liked that. At least I wouldn't have to scream at the boys to do whatever it was they were supposed to do.

“Don’t rock the boat!” Codsworth barked when I adjusted my position, and I fought not to flinch in surprise.

*Damn you, Codsworth, I’m gonna smack you with one of the oars if you don’t shut up right now!*

Taking a deep breath, I glanced over my shoulder. Greyson was still watching, his expression intense. I remembered what he said earlier. He was right—I had watched a number of tutorials. I could do this. For god’s sake, I’d fought a *demon* in the past.

How hard could this be?

“Put on your headset,” Gael told me, “and then we’re ready when you are.”

I put the thing on, fighting to remember what I was supposed to say to get them to start rowing.

*What is it? “Ready, set, go”? “Action”? “Move your asses”?*

Suddenly, it hit me.

“Ready! Row!” I barked into the microphone.

The boat lurched forward, causing me to knock my head into my knees.

*Ow!*

However, when I looked up, I was surprised to see that we were moving. For a beat, nothing terrible happened, so I went on autopilot. I started shouting whatever I had heard and saw in all the instruction videos.

“Three quarters, three quarters, row as one—get it back!”

*Translation: Shortened three-quarter strokes, often used during the start of a race or in a warm-up, in this case to get the boat to move backward, in the other direction.*

“Three quarters, half, half, lengthen—in five, power ten!”

*Translation: Good luck trying to figure that one out.*

I was so anxious that I blacked out, so anyone who wanted to hear a detailed account of what happened on that boat would have to excuse me. Overall, though, I was certain of three things: One, I did not stop giving orders. Two, somehow I figured out how to keep the boys afloat and synchronized enough. Three, they started to veer to the left at some point. I almost messed up and had them swerve the other way but eventually managed to straighten the course.

“Let it run!” I called. All rowers sat with blades off the water, allowing the boat to glide through. I wasn’t sure if I should have given that order so far away from the finish line, but this felt like a smooth ride.

*This is… not as horrible as I thought it would be. It’s kind of nice.*

I had barely finished my thought when I saw something looming in the water ahead. I frowned. Had that been there all along? What was I supposed to say when I wanted them to evade whatever that was? I felt like I couldn’t just scream at them to stop.

I craned my neck to see over the boys’ heads, standing slightly, and Codsworth shouted, “What the hell are you doing?”

“There’s a rock! Or a—”

I never finished my sentence.

Losing my balance, I tumbled over the side of the boat and splashed into the water.

**Episode 4625**

**Artemis**

I could not believe my rotten luck. Of all the people to run into, why did it have to be Marius Raistlin? Nine times out of ten, he was a problem. Trouble always followed him, framing him in this not-so-angelic light that unfortunately worked well with his smug face.

On principle alone, I wanted to punch him in the nose.

I wondered if Marius was still a bounty hunter. He hadn’t been bad at his job, but I was better. I’d always been better. And yet, here Marius was, helping me with Photokes.

“I repeat,” Marius said when Photokes grunted, “answer the lady’s question, or I’ll gut you like a fish.” He tightened his hold around Photokes’s neck, keeping him in a chokehold, Marius’s bicep flexing. Had Marius been working out? He seemed more… muscley than last I’d seen him. Probably yes and for reasons that had to do with aesthetics above all.

I trusted him just as much as I trusted Photokes. Which was not at all.

“I have no idea if Kadmos is alive or dead,” Photokes said with a huff. “For everyone’s sake, I hope he’s dead.”

Photokes’s words fell on my head like a pile of rocks. I snarled, grabbing my knife to bring it to his stomach. “Say that again, and I’ll gut you *myself*.”

“I’m telling the truth!” he rasped.

“Are you sure?” Marius asked. His voice was low and ominous. It reminded me of a predator playing with its food.

“I don’t know anything about Kadmos. I have no reason to lie,” Photokes said with a growl of frustration.

Marius laughed, revealing his pearly whites. I was certain I’d punched him in the mouth a couple of times in the past, but those damn teeth were still perfect.

“My experience with you, Photokes,” Marius said, “is that you never need a reason to lie—it just comes naturally.” He shoved Photokes to the ground. “Run along now and be good.”

Photokes scrambled up to his feet. He glared at Marius, then at me, and then he broke into a run.

“See you soon!” Marius called from behind him. He turned to me, one eyebrow arched. “You can thank me for saving you, you know. It’s not a requirement, but it is nice.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. I had no idea what Marius’s angle was, but it was probably not a good one. So for him, I wore my best fake smile.

“Of course,” I said, taking a step closer. “Thank you. I guess you expect me to show you how appreciative I am now, right?”

Marius gave me a sly grin, one of his trademark ones. “What do you have in mind?”

I took another step closer to him, my eyes dropping to his mouth. “I was thinking…” My gaze locked with his, and his breath caught. I whispered, “That I owe you nothing, and you should leave me alone.”

Before my words could register, I shoved him backward and broke into a run.

He let out a yelp and a curse, and I ducked down another alley, not looking back. The last thing I needed was to deal with that kind of man when I was on a mission. Marius was untrustworthy, had it out for me, and was as irritating as a two-headed dragon’s baby.

Which was to say, very irritating.

I smiled to myself when I realized that I had lost him.

But suddenly, something—*someone*— dropped down in front of me, straight from the rooftops. The landing was smooth, almost inaudible. I stopped running, and when Marius looked at me, his smugness had been upped a notch.

“That was a little mean, even for you,” he said, walking toward me. Prowling, actually. He reminded me of a big cat, the kind that could eat you. My first urge was to take a step back, but I shoved it down. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

“I thought you liked it when I was mean,” I said coldly.

He laughed. “Can’t say I expected to see you here today,” he said. “It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it?”

He was just a couple of feet away from me now. I made sure to keep my expression impassive. “Too short if you ask me.”

I wasn't going to take a step back, but I could move past him. Ignore him. He always hated that. Instead of letting me go, he blocked my way.

He was a stubborn son of a bitch.

Tilting his head to the side, he said, “I’ve heard a few whispers of people looking for someone named Artemis, who was seen with the Dark Fae Adair…”

“It’s a common name.”

“Sure, but imagine my surprise to hear your name again after such a long time.”

“Well, now you saw me. Time for me to leave,” I said, pushing past him with much more force than necessary. For a second, I thought we were done here. But then I felt his hand, like a vise, grabbing onto my arm. With swift force, he spun me around, pushing my back against the alley wall.

He was standing too close again.

“You don’t want to do that,” I said. My voice was low, a warning.

“Oh, but I do,” he said. His voice was raspy. I knew what he was doing, and *he* knew what he was doing too. That look on his face was familiar, always trouble. “We’ve got a lot to catch up on. And I bet you missed me.”

I hated the way the back of my neck heated up at his words. I refused to dwell on the way he gazed at me up and down, focusing on my leggings. His gaze lingered, and knowing him, it was much more than wondering what in the gods I was wearing.

Humans’ greatest invention had just betrayed me.

“I think you're projecting,” I said sharply, making a move to yank my arm out of his grip. He just held me tighter, bringing his face closer to mine. He smelled like sulfur, citrus, and burned wood. It was hard to ignore.

“What are you doing here, Ari?”

“Do *not* call me that,” I said, “and let go of me right now before I strangle you.”

He shrugged. “I think we both know I wouldn't mind if you tied me up.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve always had a death wish.”

He chuckled, finally letting go, taking a step back, and raising both his hands defensively. “I know the Kollector died—heard that a while back. Would’ve thought you’d have left. Why are you asking about Kadmos? What are you involved in?”

I raised my eyebrows. “First of all, why are you asking, and second of all, why would I ever tell you anything?”

He clicked his tongue. “We used to have a pretty trusting relationship—how long ago was that?”

“Not long enough,” I snapped. “What I know was that sleeping with you was a mistake. And that says a lot, considering all the people I've had meaningless sex with.”

“*Meaningless?!*” He was clearly pretending to be offended, and that was annoying me. “Not what I tend to hear. In fact, there’s usually not a lot of talking at all. Maybe a few profanities… my name.”

“Because you say it yourself, right?”

“Hard to do that depending on the position,” he mused, “and where my mouth is.”

I flushed. “Just stop,” I said. “I would never admit to anything that props up your gigantic, ravenous ego, so stop asking.”

I scoffed as his grin grew. I made a move to walk past him.

He blocked my way. Again.

He had a *lot* of nerve.

I wondered what Rishika would’ve done if she were here. Probably bite his head off. He was clearly flirting with me, but that was what Marius did. Flirted. With everyone. Sometimes even before he killed them.

“If you think spending time with me was meaningless,” Marius said, leaning closer, “maybe we should try again, for old time’s sake. See if we can correct it. I know I'll try my best.”

Trouble, trouble, trouble.

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Pushing back on his chest, I said, “The only reason we ever wound up together in the past was because we’d joined forces to capture a bounty. There was nothing else between us. Nothing of importance.”

He scrutinized my face for a beat. Then he sighed theatrically. “To be honest, I only pretended to ask for your help so I could get closer to you.”

“You're so full of shit—we both know you couldn’t get the guy on your own!” I scoffed. “*I* was the one who captured him.”

“That doesn't negate my initial motive. Besides, at least now we know that we work well as a team.” He glanced at my mouth. “In all areas.”

I ignored the way my stomach flipped. “You’re delusional.”

He smirked. “You’re in denial. Why else would we have met like this? *Happenstance?* Oh, Ari, you know that’s not how things work.”

I hated that we'd fallen right back into the banter that had gotten me caught up in his horseshit in the first place. I didn't need this nonsense. I had my mission.

I was done here.

“Thanks for helping me with Photokes,” I said. “But I really don't have time for your games. I have to go.”

When I moved forward this time, he let me.

Of course, that didn't last long.

“Wait.”

I paused, taking a deep breath before I faced him. “What?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I can help you find Kadmos. But it’s going to cost you.”

**Episode 4626**

**Xavier**

“Ava!” I screamed, racing to jump after her into the freezing water.

Why the hell would she do this? Did she have a fucking death wish? She didn't hit those rocks, did she? I swear to *god*, if she—

*Ava!* I mind linked, reaching her just as she surfaced.

I grabbed her by both arms, shaking her. “Are you hurt? What the fuck are you doing?”

I was angry. I was terrified. I was so relieved that she was okay I thought I was going to throw up.

“Me?” she glared, pushing on my chest. “What are *you* doing?”

“Isn’t it fucking obvious? I'm saving you!”

“What are you talking about? I didn't need to be saved!” She shoved me off her. “Why are you even here?” she demanded. Her eyes were blazing with fury. I had hoped that she would have cooled off since our fight, but no such luck.

“I went to look for you,” I admitted in a quieter voice. “I was worried when I got home and you weren't there.”

Ava hadn’t let me drag her out to the shore, so we were both still swimming in the freezing water. She paused and took in my words, processing them. Even though she was still pissed off, I could tell that my honesty swayed her just a bit.

“I didn't mean to alarm you, X. I just needed to clear my head.”

I tried not to sound angry and failed. Miserably. “Diving off a waterfall into a cold river is an extreme definition of ‘clearing your head,’ Ava.” I pointed ahead, and my tone got louder again. “Do you see those rocks? This is way too fucking dangerous!”

She huffed. “Oh my god, can you stop being so paranoid?”

“I'm not paranoid! I just wanted to make sure you didn't break your fucking skull!”

“Stop fucking shouting at me!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

We were both panting, staring at each other, treading water so cold that Ava's lips had turned blue. Finally, she muttered, “I had to get out of the house. After the argument we had, I needed to do something to take my mind off it.”

“Next time at least tell someone what the hell you’re about to do, because I was worried,” I snapped.

She scoffed, “I can handle myself, Xavier. You don't have to keep an eye on me—I’m an adult.”

I groaned. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. I thought you were hurt, and it freaked me the fuck out! Is that a bad thing? Wouldn't you feel the same?”

Ava didn’t speak for a beat. She looked away. I swam closer to her. When I reached for her waist, I was relieved that she didn't push me away. “We should get out of the water. Even werewolves can get cold.”

“You’re so annoying,” she grumbled. But this time, she didn't stop me when I pulled her toward the shore. She let me hold her, burrowing her face in my neck. I couldn't help but smile a little.

I sure as hell hoped Adéluce wasn’t watching.

“I'm not mad that you thought you were concerned about me,” Ava said suddenly. We were close to shore now, our feet touching the bottom. She fully faced me, looking up. “I like that you came running after me. And even jumped in to save me from… the water, I guess?”

I huffed. “There were rocks, and it’s cold, and you were out here all alone, and—”

She covered my mouth with her palm. “I like that you’re protective of me. That you care. But I want you to realize that you don't need to feel that you have to save me from anything just because I’m your Luna. I can take care of myself. You're not obligated to do anything.”

I gripped her wrist, pulling her hand away from my lips. “I'm not doing any of this out of obligation. I did it because I wanted to.”

The cold was piercing. But right now, with Ava staring at me like that, I barely registered it. Her hair was wet, pushed back, water dripping down her neck and collarbones. I knew that she was naked under the surface, so close that I could taste her scent.

A moment later, she slid closer. She kissed me, wrapping her arms around my neck. I moved mine on her waist, her back. She deepened the kiss immediately, making my wolf growl, seeking more. Everything about this felt so fucking right. Like Ava wanted me and loved me, no matter what.

But did it mean she had forgiven me?

Could we have put all that talk about the person who attacked her behind us?

I broke off the kiss just to breathe her in, and we stared at each other, panting. She trembled under my fingertips. When she wrapped her legs around my waist, I hissed, groaning at the contact. Her bare breasts were pressed against my chest, and I felt light-headed. My wolf was stirring, my body on fire despite the cold, and it felt like Ava needed me.

But when I looked at her mouth, ready to kiss her again, her lips were blue. I realized that her trembling wasn’t only because of my touch.

“You’re cold,” I said, my voice cracking.

“I’m fine,” she said, her breath picking up. I knew what she was doing—we’d had a fight, and she wanted this kind of connection right now. I had considered using sex to distract her from our earlier fight, but the timing wasn’t right in this moment. Her catching hypothermia was not going to solve any of our problems.

“We gotta go home,” I muttered against her mouth, cupping her cheek. “You’re shivering.”

The disappointment in her face was obvious, but she agreed. I led her back to shore and looked around. I had nothing to dry her off with.

“How about we race back home?” I asked. “Just to get your blood flowing.”

Ava’s lips, still more blue than red, stretched into a small teasing smile before she shifted and broke into a run.

*Catch me if you can!* she mind linked.

She was being *playful*. She hadn’t started a conversation about our fight. Perhaps we were done with that. Or, knowing Ava, probably not. Either way, I was going to enjoy the hell out of this moment between us. Chasing after her made me feel carefree. It made me feel young, like we used to be.

It felt really good, and I had so few good things in my life right now.

Just for that, I let her win.

Her wolf howled in triumph when we reached the house, and she shifted back to human. Twirling around to grin at me, she said, “I won! What's my reward?”

I pulled her closer, leaning in to brush my lips over hers. “Give me a second to think it over. I promise I won't disappoint you.”

She smiled, looking down at my chest. She slid her hand over my heart and muttered, “I'm glad you came to find me.”

“I thought you needed space,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged. “I guess I just needed a bit of quiet.”

Quiet. The exact opposite of the chaos that we found when we walked into the Samara pack house.

Knox, Blaine, and Zipper were shouting at each other about some video game they were playing. Marissa was in deep conversation with Geraint and Josephine, all of whom were sitting around the dining table. People were in the kitchen, singing and blasting music.

“You were saying something about needing peace and quiet,” I told Ava as we headed upstairs.

She snorted. “I guess it's hard to get that in a pack house with so many other people.”

I took her hand in mine when we got to our room. “Why don't we get out of here? Go somewhere, just the two of us?”

Ava's lips had gone back to their natural deep rose color. It felt grounding to look at her when she smiled at me right now. Her gaze was flirty. “Is that going to be my reward?”

“Sure. Where do you feel like going?”

She moved closer to me, sliding her hands from my shoulders to the sides of my neck. She smirked. “As much as I love looking at you when you’ve got no clothes on, I think we should get you a couple of outfits. Something that you could wear if we went out on a date.”

I rested my hands on her waist. Her skin had warmed up. “Are you asking me out?”

She chuckled, shaking her head at me. “Let’s go to the mall to get you some clothes first.”

The mall was the last place I wanted to go, but I needed to please Ava. Anything to keep her mind off arguing with me over the attack again. Anything to make her happy.

 I liked it when she was happy. Safe. Smiling at me for no reason at all.

We got dressed and tidied up. Ten minutes later, she and I were in my car, driving down the highway. She was looking out the window.

“All good?” I asked.

Ava turned to me slowly. Her smile had faded. Her expression was unreadable. “I have a question, Xavier, and I want the absolute truth. Do you know who attacked me?”

**Episode 4627**

The cold water was a shock to my system. My head emptied, my body went numb, my mouth opened as an automatic response as I fought to breathe. I nearly choked before instinct kicked in and I started swimming up toward the surface.

I could barely make out the boat against the sky, when suddenly the current dragged me farther away.

*No!*

My lungs were starting to burn, and my arms hurt as I fought to swim upward. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reach the surface. I had a flash of falling into the pool—Xavier had taken me into his arms, saving me before my air ran out.

If only he could do that now.

I still couldn't remember everything that had happened when I fell off that roof, but I did remember him being there for me, taking care of me, like he always used to. I wished that he were here. I was getting light-headed, pins and needles covering my entire body as I tried to hold my breath, to stay alive even if the current pulled me away from oxygen.

And then…

I felt arms around me. Strong arms, hard. Was it Xavier?

*Has he found me again?*

We broke the surface, and I gasped for air, coughing up water. He was still holding me, his large body keeping me close, panting close to my ear. My head cleared up now that I could breathe, and I realized that this had to be Greyson. Of *course* it was Greyson. I was ashamed that I had even thought of Xavier.

*God… what the hell is wrong with me?*

There were far too many answers to that question, so I disregarded it. The most important thing was that the boat was beside me now, and the team was yelling for me to come closer.

“Goddammit, Hart, you almost gave me a heart attack!” Bear said while he and Gael pulled me back into the boat. I opened my mouth to speak, to say that I was fine, but my teeth were chattering. I was shivering like crazy and turned to check on Greyson.

But this was not Greyson.

*What the hell?*

I nearly screamed in surprise when I saw Codswoth climb up behind me. He wiped the water from his eyes just to glare at me. “No wonder you asked about life jackets—since you were planning to take a dip in the cold-ass river.”

I gasped. “You think I did that on *purpose*?”

“Being part of the crew means staying in the boat, Cali!”

“Oh my god, what is your problem?” I snapped. “Didn’t you see that it was an accident? I was worried we were going to hit a rock!”

“There’s no fucking rock!” Codsworth shouted. “And even if there was one, you didn’t have to warn us about it by jumping into the water! Dramatic much?”

“*I'm* dramatic? You're the one who's dramatic! And super rude!”

“I think we should get back to shore before these two freeze to death,” Gael told the others, ignoring our fight. Which had to look ridiculous because both Codsworth and I were shaking from the cold.

*I knew I was going to blow this! I just didn’t know it would be this bad…*

Wrapping my arms around myself, I fought to stay warm, but it was hopeless. Codsworth glared off into the distance as if he were looking for Moby-Dick. All I could think about was that he had saved me, yeah, but he really was a dick.

*Why did he have to save me in the first place, though?*

Was falling into the water such a frequent occurrence for the average person? I doubted that. There had to be something wrong with me—why was I always falling off things? First the rooftop, now the boat. This was not normal, was it?

I mean, I was clumsy sometimes, but not that clumsy.

I was probably reading too much into it. I did have a reputation for falling in general. My thoughts were interrupted when we reached the dock. Greyson was pushing past people, coming right to the front of the crowd.

“What happened?” he asked worriedly, helping me step out of the boat and onto the dock. He brought his coat over my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I've been through worse,” I said, though that didn't seem to appease Greyson. I heard Codsworth grumbling something behind me. I faced him as he got out of the boat.

When our eyes met, I said, “You’re very rude, but thank you for jumping in after me.”

“Next time I might not, so make sure there's no next time.” He waved a dismissive hand at Greyson. “Go ahead now, let your boyfriend take care of you.”

I huffed. “Why are you like this? I've never done anything to you to justify—”

“Ignore him,” Greyson told me. He rubbed my arms up and down, trying to keep me warm. “It’s freezing out here. I gotta get you inside.”

“Take her to the showers; warm water will help,” Gael told Greyson. Turning to me, he said, “You can borrow someone’s tracksuit and return it at the next practice.” Before I could reply, Gael faced the crew. “Who here wants to loan Lil’ Hart a tracksuit?”

Everybody’s—other than Codsworth’s—hands shot up in the air.

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“So, what happened out there?” Greyson asked as we headed to the locker room.

“I lost my balance. I guess you're not supposed to stand in a crew boat,” I grumbled in embarrassment.

“Really?” Greyson raised his eyebrows. “I never would have guessed that.”

I smacked him lightly on the chest. He chuckled, kissing my temple. “You learn your lessons the hard way. I call that life experience.”

I snorted. “You have a way of sugarcoating things that’s nothing less than amazing.”

He paused as we reached the locker rooms, stroking my cheek. His skin was warm where mine was still cold. But I definitely felt the heat when he said, “I'm still proud of you for trying your best.”

“Thank you,” I said, blushing.

“Don’t give up, okay?” He rubbed my shoulders, warming me up. “You’ll learn how to be the best. It just takes practice.”

I looked up at him, biting my lip. “You really think so?”

“Of course,” he said. “You’re you. I don’t want you to ever stop being so daring—within reason, of course.”

I squinted at him. “Are you implying that I’m occasionally unreasonable?”

“Even that works for you, Miss Daredevil,” he said with an easy smile that sobered up quickly. “But please be careful.”

I laughed, moving up to my tippy-toes to give him a shivery kiss. I looked down the hall, my voice dropping. “I wish you could join me in the shower, but the boys are gonna bring me the tracksuit soon.”

Smirking, Greyson pushed my wet hair back from my forehead. “Go ahead and warm up. I’ll be here guarding the door.”

A minute later, I was in the shower. The hot water was almost painful against my skin, but I gradually felt my body temperature return to normal. I forced my head to stay empty—no thoughts about falling into the river and embarrassing myself, no Xavier bullshit, no Professor-Greyson-Evers-in-a-classroom fantasy skit.

*Hang on, that little scenario is an interesting one to think about—just not right now.*

I shook myself out of it and turned off the water. I realized that I didn’t have a towel. Sticking my head out of the shower stall, I called, “Professor Ev—” I snapped my mouth shut, bathing in mortification for a beat or two. Then, I took a deep breath and called, “Greyson!”

Just a second later, Greyson walked in with a bag. “A fluffy towel and a red tracksuit were just delivered by a big dude who calls himself Bear. Was he given this nickname due to his size, or because he’s hairy?”

“Both, I assume,” I said, grabbing the towel first to wipe myself down.

Greyson started folding the wet clothes that I had not-so-artfully thrown at a sink. “From what I gather, the nickname the team’s given you is ‘Lil’ Hart.’ Do you like it?”

“It’s fine,” I said, grabbing the tracksuit next.

“If you don’t like it, you should tell them. Or I could tell them and make sure they never, ever call you—” Greyson looked up at me, pausing.

“What?” I said, looking down at myself. I had folded the waist of the pants like five times, but the hem still touched the floor. When I saw myself in the mirror, I gasped. “Oh my god… I look like a deflated hot-air balloon!”

Greyson was shaking with quiet laughter, and I couldn’t help but crack up, too.

*This is ridiculous! All of it!*

I loved being here with him.

He leaned in, kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll go find Jay and Lola and bring the car over to this building so you won’t have to walk all the way back with that thing weighing you down. Okay?”

I nodded, smiling. “Okay.”

I was toweling my hair when the others came into the locker room, including Codsworth. I got teased mercilessly, but it was all in good fun. Until the others went to the adjoining room, and it was just Codsworth and me left in there.

I sighed, prepared for his snark. “Come on, Codsworth. Spit it out.”

Codsworth glared at me.

What he said next was ten times worse than any snarky comment he could’ve uttered.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Cali. Once Coach finds out what happened, you’ll lose everything.”

**Episode 4628**

Greyson’s car pulled up to the gym exit just as I walked out. I was freaking fuming after Codsworth’s threat.

*That little rat, ugh!*

“Hey, girlie!” Lola called through her lowered window, giggling. “Love your new outfit!”

“Do not even start with me,” I told Lola with a huff.

She laughed even harder. It was cut short when I got to the passenger’s door and almost tripped over the overlong hem of my pants. “Cali, be careful!” she scolded as I climbed in the passenger’s seat.

“Are you okay?” Jay asked.

“Do I *look* okay?” I snapped.

Jay was taken aback, and Lola frowned. I groaned, rubbing my face. “Sorry, Jay. I didn’t mean to yell.”

“You were fine when I left you earlier. What happened? Did someone say something?” Greyson asked me. His voice was calm, but I could see him gripping the wheel tightly.

“No matter how you put it, I embarrassed myself today and I let down the team,” I said, my voice cracking.

“It was just an accident,” Greyson reminded me.

“It was, but I might lose my scholarship over it.”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t even want the scholarship or the position, Cali.”

Groaning, I turned to face her. “You *know* that’s not the point. I committed to the team, and I’m not a quitter. At least, I try not to be,” I said. “Not if it’s going to let people down. And if I’m going to leave school, it will be on my terms, not because of some threat by Codsworth!”

Greyson’s voice grew sharp. “Codsworth? What the fuck did he say this time?”

I sighed, rubbing my forehead. “It’s nothing, Greyson. I thought that he’d be less of a dick after pulling me out of the river, but obviously—”

“He shouldn’t have been the one to help you. *I* should’ve been there. I should’ve been there when that car exploded, and when you fell in the pool at the party. *Me*,” Greyson said. His expression had an eerie blank quality that said that he’d been thinking about this for a while now.

*Fuck*, I thought. *Is Greyson mad at himself over this? Is he upset that Xavier has been coming to my aid like my very own fucked-up Prince Charming?*

“Cali was too far for any of us to get to her in time, Greyson,” Lola spoke up. “Codsworth happened to be there.” She turned to me. “What did he say to you?”

I shook my head. “Just some bullshit about Coach finding out what happened and kicking me off the team.”

“Do you want me to knock some sense into him?” Greyson asked.

The memory of what Xavier had done to Tony popped inside my head. I didn’t think that Greyson would go to such an extreme, but still.

“I don’t want you to feel like you should be there to save me or to fight my battles for me,” I told Greyson, reaching to hold his arm. “I can handle Codsworth.”

Greyson nodded. With a tense shrug that didn’t fool me, he said, “Just wanted to put that out there.”

I squeezed his bicep, shaking my head. “I appreciate it, but it would only make matters worse. All I have to do is become competent enough as a coxswain. That will shut Codsworth up.”

“True, true,” Lola said, casually inspecting her nails. “You have the right fighting spirit, but if it doesn’t work, I’m happy to pay Codsworth a little visit.” She bared her fangs for me to see, throwing out a wink.

I sighed, turning to Jay. He shrugged. “She’s very protective.”

I looked between Lola and Greyson. “As much as I love you both for wanting to be my helicopter boyfriend and helicopter best friend respectively, this is my business. I’ll deal.” I tugged on my sleeve. “I just wish I didn’t have to wear Bear’s tracksuit right now—it’s too big and scratchy.”

“Actually,” Lola said, “we *do* pass by the mall on our way home. It would be a good chance for you to get some new clothes, Cali.”

I frowned. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

Lola shrugged. “I’m just saying. Clothing comes in more colors than black, blue, white, and beige.”

“I wouldn’t mind stopping at the mall either,” Greyson spoke up. “Picking up a few things—”

I gasped. “Wait, you agree with Lola? You think my clothes are boring?”

Greyson turned his whole body toward me, taking both his hands in mine. “Of course not. I’m saying I need a few things. My clothes seem to always end up torn off me for a variety of reasons.”

I flushed.

“Plus, I’d like to pick up a belated baby gift for my brother,” he added.

Every other thought flew out of my brain, leaving behind a giant red beacon that screamed, *WHAT THE FUCK?!*

“Xavier’s having a baby?!” Lola shrieked.

“Yeah, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Colton and Maya,” Greyson said, giving us both a look. “They had twins.”

And now I could breathe again.

*Holy fucking shit, that was a near heart attack!* How had I completely forgotten about Colton and jumped straight to Xavier? Sure, Colton hadn’t been around lately, but he wasn’t exactly someone you forgot. Neither was Maya.

“Wow, that’s…” I shook my head. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I could’ve been looking for things to send them!”

“I just found out this morning,” Greyson explained. “I’m not even sure when they were born. Can’t be more than a month or two. I hope.”

Jay frowned. “Kind of sad that Colton didn’t tell us earlier.”

“Eh, with twins, they’ve got to be busy. We have been and there aren’t even any babies around,” Lola said with a shrug. “One moment you think you’re friendly with someone, the next they leave you on read, never text you again, and make your soul turn into a venomous frog.”

“I hope you’re not talking about me,” Jay said. “I forgot to text you one time.”

Lola flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Anyway, now we definitely need to go to the mall.” She grinned at me. “Baby clothes shopping, Cali! Is there anything better?”

I didn’t like buying stuff for myself—too much fuss, too many decisions, too much Lola yelling at me to stop buying things in muted colors—but purchasing something for a pair of twins sounded amazing. It gave me a purpose at least.

“I do love baby clothes,” I admitted. “They’re so tiny!”

“Babies are pretty cute,” Jay said, grinning. “Do Colton’s twins have names? Do we know literally anything about them other than they exist?”

“I didn’t get that far,” Greyson said. “He had to go help Maya with all the crying.”

“Do you at least know if they’re identical twins or not?” Lola asked.

Greyson shook his head again. Was it me, or did he look disappointed?

“You know more than all three of us combined, Greyson,” I said. “Plus, they’re babies—all we gotta know about them to shop for them is that they’re squishy and cute.”

“How many months old they are would’ve helped, though,” Jay noted.

“Babies grow fast—we could just get them some things in various age brackets,” Greyson said, turning to me. “Right?”

Jay said, “Or you could call your brother and ask how old his babies are.”

Greyson paused. “I don’t want to bother him. He already sounded weirded out when I called the first time.”

Lola sighed. “Communicating with people is *so* hard.” She reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “So glad I have you, bestie.”

All we talked about the entire ride to the mall was Colton and Maya’s twins. I was glad for the distraction—anything to stop me from talking about damn Codsworth and my tumble off the boat. I had to figure out how to fix that situation…

*I will talk to Coach first thing during the next practice. He seems like a reasonable enough guy. He’ll understand. Probably. Now that I think about it, Coach doesn’t seem reasonable at all; he seems like an unhinged—*

“How was the couple’s retreat, Jay?” Greyson’s voice pulled me back into the conversation. I immediately tuned in when Jay said, “It was just what we needed.” He took Lola’s hand in his. “It was the perfect thing for us.”

Lola smiled at Jay, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “He’s right. It brought us closer.”

“Cali and I have been considering taking a little vacation,” Greyson said, glancing at me.

I nodded. “Just a few days for us to be together without any worries or chaos.”

“What did you two do all day when you went away?” Greyson asked, taking the turn to pull into the mall parking lot.

While Jay and Lola started talking about all the activities they got into at the retreat, I watched Greyson’s expression. He looked intrigued, interested, and I felt the same way. My heart fluttered at the thought of spending uninterrupted one-on-one time with him.

“That sounds cool,” Greyson said as he parked the car. Turning to me, he added, “Maybe we should do that for our little getaway.” Giving me a soft, beautiful smile, he asked, “Do you want to join me on a couple’s retreat, love?”

**Episode 4629**

**Xavier**

“Do you know who attacked me?” Ava asked.

I had to shove down my trigger response to stomp on the brakes and send us both flying through the fucking windshield. Tearing my eyes off Ava’s cold expression, I looked at the road. My mind raced for an answer.

*Fuck.*

I itched to tell her.

That was all I’d wanted to do ever since Adéluce put the spell on me—tell someone. But I couldn’t, no matter how badly I wanted to. I bet the vampire-witch was laughing right now, watching me squirm.

“Have you lost your voice, Xavier?” Ava asked. “If so, you can answer me via mind link.”

Her tone was a warning. I could feel the hostility rolling off her, but of course she didn’t walk out on me. Ava’s loyalty came at a price, and that price was that even if she got mad at me, to the point of no return, she wouldn’t leave me. Not for real.

She’d stay with me and fucking torture me till we both bled our brains out. Literally or metaphorically. We could be monstrous together, she and I. If either of us pushed too far, I could goddamn see us unravel and turn into the stuff of nightmares. We’d done it before.

*Never again*, I told myself. But could I ever be sure?

 I pulled into the mall parking lot, weighing what I could say.

“I’m waiting, Xavier,” Ava said.

I didn’t dare look at her as I parked. She was angry. Bitter.

Her scent had been so sweet earlier. Even in the cold water, she’d wanted me. I regretted not fucking her back then, not fucking her when we got home. Though I knew that that would’ve only prolonged the inevitable.

Ava wasn’t going to let this go.

I should’ve thought harder about what the fuck to tell her before reaching out to her.

If I admitted that I did know who attacked her, then Ava would ask for that person’s identity. If I tried to tell her that it was Adéluce, I wouldn’t be able to. Could I lie about who it was? Make up some name? Invent someone from my past?

I could see that coming back and biting me in the ass.

It always did.

Shaking my head, I made a move to open my door, but Ava darted forward over my lap—super speed—and slammed it shut. Glaring up at me, she said, “You’re not getting out of this car. Not until you answer me.”

I breathed in deeply. “Drop it, Ava.”

She leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. “Do I look like I’m going to?”

“I saw you being attacked by a vampire,” I said. “Isn’t that enough?”

Ava pointed at her neck. “I saw the marks, Xavier. I know it was a vampire. But do you know who the vampire is? Do *not* fucking lie to me.”

Ava’s voice was low, a twinge of a wildness to it that I knew all too well. She would fucking explode on me soon, and I couldn’t even blame her this time.

There was menace in her face.

I felt trapped, like a goddamn mouse while she was a cat, and I wondered when the fuck I’d become so weak. Who the hell was I? An Alpha? *Really?* What kind of Alpha felt so broken down like this?

I couldn’t even stomach lying to her anymore.

I couldn’t bear seeing the hurt in her face, the fury.

Ava loved me. In her own, fucked-up way, she did.

I could only hope that I wasn’t making a mistake when I said, “I know who the vampire is.”

She stared at me expectantly. “And?”

My hands turned into fists. “Is that not enough? I answered your question. Why can't you just let it go?”

Her voice dropped. “You want me to let it go—”

“Ava—”

“You told me you loved me, but you refuse to tell me who attacked me. Who nearly fucking killed me. Am I getting this right?”

I wanted to bang my head on the wheel. “It’s *because* I love you that I won’t tell you.”

Ava laughed.

Alarms went off in my head as she snapped, “That’s bullshit, Xavier.” Her voice got louder. “Who are you protecting? The vampire who wanted to drain me dry?” She shoved my shoulder. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

She was yelling now.

I fought not to scream at her to leave this the fuck alone.

But she wasn’t done.

“Does the vampire have something on you?” Her breathing came out sharp. “Is it because of something you did in the past that you are trying to cover for them? Whatever it is, you can tell me—you can tell me anything, Xavier. You know that, right?”

Was she gonna cry?

“We’ve been through *everything* *imaginable*, Xavier. I can deal with you having another mate, with you splitting yourself in half, with all that bullshit. But I draw the line at you lying about something so important. Whatever dark secret you’re trying to protect, you need to tell me.” Her voice had become low, tinged with despair. “I need you to trust me, Xavier.”

“I can’t do this.”

She was crying now—hot, unwanted tears. She wiped her eyes fast and said, “Tell me who it was.”

“*No.*”

And then, she exploded.

“I’m not leaving this damn car till you tell me, Xavier! I’m your Luna, I’m your mate, how dare you hide this from me!”

“Ava—”

“*You said you loved me*.” Her words were a growl that flooded my ears. She grabbed me by the lapel of my jacket and hissed, “You said you loved me. Prove it. Or *else*.”

Or. Else.

What?

What would Ava do?

I didn’t want to find out.

This was the point of no return. I was supposed to be the Alpha, but Ava looked like she could set this car on fire with us both inside if it meant getting what she wanted. And I wanted…

I wanted her to stop hurting.

I hoped that what I was about to do didn’t mean her death sentence. I was going to have to try, let the chips fall where they may.

“The vampire who attacked you was…”

*Adéluce.*

I never managed to say it. I felt a shock of magic. Like a warning signal. Adéluce’s magic—it battled my desire to tell Ava the truth. Suddenly, I recalled the time that I’d let Adéluce’s name slip when I was still mostly asleep. If I were able to say it then, why couldn’t I say it now?

Was the magic that silenced me tied to my own fear of Adéluce?

I feared the repercussions of my actions more than anything else.

But Ava stared at me, and I saw no choice but to push through.

“The vampire who hurt you was—”

The magical shock happened again, even stronger now, so intense that my whole body tensed. I clenched my teeth to fight the pain. Ava let go of me, looking down at my hands that had turned into fists, frowning when I let out a choked sound of pain.

“Xavier?” She stared at me, up and down, confusion all over her features. It had overcome her anger. “What’s happening? Are you choking? Do you need water or—”

“I need you to stop asking me that question!” I snapped through gritted teeth. “Just leave it the fuck alone!”

I was panting, still hurting. The shock lingered, and Ava didn’t speak. She only watched me, and pulled away. In the end, she said, “Okay.”

Her voice was blank, just like her face.

Fuck.

She got out of the car.

“Fuck,” I rasped under my breath, fighting to catch it before I got out and ran after her.

“Ava, I—”

“Something’s going on with you,” she said with cold certainty. “I don’t know what it is, but I will find out.”

I wanted to grab and shake her and scream at her to stop. Just fucking stop pursuing this. Stop insisting. But, knowing Ava, the more I put up a fight, the more determined she would be. I hoped I could talk to her later, when we both calmed down.

We walked into the mall, the quiet between us tense, heavy.

I fucking hated it.

I regretted every single thing that had just happened. I shouldn’t have let her push me so far. I should've kept lying to her—now I’d made things a million times worse. The only way I saw out of this, if there ever was one, was to drop on my fucking knees and grovel. To tell her to trust me, that it would all make sense soon, but in the meantime, *I’m so fucking sorry.*

Very Alpha behavior, right?

My humiliation was Adéluce’s drug.

But I couldn’t lose Ava—not when I loved her. That was that.

“Ava…” I gulped. “I just wanted to say—”

She stopped walking, looking up ahead. Her expression hardened. “What are *they* doing here?”

I followed her gaze to see Cali and Greyson standing by a baby clothing store.

My heart dropped.

Was Cali really expecting my brother’s baby? Like five motherfucking seconds after we broke up? My head had shut down every other thought— Adéluce, lying to Ava, Ava’s anger. I couldn’t control my own anger anymore. I could not stop myself, and I said, *fuck it*.

Only one way to find out if Cali was pregnant. Right here, right now.

“Come with me,” I said gruffly, grabbing Ava’s hand.

I marched toward my other mate and my brother, vibrating with fury.

It was time to see if Colton was right.

**Episode 4630**

While Lola and Jay ran to get pretzels, Greyson and I went window-shopping for baby clothes.

“Although I see your point about the zebra outfit being very cute, but my choice is the one with the wolf ears, even if they’re not accurate,” he said.

I grinned, twining my arm through his. “I guess I’ll have to accept that.”

“We can buy both to make sure everybody’s satisfied.”

I laughed, resting my head against his shoulder. My eyes didn’t leave the store’s window. It was all animal-themed and so adorable I had to suppress a squeal. Without thinking, I said, “Wouldn’t it be amazing to dress our baby in something like that one day?”

I felt Greyson stiffen, and I realized what I’d just said.

*Oh, shit.*

His rigidness melted away a second later, though. When I looked up at him, there was a teasing smile on his face. His voice was low, full of fondness. “Does that mean you’re thinking about having a baby?”

“I don’t—I—” I was sputtering, because he was looking at me like that, and he was smiling at me like that. In the end, I managed to say the truth. “Oh my god, no. I’m too young. We’re too young, Greyson! Maybe one day, but not right now.” I started rambling. “Besides, I’m on the crew team, at least for now, and it seems like the Evers have two new babies to contend with. That should be enough for a while.”

“Of course, you’re right.” Greyson smiled. “You’re the one who mentioned it, so I thought I’d ask. Always a mystery what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“I was just thinking—speaking without thinking, more like,” I admitted. Good god, why was I so damn flustered? “I guess because you’re reliable and kind, it just kind of came out. I feel like you’d be a great daddy.”

I froze.

“Oh, no, I mean *dad*. A father of a child. A *dad*. You know… dads?”

Greyson raised his brows. “What’s wrong, Cali?” he asked in an innocent tone.

“Nothing,” I squeaked.

Greyson smirked. Leaning closer, he muttered in my ear, “This conversation feels like an appropriate sequel to the Professor Evers incident.”

I was going to die outside a baby clothes store.

They would bury me here, and I would rest for eternity in embarrassment, and Greyson would visit me every day and bring me flowers, gardenias if they were in season, softly weeping over the cruel fate that brought—

“Xavier?” Greyson said under his breath. His eyes flickered over my shoulder.

*What?*

I turned just as Ava and—of fucking course—Xavier approached.

*Excellent.*

I sobered up immediately. What were the two of them doing here, though? What were the odds of us running into each other at the *mall*? Ava looked distracted—or was she irritated that I was here? Probably both. Xavier, in the meantime, was scowling as if he were a pirate and someone had murdered his pet parrot, but that was nothing out of the ordinary.

“What are you two doing here?” Greyson asked casually.

“We were wondering the same thing about you,” Xavier said. His jaw clenched. So much for making small talk, it seemed.

“We’re just waiting for Jay and Lola,” I said, trying not to look directly at him.

He’d put me on edge immediately.

“Making a fashion statement?” Ava asked. I realized that her eyes had drifted over my tracksuit, her expression sarcastic. I was not about to sit here and listen to her insults.

“This isn’t mine. That’s why we’re here… I’m going to find a new outfit,” I told her, even though I knew she didn’t care. “Uh, I’m going to go look right now, actually.” I squeezed Greyson’s arm, looking up at him to say, “Go in the store and get the outfits you want to send them, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

He nodded, and I was about to quickly head off when Xavier spoke up. “Did you know that Colton, Maya, and the twins might be coming to town?”

I paused. “Really?”

“We had no idea,” Greyson said. He looked impassive, but I could tell something was bothering him.

“I was thinking we should throw some kind of welcome back party for them. Or something,” Xavier said. Was throwing a party the reason he looked so mad? Or the fact that he was the one suggesting a party, of all things?

*He’s generally antisocial and grumpy and does hate playing host, so that could be it*, I thought.

The awkward silence between the four of us stretched before Lola’s voice broke it.

“What a small world!” Lola quipped, marching over to wrap an arm over my shoulders. Looking Ava and Xavier up and down, much like Ava had looked at me, she said, “*So* nice to see you two.”

More awkwardness.

Jay, oblivious to Lola’s sarcasm—or ignoring it—slapped Xavier on the back. “Heard you’re a double uncle, man. Congrats!”

“Thanks,” Xavier said tightly.

“What are the babies’ names?” Jay asked.

“Orion and Lyra—a boy and a girl,” Xavier said. Greyson didn’t show it, but I knew that Colton not telling him more about them had hurt him.

I took his hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. He shot me a small smile.

And then Ava said, “We’ve gotta run now.” She nodded at Xavier. “Let’s go.”

Our goodbyes were weird, like this entire meet-not-so-cute. It got even worse when I felt a twinge of jealousy, remembering how I had gone shopping with Xavier for the first time at this very mall.

*Now he’s shopping with Ava. The woman he* loves*.*

The bitterness I felt made it hard to breathe. *Go away; this isn’t fair.*

“Ava looks a little tired, doesn’t she?” Lola said skeptically.

*No*, I thought*. Ava always looks stupidly beautiful. Definitely not like a loser who fell in a river.*

Greyson’s eyes were on me. “You okay?”

“I think…” I swallowed, looking around. “I think there’s a draft coming from somewhere—I’m still a little chilled. I’m going to go find something warm and not ridiculous to wear.”

Both Lola and Greyson suggested coming with me, but I said that they each should pick two outfits from the baby store in the meantime. We could always get a few sizes up so Colton and Maya could use them down the line.

“Start shopping without me, but don’t buy anything before I come back, okay? We have to decide together!”

With a quick kiss and a smile to Greyson, I walked away.

My smile faded the moment he wasn’t looking.

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I spotted Xavier and Ava walking hand in hand into a nearby store, so I would definitely not be shopping there. Shoving the thought of them out of my head, I moved on.

*Don’t fixate on him, Cali. It won’t help with anything right now. Ignore him.*

 I just wanted to find something that was comfortable and inexpensive. Walking quickly through the mall, I finally spotted a store that was having a sale. Perfect. I headed inside, greeted the busy salesperson, and went straight to the bargain rack. Riffling through a few possibilities, I settled on a pair of jeans and a sweater—in a dark green color, in case Lola started yelling at me about choosing blue again. But then a dress caught my eye.

*Well, well, well…*

It was more formfitting than what I’d normally wear, but if Greyson and I went away on a couple’s retreat, I wouldn’t mind spicing things up. With a smile, I grabbed it and brought it with me to the dressing room. I stepped in and hung the dress on the hook, then I quickly took off Bear’s tracksuit. It smelled less than fresh, and for a beat, I was horrified. I could only imagine what someone with a sensitive nose like Ava must have thought.

*UGH!*

Brushing off the thought, I tried on the jeans, and they were fine. I took them off and picked up the dress.

*Greyson’s gonna love this*, I thought. *I really hope it fits—*

The handle of the door began to turn, interrupting my thoughts. Shit, I’d forgotten to lock it. *I’m half-naked, go away!* I wanted to shout. But I settled for, “Occupied!

The door opened.

A boy—a *man*—slipped in—that familiar towering figure that I’d dreamed about a million times before.

*Xavier*.

I was stunned. Was I hallucinating him? Was this part of the *due destini* madness I’d been experiencing as of late?

“Occupied,” I repeated slowly.

“I know,” he said.

*He* is *here.* I gasped, snapping out of my shock. My heart was racing, my cheeks burning, as I scrambled to cover up. “What—” I choked. “What are you doing here?”

Xavier closed the door behind him and locked it. My stomach dropped, shattering all over the floor. His eyes were two magnets, pulling me in like gravity. And when he spoke, his voice was so gruff and raw that it sent a chill down my spine.

“Are you having his baby?”

**Episode 4631**

**Xavier**

*Are you having his baby?*

My words echoed through the small dressing room. I took a deep breath, but it just smelled like Cali and the stupid tracksuit. If she were pregnant, wouldn’t I be able to tell? She’d smell differently. My gaze racked over her body—she was in a black bra and had a dress half on, just over her hips, no more.

Cali was looking at me, her eyes wide with shock. “What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

I steeled myself, trying not to freak out as I repeated the question. “Are you having Greyson’s baby? Are you pregnant?”

Cali shook her head, a blush igniting on her cheeks. “H-How can you even ask me something like that?”

“Just answer the question, Cali,” I ground out.

“*No!*” she burst out. “No, I’m not answering anything! You burst into my dressing room to ask me *that*? How *dare* you?”

I balled my hands into fists at my sides, anxiety ratcheting up inside me. “It’s not a hard question, Cali. Just tell me yes or no—”

“No!” Cali said, shaking her head stubbornly. “I don’t owe you an answer to that question—I don’t owe you anything, *period*. Now get the hell out of here.”

Fear clawed its way up my chest. There was anger, too, but mainly fear.

“Why won’t you just answer me?” I demanded, my blood starting to boil.

Was she refusing to answer because of the way I’d been treating her since Adéluce had entered my life, or was it because the answer was yes, and she just didn’t know how to tell me?

And what the hell was I going to do if she and Greyson really *were* having a baby together? What would that mean? I dragged in a deep breath, trying to force oxygen into my lungs as the dressing room tilted around me. My wolf was *freaking out* inside me. Howling and pacing and demanding that I act. He wanted to take over, to do what my instincts were telling me to do—grab Cali up and carry her away.

She was my *mate*, as my wolf kept reminding me. *My* mate. She couldn’t be having another man’s baby—mate or not, that just wasn’t right. That wasn’t the way things were supposed to be.

And before I knew what I was doing, I’d taken a step toward Cali. Then another. Then another. I had her cornered in the far end of the dressing room before I even realized what I was doing.

Cali looked up at me, defiant. “Get out of here, Xavier.”

“Why can’t you just tell me?” I asked, my voice rough with emotion. “It’s yes or no, Cali. *Yes* or *no*.”

Her hazel eyes were wide, and I couldn’t help but stare into them. Even beneath the dressing room’s fluorescent light, they were so warm and so deep, it was like looking into the center of the earth. As always, they filled me with longing and want.

She searched my face. “Xavier? What happened? Are you okay?” she asked, her voice a whisper. “Why are you asking if I’m *pregnant*—”

“I just need to know,” I said harshly. Then, more quietly, “*Please*. I need to know.”

Her expression softened when she heard the plea in my voice. She didn’t move for what felt like a long time. Then she sighed, running a hand through her hair, and her sweet scent hit me like a ton of bricks.

“The answer is no,” she said, her voice level. “*Of course* I’m not pregnant. I’d tell you if I were.”

The relief was so sudden and so complete that it made my head spin. She wasn’t pregnant. It was all just something in my head—a horrible thought I hadn’t been able to shake. But now I could. I had no right to feel this way, no right to feel grateful and relieved that she wasn’t having another man’s baby. I was out of her life, by design. I’d been forced to do and say so many horrible things to her.

I couldn’t do it anymore.

Stepping toward her, I closed the distance between us, and my mouth descended on hers.

Cali squeaked in shock, the sound muffled between us. My tongue slid inside her mouth, almost of its own accord, as if demanding a response in this way from her. Heat flooded through me as I pulled Cali’s body tightly against mine.

She pulled me closer.

Fuck, this was how things were supposed to be. This was how I was supposed to have her—hot, heavy, and needy in my arms. She dug her nails into my chest, her heartbeat thrumming against me. I couldn’t stop my hands from mapping out every inch of her. Her curves felt painfully familiar and oddly new. I hadn’t felt her like this in so long.

I touched every part of her I could reach, running my hands down her ribcage to her hips, then cupping her ass. In one motion, I pulled her up against me. Her hips were flush against mine, and as every second passed, I got harder. It was impossible not to. I’d been deprived of Cali for so long—not by choice.

I wanted her so fucking bad I couldn’t see straight.

“Pull up the dress,” I growled, setting her back on her feet.

“*Xavier*.” Was she warning me? Or begging me?

Fuck, I’d forgotten how good it felt to hear my name on her lips.

My eyes met hers, and I pinned her against the wall of the dressing room with my body. Ducking my head down, I dragged my tongue along her jawline, and she moaned when I sucked on her ear lobe. “Pull. Up. The. Dress,” I said. “*Now*.”

She obeyed immediately, hiking the tight skirt up over her hips.

The sight of her almost broke me. With a shaky exhale, I all but tore her bra off her, exposing her to the chilly store’s air. I palmed at her breasts, rolling the hardened nipples between my fingers. Then I kissed her again, her mouth open and ready for me. Any caution I had was thrown to the wind as I trailed my fingers down to hover over her panties.

“*Yes*,” she whimpered, arching against me.

*Yes*. Confirmation she wanted this. Confirmation she wanted *me.*

The small room was filled with the scent of Cali and her arousal. Slowly, I moved her panties aside and stroked her. “You’re so wet,” I groaned, barely recognizing my own voice.

She was slick, practically dripping, and the feeling of it nearly made me come. My whole body was on fire. I wanted her desperately, and my wolf was in full agreement. She gasped when I slid one finger inside her.

“Oh my god,” she panted, holding onto my shoulders for dear life. “F-Fuck.”

I kissed her silent, easing my finger in and out. She writhed against me as I pushed another finger inside her. She rocked her hips against me, silently begging for more pressure, and I complied, pushing my fingers deeper.

“That’s right,” I said. “Fuck yourself on my hand, baby.”

“*Please*,” she said, grabbing onto my shirt. “Please, Xavier. Oh fuck, please—”

She gasped as I curled my fingers inside her, pressing the heel of my hand into her clit. My mouth found hers, silencing her once more. She moaned as I lifted one of her legs to hook around my hip. Cali began to quiver against me.

“Come for me,” I demanded.

Then I kissed her roughly, growling as I quickened the pace of my fingers—I needed to *hear* her release, to *feel* it against me. She grabbed me, returning the kiss with equal force as her orgasm rocked her. I collapsed against her, both of us breathing hard.

After what felt like a lifetime, I pulled back to look down at Cali. She was catching her breath, her cheeks flushed. Her clothes were all around her waist, her hair was mussed, and her lips looked swollen.

*Beautiful*.

She also looked very, very confused. “Xavier?”

Reality hit me then.

What the fuck had I just done?

I stepped away from her. “I should go.”

“What—”

Without another word, I turned and slipped back out of the dressing room.

I hurried through the store, heading for the exit.

Fuck. What had I done?

“Can I help you find anything?” a salesperson called to me, hurrying forward.

But I ignored him—and the confused customers waiting at the register. I strode out of the store and back into the mall, not stopping until I found myself at the fountain in the center of the atrium. I looked down and saw my shaky reflection staring back up at me from the greenish water. I almost didn’t recognize myself. I was still breathing heavily, and I looked confused.

My wolf was still on the prowl, urging me to go back to Cali and finish what I’d started—I was still so fucking hard. Cali was willing, and my wolf wanted more than anything else to make love to her. He wanted me to *take* her, and I couldn’t say I didn’t feel the same impulse. My wolf was pushing me, reminding me that she was my mate, and that I had a right to every emotion that was coursing through me.

Cali was my mate, and I wanted her, and there was nothing in the world that was simpler than that.

But I still ground my teeth and did my best to ignore the urging from my wolf. It was like he’d completely forgotten what was at stake, here, and how great the risks were.

So I shoved all those feelings away, even as fear clawed its way into my brain. This was bad. This was really, really bad. What I’d done was unforgivable.

What if Adéluce had seen what I’d just done, how close I’d been to Cali? What if she’d heard me tell Cali how much I wanted and needed her? If Adéluce knew how fucking vulnerable I’d just been, then Cali was in terrible danger—and it was all my fault.

I was furious with myself. I thought of Cali’s wide eyes and her ready kisses, thought of the feel of her body against mine, and I felt sick with fear and self-loathing.

Was Cali going to pay for my mistake?

**Episode 4632**

The dressing room was spinning. The dress I’d wanted to try on was still hiked up to my waist now with my bra hung alongside it, and I could still feel the aftershocks of my orgasm coursing through me—but now, I was alone.

What the *fuck* had just happened?

Xavier was gone. He’d left as strangely and mysteriously as he’d arrived, and I had no idea what to make of it.

I leaned against the wall and let myself slide down to the floor. This was probably for the best—my legs probably would’ve given out within the next few seconds, anyway.

I touched a finger to my still swollen lips. “What the hell was that?” I muttered.

But I had no answer to that question. Xavier had appeared out of nowhere with his questions, and he’d been all… hot and urgent and commanding. Then he’d kissed me—there was no question about who had started it—but we’d both become eager, willing participants.

Then things had… *progressed*. Quickly.

The whole incident had taken me completely by surprise, but now that he was gone, I felt an ache inside me. Being with him like that had been incredible, but it had left me feeling unsatisfied. It had been fast and dirty and hot as hell, but it hadn’t been fulfilling. I hadn’t been with Xavier in so long, and now that it had happened… I felt the strangest mixture of elation and guilt—the feeling was so powerful, I could’ve sworn it was cutting off my air supply.

How could I have gotten so carried away? I was like I’d been in some kind of sexy fog. One moment, Xavier had been up in my face, angrily accusing me of being pregnant, and the next, he’d been kissing me and fingering me like he was never going to let me go.

And I’d *let him do it.*

I’d *wanted* him to do it.

What the actual fuck?

I gave my head a hard shake, trying to get rid of the dazed feeling I’d been left with. Xavier had been blazing hot and then icy cold for so long now, but our interactions had *never* gone like that before. We’d both been taken over by need in a completely unexpected way, but I was feeling bad. Dirty. Used?

My breath caught—*Greyson.*

Fuck fuck fuck. What had I *done*?

Shakily, I got to my feet. Even though Xavier had practically sprinted out of the dressing room, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he still wanted me. The thought was already squatting inside my brain, setting up camp like it had no intention of leaving.

I slipped out of the dress and hung it back on the hanger. Then I collected the other clothes I wanted and took them to the counter to pay. I’d barely even tried the dress on, but I wasn’t about to hang that back up on the rack for someone else to unknowingly try on and buy. That would’ve been another level of fucked up. I’d throw it away as soon as I got out of here.

The cashier rang me up, and I went through the motions of paying and nodding at her questions like a sleepwalker.

“Do you want your receipt in the bag?”

I blinked, my mind struggling to stay in the present moment—it was far too busy trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do about what had just happened in the dressing room. “What?”

The woman behind the counter rolled her eyes and held out my receipt.

“Thanks,” I said apologetically. I took the receipt and the bag and shuffled out of the store.

Quickly, I ducked down one of the hallways, looking for a trash can. Looking around, I grabbed the dress out of the bag and shoved it in. I was shaking as I started walking back toward the main hallway.

I had to go find Greyson. He was going to smell Xavier on me. What was I going to say to him? I barely knew what had happened—and why.

“Sample, ma’am?” someone said at one of the center kiosks. “We’ve got the best body fragrance—”

“Sure,” I said, still feeling dazed.

They showed me one called Berry Beach Breeze, but in my dazed state, I accidentally knocked it over onto the tracksuit. Both the salesperson and I started coughing at the strong smell. “Sorry,” I said. “I’ll take this one.”

Berry Beach Breeze’d up, I started walking toward the baby clothes store. Sure enough, Greyson was standing over there. Anxiety twisted my stomach when he turned toward me as I walked over. I knew I should tell Greyson about what happened, but I had no idea how to start that conversation.

“Hey,” he said. Then he coughed as he got a whiff of me. The fragrance was strong—maybe strong enough to mask Xavier? “That’s a little strong, love.”

My cheeks heated. I had to do it. I had to say something.

“Xavier confronted me in the store.”

“What? Okay,” he said, clearly surprised. “What do you mean? Why? What happened?”

“He thought I was…” I swallowed. I looked up at Greyson, who had lifted a curious eyebrow, waiting for me to finish my sentence. “He thought we were pregnant,” said, forcing out the word.

Greyson jerked with surprise. “*What?* You’re *pregnant*?”

“No!” I burst out. “No, I’m not. He just thought I was.” I shook my head. “I have no idea why.”

Greyson nodded, and I couldn’t help but notice how relieved he looked. Then he frowned. “But why would he think that?”

“I really don’t know,” I said. I’d been wondering the same thing myself. “But he was really worked up over the idea, and then…”

I bit my lip, not wanting to go on. *Crap.*

Greyson saw this, and his expression darkened. “And then what? What happened?”

I took a deep breath. “And then he kissed me.”

This definitely wasn’t the whole story of what happened in that tiny dressing room, but—seeing the stormy expression in Greyson’s grey eyes—I just couldn’t bring myself to tell him what else had happened between Xavier and me. It wasn’t fair to him, and honestly, it wasn’t fair that Xavier had taken things that way either. I’d been a participant, yes, but it’d been impulsive. It’d been like the mate bond between Xavier and me had been drowning, gasping for air, and we’d finally gotten to the surface.

I felt my face heat again as I remembered his hands on me, ordering me to pull up my dress, to keep quiet as he brought me closer and closer to…

Fuck the *due destini*. Seriously.

Greyson’s eyes flashed menacingly, and he turned on his heel, clearly ready to go hunt Xavier down.

I grabbed his arm. “No, Greyson, wait! Whatever you’re going to do, just don’t, okay?”

He rounded on me. “Who kissed who?”

“What?” I sputtered.

“*Who* *kissed* *who?*” he repeated, more urgently. “He kissed you? Or you kissed him?”

Xavier had *definitely* initiated the kiss, but I still hesitated. I wondered if I should take the blame for what had happened and then just deal with the fallout. I really didn’t want to see Greyson and Xavier fighting again. But I also didn’t want to lie to Greyson—he didn’t deserve that. When I’d tried that in the past, it had led to nothing but trouble, and honesty had always proven to be the choice for our ridiculously complicated situation.

“He kissed me,” I admitted. Greyson tensed alarmingly, so I quickly added, “But he was really out of it. I don’t know what was going on, but I think he was just going through something because he thought I was pregnant.”

The moment the words left my mouth, I sort of wished I’d kept them to myself. They just sounded so weak and ineffectual, even to my own ears. And they definitely didn’t sound like a good excuse for what had just happened.

But—to my surprise—Greyson sighed. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked, shocked. “You’re okay?”

“No,” he said sharply. “I’m not okay, but I’m not going to cause a scene at the mall. I know you don’t want that. I don’t either”

I let out a breath. “Okay,” I said. “I really appreciate that, Greyson.”

He looked less than happy, and he might’ve said something else, but then someone called my name, and I turned to see Lola and Jay walking toward us. Their appearance effectively ended the conversation, which was definitely a relief.

“Hey!” Lola grinned as she walked over. “You will not *believe* what we found.”

“The sour Skittles?” Jay asked, looking down at the bag in his hand. “Those were exciting, but I don’t think—”

“Not the candy, Jay,” Lola said, rolling her eyes before she looked at me again. “Did you know they make tiny leather jackets?”

She rummaged around in her bag and pulled out an absurdly small leather jacket. It was so tiny, it made both Greyson and me laugh.

“That is absolutely perfect for any child of Maya’s,” I said. “But now I want to hear more about the candy.”

Lola laughed and linked arms with me as she started walking toward the exit of the mall.

“So, I was thinking about it,” she said, “and I think it’s a good idea. I think we should do it. It would be good for all of us, and honestly, I wouldn’t mind going again.”

I felt like I was supposed to be following Lola’s thought process, but I had no idea what the hell she was talking about. She’d started talking like we were already in the middle of a conversation, which was confusing enough, but I was still feeling pretty dazed, too.

“What are you talking about?” I finally asked.

Lola looked at me in amazement. “Are you not listening to me?” she asked with a laugh. “I’m talking about the couples’ retreat. Let’s do it! Let’s go!”

**Episode 4633**

**Xavier**

I washed my hands in the bathroom another time for good measure, willing Cali’s scent off of me. I’d already bought new clothes, tossing the old ones in the trash. But something told me there was no way Ava wouldn’t smell Cali. I was fucked, simple as that.

And in more ways than one.

I left the bathroom, heading for the fountain at the center of the mall, my chaotic thoughts all demanding my attention. The most persistent one had Adéluce’s name stamped on it in big red letters. For lack of a better phrase, I was *freaking the fuck out*. My fear about what the vampire-witch was going to do to me and the people I loved was roaring with a vengeance. This was bad. This was so, so bad.

There was nothing she *wouldn’t* do, and I knew it. Adéluce had proven there was no threat she wouldn’t make good on, no low to which she wouldn’t stoop. She’d already put the Seluna mark back on Cali once. It was infuriating, but as long as she posed a threat to my mates, I knew that she had me by the throat.

Why had I let my wolf take over like that? Why had I given in—even if it had felt good—when I knew what was at stake? Cali’s *life.* I hadn’t been thinking clearly at all, and now I was going to pay for it—

“There you are.”

I looked over to see Ava walking toward me, a shopping bag in her hand.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” she said. “Where were you hiding?”

I stared at her blankly, my heart racing. I was so caught up in worrying about Adéluce that for a moment I was almost convinced that Ava was an illusion. But then she slipped her hand into mine, and the warmth of her skin snapped me back to reality.

Needing to feel even more of that grounding connection, I squeezed her hand. Ava smiled up at me, and a wave of guilt broke over me. Her eyes were just so trusting, so loving… My mind went to the dressing room, where I’d cornered Cali, kissed her, and then taken things even further. This had happened right after I’d told Ava that I loved her, and that I officially wanted to be her boyfriend.

My stomach twisted with anxiety. This was not good.

“Are you ready to go?” Ava asked. “Did you want to look anywhere else?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m good. Let’s get out of here.”

“Great.” She tugged at my hand, leading me toward the exit of the mall.

As we walked through the parking lot, my mind was still racing. All I could think about was my encounter with Cali in the dressing room. Could Ava not smell Cali on me after what I’d done with the clothes? I debated telling Ava what had happened, but there were a lot of reasons to keep the incident to myself. I didn’t want to hurt Ava. She didn’t deserve that. And I knew how sensitive she was about anything concerning Cali—especially anything concerning Cali and me.

It had been one thing when the Luna arrangement with Ava had felt like it was nothing more than a relationship of convenience—when it had been what was best for the pack, and nothing more. But it wasn’t like that between us anymore. Things had changed. Or *I* had changed. I wasn’t fighting the bond Ava and I shared anymore, pretending that it didn’t matter to me. It did matter, and I loved Ava. The way I felt about her wasn’t the same as the way I felt about Cali, but I didn’t feel about Cali the way I felt about Ava, either. They were different people, and I had very different histories with each of them.

But what I felt for Ava *was* love—that much I knew. I also knew that I didn’t want her to be in pain because of me. I hated the idea of doing anything to hurt her, but the more I thought about it, the more it felt like I *had* to tell her the truth. Based on recent history, I knew that the longer I waited to tell her, the worse it was going to be when she inevitably found out.

I cleared my throat. “Ava?”

She looked over at me. “What’s up?”

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

She gave me a long look. “Is it that you kissed Cali?”

I stared at her in shock. “What? I—how did you know?”

She shrugged. “How do you think? I’m a wolf, Xavier. I can smell her on you.”

I was floored, but I shouldn’t have been surprised. Ava was a wolf, which meant she had highly honed senses. I shot her a sideways glance. If she could smell Cali on me, she had to know that I’d gotten close enough to Cali to kiss her, but whether she could tell that I’d done *other* things with Cali was an entirely different story.

“So why didn’t you say anything?” I asked her. “Why didn’t you call me out when you caught the scent?”

Ava sighed. She didn’t say anything until we reached the end of a long line of cars, then she turned to me. “I’m saying it now, okay? But I also know how complicated your double-mate situation is, and I wanted you to trust me enough to tell me first. Which you did.”

Then she reached out and took my hand again.

As we started walking again, I looked down at our intertwined hands in shock. “Wow.”

“What?” she asked, looking at me.

“I did *not* expect you to take this as well as you are.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I get that. But it’s exhausting, being constantly jealous of Caliana Hart. At the end of the day, *I’m* your Luna. And I’m the one going home with you.” She squeezed my hand.

I felt a strange warmth at her words. Quickly the feeling was followed by guilt. But I couldn’t tell Ava what had happened—she would kill Cali. There was really only a slim chance I was overexaggerating.

“Yes, you are,” I said, brushing a kiss against her lips.

But even as I did, I thought about how much I still missed going home with Cali.

We found the car and climbed in. Ava turned on the stereo and started up a playlist from her phone. I drove out of the packed parking lot, and we headed home in comfortable silence, each of us thinking our own thoughts.

But when we pulled into the driveway in front of the pack house, Ava grabbed her shopping bag and turned to me.

“But listen to me now, X,” she said, as though our last conversation had only been put on pause while we drove. “I’m being understanding because I know you’re in a difficult position, but don’t go misinterpreting that understanding as a free pass to kiss your ex whenever you feel like it. If you do it again, I’m going to have to talk to her.”

“No,” I said. “Just leave it.”

Her eyes glittered in a dangerous way, and though I was a little taken aback, I wasn’t really surprised. After all, *this* was the Ava I knew—always confident in the supremacy of our relationship, and always capable of getting rid of any perceived threats to that supremacy. Also *terrifyingly* competent.

She gave me a firm nod and climbed out of the car, shutting the door behind her. I watched as she walked up the steps toward the front door, but as I did, my vision seemed to flicker, like all the lights had gone out for a split second.

One moment the house looked normal, and the next it was a smoking husk. One moment Ava was walking confidently up the porch steps, and the next she was dead, lying face up on the steps.

My body reacted with a pulse of panic, but the next moment, everything was back to normal. Ava had reached the front door and walked inside.

I scanned the wide, sloping lawn in front of the house, half-expecting to see Adéluce lurking in the shadows. But there was nothing.

Still, even though I couldn’t see her, I was certain that she was responsible for the horrifying illusion I’d just seen. And it hadn’t just been an illusion—that had been a warning. A warning for me to pay attention.

Shit.

*Cali.*

My heart raced as I started the car again. Adéluce had just sent me a very threatening message, and I highly doubted that the threat applied to only one of my mates.

I sped out of the drive, kicking up gravel behind me, and raced toward the Redwood pack house. I had to check on Cali. I had to somehow figure out a way to warn her that something might be coming for her. If Adéluce was as pissed at me as that vision had implied, I had no idea how she was going to punish me, or what she might do to Cali.

I never paid much attention to speed limits under any circumstances, but I didn’t even see the posted limits as I sped toward the Redwood house, breaking about a thousand traffic laws in my haste to reach Cali before anything happened.

When I arrived, I whipped my car up the drive and parked haphazardly. I didn’t even bother to grab the keys before I jumped out and sprinted toward the house. But before I could get even halfway to the door, Greyson stepped through it and closed it behind him.

“Stop right there, brother.” His voice was calm, but deadly serious. “Don’t take one more step.”

**Episode 4634**

**Greyson**

I stood in the middle of the porch, right in front of the door, blocking the way. I glared at my brother. I couldn’t *believe* he’d come over after what had happened at the mall this afternoon. How dared he show his face here after he’d kissed Cali and confused her all over again?

“Not another step,” I warned him.

“Greyson, I really need—”

“No fucking way,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “I can’t think of any good reason for you to be here, and I’ll tell you this—if you’re here to fuck with Cali’s head even more, you need to turn around and leave before I fuck you up in the head.”

Xavier’s expression darkened. “You can’t stop me from talking to her—”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I *can* stop you from messing with my pack,” I informed him, taking a step toward him as he marched up the stairs. “You’re not part of the Redwood pack anymore, Xavier, and you have no business here. As the Alpha of this pack, I’m telling you right now to get off our land.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Xavier growled.

“Good. Neither do I. Leave.”

Xavier stepped onto the porch and grabbed two fistfuls of my shirt, his face twisted with anger. “Will you just fucking *listen to me*? I came here because Cali is in danger—*actual* danger—and I’m not going to just sit by and let something happen. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

For a moment, I was frozen in shock. Cali was in danger? What kind of danger? What the hell was he talking about?

Then logic took the wheel again, and I shook my head. “No way. No.”

“What do you mean, *no*?” Xavier demanded.

“I mean that I’m not falling for this—for whatever bullshit you’re trying to sell me,” I snapped.

“Greyson—”

“I don’t care about the lies you came up with on your way over here to try to talk your way into the house. I know what happened. You kissed Cali again, even though you’ve been treating her like shit for weeks. It’s all part of some sick game you’re playing, toying with her mate bond with you,” I told him. “Get the hell out of here. You have another mate waiting for you—a Luna. There’s no reason for you to be here. Just leave us the fuck alone, Xavier.”

Xavier’s face flushed with familiar anger, and then—weirdly—it just fell. He let go of me, and his hands dropped to his sides like he’d been deflated. He ran a hand through his hair, looking agitated. He paced away down the porch, then back to me, and when he spoke, he looked completely spooked, like he’d seen a ghost.

“This is all just so *fucked*.”

“What?” I asked, struggling to follow.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?” Xavier demanded, but somehow, it didn’t feel like he was talking to me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked warily. As usual, I was completely confused by his behavior. What kind of act was this? What was he trying to achieve?

I couldn’t answer those questions, but Xavier was obviously really upset about *something*. He looked conflicted, like he was being pulled in two.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” he snapped. He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

I didn’t believe that. Xavier was many things, but *fine* was rarely one of them. I thought about Cali’s concerns about Xavier—that there might be some kind of spell on him.

Slowly, I stepped toward him and put a hand on his shoulder. “If something’s happening to you—or if something’s already happened—just tell me, Xavier. Let me help you—”

“Fuck off,” he snapped, shoving my hand off his shoulder. “I don’t need your fucking help!”

My anger spiked, and I grabbed him by the shirt. “You’re the one who showed up here acting like a crazy person, man! What the fuck is going on with you? Why are you acting like this? Are you *actually* under some kind of fucking spell or something?”

Xavier’s eyes widened. They lost their anger, and for a moment, I could’ve sworn I saw fear in them.

This felt like a window, and I knew I had to keep pushing. “What’s going on with—”

But then the front door flew open, and Cali rushed out.

“Stop!” she shouted. She was barefoot, and her face was flushed. “Stop fighting!” Then she marched forward and wedged herself between us. She looked up at Xavier. “What are you doing here?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. He straightened his shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles where I’d grabbed him, and I could see him working to compose himself again. If I’d ever had a chance of getting a straight answer out of him, that moment had passed. He was closing himself off again, and I knew there was nothing I could say that would get him to keep talking.

That was just the nature of our relationship, and nothing was ever going to change that.

A cold wind blew up, wrapping around us, and I looked down at Cali’s bare feet. She didn’t need to be out here, dealing with this bullshit. I needed to get her inside.

I put a hand on her hip to lead her inside, but she was still glaring at Xavier, clearly waiting for him to answer her question.

He cleared his throat. “I just came over to…” He seemed to be searching for an idea. “To apologize. I’m sorry about earlier. It never should’ve happened.”

He shot me a ferocious glare, and I crossed my arms over my chest, watching my brother closely. Now that I was paying attention, I was starting to see that there was a distinct pattern to his behavior—his reactions. I’d seen it a lot recently, I realized—that strange two-step of fear, then anger that the fear might’ve been observed. It was maddening, but also very interesting.

“Fine,” Cali said, starting to shiver a little. “And now that you’ve apologized, you can go.”

I was surprised that Cali was being as firm with him as she was, but I was impressed, too, and glad that she was showing him the door.

Xavier looked a little surprised himself. He hesitated, then turned and jogged down the porch steps toward his car.

I moved to stand next to Cali, and we watched as Xavier opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat. He started the car, and for a moment I thought he was just going to peel out, but then he rolled down the window and looked up at Cali.

That fear was back in his eyes, though he was clearly trying to hide it. “Just… keep your eyes open, okay?”

“What?” Cali asked blankly.

“Just stay close to Greyson or Lola if you can, okay? And if you think someone’s following you…” He paused, looking miserable. “Trust your instincts.”

Before either Cali or I could say a word in response, he rolled his window back up and drove off.

We watched him for a moment in silence, then Cali turned to me, looking baffled.

“Trust my instincts?” She shook her head. “What the hell was that about?”

“No idea,” I muttered, staring after Xavier’s car. I watched as he turned onto the main road and sped away, then I turned to look at Cali. “Are you okay? Did he upset you?”

She frowned. “Well, it upset me to see you fighting with your brother when you promised me that you wouldn’t.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, love. I just saw Xavier driving up, and… I don’t know. My anger just got the better of me.” I shook my head. “I was surprised to see him. I didn’t think he’d have the balls to come to our house after what he pulled at the mall.”

“I get that,” Cali said softly. “I was surprised to see him, too. But he is a neighboring Alpha, in the end, *and* your brother—both good reasons not to fight him every time you get the chance. We’re going to be seeing a lot of him.”

I growled at the thought. “I know, but…”

Cali raised her eyebrows. “But what? What is it?” she asked when I didn’t go on.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s nothing.”

Cali wrapped her arms around herself. “Okay, it’s not nothing, Greyson. I can see it in your face. You’ve clearly got something on your mind, so just tell me what it is.”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I was watching Xavier just now…”

“*And?*” Cali urged.

“And…” I shook my head. “It seems crazy to even *say* it.”

“Say what?” Cali demanded, starting to look slightly crazed with frustration.

I met her eyes. “I think I finally see what you mean with the idea that he’s under a spell,” I said. “And if he *is* acting so strangely because of some kind of magical influence, then how do we get rid of it for good?”

**Episode 4635**

**Artemis**

I gave Marius a wary look. “What information do you have?”

He gave me a megawatt smile. “Nope.”  
 “What do you mean, *nope*?” I asked, starting to get annoyed.

“I mean that you’re not going to trick me so easily,” he said. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Ari. You have to agree to my terms before I tell you anything.”

I huffed in irritation. I hated how clever Marius was. Nothing about him was convenient, but I hadn’t found any other leads on Kadmos that were even remotely promising, and I was getting kind of desperate—a fact which Marius could probably sniff out. He’d always been good at that.

“What kind of favor do you want?” I asked with a resigned sigh. “And if you think you’re getting some kind of open-ended Fae promise out of me, you can think again. That’s never going to happen.”

Marius’s grin widened. “You know, you’re so much more suspicious than you used to be. I love this newfound cynicism. It’s very sexy.”

I rolled my eyes, hating that now I felt warm. “If you’re just going to waste my time, I’ll be on my—”

“Okay, okay, okay,” he said, raising his hands in surrender. “Here’s what I want—I need some help capturing a bounty.”

“That sounds about right,” I muttered, making Marius laugh again. Then I frowned. “But that sounds way too easy, coming from you. What kind of bounty is it?”

Marius shrugged casually. “You know how it goes in this business, Ari—you never know *everything* about who you’re going after. The target is someone who crossed a high-ranking member of the Dark Fae court. Nothing too big.”

“And why exactly do you need my help?”

“Time is of the essence,” he said. “We’ll cover more ground with the two of us.”

I searched his face, looking for clues, but Marius’s angelic countenance gave nothing away. Regardless, I wasn’t buying his “it’ll be an easy job” act. If it was so easy, then why did he even need my help?

It was clear as day that he knew more than he was letting on about this bounty. But to be fair, that was pretty typical when it came to bounty hunters. Trade secrets were carefully guarded and never shared, which meant that I was used to Marius’s roundabout way of talking. It was a bounty hunter thing, and a Fae thing. No one in the Fae world was ever direct.

I thought about the deal Marius was offering. I *was* an excellent bounty hunter, so hunting down a bounty with him wouldn’t be a big deal. It probably wouldn’t even slow me down that much. But of course, if I took the deal, that would mean spending more time with Marius. And that could be dangerous. He was so flirtatious it was nearly criminal.

But I told myself that that wouldn’t be a problem. I loved Rishika, and I wanted to be with her again when I got back. I’d be able to handle Marius’s advances without a worry.

And he wasn’t a bad guy—not really. Just selfish and sexy, which was admittedly a dangerous combination. But the vast majority of the Fae I knew had the exact same personality type, so I had some experience dealing with it.

“Hello?” Marius said when I didn’t speak for a long time.

“I’m thinking about it,” I shot back. “There’s a lot to consider.”

He grinned at me. “Okay, so now that you’ve thought about it, do we have a deal?”

I hesitated. There were drawbacks here that I couldn’t ignore, but it *was* a tempting offer. “You swear it’ll be a quick hunt? In and out?”  
 “Cross my heart,” he said with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t even know why I’d bothered to ask—Marius had probably never voluntarily told the truth in his life.

“Fine. I’ll do it—”

“That’s wonderful, Ari—”

“*But* I’ll only give you two days,” I added sharply.

“Two days?”

“Yep,” I said. “After that, whether or not we’ve caught your bounty, you’ll give me the information you have on Kadmos. Got it?”

I tried to make my terms as specific as possible so that Marius wouldn’t be able to find any loopholes through which to wiggle out of his debt. He’d always been great at that, too.

When he frowned, looking legitimately put out, I knew I’d managed it, and was satisfied. I didn’t want to get too thrown off my own search, but if he could ultimately help me along… I had to do it. I held out a hand for him to shake.

“So, do we have a deal or what?” I asked. “Two days of my best work—that’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Marius gave a long-suffering sigh, like I’d just asked him to donate a kidney. “You drive a hard bargain, Ari, but fine. You’ve got a deal.”

He slipped his hand into mine and squeezed. The contact sent a shiver up my arm and down my spine, but I gritted my teeth against it. It was nothing. It was just what happened when two Fae made a deal. It had absolutely nothing to do with the physical contact.

“Okay!” Marius said briskly, letting go of my hand. “Deal’s a deal, let’s go.”

He turned and started to march away. I watched him for a confused moment, then hurried to catch up.

“Hang on. Marius, wait,” I said. “Where are we even going? I’m happy to help, but you haven’t told me anything.”

He gave me a sideways look, and I recognized the sly glint in his eyes. “You never made me promise to tell you any details of the hunt, Ari.”

I groaned. So much for my airtight deal.

Marius smiled at me. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, Ari. I’ll be sure to tell you what I need you to do and when.”

I glowered at him. “This whole thing had better not be bullshit, Marius. If you’re trying to lead me into a trap, I’m going to murder you in your sleep.”

This threat didn’t have the intended effect, and he only laughed. “Hey, that’s on you, Ari. You should’ve added ‘no traps’ to the deal. That’s what happens when you do Fae deals on the fly.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, okay. As if you could catch me in a trap.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You should know that there are a lot of people out there—hunters and others—who are looking for someone who fits your description.”

“Is that right?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said. “So you should consider yourself lucky that I’m not hauling you in to collect the reward money myself.”

“Oh yes, that’s very generous of you,” I said, rolling my eyes. “As if you’d even be able to take me down.”

His eyes glinted. “Oh, I don’t think it would be that hard.”

He looked me up and down, as if imagining all the ways he could. I clenched my teeth against the heat that flooded me. I did *not* feel that way about this cocky asshole.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

I laughed. “You’re telling me there isn’t a single person out there who’d be happy to have your head mounted on their wall?”

“Well,” Marius said, shrugging modestly. “You know how it is—you make a few friends, you make a few enemies. You can’t make everyone happy all the time.”

“Clearly,” I said with a smirk.

That made him chuckle. “But I have improved my skills since you’ve been gone. You’d be impressed.”

“I highly doubt that,” I said, shaking my head.

He moved so quickly and so smoothly I didn’t even clock what he was doing until the dagger he’d pulled from his belt was buried in the trunk of the tree we’d just passed. I looked at it as we moved closer—it was still vibrating with the impact.

Okay, that was fairly impressive—not that I was going to tell him that.

“Kid stuff,” I said with a shrug.

He snorted. “Please—*whoa*.”

Quick as blinking, I’d spun and thrown my own knife, sinking it into the tree trunk a millimeter away from his. His knife hadn’t been buried deeply enough, and it clattered to the ground.

He cleared his throat, clearly embarrassed by this turn of events. Then he leapt forward, toward the tree just in front of us. He grabbed the lowest branch and pulled himself up like a gymnast. He stood on the brand for a victorious moment, then jumped down, landing next to me.

“How about that?” he demanded.

I shrugged. “I’ve seen better. I’ve *done* better.”

“Just admit it, Ari, I’ve gotten better, and you—”

He stopped speaking when I launched myself up in a vertical leap and grabbed the same branch. I swung around it once, the bark rough beneath my palms, then stopped at the top in a perfect handstand. My victory felt epic for a moment—and then the contents of my bag dropped to the ground below me.

“Shit,” I muttered.

I swung back down, landing and starting to gather my belongings. Everything had fallen out—my weapons, my phone, and the photo I’d brought along with me. It was the picture of Cali, Orla, Tom, and me from Christmas that I kept in my room.

Marius laughed. “That was really nice, Ari, right up until the end.”

He crouched down to help me collect my things and picked up the photo. The humor faded from his face as he looked at them, then glanced at the cell phone I was shoving back into my bag.

He frowned at me. “Hang on, what is this? Artemis, have you been in the *human world*?”

**Episode 4636**

It didn’t make me happy—*nothing* about this situation made me happy—but it was really exciting to finally hear Greyson validating what I’d been seeing in Xavier for weeks. And it was even better to know that Greyson was on board with my mission to save Xavier from whatever spell or curse had been cast on him.

It had been tough to carry that suspicion around when everyone else thought I was crazy for thinking it—Kira and kind of Ava aside. It was a relief to have someone else I trusted develop the same suspicion now that Kira was gone. And it made me feel completely energized in my mission to help Xavier. Greyson had always been so skeptical of my claim that something was going on with Xavier, but now even he could see that his brother was behaving like he was under a spell. That was huge. And now that we were both on the same page, we could finally do something about it.

“It was so strange,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “The way he acted just now was totally bizarre. It was like he *wanted* to say something, but for some reason, he literally couldn’t. I don’t know… It was like he was fighting with himself, trying to speak and being held back. And it wasn’t just normal Xavier bullshit, either—it was like some external force was keeping him quiet.”

I nodded emphatically. “Yes. I know exactly what you’re talking about. I’ve noticed it, too.”

“It was almost like he was speaking *around* something,” Greyson mused. “Not that I have any idea what that thing could be. Like he was having a conversation with someone else, half the time.”

“*Yes, yes, yes*,” I said emphatically. “That’s what I’ve been seeing, too. You’re describing all the stuff that made me suspect that there was something going on with him. Something stopping him from being fully honest with us.”

“But *what*?” Greyson asked. “What the hell’s going on?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “None at all—and believe me, I have *tried* to figure this out.”

Greyson leaned against the desk, looking thoughtful. We’d come inside when he’d noticed me shivering on the porch, holing ourselves up in the small study near the front door so that we could speak privately.

“I really wish Kira were here,” I said. “I bet she’d be able to answer some of these questions.” The grief that filled me as I thought of our lost friend was sharp and painful. Tears sprang to my eyes. I hated that I’d never had the chance to tell her how much she meant to me. Hated that I hadn’t been able to say goodbye. “I really miss her.”

“I know,” Greyson said quietly. “I miss her, too.”

“And I think she figured something out about Xavier before she died.”

Greyson shrugged. “Yeah, but she’s gone. Even if she figured out exactly what was going on with him, we’ll never know what she discovered.”

“I know, I know,” I said. Barring a séance—which always had very mixed results—there was no way for us to ask Kira what she’d found out. I glanced at Xavier. “Maybe we should talk to Big Mac.”

The door suddenly swung open, and Lola strode into the room.

“What do you need Big Mac for?” she asked.

Hesitating, I looked at Greyson, wondering if I should tell Lola what we suspected about Xavier. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. The last time I’d tried to talk to her about Xavier, it hadn’t gone well. Lola was angry at him, and she’d been reluctant to believe any explanation for Xavier’s behavior other than “he’s being an ass.”

But then Greyson saved me from making the decision. “We want to talk to Big Mac because we think Xavier is under a spell.”

Lola’s eyes went wide with surprise. “Wait, *what*? Are you serious? You believe this, too, Greyson? Huh.”

She suddenly looked thoughtful, and I frowned, a little annoyed that she was willing to consider the possibility now that *Greyson* was presenting it to her.

“This is exactly what I’ve been telling you, Lola,” I said.

“I know, I know,” Lola said. Then she shrugged. “It’s just… If Greyson believes it, then something really *must* be going on.”

I glared at her. “What does that mean? Are you trying to imply that I’m—”

“I’m just saying that Greyson is naturally a little more skeptical than you are,” Lola said hurriedly, finally realizing what she’d said. “And me, too! I fall for anything!”

I shook my head. “Just stop talking, Lola.”

“Good idea,” she muttered. Then, “Did something else happen? What changed your mind, Greyson?”

“Xavier was just here,” Greyson said. “And he was acting really strange—even more so than usual. Like he wanted to say something, but something was stopping him. He said that Cali was in danger, but then he kind of backtracked. I don’t know, it wasn’t anything he said, more what he didn’t—or couldn’t—say.”

Lola looked over at me. “I’m really sorry, Cali. I should’ve been more receptive when you were telling me about this. It was just kind of a lot, and I thought you were just looking for excuses to write off his shitty behavior. I’m sorry, girl.”

I was angry, but Lola’s expression was sincere, and seeing it soothed my anger a bit.

“Okay, thank you.” I sighed. “I might’ve sounded a little insane when I first told you about it, so I guess you had a reason to be skeptical.”

“No, you were right,” Lola said, shaking her head. “I should’ve trusted you as your friend. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That means a lot. And now that we’re all on the same page, we need to do something to save Xavier.”

“Save Xavier?” Jay stopped outside the door and peered in at us. “Save him from what? What’s going on?”

Jay was holding two mugs of tea and had clearly just come from the kitchen in search of Lola.

Lola stepped over to him and took one of the mugs. “Oh, Jay. You have some serious catching up to do.”

Jay looked at Greyson and me. “Clearly. What’s going on with Xavier? What does he need to be saved from? You know, *besides* himself?”

I sighed. “We think someone’s cast a spell on him.”

Jay stared at me in shock. “*What?* Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” I said gravely.

“But… why?” Jay asked, clearly baffled.

I shrugged. “I can’t answer that. We don’t know who might have done this or why. All we know is that there’s far too much evidence to ignore.”

Jay grasped his mug tightly, looking overwhelmed. He stepped into the study and slumped down into the armchair.

Lola knelt next to him. “Do you need anything, Jay? A hug?”

Jay nodded vacantly, and Lola put her mug down on the desk and threw her arms around him.

He pressed the heel of his palm to his eye. “Is this why he’s been such an asshole to all of us?” he asked, looking up at me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But… yeah. Maybe.” I looked over at Greyson.

Greyson moved to Jay’s side and put a hand on his shoulder. “We think that’s the reason behind his recent behavior, yes.”

Jay let out a relieved breath. “*Thank god*. Honestly, for a while there I thought someone had hit him on the head or something. As weird as this possibility is, it actually makes everything so much easier to understand.”

Lola perched on the arm of Jay’s chair and looked around. “Okay,” she said, reaching for her mug. “Now that we know what the deal is, what’s the plan?”

“The first step of the plan is to figure out who cast this spell.”

“Okay, step one: which witch,” Lola said, taking a drink. “Obviously one was either hired for the job or there’s a witch out there who hates Xavier.”

I ignored her. “We won’t be able to figure out how to unravel the spell until we find out who cast it. And why. And how.”

“Okay, so do we ask Big Mac?” Lola asked. “She’s the witch on call, right?”

I nodded, but my stomach clenched at the prospect. I knew Big Mac wasn’t going to like being asked, and I hated that we were always pulling her into all our problems. She hated it, too.

“But first,” I said, “I think we need to gather more information.”

“Really?” Lola asked. “How are we supposed to do that? I mean, it’s not like we can talk to Xavier about this. If he wanted to tell us—if he *could* tell us—he probably would’ve done it by now. But he’s not telling us anything anymore.”

“That’s true,” I said with a frown. “Which is why I need to go talk to the person Xavier is closest to, these days.”

“Well, that would make sense,” Lola said. “But who is that? I mean, I’d say it was you, but—” She stopped talking, her eyes widening with shock. “Wait. Tell me you’re not talking about talking to who I think you’re talking about talking to.”

“Yeah.” I sighed, already resigned to my fate. “I have to talk to Ava.”

**Episode 4637**

“*Ava?*” Lola burst out. “You want to talk to Ava? Cali, are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’m serious,” I said. “I think I need to talk to her. She was in on the whole thing before anyway, so she’s familiar with the concept.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary,” Lola said, shaking her head. “I mean, what can she tell us that we don’t already know? This just sounds like a waste of time.”

I sighed. I knew why Lola was so vehemently against this—she was my best friend, and she was just being protective of me. But I also knew if we really wanted to figure out what the hell was going on with Xavier, then we were going to need to get Ava on our side.

“We don’t know what Xavier’s like on a day-to-day basis these days. Ava’s around him all the time. She’s his Luna.” I swallowed hard. “We need to know if he’s experienced any other changes that we don’t know about.”

“But it’s *Ava*,” Lola said. “What makes you think she’s going to help you?”

“Like I said, she was onboard with me in this once before. I think I can get her interested again.”

“I don’t like this,” Lola said with a scowl. “You don’t need to talk to Ava. Just talk to any of the other Samaras.”

“Lola—”

“Someone who hasn’t actually physically hurt you before, maybe?” Lola added pointedly.

“Listen,” I said wearily, “I get that you don’t like Ava, but she’s changed since she first came back from the dead. She might not be my biggest fan, but she’d be a good ally. And she really loves Xavier.”

No matter what bad blood there was between us, that was always going to be something Ava and I had in common.

“I just don’t know,” Lola said, shaking her head doubtfully.

“Ava thought there was something off with Xavier before,” I pointed out. “She was the first one to agree that I had a point about him. We were working with Kira to figure it out before she…”

“Yeah,” Lola said quietly, looking down.

“Anyway, I think I can talk Ava around to our side on this one.” I glanced at Greyson. “What do you think?”  
 He didn’t look enthusiastic, but he nodded. “If that’s what you think you need to do to get information, then I’ll support you. But if you’re going to go over there, maybe I should come with you.”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, thanks for offering, but I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I think Ava will be far more likely to talk to me if I approach her one-on-one,” I said.

Greyson didn’t look pleased, but he finally nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He sighed. “I know it’s just the Samara house, but be safe, okay? I don’t like how Xavier came over here like that today or what happened earlier. But that warning of Xavier’s has me all freaked out now. He’s not cryptic—brooding and angsty, sure—but not cryptic.”

I nodded and stretched up onto my tiptoes to kiss him. “I know. I’ll be safe, I swear.”

I headed into the hallway and pulled on my shoes, then I grabbed my coat and my keys and headed out to my car.

As I drove over to the Samara house, I thought hard about what I was going to say, and when I arrived, I parked and walked purposefully toward the door. I knocked and waited for a long time. No one came to the door, and I was about to knock again when it finally opened.

Marissa appeared in the doorway, and when she saw me, she frowned. “Oh, Cali. It’s you. What are you doing here?”

She looked unhappy to see me, which sort of made sense. Marissa and I had never had any issues, but she was a good friend of Ava’s, so it made sense that she would be protective of her. It was actually kind of nice, knowing that Ava was capable of generating that kind of loyalty. It was like I’d told Lola—Ava really wasn’t the same person she’d been when she’d first gotten back.

I tried to smile. “Hey, Marissa. I was hoping to talk to Ava.”

Marissa’s frown deepened. “Ava? Did she know you were coming over? Did Xavier?”

Um… Shit.

In my urgency to get over the Samara house and talk to Ava, I hadn’t given any thought to what I’d say to Xavier if he happened to see me. If I ran into him, I’d need an excellent phony explanation for my presence.

I thought fast. It wasn’t that weird that I wanted to talk to Ava, was it? The Samaras were our closest neighbors. Maybe I wanted to have a Luna-to-Luna discussion about… Luna things?

That might’ve worked if it wasn’t common knowledge that Ava and I hated each other.

Double shit.

“I was just really hoping to talk to Ava,” I said slowly, dodging the question entirely.

Marissa looked torn. She was frowning at me, and it looked like she was about to say no, but before she could say anything, Ava came down the stairs and saw me.

“Hey,” she called flatly.

Marissa turned to look at her. I tried to smile, but Ava shot me a scowl in return.

“What do *you* want?” she demanded.

Okay, not a great start.

“I was hoping we could talk.” I glanced at Marissa, who didn’t show any signs of retreating. “In private?”

Marissa turned to me with a glare.

“Why?” Ava asked. She’d stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

I wracked my brain, trying to think of a signal to let Ava know that I wanted to talk to her about Xavier’s magic problem. “I wanted to talk to you about something Kira left for me.”

“Kira?” Ava asked, surprised.

“Yeah. She gave it to me at that party we had a little while ago.” I gave her a hard stare.

Ava narrowed her eyes. After a beat, she glanced at Marissa. “I’m good here.”

“You sure?” Marissa asked.

Ava nodded. “I’ve got it handled.”

“If you say so.”

Ava looked at me and jerked her head. “This way.”  
 Relieved, I stepped into the house and followed her into a small den.

She pulled the door shut behind us and turned on me. “Okay. What is it?”

“Xavier came over to the Redwood house an hour ago, and he was acting really weird. The way he’s been acting for months, but worse. Greyson noticed it, and now even he thinks something’s going on with Xavier.”

“What do you mean, ‘going on’?” Ava asked.

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes. “That Xavier’s being magically influenced.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “Oh, that. You seriously still think he’s under a spell?”

I stared at her, flabbergasted by the ease of her tone. “Are you serious, Ava? You’ve seen him. Can you honestly tell me that you don’t think he’s being influenced, somehow?”

Ava shrugged, but she didn’t meet my eyes. She rubbed the back of her neck, opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again.

“What is it?” I pressed.

She looked unhappy. “Fine. There was an incident in the car. On the drive over to the mall.”

“What happened?” I asked, my heart beating fast.

“We were talking about the vampire who attacked me by the lake,” Ava said, wrapping her own hand around her neck, like she was remembering it. “So we were talking about it, and Xavier goes to say the vampire’s name, but then he just didn’t say it.”

“What do you mean?”

“He *wouldn’t* say it. Or he couldn’t.” she clarified.

I frowned at her, confused. “I don’t know what that means. What do you mean, he couldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Ava said, shaking her head. “It was like he wanted to, but he literally couldn’t get the word out. And when he started to say the vampire’s name, it looked like he was in pain. It was… strange.”

I took this in, thinking hard.

“So we’re talking about a curse that involves a vampire?” I said slowly, trying to piece it all together. “And maybe that vampire has a witch on their side?”

“Or it’s a vampire who *is* a witch,” Ava said, rolling her eyes at my stupidity.

I stared at her in shock, a freezing chill shooting down my spine.

Ava’s derisive smile disappeared as she took in the expression on my face. “What? What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No,” I breathed, my heart pounding with sudden terror. “No, it’s impossible. It can’t be.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, just spit it out already,” Ava snapped. “Do you know someone who fits that description?”

I nodded slowly.

“Who?” Ava asked, her face paling, a little of the venom fading from her voice.

“We had some trouble with a vampire-witch a while back… Didn’t he tell you?” I said. “But this can’t be her…”

“Why not? What makes you so sure about that?” Ava asked.

I met her eyes. “Because she’s *dead*.”

**Episode 4638**

**Xavier**

I’d just finished showering and was jogging downstairs when I caught the scent. I froze in my tracks, my heart racing. I’d just picked up Cali’s scent in the air. But that was impossible. Wasn’t it? She couldn’t be here, could she?

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I looked quickly around, but the only people I saw were Marissa and Knox, talking in the living room.

*No*. I gave my head a shake. That was crazy. Cali wasn’t here. It was just my mind playing tricks on me.

Trying to shake off the strange feeling in my gut, I rounded the corner and headed for the kitchen. Then I caught her scent again.

Fear flooded through me. What was this? Was this one of Adéluce’s illusions? Was this not my *mind* playing tricks on me, but that damn vampire-witch?

I looked around again, more fearfully this time. Everything around me looked fine. The house looked perfectly normal, and I *felt* perfectly normal. My head wasn’t spinning—it wasn’t even aching. Everything around me was perfectly normal, except for the impossibility of Cali’s scent in the air.

*Stop*, I told myself firmly. This was insane.This was my mind playing tricks on me. That was all.

And I almost managed to convince myself that that was true—until I heard Cali’s voice.

I whipped around and saw Ava and Cali walking down the hallway, their heads bent together, speaking quietly.

Okay, this had to be an Adéluce hallucination, because Ava and Cali did *not* hang out. In fact, earlier Ava had seemed like she’d wanted to rip Cali to pieces after I admitted to the kiss. If she knew what had really happened, there would be a lot more bloodshed right about now.

So what were they doing?

I was still staring blankly at the two women when they looked up. At the sight of me, they both stopped talking. They both looked totally shocked, like they hadn’t expected to run into me. I was pretty shocked myself. And, seeing Cali, everything I’d felt for her in that dressing room came rushing back to me. It was a hell of a lot, so I took a deep breath and fought to keep myself looking and acting normal.

“Xavier?” Ava said. “What are you doing here? I thought you were taking a shower after your run.”

“Yeah, I was. I did, and I’m done now.” I glanced at Cali again. I just couldn’t figure out what the hell was going on. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just walking Cali out,” Ava said, as if it was obvious.

“Why?” I asked bluntly. Then I looked over at Cali. “What are you doing here?”

Color rushed into Cali’s face. “Oh, I was just…” She glanced at Ava. “We were just discussing… Um…”

“Our joint present for Colton and Maya,” Ava finished smoothly, looking straight at me. She smiled. “For the babies. It was my idea after seeing them at the mall earlier. It’ll be from the Redwoods *and* the Samaras. We thought it would be a nice gesture, since Colton’s family to both you and Greyson. It just makes sense.”

“What?” I gaped at them for a moment, then recovered a scrap of my composure. “I mean—why? Why am I not involved in that?” I asked quickly, feeling irritated.

Ava snorted. “Oh, I’m sorry—do you have a secret Pinterest board full of amazing gift ideas for the babies that you wanted to discuss? If so, please share.”

I scowled. “I guess not.”  
 “See?” she said, spreading her arms out for emphasis. “*That’s* why Cali and I didn’t bother to discuss it with you. Come on,” she said to Cali, brushing past me and leading the way to the door.

Cali hesitated for a moment, and the tension in the air between us was palpable. She glanced at me, then quickly looked away. The silence felt strained and awkward as we stood there, not really looking at each other.

“Um, well… Bye, then,” Cali finally said.

All I could do was nod stiffly in response. My jaw felt like it had been wired shut. There was so much I wanted to say, and so little I *could* say, and so I just kept standing there.

Cali’s face flushed even brighter, and she rushed past me toward Ava, who was holding the front door open for her. The two of them stepped out onto the porch together, and Ava closed the door behind her.

I knew I needed to just walk away. That would be the best—the least awkward—thing to do.

But I didn’t do that.

Instead, I stepped closer to the front door and looked carefully through one of the long narrow windows. Ava and Cali were still on the porch, talking. They both looked concerned—more concerned than anyone needed to look when discussing baby gifts.

So what were they talking about?  
 A thought occurred to me, making my stomach clench. Were they talking about me?

I was tempted to mind link, just to see what the hell was going on… But which of them would I mind link with?

That question made my head ache, and, frustrated, I turned away from the window. I ran a hand through my hair, cursing the increasingly complicated moving parts of my life. How was I supposed to keep this shit up?

I strode to the den, where I kept my whiskey. I grabbed the bottle and sloshed some into a tumbler. I tossed it back, gulping it down like water, then wiped my mouth.

This day really couldn’t get any worse.

Then, from behind me, I heard a laugh that froze my blood.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed. The day had just gotten worse. Of course this was happening now. Of *course* she’d shown up to rub my face in all the mess.

I turned around toward the laughter, just as Adéluce’s face appeared in the fireplace. It had been empty and cold a moment before, but an enchanted fire sprang up a moment before her face appeared, the curls of magical blue and green flames licking at her cheeks.

She narrowed her laughing eyes at me. “You are *not* following my rules, Xavier Evers,” she said mockingly.

As usual, the sound of her voice turned my stomach. I poured myself another shot of whiskey and knocked it back.

“Yeah? Well, your rules fucking suck,” I said curtly. It felt strange to speak to her like that. I didn’t know if it was the whiskey giving me courage or just the hard knot of my own anger, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. “I’m sick of your shitty games.”

The laughter disappeared, and Adéluce’s eyes flashed. “You should watch yourself, Xavier. This is not the way to speak to someone who should be feared as I should be feared. You walk a dangerous line. Do you really want the women you love to suffer for your disrespect? Your disobedience?”

I clutched the heavy crystal tumbler tightly in my hand. “Why don’t you just kill me already and get it over with? You never give me a straight answer.”

“Maybe one day,” she said. “But right now, I’m nowhere near done watching you suffer.”

I nodded. This was just part of her game. “So I’m just going to keep pushing away the people I love? For how long? Until I’m totally alone, right? And then what? What’s your plan? I just disappear to live in despair in the mountains as a Rogue hermit? Because if that’s the long-term plan, let me save you the trouble—I’ll just leave right now.”

Absolutely ready to put my money where my mouth was, I started to shift.

“Enough!” Adéluce screeched. “Enough of this! I will not tolerate this disrespect!”

“Fuck this!” I bellowed.

Anger rose inside me, burning in my head and behind my eyes and down my arms. Furious, now, I flung the tumbler I was holding into the fireplace. It passed through Adéluce’s image and shattered against the stone.

“Just kill me already!” I shouted.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “You go too far, Xavier Evers. I will not kill you. No.” She shook her head slowly, the licking flames moving with her, intertwining with her hair. “No, I’ll do something much, much worse than that.”

It felt like a giant had wrapped its hand around my heart and started squeezing. Shit. This wasn’t good. Had I gone too far? I was fucking furious, and I’d let that anger get the best of me, and now the vampire-witch was going to do her worst. What was *that*, though? Was she going to kill Cali? Ava?

“Clearly, Xavier Evers, you have forgotten the point of our whole relationship. It is about one thing, and one thing only—your suffering.”  
 An instant later, pain that felt like hellfire surged through my veins. It ripped through me like thousands of tiny daggers, and I screamed in agony, collapsing to the floor.

**Episode 4639**

“So let me get this straight,” Ava said when we were alone again. “You think that whoever is doing this to Xavier is the dead vampire-witch Adéluce?”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “Can you tell me everything you saw in your attack again?”

She sighed but started going over it again. I frowned, trying to make sense of the story Ava was telling me about the vampire who’d attacked her. This was the third time I’d asked for a description, hoping that Ava would remember something useful, but she’d had the same response every time.  
 “Like I’ve told you for the millionth time, I didn’t get a good look at her,” Ava said again, shaking her head. “It’s like I told you—she came up from behind me. All I know for sure is that she was tall—kind of—and wearing a jacket.”

“A jacket?” I repeated.

“Yeah, a jacket. It might’ve had something gold on it?”  
 “Gold?”

“The buttons, maybe?” Ava said vaguely.

My frown deepened. Why did that description sound so familiar? I wracked my brain, then finally remembered that Aysel had mentioned gold buttons once, back when Adéluce had been tormenting us. And when Xavier had seen that Vanguard security footage all those weeks ago, he’d recognized the buttons on the figure, too.

That gave me an idea. “Do you think you’d be able to recognize the vampire if you saw her again?”

Ava considered this. “I don’t know for sure. I didn’t see her straight on. And I think she might’ve messed with my memory of her, somehow.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “Can vampires do that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know about vampires, but witches sure can. Some of them have specific abilities, too,” she said, her tone condescending. “And it’s just the person’s appearance I can’t remember clearly. It seems like it was blurred deliberately, is all I’m saying.”

I mulled this over for a moment. I couldn’t get the thought of the gold buttons out of my head. It was strange that Ava remembered that particular detail.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and started to scan through my photos. I still had the Vanguard security footage somewhere. If I could find it, maybe I could show it to Ava. The footage featured Adéluce, but…

My heart was beating fast. I was nervous. The buttons seemed like too specific a detail to be coincidental, and I was getting this horrible sense of déjà vu.

It was still possible that it *wasn’t* Adéluce. Maybe it was a copycat or something. She’d had some followers, including the vampire who’d turned her. He’d been pretty loyal to her, right up until the end. Maybe this was another follower, out to get revenge for Adéluce’s death?

I shivered. If nothing else, I wanted to rule out the possibility of it being Adéluce herself, so I kept scrolling through my photos and videos, but I couldn’t find the footage. I even tried searching, but nothing came up.

“What are you doing?” Ava asked sharply.

I gave an irritated sigh, annoyed with myself. “I have a video—”

“A video?” Ava interrupted. “No thanks.”

“No, it’s relevant, I promise,” I said, still searching. Then I shook my head and looked up at her. “I’m going to track it down and send it to you, okay? When you get it, you have to watch it. See if the person in the footage is the person who attacked you.”

She gave me a wary look but nodded. “Okay. Fine. But what is this video? Who’s in it?”

“It’s…” I swallowed hard. “It’s Adéluce.”

Ava’s eyes hardened. “*Seriously?*”

I nodded.

She crossed her arms. “Why the hell didn’t you start with any of that?”

I shrugged, then nodded again. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to that. “It’s just a theory. A starting point, really.”

“Okay…” Ava said slowly, clearly under the impression that I was being ridiculous.

And honestly, I hoped she was right. I didn’t want to be correct about this. Because if this thing with the gold buttons panned out, and Ava did recognize the person in the security footage as the person who’d attacked her, then that was very bad news. If it *was* Adéluce who’d attacked Ava, who was haunting Xavier, then this whole thing was way more serious than I wanted it to be.

“Just keep an eye on your phone,” I said, preparing to leave. “I’m going to send you the video. Just watch it, and then call me. Okay?”

Ava nodded, though she still looked unconvinced. “Okay. Fine.”

I walked down the porch steps and got into my car. When I started it, I turned off the radio, too preoccupied to listen to anything.

The whole drive back to the pack house, I thought hard about what I’d just learned. The potential implications of this turning out to be Adéluce swam through my head as I navigated the narrow two-lane roads. I thought about the lake, and how reluctant Xavier had been to leave without making absolutely sure that Adéluce was dead. He’d never gotten that proof, and so he’d refused to believe she was really gone. None of the rest of us had really believed him—or none of us had really *wanted* to believe him. It had just seemed like she couldn’t possibly have survived.

Right?

My heart throbbed painfully. What if she really wasn’t dead? What if she was still alive and kicking and tormenting Xavier? If he’d been right all along—if she *hadn’t* died at that lake—then he’d tried to warn us. And now he was living under some kind of god-awful curse because none of us had been willing to listen.

I was barely paying attention as I drove and must have gotten home on muscle memory alone, because I was surprised when I turned into the long curving driveway. I stopped in front of the house and got out, then I walked up the porch steps, still thinking.

The possibilities I was considering were making me feel slightly sick. I had to find Greyson. I had to tell him everything.

Sage and Zainab were in the living room, and they called out to me when I walked in, but I just waved and headed for the stairs.

When I got to my room, I opened my door to find Greyson inside, sitting on my bed, apparently waiting for me. Thank god.

“Hey,” he said softly, getting to his feet. “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” I said heavily.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You look pale. How did the talk with Ava go?”

I kicked off my shoes and stepped toward him. I didn’t answer him right away, just wrapped my arms around him. What I needed at the moment was the knowledge that he was near me, and the comfort of his arms around me.

He must’ve sensed some part of that, because he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. We stayed like that for a long moment, until he spoke again.

“Did Ava say anything interesting?” he asked. “Anything new?”

I stepped back with a sigh and sat on the corner of my bed. “Maybe.”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked, frowning.

“Well, Ava’s a bit hazy on the details of her attack—specifically the parts where she would’ve seen the vampire. But I asked her about it a few times, and she finally remembered something.”

“What?” Greyson asked.

“She said the vampire who attacked her was wearing a jacket with gold buttons.”

“Okay…” Greyson said, clearly not following.

“And that description reminded me of when we first found out about Adéluce.”

“Adéluce?” Greyson repeated, looking shocked at the mention of her name.

“Yeah, she had those buttons on her jacket, and… Remember? Xavier recognized her in that video from the palace, when she stole Seluna’s ashes? Anyway,” I said, shaking my head, “I’m going to find that video and sent it to Ava, so she can see if she recognizes Adéluce as her attacker.”

“But—Adéluce is *dead,* love,” Greyson said gently.

“I know that’s what we all believe, Greyson,” I said with a shiver. “But maybe… I don’t know. I’m just so scared of what might happen next.”

Greyson came to sit beside me. He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “Whatever is happening to Xavier, we’re going to do something about it. We’re going to save him, I promise.”

Hot tears stung my eyes as I looked up at him. “Thank you,” I whispered. “I know this isn’t easy for you. This whole situation is complicated for us all round. It feels so strange to be working so hard to save Xavier when he’s treated us both so badly. I know you feel like he left you, too.”

Greyson looked a little startled by this, but he nodded. “Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “I guess it does feel like that. His leaving hurt me, too. I was starting to think that he and I were actually getting somewhere, as brothers. I had to be alone for so long when I was a Rogue. I always thought it would be nice to have a real sibling connection—like the one Xavier and Colton have. I always sort of dreamed about it. Being the older brother… I wanted that.”

“I know,” I said softly, squeezing his hand.  
 He met my gaze, a determined look in his eyes. “And that’s why I need to fight for him with you, now. And I’m not going to stop until my brother is safe again.”

**Episode 4640**

I stood in the kitchen and stared at the kettle. My mom always told me that a watched pot never boiled, but, in fairness, I wasn’t really watching it. My eyes were on the blue flame underneath the kettle, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

I’d come to the kitchen to make a cup of tea in the hope that it would help me relax. I needed something to help me wind down after the day I’d had. It had been a lot, and it had given me a lot of new things to worry about. But there didn’t seem to be anything I could do about most of them at the moment, so I just wanted to get my tea, then crawl into bed and unwind.

The kettle finally sang, and I poured the water into my mug, then carried it back upstairs to my room. I set it on my dresser to steep and changed into my pajamas, then grabbed the mug again and climbed into bed.

The tea was still too hot to drink, so I put it down on my nightstand and pulled out my phone, diving back into my hunt for the video I needed to send to Ava. I *knew* I still had the footage of Adéluce that Aysel had sent me. There was no way I would’ve deleted it and forgotten that I’d done it, but I just couldn’t seem to—

“There!” I shouted victoriously when I finally spotted the right thumbnail in my library. “Ha! There you are.”

I sent the video to Ava, along with a short message—*Watch this and get back to me ASAP!!*—and then I stared down at my phone screen, gnawing on my fingernails as I waited for Ava to reply.

But there was nothing.

Dammit. I couldn’t wait any longer, so I tried calling her to inform her that I’d sent the video and to remind her that she needed to watch it. *ASAP.*

But her phone only rang once before I heard her voicemail message, which was just an automated voice repeating her number.

“Great,” I muttered with a sigh.

But I needed to remember that I couldn’t rush this. At least I *shouldn’t* rush it. We needed to be extremely thorough, here. We needed to make sure we were right about all of this. I’d learned a long time ago—mostly the hard way—that the best weapon was just to be hyper-prepared. This was true of most situations, not just supernatural crises—and with that in mind, I grabbed my psychology textbook from my nightstand and started in on the chapter I was supposed to be reading for class.

I’d read the same paragraph four times when I looked up with an irritated huff. I wanted to be able to focus, but I just couldn’t stop worrying about Adéluce.

Finally, I slammed my book shut with a loud snap. Maybe it was time to give up on reading and just go to sleep. I reasoned that the faster I fell asleep, the faster I could wake up rejuvenated and ready to tackle this mystery.

This sounded so reasonable that I nodded firmly in satisfaction. I slid my book back onto my nightstand—next to my undrunk mug of tea—and turned off the light.

And then I lay back and stared up at my dark ceiling. For a long, long time.

I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

My body was tired, but I just knew there was no way I was going to be able to fall asleep. All the anxiety of the day was still spinning through my head. I hated it and wished I could turn it off, but it wasn’t going anywhere.

I sat up and grabbed my tea, but of course, it was stone cold. Grumbling, I threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. I would just have to make some more.

But when I opened my door and stepped out into the hallway, I stopped and looked around in shock. Because it wasn’t actually the hallway that I’d just stepped into. It wasn’t even the pack house. I was in a forest, and it was completely deserted.

“Greyson!?” I called, looking around nervously. “Are you there?”

The only response was the echo of my own voice.

“Lola? Can you hear me? Jay? Big Mac?”

Still no answer.

I took a single step forward, into the trees, then another. I started walking, looking around carefully. I had no idea where I was, or how I’d gotten here.

Then I spotted a figure in the gloom. I was almost certain it was a woman, and I started after her. I didn’t know who she was, but she was the only person I’d seen here so far, so I followed her despite my fear.

“Hello?” I called. “Excuse me! Who are you?”

But the woman kept walking, even though she must have heard me. She was weaving quickly through the trees, always *just* a little too far away for me to see her face.

I needed to go faster if I wanted to catch up with her, so I sped up. But then the figure sped up, too. *Crap, okay then.* I started running, but then I tripped over a root and fell, scraping my hands against the rough ground. It hurt, and I let out a hiss of pain.

*Shit, I’m going to lose her!*

I clambered to my feet and was looking around for the figure when someone grabbed me from behind, wrapping a strong arm around my neck.

I gasped and struggled to break free, but my attacker’s grip was strong—they were almost strangling me.

“*What are you doing here?*” someone hissed into my ear.

“I’m—sorry!” I choked out. I wanted to tell the owner of the voice that I hadn’t intended to come here, that I’d gotten lost somehow, but I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t even breathe.

The arm around my neck loosened, and someone grabbed my shoulders. I was spun roughly around and found myself looking into a horribly familiar pair of eyes.

*Seluna*. Oh god. What the hell was she doing here? What was *I* doing here?

She looked different. Her face was cracked and broken, like a crumbling statue. It might’ve been sort of sad—and honestly it kind of was—if she hadn’t tried to take over my body and the human world.

“Is—is this real?” I stammered, my whole body tensing with fear.

Seluna grinned at me, which made her face crack even further. Some of it crumbled away entirely, falling to the ground at my feet. “Oh! It’s you again!”

Huh? Could she not see me before?

Her grip on my shoulders was strong, but I didn’t even try to pull away.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked, my heart hammering in my chest.

Seluna hesitated, and after a moment, her manic grin shifted into a terrified frown. She let go of me and stumbled backward. As if she was only just becoming aware of it, she looked down at her body—her crumbling statue body—and then back up at me.

“H-help me!” she choked out. “S-save me! Help!”

Baffled, I took a step toward her, the concern I felt in response to her desperation completely instinctive. “How do you want me to help you? I don’t know what to do!”

Seluna’s eyes were wide with fear. “Do what needs to be done!”

“What?” I demanded. Something about that triggered a sense of déjà vu. She’d told me this before—we’d *talked* about this before—but when? I couldn’t remember. “What has to be done?”

“*You need to wake the fuck up!*” Seluna snarled, her eyes flashing.

“I’m trying to!” I shouted back.

“*Do what needs to be done!*”

“What does?!” My heart filled with dread. That didn’t sound good.

But Seluna didn’t answer my question. She was shaking her head, looking frantic. “Magic clings to you!”

“To me?” I asked, my own voice shaking. “What magic? Whose magic?!”

“It’s still out there!” Seluna hissed, looking up at me in horror.

“What?” I repeated in disbelief.

“It’s still—” She stopped talking and let out a wail, so loud and so filled with terror and pain that I had to cover my ears.

An instant later, I sat up in bed, jerked out of the terrible nightmare. Slick with sweat and gasping for air, I pulled in a deep, shaking breath, trying to calm myself down. It was just a dream. Just a dream. Just a fucking nightmare. I winced in pain—I had to just calm myself down. It wasn’t real.

But then I realized that the pain I was still feeling *was* real. It was the same I’d experienced in the dream—only now, it was localized to my shoulder.

Suddenly filled with nauseating dread, I stumbled out of bed and ran for the mirror that hung over my dresser. Terror nearly overwhelmed me when I saw it—the Seluna mark, back on my shoulder.

**Episode 4641**

My lungs burned as I forced air in and out, but I was too freaked out to slow my breathing. All I could think about was the searing pain on my shoulder and the mark that accompanied it.

I rushed to the bathroom to look at it under the bright light, nearly headbutting the doorframe in my desperation. I stared at my shoulder in the mirror and felt the mark throbbing, like it had its own heartbeat.

How the hell was it back? I should’ve been free of it for good, and yet there it was, clear as day on my shoulder.

*Then does that mean…*

If the mark was back, then had I been speaking to the *actual Seluna* in my dream? The idea made my head spin.

What did it mean that I had spoken to Seluna? Was nature going to become unbalanced again? Were things going to get worse from here? What had triggered the mark’s reappearance?

There were so many questions swirling around my head, which only seemed to make me feel worse. My breathing got faster and faster, as if the air in the bathroom was thinning. No matter how many breaths I took, I couldn’t seem to get enough oxygen.

*What’s happening? What’s happening? Why is the mark there? Why does it hurt like it’s really there?*

Just as my panic reached its zenith, the bathroom door opened, and Greyson burst in. He took one look at my face and instantly shot to the verge of panic himself. He stepped forward and grabbed my upper arms.

“Cali, what’s wrong?” he demanded.

The warmth of his fingers seeped into my skin and helped me feel a little steadier. Unfortunately, it didn’t last. The burning sensation on my shoulder intensified, and I doubled over in pain until it crested and began to subside.

Greyson watched me, his eyes desperate as he waited for me to tell him what was happening. I kept opening my mouth to tell him, but nothing came out. I couldn’t speak. All I could do was silently shake my head and try to hold myself together.

“Cali, you’re freaking me out,” Greyson said.

His voice faded into the background as I thought back to the first time nature had become unbalanced, thanks to Seluna’s ashes being stuck in our world. I remembered exactly how debilitating it had been.

But what if it had never been an imbalance in the first place? What if my sudden illness had actually been a result of Seluna’s ashes still being in our world? If that was the case, then what else had we unwittingly turned a blind eye to?

My brain was going a mile a minute. I felt like I was in my own conspiracy.

I wanted to say all of that and more to Greyson, but I was breathing even faster than before. The very real possibility of Seluna’s return was just too much for me to handle.

“Okay, okay,” Greyson said, jumping into action. “Try to take deep breaths.”

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight as I did my best to take deeper breaths. We stood chest to chest, and Greyson slowed his breathing until I was able to match his pace. Though my head continued to spin, my breathing soon began to even out.

“Just like that,” Greyson said soothingly. “In and out. In and out.”

We breathed together until my hyperventilation finally stopped. My lungs were burning, and it felt like I’d run a marathon through a forest fire. My whole body was weak, and I was worried that it would only get weaker. Who knew how the mark was going to affect me?

Greyson pulled back and cupped my cheek, gently rubbing my cheekbone with his thumb. “What happened?”

His soft voice was my undoing. Instead of speaking, I let out a heart-wrenching sob and turned around to show him the mark, bracing my hands on the bathroom counter. I watched his reaction in the mirror. He cursed the moment he saw it—he knew as well as I did what it was and what it meant.

He ran his hand over my shoulder, touching the mark like he wanted to make sure it was real. His fingertips felt like molten lava against my sensitized skin. I hissed, and he immediately pulled his hand back. Greyson stared at the mark like he couldn’t believe it was really there.

“It’s already starting to fade,” he said.

This information did nothing to ease my panic.

“But you saw it, right?” I demanded, turning back around to face him head-on. “It was real? It was really there? I’m not hallucinating?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, you aren’t hallucinating. I saw it for myself—I even felt the heat coming off it.”

His words were the final nail in the coffin. It had been one thing to see the mark in a picture, or to think that I felt it on my shoulder—to hear one of the most rational people I knew confirm its presence was something else entirely.

“Things are worse than we thought,” I said. “Much worse.”

Greyson didn’t argue with me. He knew as well as I did that the mark’s presence meant that Seluna was still around in some form or another, and far too strong for our peace of mind. I wasn’t sure how or if we’d be able to stop her, this time.

“You’re going to be okay, Cali,” Greyson said fiercely. “I’m going to protect you, no matter what.”

I shook my head. Greyson didn’t get it. He wasn’t seeing the full picture.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” I said. “I mean things are so much worse than we thought for *Xavier*! Can’t you see that?”

Greyson looked confused. Panic, frustration, and a healthy dose of fear were making me feel like I was gripping a live wire. It took everything I had to not start hyperventilating again.

I grabbed Greyson’s hand and started walking toward the door. “Let’s go into my room, and I’ll explain everything.”

“All right,” Greyson said.

We left the bathroom and walked through my bedroom toward the bed. I sifted through my spinning thoughts, trying to create a narrative that would account for everything that was going on. Seluna had been leaving subtle clues for a long time, and now, I was finally seeing them.

Greyson and I settled into bed, and then I turned to him. He took my hand again as I started to explain.

“I had a dream about Seluna,” I began.

Greyson listened intently as I told him everything I could remember from the strange dream, and my suspicion that Seluna had actually been talking to me. She hadn’t been rehashing information that I already knew, which was all she did in my typical nightmares.

“She was talking about something still being out there, me needing to do something, and magic clinging to me,” I said. “But I think I’ve figured it out.”

“You think Seluna was talking about Adéluce?” Greyson asked sharply.

“Yes—and not just because of my dream, but because of what Ava told me, too,” I said. “Think about it, Greyson—who else would have the motivation to make Xavier act like a completely different person? Who else would be so dedicated to ruining his life? Adéluce *hates* Xavier. Given half a chance, she’d tear his life to shreds.”

“Right, but that’s not reason enough to—”

“Don’t forget, Xavier never thought she was dead,” I said. “It all adds up, Greyson.”

He frowned at that, but it was too late to bite my tongue. I could see that he was feeling the same guilt that I’d experienced when I’d first pieced this whole thing together. We’d all been in denial about the threat Adéluce posed, and now Xavier was paying the price. But it wasn’t Greyson’s fault any more than it was mine.

“We looked for the body,” he said, his voice hardly louder than a whisper. “We looked everywhere, Cali. We thought we’d found it.”

“We can’t know that those bones were genuine,” I said. “Xavier never thought that they were.”

Greyson nodded, and I took a deep, shaky breath, bracing myself for what I wanted to say next.

“I think Adéluce might be way more powerful than we thought,” I said. “We underestimated her, and I think Xavier is paying the price.”

Greyson’s gaze drifted away from mine. I could tell that he was taking a moment to absorb my words, but I had no idea what he would make of them. The longer he took to reply, the more I worried that he was going to poke a bunch of holes in what I’d just said. All he needed was to point out a single flaw, and my theory would fall apart.

And why *wouldn’t* he find a reason to doubt me? Even *I* thought I sounded ridiculous. I kind of felt like I’d gone insane, jumping to such an absurd conclusion. We had so much evidence that pointed to the same conclusion: Adéluce was dead.

And yet here I was, insisting not only that she was still alive, but that she was hell-bent on destroying Xavier’s life. The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how much I resembled a conspiracy theorist, determined to hold on to the ghosts of her past.

Finally, Greyson looked at me again. And instead of pity or doubt, what I saw in his eyes was a kind of ruthless determination.

“If this is Adéluce’s work,” he said, “then I’ll hunt her down and kill her myself.”

Greyson got up and turned to the door, like he was going to track the vampire-witch down immediately. I grabbed his hand.

“You know it’s not going to be as easy as that!” I said. “It took so many of us to take her down at Crater Lake, and that didn’t even stick like we thought it had.”

Greyson sighed. “That’s true. But we need to do something. We need a plan.”

“One question,” I said. “How do you hunt down and kill a person who’s supposed to be dead?”

**Episode 4642**

**Artemis**

My tongue felt heavy as I stared at Marius, desperately trying to come up with a lie that would fool one of the best liars I’d ever met. It wasn’t like I could tell him I’d never been to the human world—he was holding the proof of my time there in his hands. He had my cell phone. He’d seen the picture of Cali, Tom, Orla, and me.

*Do I tell him it was for a job, maybe? Some sort of undercover thing?*

Marius rolled his eyes. “You’re so transparent, Ari. I can see the wheels turning in your head. You’re trying to figure out what lie to tell me, but it’s too late for that. I already know the truth, don’t I? So, where in the human world did you go, exactly? Was that Newer York I keep hearing about?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just *New* York.”

This was as good as confessing that I’d been in the human world, I realized, but Marius was right—I’d lost my ability to lie about my time in the human world the moment my phone had fallen out of my bag.

“Oh?” His brows rose. “And what is New York like? I hear it makes our capital cities look like quaint villages, and that the humans there have such sophisticated magic unlike some of the things here. What did you do there?”

*He thinks I was in New York. How has he even heard of it?*

*No, who cares, Artemis, use it.*

Maybe it was for the best to let him keep thinking that. There was no way to hide the fact that I’d been living in the human world, but maybe, if I lied well enough about what I’d done there, Marius would never find out about my family, or Rishika, or the Redwood pack. Werewolves weren’t exactly welcome in the Fae world, and if Marius discovered that I was so close to so many of them, he’d probably put his guard up.

“New York is… nice,” I said slowly.

Marius eyed me dubiously, and I fought the urge to grimace.

*You’ll have to do better than that*,I told myself.

“The buildings in New York are so tall that they block out the sun and practically touch the sky,” I said. “There’s a huge park, right in the middle of the city—a place where wild animals live alongside people.”

I wasn’t actually sure if that was true or not. I was pretty sure I’d seen something like what I’d just described in a movie that the pack had watched once around the holidays—something with an elf?—but that didn’t mean it existed in real life. It wasn’t like Marius would know the difference.

“There are lots of people in New York. People from all walks of life, from all over the human world. There’s… nowhere quite like it,” I finished.

Apparently, I needed to watch more movies. Torin had mentioned watching something called *Sex at the City*. He’d told me it was about New York. It would’ve been good research for this trip.

Marius hummed skeptically. “Perhaps I should go to the human world and see it all for myself.”

“Oh, no!” As soon as the words slipped out of my mouth, I knew I’d made a mistake. I forced a casual smirk and shrugged. “It’s just… It’s so dull there, you know? Compared to the Fae world, humans are like children. Their world is boring. Why do you think I’m back here?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Why, indeed.”

*Shit. He doesn’t believe me.*

Still, I kept trying to act casual. “So, are we going to hunt this bounty down or not? Two days, Marius. Time waits for no one.”

Thankfully, Marius let the subject drop and kept walking, leading me through a grove of shining flowers. I ran my fingers over their soft petals. While the human world was anything but boring, I had missed the Fae world. Well, parts of it—the magic of it, the beauty of it. Nothing in the human world could compare to the wild majesty of the Fae world, a place so suffused with magic that—

“Ouch! Shit!” I jerked my hand back and sucked on my finger. One of those beautiful, majestic flowers had just bitten me. “Asshole,” I muttered at the flower.

It swayed apathetically in the breeze.

“Ah,” Marius said. “There it is!”

A looked up from the bitchy flowers to see a tavern at the other end of the grove. I really, really hoped our mark was in there, because Marius was already driving me crazy.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Drinks!”

My jaw dropped. “*What?*”

But Marius was already loping toward the entrance like a dog chasing after a bone. I had to race after him to catch up.

“Marius, wait—”

He flung open the tavern’s heavy wooden door.

“Greetings, all!” he bellowed to the room, like a king addressing his court.

A few Fae nodded at him, but the patrons of the tavern mostly just ignored him and focused on their drinks.

“You know these people?” I asked.

Marius shook his head. “Nope. First time I’ve ever seen them.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh. Right.”

I’d forgotten Marius’s charismatic nature, even though it was the quality that had first drawn me to him. Friendliness, or the appearance of it, had always been a rare thing in my life—at least until I’d met Cali—and while I’d been naturally suspicious of Marius when we first met, I’d also been intrigued by him. Before Marius, I’d never met anyone who didn’t look at a room full of strangers and see a room full of potential enemies.

Of course, that wasn’t to say Marius was a particularly good man, or that he didn’t *have* enemies. He simply had the ability to charm even the most closed-off Fae—I was living proof of that.

We approached the bar, and Marius held up two fingers. A brownie was manning the bar, and he silently filled two flagons. Marius paid for the drinks, then held one of them out to me.

“No, thanks.” I shook my head and tried to push the drink away, but he pressed it more firmly into my hand.

“Come on!” he said. “We’ve a long journey ahead of us—you’ll need sustenance.”

I shook my head again. “No, thanks. I really don’t want it.”

I was only here because Marius had promised to help me find my father. Drinking was *not* on my to-do list.

“It’s customary to begin a job with a drink,” Marius said. “It doesn’t hurt to relax every once in a while, Ari. Even on a hunt. Don’t turn it down—it’s bad luck. Don’t you want fortune to smile upon you as you search for your missing person?” He raised his brows pointedly.

I sighed. He wasn’t going to give up until I drank. “Fine,” I gritted out.

I wrapped my fingers around the flagon, and Marius knocked his drink against mine.

“To a fortuitous partnership,” he said.

“May it be a short one,” I muttered, taking a drink.

The ale was actually good, though it tasted different than I remembered. It wasn’t until it hit my tongue that I realized just how thirsty I was. I took another sip as I scanned the room.

I leaned in. “What does he look like? Our mark?”

Marius’s face blurred, and I squinted my eyes and blinked to clear my vision.

*That’s weird…*

Marius’s face came back into focus, but it looked different. Smoother. Younger. And instead of a shabby tavern, we were standing in a familiar castle banqueting hall. Marius and I had attended a ball here a few years ago, during a hunt, and I slipped right into the memory as if no time had passed.

Marius grinned at me. “Come on, let’s dance! We have to blend in, right? Don’t want to stand out to any of the locals.”

I laughed and let him pull me toward the dance floor. How was he thinking of dancing right now? Though one thing was certain: this had nothing to do with keeping a low profile.

“You just want to dance,” I said.

He smiled. “So? Will you refuse me?”

I was feeling bold and proud for having read him so easily, so I wound my arms around his neck and leaned in. “No. Not yet.”

He pressed a kiss to the tip of my nose, sending a pleasant shiver down my spine. Then we started dancing, and I let Marius spin me until I was breathless, and then we danced some more.

When we finally came to a stop, I laughed, holding on to Marius tightly, since he was the only thing holding me upright. I’d forgotten why we were here, why I’d been acting so uptight earlier. We were drinking and dancing and having the time of our lives. What was there to be so uptight about?

“I might’ve drunk too much,” I whispered. But how? We’d only just started.

“Me too,” he said.

And then his lips crashed down on mine.

**Episode 4643**

**Ava**

I moved around in bed, unable to find a comfortable position. My body felt heavy, like I was about to fall asleep at any moment, but it just wasn’t coming. I sighed, rolling over to check my phone.

*Oh god.* I grimaced, squinting at the screen. Cali had sent me a message*.* Did I even want to read it?

I opened the message to find the video file she’d promised to send me. What would I set in motion if I watched this? I knew that Adéluce had been after Xavier in New Orleans… Was she really the one who’d attacked me? Who was manipulating Xavier?

And if it *was* her, would we be able to kill her? Would I be able to get Xavier out of this? To protect him? To save him?

All I knew was that I didn’t want to lose him.

I sighed, and was just about to press play when Xavier walked into the bedroom. He looked worn out. Beaten.  I immediately slid my phone away.

“Where were you?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer, just took his shirt off and slid into bed. Shuffling closer, he wrapped his arms around me. My heart started beating fast—he felt so good. He always did. But I couldn’t shake the little voice in my head that was wondering if any of this was real.

As I melted into Xavier’s side, he let out a moan and pulled me even closer, his hands starting to roam over my body.

*He’s exhausted and looking for comfort.*

I pressed a kiss to his bare chest as his hands slid up and down my back, my sides. God, I loved this. For so long, moments like this just hadn’t seemed possible. I’d been so sure that I’d never kiss him again, or share these quiet, simple moments of cozy affection with him. I’d been so sure that I’d never hear him say that he loved me.

But apparently, the universe didn’t hate me after all, and now, Xavier was finally mine. Just like he was meant to be. He might’ve kissed Cali yesterday, but he was in my bed now. He’d made it clear over the last few months who he really wanted, who he really loved, who he’d really chosen. And that was all that mattered.

*This is real*, I told myself firmly.

Xavier was becoming more urgent, his moves less sluggish and more deliberate as his hands mapped the shapes of my curves. I kissed his chest again and allowed my hands to go on their own expedition, slipping down his chest, his abs, the sexy V of his lower abdominals, until they reached their destination.

Their arrival earned me a few sleepy blinks as Xavier’s blue eyes darkened with lust. His cock hardened in my hands in seconds. He was ready. Wanting.

And so was I.

I pushed him onto his back and straddled him.

“How badly do you want me?” I asked.

He slipped a hand between us, feeling how completely soaked I was through my panties. “As badly as you want me, apparently.”

I gasped as he eased my panties aside and pushed a finger into my slickness. A whimper escaped me when he added another—but it wasn’t enough. I still felt empty, and there was only one thing that could satisfy me.

He grinned lazily as he pumped his fingers. I moaned, trying to work myself faster on his hand. Noticing my urgency, Xavier took his hand away, tearing off my panties as I hurriedly forced his sweatpants down.

“Eager, huh?” he asked. “You want this cock inside you?”

“Yes,” I said, positioning myself above him. I could feel him straining against my hand. “And I think you’re pretty eager, too.”

And then I sank onto his hard length. Xavier’s groan of pleasure mixed with my own moan as his hands landed on my hips. His grip tightened as we began to move together, but I stopped him. He was trying to take the lead—and that wasn’t what I wanted.

I grabbed his hands and slid them up my body to cup my breasts, and then, with a roll of my hips, I proceeded to take his breath away. I rode him with abandon, with no thought of a warm-up, or slow-simmering pleasure. All I wanted was the white-hot pleasure of his cock hitting me just right, of his groin working against my clit, of his hands on my breasts, and of me, taking, taking, taking.

Xavier was *mine*, all mine, and this hurried late-night coupling was a claiming just as much as it was a race for pleasure—just as much as it was a way to clear his mind of whatever had been preying on it when he’d come to bed, and to put myself in its place.

We were together. We were mates. Alpha and Luna. Partners in everything that mattered. And while he worked to take care of the pack, I took care of him. I’d take care of him in every way I knew how, because *Xavier. Was. Mine*.

The thought hit me in all the right places. Pleasure was boiling and building inside me. We’d barely begun, and already, I could feel the beginning of an orgasm. I rolled my hips faster, bounced harder on his cock, my fingernails digging into his chest as ecstasy roared through my veins.

Xavier came first, my name a curse and a prayer on his lips, and those two broken, lust-drunk syllables sent me soaring. I clamped down on him as waves of pleasure slammed into me, and his hands dropped to my hips again as we each rode out our release, wringing every last drop of pleasure out of our spent bodies.

In the aftermath, we lay together in a tangle of limbs as we slowly came back down to earth. He was still inside me, and I was draped across his body, my head on his chest. I savored the racing beat of his heart against my ear. I’d done that. I’d affected him like that.

I lifted my head and met his eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself,” he rumbled.

I tilted my head up to kiss him, then rolled off him and headed for the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” he asked. “That was a shitty excuse for an afterglow.”

I laughed. “Since when do you care about the afterglow?”

“Since my mate just rode me six ways to Sunday and isn’t even sticking around to snuggle me to sleep.”

I fought back more laughter—he was practically pouting, now.

*Who would’ve thought the big bad Samara Alpha had such a soft side?* Even with me, this version of him didn’t come out very often. I padded back to the bed to give him a soft, lingering kiss.

He reached out to pull me back into bed, and I slipped out of reach with a grin. “Sorry, X. I’m too pumped up. I’m going to go take a shower, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But be quick, or there will be consequences.”

Moments later, he was snoring lightly.

*Guess I really tired him out.* The thought made my inner Luna howl with pride. Though, to be fair, coming to bed so late probably had something to do with his exhaustion, too.

Just as I was about to walk into the bathroom, my phone buzzed. Cali again.

*Ugh. There goes my good mood.*

I was so, *so* tempted to ignore her. There were no words to adequately describe just how sick I was of Caliana Hart. I didn’t want to talk to her, think about her, scheme with her—hell, more than once, I’d daydreamed about paying a witch to make me forget her completely.

Of course, as long as Xavier was tied to her through the *due destini*, she was going to be in my life. Like a twisted in-law. Or a virus.

But I needed to watch that video. I had to remember what this was really about—Xavier being under a spell. One that we barely knew anything about.

Grabbing my phone, I headed to the bathroom and closed the door behind me, locking it for good measure. I started the shower, then took a seat on the closed toilet seat lid, took a deep breath, and played the video.

It looked like security footage from the Vanguard palace. I put the phone closer to my face, trying to see the blurry figure who’d appeared on the screen. They were wearing what looked like a dark jacket with something gold glinting on it. The buttons? I played the video again, pausing it when the person was facing the camera. I zoomed in and squinted, trying to make out the blurry figure’s face.

*This footage sucks*, I texted Cali. *Is this the best thing you have?*

I would’ve thought the Vanguards had better equipment.

To my dismay, Cali texted back immediately. *It’s not THAT blurry. Watch it again!*

*I’ve already watched it a few times*, I said.

*Well?! Blurry or not, is it the vampire who attacked you?*

**Episode 4644**

**Xavier**

I woke up to the sunlight trying to burn through my goddamn eyelids. My body felt heavy and tired, and my mind was still half-asleep as I reached for Ava. My palm landed on a patch of cool, unoccupied mattress.

*Did she already get up?*

I blearily sifted through my memories of last night and landed on images of her hands on my cock and mischief burning in her eyes. Fuck, she’d taken my breath away. Taking the lead was usually more my thing, but if *that* was what happened whenever Ava was in control, I’d definitely be able to get used to it. It had been exactly what I’d needed.

I allowed my eyes to drift shut again as my mind lingered on my memories of last night—her moans, sweet as music in my ears, her breasts in my hands, the hunger in her eyes, the way she fell apart on top of me, not holding herself back…

My cock twitched, ready for another round. It really was a shame that she’d gotten up already, or I would’ve kept her in bed for a while longer. As it was, I’d have to start my morning with blue balls. Great. Just what I wanted. For a moment, I seriously considered going back to sleep so my dreams could take me where my dick couldn’t go, but it was too damn bright in here. What time was it, anyway?

Since Ava was off doing god only knew what, and the obnoxious sunlight was making it impossible to go back to sleep, I dragged myself out of bed. I’d been exhausted last night, but Ava had fueled me up with adrenaline and lust. Now, I didn’t have either of those things to distract me, and I *hurt*. So much for being an invincible fucking werewolf.

Then again, considering the hell Adéluce had put me through last night, maybe I was getting off easy. At least she hadn’t caused any permanent damage. Yet.

The agonizing pain she’d forced through my body last night had been a special kind of torture. And for a moment, right in the middle of things, I could’ve sworn I saw a flash of a strange dark world surrounding me. It had felt a little like a vision—maybe of my future? But the image hadn’t stuck around long enough for me to identify the setting. And besides, the pain had been so excruciating, I hadn’t even been able to focus my eyes enough to see the place clearly. I was honestly surprised that I could actually remember what I’d seen. Pain so bad it felt like your every nerve ending was being dipped in acid couldn’t possibly be great for the old long-term memory.

I was certainly feeling the aftermath of that torture as I limped to the bathroom. The pain lingered in my bones, a dull echo of what I’d endured. It made sense. The pain might technically have been artificial, manufactured by a spell, but my body had reacted as though it were real. But hopefully, a hot, steaming shower would resolve the last of the phantom aches.

I was reaching for the bathroom door when I heard the front door slam downstairs. I looked out the window and saw Ava striding away from the house like someone had just lit a fire underneath her. Moments later, she shifted and raced toward the forest, disappearing beyond the tree line.

I considered mind linking her before she got out of range to ask what was going on, but what was the point? If something was horribly wrong, Ava would’ve told me. She probably just needed some fresh air. Sometimes I needed a good, hard run in the morning, too.

*Maybe I can catch up to her before she gets too far.*

As if in response, a sharp pain shot up my leg and into my back.

*Let’s go take that shower instead.*

The hot water pounded most of the pain out of my bones, and when I was one, I got dressed and headed downstairs. Hopefully Ava had kept her promise that there’d always be coffee for me. I still felt like I was half-asleep, and I desperately needed the caffeine to shock myself awake.

I poured myself a cup and looked around the kitchen. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept in so late, and I still wished I could’ve slept longer. I was probably failing in my Alpha duties by lazing in bed for as long as I had. Just because the Samaras were no longer at war, didn’t mean I could take my hands off the wheel.

At that moment, it occurred to me that I didn’t exactly know *how* to take care of my pack when there wasn’t some big, scary threat hanging over our heads. I’d never actually been a pack Alpha during peacetime. If we even had that shit, really.

I resisted the urge to knock on wood, just for thinking that we were at peace. I was pretty sure there’d only been a handful of days over the last year or so during which the Redwood and Samara packs had experienced anything even *close* to peace.

Not that I was *personally* at peace in the slightest. I was still at war with Adéluce, and she’d been beating my ass since before I’d realized we were fighting. I had to get the upper hand somehow, and I had to do it alone. I’d never let anyone around me know what I was up against. The Samaras were my family now, and I had to protect them at all costs.

I poured myself a second cup of coffee and headed into my study. My bed was calling my name, but I’d already wasted too much time that I could’ve spent taking care of pack business, so I sat down in front of the stack of “pack finance” paperwork that had been accumulating and started to sift through it.

*Fucking hell. This is so boring.*

Five minutes in, and I could already feel a headache brewing.

According to the documents, Ava had inherited the Samara pack funds from Nolan, so they were secure, at least. Because of this, the pack was financially stable—comfortable, even—but the human banks still needed signatures for the joint account Ava and I were opening for the pack.

And as mind-numbingly tedious as that task was, I couldn’t neglect it much longer. If anything happened to me, I didn’t want the pack to be hung out to dry. They needed to be able to access their money.

And, if I was being honest, the odds of something happening to me were pretty damn grim, especially with Adéluce’s constant threats.

“Fucking bitch,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

“You’re not talking about me, are you?” asked a soft, menacing voice.

I didn’t look up, didn’t turn around. *Just ignore her. Maybe she’ll go away—*

Electricity crackled through my neck, and I jerked upright, whirling around to look at Adéluce.

She glared down at me. “Look at me when I’m speaking to you, mongrel.”

“What do you want?” I asked wearily. “I’m obeying all your rules. I haven’t talked to Cali since you tortured me last night. I’m staying in my own territory. What else do you want from me?”

Belatedly, I realized that I hadn’t even given her the usual dose of smartass remarks. I’d immediately gone on the defensive, giving in and handing over the final tiny trace of control I possessed.

*Fuck, she really has broken me.*

Adéluce’s eyes narrowed. “You think that just because you’ve obeyed the rules for less than a day, you deserve some kind of reward? This impertinence needs to stop. I am not pleased with it.” She smirked. “That’s exactly why I had to punish Cali last night.”

I stood up so fast, my chair slammed to the floor. “What the fuck did you do?”

Her smirk turned into an ecstatic grin. “You’ll just have to wonder, won’t you? Though I will say that the ashes of your old demon friend aren’t as ‘secure’ as you think they are.”

I saw red, and I couldn’t even process what she was saying about Seluna’s ashes. All I knew was that she’d hurt my mate, and that was *fucking* *unacceptable*.

“Don’t you dare hurt her!”

I stalked around the desk toward her—to grab her or attack her, I wasn’t sure. I was operating on pure emotion—pure rage and hatred and protectiveness. I was gonna tear her limb from fucking limb.

But before I could reach her, pain lanced through my body, so sharp that I crumpled against the desk.

It was agony, but I refused to be beaten so easily. I refused to just stand by while Adéluce bragged about whatever fucked up thing she’d done to Cali this time.

No, it was time to end this.

I reached out a shaky hand, grabbed a letter opener, and flung it right at Adéluce’s cold, dead heart.

**Episode 4645**

**Artemis**

The dress I was wearing clung to my curves like it had been painted on, but it was still easy to move in and provided several excellent hiding places for my weapons.

But as gorgeous as the dress was, I still would’ve preferred a pair of pants and some boots. I also would have preferred to have been on the job with anyone other than my partner.

Marius and I were attending an exclusive banquet, doing our best to look like gracious guests. Since we were both after the same target, we’d decided to team up and enjoy the benefits of a rare win-win scenario.

Splitting the reward was better than not having a reward at all.

At least, that was what I’d told myself when I’d agreed to partner up with Marius. The guy we were hunting was an enemy of the Kollector. Considering his reputation, I’d initially welcomed Marius’s help.

I’d never worked with him before, but it hadn’t taken me long to realize that I didn’t like it. His style was completely different to mine. At times, he actually seemed incompetent—so much so that I was beginning to wonder if he was setting me up.

And even if I put my opinion of his abilities to the side, I still thought Marius was pretty annoying. He was quick to dub himself the greatest bounty hunter to have ever lived, and yet he took risks that even the greenest hunter would’ve thought twice about.

To be fair, Marius *was* a great bounty hunter—his reputation preceded him. But, now that I knew him better, I’d decided that his pompous attitude outshone it. While most women flocked to him, I was repelled by him.

At least to his face.

I wasn’t actually immune to Marius’s charms, just more cautious than most. Even now, I snuck a glance at him when he turned away to scan the crowd. He looked far too handsome in his tunic. It fit Marius like the tailor had sewn it especially for him. His well-defined body filled it out perfectly and made it hard for me to look away.

This really wasn’t fair. How could anyone be expected *not* to throw themselves at him when he looked so good?

His looks had no doubt helped him in his career. It was a lot easier to get close to your targets when you could charm your way into anything. It also didn’t hurt when it came to putting yourself forward for all the best jobs.

Lost in thought, I didn’t realize Marius had turned back around until our eyes locked. His gaze lingered in a way that made me think he wasn’t *just* looking at me—it was almost like he couldn’t look away. Suddenly, he grabbed my hand.

“Come with me,” he said. “He’s on the move.”

I nodded as I caught our target moving out of the corner of my eye. Marius led me away from the table, and I kicked myself with every step. Instead of staying focused, I’d let myself get caught up in Marius’s undeniable magnetism. I knew I was better than that, but I’d still let myself gawk at him like an adolescent idiot.

Marius and I kept pace with our target, making sure not to lose him in the labyrinthine mansion where the ball was being held. Just as our target was about to turn a corner, he turned back instead. Before he could see us, Marius shoved me into an alcove. His large, hard body pressed against mine until I felt his heartbeat as clearly as I could feel my own.

Forgetting about my resolve to stay focused, I stared up at Marius as the smell of his cologne and the warmth of his skin made my head swirl.

It was impossible not to be affected, but I was surprised to see that Marius was being affected, too. There was a longing in his gaze that was no doubt a reflection of my own. Instead of pulling away, Marius stepped closer. Instinctively, I slid my hands up his firm chest until I could loop my arms around his neck.

He cleared his throat. “We… We should stay in character.”

I stared at his lips as I nodded. “Yeah.”

Without hesitation, Marius leaned down to kiss me. I didn’t have to fake the gasp that slipped past my lips. He was kissing me with more passion and carnality than I’d expected from him. I kissed him back just as hungrily and immediately started to forget about the target.

All my earlier disdain melted away as Marius pressed himself against me.

There wasn’t an inch between us, but the distance was still unbearable. He tore his lips away from mine to kiss a path down my neck. His teeth scraped my skin moments before his lips kissed it better. I shivered against him as reason battled with lust in my mind.

*This is a bad idea. A really bad idea.*

Getting involved with Marius would only lead to trouble. He’d bagged as many women as he had targets, and he showed no signs of slowing down. I tried to remind myself not to make careless mistakes, even as I jumped up and wrapped my legs around his waist.

With a growl, he lifted me into his arms and shoved me against the wall. His hands were everywhere, desperate to get me out of my dress. My own hands unknotted the front ties of his tunic and got ready to rip it open to expose his chest. I wanted to feel him all over me.

We were drowning in lust, overcome by the need for pleasure. I kissed him harder, then moaned when he wrapped his tongue around mine. I dug my nails into his chest. He rubbed himself against me until I thought I was going to lose my mind. It was simultaneously too much and not enough.

Slipping my hands into his silky hair, I held him closer and kissed him with everything I had. I wanted more of him. I wanted *all* of him. I needed to quench the thirst that had been brewing within me from the moment we’d started working together.

One second Marius was pressing me against the wall and the next I was straddling him. We were no longer at the banquet, but back in the present at the tavern, forgetting about our recon all over again. Marius and I were in the corner, not giving a damn about who watched us. I was on his lap, grinding into him as he used his arms to keep me in place.

He held me close as he kissed me slowly and thoroughly, like he had all the time in the world. I melted into his hard body, wishing our clothes weren’t in the way.

He pulled his lips away from mine and kissed a path to my ear. He licked the shell of it, making me shiver.

“I can’t believe I forgot how good you feel, Ari,” Marius whispered.

I swiveled my hips over his, eliciting a groan from deep in his chest. He stared at me, his eyes shining with unbridled desire that matched my own.

“I forgot how good you feel, too,” I said.

I leaned in to kiss him, using my hands to keep his head in place. Marius quickly took control and kissed me until I was out of breath. We came up for air, but it wasn’t long before he was pulling me in for another kiss.

Like I’d been struck by lightning, my mind suddenly roared back to life, and I shoved him away. While my body was still urging me to give into my cravings, my mind was desperately trying to snap me out of my stupor.

*What the hell am I doing? Why am I kissing Marius?*

It had been a long time since that kiss at the ball. I’d gotten over him a long time ago and had decided never to let myself be so deeply affected by Marius again, and yet here I was, getting ready to ride him like no time had passed. Feeling dazed, I crawled out of his lap and fought to clear my head.

“What the fuck was that?” I muttered.

Marius shook his head, also looking a bit dazed. I wasn’t sure if he was at a loss because of our intense make out session, or because of whatever it was we’d had to drink. His lips were swollen, and he rearranged his pants like they were suddenly too tight. He gazed at me like he didn’t want to come back to reality.

“Marius!” I said. “Snap out of it!”

He reached for me, trying to pull me back into his lap. As much as I wanted to give in because of whatever had been in that drink, I knew I had to keep it together—for both of us. Out of options, I slapped Marius as hard as I could. The haze of lust began to clear from his eyes.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

“There was something in those drinks,” I said.

He rubbed his face with a groan. “Azure toadstools. *Fuck*.”

I cursed too. Azure toadstools were a well-known hallucinogenic, and they weren’t easy to get. I had to wonder why a simple tavern barkeep would’ve put it in our ale.

Wanting answers, I was about to get up and go question the man when I noticed that we’d been cornered by a group of men. They outnumbered us three to one, and didn’t look at all friendly.

“Enjoyed the show?” I asked, undaunted. “What do you want?”

The biggest of the Fae stepped forward. There was a mean glint in his eye that made my blood run cold.

“Bounty hunters aren’t welcome here,” he said.

We weren’t welcome anywhere, which was why I’d spent so much time honing my fighting skills. Unfortunately, the toadstools were making what should’ve been an easy fight an impossible feat. I could hardly stand on my two feet, let alone take down a whole group of people.

Before I knew what was happening, my wrists were being bound together. Marius cursed the men as they bound his wrists, too. We both did whatever we could to resist our captors, but it was useless. We’d fallen right into their trap.

The big man eyed me meanly. “You’re coming with us.”

**Episode 4646**

Xavier’s tongue swirled around mine, driving me wild and making me that much more desperate for him. I knew that I shouldn’t have been craving him like this, let alone satisfying that craving, but I just couldn’t help myself.

I wanted him more than I’d ever thought. What had happened at the mall had only been a taste. I craved more.

Steam billowed as the hot springs bubbled around us. The water was almost as hot as the kisses Xavier was trailing down my neck. His strong hands held me close, as if he couldn’t bear to have any distance between us.

There was nowhere else on Earth I would’ve preferred to be… But I couldn’t for the life of me remember how we’d gotten here.

The hot springs were familiar. We’d been here before, but it had been a long time ago. The last time I’d taken a dip in these springs, Xavier and I had still been together.

Not that I let that little factoid stop me.

I wrapped my legs around Xavier’s waist as his hands slid down my back. I raked my nails down his shoulder blades as his lips took mine again. My lust was overwhelming. No matter how much I kissed him or touched him, I couldn’t get enough.

He groaned as I rubbed myself against him. With no clothes to get in our way, we were skin to skin—and moments away from making the springs that much steamier. I gasped as I felt him push one finger, then two inside me. I sank my nails into his skin as he started to glide his fingers deeper.

“Wow, look at the two of you.”

The unexpected voice pulled me right out of the moment. More voices joined the first, and I realized with no small amount of horror that there were people watching us. Xavier leaned in to kiss me again, seemingly unaware of the peepshow we were putting on.

I leaned back, desperate to tell him that we weren’t alone, but I couldn’t form the words. My mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Unable to speak, I tried to mind link with Xavier. But instead of hearing his voice in my head, I heard Greyson’s.

*Cali? Why is the door locked?* He asked, sounding troubled.

*Huh? What door?* I asked.

The last time I’d checked, there were no doors at the hot springs… But when I looked around again, I realized that Xavier and I were no longer outside. Instead, we were crammed into a tiny dressing room at the mall. He had me pressed against the wall as we stood on top of our clothes. My leg was hitched up around his waist, and my head was still swimming with lust as he started to pump his fingers into me more roughly.

With the kind of Herculean effort I wished I could channel all the time, I pushed Xavier off me. My breathing was ragged, and I doubted I’d have the strength—physical or mental—to push him away again.

“Stop, just stop,” I said. “We can’t.”

Xavier tilted his head. “Do you really want to stop?”

He was the one speaking, but it was Greyson’s voice that colored the words.

“What?” I said blankly. “What the hell is going on?”

“You tell me,” Xavier-Greyson said, stepping closer. “Are you going to keep lying to Greyson? Isn’t it about time you tell him the truth?”

I woke with a start, my heart racing a mile a minute. Slowly, I got my bearings. I wasn’t at the hot springs with Xavier, or at the mall. I was in bed with Greyson.

Guilt washed over me as I came to terms with my dream and the fact that at least half of it had been based on actual events. I’d taken things way too far with Xavier at the mall, and I’d lied to Greyson about it. Apparently, I couldn’t even escape the guilt when I was asleep.

With a silent sigh, I turned to look at Greyson and wondered whether to tell him everything. I didn’t want to lie to him, and I certainly didn’t want to carry the burden of my guilt around forever.

But what would telling him really accomplish?

Sure, it would alleviate my guilt, but it could also make things a lot worse for Greyson. He and Xavier had almost gotten into a fight today. In fact, I was sure they would’ve come to blows if I hadn’t intervened.

If I told Greyson the truth, then I wouldn’t be able to stop him from marching over to the Samara house to knock Xavier’s block off.

Turning away from Greyson, I inadvertently pressed my face against the cool screen of my phone. Confused, I wondered why it was in bed with me until I remembered what I’d been doing before I fell asleep.

I’d been texting with Ava about the video, feeling frustrated as hell as the Samara pack’s very own diva took her sweet time getting back to me. It had been hours since I’d texted her with a string of question marks, but she still hadn’t replied.

*Ugh, that woman…*

Then I noticed the time. *Crap!* I was supposed to be at crew practice right now! I quickly sent Gael a message saying I was sick. *Awful fever, throwing up… Sorry!!*

Everything was a mess.

“Is everything okay?”

The sound of Greyson’s voice nearly made me leap out of bed. I turned to look at him, just to make sure I wasn’t still dreaming. Nope. It was really him. His grey eyes shone, even in the relative darkness of our room. He was watching me with such sincere concern, it was hard not to feel even guiltier that I already did.

“Uh, yeah, you know. Just missing crew practice because of… *everything*. And Ava hasn’t texted me back,” I said. “I sent her that video of Adéluce to see if she recognized her, but she hasn’t responded. Doesn’t she know how pressing this?”

“Hm,” Greyson said. “Maybe she’s watching it again and wants to be sure before saying yes. She would be admitting that a dead woman isn’t as dead as we thought.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe she’s just afraid of the truth.”

A part of me couldn’t blame Ava for wanting to live in ignorance for as long as she could. Right now, affected by whatever magic was at play, Xavier was hers. Ava had just as much reason to want to leave this situation be as I had to expose it.

“Ava’s probably just looking after herself,” Greyson said. “She’s the last person to get this information, and she has every right to take some time to process it. Especially if Xavier really is under a spell.”

“I guess so,” I said. “But how much time does she really need? She and I have been going at this for a while now. It’s not news.”

“Could she be talking to Xavier about it?”

I shook my head. “Hopefully not. Kira told us that we can’t let Xavier know that we know, just in case the witch who cursed him is listening in.”

Greyson grimaced. “I might’ve accidentally let it slip. I should’ve known better.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” I said, gently patting his chest. “There’s no way you could’ve known—not when the whole thing seemed so unlikely. Hopefully it was just a warning out of caution more than anything else.”

I really did hope that Greyson wouldn’t be too hard on himself for talking, but still… I was worried. What if Greyson’s mistake put Xavier in even more danger?

“How can we find out more without putting Xavier at risk?” I asked. “I just can’t shake the feeling that this really could be Adéluce—I’m not going to be able to let that theory go until I can definitively rule it out.”

“I get that,” Greyson said. “It’s driving me crazy, too.”

“If there’s even a *chance* that it could be Adéluce, then we need to tread lightly. If she survived what we put her through, she must be powerful enough to be listening in at all times. She must be more powerful than we ever imagined.”

“Let’s just remember to keep in mind that there are plenty of vampires out there with a grudge against Xavier,” Greyson said. “Any one of them could’ve gotten together with a witch and come after him. We can’t afford to focus exclusively on Adéluce and forget about the other possibilities.”

“I know,” I said.

“Honestly, I still don’t see how Adéluce could’ve survived that attack,” Greyson continued. “But I also understand that you want to be sure—I want to be sure, too, and I’ll help you however I can. But…” He paused for a moment. “Well, you have to understand why it’s hard for me to believe that Adéluce is alive simply because Xavier never found concrete proof of her death.”

I nodded. “We just have to rule her out. I need to make sure that it’s not her, then go from there.”

It sounded easy enough, but there were two possible outcomes here, and neither one of them was ideal.

Either we’d find out that Adéluce was both alive and hell-bent on revenge, or we’d find out that she was a dead end—and if that happened, then we’d be fresh out of leads.

With both options seeming like the worst one, it was hard not to lose hope. Just as I opened my mouth to say as much to Greyson, my phone buzzed. It was Ava, finally responding to my last message.

*Sorry, but I don’t know if that’s who attacked me. The video is too damn blurry.*

I groaned. Ava was as unhelpful as ever, but perhaps I’d been too optimistic about the footage. None of our problems were ever solved that easily.

“She says the video’s too blurry,” I said. “She can’t tell if Adéluce is familiar or not.”

“I hate to admit that Ava is right, but she is,” Greyson said. “The video is shit quality. If only there were a way to enhance the image, or get access to a better one.”

I started to agree with Greyson, then I stopped. While the video I’d sent Ava was crap, I’d just thought of a way to show her the vampire-witch’s face, once and for all.

**Episode 4647**

**Xavier**

Howling with pain, Adéluce clutched at the letter opener that was buried in her chest. Blood blossomed from the wound, spreading on her jacket.

She stumbled backward, and I knew that this was my chance to destroy her once and for all. I shifted and pounced on her, knocking her off her feet. The letter opener sank deeper into her chest as I bared my teeth, ready to sink them into her neck.

It wasn’t the first time I’d come close to killing Adéluce. I’d had plenty of chances before, but she’d always either overpowered me or found a way to escape.

But not this time.

I had her dead to rights, and my wolf couldn’t have been more ecstatic. It felt so good to be in my wolf form without conflict, which was what happened whenever we were around Cali or Ava. Right now, my wolf and I were united in a way that we hadn’t been in a very long time. Right now, there was no conflict.

In this moment, my wolf and I were one—and we wanted this woman dead.

But despite the letter opener sticking out of her chest, Adéluce was far from weak. She tossed me aside and scrambled to her feet. Not wanting to lose any ground, I pounced on her again. I sank my teeth into her shoulder and tasted blood. It was as foul as its stench, but I savored it like whiskey.

Adéluce screamed again, then jammed her claw-like nails into my side. I howled in pain as I struggled to keep my teeth in her flesh. We slammed into the table, then fell to the floor and wrestled for dominance.

While my wolf form was larger than her body, she was just as strong as I was—and what she lacked in size, she made up for in flexibility. She kept shifting around, slipping out of my grip.

Her nails scored my flesh and left my blood splattered across the floor. We finally broke apart, and I watched as Adéluce licked some of my blood from her nails. I matched her move by running my tongue over my muzzle. Her blood was all over my mouth. She was bleeding from multiple large wounds, and her fair skin was marred with slashes from my claws.

She lunged at me, waving her hand as magic blasted toward me. I dove out of the way at the last moment. I jumped onto her back and launched a flurry of attacks, trying desperately to rip into her jugular, but she held me off and sank her teeth into my arm.

I yelped and clawed at her face, trying to make her let go. She jammed her nails into my side again, and I fought like hell to escape her grip. We broke apart again, panting and glaring menacingly at each other.

Adéluce’s throat was about the only part of her body that I *hadn’t* clawed or bitten. The taste of her blood on my tongue made me more desperate than ever to rip her throat out. Who knew when I’d get another chance to take her down?

And who knew what she’d do to me if she won this fight and survived?

As I got ready to kill Adéluce, I felt a sharp pain in my side. I looked down, expecting to see her hand with its dagger-sharp nails, but I was shocked to see the letter opener sticking out of my body. Then she started mumbling, and pain ignited throughout me. I fell to the ground and shifted back to human. She was *forcing* me to.

Adéluce laughed as I pulled the blade out of my side and tossed it onto the floor. I hissed in pain, but thanked my lucky stars that the letter opener wasn’t made of silver.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t made of wood, either.

Though I was literally on my ass, Adéluce wasn’t faring any better. She staggered back, taking stock of all her injuries. I ignored the debilitating pain in my side and looked around for a weapon. The only thing I could see was a chair, so I grabbed it and smashed it on the ground, then took one of the legs and wielded the jagged end like a stake.

With one hand pressed to my side, I charged at Adéluce, but just as I reached her, she started to disappear. She glared at me as she went, her eyes burning with a rage more incandescent than anything she’d directed at me to date.

“I’ve warned you too many times,” she whispered, and then her image faded completely.

The door to the study flew open, and horror washed over me when Ava poked her head inside. Her eyes widened, and she jumped back as I came at her full force, my body still caught up in the belief that it was charging toward Adéluce.

Using every bit of strength that I still possessed, I managed to stop my forward momentum just short of Ava’s feet. I collapsed, letting my makeshift stake roll out of my hand.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Ava demanded, rushing to my side. “Xavier, what the fuck happened?!”

I struggled to my feet with her help, despite the pain of my injuries. Ava had an arm around me, wiping at the blood on my face, concern and confusion across her face. My mind raced to come up with something plausible. I hated lying to her, but I couldn’t risk telling her the truth.

Worried that there was still some trace of Adéluce in the study, I quickly scanned the room—but there was no sign of her. I looked at the floor and saw that even her blood was gone.

*Was I just dreaming*? I wondered.

If not for the taste of her blood in my mouth, I would’ve easily convinced myself that it had all been a hallucination. But Adéluce had really been here. I’d come so close to killing her, but yet again, she’d managed to escape.

Ava guided me to the only chair not destroyed and made me sit down in it. “What the hell happened, X?”

“I thought someone had broken into the house,” I said, knowing it was stupid. “But I guess I was wrong.”

It was a weak story at best, but having to maintain an elaborate lie would’ve been riskier. I waited for Ava to react with bated breath, well aware that she had every reason to doubt me.

Ava opened her mouth, then closed it in favor of simply pointing at me. I followed her line of sight and saw the blood on my chest. I gingerly prodded the letter opener wound and found that it was almost completely healed.

“So, you beat *yourself* up?” Ava asked dubiously, then she looked around the study. “And made all this mess?”

“Maybe I was dreaming,” I said, shrugging casually. “I guess I must’ve moved around a lot.”

Her eyes narrowed, and I fought to keep my expression neutral. She looked ready to give me a piece of her mind, but then she stopped herself. I jumped on the opportunity to change the subject.

“Where were you, just now?” I asked.

“I went out on patrol,” she said. Then she looked me over again. “You should come upstairs and let me clean you up.”

“You go on ahead,” I said. “I’ll be up in a minute.”

Ava hesitated at the door, so I gave her a small smile, hoping to ease her concern. She nodded, then stepped out of the study without another word.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I was pretty sure that Ava didn’t believe me. And why would she? It was pretty obvious that I’d just been in a pretty major fight. The study was trashed and I was covered in blood, and I’d lied right to Ava’s face about the cause.

Still, the corners of my mouth quirked up into a genuine smile.

I’d hurt Adéluce. *Really* hurt her. She’d made the mistake of underestimating me, and it had nearly cost her her miserable life. I rubbed my side and wondered if she’d ever be careless enough to underestimate me again.

Even though I’d come so close to victory, I still felt uneasy. As I cleaned up the study, Adéluce’s latest threat hung in the air and filled me with dread. *I’ve warned you too many times.* There was no way that meant anything good. Doing my best not to think about it, I left the study and got ready to join Ava upstairs, but then I stopped in my tracks when I heard her talking on the phone.

“I hear you,” she said. “But I’m going to need more evidence if you want me to believe that it’s Adéluce.”

Hearing Ava say the witch’s name sent a chill down my spine. I’d done everything I could to keep everyone from stumbling onto the truth. Had they been working behind my back to unravel it all this time?

*Shit! They have no idea of the danger they’re walking into!*

“Update me if you get any proof before then.”

*Proof? What proof?*

My fear got the better of me, and I stepped out to ask Ava to end the call, but she’d already ended it and was making her way upstairs. My feet were riveted to the bottom step. I wasn’t sure what to do.

*I have to stop them*, I thought.

Adéluce wasn’t above killing either of them. I knew she’d make good on it if either Ava or Cali got too close to the truth. And since I’d nearly killed her, I had no doubt that she would relish the chance to hurt me by hurting them.

Grabbing my phone, I stepped outside and called Greyson. He was the last person I wanted to talk to, but also the only person who could help me.

“What do you want?” he asked when he picked up. “You’ve got a lot of—”

“We don’t have time for that,” I interrupted. “Listen—I need you to make sure that Ava and Cali don’t meet up, okay? Do *not* let them get together.”

**Episode 4648**

**Greyson**

“Slow down, Xavier,” I said, feeling a headache coming on.

I couldn’t make sense of a single thing that Xavier was saying. He kept rambling on about Ava and Cali meeting, but I wasn’t really grasping anything beyond that. I’d accepted the fact that Xavier was under a spell. In fact, I felt like a horrible brother for not really seeing it before. But Xavier had been acting like, well, Xavier.

And now he was blabbering all this nonsense again. I wanted to help him—he was my little brother at the end of the day, along with Colton—but *how* was I supposed to do that? Especially when I was still upset about what had happened between him and Cali earlier at the mall.

Even hearing his voice reminded me of what happened between the two of them, and it made my blood boil. Had it happened because of the spell? Or the mate bond? Both?

I needed to try not to let it cloud my judgment the best I could. Keep the bigger picture in mind. Breaking the spell.

Killing Adéluce. For real this time.

“Xavier, slow down,” I said finally. “As far as I know, the two of them don’t actually have plans to meet.”

“You have to make sure!” he said. “Greyson, if you care about Cali at all, you have to listen to me and keep her from meeting Ava. You have to do this. If you don’t…”

“Breathe,” I told him. “Tell me what’s going on. Why would Ava and Cali even plan to meet in the first place?”

I knew why Ava and Cali would meet, but Cali had already pointed out earlier that Kira had warned us not to talk about the spell with Xavier. I’d already slipped up in that regard, and I wasn’t going to do it again. What did *he* think would happen if they did meet up?

Though Xavier had had plenty to say just a moment ago, he went suspiciously silent in the wake of my question. His response did nothing to assuage my own worries. Was Cali in danger if we kept pursuing this? While I wanted to get Xavier out of this mess, if it put my mate in danger, I’d have to reconsider how we were going about this.

The silence stretched out. “Xavier, you’re calling me up out of the blue to give me a warning,” I said slowly. “Can you at least tell me why? If you want me to help you, I’m going to need more information.”

It didn’t seem like he would say it was Adéluce, but if she had survived the way we thought… Clearly, we weren’t supposed to know about the spell or Adéluce, that much was clear to me. But whether Xavier was trying to prevent Cali from putting the pieces together about him or whether she was in direct danger, I didn’t know.

But we were getting closer to the truth.

Xavier cleared his throat but didn’t say anything at first. The silence seemed to speak volumes. His concern still felt palpable, but something was clearly holding him back.

*Maybe he can’t say what’s really going on?*

“Please just take my word for it,” Xavier said, clearly on edge. “Don’t let them meet. Don’t let them talk at all. But whatever you do, don’t let them meet.”

“Okay,” I said. There was clearly nothing else I was going to get out of him. “Just keep Ava away from the house. I can handle Cali.”

I ended the call and tucked my phone into my pocket. Quickly, I went back into the house to look for Cali. We needed to talk.

She came in from the porch just as I made my way to the foyer. She had her phone in her hand and looked determined to get into trouble.

Xavier’s warning rang through my head as I approached her. I couldn’t shake it off, and knew it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Are you planning to meet up with Ava?” I asked.

Cali blinked in surprise. “What? I mean, I should once I have even more proof. I just got off the phone with her.”

“Well, I just got a strange call from Xavier,” I said. “He warned me to keep you from meeting up with Ava. Said that no matter what, you can’t go see her. Does that make sense to you?”

Cali looked just as puzzled as I felt.

“What does that mean?” she asked. “He wasn’t thrilled about it earlier, but what does he think will happen if I see her?”

I shook my head. “No idea. He just seemed terrified of the prospect,” I said. “And what do you mean more proof?”

“Ava says she needs to see something other than a blurry video to confirm if it was Adéluce who attacked her,” she said. “So I have an idea for how to do that.”

“Yeah? Why didn’t you say something before?”

“I was trying not to get everyone’s hopes up,” she said. “Even my own.”

“What is it?”

“Remember Harlow from New Orleans?” Cali asked. “I was thinking of asking her to go to the Duquette house—there had been this photo album in there. It had had photos of Adéluce with the New Orleans witches, her family, everything.”

I nodded. “And you think if she can get the album that Ava can better identify Adéluce.”

“Exactly.”

“Good idea, love. It’s the best bet we have right now,” I said. And if we were dealing with a photo only, then maybe Cali and Ava wouldn’t have to meet up whatsoever. That would assuage Xavier’s concerns, and my growing ones at least a bit.  “If we can confirm it then we know who we’re up against. Did you reach out to Harlow?”

Cali pulled out her phone. “I texted her, but I haven’t heard back. I asked her to call me ASAP.”

“It’s possible that Harlow won’t be able to find the proof you need,” I said. “Adéluce isn’t exactly the kind of person who’s easy to track down.”

“I know it’s possible, which was why I was a little nervous to bring it up,” Cali said. “But I’m going to hold out hope. It’s all we can really do right now, unless we think of something else.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “If it doesn’t work, we will figure out another way,” I said. “We always do.”

I hugged Cali tightly as she wrapped her arms around me. Was there truth in what Xavier had been warning me? Would there be danger if we continued down this path? It had likely taken a lot for Xavier to call me, especially after how pissed at him I’d been earlier when I told him to leave. The warning wasn’t trivial, but how did I plan for the complete unknown?

*Should I tell Cali to be more cautious?*

If Harlow was able to give us a photo of Adéluce, would that put Cali, and even Ava, in danger? If Adéluce was alive—which was only seeming more and more possible—and they got in her way, then she’d stop at nothing to get rid of them. She’d probably relish the opportunity.

*Fuck… What are we going to do?*

I wished that dealing with my brother wasn’t so complicated, but no amount of wishing was going to change anything. Not at this point. Even after we hopefully got him out of this damn mess, he’d likely still be at odds with me. He always was. And it wasn’t like he’d apologized about the kiss with Cali in the dressing room. Hell, after we broke the spell, I didn’t know what would happen between the two of them.

Only time would tell.

“I think we’re getting closer to the truth,” Cali said, like she was reading my mind. “And the sooner we do, the sooner we can do something to help Xavier.”

Cali started to say something, but then her phone buzzed in her hand. She looked up at me, and I could see the excitement shining in her eyes. Harlow’s name was on her screen.

She took a deep breath. “Here goes nothing,” she said.

She answered the call and put Harlow on speaker phone. “Hey, Harlow! Thanks for calling me,” she said. “It’s me and Greyson.”

“Hey, guys,” Harlow said. “I got your message, Cali. What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“Not exactly,” Cali said. “We’re kind of in a situation and running out of options. Do you remember the Duquette house? Creepy, huge, you know. There was this photo album of Adéluce, and we *really* need one of those pictures. I don’t want to explain everything right now, but it’s just important we get it. Could you *please* go to the house—”

“Sorry, I have to stop you right there,” Harlow said.

“Huh?” Cali asked.

“Why?” I asked. “What is it?”

“I hate to have to tell you this,” Harlow said, “but the Duquette house has been destroyed, along with everything in it.”

**Episode 4649**

It took me a second to process what I’d just heard. Then I took another second to keep from screaming in despair. Harlow had just come back to me with the worst possible news.

*Gone? The Duquette house is* gone*?*

Every time I got close to unraveling this mystery, a new obstacle always seemed to get in the way. It was like some higher power kept intervening before we could get answers about anything, including Adéluce. It was bad enough that Xavier couldn’t just say anything to us about what was going on, but how was I supposed to help save him when the universe seemed like it was completely against me?

I felt ready to tear my hair out and wished I could summon the damn vampire-witch so I could drag her ass to Ava.

Instead, I just stood there, Harlow’s words echoing through my mind. The Duquette house had been destroyed. My only hope had been buried under a pile of rubble. Without a picture of Adéluce, I was back at square one for confirming she was who’d attacked Ava.

“What do you mean, destroyed?” I asked. “Was it Adéluce? Was she trying to cover her tracks from before?”

*Is she already on to me? Is she* watching *me?*

Ice flowed through my veins as a fresh layer of terror settled into my bones. If Adéluce *was* watching me, then I was definitely in a lot of danger… But I’d take that risk if it meant helping Xavier.

“No. This has nothing to do with Adéluce,” Harlow said. “The city did it.”

“The city?” I asked, more confused than ever.

“The city condemned the house,” Harlow said. “They leveled it last week. Everything that was inside is gone. It’s just an empty lot, now.”

The news hit me harder than a punch to the gut. I was officially out of leads.

Hoping for a miracle, I tried Harlow again.

“Are you sure it’s all gone?” I asked. “They didn’t take anything out of the house and try to preserve it?”

*What kind of city destroys a piece of history without even trying to preserve a piece of it?*

“It’s all gone, Cali, that much I know,” she said. “And I can’t say I was sad to see it go. That house was filled with too many sad memories—it should’ve been demolished years ago. Some of the people who live in that neighborhood think the place was cursed. A part of me thinks they might be right.”

“Do you know of any family pictures that weren’t in the house?” I pressed. “Surely there must be others, somewhere. The elder witches? Surely there must be some old documentation that has Adéluce in it.”

“It’s possible,” Harlow said. “But things have still been tense with Odette and the other elder witches, and I might not be able to get into the archives. Besides, even if I could, there are thousands of documents there, and I don’t think they’ll be willing to help me search.”

I sighed. All my searches were coming up empty, too.

“Why do you want the photo?” Harlow asked, interrupting my thoughts. “What’s the trouble you’re in? I thought that Adéluce was taken care of after I took you all to Crater Lake.”

Greyson and I locked eyes. He and Ava were the only two people who knew what I was up to. I wondered if it would be useful to tell Harlow about my theory that Adéluce hadn’t died. If she knew about it, she’d probably understand my sense of urgency and do whatever she could to help.

Telling her would also relieve the unrelenting stress that came with feeling like I was doing this alone. Greyson was by my side, but I knew deep down he was still probably skeptical that Adéluce was alive. And Ava… Well, she would come in handy if we could actually show Adéluce to her…

I so wanted to spill the beans to Harlow, but then I thought better of it.

I’d tell her if and when I found proof that Adéluce was alive, not before. I didn’t want to raise the alarm and then find out that my Adéluce suspicion was totally unfounded.

“Uh, I was trying to describe what Adéluce looked like to someone we know,” I said, lying on the fly. “But it’s pretty hard. She’s not the easiest vampire-witch to describe with words. Ugh! It’s so frustrating. I can remember that photo perfectly, but it’s not like I can print a copy out of my brain.”

“Yeah, Adéluce is pretty hard to forget,” Harlow murmured, then she paused. “Are you sure you can remember the photo?”

“Absolutely sure,” I said. “I’ll never forget it.”

In it, Adéluce had looked like an evil Madonna. She’d only needed a cone bra, and her heartless diva look would’ve been complete.

“It’s possible to have your mind mined, you know,” Harlow told me.

Greyson scowled. “That sounds dangerous.”

Neither of us paid him any mind. Nothing about my search for answers was safe—why draw the line at letting a witch mess around with my memories?

“There are also spells that can make memories visible to others,” Harlow added.

“That sounds perfect!” I said. “Do you know how to do it? Could you blip here and perform the spell?”

Harlow had just given us the breakthrough we needed. If we could mine my mind—if I could make my memories visible to Ava—then she’d know without a doubt whether or not it was Adéluce who’d attacked her that night. We wouldn’t have to go through the elder witches, we wouldn’t have to hunt a photo down anymore.

Ava had described the attack to me so many times, and each time I noticed she had recalled different, small details. If she could just see the photo, it might trigger more for her. I felt so certain of it.

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down,” Harlow said. “I don’t do long distance blipping. Not after last time.”

“But scrambling her brain is okay?” Greyson asked.

I gave him a look and got the feeling that Harlow was glaring at the phone, too. Greyson had a point, but it wasn’t a welcome one. We needed to do this, whatever the risk.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Harlow. “I forgot that long distance blipping isn’t easy. I’m just… I don’t know what else to do.”

“Blipping aside, I’ve never actually done any memory-related spells before,” Harlow said. “I’m not really into the idea of messing with your mind, either. I just know it’s possible.”

“Would you be willing to see if you can get into the elder witches’ archives?” I asked, hating that I had to ask.

Harlow sighed. “Sure, but it’s going to take days to sort through that mess. I’ll ask River if he can check the dump, but there’s no guarantee they haven’t put more crap on top of the Duquette trash.”

“Wait, River? The alligator shifter guy?” Greyson asked.

“Yes, him,” she said shortly. “But Cali, you’ll have to be patient. I’ll reach out if we find anything, but at this point a spell might be faster.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate everything you’re doing.”

“Of course,” she said. “Good luck.”

“Do you think they’ll be able to find anything useful?” I asked, turning to Greyson after we hung up.

Greyson shrugged. “I wish I could be more optimistic, but I’ve seen what a razed house looks like. The odds are a million to one.”

“Ugh! If only I’d put the pieces together sooner,” I said. “The house was destroyed just last week. If I’d been a little quicker, I’d have that freaking photo on my phone right now.”

“Don’t blame yourself, love,” Greyson said. “It’s just bad luck.”

“This sucks,” I said, rubbing my head. “I can see her face, clear as day. If I could just get that memory out, Ava would be able to see it, too…”

“Don’t go down that road,” Greyson said. “That spell is just too dangerous. You know I know how risky it is to have a witch poking around in your head.”

“We don’t know that it’s the same as some of the spells you’ve done before,” I said. “Harlow only said no because she doesn’t have the experience.”

“That’s more than enough of a reason to forget about mind mining altogether,” Greyson said.

“But what if we found a witch who knows how to do it?” I pressed, unwilling to let it go. “Someone with lots of experience—Big Mac, maybe? Or Rowena?”

There had to be someone close to us who could help me. I refused to give up. Who knew when Adéluce would strike again, or if the magic she was using on Xavier was only the beginning? I had to do everything I could to either prove that the vampire-witch was the one who attacked Ava and the one doing this to Xavier, or rule her out.

I had to do everything I could to get to the bottom of this mess.

Greyson sighed. “I hate to say it, but we do happen to know a few witches who could probably do it.”

I instantly realized who he was talking about. I looked into his sharp grey eyes, and he nodded grimly.

“The sisters have a lot of experience,” he said. “But I still think the whole mind mining idea is too dangerous.”

I shook my head. “No, we have to do it,” I said. “Call them.”

**Episode 4650**

“Absolutely not,” Greyson said, not missing a beat.

He stared at my phone like it was a cobra, and I let my arm fall back to my side. I wasn’t at all surprised that Greyson had immediately refused my request—he’d been against the whole mind-mining thing from the start—but I still frowned at him.

“Why even bring the sisters up if you’re refusing to contact them?” I asked.

“I just said the first thing that popped into my head,” he said. “I know it’s impossible for you to pretend that you didn’t hear me, but please try. Those women are dangerous.”

“Nothing is more dangerous than pretending that this threat doesn’t exist,” I said. “If Adéluce really is alive, then we have to prove it and find her—before she does something even worse to Xavier.”

“Dealing with witches is always risky—and costly,” Greyson said. “And trust me, the sisters take ‘tit for tat’ to a whole new level. You have no idea what you’d be getting yourself into.”

“This isn’t fair,” I said. “When you got the sisters to break the sire bond, all you had to give them was an earring. How was that risky, or too high a price?”

The look on Greyson’s face made my stomach drop. It was clear that I didn’t have the whole story, there. His handsome face was suddenly marred with guilt, and something that looked like dread—so much so that I was hesitant to ask for the details. Still, one thing was extremely obvious—he’d paid the sisters with much more than just an earring. This realization was so horrible that I immediately tried to talk myself out of it. I kept waiting for Greyson to shake his head and tell me that I was mistaken.

But he didn’t. He kept his lips sealed and averted his gaze. I stepped closer.

“Greyson,” I said. “All you had to do was get them that earring, *right*?”

“Well…” he said, grimacing. “No. Not exactly.”

My nerves ratcheted higher and higher. Having to prove that Adéluce was alive and harassing Xavier was already stressful enough—the idea that Greyson could also be in danger was bordering on too much.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “What did you have to give them as payment?”

*Please don’t let the price be too high*, I prayed.

“The payment was the earring, but that’s where things went a bit… wrong,” Greyson said. “I had to get it from their warlock brother, Dolos, but he made a game out of it. I lost, and now I’m in Dolos’s debt.”

I tried not to give in to the panic that was rising within me—owing a warlock seemed bad as it was. But he was the brother of the three witches, which implied he was *powerful* too. As I stared at Greyson, all I could think about was Jay’s eyepatch, and the eye he’d lost to Big Mac.

“What kind of debt is it?” I asked, almost scared to know.

Greyson shook his head. “I won’t know until Dolos comes to collect.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” I asked.

“I thought I had,” he said.

“*You thought you had?* Are you kidding…” I trailed off, suddenly lost in thought.

Either Greyson really had forgotten to tell me about his potentially life-shattering deal with Dolos (unlikely), or he hadn’t wanted to worry me. If it was the latter, then I couldn’t very well fault him for it—not when I was currently doing the exact same thing. I hadn’t told Greyson the truth about what had happened with Xavier in the dressing room because I didn’t want to drive an even deeper wedge between the brothers.

I decided to drop the issue.

But that didn’t mean that I was going to let an opportunity to tap into my memories slip away.

“If the sisters can mine my memories, then I want to do it,” I said. “I’ll pay the price, within reason… As long as I get to show Ava what Adéluce looks like.”

“Cali, this is a bad idea. A terrible one,” Greyson said. “Messing with your mind because of a vague hunch that Adéluce is alive?”

“I get it,” I said. “Believe me, if I felt we had another option, I wouldn't be doing this. I know now how you felt with the sire bond… I just… This is important, Greyson. I know you’re skeptical about Adéluce—”

“Cali, please—”

“But if we can rule her out, we need to,” I said. “And we’ve run out of options.”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Why can’t we wait to see what Harlow and her gator shifter turn up?” Greyson asked. “Give it a few days—you might not even need to ask the sisters for help.”

“No,” I pressed. “I don’t want to risk running out of time, too.”

Greyson was grasping at straws, and we both knew it. While he was okay with doing whatever it took to change my mind, I knew that we didn’t have time for that. Unfortunately, I couldn’t reach out to the witches on my own. Otherwise, I already would’ve been playing their version of *Deal or No Deal*.

No. I needed to convince Greyson to reach out to them, which meant that I had to change tactics.

I put my hands in his and waited until he was staring into my eyes to speak.

“How about we do it like this?” I said. “You contact the witches, I talk to them about the price, and then we both decide if it’s worth it. Can you agree to that?”

Greyson stared into my eyes, then looked away. He clearly didn’t like the idea, but it was as much of a concession as I was willing to make.

“I don’t like it,” he grumbled. “Why can’t we just think of another way?”

“We can,” I said, doing my best to stay patient. “But shouldn’t we try this if it can give us what we need?”

I gave Greyson’s hands a squeeze, wishing he could realize why I was so willing to take on this risk. If it was Adéluce, I felt certain that she wouldn’t stop until she destroyed Xavier. And who was to say she’d stop with him? Her issues with Xavier went way back, but now she had reason to hate Greyson and me, too, and everyone who’d been in New Orleans and at Crater Lake with us and had tried to kill her the first time. Who was to say that she wouldn’t go after everyone who’d played a part in her not-quite-demise?

Eventually, Greyson sighed and gave my hands a squeeze. He looked ready to keep insisting that we find another way, but instead, he gave me a slight nod.

“Fine, but only if you agree that all we’re going to do is ask,” he said. “No spells until we know all the risks, and the price.”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s not like I *want* them to scramble my memories. But really, they won’t even have to dig deep. Right now, Adéluce’s resting bitch face is just about all I can think about.”

I held my phone out again. Greyson stared at it, then shook his head.

“Sorry, I don’t have their phone number memorized,” he said. “I left my phone upstairs. I’ll go get it.”

He turned and made his way up the stairs like he’d never climbed them before. He was obviously still reluctant to call the witches, but I knew he wouldn’t go back on our agreement.

As I waited for Greyson to come back, I tried to keep my hopes tamped down. So far, none of my plans had panned out. Just because the sisters had been able to break the sire bond, that didn’t mean they’d be able to mine my memories.

*But I sure hope they can*, I thought.

“Well? What’s going on with Xavier?” Lola asked, cutting into my thoughts and bringing me back to reality.

I looked up and realized she’d walked right up to me, but I hadn’t even noticed. When she looked at me expectantly, wanting an answer to her question, I shrugged. I hadn’t learned anything since the last time we spoke.

“I wish I knew,” I said. “It’s like I only have more questions than before.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Lola asked.

I hesitated, Jay’s missing eye floating into my mind again. I wondered what the witches would want from me. Lola poked me in the shoulder, and I started speaking without giving my words a second thought.

“Has Jay ever regretted giving up his eye to Big Mac for you?” I asked.

“No,” Lola said, without hesitation. “He says he’d give up the other eye if he had to.”

“That’s pretty heroic,” I mumbled.

And it was, but the memory of Big Mac scooping Jay’s eye out made me shudder. What if the witches asked me for something just as awful? What if it took me a lifetime to pay them back?

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking me this?”

“I… I might be thinking of making a deal with a witch or two,” I said.

“What? Why?” Lola asked.

“To help Xavier,” I said. “It’s the only option I can think of.”

“It’s a bad freaking move, Cali,” Lola said. “What did Greyson say about it?”

Before I could tell her that he agreed with her assessment of the situation, Greyson made his way back downstairs. There was an odd expression on his face. Not happy or ominous. Just… odd.

“Did you ask them?” I asked.

“I did,” Greyson said.

He didn’t elaborate, which only added to the already overwhelming tension in the room.

Lola crossed her arms. “Well? What do they want from Cali in exchange for their help?”

“Nothing,” Greyson said.

“Nothing?” I asked.

“What do you mean, nothing?” Lola asked. “Witches always ask for something.”

Greyson nodded. “They do. Which is why I told them to take whatever they want from me instead of Cali.”

**Episode 4651**

**Xavier**

I was so pissed at Greyson. It was obvious that my brother wanted answers I couldn’t give, but why couldn’t he just trust me, for once? I’d told him that he needed to stick close to Cali, for her safety—why wasn’t that enough?

*Is it really so difficult for Greyson to keep Cali occupied enough to prevent her from meeting up with Ava? When I lived at the Redwood pack house and Cali and I were still together, Greyson was always trying to steal her time and attention, but now that I’m* asking *him to do it, he can’t be bothered?*

If Greyson wasn’t going to take this seriously, then I’d have to figure out another way to fix this. I had no idea what this “proof” was that Cali intended to show Ava, but whatever it was, I doubted Adéluce would be okay with it. And the fact that I’d nearly killed Adéluce today *probably* wouldn’t soften her reaction—even though it felt damn good to know that I’d finally managed to injure her.

Adéluce had already been gunning for me after my romp in the dressing room with Cali, and now she knew that *I* knew she wasn’t invincible. From here on out, I had no doubt that she’d be asserting her power over me at every possible opportunity.

Maybe it would actually be *safer* to let Ava and Cali meet. If they were together in one place, I’d be able to keep an eye on both of them.

But on the other hand, if something went wrong and I failed to protect them, Adéluce would be able to get them both at once.

Two birds with one stone.

“Shit,” I hissed.

My mind raced as I tried to figure out how to keep them both safe without alerting them to the danger they were in. If they realized I was trying to involve myself in their meeting, that would only make their suspicion grow, and they’d be even more hell-bent on figuring out what was going on with me—and putting themselves in danger in the process.

The best thing I could do was stop Cali and Ava from proceeding with their plan, whatever it happened to be. I had to keep them from getting too close to the truth about what Adéluce was putting me through. Their lives depended on it.

*Maybe I can keep Ava busy? I know she’s ecstatic that we’re officially back together—boyfriend and girlfriend. Alpha and Luna. Maybe I can use that?*

I hated the idea of being so disingenuous, but it wasn’t like I didn’t *want* to spend time with Ava and enjoy our newly strengthened bond—if doing so kept her out of harm’s way, then that would really just be an added bonus.

I quickly went up to our bedroom, closing the door behind me. I was surprised to hear the shower running, and I found Ava in the bathroom, washing her hair.

“Hey, thought you just showered last night?” I asked. I closed the bathroom door behind me, too, and looked at Ava through the glass shower door.

“I did,” she said. “But I got super dirty on patrol this morning. Just wanted a little refresh, I guess.”

I couldn’t help but think that she was lying, but at this point, I didn’t really care. I came up here to stop her from making a big mistake, and that was what I was going to do.

“Need some help with your hair?” I asked, already starting to take off my shirt. “I’ve always heard that four hands are better than two.”

Ava snorted. “I don’t think that’s the saying, X, but yes, your help would be appreciated.”

I finished stripping off my clothes and climbed into the shower with her. I immediately pulled her against me and wrapped my arms around her. She dropped her head back against my shoulder and smiled.

“This doesn’t exactly qualify as ‘help,’” she said.

“Doesn’t it?” I skimmed my hands down between her legs and dragged a water-slicked finger across her sex. “I think it’s helping more than you think.”

I circled a finger around her opening and pressed a hungry kiss to her neck.

She tensed, then pulled away. “We’d better stop. We have things to do today.”

*And on my to-do list, I have to keep you distracted and away from Cali.*

“Did you have fun last night?” I asked. “Wouldn’t you like to do that again?”

I trailed my tongue along the shell of her ear and nibbled on her earlobe, pulling a moan from Ava’s throat.

But then she twisted around to smile at me over her shoulder. “Of course I would—but not right now.”

She leaned forward into the shower jets to rinse her hair, and then she stepped out of the shower.

I followed her out. “What about a massage? I felt how tense you are. Let me work on you a bit and melt some of that away.”

Ava kissed me. “That sounds amazing. Rain check?”

She reached for a towel and twisted it around her hair, then used another to dry her body before wrapping it around herself.

I shook my head. “I can’t believe you’d choose to do whatever these other things are instead of having sex with me. Whatever you need to do, it can wait.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her close again. If I could just convince her to throw her to-do list to the wind, then she wouldn’t be able to go off to scheme with Cali, and I’d be able to keep the pair of them safe for another day

Ava laughed. “What’s gotten into you? You’re being all… *needy*.”

I kissed her neck, then found her mouth again. “Is it so wrong that I can’t get enough of you? That I want to enjoy you at every possible opportunity?”

I kissed her again, then kneaded her neck as I deepened the kiss, teasing her tongue with mine. Slowly, I moved my hands down her body, keeping my touch light. I wanted to drive her mad and have her  begging me to touch her the way I knew she liked.

“Maybe you should remind me how much you love me,” Ava said, now looking flushed as she pressed herself into me. “Just so I don’t forget.”

*Got her.*

I kissed her again, deeper this time, then pulled back to bite at her bottom lip before slipping my tongue into her mouth again. I backed her up against the bathroom wall and roughly untwisted her towel so that it pooled on the floor at our feet. Her long hair fell down between us, and I slid my fingers through it, tugging it taut.

“You know you want to stay here with me,” I said, voice gravelly. “We can get back in bed and stay there all day. I’ll fuck you over and over again until you can’t take it anymore. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

A deep sigh escaped Ava’s lips, and she arched her body against mine. I slid my hand down between us and parted her folds to find her clit. She was so wet, and I began to draw circles with my fingers around her most sensitive area.

“Xavier…” she breathed into my mouth, parting her legs to give me better access.

“I love it when you say my name like that.”

I walked her out of the bathroom and steered her toward the bed—but she stopped me by planting her hand on my chest.

“I think it’s best to leave you wanting more,” she said.

I pulled away, breathing hard. “What? Why not take full advantage of me right now?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “I would—you know there’s nothing I want more—but there’s something I have to do.”

I thought of her phone call with Cali. Did she want to go meet her? A spike of anxiety rose from the pit of my stomach. I didn’t want to let Ava go. I couldn’t. What would Adéluce do if she realized that she and Cali were joining forces to plot against her? She was probably already itching to hurt them both, now that I’d injured her so badly.

*But I can’t lay it on too thick—especially now that Ava’s told me that she has somewhere to be. Ava’s smart. She’ll realize I’m up to something and get suspicious and most likely double down on her decision to go.*

I had to play this smart.

“Fine,” I said.

“I mean it about the rain check, though,” she said. “It’s not that I don’t want to be with you right now, I’m just really busy.”

“I get it,” I said. “Do what you have to do.”

She smiled. “I’ll make the wait worth your while, don’t worry.”

We both got dressed and then headed downstairs. She went to Marissa, saying something, and the two of them headed outside. What was Ava up to that she’d literally tabled having sex with me for?

*I might not be able to keep Ava from going to meet Cali myself, but maybe I can get someone else to do it for me.*

Knox was Ava’s family. Even after the rough patch they’d gone through, she was always sticking up for him. If I played my cards right, I might finally be able to use that irritating fact to my advantage.

I found Knox in the living room and pulled him aside.

“Hey, Knox,” I said. “I need a favor.”

**Episode 4652**

“What did you tell the witches?” I demanded, staring at Greyson in horror. “What did you offer them in exchange for their help?”

Dread circled in the pit of my stomach as I waited for him to answer.

“None of the specifics have been settled yet,” Greyson said. “But whatever they want, I’ve decided they won’t be getting it from you.”

“Greyson—”

“No,” he interrupted sternly. “I’m not budging on this. You’re not giving up or risking anything. I will.”

I was kind of pissed. I hated that Greyson hadn’t at the very least *discussed* this payment arrangement with me before deciding it.

“Greyson,” I said, praying for patience, “I get that you want to protect me and all, but *I’m* the one who needs to make the deal with the witches, not you. Please tell me you didn’t offer this to them without talking to me first?”

“I’m just curious, have you considered any other options?” Lola interrupted. “I mean, there are other ways to figure this out without having to get witches involved. Be a little creative. Think outside the box. Witch dependence isn’t a good look for a werewolf pack, if you ask me.”

I shook my head. “If there were another way, I’d jump on it—but trust me, I’m all out of options. Using magic is the quickest and easiest way to get what we need.”

Lola gave me a skeptical look. “What about a police sketch artist to take the description of this person in your head? I hear that they can do some really amazing things. All you have to do is answer a few questions, and then they’ll draw up a portrait for you. No magic needed. Just good old-fashioned communication paired with artistic ability.”

I shot Lola a skeptical look. “Thanks for the suggestion, Lola, but if we go to a sketch artist, don’t you think they’ll start asking a lot of questions?”

Lola deflated. “I guess so, but I could always call a few artists. Or get one of those identi-kit things.”

“Lola, no,” I said firmly. “I’m not about to get outsiders involved in this. We really don’t need people asking questions about what we’re doing. Honestly that’s the last thing we need.”

Lola huffed and crossed her arms. “Well, I hope Greyson looks as good in an eyepatch as Jay does!”

With that, Lola left.

I sighed in frustration. “I wish she wasn’t always so direct. Doesn’t she realize that if we had time to find another approach, I’d take it? But we *don’t* have time! We have to fix this before whatever has a hold on Xavier hurts him. Or worse! I wish Lola could understand the time crunch here instead of judging my methods.”

Greyson pulled me into a hug. “I know you’re frustrated, but Lola’s just looking out for us. She doesn’t want you to do anything you might regret.”

I pushed Greyson away. “Stop. I’m upset with you, too.”

“I get that,” he said. “But I’m not going to let the witches do a thing unless I’m the one who provides the payment—whatever it turns out to be.”

“Greyson, this just doesn’t feel right,” I said. “We might be getting in over our heads… You and I both know that sometimes, witches’ prices end up being worse than the problem you’re asking them to solve. If that happens this time, it should be my responsibility to pay—I mean, I’m the one who’s asking them for help, Greyson! Not you.”

“May I remind you that Xavier is my brother?” he inquired. “I said I’d do whatever it took to help Xavier, and that’s what I’m doing. I know you want to help—and believe me, I know how much you care about Xavier—but helping him is my responsibility, too, okay? So just let me handle this part.”

I softened a little. “I love that you’re trying to protect your brother, but that doesn’t mean I’m happy about what you did,” I said. “You should’ve talked to me before making such a big decision. I know I insisted on contacting the witches, but—”

“It doesn’t matter now, anyway,” Greyson said firmly. “The deal’s been made. Please let it go.”

At this point, I realized that Greyson had probably decided to assume the burden of payment the moment I’d told him to call the witches. Dammit, I should’ve gone with him when he’d left to make the call…

I fought off a surge of guilt.

*I should be the one at risk, not him. He went through so much when the witches fixed the sire bond problem—he shouldn’t be putting himself at their mercy again, especially so soon. And anyway, I deserve a little pain for what I did with Xavier at the mall—and the lie I told Greyson about it. He has no idea that he’s putting himself in danger for two dirty liars who hooked up right under his nose!*

It might not have been a *total* lie, but I’d certainly left out some of the steamier details about what had happened between me and Xavier—and I’d made a conscious decision to do so, because I knew that what I’d done with Xavier was wrong. Lying was also wrong, but at this point, I felt it would be kinder to carry the guilt myself than to hurt Greyson with the knowledge of what I’d done. I hadn’t done the right thing with Xavier in that dressing room, but I had to hope I was doing the right thing now.

There was a sudden commotion at the front of the house, and Torin came running over.

“There are three women here to see you, Greyson,” he announced. “They’re dressed really fancy, but something about them is kind of… scary?”

I shot Greyson a look. “They’re here?!”

He returned my look and shrugged.

I sighed, immediately feeling on edge. “I guess we shouldn’t keep them waiting. But please, can we at least not agree to give them anything until we find out *exactly* what they want and get a chance to discuss it? We need to be on the same page before we jump into anything. I mean it.”

“Okay, love,” Greyson said.

We made our way into the living room where the sisters were waiting.

“Can I get anyone something to drink?” Torin asked them. “I’ve got lemonade and limeade—freshly squeezed, of course—then there’s this new cucumber melon spritz I’ve been working on. Super refreshing.”

Greyson quickly stepped in. “Thanks, Torin, but no. This is pack business.”

The witches looked disappointed.

“Really?” Posie asked with a pout. “But I find Light Fae quite charming! And that cucumber spritz sounds good enough to die for!”

“Mmm, it does,” Lauren agreed. “And he seems super interesting! I’d love the chance to pick his brain—it’s not often that we get to interact with Fae under friendly circumstances.”

“He even seems kind of hilarious,” Chloe added with a grin. “I’ll bet he has stories for days.”

“Torin—really, thank you!” I said.

I *really* didn’t want Torn to get sucked into whatever Fae-based schemes the witches were clearly cooking up. It was bad enough that Greyson would be in their debt soon—I didn’t want Torin involved as well.

As soon as Torin was gone, Greyson jumped right to the point. “So, I believe I’ve clearly explained what Cali needs?”

“More or less,” Chloe said. “Though we’re still not really sure what this is all about.”

I wasn’t sure how much to reveal—though I was fairly sure that the less they knew, the better. They weren’t the kind of people you wanted knowing the details of your life. But on one hand, would they be able to help us stop Adéluce? Surely if they offered, it wouldn’t be out of the goodness of their hearts. These witches *always* wanted something.

“I’m trying to help a friend.” *Which technically isn’t a lie.* “Projecting this memory will do that.”

“They must be a very special friend,” Posie said. “Memory extraction is fraught with risk, you know.”

I swallowed nervously. “I’m willing to take that chance. I need to show someone a very specific memory, and I’m hoping you can help me do it.”

The witches exchanged a glance. They seemed intrigued.

“We’re probably the only witches *you* know who are up to the task,” Lauren said. “We can do it—easily—but the person who you wish to see the memory must be with you when we cast the spell. Otherwise, it won’t work.”

“Okay,” I said, taking their words in. We needed Ava to come over, now.

Greyson jumped in. “Just so you know, I’m the one you’ll be collecting payment from.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Then it appears we *didn’t* know all the details. That isn’t going to work, I’m afraid. If Cali wants her memories mined, then the payment must come from her.”

“No,” Greyson said. “That’s not going to happen. The payment comes from me, or the whole deal is off.”

The three witches shrugged.

“Suit yourself,” Posie said. “Rules are rules, and our magic follows a code that we don’t expect you to understand—though we do expect you to follow it. Sisters, shall we?”

They got up to leave.

*No, I can’t let them go. If Xavier were in my shoes right now, he’d do anything to save me. It’s time for me to do the same.*

“Wait!” I shouted at the witches. They turned to face me. “What do you want from me?”

Chloe, Posie, and Lauren shared a gleeful smile that sent a chill rocketing down my spine.

Chloe leaned in close. “That’s easy—we want a Fae promise.”

**Episode 4653**

**Xavier**

To my relief, Knox nodded immediately.

“Whatever you need,” he said. “I’m happy to help.”

“Good,” I said. “I want you to keep Ava busy for the next couple of hours. But if she finds out you’re distracting her on purpose, she’ll shake you off in a second. So, do you think you can handle it without tipping her off?”

I had no idea what he’d do to keep Ava occupied, since she was so hell-bent on meeting Cali today—I was just going to have to trust that whatever he decided to do would be enough.

I was well aware that I was desperate, and I wondered if Knox was even capable of doing what I hadn’t managed to achieve with blatant seduction. But at this point, I was willing to try anything. One day, Ava would thank me. I only hoped that whenever that day came, Adéluce would be long dead.

Knox mulled it over. “Well, I’m not crazy about misleading my cousin, but you’re my Alpha, so I guess I don’t have a choice. But I *do* want to know *why* you need Ava to be distracted. This isn’t so you can run off and do something she’ll be pissed about, is it? Because if so, I don’t want to be involved. She and I are just starting to get back on good terms.”

“No,” I said, thinking quickly. “It’s nothing that she’ll be mad about. Just the opposite. I’m planning a romantic surprise.”

I wished that were actually the case. Instead, I was deceiving Knox into distracting Ava out of putting her life in danger. There was something *kind of* romantic about that, wasn’t there?

I wished I could tell Knox the truth—I wished I could tell *Ava*, more to the point—but that wasn’t an option, so this was the next best thing. Keeping Knox in the dark would keep both him and Ava safe.

Knox made a face. “I wish I hadn’t asked.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” I said. “Just a quiet dinner at a restaurant near Bend. Something nice, to show her how much I appreciate her. That’s all.”

Knox eyed me warily. “Whatever. I don’t want or need the details. What happens between you and my cousin is between the two of you.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said dryly. “Anyway, you know your cousin—she’s clever and intuitive. If you’re not careful, she’ll figure out that something’s up, and then the whole thing will blow up, and I can’t let that happen. I’ve been planning this for too long.”

“You can count on me,” Knox said. “I’ll tell her I’m having woman problems or something and I need her advice. She’ll probably be so excited about that she won’t even think about blowing your surprise.”

*Or she won’t believe that any woman would ever give him the time of day and immediately accuse him of trying to distract her*,I thought to myself. *But I guess I have to let him use whatever method he sees fit.*

“Thanks,” I said. “That might work… But keep things simple. Ava will smell a ploy a mile away.”

I hoped that my trust in the shrimp wasn’t misplaced. If Knox actually came through for me, I’d have to show him my appreciation, somehow. Maybe I’d give him some actual responsibility—something that would show the pack how far he’d come. But that all depended on whether or not Knox actually managed to prevent Ava from going to meet Cali.

*And that’s only one half of the equation. Thanks to Greyson, there’s no system in place to stop Cali from coming to see Ava. Cali’s the one who called Ava in the first place, and I know how she can get when she has her mind set on something. If she wants to meet up with her at some point, she’ll make it happen.*

And if Greyson didn’t stop her, who would? It wasn’t like I could just go to the Redwood pack house and tell her to stay away from Ava. Not only would that be suspicious—and further aggravate Greyson, who’d outright threatened me the last time I’d shown up—it would also piss off Adéluce even more, and my current circumstances with her were already dangerous enough. And I’d already called Greyson about it.

*If I go to the Redwood house, Adéluce will go after Cali for sure. But if I don’t stop Cali from meeting with Ava, then Cali and Ava will* both *be in danger. I need to figure out how to fix the other half of this problem, and I need to do it now.*

This was the definition of a no-win situation—unless I managed to convince someone else to help. It would have to be someone close to Cali, but not so close that they’d run straight to Cali and tell her all about my request.

I grabbed my phone and made my way outside, making sure that no one was around to eavesdrop. I really didn’t want Ava to catch wind of what I was up to.

Jay answered on the first ring. “Hey, man. Surprised to hear from you.”

I felt bad. The truth was, I really missed Jay. He was one of my closest friends, and I’d hoped that he would join the Samara pack, but I’d quickly given up on trying to convince him once I’d realized that he was solidly on Cali’s side, post breakup. Not that I blamed him. Not only had I broken up with Cali in an extremely nasty way, I’d also abandoned the Redwoods and taken up with a woman they couldn’t stand.

It had been an eye opener, realizing that there was literally nothing I could say to make Jay see things my way. Which was fair enough, to a point. I’d been an ass lately. Not to mention the fact that Jay didn’t do anything without clearing it with Lola first, and she hated me now, so Jay had been keeping his distance.

In the end, I’d realized that Jay would always be loyal to the Redwood pack. At least we’d managed to stay civil and not get angry with each other—at least not *too* angry. Jay had found the time to make his displeasure with my actions all too clear.

But even though Jay had been upset about why and how I’d left the pack, we’d been able to start slowly rebuilding something that resembled our former friendship. It was far from perfect, but it was there, and at this point, that was all I could ask for.

“Can you do me a big favor and keep Cali at the house?” I blurted out.

Not too long ago, I would’ve been able to ask Jay for this kind of favor without any fear of him rejecting me, and with no questions asked. That definitely wasn’t the case anymore, and I waited nervously for his response.

There was a long silence before Jay finally spoke. “For how long?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But the longer you can keep her from leaving, the better. A few hours, at least.”

“And I suppose this is on the downlow?” Jay asked. “What about Greyson?”

“Nobody should know. I understand if you can’t abide by that… Though if that’s the case, just forget I even asked.”

I waited for Jay’s answer, wondering if his allegiance to the Redwood pack and Greyson was going to prevent him from helping me. I needed him to come through for me right now more than ever. I hoped he trusted that I wouldn’t ask him to do anything that would put Cali in danger.

“Okay,” Jay said with a sigh. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, man, that’s all I ask,” I said. “I owe you big time.”

“You do,” Jay said. “And I’ll make sure to collect.”

We ended the call, and I felt a lot better as I made my way back to the house. I finally had a plan in place that covered all bases. It wasn’t the best plan, and I knew it, but it would buy me some time.

All I needed was to keep Cali and Ava apart until I could figure out how to throw them off Adéluce’s trail. I’d managed to successfully keep everyone in the dark for this long—I just needed to keep it up.

I ran into Knox as I went in through the front door.

“Hey, Xavier,” he said. “I just realized—you never actually told me where Ava is?”

I was thrown. “What? You’re the one who’s supposed to know that! It’s literally your job!”

Spitting out a series of curses, I raced upstairs to our bedroom and then did a quick lap around the house to confirm what the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach had already told me. I hurried back into the living room, just as Knox walked through the door on the opposite side.

“She’s not here,” I said. “Ava’s gone.”

**Episode 4654**

Greyson tried to keep me from answering Chloe, but I knew that I had to do this—that I would do whatever it took to save Xavier. I didn’t take Fae promises lightly, and Greyson knew it. Artemis had broken a Fae promise to our mother about Kadmos, and she’d ended up losing her magic. And it had taken a hell of a lot to get it back.

*What if this goes very,* very *badly?*

What if the witches asked for something I couldn’t—or wouldn’t—fulfill? If I ended up breaking the Fae promise, I could lose my magic like Artemis did, or something else could happen. I didn’t know for certain. I’d only just started to feel like I’d gotten a handle on it, and I definitely didn’t want to lose it…

But I did know that if Jay was willing to give up an eye for Lola, then I was willing to lose my magic for Xavier if it came down to it. The risk would be worth it if it helped free Xavier from whatever magic was holding him hostage.

I’d spent most of my life unaware that I even *had* magical abilities, and I’d still managed to survive, so I figured I’d be okay if worst came to worst and I lost it now. It would be a stiff price, but I would manage. I only hoped that this would allow Ava to confirm that Adéluce was the one who’d attacked her and that we could start down the path of freeing Xavier from her torment.

But then I started to wonder…

*Witches are always so tricky. Is there a chance I can beat them at their own game? A way to make sure I come out on top here, no matter what?*

“Why do you want a Fae promise?” I asked.

Chloe smiled. “Why does anyone want anything?” she asked. “The Fae are powerful, as are their promises. You never know when one might come in handy.”

I took that in. “Are you sure that you can perform the memory spell?” I asked them slowly.

Chloe rolled her eyes. “We already said we could, and we certainly wouldn’t have wasted our time coming here if we couldn’t. Our time is precious. So, what will it be? Fae promise, or should we go? I have dinner reservations,” she said, checking her watch. “You’ll need to speed this up if I’m going to make them on time.”

“So decide,” Lauren and Posie said in eerie unison, their voices tinged with impatience.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m ready. I promise a Fae promise in exchange for the memory extraction.”

Greyson groaned. “Cali, this is ridiculous—what are you doing?!”

I shot him a reassuring look, wishing I could mind link with him and let him know that I had a plan. As far as he was concerned, I’d just put myself in a crazy amount of unspecified danger, but if this went the way I was hoping, that wouldn’t be the case at all.

Chloe and her sisters clapped their hands in delight.

“A real, potent Fae promise,” Lauren said. “This meeting has turned out to be even more profitable than I thought!”

“I know! Isn’t it glorious?” Posie turned to me. “Cali, I’m so happy that we could reach an agreement, and so quickly too. This is going to be great, I promise. You’ll get what you want, and we’ll get what we want.” She gave her sisters pointed looks before turning back to look at me. “And we’re good at what we do, so I’m sure you’ll be satisfied.”

*I hope I know what I’m doing. With any luck, this whole thing won’t blow up in my face… I guess I’ll find out after we do the spell.*

“So now that that’s out of the way, let’s get on with it, shall we?” I said. “We’ll get the person here as soon as possible so we can move forward.”

“Before we proceed, there are a few things you should know,” she said.

There was an ominous note in her voice that unnerved me. I’d learned the hard way that when a witch issued a warning, you needed to listen. But still, it was kind of comforting that Lauren was taking the time to lay out the risks *before* casting the spell, rather than just casting the spell and leaving me to deal with whatever side effects happened to arise.

But before Lauren could continue, there was a loud, impatient knock on the front door.

I stiffened when I heard Ava’s voice. “Where’s Cali?”

She came walking in a few seconds later, followed by Torin.

“I tried to stop her, but—”

“It’s okay, Torin,” I said. “She actually needs to be here for this.”

Ava glanced at the three witches, then looked back at me and Greyson. “I came to talk about Xavier,” she said. “You two entertaining company?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “This is Lauren, Posie, and Chloe. They’re witches, and they’re going to cast a spell on me that will allow you to see one of my memories. It’s good you came by.”

Ava scowled, arms crossed. “I do *not* need to traipse down your memory lane. No thanks. In fact, that sounds like pure torture.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. “I know it sounds kind of crazy, but it’s the only way to find out if Adéluce is really behind all of this. I have memories of Adéluce, and I want to share one with you, that’s all. Once you see it and either recognize her or don’t, we’ll have a better idea of what’s going on with Xavier and can figure out what to do next.”

Ava groaned. “*Fine*. I’ll stay and watch your memory or whatever. For Xavier.”

Chloe sighed. “Now that you two are done, can we finish explaining the risks?”

“Please do,” Greyson said flatly. “Let’s just get this over with.”

I swallowed nervously as Lauren began to spell it all out. “Memories are often hidden for a reason. Some are better left uncovered.”

“These ones aren’t hidden,” I said. “I just need a clear one of Adéluce’s face.”

Posie started laughing, and then Lauren and Chloe joined in. Chloe leaned over to whisper something in Posie’s ear, then both women looked at me and outright guffawed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked. They were starting to make me self-conscious. It wasn’t like I asked witches to extract my memories every day. How was I supposed to know the rules?

“Oh, nothing,” Posie said. “Just… It doesn’t work that way, Cali. The spell isn’t selective. We can’t just go in and cherry pick one memory. When we start mining your memories, we’ll be opening a faucet that can’t be closed again. And everyone in this room will be able to see them—it’ll look like they’re being projected onto a screen.”

My stomach clenched, but even though I knew this would probably be really embarrassing—and I wasn’t at all thrilled that Ava was going to be party to it—that was a small price to pay for narrowing down who might have Xavier under a spell.

“Torin, feel free to excuse yourself,” Greyson said. “And lock the door behind you. Don’t let anyone in. We’ll let you know when we’re done.”

Torin stepped out, and the sound of the door slamming shut and locking nearly made me jump out of my skin.

Ava gave me an amused look. “Skittish, much?”

*I guess I didn’t realize how nervous I am. And why wouldn’t I be nervous? The witches are about to push their way into my brain, pull a bunch of stuff out, and screen it like a freaking movie.*

Posie, Lauren, and Chloe stood and clasped hands, and immediately I felt the air come alive around me. They started chanting, slowly raising their linked hands in the air. Then they broke apart and surrounded me before joining hands again, trapping me in the center of their tight circle.

Moments later, I started to feel like I was floating—and then I realized that I *was* floating. I was slowly rising off the floor, and the sensation was totally disorienting. I felt nauseous, off balance, and unaware of which way was up or down.

A second later, a flood of memories washed through my mind. Glimpses of my long forgotten past came flowing back—being lifted out of my crib by my dad when I was a baby, laughing at my mother’s silly faces, being kissed by Alex…

“Try to think of more recent events,” Chloe suggested.

I tried to ignore the flood of memories and focus in on the idea of Adéluce. I’d seen her plenty of times in New Orleans—we’d fought her.

*New Orleans*, I told myself, *go there!* *This is for Xavier, Cali, so figure it out!*

The thought of Xavier hit me hard. Memories flashed before me—meeting him at his house for the first time. The first time I kissed him. The first time I saw him shift after his wolf returned… They all flashed through my mind, and I tried to take control of them, but I couldn’t seem to. Suddenly, the dressing room played out in front of me. Xavier in front of me, me hiking the dress up, his fingers on me, his mouth on mine…

*Adéluce*, I thought. *Think of Adéluce!*

*The Duquette house. The photo album. The fight at Crater Lake…*

My memories shifted, and suddenly I was in the Duquette house with Xavier. We opened the photo album, and then I saw it—the picture of Adéluce with her family. Then the memory swirled to an image of Adéluce vanishing beneath the surface of the water at the lake.

I was starting to feel overwhelmed by the onslaught of memories, both pleasant and not so pleasant. A rush of older memories suddenly entered my brain, and I felt like I was drowning. I fluttered my hands around, trying to get the witches’ attention.

“Stop!” I gasped out.

“All right, that’s enough,” Chloe said. “We don’t want her drowning in the memories.”

“Right,” Posie said. “And if that happened, we know her knight in shining armor over here would try to take us out.” She winked at Greyson.

“Though I’d like to see him catch us,” Lauren added.

The three witches cackled as I found myself drifting back to the floor. Thankfully, the nausea and disorientation had started to wane.

When my feet were on the ground, I immediately turned to Ava. She stood with her arms hugging herself, eyes wide. “Ava?” I asked.

“I remember everything,” she said, her expression blank. “I remember everything about the attack.”

My heart caught in my throat. “And?” I asked, my heart beating fast. “Did you recognize her?”

“Yes,” she said, looking up. “That was that woman who attacked me in the woods. It was Adéluce.”

**Episode 4655**

*Vindicated*. That was how I felt. I’d taken the risk of making a deal with the witches in order to prove that Adéluce was the one who’d attacked Ava, and now I knew I’d made the right choice. The risk involved in the memory extraction, Greyson and me not seeing eye to eye about it, my fears about what the witches might project from inside my memory banks—it had all been worth it.

“And you’re sure?” I asked.

Ava’s eyes shot toward me. “Yes. There’s no question in my mind,” she said, a haunted look still on her face. “She’s alive. She attacked me.”

As strange as it was to hear that Adéluce was still alive, I doubted Ava was lying about it. Why would she? Which meant it was real. Adéluce was alive. It seemed impossible, but I knew it was true. I’d known it even before the witches had dived into my memory and given Ava what she needed to put the pieces together.

*But how did Adéluce survive the lake? We saw her go under… But I guess she* was *a witch too, after all.*

I thought about how angry Xavier had been at Greyson for giving up the search for Adéluce’s body. He’d wanted solid proof that she was dead, and we’d thought we’d found it.

We’d been wrong.

Xavier had been right all along, and no one else had seen it—myself included. Why hadn’t we just done what Xavier wanted? Why hadn’t we made absolutely sure that we were free of Adéluce?

The bones we’d found later had probably been planted there by the vampire-witch herself to throw us off. And her ploy had worked. It was all so obvious, now.

*Xavier must know that she’s alive, too. Right? She’d always left hints or revealed herself to him in some way, so it’d be shocking if she stopped now…*

I was about to ask Ava if Xavier had said anything about Adéluce when the three witches started moving toward the door.

“And now it’s time for us to go,” Posie said. “But before we do, Cali, we want to make sure you remember that you’ve granted us a Fae promise. And, as I’m sure you know, we always come to collect. We’ll see you soon.” She flashed me a wolfish smile, and then all three witches blipped away.

I’d only half listened to her warning—I was just too excited about this major breakthrough. But then I realized that neither Ava nor Greyson seemed to share my enthusiasm.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, looking between the two of them. “This is the exact result we were hoping for! We confirmed that Adéluce is still alive!”

Greyson shook his head. “Yes, but you still shouldn’t have made a Fae promise. It was a reckless decision, and you have no idea what the witches intend to do with the blank check you’ve handed them.”

I frowned. “Is that really why you’re upset?”

Greyson looked away, and I could see his jaw twitching. “Never mind. We shouldn’t worry about it right now, anyway. We need to focus on Xavier.”

I was confused. “Why are you changing the subject?”

He wasn’t acting like himself. It was more than clear that he wasn’t a fan of the bargain I’d made with the witches, but it was unlike him to completely shut down on me just because we’d disagreed about something.

“I’m changing the subject because I’d rather not get into it,” Greyson shot back. “For your sake as well as mine.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You said you wanted to help Xavier, and that’s what we did. Isn’t that great?”

Greyson eyed me, and when he spoke, his voice was a low rumble. “Were you helping each other in the dressing room?” he asked.

Shock went through me. “What?”

“It wasn’t just a kiss, was it? It was much more than that.”

I flinched, and nervous heat spread through my body. I glanced at Ava. I couldn’t believe Greyson was bringing this up right in front of *her*, of all people. But Ava wasn’t even paying attention. She was staring out of the window, and it looked like she was a million miles away.

I turned back to Greyson. “How do you even—”

I stopped myself. The spell. They’d been able to see my memories, and one of them had been what had happened with Xavier. I’d been so focused on trying to control the memories and get to the ones of Adéluce… And the confirmation of knowing she was truly alive had taken my mind off of everything else.

Greyson had seen everything in my memory with Xavier. All of it.

*That spell basically just let everyone read my diary—showed them stuff that no one was ever meant to see… Fuck.*

I’d lied to Greyson, and he knew it. He knew what had really happened in that dressing room. What I had done.

So did Ava.

“I wasn’t thinking at all when that happened, Greyson,” I said. “You have to believe me. It was like I was in some kind of haze—”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” Greyson interrupted.

I fell silent, suddenly feeling about two inches tall.

“We’re going to need a witch willing to take on Adéluce,” Greyson said hollowly. “The vampire-witch is definitely a force to be reckoned with, so whoever goes up against her will have to be powerful.”

I could barely find my voice. “What about Big Mac?” I croaked out.

“I’ll ask,” Greyson said without looking at me. Then he unlocked the door and left me with Ava.

Immediately, I followed him, knowing that I needed to apologize.

“Greyson, please. There was something about it that was out of my control. I don’t know if it was the mate bond or it was just…” I trailed off, realizing how pathetic I sounded, even if I was telling the truth. My excuses would only make things worse.

I stopped walking, and he didn’t. I watched Greyson go, feeling totally helpless. What was I going to do?

Then, suddenly someone grabbed my shoulder, whirling me around. I was face-to-face with Ava. Her eyes were burning with more anger than I’d ever seen from her before.

“You know, I thought you were a slut before, but you’ve reached a new low.”

I opened my mouth, not sure what to say, but she didn’t give me a chance to say a word.

She shook her head. “I tried to ignore my gut feeling about you so we could work toward a common goal, but I *knew* I couldn’t trust you,” she said, jabbing me in the shoulder. “You’ve got everyone else fooled into thinking you’re some sweet little girl who wouldn’t hurt a fly, but I know the truth.”

“Ava, you don’t know what happened—” I started.

“The *moment* you saw an opportunity, you threw yourself at Xavier—just like every other time you’ve made one of your desperate, *pathetic* attempts to corner him,” she spat. “You can’t stand that he’s with me, can you? You cannot wrap your little half-Fae brain around the idea that Xavier fucks me and likes doing it. That he loves *me*.”

Anger coursed through me. “*He* kissed *me*!” I spat back. “He initiated it! He couldn’t wait to get his hands on me.”

And I hadn’t tried to push him away. I hadn’t told him to stop, even though he was with Ava. Even though I was with Greyson. The mate bond had completely taken over all my senses. I’d craved the kiss, and I’d wanted everything else that Xavier had done in that dressing room, too. There was no way I could’ve stopped him in that moment. I’d wanted him way too badly for that.

Ava glared at me, moving closer. “Let me remind you of something. I’m Xavier’s mate. *Me*. I’m his *Luna*,” she said. “He’s no longer part of the Redwood pack, and he never will be again.”

I wasn’t about to let her get away with her hurling insult after insult at me like that. I couldn’t just let her get the upper hand.

“Xavier’s still my mate, too,” I snapped. “That much hasn’t changed.”

Ava let out a harsh laugh. “Except that he’s living with me, not you. Your little hookup in the dressing room didn’t change *that*. It only proves how desperate you’ve become.”

She shoved past me and walked to the door, then turned back to me with her hand resting on the knob.

“And let’s make one thing clear, just so there’s no confusion about this going forward,” she said. “I fucking *loathe* you, Caliana Hart.”

With that, Ava left, slamming the door so hard behind her that the entire house shook.

I just stood there in shock. I’d known that saving Xavier would be difficult, but I hadn’t imagined it would be this painful.

*So Ava hates me. That’s hardly a surprise, or a blow. But Greyson is upset, too. I’ve made a mess of everything, and I don’t have the slightest clue how to fix it.*

I was starting to break down when a sudden flash of memory clouded my brain, overwhelming me in an instant. I cried out in pain as I slumped down to the floor, clutching my head. Was this leftover magic from the witches?

I gasped as I emerged from the intense memory. I was in the hospital, where I’d been a month or so ago because the imbalance of magic—or maybe the Seluna mark—was killing me. I’d been pretty much at death’s doorstep. Everything in my mind had been so hazy. Before now, I’d only remembered Xavier and Greyson fighting and then later waking up in the hospital…

Then I saw Seluna’s face.

Suddenly a flash of a desert came to me, one with red clouds and a purple sky. The heat. A path. My shoulder burning like hell. A hooded figure.

Seluna.

I’d met Seluna in a fever dream as I laid dying from her handprint—a mark that had been killing me ever since I’d killed her. She’d said we were running out of time and that not all the ashes had been returned to the demon world.

“There are still ashes out there,” she’d said. “Ashes that you need to return to the demon world before the magical imbalance kills you, and likely everyone around you.”

I gasped for air, the memory coming to an end. My heart beat quickly, like I was still there in the desert with Seluna. Could that actually be true? Had the ashes not really been returned?

Had Xavier lied to me?

**Episode 4656**

*Holy shit. Holy* shit. Had Xavier lied? Or had he not even known?

Or had he not been able to say anything?

I took a deep breath. My mind was going a mile a minute. I needed to balance out what I knew and what I thought I knew.

*Okay. What if all the ashes really* weren’t *returned to the demon world? What then? But the Seluna mark disappeared! That* has *to mean they were taken back. And should I really believe Seluna on this? If any of the ashes were still here in the human world, wouldn’t the mark have stayed on my shoulder this whole time?*

As much as I wanted to believe that the mark was gone for good and that all the ashes had been taken to the demon world, I couldn’t ignore the fact that the mark had reappeared. So did that mean that the ashes *hadn’t* been disposed of? Or at least not all of them?

*Is this Adéluce’s doing? Is she trying to hurt me because we’re uncovering her game with Xavier? Is that why she’s basically hitting me with my worst nightmare?*

I shuddered at the thought of the Seluna mark coming back to wreak havoc on my life. I’d truly thought I was done with that chapter of my life, but now it was starting to look like I’d been wrong.

Greyson came walking back in with Ava, and I couldn’t help but wonder if they’d talked to each other about what had happened between me and Xavier in the dressing room. I hated the thought of them commiserating with each other over their mutual sadness and anger over Xavier’s and my betrayal.

“Big Mac can’t help,” Greyson said. “She’s focusing on working things out with my mom right now.”

“Well, tell her that we need a witch. How will we defeat Adéluce without one?” Ava demanded. “She should know exactly what leaving a sadistic entity like Adéluce to her own devices might mean for all of us.”

“True, but I’m not sure she’s too concerned about that right now,” Greyson said. “She’s trying to pull back from getting involved in pack stuff all the time. It’s inconvenient as hell, but I get it.”

Ava still seemed skeptical. “Then that means we’re fucked.”

I realized that neither of them were looking at me. They were talking to each other like I wasn’t even in the room. I knew that pain was the driving force behind Greyson’s inability to look me in the eye, but that didn’t make me feel any better about it.

“Big Mac needs her space,” I said. “I think it’s good that she’s taking some time to focus on her life instead of dropping everything to deal with the pack all the time.”

“Fuck her space!” Ava shouted. “My mate’s life is in danger!”

I winced at Ava’s use of the word “mate” when referring to Xavier. I knew it was an accurate description of who he was to her, but hearing Ava say it still hurt, no matter how many times I’d heard it from her mouth.

Greyson frowned. “Well, if you’d both let me finish…”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

Ava angrily crossed her arms, but kept her mouth shut.

“Big Mac won’t help, so I called Rowena,” Greyson said. “She’ll be here any second.”

The doorbell rang.

“That must be her now.” Greyson strode off to answer the door.

I felt awful. Greyson was really taking pains not to look at me—even when he returned to the room with Rowena in tow. It was like the sight of me caused him physical pain. I couldn’t blame him for that. I’d wronged him and lied to him and he was dealing with it as best he could.

“Hey, Cali, Ava. What’s going on?” Rowena asked as she looked between the three of us. I could tell by the slight furrow in her brow that she’d picked up on the tension lingering between the three of us. “How can I help?”

“Um… We think that Xavier’s under a vampire-witch’s spell,” I said. “And we need an expert opinion—and ideally expert assistance—to break it.”

Rowena frowned. “Excuse me? Did you say *vampire-witch*? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that combo before. Though I guess it’s not surprising that they exist.”

“Yes, you’re one of the lucky few to get the opportunity to tangle with the rare and deadly vampire-witch,” I said, only half-joking.

I gave Rowena a quick rundown, all the while wishing that Greyson would deign to even look my way, but he was keeping his eyes solidly on Rowena and Ava. It was like I didn’t even exist.

“So… You thought she was dead, and now you don’t?” Rowena asked once I was finished.

I shot an anxious look at Greyson. I actually met his eyes for a brief moment and was excited that he’d finally looked at me, but it almost seemed like it had been a mistake, judging by how quickly he looked away.

Rowena pinched the bridge of her nose, and I felt bad that we’d dragged her into this.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” I said sympathetically.

“Okay, so there are obviously a lot of moving pieces here,” Rowena said. “We’ve got deadly demon ashes, which may or may not be in play. We’ve got a vampire-witch who physically attacked Ava—is that right?”

Ava nodded but didn’t say anything.

“*And* said vampire-witch most likely has Xavier under a spell. Does that cover everything?”

We all nodded.

“So, what does she want?” Rowena asked. “Does anyone know? Why is she doing all of this?”

“We think she wants to ruin Xavier’s life because she blames him for her family’s deaths,” Greyson said.

I nodded. “Yes, she made that pretty clear in New Orleans. She blames Xavier for leading the killers to her house.”

Rowena nodded. “Well, I have to admit, that’s a powerful motivator—which means she’ll be putting all of her magic behind this.”

“So how do we stop her?” I asked.

Rowena pondered my question for a moment. “Well, you could try to kill her again. But she’s proven to be fairly unkillable at this point, I guess. And the really bad part is that even if you *do* manage to kill her, there’s no guarantee that the spell on Xavier will die with her.”

Ava stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Revenge magic is very powerful,” Rowena said. “And magic in general isn’t so simple that you can just stop it at the source. Once a spell is cast, it often takes on a life of its own. That’s why witches should never try spells outside of their personal skill set. The spell could take on a life of its own.”

Fear bloomed inside me. “What if we don’t kill Adéluce, but we trap her somehow? Then maybe we could force her to dissolve the spell?”

Rowena nodded slowly. “Yes. Trapping her could work. But we’d need to find somewhere powerful enough to hold her.”

I thought about that. “A Fae circle?”

“Unfortunately not,” Rowena said. “I don’t think that would be powerful enough. She’d blast right through it.”

“What if we do the same thing we did to Seluna, the first time round? Put her in the place Lucian freed her from?” Ava suggested.

“You mean the demon world purgatory or whatever?” I asked.

Ava didn’t even look my way to acknowledge that I’d spoken.

Rowena shook her head emphatically. “No. You don’t want to mess with the demon world in any capacity. It’s unpredictable and deadly, and the veil that separates us from the place is so thin that if it’s not treated with respect, it could break and unleash hordes of demons on the world. I’m sure you don’t want that.”

I shook my head vigorously. “No, we don’t. And we know the demon world is always a little dicey—Big Mac told us that none of us should ever go there, because we might not be able to come back. That’s why Xavier used the Courier to return the ashes.”

Ava frowned. “This is going nowhere fast. All we’ve done so far is come up with what *not* to do.”

“Then how do we save Xavier?” I asked. “It seems like Adéluce is always watching him.”

Rowena looked pensive for a few beats before she spoke. “Well… I know Kira said not to tell Xavier that you know what’s happening, but she said that without knowing who the witch was—rather, who the *vampire-witch* was. Perhaps I could create wards to temporarily block Adéluce from seeing him so that you can speak to Xavier about what you know. And maybe he has useful information, too.”

“That could work,” I said. Maybe he hadn’t been saying anything because Adéluce was watching him… “How quickly can you create the wards?”

Rowena hummed thoughtfully. “I’ll need at least a day.”

I nodded. “Do it.”

“Wait, so the plan is magical intervention?” Ava asked.

“Yes, but we need all the info we can get,” I said.

Ava was finally interested enough that she forgot to stare daggers at me. “Like about what?”

“I think Adéluce might have the ashes,” I said grimly. “And if she uses them again, the magical world will collapse.”

**Episode 4657**

**Greyson**

Cali thought Seluna’s ashes were back in play?

*Fucking hell*. I remembered all too well how frail Cali had become the last time we’d fought the “magical imbalance.” I didn’t want that to happen again. I didn’t have the energy to go through that chaos, and I knew Cali felt the same.

If the ashes really were back in play, and if Adéluce truly had them, then there was no telling what could happen—more freak storms, Cali getting sicker… I definitely didn’t want to put Cali at risk, even though I was pissed at her right now.

*How could she lie to me like that about what happened with Xavier? Why* would *she lie? I thought our relationship was better than that. I thought she respected me enough to be upfront about what happens between her and Xavier. But apparently not.*

I pushed those thoughts away, trying not to think too deeply about the issue. If I did, I’d start spiraling, and then I wouldn’t be of any use to anyone.

“How do you plan on finding out if the ashes are back?” I asked Cali.

“Maybe I can try to talk to Seluna?” Cali asked. “I once spoke to her in a dream.”

“I’m not sure, love,” I said. “It’s not like you can just call her up.”

Cali looked at Rowena. “Is there a magical way for me to talk to her? A way to summon her?”

Rowena’s expression went serious. “Summon a demon? No, that’s not something you want to mess around with. And anyway, it sounds like you’re already seeing Seluna in your dreams, so that’s your best bet. Stick to what works.”

“But I don’t see her consistently, and it’s hard to control the dreams,” Cali said.

“I don’t know if there’s a solution for that,” Rowena said. “But what I *can* do is give you a sleeping potion to make sure you fall into a deeper sleep. That’s the state where you’ll be most likely to see her.”

“Hold on, I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “Will the potion put her in danger?”

Rowena shrugged. “The sleeping potion is mild and safe, but I can’t speak for the dreams it might induce. It’s up to you to decide if you want to take the risk. You asked for a way to see Seluna, and this is what I can do to increase the odds of that happening. Otherwise, you can just wait for it to happen again spontaneously.”

I turned to Cali. “I don’t know if you should do this so quickly. Maybe we should wait a bit and see if there’s another way.”

Cali frowned. “But don’t you think we’ve wasted enough time? All this time thinking that Xavier was just being an asshole, ignoring the signs that there was something off with him, leaving him alone to suffer? Whatever danger he’s in right now is partly our fault, at this point.”

“Cali, don’t say that,” I retorted. “You are *not* responsible for this.”

Cali shook her head. “Not entirely, but I do bear *some* responsibility. I saw all the signs and ignored them because I was so mad at him. I let my emotions get in the way.”

“Yes, but you were mad at him because he treated you like shit,” I snapped, losing control of my temper. “And yet, you’ve still given him chance after chance! You’ve given him *you*!”

The room fell silent, and Ava and Rowena looked at the floor.

Cali’s face flushed with embarrassment, and I wished I could’ve been anywhere but here. Cali probably felt the same.

*Well, she never should’ve lied to me. And now the damage is done.*

“I’m sorry I hurt you, Greyson,” she said quietly. “I never should’ve lied to you. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, but now it has, and there’s no going back. All I can tell you is that I’m so, so sorry, and at the same time… I need your help. I need *you.* We know now that a lot of Xavier’s recent decisions might not actually have been his. We have to do something about that.”

I was frustrated and beyond agitated. Cali was right—Xavier was under the influence of a powerful magical being—but that didn’t mean he’d made all the right choices. And it *definitely* didn’t mean that we were at fault for reacting negatively to his actions. We’d had no way of knowing that there was an evil force behind it all.

*I feel guilty, too. Xavier needed our help—*needs *our help—and clearly had no way of asking for it. That has to be torture for a man like my brother, who places so much value on control.*

“Fine,” I finally said to Cali. “If you need to do this, I’ll support you.”

But the words didn’t feel nearly as good as they usually did.

Cali gave me a small smile. “Thank you,” she said. Then she turned to Rowena. “What do you need to make the sleeping potion?”

“Actually, it’s mostly made of a bunch of household spices—things you probably have in your kitchen. Boiled chamomile, sugar, salt, honey, those kinds of things. And I have some of the witchy ingredients in my pack, right here.”

“Okay, I think we have that stuff in the kitchen. Let’s go look,” Cali said.

“I’m going to get some air,” Ava said. “Let me know when it’s time.”

The three women left me to stew in my conflicting feelings. It was true that I was feeling guilty about everything my brother was going through—and the fact that I’d just been angry and aggressive to him the entire time—but I also thought that Xavier should’ve come to me. It hurt to think that he hadn’t. Unless… Unless he literally *couldn’t*.

No, I wasn’t about to dwell on the “what ifs.” I had to focus on the facts. Also, I needed a drink. That memory spell had really done a number on me. That playback of Cali and Xavier’s time in the dressing room was literally the worst thing the spell could’ve shown me. And I hated the idea that Cali was happy to just lie to me like that.

I was just pouring myself a shot of whiskey when Jay walked in.

“Hey, Greyson,” he said. “Lola wanted me to come see if there were any updates on the Xavier situation.”

I smiled bitterly and threw back my drink. “How much time do you have?”

I poured myself another.

“I’ll join,” Jay said. “Whiskey’s tonight’s poison of choice?”

I nodded and poured him a glass, wondering if I should limit the number of people who knew all the details of Xavier’s plight—but then I immediately rejected that idea. That kind of secrecy was what had gotten us into such deep shit in the first place. The more people who knew about this, the better—just in case things went south.

I took another gulp of whiskey and let the words tumble out. “We think that Adéluce is alive, and that she’s put a curse on my brother. Oh, and he and Cali hooked up in the mall, earlier.”

I poured another splash of liquor and downed that, too. I was finally starting to feel a little better. A very little.

“Shit,” Jay muttered. He downed his entire drink, then set his empty glass down on the table and poured himself another. He drank that down, too.

It felt good not to drink alone. Drowning your sorrows with a friend was always better.

“So is Adéluce why Xavier has been a total ass to all of us lately?” Jay asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe. But he also made that choice, didn’t he? I can’t imagine that the curse explicitly forced him to treat us all like garbage.”

Jay shook his head. “This is confusing, man.”

“I know.”

“Shit, is this why he ran off and became Samara Alpha? And why he’s with *Ava*, of all people?”

I scowled. “Maybe. We won’t know all the details until we talk to him.”

*And then once we talk to him and clear this up, he’ll probably get right back to chasing Cali*,I thought darkly.

“So…” Jay hesitated for a moment. “Do you think he might be able to come back?”

Jay sounded so hopeful, and even though I *did* want to free my brother—and I wasn’t exactly *against* Xavier rejoining the Redwoods—I still couldn’t help but worry about how that would work. After all, Xavier was Alpha of a pack, now. What if he came back and started pushing to be Redwood Alpha?

And then there was the *due destini*. That was obviously still a factor.

I slammed my empty glass down on the table and massaged my temples. I could feel a headache coming on.

A small voice came to life in my head.

*Just let this whole thing go. It isn’t your problem. Don’t bring Xavier back here. If that happens, it’ll be just like it used to be, with you fighting for Cali’s time and attention. Hasn’t this time with her been so nice? Just the two of you, running the pack together? Cali as your unofficial Luna? Do you really think that’ll continue once Xavier comes back?*

I was starting to wonder if I should do anything. Maybe… Maybe it would be better if I just let Xavier be and forgot all about Adéluce.

**Episode 4658**

I watched Rowena stir the bubbling potion on the stove. It smelled strange—not bad, but not good, either. I had no desire to drink the sleeping potion—or to see Seluna again, come to think of it—but if I wanted to save Xavier, I was just going to have to suck it up. I needed answers, and if this was a way to get them, I had to give it my all.

Rowena lifted a spoonful of the mixture to her nose, then she nodded and smiled. She turned off the burner and poured the concoction into a mug.

“It’s done,” she said. “It’s one of the easiest tonics to make, really.”

Once she’d filled the mug up halfway, she waved her hand over it and chanted a few unintelligible words under her breath.

“Okay,” she said. “Now it’s *really* done.”

I was nervous about deliberately seeking out Seluna, but I kept telling myself that I had to do this for Xavier. We were so close to figuring out how to pull him out from under Adéluce’s hold, and I had to just keep going—full speed ahead.

I turned to see Greyson emerging from the study with Jay. Judging by the look on Jay’s face, it was clear that Greyson had filled him in on everything that happened. I wondered if that included what had happened between Xavier and me in the dressing room.

*No point worrying about that, now. If Greyson did tell Jay, that’s his right. If I’d used self-control at the mall, and if I’d been honest with Greyson about what really happened, I wouldn’t even be in this position in the first place.*

I nodded to Greyson. “Let’s go into the living room, where it’s more comfortable.”

I sat down on the couch, and Ava sat in an armchair across the room, her expression unreadable. Greyson knelt beside me, and Jay stood awkwardly over us both.

“Good luck, Cali,” Jay said evenly.

I smiled up at him. “Thanks.”

Rowena came over and handed me the mug. “Just a couple of sips should do the trick. Don’t overdo it—there’s a fine line between deep sleep and a coma.”

Greyson winced. “I could have done without hearing that.”

Rowena shrugged. “It’s the truth. But we don’t have to worry about that, because Cali’s going to sip it, as instructed.”

I nodded and looked at Greyson. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this. See you on the other side.”

“I’ll be here the whole time,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I can do this.”

Greyson gave me a slight nod, then shifted around to make himself more comfortable on the floor.

I took a deep breath, swirled the potion around in the mug a little, and then took two sips. The liquid was bitter, but I swallowed it down.

“Perfect,” Rowena said. She took the mug and backed out of my line of sight.

I sighed and lay back on the couch, settling into the pillows.

Greyson took my hand. “How are you feeling? You doing okay?”

“I’m okay. Not feeling anything yet,” I said. “That didn’t taste very good, but it feels kind of pleasant going down. I think this is going to turn out okay.”

“Good,” he said. “But if you feel like your life is in danger at any point, remember that you don’t have to force yourself to talk to Seluna. You can just get somewhere safe until you wake up. We don’t want this to go wrong.”

“I will, I promise,” I said, then I hesitated for a moment. “But for some reason, I don’t think Seluna wants to hurt me.” I felt my eyelids drooping. “She doesn’t seem the same as she did before.”

Greyson frowned. “What do you mean? As far as I can remember, your suffering gave Seluna purpose. Are you trying to say that that’s changed?”

“I don’t know… I guess it’s just the way she keeps asking me for help,” I slurred. “I think she just wants to leave. For good…”

My words trailed off, and I opened my mouth to say more, but I couldn’t form the words.

Suddenly, I drifted into a deep, swirling darkness, and then I was falling. My limbs felt so heavy that I couldn’t even flail. And then I landed with a thud.

I immediately stumbled to my feet and looked around. I appeared to be in a desert, except everything was completely washed out—the sky was leeched of color, dimmed down to a faded grey, and the sand was the color of ash. I looked at my hands. They were normal-looking, and so was the rest of me. I was the one spot of color in this grey wasteland.

Then I saw it—a pop of red in the distance. It was moving between the dull grey dunes, and drifting in and out of my vision. That had to be Seluna.

I raced toward the movement, waving my arms over my head. “Seluna! Seluna! Is that you? It’s me, Cali! I need to talk to you!”

If it *was* Seluna out there, she didn’t seem to hear me. The figure wavered in and out of corporeality, like a mirage. A curtain of swirling heat waves obscured the dunes, and it occurred to me that I didn’t feel hot, even though I was in the desert. I supposed that you didn’t really feel temperature in dreams.

“Hey! Seluna! Or whoever you are! Can you hear me?”

I kept running, but the figure only seemed to be getting farther away.

I kept calling out, but they didn’t turn back. I suddenly dropped to my knees as the sand grabbed my feet and started pulling me down.

“Dammit,” I hissed as I started sinking faster. “Quicksand.”

*Don’t panic, Cali. If there’s one thing you know about quicksand, it’s that fighting it makes it worse. And you don’t need to worry, anyway. This is a dream. Nothing can actually hurt you here—no matter how scary it may be.*

But despite all my self-talk, I was still panicking. It was getting harder and harder to catch my breath, and I was starting to hyperventilate. All I could think was that if I kept sinking at this rate, in just a few minutes, I’d be completely enveloped by the sand and unable to breathe.

Then the flicker of red appeared only a few feet away from me, and I sighed with relief when I saw that it was Seluna after all. I looked up at her, squinting against the sun.

“Why are you here?” she demanded. “Why would you force this meeting? Don’t you know that this is dangerous?”

“Please!” I gasped out. “Help me! Xavier’s life is in danger!”

Seluna laughed. “You and I have our own problems to worry about.”

I scrambled for solid ground, hoping to pull myself out of the sand that was slowly pulling me down. “Yes, but we have a common enemy: Adéluce.”

Seluna let out an angry hiss. “That fucking vampire-witch!”

“I think I can free you from her, and from our world,” I told her. “I remember what you said, now—that not all of your ashes made it back to the demon world.”

Seluna nodded. “Yes, that’s what I said. I should’ve known that your feeble human mind would fail to remember my warning, that you’d be too pathetic to do anything about it. Humans can’t be counted on to act with urgency until the situation is out of hand.” She thrust a hand out at me. “Case in point.”

I was annoyed, but I pushed on.

“I might not have remembered your warning before, but I remember it now, and I’m trying to fix the problem!” I snapped as I sank lower in the sand. I was almost submerged up to my neck, now. “But if you want my help, I need to know how to stop Adéluce.”

Seluna scowled. “Idiot human—are you really asking me how to best her? You need to kill her, of course. That’s the simplest way to get rid of the bitch.”

“But she’s cursed Xavier!” I shouted. “If we kill her, the curse might not die with her. A very knowledgeable witch just told me that a spell can linger long after its caster is gone.”

I coughed and spluttered as sand started pouring into my mouth. I didn’t have much longer.

“Yes, and the longer the curse stands, the worse its effects will become,” Seluna said. “It’ll eat away at your beloved mate until there’s nothing left of him. So ticktock, little human—your lover’s time is almost up. And unfortunately, that means *our* time might be up, too.”

“What? If that’s true, then why won’t you help me?” I gasped.

“I am helping, but there’s only so much I can do,” she said. “And just so you’re aware—the veil grows thinner every time we meet, so do try not to make a habit of dropping in on me like this.”

I let out a muffled scream as the sand swallowed me up.

**Episode 4659**

I gasped as I woke up, my heart thrashing away in my chest. For a few seconds, I choked on the sand, but then my brain remembered it wasn’t real and I pulled in a deep, shuddering breath.

I let out a sigh of relief when I felt Greyson’s arms close around me.

“You shouldn’t have waited so long!” he snapped at Rowena. “She could’ve been hurt!”

“I pulled her out as fast as I could,” Rowena said evenly.

Greyson pulled back and ran his hands over my body, checking for injuries.

“Greyson, calm down,” I said. “It was just a dream. I’m fine, I promise. No worse for wear.”

“I know, but you started choking,” Greyson said. “I thought that Seluna might be choking you, or—”

“Really? I guess… there was quicksand!” My heartbeat sped up even more at the memory of the sand pulling me down.

Greyson looked at Rowena, who rolled her eyes and raised her hands in a “this has nothing to do with me” kind of way. “Like I said from the beginning—I make the potion, I don’t make the dreams.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Rowena,” Ava said from her seat in the corner. “This is just what Greyson and Xavier always do when it comes to Cali—they push people to help them, and then when they *do* help and it doesn’t go perfectly for their beloved Cali, they flip the fuck out.”

“Ava!” I hissed. I turned back to Greyson. “But she’s right. None of this is Rowena’s fault. I’m okay, I promise.”

“As always,” Ava grumbled.

Ignoring her, I kept my eyes on Greyson. It felt good to have him worrying about me in spite of the tension between us. I hoped we were on track to getting past what I’d done. At least he was looking at me again. Greyson loved me, and I knew that. I loved him, too. He was just hurt—and how could he not be?

*I’m still confused about what happened with Xavier myself, to be honest. It was like I lost control…*

“Okay, now that we’re done freaking out over nothing, can we hear about this dream?” Ava asked. “That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? Did you learn anything useful, or was this all just a big waste of time?”

I glared at Ava and addressed the others. “I talked to Seluna—”

“And?” Ava interrupted.

“I talked to her, and she didn’t tell me how to stop Adéluce,” I said.

“Great, so it *was* a waste of time,” Ava grumbled. “Why am I not surprised?”

“No,” I snapped. “It wasn’t a waste at all. Seluna said that my going to meet her deliberately like I just did will cause the ‘veil’ to grow thinner. And I didn’t learn how to stop Adéluce, but I *did* learn that Adéluce’s curse will only hurt Xavier more the longer he’s under it.”

I looked over at Rowena, who nodded and said, “So it’s *that* kind of a curse. Interesting.”

“What? What kind?” I asked, instantly panicked. “Is it an extra bad one?”

“I should say so,” Rowena said, with feeling. “There are different classes of curse, and one of those classes grows in strength over time—like it feeds on the life force of the cursed. That sounds like what we’re dealing with here.”

“Then we have to stop it!” I burst out. “If we wait any longer, there might not be anything left of Xavier to save!”

Rowena nodded. “Agreed. You need to talk to him right now. I just need to go back to my place to pick up a few things for the ward. See you soon.”

She blipped away without another word.

I turned back to Greyson, Ava, and Jay. “Now we just need to figure out how to get Xavier to an intervention.”

“I don’t know,” Ava said with faux-thoughtfulness, “why don’t you send him an invitation to a mall dressing room? Tell him it’ll be just the two of you—I’m sure he’ll show up.”

Heat flooded my face. Ava clearly wasn’t about to let me forget what I’d done. It actually looked like she was really enjoying laying into me. It was probably cathartic for her.

“Ava, you’re not helping,” Jay said.

Greyson turned to me, ignoring Ava. “I think we should just bring him here.”

“But will he come?” I asked. Xavier wasn’t always predictable when it came to his stance on interacting with me.

Ava sneered at me. “Come on, Cali—what’s all this self-doubt? I’m sure he’ll race right over here if you invite him.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Ava was being… a lot, right now. “What do you mean?”

Ava threw her head back and cackled. “Seriously? Don’t play coy, now. You know that Xavier will only come to this house if he thinks his darling Cali is in distress and needs his help—so call him tonight. He’ll drop everything and come running to you, just like he always does.” She stepped close to me. “Look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong.”

The anger and hurt in Ava’s eyes were almost too much to bear.

“I—I—” I couldn’t say anything. It was like my words were stuck in my throat. The intensity of Ava’s stare was enough to make me want to race out of the room.

“Enough,” Greyson said, stepping between us. “Just call him, Cali. We’ll get him here, one way or another.”

With that, we all started filtering out of the room. I’d barely cleared the threshold when Lola intercepted us.

“What’s going on? Jay? Cali?” she said. “Status update?”

*There’s a LOT to update her on—like how I completely suck. Ava’s raking me through the coals, and it’s fair enough, really. Greyson’s hurt, and I need to give him space, and I keep apologizing… But I don’t know if it’s good enough or if I’m worthy enough for him anymore. If I ever was.*

*I’ve made a horrible mess of things again, Lola, how are you?*

But I decided to keep it simple for the time being and focus on the task at hand. “We’re going to try to get Xavier here. Can you keep the pack occupied so they don’t interrupt?”

Lola sighed. “So, what? I’m a glorified lookout, now? Cool.”

“You know that’s not true,” I said. “Come on. Please. This is important.”

She scowled and rolled her eyes. “Fine. Jay and I will watch the pack while you do whatever it is you have to do.” Jay nodded at her words.

“Thank you, Lola,” I said. “I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said with a wave of her hand.

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A little while later, Greyson, Ava and I gathered together in the study.

Rowena had just blipped back and was in the process of setting up crystals around the perimeter of the room. She’d brought a bunch of incense, too, and was lighting it with her fingertip as she went, humming and muttering incantations all the while.

When she was done with the crystals and incense, she lit a few bundles of sage and placed them in crystal dishes where they quickly burned out, turning the air smoky. She even had an illuminated crystal skull that she sat in a dark corner after muttering an incantation over it.

Finally, Rowena had us push all the furniture to the edges of the room so that the center of the floor was clear, then she drew a strange symbol on the floorboards and covered it with the area rug.

She stood up and dusted off her hands. “Done.”

Taking a deep breath, I called Xavier. As soon as he picked up, I let out a far too excited, “Hi!”

It was super awkward.

“Hi.”

The tone of his voice rattled me. “Um, we need to talk.”

There was a long pause.

“I know,” he said.

“You need to come here and talk to me about what happened in person,” I said bluntly. “You owe me that much.”

Xavier went quiet again for a few seconds.

“I’m on my way,” he finally said. Then he hung up.

I looked over at Greyson, Rowena, and Ava—who was glaring at me.

I was flushed and embarrassed. How could I not be? That wasn’t the type of conversation that you wanted an audience for. Guilt weighed heavily on me. They all knew “what happened,” and I grew more ashamed of it as every second went by.

“He’s coming,” I said.

“Surprise, surprise,” Ava said.

We all sat and waited for him to arrive. No one said a word. After what seemed like an eternity—mainly because of the awkwardness, since barely no time had actually passed—I received a text from Xavier. He was here.

I left the room and went to go get him. When I opened the door, I was hit with an immediate reaction to him. Like in the dressing room, the desire was so sudden and strong. Like the mate bond was trying to pull us together. He was in the middle of putting his clothes back on after shifting, and I averted my eyes as guilty flashes of being in the dressing room with him played through my mind.

*I don’t need this now. Not again.*

“Where do you want to talk?” he asked.

Flustered and short of breath, I said, “Inside.”

Quickly—and without touching him—I ushered him into the house and into the study.

He froze the moment he walked through the door. He looked around, shaking his head as he took in the sight of Ava, Greyson, and Rowena.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he demanded.

Rowena snapped her fingers and all the crystals lit up, flooding the room with soft, calming light. “The wards are up.”

We could talk to Xavier. We could talk to him without Adéluce’s prying eyes. We had to make this count.

Xavier looked around. “Wait, what the hell is this? Someone had better tell me right the fuck now.”

I stepped in front of him. “Xavier. We know about Adéluce.”

**Episode 4660**

**Xavier**

Stunned to silence, I tried to ride the waves of emotion that were roaring through me. At first, all I felt was pure relief. I’d fantasized about this moment so many times—someone figuring out what was happening to me, someone helping me—but I’d always pushed the fantasy away, since I knew that anyone who tried to help me would only end up in Adéluce’s crosshairs.

*But did Cali really just say that she knows about Adéluce? That means… Could that actually mean that this is almost over?*

But my relief quickly gave way to fear.

*Fuck. If they all know about Adéluce, then they’re in more danger than ever. Adéluce is probably stalking us right now, getting ready to attack. This won’t go well for any of them.*

Then I looked around at the concerned faces staring back at me, and my anger rose. They didn’t get this, not as well as they clearly thought they did. I looked at my brother and took a step forward. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s okay, Xavier,” Cali said. “Now that we all know about Adéluce, you don’t have to be scared anymore. We’re going to help you. But you’re going to have to help us do that.”

I cut her off. “Do *not* talk about her. I don’t want to hear her name out of your mouth,” I said forcefully. “You don’t get it. This—this is not going to end the way you think it will.”

“This room is warded, Xavier,” Rowena said. “Nothing we say in here will be heard by Adéluce—or anyone else, for that matter. It’s just us here.”

“Adéluce can’t hear what we’re going to talk about,” Cali said. “You’re safe here.”

“Which is pretty much what Rowena already said,” Ava snapped, stepping between me and Cali. “But thanks for explaining it for everyone.” Putting her back to everyone else, Ava focused on me. “We know there’s a spell on you—a curse.”

“So talk to us,” Greyson said. “Before we can’t.”

I was completely shocked, and genuinely surprised when I managed to speak.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” I said. “It doesn’t matter that you’ve put up a ward. It doesn’t matter at all. She will find out what you know, and she’ll hurt you all. You need to get out of here. It’s not safe for you, for me—for any of us!”

*I’m surprised that I can even say any of this, but maybe it’s just mind over matter… It’s not like I’ve explained any of what’s happening in detail. Either way, Adéluce doesn’t give a shit about wards. She’s way too powerful to let them stop her.*

“Just tell us what’s going on,” Greyson said. “What happened?”

“Just a quick reminder—my wards *will* protect you against the vampire-witch, at least for a while. You should speak freely, Xavier,” Rowena said. “That’s why we brought you here—so that you can help us help you.”

I shook my head. “No, you don’t understand. None of you do. She’ll find out what you’re doing, and there will be consequences. I *can’t* talk about what happened with her. Wards or no wards.”

Cali stepped toward me. “We *want* to put a stop to what she’s doing to you. Don’t you want this to end? I know you like to take care of things on your own, but this is one time when you’re going to have to rely on other people.”

Cali looked so concerned, so scared for me, and a big part of me wanted to step forward and hug her—but Ava was right there, and she didn’t look too pleased with me to begin with. She wore a tight expression on her face. Maybe she’d seen the look I was giving Cali.

“If I could tell you about what Ad—” My words choked to a stop as burning pain filled my body. It was the same pain that had always stopped me from talking about her before.

“Are you okay?” Ava asked.

“Try telling us again,” Cali urged.

“Stop it! Don’t you see that you’re hurting him??” Ava snapped. “Is getting the information worth the torture he’s obviously going through?”

Ava was right—the pain was quickly reaching an unbearable level—but still, I pressed on.

“The spell that Adél—”

I almost got her name out. I was afraid of saying it out loud again when other people could hear, but I was suddenly hopeful, too. All these people had come together for me, and this was my chance. I had to take it. I might not get another.

I looked at my brother, who was standing a few feet away with an intense look on his face.

“What happened—I can’t talk about it.” It felt like a cheese grater was slicing across my tongue. A sheen of cold sweat broke out across my forehead, and my mouth was bone dry.

“You mean you physically can’t talk about it?” Greyson asked. “You can’t talk about the spell, about whether we’re right about Adéluce—none of it?”

I shook my head, confirming.

“Shit,” Greyson muttered.

“So she prevented you from being able to tell anyone anything,” Cali said. “Did she… Did she make you do things?”

I nodded again, but the pain was reaching a fever pitch. My words were stilted, and I couldn’t expressly tell them what was going on with me, but it felt like I was getting through to them a bit. This was so much further than I’d ever gotten, and I was beyond thankful for that. Energized by it.

“The ashes,” I ground out as pain coursed through me. “She has them.”

Cali’s eyes widened in alarm. “*What?* She does? Where? Where is she keeping them?”

“Is she going to use them?” Greyson asked.

I nodded again. The pain was at its peak, now. It was starting to tear at my focus, but I kept going.

“The ri-ring,” I stuttered.

“The ward is falling,” Rowena warned. “We don’t have much time left.”

“What? Ringing? What’s ringing?” Ava asked.

I shook my head and pointed to my hand.

“Ring?” Cali asked.

I nodded, but the pain was so bad now that I felt like I was about to pass out. I started gasping for air, then I coughed up a glob of blood.

Ava rushed forward, putting a hand on my chest. “Enough, Xavier! Don’t say another word!”

I dropped to my knees, just as a peal of angry, malicious laughter shook the room. The others looked around in fear, and I realized that they were hearing it too. It wasn’t just me this time.

Fear gripped me as the burning ache in my veins intensified. Finally, I let out a groan of agony. Cali’s eyes widened in alarm, and Ava dropped to her knees beside me, trying to support me and keep me from collapsing to the floor.

A second later, Adéluce appeared in a blinding flash of fire.

“It’s her!” Cali screamed, placing herself between Adéluce and me. She was already starting to gather magic in her palms.

“*No*,” I choked out.

I wanted to tell Cali to stop—that it wouldn’t work, that blasting Adéluce was pointless and would only anger her more—but I couldn’t speak through the pain.

“You’re ruining everything, you stupid humans!” Adéluce screeched. “This is between me and Xavier! Why can’t you all mind your own business?”

“No!” Cali shouted back. “Xavier *is* our business! Whatever you’re doing to him, we’re going to stop you!”

Adéluce threw her head back and laughed as the wall of flames danced around her. “What, you think some sparkly Fae magic is going to stop me? My vengeance is my fuel. I will never die!”

Adéluce unleashed a blast of magic that snuffed out all the lights and threw everyone back. Greyson slammed into a wall, and Rowena crashed into the window, sending a spray of glass flying through the room.

Cali and Ava let out almost identical cries of surprise as they were thrown into the air and slammed down hard to the floor.

Only I remained in the same place—on my knees, watching my world crumble.

Adéluce stepped out of the flames and approached me.

“Get the fuck away from him!” Cali shouted. “Don’t you touch him!”

But Adéluce ignored her. She bent down, put a finger under my chin, and tilted my head back. Even that small motion caused all the fire in my veins to surge, and I let out a scream of pure agony.

“Poor, stupid Xavier,” Adéluce whispered. “You should’ve heeded my warnings. Now it’s going to get so, so much worse.”

Flames licked up around me, burning my flesh as they swallowed me whole.

“Xavier!”

“Xavier!”

I heard Ava and Cali calling out for me, but their voices were quickly swallowed by my own screams.

The pain was so intense now that I couldn’t see. I’d gone blind, and I could only hope that it was temporary.

Some time later, I became aware of my surroundings again. I was sprawled on my back, screams still spiraling out of my mouth. I slowly opened my eyes and was greeted by the sight of a sky stained as red as blood.