**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 36**

**Episodes 4661–4790**

**Episode 4661**

**Artemis**

Marius and I were each bound and bouncing along uncomfortably in the back of a wagon. There were chains around our necks that had to be negating our magic. That was unfortunate, because I would love nothing more than to summon my arrows right now and shoot them straight through our captors’ eyeballs. Or Marius’s eyeballs.

Both? Both.

“What the hell did you do?” I hissed.

Marius gave me a look so innocent it sent my blood pressure to the Fae heavens. With that cherubic look, he asked, “Who? *Me?*”

“Yes, you.”

“I’m afraid you have the wrong person. I’ve never done anything wrong in my entire life.”

If I died from a spite-fueled stroke today, Marius would be to blame. I internally vowed to come back and haunt him as a ghost. Then I said, “These people don’t know me, so they must be after you. What crime did you commit?”

Marius laughed—the *gall*—and said, “My only crime is that I’m a bounty hunter.”

Bounty hunters weren’t exactly universally liked, but doing what we did was common in the Fae world. “Why would we be arrested for bounty hunting? That makes no sense!”

Marius shrugged. “Did I not mention that bounty hunting has been outlawed in some districts?”

My eye twitched. “You couldn’t have led with that?”

He grinned. “I like to provide information in small, delicious morsels. It keeps people interested.”

Rage.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this,” I hissed, smacking him on the shoulder with my bound fists. “It’s my first time back in the Fae world in forever, and I’m already an outlaw. It’s all your fault!”

He scoffed. “Artemis, come on. As long as you’re with me, there’s no reason for you to worry—”

“Oh my gods, unless you’ve got a plan to get us out of this, *shut up*,” I snapped.

“I always have a plan,” Marius said casually. “We’re probably being taken to Nelftrine.”

I paused, frowning. I knew the town. It was a lot bigger than where we were now. “Why there?”

Marius raised an eyebrow. “Sure you want to know? After all, you told me to shut up.”

I kicked him in the shin, and all he did was grin.

More rage.

“Just tell me,” I demanded.

“Nelfrine is where the accused are tried and sentenced,” Marius explained. “And unless you have a serious amount of coin, we won’t be able to bribe the guys who captured us.”

“So our captors are basically bounty hunters making money by capturing other bounty hunters?” I asked dubiously.

Marius snorted. “Yep. Ironic, right?”

The only money I had with me was human money. Our captors did not look like the quirky collector types who would pay a fortune for human papers, so that wouldn’t do.

“We’ll have to escape the old-fashioned way,” I said, struggling with my binds. “Fight our way out.”

Marius smirked. “I’m always up for a good fight. I just hope you can keep up.”

I paused for a moment, taking in his infuriatingly charming grin. “I’ve stabbed people half as annoying as you are in the throat just to stop them from talking. How’s that for keeping up?”

He laughed as if he were having the time of his life. “You’re adorable.”

Adorable. Me.

*Adorable*.

“Right,” I deadpanned. “I’m so adorable that if I get out of these chains before you do, I will leave you here to rot.”

Marius flashed me a cocky smile, pearly whites and all. “You sure about that?” he asked, holding up his unbound hands.

For a beat, I simply could not speak.

“Good thing I freed myself first, because I’d never leave you behind,” he said, reaching over to my wrists. His touch lingered as he eyed the binds, then looked back up at my face. “Might keep those cuffs on you, though. Drag you around with them. Always loved to see you squirm.”

The back of my neck heated up, and the pit of my stomach twisted. Not unpleasantly, but it wasn’t a welcome feeling. I ignored it.

“Take these off. Right now,” I said in a firm, low voice.

His gaze flickered to my mouth. “Only if you say ‘please.’ You know I like that.”

The urge to bite him—in a bad or good way, I didn’t know—struck me. Why did he *always* have to be like this?

“Oh, all-powerful Marius,” I said in a monotone, “please take these cuffs off me, so I can be free to eventually stab you in your sleep.”

“Only if you promise,” he joked.

Marius shook his head and released me, laughing at the same time. It was loud enough that one of our captors whirled around with wide eyes. He was tall, but the shortest of the lot, with green hair. He alerted his two burly comrades.

“Hey!” Green Hair barked. “They’re escaping!”

The wagon came to a sudden halt just as I jumped up. Green Hair blasted me with a puff of, predictably, green magic. I ducked and dove forward, landing in front of him to kick him in the shin, the nuts, and the chin. In that order. He toppled over the side of the wagon with a squeak. I grinned, ready to stand when Burly #1 grabbed me by the arm.

“You wench! I’m gonna—”

He never finished his sentence. Marius had his arm wrapped around the man’s thick neck in a second. He whispered something, faint silver smoke slithering out of his mouth before his lips twisted into a dangerous smile. Burly #1 gasped for air, when—

“Let him go, or I’m shooting her in the head.”

Burly #2 was standing behind me. I heard the telltale sound of a pistol being cocked next to my ear. Armed with iron bullets, no doubt.

Marius’s eyes flickered to me the same second I summoned my arrow and aimed at Burly #1’s heart.

“Let us both go, or your friend is dead anyway,” I said.

 The man behind me scoffed. “That’s not a weapon fit for the likes of you, little girl. Let the real men talk before—”

Before I could register what in the Fae hell was happening, Marius whistled loud enough to make my ears throb. The horses spooked, breaking into a run, and the wagon jolted. That had to be exactly what Marius wanted, because the sudden movement startled Burly #2. It gave me the opportunity to turn around and blast him.

He flew backward, off the carriage, followed by an unconscious #Burly 1, whom Marius tossed overboard as if he were a used-up tissue. He was so nonchalant in his movements—in complete control. It, begrudgingly, made me regain some respect for him.

“You’re welcome,” he shouted while the horses kept on running like mad.

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head before I moved over the carriage seat to get to the still-frantic horses.

“Hey, wait up!” Marius called. He scrambled behind me in a way that carried none of his earlier grace. He looked almost overeager, which should *not* have been endearing after I had literally seen him discard a man three times his size.

“Aren’t we going to talk about how I distracted and you attacked?” he asked. “Admit it, we make pretty good partners—”

I was reaching for the reins of the horse on the left when Marius’s foot caught on something that released it. The horse ran off, the carriage rocked, and Marius turned to blink at me.

“Oops?”

“I *am* going to kill you one day, Marius. Mark my words.”

He laughed, leaping to straddle the remaining horse just as it came to a sudden stop.

Marius was thrown overhead, landing on the ground with a huge thud. Not a single sound had escaped his mouth, not even a startled scream. But I still found the whole thing so ridiculous that I cracked up.

“Nice move, *partner*.” I said that last word mockingly. Grabbing the saddle of the remaining horse, I slid onto it, grinning.

Marius got to his feet, dusting himself off. Looking up at me with raised eyebrows as he swaggered closer, he said, “You better be good now and make some room for me on that saddle, Ari.”

“I’m not—”

Before I could finish talking, he jumped up onto the horse right behind me. His chest was pressed against my back as he reached over to take the reins. Somehow moving even closer, he spoke in my ear, his voice low and raspy.

“I think I told you to be good now, *partner*.”

I gulped. “I’m *not* your partner.”

He chuckled, and his breath hit my heated cheek. I had to bite my tongue when he said, “We’ll see about that.”

He whipped the reins. The horse bolted ahead toward the forest, the movement pushing Marius’s body even more tightly against mine.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

I could actually *feel* the cocky smile in his voice. “Some place where we won’t be found.”

**Episode 4662**

Xavier was there, and suddenly he just… wasn’t. His body had been engulfed in flames and light. He was gone in the blink of an eye.

*Is this real?*

*How can it be real?*

“No,” I breathed. “No, no, *no*.” I ran over to the spot where he’d been standing to find it empty. There was no trace of him, not even a speck of fire or ash. “Where—” I choked. “Where is he? Where did he go?”

I whirled around the room. It was in total shambles.

Ava panted, leaning against the wall, looking shocked. Greyson was on the floor, but he stood up quickly, looking unharmed. Our eyes locked, and he scanned every inch of me, as if making sure I was in one piece. A small groan of pain startled me, and I turned to see Rowena picking herself up from amidst the glass of the window. Greyson rushed to help her, and for a moment, there was no other sound in the room other than my frantic breathing.

No.

“Adéluce, she—” I choked. “Did she take him? Where is Xavier?”

I felt like screaming.

Ava did it for me.

“Where the hell is he?!” Her shock had melted away. It was replaced by a rage so fierce that for a moment, I froze. She snapped her head toward Rowena, her eyes flashing with fury.  “What did you *do*?”

Rowena sputtered, holding onto Greyson. “Nothing! That wasn’t me or the ward!”

Greyson’s voice was gruff. “This was Adéluce, Ava. We all saw her, we heard her…” His dark eyes flickered between Ava and me. “She took Xavier somewhere. The question is where.”

My heart was pounding so fast I thought it would drop and shatter on the floor. I hadn't thought that this intervention would push things to this extreme. Everything had been going well, or as well as this sort of thing could go, until the vampire-witch showed up.

*She’s alive…*

She’d been alive this entire time, and Xavier had not been able to tell us the truth about it. I saw him get choked up as he tried to explain everything. It had looked like he was in pain. Like someone was strangling him, cutting off his air supply.

*How is Adéluce still alive?*

My head and heart ached. My stomach followed, overwhelmed by nausea. I swallowed down the tears that threatened to escape. I needed to stay strong. For Xavier.

“How do we get him back?” My voice was throaty, shaking. I faced Rowena. There was no blood anywhere on her, thank god. She was okay, and she had to have an answer here. Witches always did.

I needed answers before I lost my mind.

“How do we find him, Rowena? What do we do?”

I sounded desperate. I *was* desperate, and Rowena looked pained. She opened her mouth to speak. She never managed, because Ava stepped forward, closer to me. Her light blue eyes were ice, pinned on me as if she’d like nothing more than to stab me with a glare.

“This is all your fault, Cali,” she said sharply.

For a moment, no one in the room moved. Nobody spoke, and I thought that, surely, I must’ve misheard.

“What?”

Ava took another step closer to me. “Having the intervention was your idea. It was your idea to bring Rowena in on this. It’s your fault that *my* Alpha is gone.”

I couldn’t help but flinch. *My Alpha*, she said. *Mine*.

My hands turned into fists, something deep within me rioting at her words. But I reined it in, reminding myself that Ava was upset and angry. I couldn’t let this escalate, not when Xavier was in danger.

“I had no idea this would happen,” I told her. I was shaking from the inside out, my voice trembling, too, as I spoke. “I’m as upset as you are.”

Ava took another step, this one slower and yet it somehow felt ten times more menacing. It was like she was stalking me, with measured movements that only a predator knew how to pull off.

“You’re not upset. You’ll *never* be upset enough,” she whispered. “You have *no* idea how I feel, because all you ever think about is yourself.”

Greyson’s cold, imposing voice rose above hers. “Watch it, Ava.”

But Ava didn’t listen. With a final step, she closed the distance between us and stood before me. I braced myself for her to scream at me, to cry, to shove me. Instead, she only peered at me, this vacant look in her eyes that sent chills down my spine.

“If he’s dead,” she said softly, “I’m blaming *you*.”

Then she recoiled like a snake, spitting in my face before moving so fast I had no idea what happened until my cheek burned, pain starting from my temple down to my jaw.

*She slapped me*, I thought in disbelief, my ears ringing, my hand coming up to protect my face like I was nothing but her punching bag.

*She* slapped *me.*

My mate’s mate had hit me as if we could never share any common ground, not even our love for him. And she was ready to strike again. I was gasping, trembling, but I wasn’t gonna let her win. Instinct kicked in, and magic burst out of my hands, surging toward her.

I blasted her backward, and Ava hit the wall.

She growled, shifting into her wolf.

She wanted to hurt me.

And there was a part of me, this dark, quiet part of the person who I’d become, that wanted to fucking break her just for existing.

Just for touching him.

My ears were still ringing, my chest tight when I snapped my fingers together. My sword appeared, light and glowing in my hands, just as Ava jumped toward me. Her teeth were bared, ready to bite my head off.

I thought, *This is happening.*

*This is it.*

*She’ll attack, and I’m going to hurt her so badly that Xavier is never gonna forgive me.*

“Enough!” Greyson’s voice echoed before he shifted. His growl, even louder than Ava’s, shuddered through the room. He pinned her to the ground before she could reach me. I had no idea how he’d gotten in front of me in time. He snapped his massive jaws over her, and she snapped back, trying to slip out from under him.

He anticipated it, slamming her down, growling in her face.

“Cali, oh my god,” Rowena choked out. She rushed toward me and offered me a tissue.

I could feel Ava’s spit dripping down my chin.

“Are you okay?” Rowena asked throatily.

No.

*No, no, no.*

Shaking with fury, I wiped my face.

“Ava,” I said simply. As if that was the answer to anything.

She shifted a moment later, pushing Greyson’s wolf off her with a hiss. Only then did he turn human again. Ava was still panting, her eyes pinned on Greyson with the kind of anger that I thought she’d only ever have reserved for me.

But then, Greyson said, “You think Xavier’s going to be happy if he finds out that you went for Cali’s throat while he was gone?”

Ava froze.

Greyson went on, “Thought you’d learned your lesson after killing his mother. Guess not.”

She was expressionless. “You’re not gonna tell him—”

“Make sure I have nothing to talk to him about when he’s back,” Greyson cut her off. Sharp. “We have to work together on this without any distractions. What just happened…” He looked between Ava and me. “… cannot happen again. Do you both hear me?”

“Yes,” I said. Despite the fury and humiliation I felt, I knew he was right.

Ava mumbled something that I *hoped* was a yes.

“What happens now?” Greyson asked Rowena then. “Can you do a locator spell?”

Rowena nodded, and Greyson shot a look at Ava. Then at me. “Let’s do this now and not waste any more time.”

Guilt hit me like a punch. I shouldn’t have let Ava get to me. Why had I let her get to me like that? The focus should be on helping Xavier, nothing else. *Another royal mess up.* I looked over at Greyson and gulped. His gaze followed Rowena as the witch walked over to the spot where Xavier had been standing.

She grabbed a tissue and dabbed it on the spots of blood on the floor. Xavier had coughed them up, his throat constricting as if there were a ravenous little creature living in there, in his esophagus, trying to tear his voice out.

Trying to stop him from telling the truth.

Rowena picked up the tissue and returned to her crystals. Greyson hadn’t taken his eyes off her. Ava hadn’t spoken a word, watching Rowena as well. I looked around at them while Rowena began mumbling, her eyes closed.

The quiet chanting made me feel shivery, and I wished I could take Greyson’s hand in mine. I wasn’t sure if he’d accept it, though. I could still sense his anger and hurt from earlier. From the lies I’d told him about what happened with Xavier in that dressing room.

I couldn’t blame him.

*Does Greyson hate me now? Did I ruin all the trust we’ve built between us?*

*Did I ruin* us*?*

The possibility was so painful that, for a beat, I struggled to breathe.

A flash of wind burst through the room, and Rowena’s chanting came to an abrupt end.

The witch opened her eyes.

“What is it?” I asked. “Where is he?”

“I…” Rowena’s brows were furrowed in confusion. “I can’t find him.” She looked at Greyson. “Xavier is no longer in this world.”

**Episode 4663**

**Greyson**

I paused. I couldn’t have heard right. This wasn’t *right*.

“If Xavier’s not in this world… then where the fuck is he?” I asked. “You say that like—like he’s…” I didn’t say the word “dead,” but I thought it. Everybody in the room did, and then Cali uttered the question quietly.

“Is he in the spirit world?” Her face, all the devastation and pain it carried said everything about her feelings right now. I had never seen her like this. Never so broken and dejected without a single tear to show for it. It was as if she was already grieving and bottling it up, ready to let it eat at her from the inside out.

Would she be so devastated if I were the one missing?

Would she ever care for me the way she cared for him?

Was the *due destini* balanced, or was I just an afterthought in this entire messed-up love triangle?

My thoughts were fucked up and unfair to her. I knew that, but I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t be the bigger person when it felt like my heart had shriveled down in size after I saw Cali’s memories.

She’d lied to me about being with him.

But no matter how badly this hurt, no matter how hard it was, I would force myself to let it go right now. Or simply not think about it for the time being. I wasn’t going to take my jealousy out on Cali. And, no matter what, I did want my brother back.

Xavier couldn’t die like this. Not because Adéluce was still alive. He’d told me about his suspicions, and I hadn’t listened. In a way, what had happened to him was my fault, and I knew that the guilt would eat me alive if he didn’t return home safe.

“I don’t think Xavier’s in the spirit world,” Rowena told Cali. She looked up at me. “He’s just… not here.”

Ava’s growl made my teeth clench. “Then work harder,” she snapped. “Find out where my mate is!”

I grabbed Ava by the arm before she could take a single step toward Rowena.

“Rowena is the Cobalt Luna, and she’s here to help us. You’ll watch your tone with her,” I ordered Ava.

She scoffed, trying to yank herself from my grasp. “I’m a Luna, too, and you are *not* my Alpha! Get your fucking hands off—”

I dragged her closer. “Control yourself, or I’ll remove you from this room and not let you come back, Ava.”

Her eyes narrowed. “*What?*”

“You heard me,” I snapped. “Who’s going to help you find Xavier, then? Big Mac? I’ll tell her not to speak to you. We’ll shut you out of the investigation if you don’t get a grip. Do you understand?”

She scoffed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

My brother’s Luna looked up at me with fury in her eyes. But I didn’t give a damn. She wasn’t going to touch Rowena. There would not be a repeat of what she did to Cali. I felt like shit about that. I should’ve stepped in sooner, but it all happened so fast, and I hadn’t expected Cali to fight back like that.

I hadn’t expected Cali to channel her sword or look so ruthless.

Apparently, for Xavier, she would.

“Fine,” Ava sniped, glaring at my grip on her arm. “Will you let go now?”

Ava was a tricky one to deal with. If left unmonitored and without any established boundaries, she could spiral out of control. At the same time, though, she desperately wanted to feel appreciated, seen, whatever the fuck.

And I needed her on our side—not out there wreaking havoc.

“I understand why you’re angry,” I told her, slowly letting her go. “But I need you to be there for the Samara pack and keep a level head. For Xavier. You’ve worked so hard to get him where he is today. Don’t throw all that away.”

Ava stared at me. With a bitter laugh, she said, “I know what you’re doing, Greyson.”

She didn’t say, “You’re trying to manipulate me.” But we both knew it.

“It’s still the truth,” I said. “I don’t want to fight you, Ava, but you know I will if I have to. Don’t make me your enemy.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, taking a deep breath. When she nodded, I knew I had her.

Thank fuck.

“What’s happening with Xavier?” I asked, turning to Rowena. “Do you have an explanation?”

“I’m confused, too,” Rowena admitted. “I can tell he’s not dead—yet, at least—but he’s not in the human realm.”

“And if we don’t know where he is, we don’t know how to help him,” I said, this realization making me even more desperate.

Cali’s voice was quiet but even. “If we can’t find Xavier, we could try looking for Adéluce. Wherever she is, Xavier’s probably with her.”

“That’s not a bad idea, but…” Rowena sighed, rubbing her forehead. “I can’t do it on my own. We’ll have a chance if I work with Big Mac and strengthen the spell. We could try to look for both of them at the same time.”

The hope on Cali’s face was staggering. “Do we need Dani to amplify it?”

Rowena shook her head. “No, two witches should be plenty.”

“It’s settled, then,” I said. “We’ll go to her now.”

“But Big Mac didn’t want to help us at first,” Cali said nervously. “What if she—”

“She won’t refuse,” I said. The next words that came out of my mouth made my chest ache. “This is my brother. He’s family. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Cali nodded while Rowena said, “Just let me know when Big Mac’s ready. I’ll head home, clean up, and bring the items needed.”

“Thank you,” I told Rowena.

With a final nod, she blipped away.

“Ava,” I said, turning to her. “Go to the Samaras. They have to know what’s going on—they’ll have questions and need the support of their Luna with their Alpha gone.”

Better to keep Ava and Cali separate, anyway.

“Should the Samaras know about Adéluce? Should the Redwoods?” Cali asked.

I looked between her and a still-silent Ava. “Yes. They have to know their enemy. It was Adéluce who attacked the Samara Luna, so the pack will want justice for that and for what’s just happened to Xavier.” I eyed Ava. “Right?”

She locked eyes with me. For a beat, I had no idea what was gonna happen. Was she going to lash out again? Yell at Cali? At me? Did she fucking realize what was at stake here?

Yes, she did.

Because she finally said, “Right. I’ll go to the Samaras. They have to know.”

“Be careful,” I told her. “The last thing we need right now is Adéluce attacking you again.”

Ava’s expression darkened. “I’d like to see her try.”

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Cali followed me outside. I didn’t have to tell her that we’d go to Big Mac’s together, and she didn’t have to ask. We already knew. A lot of the time, we didn’t need mind linking to communicate, and that was a small comfort to me. Cali and I were connected.

I reminded myself that, no matter what, she was my mate, too.

We stepped onto the front porch, and I was ready to shift when I felt Cali’s touch on my arm.

I was so startled I almost flinched.

So much for being connected.

“Greyson, I’m sorry,” she blurted. Her pained expression landed hard, and I suddenly felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. I’d do anything to make her feel better. But she made everything worse by saying, “I didn’t mean for you to know like this, I…” She gulped. “I should’ve told you what happened with Xavier. I’m so fucking sorry you have no idea.”

I braced myself. I hadn’t planned to talk about this right now. Or ever, actually. Better let it float around in the background, because confronting the implications felt too heavy to carry for me.

What was there to talk about when Cali thought that lying to me was the way to go after all we’d been through?

“We don’t have the time to discuss this,” I said quietly. “It’s—It is what it is.”

I sounded weak.

Not like an Alpha.

“But I… I feel so horrible about what happened. I just want you to know how sorry I am… And,” she whispered, “I can’t tell if you…” She looked down at her folded hands. “If you hate me.”

Her words made the bitterness I felt melt. Moving closer, I said, “I could never hate you, love.”

She gulped. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did. What I did was wrong, and it brought back all this unnecessary *due destini* bullshit—”

“Is it unnecessary, though?”

She paused, looking up at me. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes were red-rimmed. Like she’d already cried, and I missed it. She must’ve cried earlier. Over Xavier disappearing.

Xavier needed to be our priority. I knew as much. I couldn’t deal with this anyway.

“We need to get to Big Mac ASAP, Cali. We don’t need to talk about any of this right now,” I said quietly. “We’re gonna have to do it after we’ve gotten Xavier back, but not right now.”

Cali pressed her lips together. Her voice was a broken whisper. “What if we can’t find him, Greyson? What if Xavier is lost forever?”

**Episode 4664**

**Xavier**

I jumped up, taking in the scenery around me. I was in a desert, copper-colored dirt everywhere. The sky was a vivid, violent red for as far as the eye could see. The air was dry, stuffy, with the faint scent of blood and magic lingering somewhere in the distance.

What was this place? Why did it feel weirdly familiar, and how the hell did I get here?

Where was Cali?

The last thing I remembered was hearing my mate’s voice, calling my name. And then I hadn’t been able to speak or breathe. The next time I’d opened my eyes, I was here.

“Cali!” I shouted. The only response I got was my voice, echoing off the sand mountains in the distance. Was I dreaming? I couldn’t be. Because when I swallowed, I could taste my own blood.

Adéluce.

The memories rushed into my jumbled brain, shaking it up. Of course this was Adéluce’s doing. Of course she’d brought me here. I had warned Cali and the others that no amount of witchcraft would protect me from her. Rowena’s ward would’ve never lasted. Adéluce was much more powerful than that.

I whirled around, fighting to catch the vampire-witch’s scent in the air, but—

Nothing.

If I was here, where was Adéluce?

Could she be going after Cali and Ava?

She was always after Cali and Ava. That shouldn’t even be a question on my end. I had to find and protect them. Everything was fucked, and I had to get out of here before Adéluce hurt them because of me.

But at least now they knew.

Ava knew that I hadn’t been lying to her when I said that I couldn’t talk about the vampire who’d attacked her. She knew that I had tried, had done my best, to keep her safe, despite Adéluce’s fuckery. Cali knew what she’d suspected all along—that something was seriously fucking wrong with me. That there was a real reason why I’d left her and treated her like shit.

I hoped she knew that I still loved her. That I never stopped and never would.

Adéluce had threatened me, hurt me, hurt the women I loved, but in the end, they’d figured it all out. Despite the pain and the suffering and all the toxic shit, Cali and Ava had stuck by me. Cali had stuck by me despite *everything*.

And Greyson had been there, too.

I didn’t worry about my brother. I didn’t think Adéluce would go after him when she had Cali and Ava at the top of her list. But I hoped really fucking badly that now that I was gone, he would be able to figure something out and guard my Luna, the Samaras, and Cali.

Always Cali.

Adéluce might be attacking them now as I was just standing here, in the middle of nowhere, coughing my lungs out. I had to get the fuck out of this place and get back to my mates and my pack. Right now, no more time to waste.

But how?

There was reddish sand as far as the eye could see and a quiet so creepy it had my hackles raised. I anticipated an attack from anywhere and everywhere.

I *really* needed to get out of here.

A gruff voice startled me. “We can help you.”

I whipped around to face the source of the voice. I hadn’t heard anyone arriving, which was a bad thing on its own. But even worse were the three creatures facing me. The urge to look away from them hit me hard. They were hideous. Like piles of melting, burning flesh.

That wasn’t the most disturbing thing about them, though.

How did they know to answer my question? Could they read my mind?

I sure as fuck hoped not.

As if it could hear my thoughts, however, one of the creatures laughed, letting out smoke and flames. “We can help you,” it said, “or we can devour you.”

With fiery eyes, they advanced toward me.

“Oh, fuck no,” I said under my breath, stepping back to charge and shift. But when I tried, it felt like a rope was tied all around me. Something sharp and constrictive that kept my wolf down and forced me to flicker back and forth between human and wolf.

My wolf growled*.* He pushed forward, and I let instinct take over. My wolf emerged victorious, in full shift, lunging at the creatures. My fur was scorched by the heat radiating off them, but I didn’t stop. I used my full weight to slam into the one on the left, sending it barreling down a sand hill. The one on the right was next. It gave me a smile so ugly and murderous I knew I wasn’t gonna be able to avoid biting it.

The taste would be atrocious, but it would be better than dying.

I growled, charging forward to nip at its neck. But it didn’t happen. The creature vanished, and I was left with a mouthful of sand. I spat and coughed it out, spinning around to face the thing. Its comrade had joined it, and now they both went after me at once, full-force.

I was driven to the ground.

They were laughing, their huge tongues slipping out of the holes they had for mouths. One pinned me down while the other licked my forehead and said, “*Tasty*.”

I snarled. The stench of their closeness was so overwhelming to my wolf’s sensitive nose, that for the briefest moment, I thought I’d fucking die from that alone. I saw a flash of teeth then, though, and I snapped out of my daze, clawing my way out of their grasp.

I did *not* want to become their lunch.

Suddenly, one of the creatures let go, an ear-piercing scream shooting through it. I hadn’t even bitten it yet, so what the fuck was happening right now? Blood spurted out of its mouth, blinding my wolf, while the other creature fell backward. My wolf let out a sound that was both a snarl and a cough and rolled away from under them. I couldn’t see a fucking thing with so much blood all over my face, so I shifted back to human to wipe my eyes.

The entire time, I heard the sounds of fighting, flesh being torn, blood splattering.

Panting, I finally cleared my vision, only to look ahead and see that the fight was over.

The creatures had been torn to pieces.

Another creature, scarred but much less disgusting and shaped like a man, stood over the carnage, spitting blood from its mouth. It looked up at me and wiped its mouth. “You looked like you could use some help.”

The first thing I thought to say was, “I’m not gonna let you eat me.”

It was a fucked-up pronouncement, but that was where I was at right now.

The creature-man snorted. “I get it. I’d be worried about that too.” It glanced at the bodies on the ground. “This is a great way to welcome you to the demon world. Makes you realize what you’re up against.”

The demon world.

Of fucking course.

I knew that this place looked familiar—I had seen glimpses of it when I went with the courier to return Seluna’s ashes. I’d just been so confused and fucked in the head when I first arrived here that I hadn’t put two and two together.

I eyed the creature. “You have a name?”

It smiled. Its teeth were black. “They call me Ferlin.”

“What… are you?” I asked.

Ferlin shrugged. “A demon. A man. Take your pick.”

“My name is—”

“Xavier Evers,” Ferlin said. “I already know it.”

“How?” I asked. Were creatures reading my mind?

He shook his head. “You ask way too many questions for a man who was nearly eaten. It’s getting late—if you don’t want to perish on your first day, we’d better find shelter…” He started walking away, calling over his shoulder, “Follow me.”

I watched Ferlin’s retreating back, weighing my options. Should I trust a demon? I’d had experience with one before, and to say that Seluna had left me with the worst impression would be an understatement. But what the hell other choice did I have right now?

After weighing my options, I decided that I obviously couldn’t pin my hopes of escape on a demon, but staying out here to rot or get eaten didn’t seem like a good idea either.

I followed Ferlin, keeping some distance between us.

He started whistling, a sickening, wheezy-like sound.

It was so disturbing I knew I had to shut it down. Small talk was better.

“How can I return to the human world?” I asked.

Ferlin stopped whistling—thankfully—and shook his head. “It’s not easy to cross over. You need a courier.”

Right. That had been a whole other dickhead to deal with, but at least he hadn’t tried to eat me.

I needed to stay alive so I could beat Adéluce.

So I could protect Cali and Ava.

I asked the demon, “Can you take me to the Courier?”

**Episode 4665**

Greyson stepped closer, pulling me into his arms. The comforting heat of his body left me light-headed. My heart was pounding in sync with my head. I felt worried and guilty enough to erupt. Worried over Xavier’s safety, worried over hurting Greyson, guilty over focusing on my relationship with Greyson while Xavier had to be fighting for his life out there, guilty over lying to Greyson.

*On and on and on we go…*

“Please don’t think that way,” Greyson murmured against my temple. “We’re going to do everything we can to get Xavier back.” He leaned back, tilting my chin up. When our eyes locked, my breath caught. “And never say that I hate you ever again. Understand me?”

There was a lump in my throat. It grew and grew. “You don’t?”

He shook his head, leaning in to kiss my forehead. “Never. The lie was what hurt the most. I thought we were past that, love.”

The shame I felt made me sick to my stomach. I gulped, burying my face in his bare chest. Breathing in the scent of him, I whispered, “I’m so sorry. I should’ve known better. You deserve better than that. You deserve…” I looked up at him. “You deserve my honesty and respect, Greyson. The fact that I couldn’t give either to you has to do with me, not you.”

He let out a slow breath. “But why did you lie?”

“I was scared.” I paused. “We’ve been down this road before.  You…” I struggled to phrase it in a way that wouldn’t make me want to hide under a rock. “In the past, you knew that Xavier and I were *together* together. But now…”

“Ava’s entered the equation as well,” Greyson said quietly.

The thought of sharing Xavier with Ava, of him going home to her, touching her after he’d touched me, made my stomach tie itself up in knots.

*Hypocrite. Fucking hypocrite.*

“This is what the *due destini* does, love,” Greyson said as if he could hear my thoughts. “We’ll need to talk through all this stuff after Xavier is back. We’ve gotta make sure he’s safe first.”

“You’re right.” I laughed a little at the absurdity of it all. “It’s so messed up that I’m asking you all these things while Xavier’s in danger, and I know we shouldn’t stall any longer. But it was eating at me—I couldn’t go on thinking that you hated me.” I placed my hand over his pounding heart. “I guess I couldn’t help myself from asking.”

He wrapped his hand around my wrist. His gaze was dark, fixed on mine, making my heart rate speed up. “In the same way that you couldn’t help yourself in that dressing room?”

The realization dawned on me. “Yeah,” I whispered.

In that single moment, in my admission, something in Greyson’s expression eased.

“My sire bond to Elle opened my eyes to the difficulties you’ve faced with the *due destini*,” he said. “Even if it wasn’t exactly the same as a mate bond, it was something beyond myself that I couldn't control.”

I pressed my lips together. “You still controlled it better than I manage to do with the *due destini*.”

He shook his head. “That’s why it’s different. The lie was what hurt the most, anyway. All I want from you is not to lie to me again. Can you do that for me, love?”

“Yes. I’m really sorry I ever broke that promise,” I murmured.

I felt so lucky to have him.

He kissed my temple, then my forehead. Every inch of my body softened at his tenderness. Then he said, “We’ve gotta get going to Big Mac’s. We can discuss all this in time, after Xavier’s safe and back with us. Okay?”

“Okay.”

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Greyson’s wolf sped through the forest with me on his back. I gripped his fur tight, afraid to let go in more ways than one. The guilt still weighed on me. Apologizing didn’t feel like enough. When Xavier had come to me in that dressing room, I had simply given in to him, no questions asked, despite all the horrible things he’d done. And then I’d lied to Greyson, disrespecting him as if he didn’t matter, while Greyson always thought about my feelings.

Why did Xavier have to come find me in that dressing room? How the hell had he gotten it into his head that I was *pregnant*, of all things? Maybe if he hadn’t kissed me in that moment, none of this would’ve happened.

*Don’t lie to yourself, Cali. You and Xavier are inevitable. You know you’re still in love with him*, a little voice in my head said. *And as long as the* due destini *is in place, you always will be. You will always be drawn to Xavier and Greyson like this, in love with both and unable to choose between them.*

That sounded like a threat, in a way. A threat to my sanity and the people I loved. Because, of course, I still loved Xavier. Love was what had led me to see that something was wrong with him in the first place. Would we even know that Adéluce was still alive and hurting him if I had given up on him? If I had done what I should’ve and ran away from him when he’d treated me like a beast?

There were so many reasons to call the *due destini* a curse, but at the top of that list right now was the way it had twisted my love for Xavier. It had turned it into this diseased, thorny thing, sharp to the touch, making everybody involved suffer. Love felt like cruel irony, in this case. A suffocating, heartbreaking trap that I’d been stuck in and couldn’t escape.

And yet, it had still saved Xavier.

*Not yet*, I thought. *He’s not saved yet.*

The thoughts melted away as we approached Big Mac’s shack. Greyson slowed down, and I jumped off. He shifted back to human and gave me a nod before approaching the door. He knocked loudly.

“Big Mac? Mom?”

By the second knock, I heard grumbling behind the door. Then a bunch of locks coming undone. Big Mac’s ferocious glare greeted us. Her hair was all mushed up. She must’ve been sleeping. She looked so annoyed, even *more* annoyed than usual. I was glad that Greyson moved forward with swift precision, stopping her from unleashing her usual tirade.

“It’s my brother,” he said. “He’s been taken. We don’t know where he is.”

Big Mac’s eyes widened. Opening the door, she gruffly said, “Come in.”

We followed her in, and Mrs. Smith was standing in the kitchen doorway, looking at us with concern. “What happened?” She asked, looking between Greyson and me. “What’s going on with Xavier?”

Big Mac’s voice was sharp. “Who took him?”

“It’s Adéluce,” Greyson said. “She’s alive.”

You could hear a pin drop.

“Xavier is under a spell,” I added quickly, fighting to keep my voice from shaking. “He can’t talk about the spell, and Adéluce showed up and then transported him somewhere. We have to find out where he is—his life might be in danger.”

Greyson’s gaze was fixed on Big Mac. “We need you to help Rowena do a fortified location spell. This might be the only way to find and save him.”

Big Mac didn’t speak. She turned to Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Smith whispered, “This is up to you.”

Big Mac sighed, shaking her head. “I feared that something like this might happen.”

Greyson had to reach out and hold my hand. I was shaking so badly.

“How?” he asked.

“When Ava was in a coma and I tried to get her out of it, I noticed some kind of magical signature on her. It wasn’t anything I’d encountered before, but the intensity…” Big Mac paused. “There was something about the intensity of the spell that had seemed familiar. And that kept bothering me. Like I should’ve known who it was. I kept thinking about it, even after I left all of you behind and said I wouldn’t help you anymore…” She glanced at Greyson, then down at the table. Her voice dropped. “Somehow, I can’t quit you stupid kids.”

Greyson stared at her. He didn’t speak, but the intense way he gazed between her and his mother made my heart ache.

“It hit me, then,” Big Mac went on, taking a deep breath. “The magic had the same intensity as the one linked to those medals Adéluce had given to Xavier.”

The witch paused again, and I wasn’t sure what to think.

*Is that a bad thing? A good thing?*

I felt on edge but hopeful. I wanted so badly to hope.

“What does the signature have to do with helping us get Xavier back?” I asked.

“Signatures can be traceable when it comes to magic,” Big Mac said.

“That means…”

“I can help Rowena find Xavier, Cali,” Big Mac said. “And I think I might have a way to find Adéluce, too.”

**Episode 4666**

Reckless hope bubbled up inside me at the sound of Big Mac’s words.

Why hadn’t she mentioned the magical signature thing before? I wanted to ask her about it, but I doubted Big Mac would be too happy with me questioning her methods. I definitely did not want her to get mad at me right now. She must’ve had her reasons to hide things from us. There was only one thing that mattered right now, anyway.

*She said she can find him*, I thought. *He’ll be okay.*

I had learned that Big Mac never said anything unless she meant it. This was a huge deal.

This was the sign I’d been looking for.

“Is there anything I can do to help you with this?” Greyson asked her.

“No,” she said. “I only need a bit of time to get everything together for what I have in mind to work.”

“Who are you going to find first?” I asked.

“First Xavier,” Big Mac said, “then Adéluce.”

My heart was pounding, hope flooding me. I grabbed onto the feeling and refused to let go.

“Where’s Rowena?” Big Mac asked me. “Didn’t you say something about her earlier?”

I nodded. “She’ll be here shortly.”

Her gaze flickered to Greyson. “I’ll go prepare. Let me know when Rowena arrives.” She stood up, reaching for Mrs. Smith’s hand. “You’re coming with me.”

Greyson’s mother shot him a look before following Big Mac down the hallway. Before they could get out of our sight, Greyson said, “Thank you, Big Mac.”

Big Mac paused but didn’t turn to face him. She kept on walking, but I could swear I saw Mrs. Smith’s mouth twitch into a smile before the two of them turned the corner. I grabbed at Greyson’s arm, moving to face him.

“Did you see that?” I whispered. “She agreed to help! She cares about us!”

His expression gave away nothing. “She didn’t announce that she was moving back to the pack house anytime soon, though. This could be a one-time thing.”

I nodded, exhaling deeply. “True, but it’s a positive step. Don’t you think?”

Greyson took in my face, reaching out to tuck my hair behind my ear. His lips formed the tiniest smile, but it was still there. “One thing I’ll never get tired of is your optimism, love.”

He pulled me into a hug, and I wrapped my arms around his torso. I pressed my cheek against his chest, his collarbone, breathing him in, allowing myself this little reverie for a moment. I had been *so* worried about us earlier, thinking that he would be upset with me for a long time.

*I would deserve it, honestly.*

I might not have been able to control my feelings when Xavier and I were alone together, but lying to Greyson still weighed on my conscience. I promised myself to never act like this again. To never make Greyson feel like I didn’t care enough about him to be honest.

I cared about him so damn much it physically hurt.

“When I thought that the council was going to hurt you,” I whispered, “I nearly lost my mind. I wanted to blast them all without considering what that would mean and what happened next. Remember?”

He met my gaze. Nodded.

“I love you, Greyson,” I said. “No matter what.”

His eyes flickered to my mouth, and I stroked his cheek. For a moment it seemed like he’d lean in and kiss me. Did I even deserve that? *No.* But then, there was a knock on the door.

“Rowena,” Greyson said after scenting the air.

He opened the door to reveal the Cobalt Luna standing with a bag slung over her shoulder. She looked between Greyson and me. “Did Big Mac agree to help?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh, thank god,” the witch said under her breath, walking through the threshold.

“I’ll go get her,” Greyson said while I led Rowena to the kitchen.

I was filling her in on what had happened when Greyson returned with Big Mac.

“Rowena,” she said.

“MacKenzie,” Rowena said.

Big Mac turned to me. “At least you know to make friends with the right witches, Cali.”

I was pretty sure that was a compliment.

We were led to a bright, bland room that I’d never seen before in my life. I would have never associated Big Mac with the color beige, but this room was just beige—bland and boring—with a stone tile floor. Big Mac waved a hand then, though, and suddenly the beige turned into dark jewel-tone colors all over.

On every wall appeared a bookcase, and now the room was framed by three large potion stands. The table in the middle was huge, with a few things like herbs and stones set on it. Rowena made a beeline for the table, following Big Mac. The two of them muttered amongst themselves.

I suddenly felt something touch my calf.

*Oh my god! What the hell is that?*

Nope, it was just Lion. We hadn’t seen him in ages, but he tended to hide at the pack house. Lion nudged my leg, the fluffy cat rubbing against me, and this tiny little gesture of greeting made me feel welcome here after the worst day ever. I scooped him up in my arms and swallowed the lump in my throat.

I wasn’t going to cry because of the cat. I was going to cry because Xavier had been tortured for months now, and we had only just realized it. If I sat down and processed the horror of what that meant, there was no way I wasn’t going to spiral.

Lion seemed to sense that, somehow, and he appeared set on comforting me.

“We could ‘accidentally’ take Lion with us when we leave later,” I told Greyson quietly, scratching Lion’s head. The cat started purring.

*See? He wants to be stolen!*

“Don’t even think about it,” Big Mac said, not missing a beat as she and Rowena organized their ingredients on the table. Then something on the table caught my attention.

“Are those snippets of Xavier’s hair?” I asked, befuddled.

“Yes,” Big Mac replied.

I blinked. “Did you just have those stashed somewhere?”

“Yes. Haven’t we been over this?”

*That’s right… Big Mac has everyone’s hair somewhere in case she has to do a spell…*

And then I realized something. “Don’t you need Adéluce’s hair to locate her, in that case?”

“For god’s sake, Cali, be quiet!” Big Mac hissed. “I have other means!”

Rowena shot me an apologetic look that I felt said that Big Mac was harsh, but yeah, I should probably shut up. I nodded at her, and she and Big Mac continued with their setup. I breathed in and out through my nose, watching them and petting Lion.

“Step back,” Rowena spoke up suddenly, her eyes darting to Greyson and me.

“Right now,” Big Mac added.

Greyson put his hand in mine, pulling me back. Lion shifted against my chest but made no move to leave my one-armed embrace, so I let him do his thing. Which was to knead my boobs. My heart started pounding, though. I trusted Big Mac and Rowena a million times more than the three sister witches who seemed way too eager to see Greyson each time, but still.

This was Xavier we were talking about.

This was Adéluce.

I hadn’t let myself process exactly how terrifyingly dangerous the vampire-witch was.

*What if she’s hurting Xavier right this instant? What if she’s hidden him somewhere so far away that we’ll never be able to find him? What if—*

I was squeezing the life out of Greyson’s hand, and Lion was no longer purring.

Big Mac began murmuring the spell while Rowena waved her hands in the air in a soft, sensuous manner that could resemble a dance if she weren’t quietly chanting at the same time. I had no idea what language she was using, but it sounded harsher than anything I’d ever heard either of them speak in. It was laced with sharp consonants and vowels, hissing sounds that made the hair on my nape stand.

Suddenly, the candles in the room started flickering, beams of light bursting through the dark windows. A lick of fire flared around the table, and smoke followed.

The air changed, became stifling hot, and then—

A scream.

A scream echoed in my ringing ears, right along with my racing pulse. I wasn’t sure who moved first, Greyson or me, but a second later, his arms were wrapped around me. I pressed my face into his chest while he covered my ears to smother the terrifying wail.

*That can’t be Xavier*, I thought. *Please let him be okay.*

 Lion—squished now between Greyson and me—jumped from my embrace and scampered away. The wail heightened, and then…

It was gone.

The fire, smoke, and lights faded.

Big Mac’s face was grim, and my head ached.

Before Greyson or I could speak, Big Mac said, “Xavier is in the demon world.”

Greyson went rigid.

I sucked in a breath. “How do we save him?”

*Please let him be okay*, I prayed. *Please, please, let him be safe.*

Big Mac glanced at Rowena before turning back to me. “We can’t get him out.”

**Episode 4667**

**Xavier**

“Can you take me to the Courier?” I repeated.

Ferlin’s scarred face had distinguishable features. He looked like a greasy, disfigured pirate who’d seen a lot of battles more than anything else. Around these parts, where the competition was pretty fucked up, he seemed almost human-like. Familiar. But that didn’t stop me from wanting to punch him in the face when he raised an eyebrow at me.

“That’s not how this works,” he said. “I can’t take you anywhere right now.”

I had already known that following a demon I’d never met before into the unknown was a bad idea. The thing was, though, that it started to look even worse with every passing second. But Ferlin had two things in his favor. One, he saved me from those other demons. And two, he didn’t stink or make me want to vomit when I looked at him. But could I literally be going from the frying pan into the fire here?

Then again, what the fuck other options did I have?

I couldn’t just stay out here and wait to be eaten.

I looked around the desert, and there was nobody else, just us two. Why hadn’t Adéluce shown up yet? Did she bring me here and then leave me behind to rot? Or did she send me here with a spell? Could a witch even do that?

“You gonna be considering your life choices for a while there, or do you think we can keep going?” Ferlin said sarcastically.

“Why can’t you take me to the Courier?”

He huffed. “We can discuss this when we’re not in a hurry. We need to find shelter before the wind picks up.”

I scowled, wondering if I could figure out a way to contact the Courier directly. Eliminate the middleman—or demon in this case. Even if Ferlin wasn’t in a hurry, I was. I needed to tell the others where I was, somehow. Cali and Ava were likely in danger. Even Greyson. Even Rowena.

I couldn’t let anything happen to them.

“If you can’t take me to the Courier right now,” I said, “is there any way to reach the human world and relay a message? I have a pressing matter.”

Ferlin looked annoyed. “That’s hard to do, and like I just damn told your sorry ass, we don’t have the time to try. If we don’t reach shelter soon, you won’t even be around to send a message to anyone. Getting caught in a sandstorm—”

He hadn’t finished his sentence when the wind suddenly picked up. It blew sand in my nose, mouth, and eyes.

“Didn’t I tell you? A damned sandstorm.” Ferlin threw his hands up, waving for me to follow. “Just shut your mouth and come with me if you wanna stay alive.”

I followed, wondering why he even wanted to help me in the first place. But again, it wasn’t like I had any other options here. We moved forward, against the wind, and I had to ask, “Where the hell is this shelter anyway?”

Ferlin sent me another annoyed look. “You have no idea where we are. How’s telling you where the shelter is helpful?”

“But—”

“You ask more questions than a toddler, let me tell you that.”

My jaw clenched. “Look, I don’t know what the hell you have in mind, but you gotta give me something here. What kind of shelter is there? Where are you taking me?”

Ferlin finished climbing up a sand hill, waited for me to get to him, and then he pointed to a bulge coming out of the sand in the distance. “Over there. We have to hurry, or the entrance will be sealed shut until tomorrow!”

The wind was strong enough now that Ferlin had to shout to be heard. I decided to shut up for the time being and hunker down against the blowing sand and wind that seemed to be getting worse and worse. I was starting to have a hard time moving against it. The way Ferlin talked about them, I realized these sandstorms had to be a thing of the demon world, not something that Adéluce had caused.

Where the fuck was she, though?

I was thinking about shifting into my wolf to move better against the wind when Ferlin suddenly froze.

“They’re coming.”

That did not sound positive.

I spun around, getting a mouthful of sand. I could just barely make out a group of dark figures coming toward us against the blood red sky. I cursed under my breath, spat out the sand, and looked out into the distance, where the blob of the shelter was.

Would we even get there in time?

“I’ll shift into a wolf!” I shouted. “It’s gonna be faster and easier to get to shelter if—”

“Don’t do it,” Ferlin warned. “Werewolves are popular with demons. Like an exotic fish.”

The wind was howling, so I couldn’t have heard that last part right. “An exotic fish?”

Ferlin went back to shouting. “An exotic *dish*! They want to *eat* you!”

Right. I had gotten a bit of that vibe earlier when the pile-of-flesh man had called me “tasty.” Feeling both nauseated and pissed off—fucking Adéluce had to send me *here* of all places—I decided not to shift and followed Ferlin in my human form. He kept gesturing for me to hurry up. How the hell did he get to be so fast was my question. I was used to being the quickest, whether in human or wolf form, with only Greyson or Lola rivaling my speed.

And here this demon was, scampering through the desert like a fucking meerkat.

Among all of Adéluce’s tortures, this had somehow ended up being the most ridiculous.

“Get moving!” Ferlin yelled through the wind until we finally approached the bulge in the sand. It was huddled under some sort of pergola thing, whatever the fuck that was called, with two large vicious-looking creatures at the entrance. They stank of rotten flesh.

I could imagine Gabriel calling Ferlin the Beauty Queen of the demon world.

“Pass,” one of the creatures said to Ferlin, allowing both of us in.

They slammed the large gate closed behind us, and suddenly I could hear my thoughts again. The howling wind howled in the distance now, nowhere near us. The space we’d entered was dark, leading down a narrow pathway lit by torches and nothing else.

“What is this place?” I asked Ferlin.

He huffed in irritation without answering me, continuing to move. He led me through a doorway and down a long, dark stairwell. I hoped I hadn’t made a grave mistake here. Would it have been better to take my chances out in the storm? No, I couldn’t think that way. I couldn’t go back now, anyway.

There was a reason why Adéluce had sent me out here. She wanted to torture me.

Could Ferlin be part of her plan? Could she have sent him? I followed him down the dark corridor, wondering if I should straight up ask him. I realized I should have asked him before we got down here, but having to spit out sand had muddled my brain. No matter what happened next, I needed to remind myself that it was highly unlikely that I would die down here.

Adéluce didn’t want me dead. She’d told me that repeatedly.

She wanted to torture me, and that couldn’t happen if I was dead.

I had no idea why she’d brought me here, or what she was doing to Cali and Ava right now, or where the fuck she was. I only knew that my mates and brother knew the truth of what was going on with me, so there was a good chance that they were out looking for me. If Adéluce hadn’t gotten to Cali and Ava, I was certain that they would both be looking for me as we spoke.

A shudder ran through me at the thought of either of my mates down here.

Ferlin stopped in front of me. The corridor seemed impossibly narrower now, darker. Up ahead, I could see a door framed by two torches. Ferlin faced me slowly. His eyes glowed yellow in the dark.

“When we get in there,” he said, “don’t shift. And say as little as possible.”

“Why are you helping me?” I asked. “If ‘help’ is what you’re doing here.”

He paused, eyeing me. “All in good time, wolf.”

Ferlin opened the door. Immediately, a ruckus erupted in the quiet corridor. I was shocked to see what looked like a tavern—something straight out of a medieval fantasy movie. I hadn’t seen anything like it in the real world. Not even in New Orleans. It was crowded and loud with strange-looking beasts that eyed me with interest.

The moment I stepped into the room, following Ferlin, someone bumped into me.

The thing glared down at me with its one eye and offered a sharp, toothy grin.

“Oy, everyone! Lookie here!” He grabbed my arm, laughing before he shouted, “Dinner is served!”

**Episode 4668**

**Greyson**

All the color had drained from Cali’s face. “What?” Her voice cracked. She looked between Big Mac and Rowena with wide eyes. “Why can’t you get him out of the demon world?”

Big Mac gave a long-suffering sigh. “Because that’s not how things work.”

“Then *please* tell me how they work. Adéluce is a witch, and she put Xavier in the demon world for some fucked-up reason, but there’s two of you—that’s two witches against one. Can’t you just”—Cali waved her hands between them—“do witchy things? And get him out of there?”

“I agree with her,” I said. “If she was capable of doing that, why can’t we do the reverse?”

Big Mac huffed, but Rowena answered. “It’s the demon world, and it’s easier to get in, almost impossible to get out.”

Cali frowned. “But why?”

“Think about it,” Rowena said. “If it were easy, the human world would be crawling with demons.”

“*Obviously*,” Big Mac said in a flat tone.

The difference between the witches’ bedside manner was staggering, but I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth here. Resting a hand on my mate’s shoulder, I said, “Cali, I promise we’ll find a way to get to him. I don’t know how, but we will.”

Xavier couldn’t remain stuck in the demon world. It just wasn’t an option.

He had to get back here and continue being a pain in all our asses.

“The thought of Xavier languishing in some kind of hell, filled with creatures like Seluna…” Cali shook her head. “I don’t like it.”

“Look, I wish I could wave my hand and fix this, I really do,” Big Mac said. “But it’s all but impossible from where we’re at now.”

“Then we need to figure out how to make it possible,” I said. “Whatever it takes.”

Cali nodded shakily. “We have to get Adéluce, then. We need to force the vampire-witch to pull Xavier out of there before something horrible happens to him. And then we get the vampire-witch to reclaim Seluna’s ashes, or I’m screwed.”

I wasn’t gonna let that happen.

“What about using the Courier?” I asked Big Mac.

She gave me a deadpan look. “The who? And to do what? Send a love note to Xavier?”

I ignored her sarcasm and turned to Cali, who grabbed my arm. “That’s a great idea! Xavier had used the Courier to bring Seluna’s ashes to the demon world, so we know he can get in and out.” Then her face fell. “But how do we contact the Courier again?”

“Okorie was our contact with him,” I said. “I’ll call him and set it up.”

While I made the call and Rowena and Big Mac muttered among themselves in the background, my mom hugged Cali and told her that everything would be okay. The sight of my mother comforting my mate made me feel just a little better.

Okorie didn’t answer the phone, so I left a message. I hoped this wasn’t going to be a dead end. We didn’t have time to lose.

“What about Gabriel?” Cali asked. “He’s a mercenary. Could he and Mikah help us?”

I nodded. “Doesn’t hurt to ask. We need all the help we can get right now.”

I made the call. The phone rang five times, and I thought it would go to voicemail, but he finally answered. There was a ruckus happening in the background—sirens, shouting, gunshots.

But still, Gabriel cheerfully said, “Greyson! Sorry, but we’re kinda busy here, dude. Call back later!”

Before he could hang up, I said, “Xavier’s in trouble.”

Gabriel didn’t hang up. “What?”

“It’s a life-or-death matter.”

“Shit.” Gabriel exhaled sharply. “Hold on.”

Cali looked up at me, her hands clasped together. There was some muffled conversation on the other end of the line. And then a scream. Cali’s eyes widened.

“What’s going on?” she asked, gripping my forearm. “Can Gabriel help?”

Before I could answer, he came back on the line. “X is a big boy who can handle himself, Greyson. I’m gonna have to call you back, so—”

“No time. Xavier’s been transported to the demon world by Adéluce,” I said. “She’s alive.”

“Holy fuck,” he said. “You should’ve led with that!”

“Are you coming then?”

“I’ll be there ASAP.”

“Thank you.”

There was a blood-curdling scream in the background. Gabriel said, “Yikes, gotta look into that. See you later!”

“Make sure you and Mikah don’t die.”

He laughed. “Never, baby.”

*Baby?* The line went dead. I tried to call again, but it went straight to voicemail. Shit, hopefully whatever the hell he and Mikah were doing they’d get out of alive.

“Anyway,” I said to Cali, clearing my throat. “Gabriel and Mikah are on their way. I hope.”

She gulped. “Are they okay? They didn’t sound okay.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” I said.

“I can go get them,” Rowena offered. Cali and I turned to her. “Gabriel and Mikah—I can find them and blip them back here.”

“I have their hair,” Big Mac supplied.

Of course she did.

Cali thanked Rowena profusely, while Big Mac muttered to me, “You need to fill in Ava. Xavier would want you to.”

Information could send Ava into a spiral or keep her cooperating. You never knew with her. But Big Mac was right. For my brother’s sake, I needed to keep her in the loop.

*We know where Xavier is*, I typed out in a text. *Demon world.*

The message was delivered, but she hadn’t read it yet. I looked up to see Cali still talking with Rowena while Big Mac and Sabine whispered to each other. I turned to Rowena. “I sent you Gabriel’s number. Call me if you need anything.”

Rowena nodded. “Of course.”

I felt eyes on me, burning through the side of my face. When I turned, my mother was staring. “What are you going to do next, Greyson?” she asked.

There was something in her question that made me feel like she already knew the answer.

Cali wrapped her arm around mine a little too tight. “He’ll just wait for Okorie to call him back about the Courier, and in the meantime, we’ll wait for Rowena to get Gabriel and Mikah. Greyson will stay here with us.” She looked up at me with huge eyes. “Right?”

“Unless I can’t,” I said. I knew she didn’t want me to go diving into anything dangerous, but the reality was that we were far in already. I didn’t want to wait around, and I knew Cali didn’t either. It was her fear talking.

Sabine stared at me with glistening eyes and said, “What are you going to do once the Courier calls back?”

I swallowed hard, looking away from my mother. I couldn’t lie to anyone in this room.

“I’ll do what I have to do,” I said. “I’ll go with him to get Xavier from the demon world.”

I felt the silence that followed like a physical weight on my shoulders. I ignored the look that passed between Big Mac and Rowena and completely avoided my mother’s gaze. Cali’s grip on my arm had grown so tight I knew I would’ve bruised if I weren’t a werewolf.

“That’s a terrible idea,” Big Mac said, breaking the silence.

“I know,” I said. I still wasn’t looking at my mother. Or Cali. “But I’m an Alpha, and Xavier is my brother…”

And I didn’t listen to him when he’d said that Adéluce might not be dead.

How the hell could I be so stupid?

“I should be the one to go,” I said finally. “I’m not letting anyone else do it.”

Cali let go only to bring herself in front of me, forcing me to look at her. The fire in her expression was much better than her earlier anxiety. But at the same time, it felt… dangerous. There was no bigger threat to me than her, I realized.

If anything ever happened to her, I’d be done for.

“Greyson, you can’t just decide to go to the demon world,” Cali said. “Haven’t you heard Big Mac and Rowena? It’s harder to get out than it is to go back in. No you can’t just make a decision like that.”

My heart beat so fast I thought it would break. “Cali—”

“I’m going to the demon world, too,” she said.

“No,” I said simply.

“I might not be an Alpha, but I am a Fae,” Cali said. “I have magic, and I can fight demons alongside you. I killed Seluna, for god’s sake. I can do this!”

“I don’t think either of you understand the danger you’d be up against,” Rowena spoke up. “Even with the Courier, there’s no guarantee either of you could make it back. It’s best to have the Courier go alone and bring Xavier back. Besides, you don’t know what you’ll be dealing with when you meet Xavier.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, my gaze flickering between the two witches.

Big Mac stared at me dead in the eye. “It means that if Xavier *does* make it back to the human world, he might not be the same person.”

**Episode 4669**

**Artemis**

I spent several moments mentally listing all the things I hated about Marius.

One: He had implied that he possessed some information about my father, but making a deal with him had thrown me completely off course from my search for Kadmos.

Two: We were literal outlaws because he’d “forgotten” to mention that bounty hunting was illegal in some districts.

Three: He had simply decided that he’d be the one riding the horse while I held on for dear life. His body was flush against mine, right behind me, and there was no room to create any kind of distance between us. Especially not with how fast he pushed the horse to go.

Four: Why in the poisonous rat’s tail did he smell so good after literally fighting all day? That made no sense. It had to be magic.

Five: He had not told me where in gods’ names we were going. Frustration and irritation grew inside me like a pair of thorny vines that wanted to strangle him.

Suddenly, his lips were close to my ear. “Not too much longer.”

And there it was.

The sixththing I hated about Marius was the way I had just shivered at the feel of him.

This was not supposed to be happening. I had Rishika to think about. I missed her. She was the very first person I’d ever fallen in love with, and I still loved her with all my heart. The breakup hadn’t changed that. The breakup had been circumstantial, not because we’d fallen out of love. I didn’t want to be reacting like this to Marius. He was trouble anyway.

The only way for me to feel better about this entire situation would be to punch him.

It was a simple, elegant solution that had served me wonderfully in the past.

For now, I settled on elbowing him so he could stop breathing so damn close to my neck.

“Care to tell me where we’re actually going, or are you going to keep being vague about it?” I snapped.

He dared laugh. “A secret hiding place isn’t exactly secret if I tell you, is it?”

“You’re taking me there right now. It’s not going to be very secret when I see it with my own eyes, is it?”

He laughed. Again.

“Trust me, when we’re there, you’ll know,” he breathed in my ear once more.

For the love of—

I elbowed him again.

“Can you at least give me some space?”

He snorted. “You want me to find a rope and drag you behind the horse or something?”

“No, I want you to stop gluing yourself against me like overly friendly tree moss!”

Marius shifted in the saddle, but that did the opposite of what I wanted. He seemed even closer to me now, and then he *dared* brace a hand on my hip.

I squeezed my eyes shut and dreamed of violence.

“If you do not remove your hand right now, I will hurt you the moment we’re off the horse,” I said.

His grip on me tightened while the horse picked up speed. “We’re almost there. You can do whatever you want to me once we’re on the ground.”

That sounded like a dare.

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When we emerged from the forest, I saw a building up ahead. Marius brought the horse to a stop near a trading post. He hopped off first and looked up at me with a smirk. Then he reached for my hips. Again.

I shoved his hands away. “I know how to get off a—”

Too late. He was all grabby hands again, and I hated how much I liked it, so in conclusion, I hated it. He pulled me down, close in front of him. All up in my space yet again. My entire body felt aflame as it brushed down his.

When I looked up at him, he smirked. “You look a little flushed, Ari.”

I punched him in the gut hard enough that he doubled over.

His laughter was mixed with a grunt of pain.

“I told you I’d hurt you,” I said, dusting off my clothes.

He laughed some more, wincing as he straightened slowly. With a shrug, he said, “Worth it.”

I turned toward the building with a scowl. “You still haven’t told me what the hell this place is, though. There’s no sign or name.”

“It’s an inn.”

I whirled toward him, glaring. “Your safe place is an inn? Why would those people not come looking for us here?”

He snorted. “Because this inn is discreet. You didn’t even know it was one until I told you, right?”

My glare intensified. “Marius. Are you serious?”

Smiling, he casually tied the horse up and started walking toward the entrance.

“Marius!” I hissed, marching behind him. I grabbed him by the arm, forcing him to spin around and face me. “Did you just bring me to a *lust house*?”

He looked down at me, wrinkling his nose. “How crass, Ari. What do you take me for?”

“A sexual deviant, an insatiable beast who—”

“Thank you for your compliments, but this is *not* a lust house,” Marius said, straightening his clothes with pretend dignity. “It is simply an inn where weary travelers come to hang their hats, get an ale, and spend time with lively company.”

I blinked at him.

He offered me a dazzling smile.

“Wow,” I whispered. “I really might kill you tonight.”

He grinned. The list of things that I hated about him hit me full-force, led by the fact that I had no idea where my father was, and Marius had just made my life ten times more difficult.

“I’m leaving,” I declared, turning my back on him.

He blocked my way, scoffing. “Whoa, nope!” He pointed at me. “You said you would help me with my bounty.”

Pointing back at him, I snapped, “And *you* said you’d help me with mine, but all that’s happened so far is me almost getting arrested and thrown totally off the leads I had.”

This horrid, arrogant monster rolled his eyes. “Let’s be real, Ari, you don’t have any leads. You’re walking in the dark looking for Kadmos. The Mauvais family has all but buried everything about him and probably hurt anyone who tries to ask any questions, even if their focus is Adair. I’m the only one who can really help you.” He paused, taking a step closer. “This is my one condition. Help me with this bounty, and then I’m all yours.”

I did not like the way his voice lowered as he said that last part.

Not. One. Bit.

“Fine,” I said with a huff, shoving past him. “Let’s get this over with, avoid those men, and get a move on.”

Following me, Marius singsonged, “Music to my ears!”

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“We need a room,” I told the plump woman behind the reception counter.

She looked startled by my abrupt tone, but I didn’t have all night here. “I beg your pardon?”

Marius offered a smooth smile, placing an arm around my waist before pulling me into him. I immediately stiffened, his touch scorching through me in that same way I was supposed to hate. Meanwhile, without a single care in the world, Marius told the lady, “Apologies. My sweet new wife over here is eager to, ah, spend time with me now that we’re newly married.”

He flashed a smile.

The woman blushed. “Oh, congratulations,” she said.

I dug my nails into Marius’s side.

He continued with his brazen charade, ignoring me.

“Would you be so kind as to give us a room?” he told the woman. “We’ve been traveling for quite some time. A bath would be wonderful as well.”

The woman nodded. “Of course. But there’s only one room available—it’s the biggest, most expensive one.”

He waved a casual hand. “Money is not an issue.” He shot me a look that was supposed to be adoring. “Thank you,” he said smoothly when the lady gave him the key to the room.

“I’ll send someone to draw the bath,” she said happily. She turned to me again and said, “You’re a lucky girl to have such a handsome and kind husband, girlie.”

“Oh,” I said tightly, nails digging harder into his side. “You have no idea.”

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“Your wife?” I hissed once we got to the door of the room. “You couldn't think of any other charade?”

Unlocking the door, Marius said gravely, “They wouldn’t let us stay in the same room otherwise, Ari. I’m certain of it.”

He was so full of shit, I wondered how the entire corridor hadn’t flooded yet. I threw my hands up. “Have you lost your mind? Nobody cares about that.”

Ignoring me because he really did want to die tonight, Marius opened the door.

I froze.

How the hell was this the most expensive room in the inn?

“Marius,” I said slowly, turning to him. “There’s only one bed.”

He grinned. When I made the mistake to glance at his lips, something low in my belly got tied up in a giant flaming knot.

He asked, “Do you want the left side or the right, lover?”

**Episode 4670**

Big Mac’s words rang in my ears.

*Xavier might not be the same person?*

Nausea started crawling around in my stomach. It had probably been there all along, lurking like a threat.

“What do you mean?” I asked Big Mac. I turned my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. “Will he be possessed by a demon or something? Like me and Seluna? Or—”

“I never said anything about possession,” Big Mac interrupted strictly. “I just said he might not be the same.”

“But *how*?”

“There’s no way of knowing,” Big Mac replied. “Though perhaps because he’s a strong Alpha, and he’s accustomed to situations that are less than favorable, it might not be so bad.”

“But in what ways won’t he be the same?” I persisted.

Big Mac glared. “I know you’re worried, Cali, but I just explained that there’s no way of knowing. Don’t you ever listen? It’s like talking to a brick wall sometimes, I swear.”

“What Big Mac means is that people aren’t made to pass through the demon world,” Rowena cut in, firmly taking the hand that Big Mac had been waving around to place it on the table. “It’s not meant to be experienced by anyone other than demons. It can be… traumatic to anyone who visits.”

“*Traumatic?* Then Xavier really needs to get out of there ASAP.” My heartbeat accelerated.

Greyson put a firm hand on my shoulder. “We will.” He looked between Rowena and Big Mac. “Besides, there’s nothing we can do until Okorie gets back to me. Right?”

The witches exchanged a look and nodded.

“Okay,” Greyson said, taking a deep breath. “Then Cali and I will go back to the pack house to fill everybody in. They deserve to know what’s going on.”

“I’ll go find Gabriel and Mikah and touch base with you,” Rowena told Greyson.

“Good, then,” Big Mac said, making a shooing gesture with her hands toward Greyson and me. “You two run along now before—”

Mrs. Smith cut in. “You shouldn’t go to the demon world.”

She hadn’t said a word for the past few minutes. And when she spoke now, her attention was fixed on Greyson. My stomach dropped when I saw his pained expression,

“Mom…”

She gulped. “There must be another way.” She turned to me. “You shouldn’t go either, Cali.”

Greyson didn’t say anything. He just walked over to his mother and pulled her into a hug.

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On our way back to the Redwood pack house, my brain buzzed with thoughts. Mrs. Smith’s sorrowful expression would haunt me for a while. Truthfully, I didn’t want Greyson to go to the demon world either. I would’ve preferred to go there on my own without having to worry over both Greyson and Xavier, as insane as that sounded. But I reminded myself that that would *not* be a good idea.

Xavier and Greyson were Alphas, and they had seen multiple wars and other horrible things. They were much more desensitized to violence and gore than I was. I still had nightmares sometimes about the Bitterfang war.

*I can’t even fault anyone for telling me to stay here*, I thought. *Obviously, they care about my safety, and I can’t be reckless right now, not when Xavier is in danger.*

I felt stuck, my nerves rioting. But the feeling of Greyson’s fur under my fingertips as I rode his back settled me down a bit. I breathed in and out, refocusing on what mattered here. Xavier escaping danger. Escaping the demon world. But there was one more thing to consider here.

Adéluce.

I had to make sure that Adéluce paid for what she’d done to Xavier.

I promised to myself I would.

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“Jeez, what took you so long?” Lola asked the second I walked into the Redwood kitchen. She jumped down from the counter, looking around while whispering, “Everybody’s been asking about what’s happening. Jay and I could only deflect for so long!”

Jay stared at me. “Rishika has been *very* insistent. She can be kind of scary, actually.”

I sighed. “Greyson said—”

“I’ll answer everyone’s questions right now,” Greyson said from behind me. He’d finished getting dressed, his expression serious. “Cali, please call everybody to the living room. We’re going to fix this one step at a time.”

The certainty in Greyson’s voice grounded me.

That only lasted for a moment, though. When we gathered around in the living room and everybody started asking questions, I felt like climbing up the walls with stress. The pack deserved to know, but I hated waiting around for Okorie to call.

*We need to save Xavier now. Right. Now.*

Could the demon world really change him?

No, not Xavier. He was tough.

*Not tough enough to escape Adéluce earlier, though.*

I felt sick to my stomach. Not only was Xavier in danger, but we all probably were. Which was why we needed to figure this out. And fast.

“If Okorie doesn’t reply within the next hour, we will reach out to Marta,” Greyson told the others after explaining everything, settling their fears, and mine, too.

But fear was a tricky thing, and it had many heads.

*But what if Okorie can’t reach the Courier? Is there another way to get to the demon world?*

I ignored the little doubtful voice in my head and looked around the room. Lilac, Violet, Charlie, Ravi, Sage, and Zainab had joined for the meeting. Xavier might be a Samara now, but his old pack still cared for him. It made me feel like there was hope here. Until everybody’s questions escalated and Greyson started offering details regarding the situation. I couldn’t hear any of it anymore. It just made me realize how truly helpless we were right now. I needed some chamomile tea to at least try calming my stress.

*Please*, I thought, swallowing down the tears. *Please let him be okay.*

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“Where the hell is everyone?” A familiar voice startled me. I looked up from the teakettle and through the kitchen window. Gabriel, Mikah, and Rowena were on the back porch. She shot me a wave before blipping away. I felt a strong wave of gratitude.

*What would we have done without Rowena today?*

“Where’s Cali?” Gabriel stomped across the back porch, flinging the door open before walking into the kitchen. “There you are!”

“Gabriel,” I breathed, relieved. Mikah followed him into the kitchen a moment later.

 Xavier’s friends were here to help. Reinforcements, all for him.

“I’d give you a hug, but I’m a mess,” Gabriel told me with a wink.

When I fully took in their attire, I gasped. They were covered in dirt, grease, and their clothes were torn.

“What on earth were you two doing?” I asked, moving closer to inspect the wounds on Gabriel’s forearms. “Should I get Torin?”

He snorted. “Oh, please, it’s just a flesh wound. Or two. I’ll heal, it’ll be fine.”

My gaze flickered to Mikah. He was too busy glaring at his mate. “You said it would be an easy job,” he said with a bit of a snarl. “It *wasn’t*.”

Gabriel shrugged. “You’re still alive, aren’t you?” He paused, blinking at Mikah. “Well, relatively speaking, I mean.” He cackled at his own joke. I probably would’ve laughed, too, if I weren’t so freaked out.

Mikah, in the meantime, looked deeply unimpressed.

Shaking his head at Gabriel, he walked up to me. “Sorry about that,” he told me in an even tone. “Any word on Xavier?”

Mikah’s stoic expression, the heaviness of it, reminded me how grave things truly were. How Xavier could be out there, fighting for his life as we spoke, and I was here, making fucking chamomile tea.

Just hearing his name made me feel like I was going to burst into tears.

“Nothing yet,” I whispered.

Mikah nodded, resting a hand on my shoulder. “Patience. Rowena told us everything.”

Gabriel had approached as well, only his easy smile had vanished. This kind of seriousness was so unlike him that it made things worse for me. His expression softening, he muttered, “It makes sense now that Xavier was under a spell, you know?”

I gulped. “What do you mean?”

Gabriel exchanged a look with Mikah. Then he said, “I knew something was up with my friend, but I didn’t know exactly what.”

I nodded slowly, sighing. “What was it that made you suspicious?”

“A lot of things, but mostly that he left you,” he said.

I paused, taking in the meaning of his words.

Gabriel went on. “My boy was crazy about you. I couldn’t believe that he’d just dump you like that. It made no sense, no matter how hard he tried to spin it, or how he fought to give me one excuse or the other. There was something off about the whole thing.”

Heat rose up into my cheeks. My voice lowered when I asked, “What do you mean, Gabriel?”

He paused, staring at me. His expression twisted to confusion. “You know that Xavier’s still in love with you, right?”

**Episode 4671**

**Ava**

I ran through the woods, moving on instinct, barely seeing a thing as I sprinted across the frozen ground. I was heading for the Samara house, but my only hope was to find the house by muscle memory. I wasn’t looking—I was barely conscious of the fact that I was running. My thoughts were a thorny blur, and all my energy was devoted to holding back a panic attack.

But that was a struggle. I’d just watched Xavier—my mate, my Alpha—disappearright before my eyes, and I could barely breathe through the fear.

Where the hell had he gone? Where was he now? What if he was…

*No*, I told myself sharply. No, I couldn’t think like that. I couldn’t go there. He couldn’t be *gone*. There was no way. I was his mate, his Luna. There was no way I wouldn’t have felt something like that. I loved him, and he—

I stumbled as I landed on the far side of a small stream. I caught myself before I could fall, but just barely. The thought had thrown off my balance, and I was struggling to regain it.

I loved Xavier—that much I knew. But… Did he love me? Was what he claimed to feel for me real? Or was he only with me because that goddamn vampire-witch had forced him to be?

An awful taste rose up in the back of my throat. Adéluce was intent on making Xavier suffer. So… Did that mean *I* was part of his torture?

My heart twisted with agony as I considered the idea, but… But it just didn’t feel right. I loved Xavier, and I knew him, too. I knew what I saw in his face, and what I heard in his voice. I knew how gentle his hands were when he touched me, and how it felt when we made love, and how he looked at me when he didn’t think I was paying attention. He loved me. He did.

And I knew what I was talking about. I remembered what it had been like the first time—before the pack wars, when it had been just the two of us. We’d grown up together, and then one day I’d looked at him, and he’d looked at me, and we’d just known we were meant to be together.

I knew what it felt like to be loved by Xavier Evers, and it felt like *this*—and yet this time, it was somehow even better than it had been before. We were both older and wiser, and the fact that I could feel the difference between then and now… It told me I was right about this, that I wasn’t just fooling myself. I knew what it felt like to be hated by Xavier, too. I knew what it felt like to be lied to by him.

I took a deep breath, drawing the freezing winter air into my lungs, feeling my chest expand as I ran. I couldn’t let myself spiral like this—it would only slow me down. I knew Xavier, and I knew that he loved me.

Even if he’d done what he had with Cali.

The pack house finally came into view. I’d somehow managed to find my way back, though it felt like I’d been running completely blind.

When I emerged from the trees and stumbled onto the frozen lawn, I shifted back to human and took a deep breath as I looked up at the house. I knew that once I went inside, there were going to be questions, and I was going to have to answer them. Our Alpha was gone, and I was the Luna, which meant I had a duty to the pack. I was going to have to fill everyone in on what was going on, and that wasn’t going to be easy.

The house was mercifully quiet when I walked inside. As I started up the stairs, Knox turned the corner and started walking down.

“Hey, Knox,” I said. “Gather the pack together, will you?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said. Then he looked at my face, and his expression darkened. “Is everything okay?”

“Just make sure everyone’s in the living room when I come back down,” I said. “I’m just going to get dressed.”

“You got it, Luna,” he said, though he still looked concerned.

With that taken care of, I finished climbing the stairs and headed down the hall. Then I stopped—stock-still—in the doorway of my room. Despite all the thoughts and questions racing through my head, I somehow hadn’t prepared myself for the sight of our empty bedroom.

I looked at the bed, which was still unmade, and Xavier’s pillow, which had been tossed to the side. He always ended up sleeping on his stomach, his head resting on his arm.

Sudden tears sprang to my eyes, but I tried to push them away. I took a deep breath and walked into the room, trying to ignore the ache in my chest.

I grabbed my phone and looked down. There was a message from Greyson.

*We know where Xavier is. Demon world.*

I stared down at the message and collapsed onto the bed. The *demon world*?

Unthinkingly, I smoothed my hand across Xavier’s pillow, imagining that I could still feel his warmth.

We *had* to get him back—whatever it took. My jaw clenched. I wasn’t going to lose him. Not again, and certainly not to some stupid vampire-witch.

I stood and grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I pulled them on and headed downstairs. The pack was gathered in the living room, and everyone looked at me when I walked in.

“What’s going on, Ava?” Josephine asked. “Why did you call a pack meeting? We haven’t had one of these in a while—and definitely not without Xavier.” She looked around. “Where is he, anyway?”

I moved to the front of the living room and took a deep breath. “That’s what I need to talk to you all about.”

“Has something happened to him?” Knox asked, frowning.

I nodded. “Yeah. Something has.”

I filled them in on the Adéluce situation, telling them about the vampire-witch and how she’d cast some kind of spell on Xavier. And then, finally, I told them about his—quite literal—disappearance.

When I stopped talking, the pack stared at me in stunned silence.

“So… What does this mean?” Knox asked, looking floored. “Are we—do we not have an Alpha again?”

“No Alpha?”

“We need a leader!”

“We can’t go back to the way things were before!”

I could feel the pack’s anxiety starting to rise, and I knew I needed to calm everyone, no matter how anxious I felt myself.

“That’s *not* at all what this means,” I said sharply. “We have an Alpha. *Xavier* is our Alpha. He is alive, and we are going to find him.”

“Okay, but how are you planning on doing that?” Blaine asked, giving me a level stare.

I opened my mouth to answer, but Blaine’s question had opened the floodgates, and I found myself inundated with questions from the pack.

“How long has he been gone?”

“If this vampire is so powerful, how are we supposed to fight her?”

“We can’t get involved in another war!”

“Should the rest of us be worried?”

“Why can’t we just go get him? Where is he?”

“Why did this vampire-witch attack him, anyway?”

“What are we going to do if Xavier is dead?” Geraint asked, standing up.

“SIT!” I barked out, glaring hard enough that Geraint flushed and sat back down.

“Wait, Ava, I have a question,” Knox said. “Are you saying that Xavier’s been under a spell the entire time he’s been our Alpha?”

The sting of this question was excruciating, but I fought to keep my reaction off my face. There was no reason the whole pack had to know that these were the exact same questions I’d been asking myself since I’d found out about Adéluce. I needed to be strong for my pack—and for Xavier.

“None of that matters,” I said, shaking my head. “All that *does* matter is that Xavier is the Alpha of this pack, and that everything he’s done as our Alpha, he’s done for all of you. He’s never acted against the pack’s best interests. Now,” I said, looking around, “I wish I had more answers for all of you, but I don’t. I’m stumbling through the dark on this as much as anyone else. But there is one question that I can answer without hesitation: Xavier is the Alpha of the Samara pack, and he always will be.”

“Ava?” Marissa got to her feet—but unlike when Geraint had done the same, the move wasn’t aggressive, just worried and curious. “What can we do? How can we help Xavier?”

I ground my teeth, anger coursing through me like poison. “You help me kill the vampire-bitch who’s got him.”

**Episode 4672**

I blinked at Gabriel, completely shell-shocked as I replayed his words in my head.

*You know that Xavier’s still in love with you, right?*

My heart beat wildly at those words. I had known it was true all along—I’d felt like it had to be, anyway—but hearing someone else, someone who was close with Xavier, confirm it out loud, made my spirit soar.

Xavier had been consistent in exactly two ways since he’d broken up with me and left the pack: he’d been saying shitty, hurtful things to me, and he’d been acting like he still cared about me. Adéluce must’ve been responsible for the first part—she must’ve been forcing him to be awful to me. And the second part explained why he kept coming back to me again and again.

Despite the hellish situation we were trapped in, I couldn’t stop the grin from forming on my face. Xavier still loved me. He *loved* me.

Gabriel started laughing. “Well, this is a fucked-up situation, but I just wanted you to know that.” Then he shook his head, sobering. “I knew something was up with Xavier. I just knew it.”

I nodded. I knew what he meant. It had been impossible to put my finger on any one thing for a long time, but I’d just known something wasn’t right with Xavier—just like Gabriel had known.

Suddenly I remembered what I’d overheard a few days ago, when Xavier had forgotten to end that phone call. I wanted to ask Gabriel about it. But I didn’t know what to ask exactly. I mean, Xavier told Ava that he loved her when no one else was listening—or so he thought. What did Gabriel think about their relationship? It seemed unlikely for Xavier to say something like that if he didn’t believe it. The thought was sobering, horrible even. But I knew Xavier. He didn’t say anything he didn’t mean. It seemed possible that maybe Adéluce had something to do with everything, but Xavier faking feelings? Unlikely.

*She is his mate, too… As hard as that is to swallow.*

I cleared my throat. “Gabriel, do you know how Xavier feels about Ava?”

Gabriel looked at me for a moment, then away, like he suddenly couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Honestly,” he finally said, “I wish I could tell you that their relationship was all bullshit, but… I know Xavier, and I’ve seen them together.” He finally met my eyes. “He really cares about Ava.”

I nodded, trying hard not to let the hurt show on my face. I hated to hear that, but as I let the information sink in. It wasn’t something I didn’t expect. Not really. I thought back to what Rowena had told me when she’d checked on the *due destini*. She’d said that Xavier’s connection with Ava was just as stable as his connection with me. They were mates—mated even before I came into the picture.

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. The fact was that Xavier loved Ava, too, and I was just going to have to learn to deal with that. Wasn’t that basically the motto of the *due destini* and what I put Greyson and Xavier through anyway?

*Karma’s a bitch.*

“Thanks, Gabriel,” I said quietly.

“Cali,” Greyson said, striding into the kitchen. He looked over at Gabriel. “Oh, hey, you’re here. Good. Listen, I just sent a text to Lucian asking him to meet up with us.”

“*Lucian?*” I repeated incredulously. “Why do you want to meet with him?”

Greyson looked grim. “Since it’s his goddamn fault that the ashes even exist for Adéluce to fuck around with, I told him that the least he could do was help out.”

“I guess so, or he’ll just complicate everything even more,” I said.

Mikah walked into the kitchen. “Greyson, hey.”

“Hey, man. I’m glad you’re both here,” Greyson said. “Thanks for coming.”

“It’s not a problem,” Gabriel said. “I’m excited to kill Adéluce once and for all. No one messes with my boy.”

Greyson nodded. He glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

I sighed, painfully aware of the lingering tension between us. I could feel it, and it sucked. I wished things could just go back to normal, but I had no idea how to make that happen—or if it was even possible.

I must have sunk deep into my thoughts, because Greyson had to touch my shoulder to get my attention.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, just thinking. Sorry—what were you saying?”

“I was talking about Seluna,” he said, giving me a curious look.

*Right, yes. Seluna.*

I tried to tune back into the conversation. “Well, at least if *she* comes back to cause problems, we’ll know about it. It won’t be like it was with Adéluce.”

“How do you figure that?” Greyson asked.

I shrugged. “We just have to wait and see if she starts hurting me.”

Greyson’s expression grew tight with tension, and his eyes flashed. “I don’t think that’s going to work. I don’t want it to get to that point.”

“Okay, so Cali’s not going to be our Seluna barometer,” Gabriel said. “I’m okay with that. But can anyone tell me what our plan actually is?”

“For now, we’re waiting on the witches,” I said. “They’re trying to figure out where Adéluce is, and if there’s a way to pull Xavier out of the demon world.”

Mikah’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, that sounds easy,” he said sarcastically. “Do you know *how* they’re going to figure any of that out?”

I tried not to wince. “Um…”

“Do your witches know a lot about the demon world, then?” Mikah pressed. “How to enter and exit? How to make contact with the beings who live there?”

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t think so.”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Greyson conceded.

“Do they even know where to start?” Gabriel asked.

I opened my mouth to say I didn’t know, but then a thought hit me like a ton of bricks. “Wait a minute!”

“Cali?” Greyson asked. “What’s going on?”

“I just thought of something! There’s someone we could talk to about this,” I said excitedly.

“Who?” Mikah asked.

“Vander,” I said.

“Vander?” Gabriel repeated.

I nodded enthusiastically. “They’re the Keeper of All Nature. So, like, super powerful and knowledgeable.” I looked at Greyson. “They were the one who told us about the imbalance in the first place, remember? Months ago, when Seluna first started pulling all her bullshit, Vander knew exactly what was going on. They’ll probably know what’s happening now. And we should talk to them anyway, because we all deserve a warning if the magical world is about to fall apart.”

“Whoa,” Gabriel said. “I’ll be the first to admit that this Vander person sounds pretty legit. But… How do we find them, exactly? How does one go about contacting the—what? NatureKeeper?”

This question felt like a wet towel thrown on top of my enthusiasm, because the fact was, I had no idea how to contact Vander. Vander was one of those people who kind of let me know when they wanted to talk to me, not the other way around.

“Well,” I said slowly, “I guess we should probably start by going outside.”

“Okay,” Gabriel said with a shrug. “To contact the nature god, go outside. Makes sense.”

I led the way into the backyard. When we reached the dry winter grass, we all just stood there for an awkward beat, looking at each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. It was obvious that none of us knew where to start.

I took a deep breath—this had been my idea, so it was up to me to get the party started.

I tipped my head up to look at the sky, which was darkening. The stars were just starting to come out, and the temperature was dropping.

“Vander?” I called tentatively.

Nothing happened. Literally nothing. We all just stood there in the cold darkness, looking around, but there was nothing to see.

I felt my face flush. This had been a ridiculous idea.

Gabriel cleared his throat. “Maybe we should—”

A flash of light shocked him into silence.

We all looked toward the source and—to my complete surprise—found Vander standing in front of us.

I instantly recognized the form they’d taken this time—the hot dude—and I smiled.

Vander looked us all over. “Wow, imagine this—just the troublesome werewolves I’ve been thinking about. What can I—”

“It’s the ashes,” I said without waiting for Vander to finish.

“What?” they asked.

“Seluna’s ashes. They’re in the hands of someone who wants to hurt us.”

Vander nodded slowly. “Yeah, that makes sense. I thought something strange was happening. If those ashes aren’t in the demon world, then we’re all in a lot of trouble.”

“What does that mean?” Greyson asked. “What kind of trouble?”

“Every time the ashes move back and forth, the barrier between the demon world and this one gets weaker.”

“What do you mean, *weaker*?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I didn’t want to hear the answer.

Vander gave me a hard look. “I mean that pretty soon, there won’t be a barrier at all.”

**Episode 4673**

**Xavier**

The creature that had grabbed me by the arms was strong, but instinct took over, and I shoved it away, making it stumble back.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I snarled.

Ferlin elbowed me. “What are you doing? *Keep* *quiet*.”

I ignored him. I just didn’t see how keeping quiet was going to help at this stage of the game. Every eye in the tavern was now trained on the two of us. A tense silence filled the place. I recognized the sound of it—it sounded like the moment right before a fight broke out. I was preparing myself for the inevitable when Ferlin spoke.

“*What?*” he exclaimed, holding his arms out. “You’ve never seen a couple of greenhorns before? Get back to your drinks.”

There was a beat of silence, and then—to my surprise—everyone did exactly that. There were some grumbles, but every monster in the place looked away from us, turning back to their grimy drinks or their slimy-looking food or the monster across the table from them.

“Come on,” Ferlin muttered.

He led the way across the dim, crowded room to the bar, where we grabbed a couple of stools near the end. The bar was sticky and wet, and the whole tavern had a sour smell that turned my stomach. I didn’t have any interest in staying here, and I wondered what Ferlin’s plan was.

“How long do these sandstorms typically last?” I asked, glancing back at the door.

Ferlin shrugged. “Hard to tell.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s hard to tell. It’s a sandstorm, wolf—I’m not in charge of ’em. They can last anywhere from a few minutes to a few days. It just depends.”

I gripped the bar convulsively. “*A few days?* No, that’s not going to work. I don’t have time for that! I have to get out of here. I need to get back home! There are people—”

“*Shut up*,” Ferlin hissed. “What you *need* to do is keep quiet. We don’t know who’s listening, and you’re not as safe as you seem to think you are.”

I looked at Ferlin with a wary eye. I suspected he was right about that, and it was time for me to get some answers.

“Why are you helping me, anyway?” I asked.

“What?”

“You heard me,” I said. “Why are you helping me? I can’t think of any good reason why you’d help me find shelter or tell me how to stay safe around here.” I narrowed my eyes. “So, I have to ask myself—what are you getting out of this?”

Ferlin shrugged again. “Maybe I’ve just got one of those altruistic spirits.”

I snorted derisively. “I truly doubt that. So what is it?”

Ferlin looked around furtively, then leaned closer so he could speak in a whisper. “Okay, you want to know the truth?”

“Ideally,” I said dryly.

“The truth is that you’re an anomaly, all right? And around here, that’s a precious thing, which means it’s in my best interest to stick close to you. And let’s just leave it at that,” he said, looking shiftily around the tavern.

I leaned away from him. I didn’t much like the sound of any of that, but what was I going to do about it? I really wasn’t in any position to turn down an offer of help—at least at the moment. No matter what Ferlin’s long-term plans were for me, he was helping me right now, and that wasn’t nothing.

So I gave him a short nod. “Fine. We’ll leave it at that—for now. But you can tell me something else—do you know of a way to get to the human world?”

Ferlin immediately got a shrewd, calculating look in his small eyes.

“Maybe,” he said evasively. “How did *you* get here, anyway?”

“Why do you ask?” I said, willing to play his game for a while.

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “We usually don’t get a lot of humans in these parts—or werewolves, for that matter. Maybe you should just go back the way you came.”

I growled deep in my throat as I thought of Adéluce, already shaking my head. “I can’t go back the way I came. I have to find another way out.”

Ferlin nodded, though my growl seemed to have put him on edge. “Okay, okay. I’ll back off. Keep your secrets. But if you’re not willing to go back the way you came, then the only way out I’ve heard of is your precious Courier.”

“But contacting him is difficult, you said?”

“Yeah. Because of the storm.”

“How so?” I asked.

“There’s a spot the Courier always passes through, but it’s not anywhere nearby. And it’s going to be difficult to get there, even after the storm clears.”

“Whatever. That’s fine,” I said. I didn’t care how long it was going to take, as long as I fucking got there. “I’ll do anything to get there.”

His brows went up. “I hope you mean that.”

Great. Very reassuring response. But I couldn’t worry about that right now. If this demon was helping me for some horrible secret reason, then I’d just have to deal with it. If push came to shove, I’d be more than capable of fighting Ferlin on my own. I was more than capable, even in this world. I just had to get back to my world so I could deal with Adéluce, once and for all.

I was about to tell Ferlin that I was ready to leave when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder and yanked me all the way around.

I blinked up at the massive, ugly-ass monster standing in front of me. The thing was tall and wide and covered in scales, but the worst part was the eyes. It had too many. *Way* too many.

My stomach churned as I stared at it. It just looked… *wrong*. I’d never seen anything like it—thank fuck. If these were walking around where I was from, humans definitely would’ve noticed by now. I wanted to ask what the fuck it wanted with me, but I couldn’t quite form the words.

*Don’t tell me you’re scared Xavier.*

The demon stared down at me from an incomprehensible height, its massive, clawed hand still gripping my shoulder. It was silent for a long moment, looking me over. I tensed, ready for anything.

Then it finally spoke. “I don’t fuckin’ like you.”

And then, without giving me a single moment to respond, it picked me up and hurled me across the tavern. As I flew, my stunned mind registered that the thing had picked me up and thrown me so easily that I might as well have been a Frisbee. But I didn’t have much time for reflection before my flight across the room came to an abrupt end when I hit the wall. I crumpled to the floor with a groan, my whole body immediately screaming with pain.

But then I grinned. Because *this* was something I could understand. No matter where I ended up, one thing was always, *always* the same—fighting.

I got to my feet and shook my head to clear it. Then I eyed the monster. “Is that all you got?”

Ferlin was just visible behind the monster, gesticulating wildly, clearly trying to communicate to me that it would be in my best interest to back off. But right now, I wasn’t particularly interested in my best interest. I was in the fucking demon world, I had no clear way to get home, and I was *pissed*. Every part of my life had felt so completely out of my control for such a long time, and I was ready to hit something. Hard. I just had a feeling that it would make me feel better.

And I was about to find out if I was right, because at that point—with a furious snarl—the demon started toward me. Ferlin darted past it, still gesturing wildly. He was probably hoping I’d remember what he’d told me, about how demons liked to eat werewolves. Well, that wasn’t going to work for me, now was it?

But to my surprise, when he skidded to a halt beside me, he had a different message to pass on.

“You can’t fight like this,” he hissed, his eyes wide as dinner plates.

That was all I needed to hear.

I took a deep breath and started shifting… But nothing happened. I couldn’t shift. Something was preventing the change from sweeping through my body. Like it was being dammed up, somehow.

In a moment, I understood. It was this place. The demon world was fucking with my wolf.

*Fuck. This isn’t good.*

Anger clawed at the inside of my chest, but I knew I needed to stay focused. I couldn’t let this happen. I needed to shift—right now. The monster was nearly on me, and if I didn’t find my wolf, I was going to die.

**Episode 4674**

**Greyson**

I didn’t like the sound of that at all. The last thing we needed right now or ever was more fucking demons slipping into our world through some faulty gateway. The horrifying possibilities that instantly occurred to me made my head spin, but I kept them to myself. They wouldn’t be helpful.

“You should know that we have a very limited amount of time to deal with this,” Vander continued.

“What does ‘limited’ mean, exactly?” I asked sharply. “How limited? How much time do we actually have?”

Vander shrugged their shoulders. “It depends.”

“On what?” I pressed. I didn’t like how they kept dancing around an answer. This was my brother’s life at stake here.

They gave me a hard look. “On how many times the ashes cross the barrier. It’s already pretty weak, though—it can probably only handle a couple more trips. No way to know for sure how many.”

Next to me, Cali tensed.

“Seluna mentioned this,” she said quietly.

“What?” I asked, looking over at her.

She nodded. “She said something about the veil growing thinner. I guess it was a warning. This must have been what she was talking about. A couple more trips…” She shook her head. “That’s not a lot—it could happen easily. Vander, how do we stop this from happening?”

“Cali,” I started, hearing the panic in her voice. “You don’t—”

“We could barely deal with Seluna, Greyson,” she interrupted. “How are we supposed to handle the entire population of the demon world pouring through that barrier? Think about what that could mean! We’re not equipped for that kind of fight let alone the entire human world.”

“The first thing we need to do is tell Big Mac about this,” I said, forcing calm into my voice. “We’re really getting ahead of ourselves, here—let’s just deal with what we can deal with. Right now, we need to tell Big Mac that we need to move faster than we thought.”

“Yeah,” Cali said. Her eyes were wide with fear, but it looked like she was trying to keep it under control. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

“I really wish there was more I could do,” Vander said apologetically. “But the imbalance is already very bad. I’ve got my hands full trying to keep everything together. Actually, I really need to get back—I’ve already been away too long.”

“What happens if you don’t get back?” I asked, my stomach tensing.

“I just need to be there,” they said. “If the veil falls and magic is thrown completely off balance, I won’t be able to stop it. And if that happens, then none of us will be safe from what will come next.”

“You should go, then,” I said to Vander.

They looked worried. “I just wish I could help you more—”

“You’ve given us plenty to go on, Vander,” I said. “We appreciate it.”

“Goodbye, Vander,” Cali said. “Thanks for taking the time to come tell us what you could.”

I turned away from Cali and Vander, pulling my phone from my pocket. I thought for a moment, then dialed my mom’s number.

“Greyson?” she said, answering on the first ring. “What’s wrong?”

“What?” I asked blankly.

“What’s going on?” She sounded tense.

“How do you…” I started. “How did you know I was calling with bad news?”

“I always know, Greyson,” she said. “You’re my son after all.”

I sighed. “I have some new information that Big Mac needs to hear.”

“Okay.” There was a brief shuffling noise. “You’re on speaker, Greyson. Go ahead.”

“Big Mac?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said shortly. “I’m here.”

“We just had a visit from Vander—”

Big Mac groaned.

I continued. “They told us that the barrier between worlds is weakening. When we told them about the ashes, they weren’t surprised. They said that taking the ashes back and forth between worlds is causing the problem—it’s making the barrier between our world and the demon world weaker every time they pass through. And if it keeps happening, the barrier between the two worlds is going to disappear.”

“When?” Big Mac asked sharply.

“Vander said the ashes can only cross a couple more times before the barrier falls completely. No exact number, so the fewer, the better.”

There was a long pause.

“Shit,” Big Mac muttered. “That’s not good.”

“No,” I said. “It’s really not.”

She heaved a gusty sigh. “I was hoping I’d be able to find Adéluce without having to…”

I waited for her to finish her sentence, but she didn’t.

“Without what?” I pressed. “What didn’t you want to do?”

“Nothing,” she snapped. “Nothing. It’s fine. I’ll figure it out. Just don’t get into any more trouble, okay? You worry about yourself, and I’ll find Adéluce.”

I opened my mouth to ask how exactly she was going to manage that, but before I could say anything, the call ended. Big Mac had hung up on me.

I looked down at the black screen. I didn’t like the sound of this plan—at all—but I had no idea what I could do to change it. The reality was that we really did need to find Adéluce. There was no other way. We had to get the ring and the ashes, and we had to save my brother.

Shit.

I ran a hand through my hair. Thinking of Xavier made me think of Colton. I needed to call my other brother. He needed to know what was going on with Xavier. They were twins and connected in a way I could only ever hope to be with them.

This wasn’t going to be a fun conversation, but it needed to happen, so I pulled up his information on my phone and dialed.

Every part of me tensed, and I winced, thinking about the last interaction I’d had with Colton. It had been awkward as hell.

The call went through, his phone rang a few times, and then—

“*What?*” Colton snapped. His voice sounded rough, like he’d just woken up. “Someone had better be dead or dying, because this is the first time I’ve slept in two days.”

“Hey, Colton,” I said. “It’s me.”

“Greyson?” Colton sounded slightly more alert. “I guess I’m surprised to hear from you again so soon. I figured we’d probably just go to our default mode after that last call got so weird—you know, awkward radio silence. But, uh… What’s up, man?”

I just got to the point. “Something’s happening to Xavier.”

“*What?*” Colton sounded wide awake, now—also tense and angry. “What happened to my brother? Is he okay? Where is he? What are you talking about?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” I said, trying not to get annoyed. And the way he’d said “*my* brother” stung—as if Xavier was his *only* brother—but I shoved the pain to the side. “And it’s what we’re trying to figure out.

Colton took a deep breath, clearly trying to control his response. “Okay. Tell me what happened.”

“I don’t even know how far back to go,” I said, rubbing my jaw. “Xavier’s been acting really weird for a while, which we finally realized had less to do with him just acting weird and more to do with a spell that a vampire-witch called Adéluce has put on him.”

“*What?*” Colton burst out. “A *vampire-witch*?”

“Save some shock for later—I’m just getting started,” I said grimly. “When we found out about the curse, Adéluce freaked out. Very long story short, Xavier’s gone. We know Adéluce threw him into the demon world, but we don’t know how to get in or how to find him if we do manage to get there. We’ve learned that the barrier between the demon world and our world is getting thinner. While on one hand that could mean we could get Xavier out a heck of a lot easier, I think you know as much as I do that we cannot fucking open up the demon world to ours. So we’re trying to get Xavier out; it’s a matter of *how* we do it that we’re trying to figure out.”

Colton was quiet for a long moment, then he blew out a long breath. “How did this happen?”

I gritted my teeth. “I just told you—”

“That’s not what I meant,” he growled. “How did this happen *on your watch*? I thought your whole-ass job as the older brother was to keep us safe!”

I knew Colton was upset, and I didn’t blame him, but the jab still hurt.

“That’s not fucking fair, Colton,” I said in a low voice. “Xavier’s a grown-ass man, and I’m not in charge of him—not that he’d ever let me tell him what to do. And I’m doing everything I can to get him back.”

Colton laughed, but the sound was mean and angry. “Yeah, you’re going to have to forgive me for not trusting you to pull out all the stops.”

“What’s that supposed to—”

“I’m on my way,” Colton snapped. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Try not to make things worse before I arrive.”

**Episode 4675**

Vander had disappeared, and Greyson had stepped away to make a phone call. Gabriel and Mikah were standing close together, speaking quietly so I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

After a while, Mikah glanced at me. “We’re going to head inside.”

I nodded wordlessly, barely listening—I was too busy trying to wrap my head around all the things that seemed to be going wrong, all at the exact same time. My heart raced, and my head was throbbing. Everything we’d been told about Xavier and the ashes and the barrier between the demon world and the human world… It all just seemed insurmountable. I had no idea how the hell to fix even *one* of those things, never mind all of them.

I looked over at Greyson. His back was to me, but I could see that he was tense. I didn’t think he was still talking to Big Mac—she didn’t like to linger on phone calls—so who was he speaking to now?

Taking a step closer to him, I tried to listen in, figuring I’d be able to figure it out if I could hear his half of the conversation, but I didn’t get the chance.

“*Fine*,” he said shortly. Then he ended the call without saying goodbye to the person on the other end. He turned around and saw me standing nearby. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said, eyeing him warily. “Who were you just talking to?”

He rubbed his hand over his face, looking exhausted. “Colton.”

“Oh,” I said. So that was why he looked so stressed.

“Yeah.”

“You told him about Xavier?”

Greyson nodded.

“How did he take it?” I asked. Then I winced. “Ask a stupid question… Obviously he didn’t take it *well*. Is he okay, at least?”

Greyson’s expression hardened for a moment, then he shrugged. “He’s on his way,” he said, not answering my actual question.

“On his way?” I repeated blankly. “Here? Why?”

“To help.”

This didn’t seem like enough of an explanation, and I sensed there was more that he wasn’t telling me. But I took one look at the grim anger in his eyes and swallowed the rest of my questions. This did not seem like the moment to push him.

“Well, more help can’t hurt,” I said, trying to sound positive.

“Yeah,” he said grimly.

I suddenly remembered that he’d just spoken to Big Mac, and I was about to ask what she’d said when I felt my own phone buzzing in my pocket.

I pulled it out and looked at the screen, and I was surprised to see Okorie’s name.

“Hello?” I said, putting the phone on speaker so that Greyson could hear as well. “Okorie?”

“Hey, Cali. *Finally*,” he said, sighing theatrically. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of Greyson, but my call wouldn’t go through. Do you know where he is?”

“I’m right here,” Greyson said. “Sorry about that—I just got off another call. But you’ve got me now. What’s up? What can you tell us?”

“What do you need to know exactly?” Okorie asked testily.

“What I told you when I left a message. We need to find the Courier,” Greyson said. “Can you tell us how to get in touch with him?”

There was a beat of silence on Okorie’s send. Greyson and I exchanged a nervous look.

“Sorry, Greyson, but no, I can’t,” he finally said.

“What do you mean? Why not?” Greyson demanded.

“The only person who can give you that information is the Courier himself,” Okorie said.

Greyson let out a frustrated groan.

“Okay, is there *anything* you can tell us?” I asked, feeling my annoyance rise. “Or anything you can do?”

“I’ll get the Courier on his way immediately,” Okorie said quickly. “And if you need us, Marta and I could come back.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said. “Honestly, we need all the help we can get. And maybe there’s something Marta can do as a bridge that will help us get to Xavier. Do you think that’s possible?”

The wind whistled around us as Greyson and I stood huddled over my phone, waiting for Okorie to answer. It seemed like he was responding slowly, but I supposed I understood. We were desperate for answers, and I suspected he wanted to be sure before he answered, and not run the risk of overpromising.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Marta’s very powerful, but there’s no way to know if her magic will be useful in this situation. But I can look into it.”

“Thank you,” I said, grabbing onto the sliver of hope he’d offered. “And thanks for being willing to come back and help. We might not need you, but I appreciate that you’re willing to come.”

“Of course,” he said. “Just let me know.”

“I will, thanks. This situation has definitely turned into something bigger than we ever could’ve imagined.”

“Seems like that happens a lot.”

“Too much,” Greyson said. “Thanks, Okorie.”

“Yep. Talk soon.”

He ended the call, and I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Then I looked up at Greyson.

“Now I guess we just have to wait to see if we need them,” I said with a sigh. “We’re just waiting for everything. I hate it.”

Night had fully fallen now, and the temperature had plummeted. Greyson didn’t look remotely cold, but that was just the way werewolves were. The cold was starting to sink through the soles of my shoes, so I grabbed Greyson’s hand and started to pull him back toward the house.

He seemed distracted and let me take the lead, trailing along behind me like he barely knew where he was. I glanced back at him as we drew closer to the house, unnerved by how quiet he was being.

Inside, the house was blessedly quiet. It felt warm and bright, and I kept hold of Greyson’s hand as I led him through the kitchen and up the stairs. He still wasn’t speaking.

I hadn’t kept track of what the rest of the pack was up to, but they must’ve been doing something together, because we made it up the stairs and all the way to Greyson’s room without running into anyone.

I stepped into the room and pulled the door shut behind us, taking a seat on the bed. Then I looked up at Greyson, surprised that he wasn’t moving to join me.

The silence between us pressed in on me. It was starting to feel like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room. Finally I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Greyson, what are you thinking?” I asked.

His eyes pierced into me, then he looked away, out the window at the dark night. “I don’t know.”

“Please, Greyson,” I said quietly.

He flexed his hands and sighed heavily. “I just can’t help but feel like I’m failing everyone around me.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Of course you’re not failing anyone.”

The only person failing anyone right now was me. I’d failed Greyson the second I’d let the mate bond with Xavier get to me. I’d failed not only Greyson, but myself.

“Cali—”  
 “Greyson, you’re one of the strongest people I know. You’re always fighting for the people you love,” I said. “It’s so admirable. It’s one of the reasons I love you. I hope you know that… I’ve never once felt let down by you, and I know you’ll protect me—always.”

He shook his head, his eyes still on the window. “Look how well I protected my brother. He’s been stuck under some kind of spell for god knows how long, and I didn’t see it. I didn’t even want to believe it when you pointed it out to me. I just didn’t want to see it, and look what’s happened now—he’s stuck in the demon world, for fuck’s sake.”

Seeing the misery on his face made my heart ache for him. He always carried so much responsibility for everyone around him, and it was clear that what had happened to Xavier was tearing him apart.

“Greyson, *please*,” I said. “You need to accept that what happened to Xavier isn’t your fault. You have nothing to feel guilty about. You didn’t put that curse on him, and you didn’t banish him to the demon world. He’s not there because you failed. You’re doing everything you can to fix things, too.”

“You just don’t understand,” he said sharply, rounding on me. “You don’t get it, Cali.”

“What am I not getting?” I asked desperately.

He shook his head. “I’m going to save Xavier. Of course I am. I have to. But there’s a part of me…” He trailed off, looking so miserable that it made my heart break.

“What?” I asked.

He took a deep, steadying breath. “I just can’t seem to shake this voice in my head—the worst, most selfish part of me that keeps asking the same question.”

“What’s the question?” I whispered, my heart pounding.

He looked deeply into my eyes. “What happens to us when Xavier comes back into your life?”

**Episode 4676**

I gasped, then launched myself off the bed and into Greyson’s arms. I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder, then held onto him as tightly as I could.

“Greyson,” I murmured, my voice muffled by his shirt. “I *need* you to understand how much I love you. Please tell me you understand.”

For a moment, Greyson didn’t move. Then his arms wrapped around me, pulling me close to his chest. “I understand. I know that you love me, Cali.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I had to blink quickly to keep them from escaping. “Good. Because I don’t ever want to lose you.”

“That’s not something you ever have to worry about,” he said. “You’ll never lose me. It’s just…” He held me tighter still, dragging in a deep breath. “It’s just that I’m afraid of losing you.”

I pulled back just enough to look up into his stormy grey eyes. I took his face in my hands, gently stroking his cheeks with my thumbs. How could he still think that? How had my actions with Xavier not pushed him to the brink of things? I still expected him to hate me, and the guilt of what I’d done hadn’t gone away. It had just become… normal.

“Being a *due destini* doesn’t mean that I love one of you and not the other. It means that I love you both. It means that I love *you*.” I shook my head as a tear slid down my cheek. “I can’t even imagine a world where I don’t love you. It just doesn’t compute. I can’t imagine not loving you, Greyson. I need you to know that.”

He sighed, then leaned forward and rested his forehead lightly against mine. He stayed like that for a long moment, breathing quietly.

“I’ll try to remember that,” he finally said.

“You’d better,” I said, trying to sound threatening.

I must’ve been unsuccessful, because I actually managed to elicit the ghost of a smile from Greyson’s worried face.

“Listen to me,” I said, trying to fill my voice with a certainty I didn’t fully feel. “We’re going to figure all this out, and we’re going to rescue Xavier. And then when he gets back, we’re going to figure this out, too.”

“Of course.”

“I know I hurt you, Greyson, and I don’t expect you to forgive me. But I’m going to do everything I can to earn that forgiveness,” I said. “We’re going to do everything one step at a time. We’ve been dealing with the *due destini* up until now, and we’ll just keep dealing with it.”

“That’s right,” Greyson said, nodding firmly. “We’ve figured this out before, and we’re going to figure it out again.”

I smiled at him, though it was a little rueful. “Though I will admit, when Xavier gets back, we’re going to have even more to figure out than before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Xavier’s in love with Ava, which only does god knows what to the *due destini*,” I said. “And don’t forget, when Rowena cast that spell to check on the *due destini*, she said you have a branch reaching toward someone else, too.”

He frowned. “I don’t know if you should put quite so much stock in that spell of Rowena’s. I don’t see that kind of thing ever being a problem for me,” he said. “Plus, it might’ve been Elle because of the sire bond situation.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” I said. “She was right about everything else.”

“Listen to me, Cali. No matter what happens, you should never, *ever* question my love for you,” Greyson said, his voice low and husky. Then he dropped his head and kissed me.

The pressure of his lips against mine hit me like a shot of dopamine, and I relaxed into his arms, letting myself melt against his broad chest. His arms tightened around me, and I could tell that he needed the reassurance of our kiss just as much as I did.

I poured all my feelings into that kiss—all my love and devotion, all the passion I felt for him. I hated that he was feeling insecure about our relationship, and that he was even capable of questioning my feelings for him. I had to make good on my vow to myself to do everything I could to earn his forgiveness.

I wasn’t sure what was going to happen when Xavier got back. I’d been so focused on getting him back, I hadn’t really had a chance to process the fact that all the terrible things he’d said and done to me had been the result of a curse. But I did know that no matter what happened when Xavier got back, I was going to be careful with Greyson’s heart. I made a silent vow to keep it safe as I dropped my head back, letting him kiss my jaw before he moved down to my neck.

He pressed one more kiss to my lips, and when he leaned back to look at me, he was smiling, his expression more relaxed than I’d seen it in a while.

“It’s hard to know what’s coming,” he said, “but maybe we should both try to remember this conversation whenever we start to feel untethered.”

I nodded. “I think that’s a great idea. And we can keep having this conversation, too. I never want you to doubt how much I love you. So any time you need to hear it, just say so.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Same goes for you.”

“And for now,” I said, leaning back to look up at him, “You were right before. We should focus on the things we can control. Like saving Xavier.”

Greyson took a breath and nodded. “We’re going to get him back—no matter what. And we can deal with everything else once he’s home safe.”

I was about to agree with this when we heard the loud rumble of a motorcycle engine outside the window. We looked at each other, stunned.

“Is that who I think it is?” I asked. “Could the Courier really be here already?”

“We can only hope,” Greyson muttered.

We both stepped to the window, but it was dark out, and we couldn’t see much.

“Do you think it’s him?” I asked, pressing my face to the glass.

“If it is, then we can actually get started,” Greyson said. He grabbed my hand. “Come on—let’s go.”

We hurried down the stairs and out the front door, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief when we made it to the driveway and I saw the Courier sitting astride his massive motorcycle, clearly waiting for us.

He was still wearing his black helmet with the mirrored visor, and as we approached, he made no move to take it off.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” he said, his voice so low I could feel it rumbling through my chest.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “That’s right, we have.”

“I came to find out what you need,” he said.

“My brother Xavier—he’s stuck in the demon world,” Greyson said. “We were wondering if you could help us get him out.”

The Courier sat back in the seat of his motorcycle. “Demon world, huh? Well, I don’t know. That’s a pretty big ask. Not easy.”

I shot a glance at Greyson. “Yeah, we were hoping—”

“There’s a reason why my job exists,” he continued, speaking over me. “And there’s a reason why most people don’t go to the demon world unescorted.”

“What’s the reason?” Greyson asked warily.

“It’s usually a one-way trip,” he said.

“It’s *usually* a one-way trip,” I repeated, refusing to lose hope. “Which means that sometimes, it’s not. There must be a way to get someone back once they’ve gone in. And you come and go all the time, so clearly it’s not impossible.”

He tipped his head. “Impossible’s a relative term. What you’re asking wouldn’t be easy. And then there’s the matter of payment—not to mention the matter of finding him, and figuring out how to get him out. If he even wants to leave, that is.

“What does *that* mean?” Greyson snapped. “He didn’t go to the demon world for a vacation. It’s not the fucking Caribbean. Of course he’s going to want to leave.”

“Look, you know that I deal in time,” the Courier said, his tone still totally neutral. “You want a job done by me, you pay me in time. That’s how it works. If Xavier’s trying to get out of the demon world, he’ll be making some of his own deals, just to survive.”

“What kind of deals?” I asked, my stomach twisting with fear.

The Courier turned his helmeted head toward me, and it felt like I could actually feel the laser focus of his hidden eyes. “The kind of deals that will be hard for him to get out of—and demons deal in all sorts of things.”

Fear was coursing through me now. I hadn’t expected any of this to be easy, of course, but the way the Courier was talking, it sounded like rescuing Xavier was going to be impossible.

I reached over and took Greyson’s hand. He gave mine a reassuring squeeze.

“What are you saying, exactly?” he asked the Courier.

The Courier shrugged his massive shoulders. “I’m saying there’s no way to know what Xavier’s going to have to give up in order to survive.”

**Episode 4677**

**Xavier**

The massive demon was stalking toward me with murder in its unsettling quantity of eyes. There was something about this place that was trying to block my connection with my wolf, but I didn’t have time for any demon world bullshit, so I concentrated hard and pushed through the barrier. Finally, I felt the familiar cracking in my bones that told me I was shifting.

As I dropped onto four paws, someone yelled out, “*Werewolf meat!*”

*Fucking idiot.* I made a mental note to find whoever had yelled that and take them down—after I was done with Scales McEyeballs, of course. I was not a fucking *meal.* And not for demons, of all things.

I launched myself forward, teeth bared, and hit Scales right in the chest. Within seconds, I’d latched onto its throat. Hot, bitter blood flooded into my mouth as my teeth sank in. Scales let out a desperate, shocked croak and grabbed at me with its clawed hands, trying to shove me off, but it was no match for the strength of my bite.

Scales stumbled, then fell to the ground. I felt the thrill of victory pulse through me, adrenaline thrumming through my veins like a drug. When Scales stopped moving, I finally relaxed my jaw and let the creature fall to the ground, lifeless. There was a heavy thud, and I looked around. The previously noisy tavern had gone completely silent, and the voice that had screamed about werewolf meat spoke again.

“Oh *shit*.”

This time, I tracked the voice to a demon that was sitting at a small table near the bar. The creature was mostly red, with small, bright blue eyes. It stared at me as I moved toward it, and its red skin flushed even darker when I growled. The demon leaned back in its chair, like it was trying to get as far away from me as possible without actually moving. For a few seconds, the tavern went so quiet, I could actually hear the sizzle of meat cooking in the distant kitchen.

And then all hell broke loose.

The demon crowd surged to its feet as one, cheering and hooting, begging for a fight.

“Kill him!”

“Take him down!”

“*Fight! Fight! Fight!*”

Honestly, I had no idea if they were cheering for me or the red-faced demon, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t here to provide these losers with free entertainment. I had one goal: get the fuck out of here alive and back to my world.

Ferlin pushed his way through the throng and made his way to my side. I shifted back to human, much to the disappointment of the crowd, who groaned and booed.

“That was the right move,” he said, shouting in my ear to be heard over the chaos. “You just showed everyone in this room that you’re not someone to screw around with. That’s smart.”

I nodded, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. The smeared demon blood was black, and I was sure I made for an intimidating sight with all that black blood dripping from my mouth.

Over Ferlin’s shoulder, I spotted a demon with horns all over its head looking at me closely. I didn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea, so I bared my teeth at the thing, just for good measure. The horned demon flinched with surprise and quickly looked away.

Ferlin glanced over his shoulder and laughed. “Not bad, werewolf. Looks like you’re figuring out how to survive here.”

“Whatever,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I want to get back to my actual problem.”

“Which is?” Ferlin asked, annoyingly.

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if he actually didn’t know, or if he was just screwing with me. He had to be. I was done with his bullshit. “*How do I find the fucking Courier?*”

“Oh right, the Courier,” Ferlin said, like we’d talked about it weeks ago instead of minutes. If I didn’t need this guy, I might’ve killed him.

“Yes,” I growled. “Now, where’s this spot you were talking about? The one the Courier always passes. Can you take me there now?”

Ferlin looked me over appraisingly. I had no idea what he was looking for, but he nodded. “Fine, I’ll take you there. I’ll get you to where you need to be, Xavier—I’m especially inclined to do so now that I’ve seen you fight. I’m not nearly as worried about the journey as I was before.”

“Great,” I said wryly. “Let’s go, then.”

Ferlin stopped me with a hand on my chest. “Yes, but first, let’s get you some clothes.”

“What?” I asked. “We don’t have time for—”

“Look, I can’t just keep talking to you while you’re standing there completely naked,” he said, sounding suddenly stiff and outraged. “For crying out loud, don’t humans have a *scrap* of propriety?”

This caught me so off-guard, I had to laugh. “Fine. Whatever you say, man. I’ll do whatever it takes to get the hell out of here.”

“This way,” Ferlin said, waving for me to follow him. He led me across the tavern and through a narrow door that I hadn’t noticed when we’d first walked in.

Based on the narrow width of the door, I had figured Ferlin was leading me into some kind of closet where they kept the demon lost and found, but when I stepped inside and looked around, my jaw dropped.

It wasn’t a closet, it was a room—and it was *packed*. In fact, as I scanned the place, I was forced to wonder if I hadn’t accidentally found a portal that led to a wild west gift shop in the human world. The room was jam-packed from floor to ceiling, and it had *everything*—cowboy hats, boots, spurs, jeans, shirts, chaps… I even saw a barrel of toy guns stationed near the register.

I just couldn’t get over the place. I had *not* expected to find this in the demon world. It felt like standing in the middle of a cowboy theme park gift shop—but multiplied by a factor of ten.

The place was just so *corny*. There was something so tongue-in-cheek about it—like the demons had put it together to make fun of humans and their kitschiness.

There was a demon standing behind the counter, and it waved at us as we walked in. “Welcome. Are you two looking for anything in particular?”

I looked at the demon, which looked like nothing so much as a large green mushroom. It was wearing a bolo tie with a large piece of turquoise that fastened just under the mushroom cap, at what I figured had to be its throat.

“Just looking,” I muttered, totally baffled. Everything that had happened to me since I’d entered the demon world had been super weird, but this… *This* had the competition beat.

“Hey, Guy!” Ferlin said, walking over to the mushroom. “How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain,” the mushroom reported.

“Hey! Xavier! Get over here—I want you to meet my friend, Fun Guy. Fun Guy, this is Xavier.”

I blinked hard, not sure whether to laugh or bolt.

Fun Guy smiled—or at least I think it did, it was hard to tell. “So you’re just looking, Xavier?”

“Hell no, look at him!” Ferlin said. “Xavier needs the works! Full set of human clothes, and some gear.”

“Gear for what?” I asked warily.

“We’re going to Stone Valley, so you know what that means,” Ferlin said to Guy, shooting the other demon a knowing look.

Its voice was coming from somewhere, so Fun Guy must have had a mouth, but it had no face that I could see. But even without one, the mushroom demon still managed to look shocked.

I stared at it, wondering how the hell it was managing that.

“Are you sure about that, Ferlin? Stone Valley? *Really?*” the mushroom demon squeaked.

“Sure, I’m sure,” Ferlin said. “Xavier, take a look around, get yourself some human clothes, and get dressed, for cripes’ sake. I’m going to go outside and check on the storm, see if it’s still blowing. I’ll be back in a few.”

Ferlin walked out, leaving me alone with Fun Guy.

The demon was already on the move. As I watched, it started toward a bank of shelves which held neatly folded jeans and rows of cowboy boots. It started pulling jeans off the shelf and throwing them at me—though I couldn’t figure out where its arms were coming from, either.

After it had thrown me half a dozen pairs of jeans and two pairs of cowboy boots, the mushroom whipped around to face me.

The thing didn’t have eyes, but if it did, I just knew it would’ve been giving me a long, hard stare.

I could practically feel the intensity of it, radiating from the dots on top of its mushroom cap.

“I can tell you’re not from around here,” it said.

“Good call,” I said, watching the thing warily.

“Well, then, a word to the wise,” it said. “Watch your back with Ferlin.”

**Episode 4678**

**Artemis**

I shoved Marius off me. “I don’t need to claim a side, because I’ll be taking the whole damn thing. You can sleep on the floor, *husband*.”

Marius had barely moved when I’d shoved him. He was too agile to stumble, and he just danced his way back to fully balanced. Then he gave me a crooked grin and a mock bow. “Whatever my lady desires. How could I deny my bride’s request while we’re on our honeymoon?”

“Shut up,” I said, rolling my eyes.

His grin twisted into a smirk, then he mimed using a lock and key on his lips. When he slipped the invisible key into his pocket, I groaned.

“You’re telling me people actually *fall* for your stupid charms?” I asked incredulously.

He winked. “So you think I’m charming?”

Before I could tell him *exactly* what I thought of him, there was a knock on the door.

My heart beat a fast tattoo in my chest. Who knew we were here? Had we been followed? I hadn’t seen anyone tailing us, but it was still possible.

Marius must’ve been thinking along the same lines, because he pulled a dagger from the sheath on his belt. Gripping it, he moved toward the door. When he reached it, he waved me forward, gesturing for me to open it.

Tightly gripping my own dagger behind my back, I reached for the door and *slowly* opened it a crack—just enough to see who’d knocked.

When I realized who was standing in the hallway, my whole body relaxed. I swung the door open, letting it slam into Marius.

“Come in,” I said brightly, ignoring Marius’s groan and gesturing for the maid to enter.

Marius stepped out from behind the door, rubbing his nose and glaring at me.

“Oh, dear heart, were you back there?” I asked with syrupy sweetness. “I’m *so* sorry, *darling*.”

His glare disappeared, replaced with a knowing grin. “Oh, that’s all right, light of my life.”

The maid cleared her throat pointedly, and we both looked over at her.

“The mistress asked me to tell you the bath has been drawn, and to take you to the bathing room. She said you should come while the water’s still hot.” She paused and looked between us. “Will you both be bathing?”

My cheeks went hot, and I knew I was blushing. I opened my mouth to say *absolutely not*, but Marius spoke first.

“Of course,” he said lightly. He took my hand, squeezing it. “We’ll follow you,” he said to the maid.

I twisted my hand from his grip and—gritting my teeth—tried to smile.

“Actually, I don’t think I will, dear,” I told Marius. “We’ve been traveling for so long, and I’m tired. I think I’m going to lie down.”

Marius narrowed his eyes at me for just a moment, but then his expression shifted into the sweet, guileless look that never fooled me. “That’s fine, my sweet. I only hope I’ll be able to find my way back to you afterward. There are so many other rooms, here—who knows what could happen between here and the bathing room?”

I had to force myself not to roll my eyes in front of the maid, who was watching us like we were one of the soap operas Lola got Torin hooked on.

“But if my dear wife is tired, then she’s tired,” Marius told the woman mournfully. “I can’t ask too much of her.”

I frowned at him. *Manipulative, scheming bastard…*

I cleared my throat. “On second thought, maybe a relaxing bath would be just the thing.”

“Very good,” the maid said, dropping into a shallow curtsy. “Right this way.”

I glared at Marius as we walked into the hallway, but he only smiled back at me. We followed the maid into a room that would’ve been empty without the large metal tub that sat in the center and the wooden chair in the corner. The room was small enough that the tub took up most of the available real estate, leaving only a narrow border around the edge. The bath was filled with hot water, which steamed pleasantly.

“There are soaps just there,” the maid called to us from the doorway. She pointed to a dish that held three bars of yellow soap. “And the towels are just there, on the chair.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

She glanced between us once more, then bobbed another curtsy. “I’ll leave you both to it.”

As the door clicked shut behind her, I looked over at Marius and found him already looking at me. We stared at each other for a long moment, the sound of our silence filling the room. She’d said “it” in a certain way—what did she think we were going to do?

Then Marius reached down, grabbed the hem of his shirt, and began to pull it up.

Without conscious thought, my eyes tracked his movements. As he pulled his clothes up, I got a full view of his muscular chest. His body was all hard angles, and every time he moved, a different area of him seemed to flex. It was like his muscles had muscles. Had he always looked like this? When I happened to glance back up at him, he raised a teasing eyebrow.

Furious with myself, I whirled around, turning my back on him.

I crossed my arms over my chest, gripping my biceps. When I heard Marius’s quiet chuckle, my face heated up again.

This was *not* how I’d expected this trip to the Fae world to go. But really, when did trips to the Fae world *ever* go the way they were meant to?

I was hyper aware of Marius’s presence. I could practically feel the heat of him behind me, even though I knew he was too far away for me to actually sense him. And I had to admit—if only to myself—that I would’ve liked to turn around to watch as he finished undressing for the bath.

I wasn’t actively trying to think of it, but my thoughts kept going back to the kiss we’d shared. Marius and I had a long history, and that wasn’t something I could just forget.

But I loved Rishika. And I missed her. I felt bad about having these feelings, and Marius wasn’t—

“You can turn around,” he called to me, interrupting my thoughts.

“What?” I snapped, my back still to him.

There was laughter in his voice. “I know you want to, Ari. Besides, it’s nothing you haven’t seen before. Or touched before,” he added, his voice dropping an octave.

I swallowed a groan. I should’ve been immune to this. What the hell was wrong with me? I’d just spent the last several months with werewolves, and they were always naked. Hot naked, too. I’d been constantly surrounded by sleek, muscular, *unclothed* bodies. What was one more, even if we had a history?

I tightened my grip on my own arms. I was going to show Marius that I wasn’t the person he thought he knew. I was different now, and I was going to prove. He thought he could get the upper hand with me? He thought he could unsettle me? Intimidate me?

Please.

I turned back around, fighting to keep my expression neutral, and found Marius standing right in front of me, completely nude.

*Fuck*. Somehow, he was even more beautiful than I remembered. His dark hair fell in soft waves over his forehead. His body was long and rangy and looked just as strong as it always had. Though, as I looked him over, I did notice that he had quite a few scars that I didn’t recognize—which meant they had to be new.

He cleared his throat, knocking me out of my reverie.

My gaze snapped back up to his face, which was wearing a knowing smile.

I glared at him. “Okay, Marius. Enough is enough. I agreed to your terms. I’m done with your bullshit. Tell me what you know about Kadmos.”

Marius sighed deeply, and I watched his muscled chest rise and fall. He stepped into the tub and sat, leaning back and closing his eyes. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, Ari.”

I glared at him. “You know what I want to know. *Tell me about Kadmos*.”

He twisted around in the water, moving slightly to the side so he could look at me directly. The water sloshed invitingly around him. He draped his arms over the side of the tub and looked up at me.

I glowered down at him, trying my damnedest not to notice the way his dark hair curled behind his ears. Vaguely, I wondered if he knew it did that. He probably didn’t like it. It made him look younger, almost boyish.

“Tell me what you know,” I snapped, more angry at myself than at him. “Do you even know *anything*, or are you just going to repeat the same old rumors?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Rumors? Listen—not only can I confirm those ‘rumors,’ I can tell you with absolute certainty that Kadmos is alive.”

**Episode 4679**

**Greyson**

Fear made my stomach twist almost painfully, and I glared at the Courier.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” I demanded.

The Courier shrugged his leather-clad shoulders. “The demon world isn’t like this world. There are lots of things that demons just don’t have access to.” He turned his helmeted head so he was facing Cali. “Once, someone had to give up all the love they’d ever felt to make it out of that place alive.”

Cali shivered and took a step closer to me.

The Courier turned to me. “Or maybe it’s childhood memories he’ll have to give up.” He shrugged again. “Like I said—it could be anything. The real question is: by the time we find him, how desperate is Xavier going to be to leave?”

“What are you talking about? He hasn’t even been gone a day,” I said, starting to feel sick. “Xavier’s been in tight spots before. He’s not going to be panicking after a *day*. We’re going to get him out before he has to sacrifice anything at all.”

The Courier tilted his head. I couldn’t see his expression through the mirrored visor of his helmet, but I could’ve sworn he looked surprised.

“You don’t know,” he stated.

“What are you talking about?” Cali asked nervously. “Know what?”

“About the time difference.”

“What time difference?” I demanded. For a wild moment, I found myself wondering if the demon world was on East Coast time. How the fuck did it work, actually?

“Time in the demon world doesn’t pass the same way as time in the human world,” the Courier said. “The demon world moves a lot faster than here.”

Cali gasped. “Oh my god.”

My mouth fell open in surprise. For us, it had felt like no time at all, but by this point, Xavier could’ve been in the demon world for what… A week? Longer? No matter what, he’d already been there way too long. And who knew what the fuck had happened to him in that amount of time? He was strong, but I didn’t know what this world was like and what he might be up against.

My hands curled into fists at my sides, and anger ripped through me. I was furious, itching to hit or tear into something—*anything*. But I knew I needed to calm down. Time was of the essence, and I had to think clearly.

“Can you find him?” I asked the Courier. “And if so, how quickly can you get him out of there?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” the Courier said, sounding unconcerned.

“What are you talking about?” I growled.

“We haven’t even agreed on payment,” he pointed out.

“*Anything*,” Cali said quickly. “Whatever you want, it’s yours. We’ll do it.”

I nodded in agreement.

The Courier was quiet for a moment, then he tapped a finger against his helmet. “Extracting a human from the demon world is no joke. It’s not something most people are willing to do, under any circumstances. It’ll take a lot of energy and prep work, so you have to factor all that legwork into the cost—”

“Just tell us,” I growled, my irritation mounting. “We don’t need to listen to you stall, and you don’t need to build up the tension on our account. We said we’d pay, so just spill it. What is it? What are you charging?”  
 The Courier swiveled his helmeted head between Cali and me. “I’m going to need fifteen years of someone’s life.”

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. *Fifteen years?* I couldn’t have heard that right. Fifteen. *A decade and a half?*

One look over at Cali told me I hadn’t heard wrong. Her face was partly shadowed, lit only by the lights that illuminated the porch and the driveway, but even in the semi-darkness, I could see that she looked just as stricken as I felt.

I looked back at the Courier. “You only needed three years from Xavier for the last trip.”

The Courier shrugged casually. “That was for a delivery, if I recall correctly. I already told you—what you’re asking for now is significantly more complicated.” He looked up as a gust of icy wind blew past us. “The price is fifteen years. Take it or leave it.”

My stomach felt like it had been twisted into a tight ball, but what the hell could I do? I was going to say yes. I had to. I had to save my brother. But then Cali spoke before I could say anything.

“Do the years all have to come from the same person?”

“What?” I asked, surprised by her question.

“Does it have to be fifteen years from just one person?” she asked again.

The Courier shrugged. “There aren’t really any rules for this kind of thing, one way or the other.”

In an instant I saw what Cali was thinking. “No, Cali. You can’t. I won’t—”

She put up her hand to stop me. “We can talk to Ava. She’s just as desperate to get Xavier back as we are. I know she’ll agree to take on part of the debt. That way, we can bring it down to five years each. That isn’t so bad. Better than fifteen, right?”

She tried to smile, but the result was unconvincing. It was obvious that she was trying to put on a brave face. Then, without waiting for me to respond, she pulled out her phone.

“I’m going to call Ava now,” she said.

She put the call on speaker, so I knew that the first ring hadn’t even finished before Ava picked up.

“Have you found anything?” she said, without bothering to say hello. “What’s happened? Do you know how to get him back?”

“We have a lead,” Cali said carefully.

“What is it?” Ava demanded.

“We’re with the Courier right now,” Cali said. “He says he can get Xavier—”

“When can he leave? How long will it take him to get Xavier back? What’s the timeline?”

“Hang on,” Cali said. “The Courier has a price—”

“Fine. That’s fine. Whatever it is, we can pay it. Anything. I’ll give whatever I need to give,” Ava said quickly.

There was desperation in her voice, and the echo of Cali’s own sentiments. They both loved my brother so much. My heart gave a painful throb at that thought, but I pushed the whole topic away. That was a twisted, complicated road, and I didn’t have time to go down it. Not now.

“Hang on, Ava,” Cali said. “You need to hear what the pricing looks like before you agree—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ava snapped. “Whatever it is—”

“It’s five years of your life.”

“Take it,” Ava said without hesitation. “I don’t need it. The Courier can have it.”

Cali gripped her phone. “Ava, listen to me. You need to take a second to consider what this is going to mean. It’s five years of your life—”

“I don’t need a second to consider anything,” Ava said. “I’m in.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah. Okay. I thought you might be.”

“Just… keep me updated, okay?” Ava asked. She’d sounded stressed but brisk up to this point, but suddenly, I could hear the fear in her voice.

“Yeah, I will.” Cali ended the call and looked up at me.

I nodded and turned to the Courier. “You heard that. We’re all in. Fifteen years, split into five years from the three of us. Now you can go get Xavier.”

The Courier shook his head. “Not quite.”

“What else do you need?” I asked, starting to feel crazed. We were wasting time. The time difference with the demon world was crashing around in my mind like a wrecking back. Every moment that we delayed—every moment that felt like so much longer to Xavier—seemed to pile more weight onto my shoulders.

The Courier, however, seemed to be in no big hurry, and he slowly pulled a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket of his leather jacket. “I’m going to need you to sign a few things, first.”

I eyed the papers warily. “Why? You didn’t do this last time.”

“That’s because you were asking to me deliver a trash bag,” the Courier growled. “This time, we’re dealing with a whole-ass person. Transporting your brother will be significantly more dangerous.”

I took the offered contract and unfolded it. I scanned the paper, and one line in particular stood out.

“This says that there’s no guarantee of delivery,” I said, jabbing my finger into the section at the bottom of the contract. Next to me, Cali sucked in a horrified breath.

“That’s right,” the Courier said evenly.

“What the hell?” I demanded. “Why would I sign this agreement if you can’t even guarantee that you’ll finish the job? Why isn’t that a given?”

The Courier turned to look right at me. I couldn’t see his face—just my own, reflected in the helmet’s mirrored visor.

“Because technically,” he began coolly, “no human has ever actually escaped from the demon realm.”

**Episode 4680**

**Xavier**

I looked at the mushroom-shaped demon, shocked by what it had just told me.

“What do you mean, ‘watch your back with Ferlin’?” I asked.

Fun Guy twisted to the left, like it was checking for listening ears behind me. Apparently satisfied that we were alone, it spun back around and looked at me—at least, I assumed it did; I still didn’t know where the hell its eyes were.

“Listen, new guy,” it said, “I’ve known Ferlin for a long time. He and I have a history together. And don’t get me wrong, the guy’s fun—”

I swallowed a snort.

“—and I like him well enough, but I wouldn’t trust him any farther than I can throw him. And I can’t throw *anyone*, if you catch my drift.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I guess I do. But I have to say, I’m a little surprised to hear this. You seemed pretty friendly with him a minute ago.”

The demon chuckled—or made a throaty coughing sound I *thought* was a chuckle—and shook its head. “There’s no such thing around here.”

“No such thing as what? Friends?” I asked.

“The demon world isn’t set up that way. We’re not here to make friends, and that’s not what Ferlin and I are. We get a drink together every now and then, and sometimes we team up for this or that, but only when it suits us both.”

“Okay…” I said slowly.

“I’m just giving you a heads-up, as a favor,” the mushroom said. “Pay attention to the guy. Pay especially close attention to the questions he asks you, and *think* before you answer them. And never promise him shit, you got me?”

“Yeah, I got you,” I said. “But I have to ask—why are you doing me any favors? Why are you giving me a warning? You’re not friends with Ferlin, but you’re not friends with me either. I don’t know you, and you don’t know anything about me.”

The mushroom cap tilted down, then back up, like Fun Guy was looking me up and down. “I know enough.”

“Enough about what?” I pressed, still not prepared to trust it.

“I know what you did to that scaly bastard in the tavern.”

“The thing with the eyes?”

“That’s the one.”

This still didn’t make any sense.

“I took that demon out, so you’re helping me?” I asked slowly, trying to get it all straight.

“That’s right.” Fun Guy nodded its mushroom cap head. “Consider the warning a symbol of my gratitude. I hated that piece of shit.”

“Um… Okay. Thanks?” I said warily.

It nodded again. “Sure. Just remember what I said. Now, try on the Wranglers. They’re going to look great on you.”

I picked up the pair of worn Wrangler jeans that the demon had tossed my way and pulled them on. I still had no idea if Fun Guy had eyes, but I had to admit, it definitely had style. The jeans fit great.

I grabbed a red shirt and a denim jacket, too, then stepped into a pair of deeply worn-in cowboy boots. As I pulled them on, I tried not to think about where the clothes had come from, or who’d worn them last, or how the demons had managed to acquire them.

There was a bin full of supplies nearby, and I sifted through it, grabbed a couple of water canteens, and slid them onto my belt. I wasn’t sure where we were going, but it never hurt to be prepared.

There was a mirror near the registers, and I caught a glimpse of my reflection. I barely recognized myself. I looked like an extra from one of the black and white cowboy shows Colton and I used to watch on Silas’s scratchy TV, on the rare occasions when we’d visited him. We’d watch them whenever he was out, so he wouldn’t yell at us—and every night, I’d dream of riding off into the sunset on a horse of my own.

I knew now that I hadn’t really wanted a horse, just a way to get away from Silas.

“What’s with this place?” I asked, turning back to Fun Guy.

“What?”

“Why is it like this down here?”

“What do you mean?” the demon asked, sounding puzzled.

“You know—like we’re in the fifties movie version of the Wild West,” I said, gesturing around.

Fun Guy followed my hands, looking around the place like it was seeing it for the first time. “I actually have no idea—it’s just been like this for as long as I can remember. If I had to guess, I’d say that some demon sometime back saw something like this in the human world and liked it, and now we’ve got this.”

I had to laugh. This place was fucking weird. “Honestly, I didn’t think this world could get any weirder, but then I walked in here.”

“Thank you very much,” Fun Guy said, gliding back behind the counter. It didn’t sound the least bit offended.

At that point, I realized Ferlin hadn’t come back.

I rubbed my eyes, which felt dry as sandpaper. I was exhausted. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept—never mind slept well. I had no idea where Ferlin had gone, or when he was going to be back, and just standing around waiting felt like a waste of time.

Maybe this would be a good time to get some shut-eye. A little sleep could give me a better chance at surviving this fucked-up world.

I glanced around the little shop. “Is there a place around here where I could get some sleep without having to worry about someone trying to eat me?”

Fun Guy made a noise I thought was supposed to be a laugh. It made its mushroom cap bob.

“Over there,” it said, tipping its head toward the bookshelves, which held the most impressive collection of Louis L’Amour novels I’d ever seen. “There’s a spot behind the books.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully, and moved toward the bookshelves. The spot Fun Guy had indicated was narrow—too narrow to accommodate my shoulders—but it worked if I lay on my side. It felt like heaven just getting off my feet, and I pulled in a proper deep breath.

I closed my eyes, hoping I’d get at least a few minutes of peace—maybe even an hour. I’d been fighting through it, but I was tired as hell. I didn’t know what lay ahead of me, but I did know that I was going to need my strength to get home. That was the only thing I could think about. The only thing that really mattered. Getting back to Cali—and to Ava. I had to make sure that they were okay. I had to do what I could to protect them.

After that, the next item on my agenda was to kill Adéluce.

My shoulder started to ache with the pressure of lying on it, so I rolled onto my other side, trying to get comfortable. The ground was hard beneath me, making it difficult to relax. The thoughts spinning through my mind weren’t helping, either.

Where the hell was Adéluce? Where had she gone? Hadn’t she sent me to the demon world to suffer? So where was she? If I was supposed to be suffering for her amusement, wouldn’t she want to watch? Would she get stuck here, too, though, if she did? I didn’t know how she was managing to bring the ring where she’d fused the ashes back and forth. Certainly she had a way, but maybe only for that.

Maybe she was just so pissed off that I’d finally taken a real stand against her that she’d just dumped me in this hellscape to rot?

That thought made my stomach twist.

*No*, I told myself firmly. No, that couldn’t be it. I wasn’t just going to stay here—I was going to get myself out of this place. And I was sure that Greyson, Cali, and Ava were working on getting me out from their side, too. They wouldn’t just abandon me here. They wouldn’t forget about me.

Ava and Cali in particular would never give up on me.

But if they did, I certainly wouldn’t blame them. I was genuinely surprised that Cali was still able to look me in the eye after the way I’d treated her. And Ava… She had to be questioning everything about her life, now that she knew what had driven me away from Cali and the Redwood pack.

These happy thoughts swirled through my head as I dipped in and out of a restless, anxious sleep. My bones ached, my head hurt, and I sweated through my new cowboy clothes as I slept fitfully.

When someone poked my shoulder, I opened my eyes, feeling worse than I had when I’d laid down. I hadn’t gotten any rest at all.

I blinked, trying to focus on the figure looming over me.

“Storm’s passed,” Ferlin said. He tipped his head toward the door. “Time to get moving.”

**Episode 4681**

I frowned at the Courier. Was this supposed to be some kind of sick joke? What did he mean, no human had ever made it back from the demon world? If that was the case, why was he even taking this job?

*Maybe he’s just trying to manage our expectations or something? To make sure we’re happy when he brings Xavier back, no matter what condition he’s on? Or is this just a scheme to get that insane payment out of us?*

A retort was on the tip of my tongue. I’d give the Courier whatever he wanted to bring Xavier home, but I didn’t appreciate being jerked around. I wasn’t here to play games with yet another supernatural being on a power trip. I was here to get my mate back.

And yet something was nagging at my memory. Hadn’t Big Mac said something similar about the demon world? That it was impossible to retrieve someone who’d been sent there? My heart sank.

When she’d told me that, I’d assumed she was just trying to dissuade me from trying to go to the demon world. But if the Courier was saying the same thing, there had to be something to it, right?

Suddenly, a part of me was *hoping* that the Courier was just trying to scam me, and that Big Mac had only been trying to keep me safe. Because what if the Courier really *couldn’t* bring Xavier back? What if he was trapped in the demon world forever?

*The Courier already said that there’s no guarantee…*

Oh god, I was going to be sick. What if we never saw Xavier again? What if I never got to tell him that I forgave him for everything he’d said to me while he was under Adéluce’s control? Things hadn’t been good between us for a long time, but now that I knew why he’d been acting so terribly, I had hope that we could still have some kind of future. But if he was stuck in the demon world? That future would go up in smoke.

“Listen, I can see the cogs turning in your head, so let me elaborate,” the Courier said. “The demon world is difficult enough to traverse just for me alone, and the sheer scope of the place makes locating one individual a very difficult task. And it’s also not exactly a place that’s welcoming to outsiders, if you get what I mean. The best way to approach this is for me to work as quickly and efficiently as possible—get in, grab Xavier, and get out.”

*Well, duh. It’s not like I want him to take his time.*

“In order to increase my odds of finding Xavier, I need something that belongs to him,” the Courier continued. “Something that I can use to help guide me once I cross into the demon world.”

“Like a tracking beacon?” I asked.

The Courier shrugged. “More or less.”

“I can find something of his,” I said. We could work with that, hopefully. “Maybe his clothes?”

“That’d work,” the Courier said with a nod. “I need to go prepare for the trip, but before I leave, I’ll need you to sign the contract. It’s not that I don’t trust you,” he added quickly. “It’s just standard operating procedure.”

I wouldn’t have blamed him if he didn’ttrust us. I didn’t really trust him, to be honest, but there wasn’t exactly a plethora of alternate options to get Xavier home. If signing a contract and giving up a few years of life was what it was going to take, then that was the course we’d pursue. Because if the only alternative was leaving Xavier in the demon world…

Well, there *was* no alternative.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll sign first.”

“No, Cali. I’m not going to let you do that.” Greyson stepped forward. “I’ll sign first.”

I scowled. “I’m perfectly capable of signing a contract, Greyson. I want Xavier back—I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

“I want him back, too,” Greyson said, “but this is a magical contract. Do you really think I’m going to let you be the first to sign?”

“It really doesn’t make any difference whose signature is first,” the Courier said. I was fairly sure he was smirking under his helmet. “And what about this Ava person? You said she was going to sign, too?”

“She’s at the Samara pack house,” I said. “That’s why we had to call her. I can call her again to ask her to come over and sign.”

“Eh, no need,” the Courier said. “I’m heading in that direction anyway, so I’ll go to her once I’m done here. In the meantime…”

He held the contract out to Greyson, along with an old-fashioned fountain pen.

Greyson’s frown, which had been glued onto his face since the Courier had arrived, deepened as he looked at the strange words on the page. “What language is this? It didn’t look like this before.”

I definitely couldn’t read the new words either, and my frown matched Greyson’s as I turned my gaze on the Courier. “How are we supposed to sign something if we can even read the words?”

“Fair point. My apologies.”

He tucked the contract into his bag and pulled out a new one. This time, it was written in English.

Now that they were readable, the contract terms seemed pretty straightforward: Greyson, Ava, and I would each exchange five years of our lives for “the extraction of one Xavier Evers from the demon world—no guarantee, payment due regardless of outcome.”

I fought the urge to grimace. *With payment terms like these, how could I ever doubt the Courier?*

I wished again that we had better options as I watched Greyson step forward and take the pen. He signed his name, and the ink was a dark red that looked like blood. It glowed for a moment before it dried.

*Here goes nothing*. I held out my hand for the pen, but Greyson didn’t hand it over. “Cali, five years is a lot. Are you sure?”

“Completely sure.”

I snatched the pen out of his hand and turned to the contract. Greyson would never stop trying to protect me, and I understood that. But didn’t he know I felt just as protective over him and Xavier? I thought I’d already made it more than clear that I would die to save either of my mates if that was what it took. Signing away five measly years to bring Xavier home from the demon world was a no-brainer.

I’d do the same for Greyson in a heartbeat, too.

With that thought in mind, I signed. I’d assumed that I’d feel those five years being yanked away, but there was nothing.

“Very good,” the Courier said as he tucked the contract away. “Per paragraph 7a, I will require something of Xavier’s to help locate him in the demon world.”

“Okay, I’ll grab some of his clothes.”

I spun around to head up to his room, but the Courier’s voice stopped me.

“Do you have anything that’s been worn in the last couple of days?”

I slowly turned around, my heart sinking. “Um. No.”

“Okay, well, the more recent, the better.”

My shoulders slumped. “He hasn’t been living here for a while. Are you sure something older won’t work? We still have plenty of his stuff upstairs.”

The Courier eyed me skeptically. “Remember, the point of this is to make it easier for me to find him in the vast terrain of the demon world. The older the item is, the less precise the location, which means a bigger search area and a smaller chance of finding him. If you don’t have something recent, I can’t do the job.” He started to take a couple steps backward, like he was about to leave.

“Wait! We can get you something from the Samara pack house. Are you seriously giving up already?” I demanded. “Why even have us sign that contract in the first place?”

I was on the verge of a complete meltdown when Greyson cleared his throat.

“Ava will have something at the Samara house,” he told the Courier. “Xavier lives with her. She’ll hook you up with whatever you need to find him.”

*Will he listen to Greyson?* This is our one major chance to do something to help him. If it means that Ava is able to save the day because she has access to Xavier’s underwear drawer, then so be it.

“Perfect. I’ll head over to the Samara pack house, then.” The Courier mounted his motorcycle.

“Hey, wait,” I began, hurrying after him. “I still have questions! When are you going to the demon world? How long will this take? Do you have any way for us to contact you, or get updates—”

The roar of his motorcycle drowned out my voice, and the Courier pulled away without another word.

I ground my teeth. *I really, really wish someone else could help us with this.*

Greyson slipped an arm around my waist as together, we watched the Courier disappear down the road. Once the rumble of his bike faded into the distance, I turned to Greyson.

“Now what?” I asked him.

He sighed. “Now, we wait.”

**Episode 4682**

**Ava**

I stood in front of the pack, staring out at their shocked and confused faces. I’d just told them about Adéluce, and Xavier being in the demon world, and the plan to hire the Courier to bring him home. I saw my own feelings reflected in their faces, which only reminded me of all my worries and questions surrounding this new threat, and what it meant for Xavier and me.

“Why can’t we just find a demon world portal, go there, and bring our Alpha back ourselves?” Knox suggested. “Why do we have to outsource this job? It seems like this is something we should do together, as a pack.”

I tried to keep my expression neutral, though on the inside I couldn’t have been more surprised by Knox’s words. Since when was he so loyal to Xavier?I was pleased by his change of heart, by the way he’d publicly called Xavier “our Alpha,” but I couldn’t help wondering if Knox had actually listened to anything I’d just said.

“Only the Courier can travel to and from the demon world,” I reminded him. “We don’t have access to any portals, and even if we did, whoever went through it would probably end up stuck there, too. Using the Courier is our best shot to get Xavier back.”

That seemed to get through to Knox, and he nodded and backed off.

“I’ll keep you all updated as this unfolds,” I told them. “For now, keep an eye out for anything that seems strange and suspicious. We don’t know if Adéluce is still around, or if she has any plans for the pack.”

Privately, I doubted that she did. From what I’d gathered from Cali, Adéluce’s sole motivation was to make Xavier’s life hell. I didn’t think she cared enough about the Samaras to torture us—unless doing so would hurt Xavier in some way. I tried not to think too hard about everything that this information implied. When Xavier had left Cali and the Redwoods behind, he and I had built something together. Learning that all of that was supposed to be some kind of punishment—that being with me instead of Cali was just another way for Adéluce to torture him—made my stomach churn.

So, yeah. I wasn’t thinking too hard about it. For now, I was focused on getting Xavier back. Whatever came after that, we’d deal with it. Though one thing was certain: when this was over, Xavier and I were going to have a good long talk. Hopefully our relationship would still be intact when all was said and done.

As the rest of the pack dispersed, Marissa sidled up to me. “You didn’t mention anything about the contract—or giving up five years of your life as payment for this Courier guy.”

I shrugged. “What’s the point in telling people that? It was my decision; I’m not unmaking it. Besides, it was a small price to pay to bring Xavier back.”

“And Cali?” Marissa prompted. “Aren’t you worried about her signing the contract?”

I scoffed. “Why should I be? Her taking on part of the payment means fewer years lost from my own life and five years less for her. Sounds like a win-win.”

“Sure, but at what cost?”

“What are you talking about?”

“By signing the contract, Cali’s created *another* connection to Xavier.”

Her words were like a gut punch.

“It’s not like I had much choice in her involvement,” I growled.

But Marissa wasn’t wrong. Cali had masterminded this rescue attempt, and she’d given up the same number of years I had to ensure that Xavier had a way out of the demon realm.

*But it doesn’t matter. She’s not his Luna. I am. He loves me. We’re together. He had Kira build me a pack house. Our mate bond has never been stronger.*

Except… was that really true? Everything Xavier and I had built was now under the cloud of that bitch Adéluce and her fucking spell. Did Xavier really want me, or was I just another way to hurt him? If he really loved me, wouldn’t Adéluce have threatened me, too? Wouldn’t she have taken me away from him?

I rubbed my head. This was a mindfuck I didn’t have time for—and I wouldn’t even get any real answers until Xavier came back.

“You deserve better than being forced to team up with the woman who’d steal your mate away in a heartbeat if she could,” Marissa said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I know,” I said. “But there’s nothing I can do about it. Not if I want to get Xavier back. I have to just suffer through her presence.”

Before she could reply, the roar of a motorcycle broke through the forest.

Knox rushed back outside. “Who the hell is that?”

“No idea.”

We watched as a helmeted biker pulled up to the pack house, cut the engine, and approached the house. He had a messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

“Which one of you is Ava?” he asked.

I eyed him warily. “Are you the Courier?”

“Guilty as charged.”

I frowned. For someone whose job was crossing back and forth to the demon world, I was expecting someone… more intimidating. More official-seeming. This guy just seemed like a biker making his way through Oregon in need of a pitstop.

*Did Cali hire a second-rate demon world courier? Am I seriously supposed to sign five years of my life away to this guy?* I sighed. *Trust her to screw this up.*

The Courier dug a pen out of his bag. “I understand you intend to sign this contract. Here.”

He pulled a contract out of his bag as well and held it and the pen out for me to take.

I reached for the pen, but Marissa slapped my hand away. “Aren’t you going to read it first?”

I narrowed my eyes at her but glanced at the Courier. “Do I need to read it?”

He shrugged. “It’s just a standard recovery deal in exchange for five years of your life.”

“Perfect.” I signed the contract without reading it.

Marissa gasped. “Ava, no!”

I’d have been lying if I said her obvious distress didn’t give me the smallest amount of pause, but it was too late. Besides, what did it matter what the contract said? All I wanted was to get my mate back. I’d returned from the spirit world to be with Xavier again, to reconcile with him and rebuild our relationship. I’d do whatever it took to bring him back from the demon world.

“Excellent.” The Courier took the pen and rolled up the contract, stashing both items in his bag. “I was told you’d have some recently touched personal effects of Xavier’s? I’ll need something of his to help track him down.”

I nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

As I headed inside and went to our bedroom, I smiled to myself. Clearly, Cali hadn’t been able to come up with anything of Xavier’s. Good.

It was petty, sure. But since this Adéluce revelation was threatening to turn all my hard-earned joy into dust, I’d take any win I could get right now, no matter how small.

I jogged back downstairs a few minutes later and handed Xavier’s pillowcase to the Courier. He stuffed it into his messenger bag.

Xavier’s presence and his scent had been all over our room, and so it had been hard to decide what to give up. I’d hesitated to use his pillowcase—Xavier’s scent was all over it, stronger than anything else in the room—but maybe that would make it a better tool to find him.

“So, how long is this going to take?” Marissa asked.

The Courier shrugged. “How would I know? It’ll take as long as it takes.”

My eyes widened. *Seriously? What kind of amateur is this guy?*

“Isn’t it your *job* to know how this will go?” Marissa pressed.

“It’s my job to pass through the portal—and no two journeys are the same.” He climbed onto his bike, but I stepped forward before he could leave.

“You’d better bring him back,” I said, “or we will meet again, and it won’t be pleasant for you.”

“I’ll do what I can,” the Courier said. “But my contract specifies that there are no guarantees.”

“I don’t give a damn about the contract!” I snapped. “I want my mate back!”

He nodded, revved the engine, and drove off.

Marissa shook her head as he disappeared down the road. “I don’t have much faith in that guy.”

I scowled. “Unfortunately, he’s our only option right now.”

“Not necessarily,” Marissa said. “There might be another way to secure Xavier’s return.”

My brows shot up. “Why didn’t you mention that before?”

She shrugged. “I mean, it’s a little extreme, but I’ve heard of situations where… deals have been made.”

“What kinds of deals?”

“What I’m thinking of would be similar to a prisoner trade.”

I frowned, confused. “And what are we supposed to offer in exchange?”

“Not what. *Who*.” Marissa smiled darkly. “What if you could just leave Cali in the demon world in exchange for Xavier? That way, Xavier would be all yours.”

**Episode 4683**

**Xavier**

I’d lost all concept of time and distance. It felt like we’d been traveling forever—like it had been days since we’d left the tavern, and weeks since I’d woken up in this godforsaken realm. The desert stretched out in every direction, hot and lifeless and unforgiving. I’d been shocked when we’d emerged from the tavern—there had been no trace of the blinding sandstorm we’d taken refuge from. But then again, the desert was just one big sand trap. How different could it possibly look if some of that sand got tossed around?

As I followed Ferlin on this never-ending walkabout through the demon world, I thought about the people I’d left back in the human world. What did they think of all this? Did they know where I was? Were they searching for me? Had they given up on me?

If I was being honest with myself, I knew there were probably a few Samaras in the pack—*yeah, I’m talking about you, Blaine—*who were probably already thinking about who should replace me. But Ava would never give up on me. I knew in my heart that she was doing everything in her power to try to bring me home. She probably wouldn’t hesitate to beat anyone’s ass if they tried to take my place.

For all her faults—and there were many—Ava had always been loyal to me. Probably more loyal than I deserved.

*I just hope this whole Adéluce, demon world thing hasn’t freaked her out too much. I don’t want her to do anything rash, or anything that’ll come bite us in the ass later.* She had to keep herself safe—and then she had the pack to think about. Now that I’d been tossed in this desert garbage dump, it was up to her to lead the Samaras. I knew she’d serve them well—as long as she didn’t lose sight of what was most important.

Of course, Cali was also fiercely loyal. And she was probably worried, too. She was also still in love with me—another thing I probably didn’t deserve, but, selfish bastard that I was, I’d take it. And I’d be a liar if I said that I didn’t return her feelings, if I said that knowing she was still in love with me didn’t hit me with such a strong wave of relief that it nearly knocked me over.

Somehow, Cali and I still had a chance—you know, once I got the hell out of here and stuck a stake in Adéluce. Not a small or easy task. But still. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I could see the end of all of this Adéluce bullshit, and like there was light and hope and good things waiting for me on the other side.

Of course, there would still be plenty of complications to sort out once Adéluce had been knocked off the board. I was the Samara Alpha. Ava was my Luna, and I loved her. Greyson was still the Redwood Alpha, and Cali was still mated to both of us. Personally and politically, my post-Adéluce life would be a total minefield.

But at least I’d be able to be honest, and that would be a huge improvement all on its own.

For now, though, I couldn’t let myself get too caught up in the “what ifs” and thoughts of the people waiting for me back in the human world. I still had to make it out of the demon world, and my best chance of doing so was following this untrustworthy demon and hoping that he wouldn’t screw me over, and would actually help me find the Courier.

Ferlin’s voice finally broke the long, uninterrupted silence that had settled between us. “You know, you’re not much of a travel companion.”

*Right. Because that’s what we are to each other. Companions.*

I shrugged. “I guess I don’t have much to say.”

“No shit. You haven’t said two words since we left the tavern.”

“Like I said, I’m a man of few words. Besides, can’t you read my mind?” I asked.

“I can,” he said breezily.

There was something he wasn’t saying—something that made me narrow my eyes at the demon bastard. “Have you?”

“Well, yeah,” he said unapologetically. “Obviously. I had to make sure you weren’t going to, I don’t know, kill me and wear my skin or something fucked up like that.”

I grimaced. “Jesus. Glad I passed the test, I guess.”

“You did. But at this point, I think I’d rather listen to you plot my death than hear any more angst about getting back to the human world, or your constant hand wringing over your mates. ‘Oh, I miss Cali. She loves me.’ ‘Oh, but I love Ava, too. She’s my Luna. Whatever shall I do?’ Ugh.”

“If you don’t like it, get the fuck out of my head,” I snarled. Hearing my mates’ names on this guy’s lips had me two seconds from *actually* plotting his murder.

“That’s what I meant—I *did* stop listening.” Ferlin didn’t seem bothered by my anger. “Though I have to admit, having two mates sounds intriguing. Maybe I would’ve listened longer if your thoughts had gone in another direction.”

He waggled his brows at me. and I snarled under my breath. *Fucking pervert.* I still wasn’t sure I believed that he’d stopped reading my mind. If I were him, I’d want to know everything I could about the stranger I was leading through the desert.

*Speaking of…*

I glanced back, looking for some kind of landmark connected to the tavern we’d come from, but all I saw was sand, sand, and more sand. I had no idea how far we’d walked.

I looked ahead, and the landscape seemed pretty much identical to what we’d left behind.

“How much farther?” I asked.

He hummed noncommittally. “Hard to say for sure. Like time, distance is fluid here. We still have a ways to go.”

*Of course we do. God, this is worst fucking place I’ve ever been. I’d happily take the Fae world over this place.*

“Okay, so what about the human world, then?” I pressed. “Do you know how much time has passed there? Have I been gone for days? Weeks? Months?”

My stomach bottomed out at the prospect. *God, months?* What could’ve happened there if months had passed? What would I come home to?

Ferlin shrugged. “You can’t really compare. It’s like apples and oranges.”

I cursed under my breath. “So, you don’t have any solid answers for me. You don’t know how long I’ve been here, or how far we have to go, and you’re content to just keep marching across this fucking wasteland with someone you just met? Why the hell should I believe anything you say? For all I know, you’re leading me nowhere.”

“What would be the point of that?” The demon laughed. “I agreed to help you.”

“I’m not stupid,” I said. “You’re a demon, and you said I’m valuable but never explained why. So tell me—what’s in this little journey for you? What are you getting out of it?”

Ferlin stopped short, his face twisting with anger. “If you’d rather find the Courier on your own, you’re welcome to do so.”

I frowned. Clearly, I’d struck a nerve. I just didn’t know why.

“I never actually asked for your help,” I pressed, “And I’m sorry if this hurts your feelings or whatever, but I’ve learned not to take demons at their word. But hey, since I have no fucking idea where we are or where we’re going or when we’ll get there or how far we’ve come or *anything*, really, lead on.”

Ferlin shook his head but turned and kept walking. And I had no choice but to follow after him. Fun Guy’s warning ran through my head again. Ferlin wasn’t exactly trustworthy, but what choice did I have?

*I helped defeat Seluna. If I have to kill Ferlin, I’m capable. I can protect myself if I have to.*

Another thought occurred to me.

*Unless Ferlin’s already aware of that? Since he can hear my thoughts whenever he cares to listen?*

It was a crapshoot no matter how I looked at it. I’d just have to be extra careful and watch Ferlin for any signs of betrayal.

*I guess it wouldn’t hurt to learn more about this guy.*

“So, what’s your story?” I asked.

He didn’t look away from the horizon. “I’m a demon in the demon world. There’s not much to it.”

I glanced around. “But you live in a barren desert. Have you been banished here? Exiled?”

Ferlin shrugged. “Oh please. It’s not that bad out here. Nobody bothers me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I informed him. “I fully intend to bother you until we find the Courier.”

Ferlin didn’t respond, and we kept walking. The heat seemed to rise more and more, and soon I was drenched in my own sweat. I was ready to ask Ferlin about having some water when I spotted a familiar figure on the horizon.

*Greyson? What the hell is he doing here?*

**Episode 4684**

“Now we wait,” I muttered, repeating Greyson’s words.

The thing was, I hated waiting. I wasn’t good at it—I didn’t have the patience for it. Waiting meant sitting around while someone else took control. Waiting meant wondering and worrying and hoping and catastrophizing and oh *god*, how was I going to be able to do this? Just… wait around and put my trust in the Courier to get Xavier home safely? Just sit here and pace a hole through the middle of the porch because my mate’s life was hanging in the balance?

This was worse than signing away years of my life. Worse than tracking down a vampire-witch or fighting a demon or anything else I’d done. Because at least all those other times, I’d been *doing* something. Doing nothing—trusting some guy whose contract specifically said he made “no guarantees” that he’d be able to bring my mate back in one piece—was torture.

“This is the worst,” I finally said, breaking the silence that had settled between Greyson and me. “I wish there was something I could do. *Anything* I could do.”

As I kept pacing, I glanced over at Greyson, who was sitting on the porch steps, staring out into the night.

“I’m sorry there isn’t more I can do to solve this,” he said quietly. The energy rolling off him was strange. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it—I didn’t know if it was regret or anger or sadness, or if he was just plain tired.

“I think giving up five years of your life to save your brother is plenty,” I said.

“I’m not the only one who gave up five years.” He turned to meet my gaze. “If we get Xavier back, I just hope he appreciates what you’ve sacrificed.”

I flinched—not at the implication that Xavier would treat those years of my life like they were worthless, but at the wording Greyson had used. *If* we got Xavier back. To me, it was a *when*. It had to be a when, because if I didn’t believe we’d eventually get him back, then what was the point?

But I also knew that Greyson was wise to be cautious. The Courier’s “no guarantees” clause rang through my head again, and my stomach knotted. I started pacing faster. No, I wasn’t going to give in to my fears. I’d keep doing everything I could to get Xavier back—even if the only thing I could do right now was wait.

“Hey.” Greyson took my hand, stopping my momentum. “If you don’t stop pacing, you’re going to wear the floorboards out and we’ll have to call Phil, and I really don’t want anything else on my to-do list right now.”

His lips curved up into the ghost of a smile, but I just didn’t have it in me to laugh.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I can’t help it.”

He stared at me for a moment before releasing my hand and standing up. “It’s late. Why don’t we go to bed?”

“But what about the Courier?” I asked. “Don’t we want to be here when he gets back?”

“If he comes back, we’ll know.”

My shoulders curled forward, and I grimaced. There was that word again. *If*. Would it kill him to show a little more optimism? If not for himself, then for me? To show me that he believed Xavier could survive this and come back to us?

“Love.” He leaned in, wrapping his arms around me. “Running yourself ragged isn’t going to help Xavier. If you want to help him—”

“Can you please stop saying that?” I snapped.

A crease appeared between his brows. “Saying what?”

“*If*.” I practically snarled the word. “*If* the Courier comes back*. If* he finds Xavier. *If* I want to help.You keep saying that word like it means anything. Of course I want to help! Of course Xavier’s coming home to us, because of course the Courier is going to find him and bring him back.”

“I’m just trying to be careful,” Greyson said. “The Courier did say there were no guarantees. I don’t want to count on anything happening before we know for sure that it’s going to happen.”

“Why not?” I demanded. “What difference does it make? Do you think any of us are going to be any less devastated because we’re using the right words? No, we’re not. So you can give it a rest, okay?”

Silence settled between us for a beat, and then Greyson sighed. “All I was saying is that it’s to Xavier’s advantage for us to be well-rested tomorrow. We can start looking into backup plans first thing in the morning, just in case.”

“Oh.” Remorse rushed in, and my face heated. “Right. That’s… That’s a good idea.”

Those grey eyes bored into me. “I’m worried about him, too,” he said, his voice soft.

I wrapped my arms around him and rested my head on his broad chest. “I know you are.”

Greyson took my hand and led me inside. A few minutes later, I stepped out of the bathroom, dressed and ready for bed. Greyson was in my bed waiting for me, and I slipped in beside him. He pulled me onto his chest, and I closed my eyes.

I breathed in slowly, deeply, willing myself to drift off and get some much-needed rest. But as seconds dragged into minutes, sleep didn’t come. I couldn’t stop thinking about the nightmare we were living. My mind kept swirling, thinking of Xavier, demons, Adéluce, the Courier, the contract…

I peeled my eyes open and looked up at Greyson. His eyes were open, too, and he was staring up at the ceiling. He must’ve felt my eyes on him, because he looked down at me.

“Have you thought about what happens next?” he asked.

I frowned. I wasn’t entirely sure what he was talking about. I thought back to our conversation on the porch. “Are you talking about what we’ll do if the Courier can’t bring Xavier back?”

“No. I’m thinking about what will happen if we *do* get Xavier back,” he said. “It’s nagging at me. If the Courier brings him home and we destroy Adéluce once and for all and break the spell she cast on Xavier, where will that leave us?”

I dropped my gaze down to his chest. I’d thought about the same thing. Before all of this, it had just been me, my mates, and the *due destini*. We’d all been Redwoods. Things had been complicated, of course, but they’d been the normal kind of complicated. Now, Xavier was a Samara. Hell, he was the Samara *Alpha*—and Ava was his Luna. He and I were still mates, and I had reason to believe he’d only treated me so horribly because Adéluce had made him, but there were so many other factors to consider when it came to moving forward from all of this.

“You can be honest with me,” Greyson added. “I know this is… not an easy conversation, and probably not one you want to have right now, but I just want you to know that since I went through the whole sire bond mess with Elle, I think I have a better understanding of what you’ve been going through with the *due destini*. It’s not the same, of course, and I know I’ll never get fully used to it—jealousy is always going to be a problem for me—but at the same time, I understand now that this has been just as hard on you. I’m never going to blame you for that.”

Gratitude swelled up inside me, and I tilted my head up to kiss him. “You’ve never blamed me. Even when you’ve been upset, and even when we’ve fought about it, you’ve never blamed me. You’ve always been there for me.”

He kissed me back. “And when Xavier comes home, I’ll still be there for you.”

I didn’t miss his word choice, and I appreciated him to no end for talking about his brother this way. And it was then that I realized I’d never actually answered his question about what would happen once Xavier was back.

“I know things won’t be the same as before,” I said. “Xavier might’ve been under Adéluce’s control, but he still said and did some terrible, painful things to me. It’ll take me a while to get over that. And then there’s also the matter of him being a Samara now…” I sighed. “But I’m not going to lie to you. I’m still a *due destini*, so I guess there’s really no telling how Xavier’s return will affect us all.”

Greyson sighed, and my head rose and fell with the movement of his chest. “I understand.”

Silence settled between us again, but not the comfortable kind. I peered up at him. He was staring at the ceiling again.

“Are you just saying that?”

His eyes met mine. “No, love. I do understand—but I also want to make something clear: I know that I love you, and that you love me. So no matter what happens, no matter how many things change when Xavier comes back, my feelings for you will always stay the same.”

My stomach twisted. His words were so kind, so loving. I didn’t feel I deserved them. “I do love you. You know that, right? And you know how sorry I am about everything?”

“I know,” he said, pulling me in. “And I don’t want to talk about my brother anymore.” Then he kissed me.

**Episode 4685**

**Greyson**

The moment Cali’s lips touched mine, that near-constant hunger I felt for her flared up into something just this side of desperate. It was like I was starved for her, for my mate, and if I didn’t kiss her, touch her, taste her mouth, feel the weight of her body against mine, I would die.

She responded in kind, pressing her palms against my chest, breathy little sighs slipping from her mouth as I deepened the kiss. It felt like I was proving something to her, in a way—proving it to myself, too. I could feel the mate bond thrumming between us, strong as ever. Stronger, maybe. And I knew that regardless of any *due destini* feelings Cali had for Xavier, her feelings for me were real.

This wasn’t fake. This wasn’t watered down. This was *love*, pure and simple, and Cali was my everything.

She was mine. It was that simple.

I gently rolled us over so I could hover above her, then I leaned down and kissed her again. My tongue traced the seam of her lips, begging for entrance. She opened for me, and a low growl rumbled in my chest. I poured everything into the kiss—all my love, my hunger, my hope for us, for the future I’d been fighting for all this time.

She tugged at my shirt, her pupils blown wide with lust, her lips swollen, her hair mussed. God, she was so fucking perfect. I had to have her. All of her.

Our clothes were peeled away, and I kissed my way down her body, savoring every hitch in her breath, every sigh and moan. And when I reached her center, I found her wet and aching for me. Bracing my hands on her thighs, I lapped at her, drinking in the gorgeous fucking sounds she made, the way her thighs twitched and her fingers gripped my hair. Her hips rolled against my face in time with my tongue, and her moans reached a fever pitch before her back arched and she fell over the edge.

I kissed her thighs as she came back down, my lips wet with her, before I went back for more.

“Again,” I growled as I devoured her. “Come for me again.”

And she did. She whimpered and moaned and called out my name in broken syllables. *My* name. Not Xavier’s. Mine.

She. Was. *Mine*.

I made her come twice more before I released her. She was panting like she’d just run a marathon.

“Please, Greyson,” she begged, her cheeks and neck the sweetest shade of pink. “I need you. All of you.”

She’d asked so nicely—who was I to say no?

Sinking into her felt like a religious experience. Feeling her wrapped around me, watching the pleasure in her face, her hands gripping my shoulders, her legs pulling me in closer, the need and want and love that was fucking shining in her eyes… It was the closest I’d ever get to god.

We moved together in perfect harmony, the roll of my hips matching hers, every gasp and moan and whispered word slipping from her lips to mine. It soothed that hunger inside me as it drove me higher and higher. She was mine. This was proof, wasn’t it?

All too soon, I felt her clenching around me again, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. We came together, our bodies moving as one until every last drop of pleasure had been wrung out.

I fell asleep sated, with Cali tucked safely in my arms—but when I woke again, it felt like I’d barely closed my eyes. The pale light outside told me that dawn hadn’t yet come—it *had* only been a handful of hours since I’d fallen asleep—but I felt keyed up. Urgency itched beneath the surface of my skin.

I tried to tell myself to go back to sleep, to enjoy the warmth of Cali in my arms, to rest while I could. But that relentless need to get up and *do something* refused to let me stay where I was. My brother was trapped in the demon realm and, currently, our only hope for getting him home was a guy who’d specifically said he couldn’t promise to save him.

No, I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. That had never been my style. Besides, Cali would be awake soon, and the moment her eyes popped open, she’d want to do something, too. She’d sent another text to her crew team late last night, telling them she was sick. So at least when she woke up, she’d be able to focus on helping me find other ways to bring my brother home. I couldn’t decide if it would’ve been better for her to have that distraction, but I did wish she could just drop out of the crew team.

I knew she wanted to be involved, but right now, it was just way too risky for her to be around humans—she’d just be putting them all at risk of becoming Adéluce’s collateral damage. Or worse, exposing the supernatural world in the process.

I sat up with a sigh and headed downstairs to make tea. While it steeped, I thought through the enormously complicated task of getting Xavier home. I didn’t know how we were going to fix this.

I took my tea out on the porch, returning to the spot I’d sat last night after the Courier had left. Was I keeping watch? I wasn’t sure. It just seemed like the right place to go. But even sitting there for longer than twenty seconds brought back that itch to move, to go somewhere, to do *something*.

*Maybe I can shift and go for a run before the others wake up…*

“Hey.” Rishika dropped down next to me, holding her own mug. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Not really. You?”

She shrugged. With Artemis searching for her father in the Fae world, Rishika had more than just Xavier to worry about.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“I miss Artemis,” she confessed. “But I didn’t come out here to talk about that.”

“Oh?”

“You dropped a lot of stuff on us last night,” she said. “I’ve talked to Ravi and Jay, and they want to know if there’s anything the pack can do to help. Xavier might not be our Alpha, but he still matters to us.”

I blew out a breath. Cali and I clearly weren’t the only ones uncomfortable with just sitting around and waiting. “I wish I had something for you, some task you could all do, but unless you can come up with a way to bring Xavier back from the demon world or find Adéluce, the best thing any of us can do right now is stay vigilant. We need to be ready for anything, just in case.”

“Fair enough.” Rishika stood and headed for the door, then she paused and turned back. “How’s Cali holding up?”

I shrugged. “About how you’d expect. She’s impatient. She wants to help, too.”

“Tell her to hang in there. We’ll get through this.”

“Right,” I said dryly. “She’ll love hearing that.”

Rishika laughed and headed inside. I started racking my brain. I’d told Cali we’d look into backup plans today, but what would those plans be?

Big Mac had said she’d try to locate Adéluce…

*She said she needed time, but she never said how much.*

I decided to test my luck. I knew it was early, and that the witch probably wouldn’t be happy to hear from me so soon, but given the circumstances, Big Mac hopefully wouldn’t be too upset.

I called her, and to my surprise, she answered on the first ring.

“Yes, Greyson?”

She didn’t sound happy. Or sad. Or mad, for that matter. Just very, very tired.

“We signed the Courier’s contract last night,” I said without preamble. “Now we’re waiting for him to return with Xavier. If he can.” I winced as I added that last part, thinking of Cali’s desperate request last night. But no matter how much Cali wanted to believe otherwise, the chances of the Courier returning with Xavier were anything but sure. That was why I’d decided to call Big Mac in the first place. I cleared my throat. “But if that doesn’t work out, I want to have a backup plan. How’s the search for Adéluce? If we can locate the vampire-witch and capture her, maybe we can force her to bring Xavier back, then break the spell and kill her for good.”

Saying the words out loud gave me a burst of hope. It felt good. It felt like taking action, even if I was just talking about it.

“I can’t make any guarantees,” Big Mac said, “but I’m ready, and I’m willing to try.”

I laughed quietly. I was really tired of hearing those words, but what other options did I have?

*At least it won’t cost us another fifteen years of our lives. But will it actually work? And what will happen if the plan fails? Will it only make things worse?*

Though I didn’t really see how things could *get* worse.

“Do you need more time?” I asked.

“What’s going on?” Cali’s voice came from behind me, and I turned to see her standing on the porch in her pajamas, her hair still mussed from sleep. “Did you hear from the Courier?”

God, I wished I could tell her that Xavier was back.

“I’m talking to Big Mac. I’ll fill you in.” I gestured for her to come closer, putting the phone on speaker.

“I was actually just about to call you, Greyson,” Big Mac said. “I’m all set to look for Adéluce, but I need you to find one more thing for me first.”

**Episode 4686**

**Artemis**

Marius’s confirmation made my heart beat so fast, I thought it would burst out of my chest. I’d been longing to hear those words for so long that this hardly felt real. A myriad of emotions washed over me, but none so powerful as the feeling of vindication.

*I knew it!*

No matter how much time had passed or how much “proof” there was to the contrary, I knew that my father was still alive. Even though people like Adair had doubted me and basically told me I was kidding myself, I’d remained steadfast in my belief. And now, I knew that I’d been right all along—my father was out there, and I was going to find him. Excitement surged through my veins.

Though it would’ve been easy to give in to my elation, I made sure to school my features and give nothing away. The truth was always a gray area with Marius. He was just as happy to use it as a weapon as he was to use it as part of a casual conversation. I had to be careful.

With my emotions tucked away, I looked back at Marius. “If that’s true, then tell me everything you know. Start with why you’re so certain that he’s alive.”

Marius replied by holding out a sopping wet sponge. It dripped onto the worn wooden floor as I stared at it with disdain. Marius leaned over and hitched a thumb toward his muscular back.

“Do you mind scrubbing my back?” he asked. “There’s always this one spot I can never reach…”

I grabbed the sponge and flung it at his head. “Scrub it your damn self. I didn’t come here to be your servant.”

“That’s fine,” Marius said, chuckling good-naturedly. “But the least you can do is join me. This tub is quite spacious, and the water’s divine.”

“Keep that up, and next time, I’ll throw *this* at your head,” I said, brandishing a dagger.

Marius laughed. “You can’t blame a man for trying. We had some fun baths together, didn’t we? They don’t have to be a thing of the past… Not if you don’t want them to be.”

His words caused a flurry of memories to flood my mind. My cheeks started to burn, and I turned away, hoping I could keep the memories from leading me down a dangerous road. Marius knew just how to tempt me—and how to satisfy me.

My memories were filled with countless occasions when he’d satisfied my craving for him, only to make me crave him even more. Once was never enough with Marius, so I had to make sure that I didn’t give in to his seduction attempts. What had happened between us had been long ago. Now I’d met Rishika. I loved her, and if I could make it through this shit alive, I was hoping to make it back to her.

Whatever I’d once had with Marius—whatever I’d once felt—was over and had to stay that way.

With my emotions once again under control, I cleared my throat and turned back to him.

“Enough with the games,” I said. “Tell me why you believe Kadmos is alive.”

Marius smiled, like he knew he was getting to me. His confidence irked me. I took my dagger and pointed it at his head, like I was getting ready to make it a permanent feature of his body. Undaunted, Marius laughed, as though we were just flirting. It pissed me off, and I drew my arm back to throw the dagger.

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you!” he said, holding his hands up.

“Speak,” I snapped.

“I don’t know all of the details—”

“Stop. Just focus on what you do know,” I said.

“I’ve heard rumors,” Marius said.

I groaned. “So this is just conjecture? What good is that?”

The smug look on his handsome face hardened. He sat up straighter and tensed his muscles, like he was preparing to attack.

“The trees don’t lie,” he said. “I’ve heard that Kadmos is being held captive. I’ve also heard that Kadmos is hiding out deep in the mountains. Others say that he’s escaped to another world. Perhaps even the human world.”

Marius wasn’t telling me anything that I hadn’t already heard from various sources. Rumors abounded in our world, and only fools gave them any credit. I sighed in frustration, my patience starting to wear thin.

“Again, what do you *know*?” I asked. “You told me that you know where he is.”

Marius ignored my question. He stared at me curiously, and I made sure to keep my expression closed-off.

“Why does this matter to you?” he asked. “You’ve clearly been enjoying your time away from the Fae world, with your little human toys. Why bring up old ghosts? Why take on a bounty like this?”

He was fishing for more information—information I knew he wouldn’t hesitate to use against me if the price was right. While it was a ruthless way to live, it was what you had to do to survive in the Fae world. Marius, like me, was only alive right now because he was able to cash in on information.

Unfortunately for Marius, he wasn’t going to strike gold with me. I wasn’t going to tell him that Kadmos was my father—and I certainly wasn’t going to drop my guard, despite his half-hearted attempts to flirt with me. His lame attempt at seducing me was just another attempt to extract information.

While I couldn’t help how attracted I was to him, I refused to rekindle a flame that was best left put out. He couldn’t use our past as a shortcut. If Marius wanted my trust, he’d have to earn it.

I shrugged. “My reasons are none of your concern. Do you ever question why a client hires you to catch a bounty?”

“Fair point,” he said. “But I heard that the Kollector died. You’re no longer bound to him. You’re free. Why not let this Kadmos thing go and move on?”

With Marius so determined to learn more about my motive, I knew I had to tread lightly and give nothing away. He was definitely going to keep trying, but that didn’t mean I was going to give in. He had nothing over me, and I wasn’t in the mood to tell him anything more than I had to. As soon as he gave me a good enough lead, I would disappear, and do my best to forget about him.

I shook my head. “I have my reasons. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Leave it at nothing?” he asked. “Oh no, that’s impossible.”

Marius scrubbed his body as he laughed. He looked ready to double down on his questioning. It didn’t surprise me that he was refusing to listen to me. He never did.

“Why are you involving yourself in the war?” he asked. “What do you have to gain? Or to lose?”

“Why do you think I have any interest in the war?” I asked. “It means nothing to me.”

Marius smiled. “Because Kadmos and the war are inseparable. They’re bound together.”

Before I had a chance to react to this statement, Marius began to stand up. In a panic, I turned away and grabbed a towel. I tossed it at Marius and turned away before I saw anything. The last thing I needed was to get distracted by his—admittedly amazing—body.

*Just get the information and go*, I reminded myself.

Marius stepped out of the tub and started to dry himself off, utterly at ease. His nonchalance grated on me, but I had to stick this out until I had what I needed.

“What about you?” he asked.

“What about me?” I asked, not looking at him.

“Aren’t you going to take a bath?” he asked.

I hazarded a glance to glare at him. “In your dirty water? No, thanks.”

“I was going to ask the innkeeper for clean water,” Marius said. “It’s no trouble.”

“No, thanks,” I said, wanting to get back on track. “Just put some clothes on and tell me what you know and how I can find Kadmos. This little adventure with you has already taken up too much time.”

Marius said nothing, forcing me to brave another look at him. He stared at me with an inscrutable expression. Suddenly, he snatched the towel from around his waist and tossed it at my head. I dodged it easily but came face-to-face with his naked body.

I didn’t know where to look, but I did know that I didn’t want to look away. Using every ounce of my willpower, I turned to face the wall and was getting ready to draw my dagger again when Marius spoke.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” he said. “But first, I need you to tell me how much you’re getting paid.”

“What?” I asked, genuinely surprised. “I’m not being paid at all.”

It was the truth, if not all of it. If Marius managed to convince himself that I was being paid to look for Kadmos, then he wouldn’t leave me alone until he got a cut for himself, found out who I was working for, or both.

“Don’t lie to me, Ari,” Marius said. “The only reason I can think of to explain why you won’t tell me why you’re looking for Kadmos is because you want to keep the bounty all to yourself. I’m sure it must be sizable.”

I balked, not quite sure how his reasoning had led him down that road. He was way off base, and about to start chasing rabbits that didn’t exist.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “Not everything is about money.”

“Sure it is,” Marius said. “And I won’t tell you anything unless you agree to split the price on Kadmos’s head with me. Fifty-fifty. What do you say?”

**Episode 4687**

“You need the medals?” Greyson said into the phone to Big Mac.

“The ones Adéluce gave to Xavier?” I asked.

He nodded, listening to Big Mac’s response. I leaned closer, and Greyson put the witch on speakerphone. “The medals would be enough to use for the spell,” Big Mac was saying.

“We don’t know where they are,” I said.

If Big Mac was surprised I was on the call now, she didn’t make it known. “Then find them,” she said. “Not really my problem how you do.”

“We’ll figure it out and get them to you,” Greyson said. “Thanks, Big Mac.”

He hung up and turned to me. “Should we check his room?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But do you really think he would’ve kept those things?”

Greyson shrugged. “It’s possible.”

“No, you’re right,” I said, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. “We shouldn’t leave any stone unturned.”

It was the second time in the last twenty-four hours that I’d been asked to search for something of Xavier’s. I wasn’t looking forward to it.

Greyson nodded. “You go ahead. I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” I said, not feeling hopeful.

My heart in my throat, I opened the door to Xavier’s old room and stepped inside. Immediately, I was hit by an overwhelming wave of sadness at the sight of his belongings. Some of his stuff was gone, but there was still his bed and some clothes he hadn’t taken with him. The furniture was covered with a thin layer of dust. It hadn’t been so long ago that Xavier had been living here, and yet the room looked like it had been abandoned for years.

So much had happened within those four walls. The bed where I’d slept with Xavier for the first time was still there. So were all the memories that he and I had shared, as well as all the promises we’d made to each other.

This was the room where I’d fallen in love with him.

*Nope, nope. We are* not *going there.*

How could just seeing his stupid room make me feel this way? Not wanting to make things even more depressing, I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. I walked to the closet and looked through what was left behind. It was pretty much empty, just a few items of clothing still in there. No medals, that was for sure.

Then I went to the dresser, even seeing if any of the drawers had a secret compartment of some kind. None did. Where else could they be if they were here? I turned to look at the bed and had another wave of emotion come over me.

“What are you doing?”

Lola’s voice startled me out of my melancholy and brought a flush of heat to my face.

“Hey!” I said, turning around. “Um, I’m looking for something that belonged to Adéluce so we can take it to Big Mac.”

“In Xavier’s old room?”

Quickly, I caught her up to speed about the medals. Though I felt like I was on the verge of turning into an emotional wreck, I didn’t want Lola to see that. It didn’t seem like they were here. What were we going to do then?

She nodded and looked around the room. “I’ll help you search,” she said. “We can turn this room upside down and find them.”

“I checked the closet and the dresser,” I said. “There wasn’t much to search through in the first place.”

“Okay, so where do we look next?” Lola asked. “Maybe the bed frame?”

As Lola and I started feeling around the frame of the bed—again coming up with nothing—the door opened, and Greyson stepped into the room. He looked around the space before his silvery eyes settled on me.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said, then I sighed. “That only leaves us with one option. We have to go see Ava.”

Lola scowled. “Is that really necessary?”

“Sadly, yes,” I said. “If Xavier kept the medals, then he could’ve taken them with him to the Samara pack house.”

“Fine, but is a visit really necessary?” Lola asked. “Why can’t you just call her?”

“I wish, but I’m not sure if Ava’s even seen the medals before,” I said. “And if Xavier hid them, then it’ll be better if we all search for them. That’s assuming Ava will cooperate, of course.”

I knew better than to expect Ava to help us out of the goodness of her heart, but if she really cared about Xavier, then she’d help us find those medals.

“I’m fairly certain that she will,” Greyson said. “She already gave up five years of her life to get Xavier back.”

Lola’s eyes widened. “She what? Seriously?”

“Greyson, Ava, and I all gave up five years to pay the Courier,” I said.

“Shit,” Lola said. “I think giving up an eye would’ve been a better deal.”

“The Courier isn’t a witch,” I said. “Splitting the years between us was the best way to pay him.”

While I may have sounded almost cavalier about the transaction, in reality, I was anything but. I knew that five years would feel like a long time when my years were coming to an end, but I didn’t have a choice. I kept telling myself it was a small price to pay to save Xavier.

“Let’s go to the Samara house,” Greyson said, cutting into my thoughts.

“I’m going with you,” Lola said.

It was an unexpected but kind gesture. I knew the thought of visiting the Samaras set Lola’s teeth on edge.

“I appreciate it, but you don’t have to go,” I said.

The last thing I needed was for Lola and Ava to come to blows—or worse. I also didn’t want Ava to think I was trying to overwhelm her with a show of force. The simpler we kept things, the faster we’d be able to find those medals.

“I beg to differ,” Lola said. “I know just how well you and Ava *don’t* get along. It won’t hurt to have another friend in your corner.”

She was right. While Ava and I happened to be on the same side right now, there was no love lost between us. Ava wouldn’t hesitate to try and put me in my place when I showed up at the Samara pack house.

*Maybe Lola’s right.*

“You’re the best,” I said, wrapping her up in a hug. “Thank you for always being in my corner.”

“Somebody has to be,” she said, hugging me back.

A few minutes later, we were downstairs. I slung a small backpack over my shoulder. Inside were Greyson and Lola’s clothes, their phones, and mine. With the pack cinched close to my body, I climbed onto Greyson’s broad back, and then we were off.

Though I’d tied my hair back, a few tendrils escaped and whipped around as Greyson raced through the woods. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the breeze on my face, even as I held on for dear life. Riding a wolf was always a heady mixture of adventure and terror.

The unintended innuendo made me blush, and I opened my eyes to stop myself from going down that route.

Lola raced beside us, her wolf just as strong as Greyson’s, but with a leaner frame that was clearly feminine.

As we raced through the woods, I wished I was feeling more enthusiastic about our mission. Unfortunately, it was hard to be hopeful about what amounted to a slim chance, at best. Still, what choice did we have? We had to try everything.

Lola yipped as she leapt over a fallen tree. She looked eager to take on whatever was waiting for us at the Samara house. Even though I’d initially turned her down, I was happy that Lola was coming with us. It was good to know that I wasn’t alone, and that I had plenty of backup. Ava would most certainly have her pack behind her.

Lola, Greyson, and I would probably be enough of a presence to get Ava to concede to a search. Granted, just like Greyson, I didn’t think Ava would be opposed to letting us search for the medals. But I doubted she’d be happy about it.

Though Ava was certainly an obstacle, she was nothing compared to the very real possibility that the medals weren’t actually at the pack house. What if we searched and found nothing?

*What if Xavier got rid of them because they belong to Adéluce?*

I wished I could mind link with Greyson right now. I was driving myself crazy with questions, and I needed to get his thoughts on the matter.

*Did Big Mac offer any other suggestions on things we could use if we don’t find the medals?* I wondered.

*She said we could use anything as long as it belonged to Adéluce*, Greyson said.

I stared down at him, confused. Had Greyson just spoken to me? How was that possible when he couldn’t speak in his wolf form? It took me another second, but then I finally realized what had happened.

*Greyson! It’s back! Our mind link is back!* I said, thrilled.

*Thank god, love. I missed hearing your voice*, he said.

Ecstatic, I hugged him a bit. *Big Mac said it would only be a matter of time.*

*Glad to see she was right*, Greyson said.

By the time we reached the Samara house, I was smiling from ear to ear and feeling hopeful. As Greyson and Lola shifted back and got dressed, the welcome party came out to greet us. Ava and Marissa stepped out of the house with their arms crossed, the expressions on their faces just as hostile.

“What are you doing here?” Ava asked.

“What do you want?” Marissa added.

Ignoring her, I turned to Ava. “Did Xavier ever show you any medals that belonged to Adéluce?”

Ava shook her head. “No. Why?”

“Because Big Mac can use them to find Adéluce,” Greyson said.

Ava nodded before gesturing to the house. “Then let’s go find them.”

**Episode 4688**

**Xavier**

“Xavier, don’t! It’s not real! Come back, werewolf!”

I ignored Ferlin’s shouts and ran toward Greyson. Of course he was real. My brother was standing right in front of me. I had no idea how he’d gotten there, but I knew I had to get to him. Something was terribly wrong if Greyson was out here in this desert, too.

My older brother stared at me with a bemused expression as I ran at him, full speed. Yet no matter how much I ran, I couldn’t seem to close the distance between us. Greyson was still exactly where he’d been when I first saw him, even though my lungs were on fire and my legs were aching from all the running.

*What the hell is going on?* I wondered.

Ferlin was still shouting, but I tuned him out. Taking a deep breath, I gathered my reserves and ran as hard as I could. But after a few minutes of that, I had to stop. I bent over to catch my breath and heard footsteps approaching.

Greyson walked over to me as if he’d only been a few feet away the whole time, which made no sense. I looked around to see if Ferlin was close by, too, but he’d disappeared. Typical.

Greyson patted me on the back, and I jerked away from him.

“You all right there, little brother?” he asked.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, still gasping for air.

Greyson snorted. “Me? What about you? You’re out here traveling with a demon. Is that really the best choice you could’ve made?”

Standing up straight, I got in his face. Greyson looked undaunted as he stared at me. Shaking my head, I started to walk away.

“Fuck you,” I said. “I’m out of here.”

Greyson laughed. “That’s it? You’re just going to get going? Snap the fuck out of it, dude.”

I stopped in my tracks.

*Did Greyson just call me “dude”? That… That can’t be right*.

While Colton had no problem calling me “dude” or any other ridiculous nickname, Greyson always called me by my name. Always.

Something was wrong.

“Snap out of it, Xavier,” Greyson said, stepping closer.

“What?” I asked. “Get back!”

“I told you to snap out of it!” Greyson said, shouting so loud my ears rang. “Xavier! Snap out of it!”

Suddenly, my head was knocked back by a hard slap. I grabbed my face out of shock more than pain.

*What the hell is going on with Greyson?*

Ready to pay him back in kind, I looked up. But he was gone. The only one there with me was Ferlin. He raised his hand as if getting ready to slap me again. I snarled until he put it back down.

“You slap me again, and I’ll kill you,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I had to do something,” Ferlin said. “You were having a conversation with the air.”

*I was?*

I looked around, wondering if he was right. Greyson was nowhere to be seen, and there were only two sets of footprints on the sand. My brother hadn’t been here.

*But I could’ve sworn…*

“He was standing right in front of me,” I said. “I heard his voice. I saw him.”

“You were probably hallucinating,” Ferlin reasoned. “Deserts can play all kinds of tricks on your mind if you’re not prepared.”

“Well, it’s hard to prepare for something so realistic,” I said. “There’s nothing like having your older brother yelling at you.”

“In that case, you’re welcome for the slap,” Ferlin said. “We should keep moving.”

Before I could agree, I started to cough. Thanks to my pointless running, my throat was so dry, it felt like it was on fire. We’d already drank all the water bottles I’d grabbed at the store.

“We need more water first,” I said. “Know of a place?”

Ferlin shrugged. “Look around. We’re in a desert. Just how easy do you think it is to find water out here?”

“There’s no need for you to be even more of a pain in the ass than you already are,” I snarled. “Let’s just fucking go.”

“Gladly,” Ferlin said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

I shook my head and bit my tongue. The last thing I needed was to use the last of my saliva trying to put Ferlin in his place. I was already regretting partnering up with him. He was absolutely nothing like Gabriel—the only partner I’d ever been able to tolerate—and it was grating on my nerves.

As we were about to continue our trek, a loud screech from overhead made us stop and look up. A large shadow flew above us, large enough to cast a menacing shape on the sand all around us.

There was a trio of enormous birds flying in circles above us, making so much noise that I was tempted to cover my ears. Whatever they were, I knew they were bad news. Birds that big could tear us apart.

“Take cover!” Ferlin shouted as he started to run.

I held my arms out. “Where? There’s nothing but sand out here!”

Not bothering to reply, Ferlin sprinted away from the giant birds. With no better ideas coming to mind, I took off after him. Despite my earlier exertion, I caught up with him easily. We ran side by side as the birds flew overhead, screeching louder.

“What the hell are those things?” I asked.

“Sun divers!” Ferlin said. “And it must be feeding time. Run faster!”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. The two of us ran faster as the birds started to descend. I could hear them snapping their beaks, as if they were already pecking at us. As we raced up another dune, my shoe got stuck between rocks, and I went down on my knee.

Faster than I’d ever done anything in my life, I pulled my shoe free, tugged it back on, and kept running. One of the birds swooped in, and I ducked when it got close enough to bite my head.

“You didn’t think to mention the huge birds before?” I asked. “Where the hell are we supposed to hide out here?”

“Give me a minute to think,” Ferlin said, gasping for breath.

I’d just opened my mouth to curse at him when a sun diver dove into the sand right in front of me. I nearly fell over as I changed directions to avoid running into it. The sun diver drove its entire body deeper into the sand, like it was water, before pulling it back out, a strange, fish-like creature clutched in its beak. The massive thing wiggled in the sun diver’s mouth, desperate to get back below ground.

After catching a glimpse of the fish-like creature’s sharp rows of teeth, I decided it was best not to ask what those things were. We needed to get away. Fast.

Ferlin and I kept running. More and more sun divers arrived to dive into the sand for their midday meal until it felt like we were caught up in a warped game of Whac-A-Mole.

We ran every which way but straight, which was exhausting. Sweat poured down my face as my tongue swelled in my mouth. I wouldn’t be able to keep running like this for much longer.

Just as I dodged a sun diver enjoying its meal, another one slammed into Ferlin. He went down with a scream and started to wrestle with the bird. I ran over and flung the giant thing off him. The sun diver flew away with an enraged shriek that set off the other mutated-looking birds. I helped Ferlin to his feet, then realized that my hands were coated in a dark, oily slime.

*Fantastic. I fucking hate this place.*

Ferlin looked up at the sky before he shook his head at me.

“What?” I asked.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you just pissed off the mother,” he said, then pointed up.

I followed his line of sight until I spotted the mother of all sun divers bearing down on me. It was twice the size of any of the other birds I’d seen so far, and its screech was so loud that we had to cover our ears. Great, this was exactly what we needed. Why the fuck did everything here want to *eat me*?

The mother sun diver outstretched her talons, which looked more like daggers. Ferlin ran off while I dug my feet into the sand. The giant sun diver went for my head, but I swiped at her foot and managed to keep her talons from tearing into me.

As I prepared to fight back, my shoulder was suddenly engulfed by a strange blend of pain and pressure. With horror, I looked down to see the sand falling away beneath me, and my feet dangling in the air. I struggled to break free, but the sun diver just tightened its grip as it flew higher and higher.

**Episode 4689**

We followed Ava upstairs in a silent procession. While Marissa kept glaring at me over her shoulder, Ava seemed to have no problem leading us through her home.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t feeling as carefree as she was. It took every bit of willpower I possessed to keep my feet moving. I hesitated at the threshold of the room we were about to search. It wasn’t just Xavier’s bedroom I was walking into—it was also Ava’s.

The sight of their bed made me nauseous, and I had to fight the urge to turn around and race out of the house.

Though the room was nothing special, it still hurt to step into it. It was yet more proof that what Xavier and I had was really over. He’d left his old room, his old life, and his old mate to start a new life with Ava at the Samara pack house.

*Is this really all because of Adéluce?*

Had Xavier left me and run into Ava’s open arms because of the vampire-witch? Or had he left of his own volition? Had it been a mixture of both?

Not sure which answer was more painful, I took a deep breath and forced myself to stay in the moment. We didn’t have any time to waste.

I glanced at Ava, who didn’t bother to hide her disdain.

“Are you just going to stand there being useless?” she asked.

Not wanting to fight with her on her territory, I brushed past her and stepped into the room. Xavier’s life depended on us finding the medals, and I wasn’t going to let my issues with Ava get in the way of saving him. I’d cooperate with her for as long as I had to.

But not a single moment longer.

“I’ll take the closet,” Greyson said.

Ava pointed to the one on the left. “That one belongs to Xavier.”

“Thanks,” Greyson said.

As he opened the closet door, Ava turned to Lola and me. She fluttered her fingers at the drawers close to the large bed.

“The top two dressers are Xavier’s,” she said, then pointed to the rest. “The last two are mine, obviously. And we share the one in the middle.”

She gave us a vicious smile. I turned away without a word, and could’ve sworn that I heard Lola quickly stuck her tongue out at Ava. While I understood the sentiment, she couldn’t do that again.

When Lola spun around to dig through the open drawer, I shot her a look. She narrowed her eyes at Ava but nodded at me. We couldn’t afford to be unfriendly to our host, even if she was a massive B.

I slid the drawer open and abruptly realized how tense I was. My teeth ached as I clenched them together. I hated every moment I spent searching through Xavier’s drawers. His clothes didn’t belong here. They belonged at Redwood house. Xavier belonged there, too. And he belonged with me.

No matter how many times I tried to force myself to face the truth that Xavier was with Ava now, it just never seemed real. My fingers clenched on Xavier’s shirts as I moved them aside. I wanted so desperately to pack them all up and take them home, along with Xavier himself.

“Can you describe the medals?” Ava asked. “That might help.”

“They look like thick old coins,” I said, making a round shape with my fingers. “About this size and worn, thanks to their age. You’d know them if you saw them.”

“Great,” Ava said.

I could’ve sworn I heard her roll her eyes. Though she hadn’t hesitated to let us come in and search, it was easy to see that Ava wasn’t eager to have us there. Too bad.

“There’s nothing here,” Lola said.

I nodded, and we closed the first drawer before moving on to the second. The first shirt I saw made me feel weak in the knees. It was a soft Henley that I’d given to Xavier. He looked so sexy in it—I never seemed to be able to keep my eyes off him whenever he had it on.

*I wonder if he’s worn it for Ava?*

*I wonder if she thinks he looks sexy in it, too?*

Pushing the thought away, I searched the rest of the drawer and forced myself not to think about how Xavier looked in every shirt that I saw. The coins weren’t in that drawer, either, so we closed it and moved on to the middle one.

Even if Ava hadn’t told us she shared it with Xavier, I would’ve known the moment I opened it. Her overpowering perfume wafted up from her clothes as if to taunt me.

My hands froze above the clothes. Xavier’s boxer briefs were folded up alongside Ava’s lingerie. Staring at their underwear felt almost as intimate as when I’d accidentally heard Xavier telling Ava that he loved her.

It was too much.

“Just let me know if you want to borrow anything,” Ava said.

She and Marissa laughed. I gritted my teeth and roughly moved her things to the side. A part of me wondered if Ava was enjoying herself, while the rest was damn sure that she was. Unfortunately for every malicious bone in Ava’s body, I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of seeing how upset I really was.

While clothes would normally be considered a mundane item, seeing Xavier’s clothes next to Ava’s was even more proof of the fact that he was truly hers. He’d left me for her and had settled into a new life without giving me so much as a second thought. My heart shattered more irreparably with every article of clothing that I sorted through.

Lola took my hand where Ava wouldn’t be able to see and held it tight. I was so glad that she was there with me. I wasn’t sure how I would’ve been able to get through this without her, even with Greyson there, too.

*Thank you*, I mouthed.

She winked at me, giving my hand a squeeze.

“There’s nothing in the closet,” Greyson said, closing the door.

“Nothing in the drawers either,” I said.

Lola and I put everything back where it belonged except for Ava’s lingerie, because screw her. Ava was eyeing us with a bemused smile, like she knew exactly how horrible it was for me to be here.

“Is there anywhere else my brother could’ve put the medals?” Greyson asked. “Someplace safe that no one else would think to search, or could stumble onto?”

Ava rolled her eyes as she gestured widely at the house. “That could be literally anywhere.”

“Maybe you should’ve brought a metal detector,” Marissa joked.

“Oh no, I think the manual search is way better,” Ava said. “Right, Cali?”

I put a hand on Lola’s arm to keep her from starting World War III. Though it was incredibly difficult, I took the high road and let Ava enjoy her petty game. What I was doing had nothing to do with her. I was here to save Xavier’s life.

Since we’d probably have to search the entire house, I was about to suggest we move on to the study. But just as I opened my mouth to say as much, my gaze landed on a gym bag. It was lying on the floor underneath the bed, and it looked full.

I hadn’t seen it before because I’d been doing my best not to look at the bed—seeing Ava’s lingerie had been bad enough.

When I stepped closer to the bed, I saw that the gym bag was one that I’d seen Xavier use before. I got ready to scoop it up, but then I stopped myself. Turning back to Ava, I pointed at the bag.

“Is it all right to go through that?” I asked.

Searching a bag wasn’t a big deal, but doing so without her permission might’ve been more than enough reason for her to kick me out. I also didn’t want to open a bag full of kinky sex toys that would scar me for life.

“Go for it,” Ava said. “I doubt you’ll find anything other than some old sweats.”

I dragged the bag out from under the bed and immediately unzipped it. Before I peeked inside, I realized there was something under the bag. It was covered with dust, but I picked it up anyway.

I shouldn’t have.

It was an old, dusty bralette that had been torn apart in someone’s rush to get it off.

*Oh, god…*

Seeing it, touching it, and knowing what it was made me want to throw up. It was a far too concrete reminder of just how real Xavier’s life with Ava was.

The evidence of their passion made me wonder if I was being an idiot. Even if I managed to break Adéluce’s spell, would Xavier actually *want* to come back to me? He certainly seemed to have a satisfying life with the Samaras…

*Don’t think about it*, I warned myself.

Lola snatched the old bralette from my hand and tossed it at Ava’s head. Marissa snatched it out of the air before it could hit its target. Ava smirked at me.

“You need to do some deep cleaning in here,” Lola said. “Your room is filthy.”

Ava chuckled as I turned back to the bag. She wasn’t wrong about it being filled with sweatpants, shirts, and running shoes. But there were other things, too.

I pulled out the AirPods that I’d given Xavier for Christmas. Before they could make me sad, something heavy clunked onto the floor. I looked down and saw one of the medals.

Forgetting my memories of Xavier for the moment, I grabbed the medal and brandished it triumphantly. “We need to get this to Big Mac right now.”

**Episode 4690**

**Artemis**

*He’s got to be kidding me.*

Marius stared at me, a cocky smile on his face and his hands on his bare waist. He looked beyond smug—as if he’d figured it all out.

“I’m not trying to be greedy here,” he said. “That’s why I’m willing to go fifty-fifty. A *guaranteed* fifty-fifty.”

My lips began to quirk into a smile, and I had to turn away before Marius saw it. This was just too funny. Marius was too clever by half, and completely unaware that he was haggling with me over a reward that didn’t exist. Even if there *had* been a reward, I wasn’t doing this for money. I’d never turn in my own father for a reward, no matter how large.

But who was I to tell Marius that?

He was the kind of bounty hunter who never hesitated to sell anyone to the highest bidder. Had he known who his own mother was, he would’ve sold her, too. Then again, I was fairly certain he had no mother, and that he’d come into the world on the day he’d hatched from an egg a monster had laid in some murky ditch.

Luckily for me, his greed was the perfect way to hide the truth from him. The more he focused on the supposed reward, the less he’d wonder why I was so keen to find Kadmos.

Hiding my smile, I turned back to face Marius. He was still totally naked, and my gaze wanted to drift down, but I forced it to stay on his upper body.

“I can do better than that,” I said. “If you help me find Kadmos, I’ll give you seventy-five percent.”

His eyes narrowed. “Seventy-five percent? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I said.

“What’s the catch?” he asked. “No true bounty hunter gives up their stake so easily.”

I shrugged. “Twenty-five percent of a reward is better than one hundred percent of nothing. I need to find him, and you’re my best bet. But if you’re not interested…”

Marius stared at me for a long beat. I could tell right away that he wasn’t buying my story. I wondered if I should’ve kept my mouth shut and let him haggle for fifty percent.

*Well, too late now*, I thought.

“I’m not going to stand here all night so you can stare at me,” I said. “You don’t want the cut? No problem.”

I turned to leave.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m in. I’ll gladly take the greater cut in exchange for helping you.”

Suspicion was rolling off him in waves, but I didn’t care. As long as he helped me, I was willing to put up with Marius and his games.

“Great,” I said. “Now get dressed.”

“You sure?” he asked, his tone flirtatious again. “We can have more fun this way.”

He laughed when I pulled out my dagger again, but finally went to get dressed. It took more effort than I was happy about to keep myself from following him with my eyes. Not that I had to. I’d once known his whole body quite well. I’d traced them enough with my fingers… and my tongue.

*Stop. Stop it. No more.*

“Is that offer for a fresh bath still on the table?” I asked.

“Among other things?”

“Just the bath,” I said.

True to his word, Marius requested a bathtub full of fresh, hot water for me. And, true to my word, I kept my dagger with me in case he got any ideas.

I took my time getting clean, and felt my muscles relax despite my surroundings. The feeling was short-lived, though. As soon as I stepped into the bedroom, I froze.

Staring back at me was Marius, already lying in the room’s one bed. His large frame took up most of it as he leaned back against the pillows. His face split into a grin as he patted the space beside him—what little there was of it.

“I hope you don’t mind sleeping on the right side,” he said. “I’m left-handed.”

“You can have all the space you want on the floor,” I said. “Or did you forget that you agreed to sleep there?”

“Did I?” he asked, then he shrugged. “Guess I did forget. Oh well. This bed is so comfortable, and it’s big enough for us to share. What do you say?”

“I say no,” I said. “Now get out. I’m tired, and I don’t want to deal with you in the middle of the night.”

“Who says I’d wait that long?” Marius teased.

“Marius,” I said, sighing in frustration. “Move.”

The world’s most obnoxious bounty hunter folded his hands behind his head as he stared at me. He wasn’t going to move, and I was too tired to fight him.

“Fine,” I muttered.

I went for my bath, giving Marius enough time to grow a sense of decency. I’d hoped that when I stepped back out, I’d find him on the floor, but he wasn’t. Totally unsurprised, I debated whether I should just sleep on the floor instead. The thought made me groan. The human world had gotten me way too used to real beds, and I really didn’t want to give up one night in one. Sighing, I slipped into bed and got as close to the edge of it as I could.

“Stay on your side,” I warned him.

When Marius didn’t answer, I rolled over and saw that he was asleep. He was snoring lightly, making me wonder if he’d worn himself out by being a pain in my ass. At least he’d probably actually stay on his side since he was already asleep.

*He almost looks innocent*,I thought.

But I knew better. Marius was anything but innocent. He was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, if ever there was one. It was the very thing that had attracted me to him in the first place. Marius was as dangerous as he was sexy. He used his looks like a weapon, and few people were immune to them.

I certainly wasn’t.

Unable to look away, I stared at Marius and took in every one of his features. He was so handsome, it pissed me off. I was just as tempted to trace his features with my finger as I was to smother him with my pillow.

I rolled over, acutely aware of how crazy this trip had turned out to be so far. Had someone told me a week ago that I’d end up sharing a bed with Marius the moment I got back to the Fae world, I would’ve laughed in their face. He was the last person I wanted to see, in *any* world.

Yet here I was. With him.

If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought this whole thing was a setup. Honestly, what were the odds of me running into Marius? A million to one? Less?

*Maybe the fates are trying to punish me for something*.

I listened to him breathe and thought about the last time we’d shared a bed together. I’d been getting ready to head out to do another job for the Kollector, but I’d decided to see Marius before I left. We’d gone to our favorite ale house and had had far too much to drink.

By the time we’d stumbled back to his room, we’d been tearing each other’s clothes off.

The memory sent a flash of heat through my body. Marius and I had battled each other for dominance that night. No sooner had I pinned him beneath my body and kissed him than he’d flipped me onto my back. It had been playful, and sexy, and so hot that I could’ve lived another thousand years and never forgotten it.

Marius was certainly guilty of being an asshole, but he had moves. I could at least admit that. That night had been incredible—memorable, too. As I’d lain next to him, trying to catch my breath, I’d realized that it was the last time we’d ever be together.

Because it had had to be.

He’d trailed a finger down my thigh while asking when he’d see me again. Ignoring the pain in my heart, I’d made light of it and kissed him to avoid answering. I’d known that there would never be a next time.

There couldn’t be.

Being with Marius was something that I’d always looked forward to. I’d enjoyed our time together and wanted to see him as much as he wanted to see me. And that was dangerous. Relationships were a liability for a bounty hunter—and even more so when you were working for the Kollector.

Besides that, romantic relationships had been totally foreign to me. I’d had no idea what it meant to be in one, let alone maintain one. And why *would* *I* let something I’d never had before become a threat to me? Had the Kollector found out about Marius, he would’ve used him against me. I’d seen him do it countless times.

So, like a thief in the night, I’d slipped out Marius’s room while he slept. I’d never looked back, and I’d never regretted my decision. Not that it had really been a decision—I’d had no choice.

With a silent yawn, I closed my eyes and had started to drift off to sleep when I felt Marius’s hand on my leg. The heat from his skin caused my breath to catch. I remembered how good it felt to be with him.

But then he moved his hand further up and pulled my body closer to his. My eyes flew open and, in one swift move, I shoved him away, twisted around, and grabbed the dagger from my bag. I flipped back around, ready to slam the dagger into his chest.

“*I told you to stay on your side*,” I hissed.

**Episode 4691**

**Xavier**

Pain sliced through my body as the sun diver dragged me high into the air. I threw a wild punch and managed to hit it, but the bird barely twitched. It was hard to get a good punch in while clamped tightly in the creature’s giant mouth. Not to mention how disorienting it was to be lifted so high into a red-tinged sky by a creature I’d never seen before today.

“Let me go!” I snarled as I tried to wrench its beak open, but I gave up on that fairly quickly. I knew I wouldn’t be able to loosen its grip, no matter how hard I tried. I attempted to shift, but I encountered the same block as before—only worse.

I screamed with effort, trying to force my transformation, but only my hands shifted.

*That’ll have to do for now.*

Grunting with effort, I raked my claws across the sun diver’s face. It jerked back and screeched in pain before tossing me into the air. I was free… but now I was falling, plummeting toward an unaccountably rocky section of the desert. But just before I hit the ground, another sun diver swooped in and grabbed me.

“Goddammit!” I hissed as I punched at the sun diver’s huge beak and tried in vain to pry it open. These things were stronger than any bird in the human world, which made sense, given the environment they’d evolved in.

I kept twisting and punching and kicking, but no matter what I did, I couldn’t free myself—and things were quickly going from bad to worse. The mother sun diver had caught up to us. It lunged for me and clamped its beak around my legs, trying to pull me away from the other sun diver’s mouth.

*These fucking birds are going to tear me apart!*

The birds were in a frenzy, fighting over me in mid-air, yanking me in opposite directions. I bit back screams of pain as I weakly punched and kicked at both birds, trying to deter them, but nothing was working. I was bleeding all over the place, and still unable to fully shift.

The massive mother sun diver launched a particularly brutal attack against the one holding me, and it shrieked in pain and veered away. It was badly injured, its eye mangled and bleeding. With a tortured screech, it opened its mouth and released me before swirling into a nosedive and crashing to its death.

Once again, I fell at breakneck speed until the other sun diver swooped in and grabbed me. With a lot of pain and even more difficulty, I twisted my body around in the sun diver’s mouth so that I could wrap my arms around its neck. Gritting my teeth and doing my best to ignore the excruciating pain, I cinched my arms around the sun diver’s neck with all my might, trying to choke it to death.

The diver wavered and dipped in the air, trying to throw me off, but I held on, ignoring the pulsing pain from the numerous injuries I’d suffered during the divers’ game of tug-of-war.

I tightened my chokehold, and the creature let out a hoarse squawk and began a swift nosedive. I yelled at the top of my lungs as we raced toward certain death. But then, at the last possible moment, the sun diver straightened out just a few feet above the rocky ground and then spun around so that I was dragged through the sand and rocks, suffering even more cuts and bruises.

My head was dangerously close to the ground, and sand was flying into my eyes and making them sting like hell, but I knew that if I didn’t push through the pain and free myself, I was going to hit a boulder and it would be lights out for good. And there was no way I was going to die in the demon world. I had to get back to my mates.

Gathering all my strength, I tightened my grip on the sun diver’s neck one last time, and then my arms finally gave out from exhaustion, and I went slack in the bird’s mouth.

As if paying me back, the creature clamped its beak down even harder across my middle and pivoted to soar back up into the sky. If I didn’t do something, this thing was going to actually end me. With a new wave of strength, I fought back. I was flailing with panic and frustration, kicking, punching, biting—anything I could think of to get free.

The bird screeched and opened its mouth just a little, and I jerked myself out of its beak. I was finally free and falling through the air once more—until the bird swooped low and caught me in its beak again, this time by my legs.

Concentrating, I tried to fully shift, but all I managed to do was bring on a sharp wave of pain—and I still couldn’t fully shift. All I managed to do was shift one of my paws back to a hand, which I promptly used to gouge out one of the bird’s eyes.

It let out a pained cry, and a river of blood spurted into the air, burning my hands like acid.

“Fuck!” I hissed, shaking my hands to slough off as much of it as I could.

I’d done some damage, and the creature started flying erratically, giving me a gnarly case of vertigo.

Suddenly, a blast of fire rose up out of nowhere, singing the creature’s oily feathers. Seconds later, it burst into flames. The fire had missed me, thankfully, but the heat was so intense that I felt like my entire face was about to melt off.

Finally, the flaming bird released me—but my sleeve was caught on its beak. I struggled and twisted, trying to get my shirt to tear, but the fabric was holding strong. Together, we spiraled toward the ground in a flaming ball of fire and smoke. The rancid smell of the bird’s burning flesh paired with the wild spin of its descent was making me nauseous.

Even in my disorientation, I could tell that the ground was rushing up to meet us. I didn’t have time to contemplate that for long before another blast of fire hit us. My clothes were now on fire, which meant my shirt ripped, and I was finally free of the bird—and free falling again.

I braced myself for the inevitable crash, hoping to hell that I was strong enough to survive it—if I didn’t burn up first, of course.

My body jerked in surprise as, rather than hitting solid ground, I splashed into a body of water and sank like a stone. Fighting to get my bearings, realizing that both hands were paws again. I immediately thrashed my way to the surface and wiped the water from my eyes.

I spluttered and coughed, trying to eject the water that had snuck into my lungs on impact. I almost screamed in relief when I saw the flaming sun diver hit the ground a short distance away, its large wings two raging fireballs.

I could barely move my legs as I struggled to make it to shore. Ferlin ran over to help, yanking me out of the water.

“Thanks,” I choked out, gasping for air and wincing in pain. Everything hurt, from head to toe.

Thick, rancid smoke was rolling off the still-burning creature nearby, burning my eyes, but I still managed to crawl to my knees. I was surprised to hear the creature screech again as it struggled to come toward us.

*How is it still* alive*?*

Ferlin blasted the sun diver with another jet of flames. It looked like magic, coming from his hands. The creature finally collapsed as the flames engulfed it.

I glared at Ferlin. “Why didn’t you do that sooner?”

“Tried to, but I couldn’t get a clean shot,” he said. “And I’ll admit, I was a little curious to see how a werewolf would fare against a sun diver. Not very well, as it turns out.”

I snarled, waving a shifted hand at him. “I can’t even shift! What the hell is going on with me?”

“I have no idea,” Ferlin said. “We don’t come across too many of your kind in the demon world. By all accounts, you shouldn’t even be here.”

I staggered to my feet. “Well, I wish I weren’t.”

I looked down at the wounds covering my body. There were a lot of them, but at least I was starting to heal.

Ferlin gestured at the body of water. “You said you were thirsty, right?”

I started to make a smart remark, but then I realized he was right. I dropped to my knees and began to drink. The water tasted strange but was oddly satisfying at the same time.

I didn’t get a chance to drink much of it before Ferlin yanked me to my feet.

“We have to go,” he said. “We’re being followed.”

**Episode 4692**

Ava had insisted that she and Marissa come with us to Big Mac’s, and I wasn’t in any state to argue with her. Not that I would’ve been able to stop her, anyway. There was no way Ava was going to let me handle anything to do with Xavier without her involvement-slash-supervision.

Lola and Greyson stayed close to me as we reached the witch’s house, where Jay, Mikah, and Gabriel were waiting for us.

As the werewolves shifted back to human and got dressed, Gabriel approached me.

“Can I see the medal?” he asked. “I wonder if it’s worth anything. It’s like a rare coin, right?”

I glared at him. “We’re using this to save Xavier, not selling it on eBay,” I snapped, not bothering to show it to him.

“Sure, but what about *after* we’ve saved Xavier? Then it’s up for grabs, right?” Gabriel said breezily. “When life hands you lemons…”

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith came out to greet us, interrupting the snide remark I had planned for Gabriel. I knew he was just as worried about Xavier as the rest of us, but he sure had a funny way of showing it.

“Great, the cavalry’s here,” Big Mac said dryly.

“Here’s one of the medals.” I handed it to her. “Is this what you need for the spell? Is one enough?”

Big Mac didn’t answer right away. She studied the medal, her eyes narrowed nearly to slits as she turned it over in her hands, examining it closely.

“Yes, I can do it with one,” she finally said. “I can feel the vampire-witch’s magic coming off it in waves. Her power would be impressive if she weren’t using it to terrorize our friend.”

“And if she weren’t an evil b-word,” I added.

“That too,” Big Mac agreed.

“So… great,” I said. “The medal works—that means we can get started now, right?”

I was eager to do something—anything—to bring us closer to pulling Xavier out of the demon world. Every second that ticked by put Xavier in greater danger.

Big Mac shook her head. “Don’t rush me. I have to be careful, here. One mistake could be disastrous for Xavier.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “What do you mean?”

“The tracking spell doesn’t actually locate Adéluce—it traces magic back to its source,” Big Mac said as she led us to a large pentagram of stones on the ground alongside her shack-that-wasn’t-really-a-shack. “I have to perform this spell just right if we want it to work. One missed ingredient, one wrong word or motion or anything in between, and the medal won’t produce the information we’re looking for.”

Another tracking spell. I remembered doing a similar spell on the medals a while back, the last time we’d tried to track Adéluce. We hadn’t had much luck then, and I hoped this time would be different.

“So, just to make sure I get it,” I said. “This spell is going to track the magic back to its creator—like a treasure map?”

Big Mac nodded. “Yes, though there won’t be any treasure at the end of this. If the tracking spell isn’t performed correctly, it could alert Adéluce. And if that happens, she could lash out at Xavier—or at us. That’s the main reason why we have to be careful. This isn’t a game. Things could go very wrong very quickly.”

“But that’s a chance we’ll have to take,” I said. “If we don’t do anything, Xavier will be stuck in the demon world.” Even saying the words sent a shiver down my spine.

“Thanks for your input, Cali, but as Xavier’s *Luna*, I should have some say in this,” Ava said haughtily. “He’s my mate and the Samara Alpha. His ties to the Redwood pack are long gone, so you shouldn’t be speaking for him. Though, of course, that’s never stopped you before.”

Lola rolled her eyes and stepped forward to glare at Ava. “So I take it you have a better plan? Or *any* plan, for that matter?” she snarled. “Or are you just going to lurk around and shoot down everyone else’s ideas because you’re feeling insecure?”

Ava glared in Lola’s direction but otherwise didn’t acknowledge her, instead turning her attention to Big Mac. “Why can’t you just use the medal to locate Adéluce directly? Witch magic should be capable of that, right? I don’t understand this random limitation keeping us from just finding that bitch.”

Big Mac flashed Ava an exasperated look. “Because we tried that once before, and Adéluce was using magic to cloak herself and ensure that she couldn’t be tracked. We’re not dealing with a slouch in the magic department. You should all have realized that by now. Adéluce is a skilled, powerful witch who now knows that we’re on to her, which makes hunting for her all the more dangerous.” Big Mac glanced between me and Ava. “So, if you two are done growling at each other and playing ‘who loves Xavier the most,’ may we proceed?”

Ava and I exchanged a look, but stayed silent. It was clear that neither of us wanted to annoy Big Mac. We needed her help, and if we pushed her too hard, I wouldn’t put it past her to tell us to forget the whole thing.

“Good,” Big Mac said. “Now, everyone stand around the outside of the pentagram.”

As we all shuffled into position, Greyson came over to stand beside me. Big Mac stepped into the center of the pentagram, where she’d placed a basket of things she needed for the spell.

“Do not disturb me once I start casting the spell,” Big Mac warned us. “Stay in position no matter what happens, and whatever you do, do *not* enter the pentagram. Is that clear?”

Her gaze found me and stayed there.

I swallowed nervously. “I understand. Don’t disturb you. Don’t move.”

“Precisely. And I should reiterate that that’s not a suggestion—it’s an order.”

I nodded again. “Got it.”

“Wait!” Mrs. Smith shouted, just as Big Mac was about to close her eyes. “Are you going to be at risk? Is there any reason why it might not be safe for you to perform this spell? Because if so…”

“Don’t worry. Really.” Big Mac smiled, which I found a little sweet, yet somehow disturbing—a smile on Big Mac’s face would never *not* be disturbing.

“Clementine isn’t here, so I have to do it,” the witch said. “Admittedly, I’ve never done this particular spell before, and I’m not an expert tracker like Clementine was—but trust me, I did a lot of research to prepare. It’s going to be fine. If I were unsure about doing it, believe me, I would’ve sent these wolves right back where they came from.”  She plied us all with a loaded glance.

Mrs. Smith leaned in to kiss Big Mac. “Okay. Just… Be careful, okay?”

“I will,” Big Mac grunted.

Apparently satisfied, Mrs. Smith moved back into position.

I shot a quick glance at Greyson.

*He must be so happy to see that his mother and Big Mac have reconciled. It was looking a tad touch-and-go for a while there. Big Mac is always a bit less prickly when Mrs. Smith is in the picture. Let’s hope that things stay good between them.*

I refocused on Big Mac. All eyes were on her as she began the spell, placing the medal right in the center of the pentagram. She lifted a pile of herbs from the basket and let them run through her fingers, scattering them across the pentagram and chanting under her breath.

Then she closed her eyes and recited the entire chant again, slowly turning around and throwing the herbs to every point of the star. The air took on a heavy quality as Big Mac’s chanting intensified. Something about it comforted me—maybe the knowledge that we were doing everything in our power to get Xavier back.

I held my breath, hoping that Xavier hadn’t given up hope, and that he was holding his own in the demon world.

There was a collective gasp of awe as the medals began to vibrate, and the air crackled with magic.

I glanced at Greyson. “Did you just say something?”

But he was staring intently at the medals, and I realized that I was hearing whispers coming from every direction. I remembered something similar happening when Clementine had done the same spell in New Orleans.

There was a sudden, bright burst of light, with beams shooting out in every direction like a laser show out of the medal. It was so bright that it hurt, and I winced, narrowing my eyes to block some of it out but too curious about what was happening to close my eyes completely.

Some of the beams were brighter than others, and there was one that was the brightest of all—a shifting mix of colors that extended far out into the woods.

Mrs. Smith’s sharp scream startled me and yanked my attention back to the pentagram, just as Big Mac collapsed to the ground.

**Episode 4693**

**Greyson**

I grabbed my mother as she lurched toward Big Mac. “Mom, stop! You can’t.”

Ignoring my protests, she struggled to pull out of my hold, her gaze riveted to Big Mac’s crumpled form.

“But look at her! She needs me!” my mother wailed. She tugged at my fingers, trying to pry them away as she strained toward the center of the pentagram.

“Mom, no!” I shouted. “You heard what she said—no matter what happens, we can’t cross into the pentagram. It could make things worse for her!”

That did little to comfort my mother or make her stop straining against my hold.

“MacKenzie!” she shouted. “MacKenzie!” She stopped fighting and turned to look at me, her eyes flashing. “Greyson, let me go!”

“Mom, I can’t,” I said. “She said not to interfere…” I trailed off, realizing how hard it was to finish that sentence when Big Mac was lying face down on the ground, unmoving. I could only imagine what seeing her like that was doing to my mother.

I glanced at the light beams, noting the one that was shining a lot brighter and stronger than the rest.

*Could that be the path to Adéluce? Without Big Mac, how are we supposed to know? What if it’s a trick? Or what if it leads us somewhere we shouldn’t go?*

I was considering my next move when all the lights slowly began to merge into one, joining with the stronger beam until it was almost too bright to look at.

“I think we should follow it,” Cali whispered to me, her eyes still on Big Mac. “It has to be pointing to Adéluce—why else would all the lights merge into it like that? Besides, Big Mac said that the spell would plot a course, and this sure looks like that.”

My mother was still struggling in my hold.

“Follow it,” she said. “The spell is done. Let me go so I can help her! Don’t make me take you down, Greyson!”

I heard her threat loud and clear, and fully believed that she would do whatever it took to get to Big Mac. I didn’t blame her. I would’ve done the same to get to Cali if she were in the same position. With lingering uncertainty, I let my mother go. She wasted no time rushing to her fiancée’s side, pulling the unconscious witch into her lap and stroking her hair.

“I say we do it. Let’s follow and get moving before the light fades,” Gabriel said. “I have a feeling that Big Mac will kick our asses if she wakes up to see us just standing around when she all but laid a path out for us.”

I was torn. My mother needed me, but so did my brother. I took one last look at Big Mac and my mother before I realized that there was nothing I could do for them in this moment. Nor did I want Big Mac’s hard work to be in vain.

“Go!” my mother urged me, making my decision easier.

“Come on,” I said to the hunting party. I was already heading toward the light. “Let’s go.”

Cali was right beside me as I led everyone away from Big Mac’s house and into the woods, keeping the light beam in sight. Those who could shift did, and Cali climbed on my back. We hurried after the light—it was so powerful that it shone straight through everything in its path, even the trees.

*I wonder if I should shift now or later? We have no idea how long we’ll be following this light. The path might be dangerous, and if all goes to plan, we’ll end up where Adéluce is. I want to be prepared for anything. There’s no way I want to be taken by surprise. Not against a vampire-witch powerful enough to blow up my brother’s entire life.*

But then I realized that I had Cali’s Fae powers and Mikah’s vampire abilities to fall back on, not to mention Lola’s general hybrid badassery. We could handle running into trouble. Defending ourselves was second nature to us—which was good, since we often had a lot from which to defend ourselves.

*This is spooky*, Marissa said to everyone. *And I don’t have a good feeling about it, either.*

I didn’t say anything, mostly because I wasn’t sure how I felt about it myself, yet. The light was obviously the result of Big Mac’s spell, which meant that it had to be safe, more or less, but I would’ve felt a hell of a lot better if Big Mac had been the one leading the way instead of me.

The light began to waver as we continued, and I was beginning to worry that it might suddenly disappear. What would we do then? There was a good chance that Big Mac was still lying in the same place we’d left her. I doubted she’d be in any state to recast the spell.

*Are you picking up any scents?* Cali asked via mind link. *Anything to let us know that we’re close?*

I lifted my nose to the air to try, but the woods were filled with so many scents right now—if Adéluce *was* around, her scent was getting lost in the crowd.

Then, a sobering thought hit me. I’d left my mother alone with Big Mac… What if Adéluce attacked them while we were out here following this light?

I glanced over my shoulder. *How far have we gone?*

*Not that far*, Lola said back.

Mikah held up a hand from his position on Gabriel’s back. “I smell blood.”

*And I smell death*, Gabriel added. *It’s faint, but it’s there.*

I was picking up the scent of it now, too. Was it a vampire? Or just a dead body? But the smell was different from the way that Mikah smelled as a vampire—or even Lola, who didn’t even smell like death since she was a hybrid.

*What or who is it, do you think?* Ava asked as a cloud of unease settled over the group.

*Greyson, I sense magic*, Cali told me. *I can feel it in the air. I don’t know how, but it’s vibrating like the coin.*

The light beam pulsed brighter and crackled with a burst of energy before it vanished.

Everyone looked around, frantic.

*Where did it go?* I asked. *Can anyone see any trace of it? Or—*

Cali gasped and crumpled against me.

*Love?! What’s wrong?*

She doubled over on my back, obviously in too much pain to answer. Completely freaked out now, I was about to shift back to human—just as Adéluce materialized.

At first, I wondered if I was under some sort of spell—if I was imagining her. But there was no mistaking it. Adéluce was standing right before me.

*Shit.*

It hit me all over again that Xavier had been right all along. Adéluce wasn’t dead and never had been. Instead, she’d spent her time as a “dead woman” terrorizing my brother and ensuring that he couldn’t even ask for help.

*How did I fall for her tricks so easily? Why did I believe that she was dead? Especially when Xavier was so skeptical about it?*

Adéluce’s face twisted with anger as she rounded on us.

“You seriously thought you could stop me?” She lifted her head and cackled, her voice seeming to come at us from every direction.

I clenched my jaw. I wanted nothing more than to attack her, but any sudden move of mine could throw Cali off my back. I didn’t want to put her into harm’s way.

Cali grimaced and then pushed herself up and then slid off of me. Before I could do anything to try to stop her, she screamed and sent a blast of magic careening toward Adéluce, but it slammed into some invisible barrier she’d erected and bounced back, knocking down a tree behind us.

Ava and Marissa bolted toward Adéluce, lunging at her. Gabriel, Jay, and Lola were right on their heels. But it was no use. They hit that same invisible barrier and were thrown back.

Adéluce smiled. “Such heart! Such courage! Too bad neither of those things can blast through my barrier. So, who’s next? Who else wants to smack into my magic?”

I was still fighting the urge, but I held back. The barrier was still there. If Cali’s magic and five werewolves couldn’t break through it, there was no point in me making a fool of myself for Adéluce’s pleasure.

Cali lifted her hand, clearly preparing to blast Adéluce again. But before she could, she winced and staggered back in pain, crying out before she collapsed to her knees.

I rushed to Cali’s side as she gasped in agony. “It’s my shoulder!” Cali clawed at her shirt, revealing the glowing handprint. “Adéluce… She… She must be using the ashes!”

The others were just starting to recover when Adéluce raised her hand and wiggled her fingers, revealing a diamond ring. “Looking for this?”

**Episode 4694**

I could barely breathe. My shoulder was on fire, and there was no doubt in my mind that the pain was being caused by the Seluna mark—reinvigorated by Adéluce’s influence, no doubt. And now the vampire-witch was taunting us with the ring.

I felt a pang in the pit of my stomach as I remembered how Xavier had struggled to tell us about Adéluce’s ring. Seluna’s ashes had to be in there. There was no other explanation.

My vision was starting to blur, and I was worried that I was going to pass out. The others seemed to be frozen in place, unable to move. We’d followed the light created by Big Mac’s spell right to Adéluce, but I doubted any of us had expected things to turn out like this.

A cascade of voices flooded my head, and I realized that many of them belonged to Seluna.

*Caliana, you must take the ring. If you want this to end, getting the ring is the only way. Don’t let her keep it. All will be lost. We don’t have much time!*

*Can I do anything?* Greyson asked through the mind link. *Cali? Are you okay?*

*Don’t give up.* It was Xavier’s voice in my head, now, echoing alongside Seluna’s. *You can do this, Cali. Just don’t give up on me.*

My head was spinning, and I couldn’t get the voices to stop. Adéluce’s voice suddenly sliced through all the others, drowning them out. I forced myself to look at the vampire-witch head-on.

“This really is a surprise, seeing you all fighting for Xavier like this,” she mused. “When will you all realize what he’s done? He’s a murderer, and yet you’re all ready to risk your lives for him.” She turned her blazing gaze on Ava and me. “How can you love him?”

She stepped close to me.

“I did you a favor by forcing him to leave you,” she told me. “And this is how you show your thanks? By trying to kill me? By worming your way into my plans and trying to ruin them? Do you know how hard I worked to craft the most oppressive conditions for your mate? None of this has been easy—least of all on me. But I’ve made the necessary sacrifices to get my revenge.”

“But why are you so obsessed with revenge? Xavier didn’t kill your family! He didn’t know!” I snarled through the pain. “You pretend to know him, but if you really did, you’d know that Xavier would never have taken a job that involved hurting anyone innocent!”

Adéluce waved that off. “His intentions mean nothing to me. Xavier was responsible from the moment he agreed to find us, and he must pay for what he did. Why am I not surprised that you’d make excuses for a man who played a key role in killing an innocent family? Are you all so selfish and blinded by his worthless love that you can’t tell right from wrong?”

“Like you know anything about what’s right!” I hissed. “You’re a monster!”

I gritted my teeth against the pain, but it was only getting worse. I wondered how long my body would be able to take agony this sharp.

Adéluce’s eyes flashed. “Perhaps you’re right, Caliana. Perhaps I am a monster. But if that’s the truth, then Xavier made me into one, which means that it’s still his fault.”

Adéluce gestured with her ringed hand, and pain unlike anything I’d ever experienced ripped through my body. I fell against Greyson as my shoulder throbbed and burned like it was on fire. I was starting to feel sick to my stomach.

“I’m not a monster, Cali,” Adéluce added. “Ever consider that? After all, you’re in love with a monster yourself.”

“What do you *want*?” I screamed. “What? Is that what this is all about? Making everyone pay for what happened?”

“Is your memory so feeble that you don’t recall trying to kill me? You all rejoiced, thinking that you’d succeeded. But your pathetic attempt wasn’t good enough. You underestimated my power, just like you did when you got involved in this. And then you tried to use a spell to track me down.” Adéluce chuckled. “Typical. But I was ready for that. I’m always two steps ahead.” She glanced at Greyson. “Your witch is no match for me,” she hissed, “and she’ll pay for what she did. You’ll *all* pay!”

Adéluce bared her fangs and waved her hand, sending Jay slamming into a tree with a sickening crack. He crumpled to the ground and stayed there.

Lola snarled, but she was frozen just like everyone else, and it wasn’t like she’d be able to get to Adéluce even if she *could* move, since the barrier was still intact.

*We need to get that ring!* I mind linked to Greyson. *I think if we can separate her from it, her power will lessen and we might actually stand a chance against her.*

*I agree, but she’s using a spell to freeze everyone*,Greyson said. *I can’t move. But… Maybe if we find a way to distract her, we might have a chance.*

I was still clutching my shoulder, though it wasn’t doing much to stop the pain. If only Adéluce would drop that damn barrier—then I’d be able to blast her and put an end to this once and for all.

I turned to Ava, whose face was locked in a scowl. Adéluce now had her sights trained right on her.

“And you, Samara Luna,” Adéluce said. “You should be on your knees thanking me. You finally got what you wanted more than anything in the world—Xavier’s love. That was all you longed for in your pitiful life, and I gave it to you. So what quarrel could you possibly have with me?”

It hurt me to hear that Xavier truly loved Ava, but I knew that Adéluce had manipulated Xavier’s feelings. Xavier hadn’t needed magic to fall in love with me. That was the one thing I knew without a doubt. The love that Xavier had for me was real. It hadn’t required any sort of magical intervention to make it grow into what it still was today.

“Fuck you!” Ava growled, her teeth bared, her sickeningly beautiful face contorted into a mask of anger. I could tell that she was trying her best to break free of the spell and would probably tear Adéluce in half if she could.

“Ungrateful bitch!” Adéluce spat. She snapped her fingers, and Ava howled in pain.

The vampire-witch stood back and assessed us all, obviously enjoying the sight of the pain and power she was wielding over us.

“Just a warning, before you consider trying to kill me—if I die, Xavier dies with me.” A smile spread across her face. “Brilliant, no? A little magical failsafe that I’ve just put into play, thanks to all of you. Come on—you all *have* to be impressed. I’ve thought of everything, haven’t I?”

My stomach twisted as the pure hate I felt for her gave way to sadness at how much worse things had become for Xavier since we’d interfered. We’d only gotten involved to save Xavier, but so far, we’d done nothing but make things worse for him—and for ourselves.

“So, if you truly love Xavier as much as you’re all so desperate to prove to each other,” Adéluce continued, “you will keep that in mind. His destiny is tied to mine.”

Then Adéluce stepped up to me, and the air took on a strange shimmer. She grabbed me by the throat and squeezed.

“Cali, Cali, Cali,” she crooned. “You really shouldn’t have stuck your nose where it doesn’t belong—though I’ve seen you do just that, time and time again. Obviously, it’s very difficult for you to mind your own business.”

I struggled to draw breath, but the vampire-witch’s hold was only tightening. My eyes felt like they were going to pop right out of my head, and my throat was on fire.

“Cali!” Greyson bellowed. I could see the strain on his face as he struggled against Adéluce’s immobilization spell, but he didn’t so much as twitch.

“I can’t for the *life* of me figure out why Xavier would fall in love with an ugly half-Fae like you,” Adéluce said. “His taste leaves much to be desired.”

Gasping for air, I reached out to push Adéluce off of me, and my heart jumped in surprise when I actually touched her. I stopped myself from reacting, just in case it tipped her off to what I’d just discovered.

*I can touch her! That means that the barrier must be down! This is my chance. I have to act now!*

That was all I needed. I summoned my magic and blasted Adéluce with everything I had. The vampire-witch flew back and skidded across the ground.

I lunged toward her, summoned my sword, and, completely focused on the ring gleaming on her ring finger, sliced off Adéluce’s left hand.

**Episode 4695**

**Xavier**

I turned to see what Ferlin was looking at.

“Who? Who’s following us?” I asked.

But just as I said the words, I spotted figures in the distance, their forms shimmering in the heat of the desert. I wondered if this was just another mirage—rather, I *hoped* that it was. If there was someone following us, they certainly weren’t tracking us down to offer help, and I was in no state to fight only minutes after almost becoming lunch for those two sun divers.

“I think I see them now…” I said. “But who are they? And why would anyone follow us out here? What could they possibly want?”

“They’re probably from the tavern,” Ferlin said. “I did warn you that being a werewolf attracts a lot of unwanted attention in this world, but you shifted anyway… Though I totally understand why, given the circumstances. Still, in a place like this, finding a delicious anomaly like a werewolf will drive many to chase you, no matter what. And they probably saw the smoke from the sun diver and are coming to investigate. Wouldn’t take much for them to put two and two together and decide that you might’ve had something to do with it.”

“But I don’t understand,” I said blankly. “What do they want me for?”

Ferlin rolled his eyes in obvious exasperation. “I don’t know! Lunch? Dinner? Both? Who’s to say? But if you don’t want to be on anyone’s menu, we’d better get going.”

I turned away from Ferlin and splashed my head into the water to take one last long drink, and then Ferlin and I took off.

Ferlin eyed my shifted hand. “You’d better do something about that. It’s a bit of a dead giveaway that you’re a werewolf. You’ve already announced it to everyone in the tavern, but you might as well not attract the attention of any random passersby. If you thought the folks in the tavern were hard to handle, you don’t even want to *think* about dealing with a rogue wanderer.”

I nodded and tried again to shift back, but I was left with nothing but a sharp pain in my left hand for my efforts. I’d had issues with shifting before, but it had never felt quite like this—like literal searing pain. It felt like something in me had broken. I hoped it was only temporary.

“What’s wrong?” Ferlin asked.

“I can’t control my shifting,” I admitted. I tried to shake off the pain, but it lingered. “It’s like this place has made me short-circuit.”

“Tough break,” Ferlin said distractedly, still looking over his shoulder.

I glanced back to follow his gaze and confirm what I already knew: that the figures were still following us. I hated this situation—being followed without any idea of how much farther we had to go. And from the looks of things, there wasn’t anywhere to hide, either. I had no clue how we were going to survive out here in the open without anything even *resembling* cover.

“Are there any shelters around?” I asked. “Somewhere we might be able to hide from whoever’s following us?”

“Nope,” Ferlin said. “I’m not aware of any between here and our destination. This isn’t like where you come from—people aren’t out building houses and stores every few miles. Besides, it seems like it might have been a mistake to bring you to the *last* shelter. You drew a lot of attention—and not the good kind. This isn’t your world, the rules aren’t the same, and as those sun divers so aptly demonstrated, you are *not* at the top of the food chain here.”

“Then pick up the pace!” I snapped. “Unless I somehow regain my ability to shift, I’ll be at a big disadvantage if we have to fight.”

I was healing from my sun diver injuries, but something about this place had me out of sorts—even beyond my sudden inability to shift.

Ferlin gave me a hard look. “I don’t think you understand. If you shift, it’ll be like waving a delicious steak right in front of their noses. Sort of a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation. But I have a feeling you’ll be a lot more damned if they catch you as a werewolf.”

“Maybe, but I’d still rather be in wolf form,” I grunted as I tried once again to shift. “If I could shift, I know I’d be able to take out any one of those assholes.”

I closed my eyes and gnashed my teeth as I tried to shift, but this time the pain was so intense that I staggered and had to brace myself against a boulder to keep from collapsing.

Something felt strange. Wrong. My left hand, which was partially a paw, no longer felt connected to me—which made no sense, because I was looking right at it. I could even feel it.

I flexed my muscles. They felt stiff and difficult to move. The joints in my left hand felt like they were grating against each other—like all the cartilage had been removed. My hand felt like a decommissioned machine part.

*What the hell is going on with me? Is this happening just because I’m in the demon world? It can’t be. Why can’t I shift?*

I looked up when the sky suddenly darkened to a blood red. The air thickened around me, and I heaved in a breath. I wondered if suffocation was next on the list of fun stuff to do on your trip to the demon world.

Ferlin cast an anxious glance at the sky and muttered something about a storm.

“Did you say storm? Is another sandstorm rolling in?” I asked. If so, that might not be such a bad thing. Maybe if the storm was bad enough, our pursuers would give up and we’d be able to concentrate on something other than getting away from them.

Ferlin shook his head. “Not sand this time. Hail.”

Something struck me on the head, and sparks rained down on the ground around us. Then realization dawned. The hail wasn’t made of ice—it was made of fire.

*Great. How on the nose. Actual fire raining down from a bloody sky. The demon world is living up to its name, I guess.*

I immediately got to work dodging the fireballs as they dropped from the sky, leaving trails of black smoke in their wake. But no matter how quickly I moved, I wasn’t fast enough to escape the deluge. Pellets of liquid fire hit me one after the other, burning my skin.

“Shit!” I cried out. “Is this really happening right now?”

Ferlin was cursing and holding his hands over his head. “Oh, it’s happening—and this was a mistake.”

“You think?” I shot back.

“No, you misunderstand me—it was a mistake trying to help you! All I’ve gotten in return is your shitty attitude, and now I’m being hunted while the sky is literally attacking me. It’s not worth it. You can’t even shift! The novelty has officially worn off. Now, you’re nothing but a smart-mouthed liability.”

“What? You can’t possibly blame me for this hail!”

“I’ve had enough! You’re on your own. Good luck.” Ferlin turned and started to walk away.

I was incredulous, and I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to convince him to change his mind when I was so busy dodging flaming balls of fire. “You’re really leaving me here? In the middle of nowhere? Where are you even going to go?”

Ferlin started to run. “As far away from you as possible!”

I was furious. I’d been nearly devoured by *two* sun divers, my hand was killing me, and I was getting burned to a crisp by hellfire. My wolf felt like he was seconds from passing out, and the one guy who’d offered to help me was running away.

*What the fuck? I used to think that nothing could be worse than dealing with Adéluce, but now it’s clear that I was wrong about that. If Ferlin leaves, what the hell am I going to do? I don’t know the first thing about how to navigate this place.*

Without thinking, I raced after Ferlin and tackled him from behind. We crashed to the ground as the “hail” continued to rain down from the sky, splashing rivers of liquid fire on the ground all around us. It was so hot that I was sweating like crazy—so much so that the fire hissed and steamed as it hit my skin.

“No you don’t!” I roared as Ferlin tried to get away. I smacked him and held him right where he was. If I was going down, Ferlin was going down with me.

As we struggled on the ground, both of us yelping as balls of fire hit our skin, Ferlin strongarmed me away from him and shouted. “Stop!”

At first I just kept going at him, but then he started pointing, looking at something in the distance behind me.

“What now?” I demanded, panting.

Ferlin shoved me off him. “That’s it. That’s the hub!”

**Episode 4696**

Blood spurted across my face, and Adéluce screamed in agony, clutching at the bloody stump where her hand used to be.

“I’m going to kill you! I’m going to rip you limb from limb, and then I’m going to do the same thing to everyone you love!” Adéluce screamed as she writhed on the ground, nearly foaming at the mouth from pain.

Ignoring her threats, I spat out the blood that had gotten into my mouth and grimaced as I plucked her severed hand from the ground. As soon as I picked it up, it immediately tightened around my fingers in a vice grip, Adéluce’s long, pointy nails digging into my skin.

“Ack, it won’t let go!” I shrieked as I tried to shake it free. But the hand held on tight. I was starting to worry that if I didn’t get it off it would shatter my fingers. I flailed wildly, stumbling all over the place and nearly smacking Ava in the head with the thing.

“You bitch! You dirty, stupid, ugly bitch!” Adéluce hissed, watching me from where she lay writhing on the ground. “Give me my hand back this instant! You don’t know who you’re messing with! I’m going to tear you apart!”

I stumbled into Greyson and we both nearly fell to the ground.

“Help me! I can’t get it off!” I squealed at him. “It feels like my hand is about to break!”

Greyson grabbed me, took my hand, and used all his strength to pry the fingers loose. With a grunt of effort, he finally managed to pull the hand off, but then it attacked him, leaping up and closing around his neck and squeezing, choking him.

“Get it off!” Greyson choked out, his skin turning blue and his eyes bulging.

I yanked and pulled at it, but it held on tight.

“Help!” I shouted. “I can’t get it off him! It’s going to kill him!”

Adéluce’s pained cries mixed with a torrent of cackles as she watched us both struggling to remove the hand—to no avail.

Lola jumped in to help, and so did Jay, who was still recovering from Adéluce throwing him into the tree.

“Cali, grab hold of the hand, and Jay and I will pull you. You just have to hold on!” Lola shouted.

I dug my fingers in between Adeluce’s hand and Greyson’s throat while he let out choked shouts. I braced myself as Lola and Jay grabbed onto me and pulled. I let out a sigh of relief when we finally pulled the hand free.

The hand fell to the ground and immediately started crawling back toward Adéluce. Marissa dove to the ground and tried to catch it, along with Gabriel, but neither of them had any luck. The hand was too quick for them and had almost made it back to Adéluce, who was crawling toward it with her arm outstretched.

I couldn’t let the ring get away. This might be our only chance to get it.

I raced after the hand and stomped on it, hard.

“You’ll pay for that!” Adéluce screamed at the top of her lungs.

“She can still feel it,” I announced. I ground my foot into the hand for good measure, and Adéluce cried out in pain again.

“Good, break it if you can!” Greyson panted, gingerly probing the fast-healing scrapes that Adéluce’s hand had left on his neck.

The ground was too soft to break the hand, and I quickly realized that the harder I pressed, the deeper the hand sank into the muddy ground. As the hand scrabbled at the soft muck beneath it in a mad frenzy to get away, I dropped to the ground, pinning it beneath my knee. I reached for the ring, determined to pull it off before Adéluce recovered. But no matter how hard I yanked at the ring, I couldn’t get it off. It was stuck.

Grimacing, I scooped some of the blood from my face and smeared it around the finger as lubricant, and then, finally, the ring slipped off.

Adéluce finally staggered to her feet and lifted her remaining hand, as if preparing to cast a spell.

I had the ring clutched in my fist and was about to raise my shield when the others—in wolf form—attacked Adéluce. Snarling ferociously, Ava, Gabriel, Lola, and Jay lunged at the vampire-witch, their angry snarls filling the air.

Greyson was about to join in when I was rocked by another shooting pain in my shoulder. This was the worst jolt of pain yet, and it radiated throughout my entire body. I dropped the ring as my screams of pain mingled with Adéluce’s.

“Cali!” Greyson shouted, rushing to my side.

“No! Forget about me! Get the ring!” My head was throbbing, and I was seeing spots. I wondered if I was about to pass out. I was dizzy, and my head swam as I started to fall.

“Got you!” Greyson said as he caught me. “And I’ve got the ring!”

There was a powerful blast of magic, and everyone tumbled away from Adéluce. The vampire-witch was bloodied, ragged, and staggering. She pointed a shaky finger at her hand as it crawled toward her. She scooped it up and gasped out a threat in my direction.

I couldn’t make out exactly what she said, but I could tell that it wasn’t anything good.

Using the last of my strength, I summoned my magic and fired a blast at Adéluce—who blipped away just before my magic could hit her.

Gabriel jumped up and shifted back to human. “Where did she go?”

“She’s gone, for now,” Mikah said. “And thank goodness for that. I don’t think I could’ve handled hearing her screaming and cackling for one more second. Good job, Cali, severing her hand like that. Badass.”

I nodded, still too shaken to say a word. I was leaning against Greyson, and if it weren’t for him, I would’ve collapsed. The pain was still coursing through my body, and I was starting to shake from the severity of it. I felt like crying, but I fought back the tears.

“I—I can’t believe that I actually used my magic to cut off someone’s hand!” I gagged at the memory and wrapped my arms around my middle. “I feel like I’m about to throw up.”

“Don’t worry, Cali—and don’t feel bad,” Greyson said. “Adéluce got what she deserved.”

Gabriel spat on the ground. “She deserved a lot worse, but she got away before we could finish her off.” He looked off into the distance. “But we’ll get her. Now she knows that *we* know she isn’t invincible.”

“Adéluce got away, yes, but the ring didn’t,” I said. “We have Seluna’s ashes. Now, all we have to do is get them to the demon world. And…” I trailed off, struggling to finish my thought. The pain was so great that it was taking my breath away. “And then the Seluna mark will be gone for good.”

Greyson glanced over his shoulder. “I need to get back to check on Big Mac and my mother. I’m not going to shift—I don’t think you have the strength to hold on,” he told me.

I wasn’t going to argue with him—he was right. I barely had the strength to stand right now.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this much pain, and I was surprised that it was still here now that Adéluce was gone. It was obvious that Adéluce’s power was great, and it was becoming just as obvious how she’d managed to keep someone as strong and capable as Xavier under her thumb for so long—she was relentless.

Greyson picked me up and carried me, the others following close behind. Despite my pain, I felt safe in his arms. I wished that none of this was happening, and that Xavier was beside us instead of trapped in the demon world dealing with god knew what. We had the ashes, and I was happy about that, but we still had a hell of a lot of hurdles to jump before we’d be able to get everything back to normal.

*It’s going to be okay*,Greyson mind linked, obviously sensing just how hopeless I was feeling. *We have the ring, thanks to you, and we’ll send it back to where it belongs, and then you’ll recover. It’s only a matter of time. Once we figure out how to kill Adéluce, we’ll get Xavier back from the demon world, and then this nightmare will finally be over.*

I nodded, my head lolling against Greyson’s chest as I closed my eyes and tried to breathe through the pain. I refocused on trying not to pass out as we approached Big Mac’s house.

As we got closer, I felt Greyson’s body stiffen. I opened my eyes to see that Mrs. Smith hadn’t moved. She was still kneeling in the center of the pentagram with Big Mac in her arms. She looked up at us as we approached.

“Greyson,” she choked out, tears rolling down her cheeks. “MacKenzie’s not waking up!”

**Episode 4697**

**Artemis**

I held the dagger up high above my head, my hair fanning out across my shoulders like armor. Marius had just opened his eyes, and confusion immediately flashed across his face.

“What the fuck is going on here?” he asked after letting out a huge yawn. He blinked awake and finally seemed to register what was happening.

I felt my blood pounding in my ears. My hands were wrapped tightly around the hilt of the dagger, and I wondered if I’d really be able to plunge it into his body if I had to.

“*What’s going on* is that you need to keep your hands to yourself!” I spat. “You’ve crossed the line one too many times, and it’s become very clear that I need to remind you of my boundaries!”

He relaxed, finally looking a little less alarmed. “Ari, I was asleep,” he said in a placating tone. “Whatever I did, I’m sorry. But I have to admit, I don’t mind waking up to this.”

Marius didn’t move, but his eyes certainly did. They took in the scene, slowly dragging from the tip of the dagger to me, and he took his time looking me over from head to toe.

“We do seem to keep finding ourselves in positions like this,” Marius said.

I flushed as I realized that I was straddling him, which wasn’t exactly what I’d intended to do. For a second, I was thrown back into a memory that featured him lying just like this… Only there’d been fewer clothes involved, and no dagger.

I tried and failed to fight off the memory of a time when I’d felt his body between my legs just like this. I remembered the feeling of his chiseled body beneath my lips as I slid up and down the length of him, covering him with kisses.

We’d kissed until we were panting, and I recalled the feeling of the rough pads of his battle-worn fingers sliding over my skin and shifting around until they tunneled under my clothes…

I snapped back to reality and realized that I was even more bothered now than I’d been before. I quickly scrambled off him, and he rolled onto his side, reaching for me.

“Ari, come on!”

He reared back when I stabbed the dagger down between us, piercing the mattress.

“Don’t ‘Ari’ me! You were never supposed to even be in this bed! You stay on that side, and I’ll stay on this side. There’s not going to be any more of…” I gestured at him. “*That!* We’re making rules. Now!”

Marius sat up in bed, tucking his muscled arms beneath his head and staring up at me through his eyelashes. “Rules?”

“Yes! Rules. Guidelines. Agreements. I don’t care what you call them. But what just happened and what happened back at the tavern? That can’t keep happening. I’m going to make sure it doesn’t, and if that means I have to make rules, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

Marius shrugged, and it infuriated me. “Which part can’t keep happening? The bed? The kissing? You undressing me with your eyes? I mean, there are so many things that have happened… Are the rules for you, or for me? I’m confused,” he said with an exaggerated pout that somehow made his handsome face even more enticing.

I quickly looked away. “You know which parts, Marius! Stop playing coy. The kiss, the bed—all of it, obviously! And don’t act like I’ve been coming on to you! Have you heard half of what you’ve said to me? Plus, someone put azure toadstool in our ale, remember? So that meant nothing. We weren’t thinking clearly!”

“Oh yes, the ale. That’s a good excuse.” Marius smirked. “Some say that azure toadstool only unlocks repressed feelings—it can’t create emotions and urges that were never there.”

“That’s not true, and no one says that,” I retorted. “Everyone knows that it makes you do things you don’t mean to do. And I’m not making excuses! It’s the truth. And let’s get one more thing straight—just because we have a past, doesn’t mean that we need to reignite it. We haven’t seen each other in years.”

Marius gave a flippant nod. “I completely agree. We’re associates, now. Nothing more. And it’s not like we were friends before, either. Far from it.” He gave me a long, knowing look. “I don’t even know how you and I would *do* friends. Like you said, we have history.”

“Well, I’m glad we’re on the same page. I have someone now, anyway,” I added quickly. The words flew out of my mouth without any real thought.

*Is that even true anymore?* Do *I still have someone? I know that Rishika still loves me, and I still love her as much as ever… But we broke up because of my mission. What if this search for Kadmos takes months—years, even? I can’t expect Rishika to wait all that time. Gods, I don’t want to wait all that time.*

That didn’t mean I needed to fall into old habits.

“You look vexed, Ari. You good?”

I scowled at Marius, but my thoughts were still racing.

*And what if Rishika meets her mate while I’m gone? That’s a possibility. Would she turn them down based on the chance that I might come back? Is that even a thing—do werewolves ever turn down their mates? Lilac finding his mate pretty much torpedoed his relationship with Marta. Why would things be any different with Rishika and me?*

“Why are you just sitting there staring at nothing?” Marius asked, clearly amused.

“None of your business! I was thinking,” I snapped. It wasn’t like I was going to give Marius more information about what was going on in my head. It would only spur him on.

“Thinking about this *someone* you mentioned?” Marius said breezily. “Are they from the human world?” He said those last two words like they tasted bad.

I quickly waved that off. “I’m not talking about the human world with you.”

Marius idly fingered the dagger still stuck in the mattress between us. “Oh, no? That’s strange… Especially for someone who has photographs from the human world secreted away in her pack. I don’t know—it seems a bit odd that you’re so averse to even *talking* about a place that seems to mean so much to you.”

*How am I supposed to respond to that? And why is he tripping me up like this? It’s like I can’t get my balance with him.*

Marius kept talking. “You know, now that I think about it, the other two women in that picture kind of look like you. Why’s that?”

I shrugged, almost too hard. “Couldn’t tell you. There are a lot of people who look like me.”

A slow smile spread across Marius’s face. “Oh, Ari. You know as well as I that one skill every bounty hunter counts on is their ability to recognize people. So let’s not play games. I know family when I see it. And those two women… They look familial to me. You and I used to talk a lot about you not knowing your family. Did you finally find them?”

*Fuck. I hate how observant he is. He might actually be the most perceptive person I know. He only saw that picture for what, two seconds?*

“Look, Marius—I’ll admit that you’re smart and sharp, and that you’ll be an asset for me in this Kadmos… situation. But *not* if you keep prying into my business and asking me all these questions.”

“Fair enough,” Marius said, though I could tell by his tone that even if he was open to dropping it for now, he wouldn’t be letting it go permanently.

“Anyway, I’m shocked you even remember what we talked about so long ago,” I said breezily. “It’s all ancient history.”

“Maybe to you,” Marius said.

*Did I really discuss my family stuff with him? That I was lonely? That I wanted to find them more than anything? That’s a vulnerable thing for me to do… And even more so back then, when I was even more tight-lipped about almost everything.*

“We’re not talking about this,” I said flatly.

Marius shrugged, settling back down into the bed. “Suit yourself.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “What? You’re actually going to stop pushing?”

“Yes,” he said easily. “I told you, you can keep your little human world secrets all to yourself. Far be it from me to push the issue if it’s not something you want to talk about. I’m not a monster.” He grinned, and there was something animalistic about it that kind of turned me on.

*What’s the matter with me? Am I really* this *attracted to him? No. It’s just old feelings masquerading as new ones.*

*Think of Rishika. Finish this mission and get back to her.*

Marius gestured to the bed. “You’d better get some sleep. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

Slowly, and with my eyes still on Marius, I lowered myself down to the bed. “Why? Where do we have to go?”

“Across the border into Light Fae territory.” Marius’s expression turned conspiratorial. “But to get there, we’re going to have to pass through the front lines of the war.”

**Episode 4698**

“Put me down and go help your mother with Big Mac!” I shouted at Greyson. The pain was still almost too much to bear, but Mrs. Smith needed Greyson more than I did right now.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Greyson asked as he lowered me gently to the ground. “Because if you’re not—”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Help them!”

Greyson rushed to his mother’s side, and she reached up and grabbed his arm, yanking him down to the ground beside her.

“She won’t wake up, no matter what I do!” Mrs. Smith burst out. “I’ve called her name so many times, but nothing.”

I couldn’t do anything but stand by and watch, feeling terrible about how quickly things had spiraled out of control. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac had only just mended their relationship, and now this. It wasn’t fair.

*Could it be that the spell just drained her? And maybe, with time, she’ll recover on her own? She said that she wasn’t familiar with this spell. Maybe it took more out of her than she expected.*

I wondered if it would be better to move her inside so that she could rest in her own bed, but before I could make that suggestion, I was hit by another searing surge of pain. I doubled over and wrapped my arms around my stomach, trying to resist the urge to cry out. I didn’t want Greyson to lose it, and he would if he thought my pain was getting worse.

Lola rushed to my side. “Cali, is there anything I can do? Should I get Torin?”

“No,” I choked out, gritting my teeth. “This isn’t something Torin can help with. This is all happening because of Seluna’s ashes and Adéluce’s magic. Torin is better with physical injuries—and until we’ve returned the ashes to the demon world, I don’t know if there’s anything we can do.”

If only Torin had the power to negate the magic of a sadistic vampire-witch… But that was what made Adéluce’s attacks so effective—her magic wasn’t easy to dispel. Xavier’s extended torture at her hands was proof of that. Not to mention how awful I was feeling right now because I’d dared to interfere with Adéluce’s plans.

Lola and I went quiet as we both looked at Greyson, kneeling by Big Mac’s side and calling her name.

“Big Mac, it’s me, Greyson. We’re here waiting for you to wake up. Please. Just open your eyes. You’re scaring my mother.”

“I’m more worried about Big Mac than myself,” I told Lola. My heart ached for Greyson—I could only imagine how bad he was feeling, watching his mother in so much pain.

*Mrs. Smith doesn’t deserve this. Not after everything she’s already been through.*

“Me too… Do you think Torin might be able to help Big Mac?” Lola asked. “Is it worth a shot?”

I had a gut feeling that whatever was wrong with Big Mac was also outside the realm of Torin’s expertise. “No. I doubt it. But I do wonder if maybe Rowena might be able to help, since this is a witch problem. She might be able to cast a spell to counter whatever’s going on with Big Mac, especially if it’s due to the aftereffects of the spell she just cast.”

Shit. What were we going to do?

“Greyson?” I called. “Should we call Rowena?”

“Yes,” Greyson said without hestation, looking over at us from Big Mac’s side. “Get her here. Now.”

I pulled out my phone and tried to call Rowena, but my hands were shaking like crazy. I shoved my phone at Lola. “Can you do it? I’m in too much pain to even hold it.”

Lola took the phone and called Rowena, but then her face fell. “It’s going to voicemail,” she said. “What should I say?”

“Tell her to get here ASAP!” Greyson called.

Lola rolled her eyes at him. “You don’t have to yell!” She turned back to the phone. “Rowena, if you could get to Big Mac’s ASAP, Greyson would really appreciate it.”

She ended the call and handed the phone back to me.

“Now what do we do?” Ava asked.

“We wait,” Greyson replied.

Ava grumbled, sharing a few meaningful side-eyes with Marissa.

Greyson’s mind link reached me. *How’s the pain? Anything I can do?*

Greyson had enough to deal with right now. His mother was in hysterics and crying over her fiancée, who was just as still and lifeless as when we’d found her. I didn’t want to add to his stress.

*I’m doing okay. Stop worrying about me, okay?* I said.

*That’ll never happen, and you know it*,Greyson replied. *So don’t even try to convince me. I can worry about my mother and Big Mac and you at the same time. I just want to make sure you’re not suffering.*

I smiled at him weakly. *The pain is still here, and it sucks, but I can tolerate it now that I know the ashes are in our control. We’re one step closer to putting an end to all of this. But first we have to figure out what’s wrong with Big Mac.*

Gabriel let out a frustrated sigh. “I wish that X were here to help finish off Adéluce. I’m pretty sure that after everything that creep put him through, he wants to be the one to deliver the final blow.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Gabe,” Mikah warned him. “It’s not like we actually *have* Adéluce. Though Cali *did* give the bitch a lot to think about. Great work with your sword, incidentally.”

I shuddered, remembering the awful sight of Adéluce’s disembodied hand coming to life. “I did what I had to do, and I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.” I shuddered again.

Gabriel grinned. “We’ll have to finish the job and chop off the other one. Make it a matching set.”

“I bet she’ll use magic to reattach it,” I said. There was no way Adéluce was going to let a missing hand stop her—and I had a sinking feeling that she’d be extra careful about protecting herself against us from now on, since I’d managed to get one up on her.

The air suddenly shifted, and Rowena blipped into corporeality.

“What’s so urgent?” she asked, taking a quick look around. “Wait, why do you guys look like you just lost a battle?”

“That’s not strictly accurate,” Gabriel said.

“It’s complicated,” Jay added.

“Can you help us here?” Greyson called.

Rowena shifted her attention to Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. “What the hell happened to her?”

“Cali and Greyson asked MacKenzie to perform a tracking spell, and she did it, but when it was over, she ended up like this. I can’t wake her!” Mrs. Smith said through her tears.

Rowena rushed over and knelt beside Big Mac. She pulled a tangle of herbs from her satchel and chanted words that I didn’t understand, but they were calming all the same.

When Big Mac didn’t move right away, Rowena reached deeper into her pack and brought out a pile of herbs that smelled so strong, we all started sneezing. Rowena started chanting again, this time with more fervor.

I held my breath and watched, but nothing was happening. Big Mac was still lying motionless in Mrs. Smith’s embrace.

Rowena sat back on her haunches and sighed. “It’s not working.”

“Can you try again?” Greyson asked.

Wordlessly, Rowena pulled out another tuft of the *really* fragrant herbs and held them under Big Mac’s nose, chanting again. I could tell that she was giving it her all. But then she leaned back and shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s still not working.”

“Is there anything else you can try?” I asked.

Rowena pulled a vial out of her satchel. “Stand back,” she warned.

She tipped the powder from the vial into her palm and leaned over to blow it over Big Mac.

Still, Big Mac didn’t stir.

“Wait, I remember that stuff! Big Mac once used a powder to reveal magic signatures. Is that what you’re doing?” I asked.

Rowena kept her eyes on Big Mac and held up a hand to silence me. She watched Big Mac closely for a few more seconds before she looked up at us. “Big Mac didn’t collapse because of the strain of casting a spell—she’s *under* some kind of spell. And from what you’ve all told me, I suspect that it was cast by Adéluce.”

Mrs. Smith wailed and pulled Big Mac tighter against her. “What do we do?”

Rowena shook her head. “Honestly, I’m not sure.”

Gabriel stepped forward. “What about the true love’s kiss thing? It worked with Ava and Xavier. His love for her woke her from whatever coma spell she was under. Maybe it’ll work now, too.”

I couldn’t help but wince at the idea that Xavier’s love for Ava was strong enough to dispel a curse.

Ava and Marissa exchanged a confused look.

“Wait, what?” Ava said.

Gabriel looked shocked. “You didn’t know?”

Ava shook her head. “No, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Marissa was looking pissed off on her friend’s behalf.

I glanced between Ava, Marissa, and Gabriel, stunned at what I was hearing.

*If Xavier’s in love with Ava, then why didn’t he tell her exactly how he woke her up?*

**Episode 4699**

**Xavier**

Ferlin and I took off toward the hub, our scuffle forgotten for the moment. Now that we’d reached the hub—one of the apparent demonic epicenters in this fucking desert—I felt a little better about the prospect of being in the demon world on my own, but that didn’t mean I was ready to let go of Ferlin. I wasn’t keen on trusting *anyone* in this strange, volatile place, but right now, he was all I had.

I was still doing my best to dodge the fiery hail when something whipped by my head. Moments later, an arrow landed in the ground just ahead of me.

*What the hell? What’s going on, now? Is someone seriously shooting arrows at us?*

I looked back and was nearly skewered by another arrow. I had to dive to the ground to avoid it, and my backside was hit with a barrage of flaming hot pellets of hail for my trouble.

“Are you seeing this? Whoever’s chasing us is shooting at us now!” I shouted at Ferlin as I sprang up from the ground and kept running. “This just keeps getting better and better. Being burned by hail wasn’t enough, apparently—now we’re going to be used as target practice to cap off one of the craziest nights I’ve experienced in this godforsaken hellhole!”

“We just need to get to the hub,” Ferlin shouted over his shoulder. “We’ll be safe there—we’ll be able to blend in.” Ferlin caught sight of my half-shifted paw again. “But you *really* need to cover that up!”

Another arrow flew overhead. I tried again to shift, just as an especially large piece of hail exploded on the ground right in front of us. Ferlin and I were forced to change course so that we didn’t run through the raging pool of fire that the hail created. Luckily, we were still on track to reach the hub in a matter of minutes.

I was happy that we’d finally reached this particular milestone, but I was also absolutely *seething*.

*This is all Adéluce’s fault! If she wanted to kick my suffering up a notch by sending me here, she’s succeeded! This is literally the worst sequence of events that I’ve ever been through in my life—which is saying a lot, seeing as I was raised by Silas.*

But Adéluce might’ve made a mistake, too. At the rate I was going, there was a good chance I wouldn’t survive my little vacation in the demon world—and that would bring her little game to an end.

*As soon as I get back to my world, I’m going to go at her with everything I’ve got. There’s no way I’m going to let her live after what she’s done to me. I’ll stop at nothing to make her pay.*

I wished that this was nothing more than a nightmare—that I’d wake up in Cali’s arms any second, safe and warm and content. I was surprised at how quickly my thoughts of happiness took me to Cali. Then again, my goal had always been to reunite with Cali. Nothing had changed that—not even my newly realized love for Ava.

I felt a twinge of guilt, but I pushed it away. There wasn’t time for me to feel guilty. Right now, I had to focus on saving my ass, or I wouldn’t be seeing either woman ever again.

Ferlin grabbed me, nearly knocking me over. “We have to go this way. Get a move on!”

A piece of flaming hail struck the demon, and his sleeve burst into flames. He seemed unfazed as he patted it out and dragged me toward a narrow passage between two buildings.

I was stunned. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected when Ferlin had mentioned a hub, but it certainly wasn’t this. As soon as we stepped into the alley, the sky above us started to fade into a less bloody hue of red, and thankfully, and the hail finally stopped.

The streets—the fact that there *were* streets was enough to blow my mind, all on its own—were crowded and lively. There were stores, bars, clubs, cafés… It reminded me of some kind of warped Vegas. But I quickly realized that this Vegas wasn’t anything like the one in my world. For one thing, this version was populated not by the typical tourist, but by demons—hundreds of them, from the looks of it.

As we passed by a shop, Ferlin snatched a coat off a rack and shoved it at me. “Use this to cover your paw.”

I quickly did as Ferlin suggested, hoping that no one had noticed it. I remembered all too clearly what had happened at the tavern, and I was in no mood for a repeat performance.

We finally slowed to a leisurely walk.

“Now what?” I asked Ferlin. “Can we find the Courier? I want to look for him right away—before something else happens and we’re thrown off track again.”

Ferlin shot me an annoyed look. “Well, for starters, the first thing we need to do is blend in. Stop acting so… *werewolf-y*.”

I shook my head at Ferlin. “Werewolf-y? What do you mean? All I’m doing is walking.”

Ferlin eyed me. “Just keep a low profile, okay? This place is crawling with the types of people who won’t let you get away once they set their sights on you, so just be aware of that.”

I fumed and bit back an insult, deciding that it was better to keep my cool and not stand out, just like Ferlin advised. I stole a glance back at the alley we’d just slipped through. So far, it didn’t look like we were being followed.

“This way,” Ferlin said, leading me to an inn.

I assumed that he was finally about to bring me to the Courier, and I picked up the pace, eager for the meeting that would signify my next step in getting the hell out of this place—but as soon as we stepped into the building, Ferlin stopped me.

“This is as far as you go for now,” he said. “Wait here.”

He started to walk away from me, but I pulled him back. “Why do I need to wait? Just take me to the Courier and then I’ll be out of your hair, just like you want.”

“Believe me, I wish it were that simple,” he said. “Arrangements have to be made, and that will take some time. I know someone who can hide us—the same person who deals with the Courier directly.” He shook off my hands. “Wait here, stay out of trouble—if you can—and I’ll be back before you know it.”

I was about to ask how long he was going to take, but then I remembered that there was no point. Time was fluid, here.

Without another word, Ferlin disappeared up a flight of stairs, and I was left alone in a room full of demons.

I looked around, trying to feign nonchalance and not make eye contact. There was something off about this inn, which wasn’t surprising, considering the fact that I was in the demon world. But I could help but overhear snatches of the conversations going on around me. Everyone seemed to be bargaining for something—negotiating terms, striking deals, that kind of thing.

*Just what the hell is going on here? Why is everyone talking like this… And what are they bargaining for?*

I couldn’t figure it out.

A beautiful woman with freakishly metallic golden eyes sidled up next to me and hooked her arm through mine. “Can I help you, handsome?”

Very aware of my partially shifted claw and trying to stay out of trouble just like Ferlin had advised, I said, “No thanks, just waiting for a friend.”

The woman laughed. “That’s what they all say. But you don’t need to be coy with me. I’ve seen things, and I know things. Nothing you say will surprise me, nor will anything you ask me for. I’m very, very adventurous.” She gestured to a staircase—an entirely different set to the one Ferlin had taken.

“My room is just up there,” she said. “Just a short walk. Why don’t you join me?”

It suddenly hit me that this place was some kind of demon brothel, which loaned a little clarity to the strange behavior I’d observed.

*Thanks again, Ferlin. You tell me to stay out of trouble and then you leave me unattended in the lobby of a brothel. I’m probably like fresh meat in this place.*

Making sure to be gentle, I slid my arm out of the woman’s hold. “Thank you, but no thank you. I don’t… need anything.”

Clearly not prepared to take no for an answer, the woman leaned in close. “Listen, you’re cute. Real cute. I’ve been watching you since you came in here. And I have to be frank: I want a taste.”

She pecked a kiss onto my cheek, and a strange warmth spread through my body.

“This isn’t… I don’t—”

The woman wasn’t listening. She leaned so close that her lips brushed my ear. “Tell me—what are your desires?”

**Episode 4700**

**Greyson**

Sabine threw a confused look my way. “What is he talking about? True love’s kiss?”

“I know that it sounds a lot like a fairy tale, but if you really love Big Mac, you should try it,” I said. “What’s the harm?”

It definitely sounded a little hokey to me, too, but I’d learned long ago not to count anything out, especially when it came to magic. And it made sense that love would be the one thing that could counteract whatever magic an awful witch like Adéluce had up her sleeve.

Sabine wiped her tears away. “Try what?”

“Kiss her,” I said simply.

Rowena stood up and backed out of the pentagram. “It’s worth a try,” she said. “Because I can tell you, none of the old methods are going to work. Adéluce’s magic is just dark enough that hitting it with a bit of light and goodness might do the trick.”

“Do it, Mom,” I pressed. “Imagine how amazing it will be if that’s what pulls Big Mac out of whatever this is. You’ll be able to tell her the story of how you saved her with love for the rest of your lives together.”

*And something tells me that Big Mac will* hate *that story. Love conquering all is* not *her style at all.*

Sabine was still looking at me like I was joking, but she leaned down to do it, anyway. I watched, seeing and appreciating the love that my mother had for Big Mac. Seeing the way she looked at her as she cradled the witch’s head in her hands and gently pressed their lips together.

Cali squeezed my hand hard, and I glanced at her. She looked so tense. It was like she was focusing all her energy on helping my mom and Big Mac. I hoped she was saving some of that energy for fighting off the aftershocks of whatever Adéluce was doing to cause her so much pain. I hated to think that she was suffering right now and there was next to nothing I could do about it.

I reached out to her via mind link. *If you’re still in pain, I’m here for you. Please know that. And know that I would take your pain from you if I could. Just hold on a little longer. We’re going to fix this.*

Cali smiled up at me—that same forlorn smile as before. *I know*. *I’m okay, really. I just want Big Mac to be okay.*

I turned back to my mother. If the same thing happened to Cali, would I be able to wake her with nothing more than a kiss? I’d like to think so, but with the *due destini* at play, I couldn’t be sure. For all I knew, both Xavier and I would have to kiss Cali for the true love’s kiss to work.

Sabine slowly pulled back from the kiss, distress blooming in her eyes. “It’s not working,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “It was a nice thought, but MacKenzie would laugh if she saw me doing this. I just can’t imagine that a kiss could fix something like this.”

“Try again,” Gabriel suggested impatiently. “Really pucker up this time. Give it all you’ve got.”

Mikah smacked him and glared. “Stop it!”

“Ow!” Gabriel said, rubbing his arm. “What did I do? I’m just trying to help her loosen up. That kiss was barely a kiss at all. I’m sure that Xavier really laid one on Ava when he did it.” He winced as he looked at Cali, and then to Ava. “Sorry, just saying. Passion is probably a requirement for something like this to work.”

“We get it, Gabriel. Now shut up!” Mikah hissed. “You’ve said more than enough.”

“Go ahead, Mom,” I said. “Give it another try.”

Sabine was about to lean down again when Big Mac coughed, her entire body jerking with the force of it.

Everyone froze, waiting.

“MacKenzie?” Sabine whispered. “Hey, you. Welcome back.”

Big Mac stirred, and then blinked rapidly in obvious confusion. Then her eyes landed on Sabine, and she smiled—but her smile quickly faded when she saw everyone standing around watching them.

“What the hell is everyone looking at?” she barked.

“I’m not sure, but I think we may have witnessed a true love’s kiss right here in real time,” Gabriel said. “Wow. The power of love, am I right?”

Big Mac glared up at him. “What the hell is he blabbering about?”

Sabine was smiling and crying at the same time. She started to say something, but then she just wrapped her arms around Big Mac and buried her face in the crook of the witch’s neck.

I exhaled. I couldn’t fathom what would’ve happened if Big Mac hadn’t woken up. My mother would’ve been crushed. We *all* would’ve been crushed. We relied on Big Mac so much, and she was an important part of the pack. If anything permanent had happened to her, I would’ve felt personally responsible for pulling her into a dangerous situation. It would’ve been like Kira all over again.

“Do you remember what happened?” Sabine asked as she pulled away. “Before or after the spell?”

Big Mac looked pensive for a few moments before she slowly shook her head. She still seemed groggy. “No. I don’t think so. Everything’s kind of blurry.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” Sabine said, sniffling. “You don’t need to remember everything right away—or ever, quite frankly. Let’s just go inside. You need to get some rest.”

I rushed over to help Big Mac get to her feet and waited until my mother had led the witch inside before I turned to Cali and held up the ring. “We need to get this thing to the demon world as soon as possible.”

Cali gave a brisk nod of agreement. “Yes, but it’s not like we can just walk it in there and drop it off like it’s the post office. We need the Courier.”

“I know… But if we don’t do this soon, there’s no doubt in my mind that Adéluce will come back for the ring—and for you, to get revenge for chopping off her hand,” I said. “She doesn’t seem like the type to forget a slight like that.”

Gabriel grinned at me, making a hacking motion with his hand. “Once again, that was *so* badass, Cali. *No one* would forget a slight like that, Greyson. Are you kidding? Cali sliced her damn hand off like she was carving a Thanksgiving turkey!”

Lola grinned. “Yeah, and I thought *I* was the hacker.”

Gabriel and Lola guffawed and slapped a loud high five.

I shook my head at them. “So… Are Cali and I the only ones who understand the gravity of the situation we’re in? This is serious shit. Cali’s still in pain, and we just pulled Big Mac out of what was essentially a coma, and you two are making bad jokes?”

Cali put a calming hand on my arm. “Don’t blame them. They’ve just been through a lot, too, fighting Adéluce and all. Everyone lets off steam a little differently after something like that.”

“See, Greyson? Cali gets it. Gotta find the humor in this somewhere,” Gabriel said soberly.

“How wise of you,” I grumbled.

I took Cali’s phone and quickly dialed Okorie, hoping that we weren’t going to run into any roadblocks in our quest to get the ashes back to where they belonged. I just wanted to get Xavier back, break Cali’s tie to the ashes, and get on with our lives.

The warlock answered on the first ring. “Hey, Cali. What’s up?”

“It’s not Cali, it’s Greyson,” I said quickly. “I need to contact the Courier right away. Text me his number.”

There was a pause on the line before Okorie cleared his throat. “I’m not supposed to do that.”

“I know there are rules, but I don’t have time to keep relaying messages, Okorie,” I said tightly. “My mate’s life is in danger, and if you don’t give me that number, then your life is going to be in danger, too.”

Okorie hesitated. “I’m sorry about Cali,” he said, and then he ended the call.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it in shock. “Did he just *hang up on me?*”

“Well, you *were* kind of a dick…” Gabriel began.

I shot him a hard look, and he just shrugged.

A moment later, Cali’s phone vibrated. The number arrived, along with a note from Okorie.

*You didn’t get this from me. Delete this message.*

I sighed with relief and immediately dialed the number. I closed my eyes and waited as the phone rang once, twice, and then three times. I was starting to think that no one was going to pick up when a harsh voice barked, “What?”

“Hello? Hi, is this the Courier?”

“Who wants to know?”

My impatience flared. “Is this the Courier, or isn’t it?”

There was a long pause, during which I thought the other person had hung up, before that harsh voice spoke again. “The Courier is dead.”

**Episode 4701**

Greyson’s expression darkened. Something was wrong.

“What do you mean the Courier is dead?” Greyson asked.

Dread filled me, threatening to overflow. A million questions exploded inside my head: *What does this mean for Xavier? How can we get him without the Courier? What do I do with the ring? Are we all fucking doomed?* But I held myself together.

I needed to. For Xavier, I would.

I reached for my phone in Greyson’s hand, taking it from him before putting it on speaker. At the same time, the person on the other end of the line replied to my mate’s question.

“Don’t you understand English? The Courier’s dead, and that’s it. End of story.”

My eyes narrowed. I *knew* that gruff voice. It was familiar.

“How’d he die?” Greyson asked. He sounded calm, but the heavy set of his brow told another story.

“The Courier died heroically while trying to fulfill a dangerous job,” the man said.

Greyson’s raised eyebrows said he’d caught the hint of pride in the voice’s reply, and he wasn’t impressed. Covering the phone, I whispered, “I recognize that voice. Keep the conversation going till I can figure it out.”

Greyson nodded, clearing his throat. “Heroically, you say? How heroically?”

“*Very* heroically,” the man replied with a grandiose sigh.

“Sure.” Greyson sounded dubious.

What was going on? *Is this just the Courier trying to disguise his voice? Why would he do that?*

“The Courier was the bravest man I ever knew, actually,” the self-important asshole was saying. “Perhaps a descendant of Hell himself. Feel free to circulate that, by the way, it’s—”

“Seriously?!” I scoffed, snatching the phone from Greyson. “You’re lying! I recognize your voice—*you’re* the Courier!”

Silence from the other end of the line. Greyson blinked at me in shock before he looked like he wanted to laugh. Or hit something. Probably the Courier.

“How did you get my number?” the voice asked with an annoyed huff.

Greyson shook his head. *Don’t tell him*,he mind linked.

After so long without it, the sound of Greyson’s voice in my head fueled my confidence. Nodding to him, I said to the phone, “It doesn’t matter. I got it because I needed to speak with you. I’m Caliana Hart—I just signed away five years of my life for you to get my mate back from the demon world.”

“I will not be discussing anything with you or the Redwood Alpha until I know who leaked my number,” the Courier declared. When the hell did he become so dramatic? “Do you realize this puts me in danger?”

The dread I’d felt before returned full force. For a moment, I struggled to say something, anything, but then Greyson squeezed my shoulder. His touch grounded me, brought me back.

*Remember what you need to do here, Cali*, I told myself.

“I have another delivery for you to make,” I said. The ring burned in my pocket. “Can you come back to the Redwood pack house to pick up the item?”

He scoffed. “This isn’t a human delivery service where the employees get paid jackshit to make money for billionaires, Caliana Hart. This is a life-or-death matter.”

“But—”

“I’m almost to the portal as we speak,” he snapped. “Do you have any idea how far I’ve had to travel and the risks I’ve had to take to get here?”

The ring felt as if it were throbbing in my pocket, with a life of its own. “This is important, too. If you—”

“I thought bringing back Xavier Evers was the most important thing of all,” the Courier said. “If I have to turn back after—”

The voice was cut off.

I scowled at the phone. “Hello?”

“Did he just hang up on you?” Greyson asked. A vein on his forehead was throbbing.

Bad sign.

“It’s probably the service,” I said. I had no idea why I was making excuses for a man who’d called orphans annoying.

“Call him again,” Greyson said.

But when I did, no dice.

The entire group had deflated. Gabriel was shaking his head, bouncing in his spot as if overflowing with nervous energy; Mikah and Jay were frowning; Lola looked at me as if she was waiting for me to explode; and Ava and Marissa were exchanging looks that I didn’t want to try to decode.

“What are we going to do with the ring?” I asked, breaking the silence. My voice sounded throaty, like I’d been shouting.

“Adéluce will be looking for it,” Ava said, glancing around. “I feel like the only reason she hasn’t come already is because she’s recovering.”

“What if we hid the ring somewhere?” Marissa asked.

Lola shook her head. “It can’t be that hard for someone like her to be able to track it somehow with one of her spells.”

“I’m holding onto the ring,” I said, my tone even. “I’m not running away from Adéluce like a coward.”

Wrapping an arm over my shoulders, Greyson kissed the side of my head. “We’ll all protect you.”

Everybody nodded—apart from Ava and Marissa, which didn’t escape me.

*Whatever*, I thought. *Didn’t expect any enthusiasm from them anyway.*

“We can’t forget that the one person in the greatest danger right now is Xavier,” Ava spoke up.

“That’s true,” I said.

But on the inside, my brain was going a mile a minute.

*Possessing the ring doesn’t only put* me *in danger, though. Everybody who’s here with me is a potential target for Adéluce…*

I gulped, glancing at Greyson. The Seluna mark on my shoulder throbbed. The pain was dull now, a remnant, but never forgotten. As long as this ring stayed in the human world, it could only get worse.

“Either way, we can’t keep the ring here for much longer,” Greyson spoke up, as if reading my thoughts. “There have to be some other options, perhaps another courier.”

Jay turned to Gabriel. “Have you heard of any other ways to get to the demon world?”

“Nope,” Gabriel said. “Though I feel like I should’ve known these kinds of things as a mercenary.”

“You don’t even remember what you ate for dinner, Gabriel,” Mikah said impatiently.

Gabriel smirked, eyeing him up and down with a wink. “I do remember dessert, though.”

Mikah sighed, rolling his eyes, and looked like he wanted to hide somewhere. Ava snapped at Gabriel, “Can you focus here? Your friend is in danger!”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Xavier is harder to kill than a cockroach.”

“He does have a point there,” Lola mused. “X almost dies a lot, so—”

Ava bared her teeth. “That’s not what—”

“This discussion is over,” Greyson said loudly in a matter-of-fact voice. It reminded me of a teacher snapping a ruler on a desk. I would’ve flinched if it didn’t make me feel oddly safe despite the chaos all around. “Everyone be quiet, I’m calling Okorie.” Greyson picked up his phone. “There’s gotta be another way to get to the demon world…” He turned to me, squeezing my hand in his. “And I’m gonna figure it out.”

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Okorie told Greyson that he’d tried to reach the Courier himself. It would be more possible for him to pick up for Okorie, since the warlock was his old contact. I started to feel hopeful again, despite all the anxiety and the stress and the unshed tears. My hopes were shattered when Okorie called back, and Greyson’s expression turned into a scowl.

“Okorie wasn’t able to reach the Courier either,” Greyson said.

“Just fucking great,” Ava said, starting to pace in the background.

At the same time, Greyson added, “He doesn’t know another way to reach the demon world, though he said he would ask around.”

My grip on Greyson’s forearm turned tight. I felt light-headed, the dull throb of Seluna’s mark like a never-ending threat.

*Don’t fucking pass out right now, Cali! Xavier needs you, and Gabriel called you a badass before; you’d better not ruin that for yourself!*

“Hey.” I felt Greyson’s touch on my cheek. He made me face him, his voice soothing. “I’m right here. We’ll find a way to fix this. We’ll get the ring to the demon world and bring Xavier back here—”

“So he can brood and be pretty and occasionally tell a joke or two. But not more than two jokes a day, because that part of his brain is not developed enough,” Gabriel said with a straight face. Then, with a sigh, he added, “I love that boy.”

Jay slapped his forehead, and Lola rolled her eyes but smiled. I didn’t have the time to register Ava, Marissa, and Mikah’s expressions, because right then Big Mac emerged from her house.

“MacKenzie, come back here! You have to rest!” Sabine was scampering behind Big Mac, who waved her off and came to us.

“You should listen to my mother and take a—”

“I couldn’t nap, Greyson. You all were shouting,” Big Mac cut Greyson off, eyebrows arched. “Speaking of, maybe don’t scream the words ‘demon world’ while standing in the middle of the forest. What’s happening right now?”

Greyson explained to Big Mac what was going on while his mother stared at him. Big Mac’s eyes flickered between Greyson and me. “Whatever you do, do not try and make the trip yourself. It’s too dangerous.”

“We know,” I interrupted. “But what are we supposed to do?”

Big Mac frowned. “Let me see the ring.”

I handed it over to Big Mac, and she examined it. Nobody spoke for the longest moment.

“Why do you assume the ring contains the ashes? Or *all* of them?” Big Mac asked, then. “It’s not like Adéluce is known for telling the truth.”

I went rigid. “We just… assumed.”

*Oh, no.*

Everybody stared at the ring while my pulse rang in my ears.

*Oh god… What if Adéluce* *lied? There’s no reason she couldn’t have. What if there are more ashes we don’t know about?*

**Episode 4702**

**Greyson**

“I can do a spell to verify if the ashes belong to Seluna for a fact,” Big Mac said. She spoke as if it were no big deal. It was such a surprise to have her offer her help before being asked that for a brief moment, I just stared at her.

When she raised an eyebrow, I cleared my throat.

“Yes, you can,” I said. Then I realized what I’d just said and forced myself not to cringe. “I mean, doing a spell to verify the ashes’ identity would be great.” I glanced at my mom. She looked pale. “If it’s okay for you to do it right now, I mean.”

“It’s fine,” Big Mac said.

I turned to Sabine, as if asking for her permission, too. My mom sighed, nodding. I told Big Mac, “Thank you. Your help is always immensely appreciated.”

Big Mac gave me a curt nod.

“Is there a way to see if there are more ashes?” Cali asked. Her voice was pitched a little too high, her anxiety obvious.

I reached over, placing an arm around her. She clung to me, as if she’d been needing this. Big Mac said, “We can start with the ring and take it from there.”

Turning her back on us, she headed toward the house. Following suit, Sabine mumbled to her not to overexert herself, pushing a shawl she’d had with her over Big Mac’s shoulders. Big Mac actually chuckled, then.

*Chuckled*.

We all watched them for a beat, astonished.

“Did Big Mac just chuckle?” Cali asked, breaking the silence.

“Better yet, did she just offer to help without us asking?” Lola asked.

“Yeah,” Ava said with a scowl, “what the fuck was that all about?”

Gabriel shrugged. “I guess she’s in a good mood?”

“Is she, though?” Mikah squinted in the direction of the house.

“When the hell is Big Mac ever in a good mood?” Marissa scoffed.

“This isn’t normal,” Jay declared, his hand coming up to his eye patch like he was tracing a phantom wound. Which he was, because his eye was in one of those jars Big Mac had stashed somewhere in her newly renovated home.

“Let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth,” I said. “We have other things to worry about, like—”

“What if there are more of the ashes in the human world?” Cali whispered, her nails digging into my forearm slightly. When our eyes locked, she seemed upset for the millionth time in the past few months. My stomach dropped. I was never going to get used to seeing her like this, but I refocused and pushed forward.

For Xavier, and for her as well. For me, too. It was the right thing to do.

It was vital to calm everyone down right now.

“If the ring is part of Adéluce’s plan to torture Xavier, she will try to get it back,” I said. “But if there are more ashes out there, she may have what she needs already to move on with her plan. She knows that we can take her now, so she may not risk another attack on us.”

I didn’t believe that last part, but I still had to say it. Just for Cali’s sake. She looked at me with so much hope that I owed her just this bit of optimism.

But Lola wasn’t going to let it slide.

“I’m pretty sure Adéluce could attack again out of spite,” Lola said with a scoff. “Cali chopped off her hand! With her sword!” Lola waved her own hands around in a wild demonstration.

“I did what needed to be done,” Cali said. Her voice was quiet. I knew she hated violence, but in my eyes, she’d stepped up when she had to. She was a badass.

“You’re a badass!” Lola said, voicing my thoughts.

While Cali looked torn between pride and mortification while everybody—other Ava and Marissa—talked about her attacking Adéluce, I kept my arm around her. She was glued against my side, the warmth of her seeping into me. This was the same person who’d gotten Adéluce’s ring without any hesitation. How could she be so soft and vulnerable one moment and so fearless the next? I didn’t know.

I loved it all the same.

While we all waited for Big Mac to return with her verdict on the ring, I let the others chat among themselves and kept Cali close. She remained by my side, still clinging. Her cheeks had grown pale again. I asked her, “Does the Seluna mark still hurt?”

“No,” she muttered. “It was just then that it got… a bit much, I guess.”

*A bit much* was Cali-speak for “I almost blacked out from the pain.” I knew that. I had seen her expression when Adéluce attacked. Right now she seemed okay enough, but that only left things open to becoming worse. The ring—if it did indeed contain Seluna’s ashes—had to be returned to the demon world before Cali was in serious pain.

And danger.

She was already in danger, of course. What Lola had pointed out and I had avoided to admit earlier was true. Adéluce would want to hurt Cali simply because Cali had bested her and gotten that ring. I would have to speak to everybody in the pack about keeping an eye on Cali till we could kill Adéluce once for all.

For real this time.

Guilt hit me again.

Seriously, how the *hell* could I have been so blind when Xavier said that she might not be dead? What the fuck had I been thinking?

“I have news.” Big Mac’s voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked up to see her heading toward us. She came to stand in front of me, her face neutral. She didn’t say if it was good or bad news, but my mother’s clear expression as she stood next to Big Mac already gave me an idea.

“Adéluce fused the lat of Seluna’s ashes into this ring,” Big Mac announced.

Everybody let out sighs and murmurs of relief.

Cali gulped, though. “And are they all here?”

Big Mac shook her head. “There’s no way of knowing.”

Cali’s face fell. I leaned down, kissing her temple before muttering softly, “We’re going to figure this out, love.”

Gulping, she nodded. She seemed ready to say something, but then Big Mac spoke up again.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “if I can come up with something else, I will let you know.”

I blinked at her.

*Did… did Big Mac just say “I’m sorry”?*

I was so stunned I couldn’t even speak when she gave me the ring back. Everybody had fallen silent all over again, apart from Lola, who boldly blocked Big Mac’s way.

“Big Mac, are you… okay?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

Big Mac offered a skeptical look. “I feel fine. Why are you asking?”

Lola kept squinting at the witch. “It’s just… you almost seem… *content*?”

Big Mac’s signature flat look returned. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Lola.”

“That’s what I said,” I muttered under my breath, watching as Big Mac returned to the house. My mom had been waiting on the porch, and the two of them held hands before walking inside.

“Okay, but what if she’s possessed?” Gabriel asked, speaking up. “What if there’s an evil spirit feasting on her liver as we speak?”

Mikah looked bemused. “Maybe she’s really fine, though.”

“Why?” Marissa huffed. “It makes no sense!”

“She was just awoken by a true love’s kiss,” Lola said with a grin, wrapping her arm in Jay’s. “Maybe she’s just in love!”

The possibility of my mother being the reason why Big Mac was a little less grumpy made me want to smile. It made me want to go inside and talk to both of them, tell them how goddamn happy I was that they were back together. Every thought of my mom and Big Mac faded, though, when I noticed Cali’s face.

We had a lot of work left to do.

“I’ll try to call the Courier again,” I told her. “There’s a chance he’s already coming back with Xavier.” She nodded and handed me her phone.

Ava’s eyes flashed dangerously. “He’d better be, or I’ll kill the bastard for real this time.”

Cali ignored Ava. “When the Courier does come back, we could make another deal with him to return the ring right away, before—”

“I’m not giving up five years of my life for you, Cali,” Ava said coldly. “I would only ever do that for Xavier, and Xavier only.”

Cali’s expression hardened, but she just looked away. I wasn’t going to let this slide, though. After what happened when Xavier first vanished, Ava should know better than to give Cali shit on my watch.

“Nobody here is delusional enough to expect you to sacrifice anything for Cali, Ava,” I said. “Though, keep in mind that there’s always the possibility that Xavier would give up a few years of his life for her. He already did that in his last deal with the Courier.”

I had hit Ava where it hurt, even if she and I had the same sore spot. And it worked. Ava looked at me like I’d slapped her. Marissa grabbed her by the arm, as if in warning.

I broke eye contact with her, turning to Cali.

“Don’t worry about the Courier’s fee to deliver the ring. We’ll figure something out,” I told Cali, bringing her phone to my ear at the same time.

I called the Courier, but it went to voicemail again.

“Why won’t he pick up?” Cali asked, biting her nails.

“Don’t know about you guys, but just knowing the ring is here makes me nervous,” Lola said, starting to pace around Jay in a circle.

“Could Big Mac hide the ring here?” Cali asked me.

“Yes!” Gabriel clapped his hands together. “We’ll have to ask her now that she’s in a good mood.”

 “But what if she can’t hide it here?” Lola was still circling Jay as if she was a too-friendly shark and he was a diver considering his life choices. “What happens then?” She paused, facing Cali. “What happens if the Courier never responds to our phone calls, Cali?”

Nobody spoke.

I hoped how fucking stressed I was didn’t show.

“Greyson…” Cali gulped. “Should we take the ring to the demon world ourselves?”

**Episode 4703**

**Xavier**

The woman’s golden eyes were both comforting and enticing. She appeared to be nice, but I wasn’t naïve enough to believe that she could be trusted. Maybe if my plate wasn’t overflowing with Cali and Ava, I would’ve been interested in—*whatever* it was that she was offering. But at the moment, all I wanted was to get out of this damned place without anyone trying to eat me.

Nobody could know I was a werewolf.

After checking for the millionth time that my clawed hand was covered, I told her, “My desire is to wait for my friend to return. And then take care of some business.”

The woman tilted her head to the side. The slope of her neck was elegant. Her voice was low and husky. “What kind of business?”

“Personal business,” I said.

The woman smiled, then. There was a playful edge to it. “You look like you could use a drink. Why not join me while you wait for your friend?”

On the one hand, hanging out with a demon, albeit a beautiful one, while waiting for another demon was probably not a good idea. But also, *fuck it*—I was thirsty. What was the worst thing that could happen anyway?

I double-checked that my shifted hand was covered.

“Fine,” I said.

“Follow me,” she said with another smile, leading the way toward the bar area. Her hips were swaying. “I’m Tallis,” she said after we took a seat. Holding out her hand, she added, “Nice to meet you.”

I didn’t tell her my name, but I didn’t want to offend her, so I reached over to take her hand. The second my skin brushed hers, another surge of warmth hit me straight in the chest. It traveled to my dick at the speed of lighting. I couldn’t stop my eyes from flickering down to her lips. When she licked them, I was suddenly smacked with the urge to kiss her.

She smiled like she knew. Alarms blared inside my head, and then Greyson’s voice, echoing like this was a mind link.

*You stupid idiot, this isn’t normal. Get the fuck away from her. You’re not an apex predator down here. You’re prey.*

My jaw clenched. I hated that my older brother was goddamn scolding me even in my head. Besides, Greyson was wrong. I would never be someone’s prey.

No matter how badly Adéluce wanted that to happen, I refused to accept it.

“About that drink,” I said, shifting a little. “Where’s the server?”

Tallis smiled. Again. “Do I make you nervous? You didn’t look like the shy type to me.”

*He’s just the oblivious dickhead type*, Greyson would say, and fuck him.

Fuck. This.

I could handle myself. I could handle anything. I was an Alpha.

“I’m not nervous,” I said.

She chuckled, and the sound made the hair at the back of my nape stand. Her smile was dazzling, actually emanating light somehow, same as her golden eyes. They gleamed and glistened like a shiny thing you’d want to grab when you were a kid.

Her voice was soft as a feather tracing down my neck. “I think you are. But I love it. It’s…” She leaned closer, and by now my entire body was vibrating. “Delicious.”

I forced myself to look away. My eyes ached when I did so, as if they refused to cooperate.

Okay.

Maybe the Greyson in my head was right, and I needed to get the fuck away from her.

This wasn’t normal.

Glancing back toward the lobby, I said, “My friend’s taking too long. I should go find him in case—”

“You don’t have to be nervous,” Tallis cut me off, closing the space between us. Her hot breath hit my cheek. “You just need to relax.”

She placed her hand on the place her breath had marked.

The wave of need that hit me was so raw I squeezed my eyes shut.

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My eyes flew open.

I was in a luxurious bedroom, with a canopy bed and a high ceiling, red velvet everywhere.

What the fuck? How the hell did I get here? What happened before—

“Hey, baby.” My chest heaving, I turned just as the bedroom door opened and my mate walked in.

The moment I saw Cali, every other thought flew out of my head.

She was naked. Mostly. The frail little slip she had on reached the middle of her thigh. It was white, sheer, barely there. It looked like a spider’s web, and I was caught all right. I couldn’t stop looking—from her legs, to the shadowy spot between her thighs, to her breasts, and then up, to her face. Her dark hair was loose, wavy, falling over her shoulders. Her eyes were the color of honey today. Her lips were pink, and when they stretched into a smile, I forgot how to breathe.

I was a fucking goner already.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. And then: “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Cali smiled again, all soft and pleased. Like she already knew I was ready to drop on my knees for her. She moved onto her tippy toes to kiss my jaw, my chin, and then—

My mouth.

I wanted her mouth all over me.

“Get on the bed,” she said. Her voice carried a smooth command. When did Cali get so confident and assured?

“Cali—”

She pushed me backward. I fell on the bed, my legs useless. She straddled me, smothering the words that tried to slip out of my mouth with another kiss. She glided over me, and I groaned at the friction. My hips bucked upward when our lower bodies locked. She felt so right on top of me, grinding herself against the seam of my jeans, that I worried I would come too fast like a fucking rookie.

“You’re all I think about. All I want,” she rasped. It was perfect to see her tentativeness melt away. It was perfect to feel that she needed me so badly she couldn’t help herself from going a bit mad. Mad for *me*.

Only me.

“Please,” she moaned against my neck, kissing me there. I grabbed at her hips, my eyes rolled at the back of my head, when—

“Starting without me?”

Ava’s voice made my spine go rigid.

The full-length mirror shimmered, and I saw her step out of it. Long, dark brown hair, darker than Cali’s. Ava’s skin was much paler, and her eyes much lighter, too. An icy blue, but when she looked at me, I was on fire.

She wore a sheer slip similar to Cali’s, only black.

“Ava?” I choked out. Walking toward us, she took the slip off. She was naked when she came to the bed.

*This can’t be real*, I thought.

But who the fuck was I to tell her to stop?

“My turn,” she told Cali with a smile that was all teeth. And then she shoved Cali out of the way and climbed onto my lap. She kissed me hard, biting on my lips, sliding her tongue against mine.

*This can’t be real*, I thought. It all happened so fast, but it fucking *felt* real. I thought I would fly out of my skin, even if they pinned me down.

Ava tore off my shirt while Cali reached for my pants, dragging them down, tossing them away. Ava rubbed her wet center against my abs, leaving her mark, while Cali marked me with her tongue, licking across the elastic of my boxers. Ava grabbed my jaw and forced me to look at her while Cali slid down my underwear. Ava spat in my parted mouth while Cali’s lips wrapped around my hard cock.

All the sounds I made were animal, my lips chasing Ava’s, my hips bucking up toward Cali. I felt more animal than man. And once they each realized what the other had just done, I turned into a prize to win. Cali looked up at Ava, stroked me, and licked at the tip. Ava looked over her shoulder at Cali, dipping her fingers in my mouth to make me swallow her own spit mixed with mine.

At once, to each other they boasted, “He’s mine.”

This could be the best way to die.

Ava slid down to join Cali. Both their hands on my cock now, both their eyes on me. Eyes on the prize. Lips and tongues on it, too. Me. I was needed. Wanted. Irresistible, irreplaceable, un-fucking-comparable, beyond all doubt.

Alpha.

The ultimate prize.

“Who do you want?” Cali rasped.

She meant who I wanted to fuck me first, I realized.

*Lies.*

There was much more to her question.

*This can’t be real*, I thought.

I was too overwhelmed to utter a single goddamn word.

“Why don’t you choose?” Ava demanded.

“I’ll make this easier for you,” Cali said.

She crawled closer to Ava. When she wet her lips, I thought that this was it. I would combust, anticipation would fucking decimate me. This couldn’t be real, this made no sense because they fucking hated each other, but—

For me, they kissed.

It was all for my pleasure. Cali kissing Ava, Ava kissing Cali.

Cali gasped when Ava bit her lip. Her hands slid into Ava’s hair, tangling with it. Ava grabbed at Cali, a hand going around her neck. Cali’s hands balled into fists, pulling hard on Ava’s hair, making her moan.

*Wait, what the fuck is going on? Ava and Cali hate each other. They would never do this…*

But they looked so good doing it.

*No! Something’s wrong!*

They grabbed each other by the hair, gasping, “*He’s mine*.”

They said it differently this time. There was more fury to it than lust. More possessiveness than need. They turned to me, all eyes on me again, eyes on the—

Prey.

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I blinked.

I was back at the bar. I was panting, sweating, rock hard, feeling like I was about to throw up.

“Your ales,” a horned server said, placing two glasses down on the table.

“My, my…” a gruff female voice said. “What a ride.”

When I turned to look at Tallis, she was smiling wide. Practically glowing and flushed as she sipped on her drink. Her golden eyes flashed at me. What the *fuck* just happened?

Shaking, completely out of it, I reached for my drink.

Tallis’s eyes went wide.

The hand that I’d wrapped around the glass was clawed.

**Episode 4704**

“Big Mac said that nobody should attempt going to the demon world,” Greyson said matter-of-factly. He didn’t seem surprised by my suggestion, or annoyed. Just determined to trample it as if it were a bug. He turned to Mikah. “Didn’t you hear that?”

“I heard that,” Mikah agreed.

Greyson turned to Jay. “Jay, did you hear it?”

“I heard it,” Jay said.

He completely ignored Ava, Marissa, Lola, and Gabriel, and turned to me. “See?”

“Wait a damn minute,” Gabriel spoke up. “Isn’t anyone gonna ask me if I heard it? I want to be involved in the drama!”

“Depends on your answer,” Greyson said.

“I heard it,” Gabriel said, nodding. “Happy now?”

“Thanks, Gabriel. You are now officially part of the drama,” Greyson said. Gabriel preened. Greyson turned to me again. “Where was I? Oh, yes. Demon world trips? I feel like they’re not part of our journey right now. Or ever.”

“Isn’t anyone gonna ask *me* if I heard it? Because I heard it, too, but—”

“Thank you, Lola,” Greyson said in an imposing tone, cutting her off. He didn’t look at her. He just stared at me, and there was something about the intense way he did it that made my cheeks heat up.

*Cali! Snap out of it.*

I did.

“I get why this isn’t a good idea,” I started, “but wouldn’t leaving the ashes here be even more dangerous? Not just to me, but to the pack?”

“No,” Greyson said. “Because every time we’ve gone against Big Mac’s advice, it comes back to bite us in the ass. I’m trying to prevent yet another crisis.” His tone dropped, softening. “You get that, right?”

I frowned.

“Tale as old as time,” Mikah muttered.

Everybody turned to look at him. Greyson asked, “What?”

Mikah stared at Greyson. “If I had a penny for every time I’ve tried to convince Gabriel not to do something that is reckless and ill-advised, I’d be a millionaire. I sense that you’ve had to deal with that a lot when it comes to Cali.”

“Hey!” both Gabriel and I said, clearly offended.

*Wait… should I be worried that Mikah saw a correlation between me and Gabriel?*

“I could buy Cali a one-way ticket to the demon world and get this over with,” Ava scoffed. “When do you want to go?”

I glared at her. “Do you *ever* have anything helpful to say, Ava?”

“She cannot go,” Greyson said.

I scowled. “Excuse me? You can’t just tell me what to do—”

“No, I mean you literally cannot enter the demon world without the Courier. And even if you did manage to enter, how would you get back out?”

I paused at the question. Greyson’s face was calm, but I could feel his frustration. I loved him for making an effort here, for keeping his cool, for letting me work shit out on my own. Even if it was aggravation instead of logic leading me to make these suggestions.

“I know this makes no sense,” I said quietly. “But I’m tired of being in pain, of Seluna still causing problems.”

Greyson swallowed, nodding. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, leaning in to kiss the side of my head.

“Maybe I don’t have to actually cross into the demon world,” I murmured. What if I just throw the ring in?”

“Okay, bestie, now you’re reaching,” Lola said with an eye roll. “You’ve always been terrible at pitching! What are you even thinking?”

You knew shit was bad when even Lola—my forever partner in crime—thought I was being unreasonable.

“Besides,” Lola added, “wouldn’t you want to put the ashes as far into the demon world as possible?”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I said.

Lola frowned. “But wouldn’t it be easy for someone like Adéluce to just reach in and retrieve the ring if it’s close to the gate? Or use a magnet spell or something to pull it out?”

Greyson broke the half-hug he’d pulled me into, placing himself in front of me to block my view of Lola. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not going to the demon world. It’s bad enough that my brother got tossed in there. The last thing I want is to have you get trapped there, too. Do you understand, Cali?”

I paused, looking up at him. The intensity in his expression made me realize that his patience was running thin. I knew I’d feel the same way if he were suggesting something similar, so I tried to make him see my point of view.

“What should we do about the ring, then?” I asked.

“I’ll ask Big Mac if she can put a spell on it to hide it from Adéluce while we wait for the Courier to return,” Greyson said. “Okay?”

I nodded, breathing deeply. “Okay.”

He squeezed my shoulder before heading back inside. I looked around the group of people. Mikah and Gabriel were bickering, Marissa was texting, Lola was telling Jay that Greyson was occasionally patronizing and she wanted to smack him for it, but she also found patronization intriguing so they should try it in bed, and Ava—

—was eyeing me as if I were gum stuck on her shoe.

“Can I help you?” I asked, feeling my stomach twist into a ball.

It was definitely a ball of anger.

“I’m just thinking that we should go back to the Redwood pack house so we can be there when the Courier returns with *my* mate,” she said coldly.

My jaw clenched.

*Stay cool, Cali*, I told myself. *You don’t want things to get out of control again.*

But I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“Xavier is still *my* mate, too,” I said. “No matter what happened, that hasn’t changed, so you should stop acting like you’re the only one who cares about him.”

“I *am* the only one!” Ava snapped. “All you’ve been talking about is returning the ashes.”

*Oh my god. This. Bitch!*

I didn’t like using that word, but *seriously*.

“I’m the one who insisted that Xavier was in trouble, Ava.” I pointed at my chest. “*I’m* the one who could sense that he needed help.”

“You know nothing,” Ava spat. “You have no idea what kind of connection Xavier and I have.”

“You’re too self-obsessed and duplicitous to have a real connection with anyone, Ava.”

“And you’re too weak and fucking whiny to ever actually be helpful. How about that?”

I had to laugh. “*Weak?* I’m the one who got the ring by cutting her hand off! Who gave us leverage?!”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please, get the fuck over yourself!”

“Greyson’s coming,” Marissa hissed, tugging on Ava’s sleeve.

Ava stopped talking. I was shocked by her reaction, but then I realized that Greyson’s threat to kick her out of the search for Xavier if she didn’t cooperate must’ve stuck with her.

A second later, Greyson came back out, looking between the two of us. His face was sharp. “Everything okay?”

I shot Ava a glare. She looked at Greyson defiantly. “We’re not trying to gouge each other’s eyes out, if that’s what you’re asking. What happened with the ring?”

“Big Mac is going to use a cloaking spell on the ring until we figure out what to do with it. I’m leaving it with her,” he said.

I gulped. I wasn’t happy about that solution—we’d already lost Seluna’s ashes so many times. But I also knew that if anyone could handle keeping the ring safe, it was Big Mac. I trusted her.

“What happens now?” Jay asked.

Greyson looked among everybody. “We get back to the Redwood pack house and wait for the Courier to return with my brother.”

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I was riding on Greyson’s back toward the Redwood pack house, holding tightly to his fur. My heart was hammering in my ears. Had it slowed down at all since Xavier had been gone? I didn’t think so.

*You okay?* Greyson mind linked. *You haven't said much.*

That was because I was still boiling.

*Ava pissed me off*, I admitted. *She’s acting like she’s the only one who cares about Xavier, when I was the one who realized something was wrong with him from the beginning. If she can’t see my feelings for him, she’s blind!*

Greyson didn’t answer, and I realized what I’d just said. My anger took a backseat.

*Sorry for talking about Xavier so much*, I mind linked.

Another pause.

*It’s okay*, he mind linked. *I know you’re having a hard time.*

The hint of dejectedness in his tone made me feel like shit. I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck, burying my face in his fur.

My shoulder was starting to hurt again.

God, would this ever end? Why couldn’t things go back to the way they were before? It wasn’t ideal—being a *due destini* was way less than ideal—but we were managing it the best we could. Now I had a vengeful vampire-witch after me, Seluna’s ashes were not back where they should be, and Ava was being her usual asshole possessive self.

I only hoped that the Courier came through and returned Xavier.

*Please, oh, please*, I thought. *Let him return home safely.*

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“Are you okay?” I asked once we got to the house. Greyson had just shifted back to human.

“As long as you’re here with me, I’m all good,” he said. I felt a lump form in my throat. He leaned in, his lips soft on my cheek before he stepped back. “I’ll go fill in Rishika. Stay out of trouble while I’m gone, please.”

I frowned. “What could I possibly do?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. You’re pretty inventive.”

I swatted him on the arm, and he shot me a smirk, then strode back inside. I was watching his muscular backside move as he walked away—a pleasant reverie in a time of sorrow—when someone poked my shoulder.

“Shit!” I jumped in surprise. “Lola!”

She stared at me. “Excuse me for interrupting your ogling, but I had an idea.”

I squinted at her. “What kind of idea?”

Her eyes gleamed. “What if *I* managed to find the portal to the demon world?”

**Episode 4705**

I was immediately intrigued. And terrified. “But *how* would you locate the portal to the demon world?”

Lola’s eyes were still gleaming. She was up to no good, my brilliant friend, and I loved her for it. Most of the time. But what we were talking about right now was pretty high risk, but if we could get Xavier back somehow… High reward.

“I have no idea,” she said. Classic Lola. “But I’m willing to try.” Also classic Lola.

With a sigh, I pulled her away from the front porch, making sure to drop my voice. We did not want Greyson hearing this.

*“Stay out of trouble while I’m gone,”* he’d said. *Is he a freaking seer or something? Or are we that predictable?*

Shaking off the thought, I asked, “How would you do it?”

Lola shrugged. “I figure there has to be some way to locate it. I could reach out to Steinar. Or go to the dark web. It has everything. Do you know any demons?”

“Thankfully no, sorry. I’ve been avoiding meeting more ever since Seluna.”

Lola sighed. “Fair, fair. Demons like Seluna give the rest of her kind a bad name. Well… *Are* there any good demons?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “I’m hoping Seluna is the last demon I’ll ever meet, though.”

“But if we do locate the demon portal,” Lola said, “and we somehow figure out a way in, chances are you *are* going to come into contact with demons. Are you ready for it?”

*Nope!*

“Let’s just cross that bridge when we get to it,” I said slowly. *If* we get to it… Looking around again to make sure we weren’t being overheard or seen, I added, “But let’s keep this on the DL. I want to keep my options open, but Greyson’s made it clear he’s against going to the demon world.”

Lola scoffed. “Who even cares what Greyson thinks?”

I frowned. “I do. And you should, too—he’s your Alpha.”

Lola’s mocking expression vanished. “I know, I know. And I do *ultimately* care. But also, he usually comes around when our genius plans end up working out. We just have to take the initiative.”

“That’s a good point,” I conceded. “You realize that if we do go to the demon world, we’ll probably have to ask Big Mac for the ring, right? It’s not like we can go without it.”

Lola cringed. “Oh, god. I can just imagine her expression.”

I winced. “Yeah, same. She’ll look at us and go, ‘what the fuck are you two up to this time?’”

“Well, no matter what, we have to figure this out and do what we do best,” Lola said, wrapping her arm around me.

“Right.” I nodded, trying to psych myself up. “Which is what exactly?”

Lola grinned. “Get shit done, of course. Onward!”

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I followed Lola upstairs to her room, where she kept her laptop. We’d decided she would check with Steinar at the supernatural library first.

“Let’s avoid the dark web if we can help it,” I said. “I don’t know that we want to get into all that.”

“Of course,” she said.

No further comment. Great. We were probably going onto the dark web, weren’t we?

Once we got to her room, we found Jay changing shirts. Eyeing us, he asked, “What are you two up to?”

 “Hmm?” Lola’s eyes flickered up to his face—they’d been lingering on his abs—and she seemed to compose herself. “Oh, right! We are going to be doing some research for a school project.”

I held my breath once Jay narrowed his eye at her.

*Oh my god, has he caught us already?*

“I thought school didn’t start yet,” Jay said. “What kind of assignment do you have?”

Lola spoke smoothly. “It doesn’t matter that school hasn’t started, we still have assignments. If the syllabus is out, there’s always something you can get a head start on!”

I braced myself for him to call us on our bullshit.

“Had no idea you were so studious,” Jay teased, pausing as he walked past Lola to give her a quick kiss.

The moment he was out of the room, I ran to the door and slammed it shut. Gulping, I turned to face her. “Don’t you feel bad about lying to Jay just now? Because *I* kind of feel bad.”

But I had to remember the bigger picture here.

Lola shrugged, plopping on her bed where her laptop was. “It was just a little white lie. He’ll be fine. Besides, maybe I *can* use this demon research for a school assignment.”

“The way you can rationalize every questionable thing you do is a little scary,” I said, walking over to her.

“Thank you,” she said.

When I looked over her shoulder and saw her fingers fly on the keyboard, I was amazed. “Wow, you’re fast.” I eyed the page she was loading—it looked… well, dark. “Wait, I thought you were going to check in with Steinar first and not go immediately to the dark web?”

She shook her head. “Change of plans. I do the dark web thing, you get your laptop and message Steinar. We do both simultaneously, and that way we save time.”

“I guess… that works,” I said. But I really wasn’t thrilled about this. The dark web would have who knows what and who knows who. It seemed more likely that we’d find a demon there instead of any information.

“Go get your laptop,” she said. “I’ll be here being a badass.”

I shook my head and then headed to my room. I felt thankful to have Lola around at a time like this, actually. I had been so worried and guilty over what had happened to Xavier, and freaked out about Seluna, that hanging out with Lola was like ointment to my soul. Not to mention, actually *doing* something like figuring out where the demon portal was, was much better than waiting around for the Courier to respond to Greyson’s calls.

*Greyson’s gonna be upset, though*, I thought. *I’d be upset, too, if he decided to snoop around on something behind my back… But he’s doing what he can for his brother, and I’m trying to do the same.*

My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp pain in my shoulder. I gasped, clutching at it. I didn’t have to check to know that it was the Seluna mark. Was I being punished somehow for looking for the demon portal? I had no idea. I just knew I had to push through the pain and get it done.

A moment later, I rejoined Lola in her room, laptop in hand. My friend was typing away furiously. Glancing up at me, she said, “I found some information, though it’s a bit sketchy.”

“No surprise there,” I grumbled, wincing when I sat on the bed.

Lola frowned, pausing her typing to look at me. “Wait, what’s wrong?

“My shoulder is hurting again,” I admitted.

Lola’s frown deepened. “We better find that portal and end this ASAP.”

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*I was wondering if you had any information about the demon world*, I messaged Steinar after pulling up the library’s online portal.

Three dots appeared on the screen only to pause again.

Shit.

The three dots danced once more before Steinar’s reply came.

*Are you sure you want to go there?*

His question startled me. First Greyson, then Jay, now Steinar—did they all just see right through me? This was just ridiculous! But then I realized that Steinar didn’t mean “going there” literally. He was asking about the research. I typed out my answer.

*Yes. It’s important to what I’m looking for.*

Steinar replied, *Most of the useful information would be in the restricted area. I’ll have to get back to you in a minute.*

So… the library’s version of the dark web. I shot back a quick reply.

*Thank you for your help, Steinar. Always appreciated.*

*Always happy to chat with my favorite half-Fae!*

I smiled… before I wondered if Steinar knew any other half-Fae.

“I found it!” Lola announced, and I looked over at her.

“What?” I asked. My stomach jumped in both excitement and dread as I looked at Lola’s screen. “What’d you find?”

She turned her laptop to me, and my eyebrows shot up. There was a strange-looking map in some language I didn’t know. My heart was hammering when Lola pointed to a red circle.

“According to the map key, that’s the portal,” she said, her voice dropping to a serious whisper.

I gulped. “How do you know how to read the key?”

Lola shrugged. “Someone in the comments provided a rough translation, allegedly, so I’m pretty sure that’s it.”

*“Pretty sure” isn’t certain, Cali!* a little voice in my head said. I shoved it away. Hope filled me. With this, we could, in theory, take the ring back to the demon world. We could also find Xavier.

*Could* being the operative word here.

This map opened a world of scary but tempting possibilities.

My shoulder throbbed again, as if in warning. I ignored it.

“I can’t believe you found it so quickly,” I breathed. “So *easily*.”

Should we even trust that?

Lola thrust her chin up, full of pride. “You should never underestimate me.” She lowered her face close to mine, then, staring deep into my eyes, she said conspiratorially, “But this is just a map. The real question is: should we use it to go to the portal?”

**Episode 4706**

**Artemis**

I woke up in a warm cocoon, Rishika’s breath hot against my neck, her arms around me. Shivering, I arched backward, a tiny moan slipping through my mouth. One of those that always made her kiss my nape in the morning and slide her hand down my stomach.

But then I realized that something was wrong.

Rishika’s arms weren’t that heavy… or muscular… or hairy.

My eyes snapped open. I saw the dagger. What in the world was *that* doing on my side? Who *dared*—

His scent hit me all at once. Citrusy and herbal.

*Marius*.

Of course.

“Unbelievable,” I said with a huff, turning over to shove him off me. He was already awake. Leaning back, he relaxed against the pillow. I did *not* look down at his abs. It was a matter of principle.

He smirked. “Good morning to you too, starshine.”

I rubbed my temples to stop myself from summoning my arrows and turning him into a kebab for breakfast. Tom had shown me a recipe, so that was always on the table.

As Cali would say, pun intended.

“How many times do I have to tell you to keep your filthy paws to yourself, Marius?”

“I—”

I grabbed the dagger and pointed it at him. “Maybe I should chop them the hell to make sure you get the message.”

He snorted, standing up from the bed. “Gods, relax. You’re the one who came on my side.”

I paused, looking down, and my eyes widened when I realized that he was right. The mortification was too much to swallow, so I decided to deny and evade.

“The only reason I came near you last night was because it was cold, and you kept hogging the covers like a pathetic tiny creature who can’t regulate its body temperature on its own.”

There. That was harsh.

But Marius burst out laughing. “You’re still funny.”

I would kill him.

“Were you really about to chop off my arms?” he asked curiously, eyeing the dagger in my grip. “Only asking because you seemed keen on burying yourself in my embrace last night.”

“I did *not*.”

“Maybe you’re the delicate creature here, Ari, and you needed to be cuddled to sleep. I could swear you started purring before—”

I grabbed a pillow and threw it at his head. He ducked.

I should probably try throwing a vase next.

“Glad we settled that one,” he said with a yawn, making a big show out of stretching, his lean muscles flexing. “Today’s a new day. Let’s go have breakfast.”

I looked away, ignoring the way my mouth dried out at the sight of him… looking like *that* in the morning. Grabbing my clothes from a chair, I moved behind the changing screen to get dressed. He started whistling as if he had no care in the world. Because he basically didn’t. He’d always been like this, flirting with me shamelessly.

With me and everybody else.

The Marius I used to know lived to fuck with people. And fuck people.

He was trouble, and a nuisance, and he was going to backstab me at the first chance he got. I could feel it. I knew it. He was a bounty hunter, and there was always a better deal out there.

“Ready to go, partner?” He stuck his head behind the screen, not even caring that I hadn’t finished getting dressed yet. With a grin, he said, “This morning is lovely, and you are gorgeous, Ari.”

I could always just poison him after the mission was over and I had what I needed.

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“So,” he said as walked down the corridor. “Who’s Rishika?”

I forced myself not to freeze on the spot. What the *hell*?

Marius was staring at me, and I could tell that he was looking for a weakness he could exploit. He loved to bargain, after all, and the only way you got good at that was when you knew more about the other person.

I decided to shrug and keep on walking. His eyes narrowed. “You’re not fooling me, Ari. Is Rishika the ‘someone’ who’s waiting for you in the human world?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said.

“I think you do,” he replied, eyebrows arched. “You repeated her name several times during the night. After you snuck your way over to my side of the bed.”

I glared at him. “I wasn’t sneaking. I was freezing to death because you’re a selfish cover hog, and it’s none of your business.”

He sighed. “I firmly believe that we shouldn’t be keeping secrets from each other. Your lies wound my heart.”

“Oh, gods,” I muttered.

“We’re going to cross through the war zone in a little while, after all. Shouldn’t we be open with each other?”

I shot him yet another glare. He was growing quite a collection of them. “The war zone doesn’t change anything. We’re business partners. That’s it. No feelings or secrets involved.”

We were passing through the lobby, and he frowned. “But—”

“Marius!” a breathy female voice exclaimed, cutting him off. I rolled my eyes and turned around with him, only to see a petite brunette rush up to us. “Good morning,” she said, simpering. “Where have you been? We’ve missed you around these parts.”

Marius’s frown was gone. It had probably never even been there. I must’ve imagined it. Because right now, he looked at the brunette as if he’d have no problem bending her over the reception booth right here and now. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, my dear.” He kissed her hand in a way over-the-top manner.

She giggled, blushing. “Please do come back soon.”

Either it was getting hot in here, or I was boiling because of how ridiculous this entire scene was. I cleared my throat, ready to leave Marius behind if he insisted on wasting more time here. But then the girl noticed me, and her blush deepened. “Come back with your, ah, wife, of course!”

“Don’t worry,” I said with a smile. “We won’t be married for too long.”

Marius chuckled, grabbing me by the arm. He told the brunette to have a wonderful day before leading me outside.

“You’re such a joke,” I said as we walked down the street.

He smirked. “Oh, Ari. Green sure looks lovely on you. Is it my fault everyone finds me so irresistibly charming?”

I snorted. “I find you annoying more than anything.”

He laughed, linking his arm with mine. Leaning in to whisper in my ear, he said, “I promise I *could* charm you if you gave me a chance…”

I shoved him hard enough for him to lose his step. *Good*.

“You’re sleazy and exhausting.”

He winked. “Keep that in mind the next time you make me cuddle you in the middle of the night, kitten.”

He was the worst. Truly.

Jaw clenched, I changed the subject. “You told me we’re going to have to cross the war zone. Let’s go.”

I made a move to leave, but he blocked my way. “I said we’d be getting breakfast first, didn’t I? A good journey requires good food. Follow me.”

Grumbling under my breath the entire time, I followed him, contemplating my life choices.

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The moment we entered the tavern, I felt eyes on me from all over the room. Of course, Marius noticed, too.

“I bet you could bed any one of them,” he muttered in my ear.

“Is that all you think about? Bedding people?”

He shrugged. “Only when I get bored.”

The pretty waitress scrambled over the second we were seated, and her eyes were on Marius only. He made sure to return the favor, complimenting her bracelet and asking where that beautiful accent of hers was from.

I was no prude, but there was something about the way Marius did all this that just got on my nerves. I didn’t know why, but it *bothered* me.

“What?” he said after the waitress was gone.

“Nothing. Just thinking that you haven’t changed a bit.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why should I? You don’t fix something that isn’t broken.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s talk less about you and more about the mission. How far away is the war zone? If we—”

The door burst open with a bang, and I reached for the dagger at my waist. A woman hurried in, panting. “The Dark Fae court is coming!”

*Shit*.

I’d had several run-ins with the court, and none of them were pleasant. In my experience, and Adair’s, they were hard to shake. They asked all sorts of questions unless you figured out a way to distract them. I drew a blank on distraction methods right now, though.

“Is there a back way out?” I whispered to Marius.

He frowned. “Why?”

The door opened again, and everybody fell silent.

Three tall, imposing Dark Fae came in. I needed to figure out what lies I’d tell them if they singled me out. But we’d already lied about being a couple last night, and I couldn’t think of anything else that would distract the Dark Fae from—

“Ari?” Marius asked. “What’s going on?”

Something clicked inside my head.

Without thinking, I grabbed Marius and kissed him.

**Episode 4707**

**Xavier**

I quickly covered up my clawed hand. Fuck. This wasn’t supposed to happen.

“I should’ve seen that coming,” Tallis said, her expression growing dark.

I was still breathing hard. “What?”

“You didn’t turn into a wolf in your desires, but the territorial marking should’ve been a hint,” she said wryly.

I frowned in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just that you shouldn’t be here,” Tallis declared. Gone was the sensuous vibe she’d had going earlier. She was no longer interested. Now she was all suspicion and alarm and a hint of something else I couldn’t place.

“I never *wanted* to be here in the first place,” I replied between gritted teeth, making a move to stand up.

“You have a lot of nerve talking to me like that,” she scoffed in a quiet voice. And then, as if out of spite, she looked around the room and shouted, “Help!”

“*Help*?” I gaped. “What the fuck did I do?”

“He’s being disrespectful!” Tallis pointed an accusing finger at me.

Everybody turned to look, and I backed away from her. I wanted to say that she was the one who’d been disrespectful, not me. For fuck’s sake, she had touched my face earlier, and then… I didn’t fucking remember what happened next. Not exactly.

“I never—” A large hand grabbed my shoulder, cutting me off. I was ready for a fight, adrenaline coursing through me, before I realized it was Ferlin.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he hissed, dragging me out of the brothel.

At least Tallis hadn’t told everybody I was a werewolf. Either way, my blood was still rushing. I felt dizzy. I got flashes of Cali’s face, then Ava’s here and there. It made me swallow hard. I had my suspicions about what had just gone down with Tallis…

“What the hell were you thinking?” Ferlin snapped, pulling me back to the present.

He and I ducked into a doorway, looking over at the brothel’s entrance to see if we’d been followed. Nothing. I’d been ready for a brawl, honestly.

“I think we’re good,” I said, exhaling deeply.

Ferlin glared at me. “I told you to stay put!”

“I got tired of standing, and I was thirsty.”

Ferlin shook his head. “Do you realize who you were sitting with?”

The back of my neck heated up suddenly. “Her name was Tallis.”

“She’s a succubus. Do you know what those do?” Ferlin demanded.

I did. And now that I had a second to think, everything made sense. The way my body reacted around Tallis. The fact that I’d felt disoriented, like I’d just missed a chunk of time while sitting with her. I remembered something about a bedroom covered in red velvet, probably a daydream that she’d pushed me into to feed, but not much else. This wasn’t the first time I’d dealt with this kind. Ava and I had encountered an incubus after Seluna had flooded the Vanguard palace with demons.

What a sick joke this place was.

“I know what a succubus is,” I said, pulling my arm free from Ferlin’s grip.

“Then you should know not to mess with them,” Ferlin snapped.

I huffed. “If you were so worried about things like that, why did you bring me to a demon brothel in the first place?”

“I told you,” Ferlin said. “I had business to attend to.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, snorting. “Business? The kind of business that brothels are known for?”

Ferlin scowled, waving for me to follow him down the street. “That isn’t the only kind of business that takes place there. I made contact with someone who can guide us to the Courier.”

My mocking smile faded. “Where is he?”

“Take it easy,” Ferlin warned. “He’s going to meet us. Though after the scene you just caused, I’m not sure the guide is going to come at all.”

“I didn’t even do anything!”

“That’s what they all say,” Ferlin scoffed.

I wasn’t going to dignify that with an answer. “Where are we meeting this guy?”

“At the stables,” Ferlin said.

 “I thought you were taking me to the Courier. Why would we need a damn stable?” I glared at him. “Is this a trick?”

Ferlin looked so offended, I was compelled to think that this *was* a trick.

“I am taking you to the Courier, Xavier. But I need the guide to help me get you there.”

I narrowed my eyes at the demon. I didn’t like how he kept springing new shit on me. I didn’t trust him, and my gut said that I should probably drop him. But where would I go then? Back to Tallis? Fuck that.

Fun Guy had warned me about Ferlin, though. Maybe I could go back to him? How the hell would I even do that, though? I had no idea where I was.

“Why didn’t you mention needing a guide before?” I asked.

Ferlin rolled his eyes. “I’m not about to give you a list of every single little thing we have to do to get you where you need to go, Xavier. Just follow me and shut up.”

I followed him. But I didn’t shut up. “I still don’t know why you’re helping me.”

Ferlin shook his head. “You’ll see soon enough. It’s nothing outrageous, I’ll tell you that.”

That wasn’t comforting.

Ferlin and I walked in silence, and about ten minutes later we arrived at some sort of barn. I scowled. “Is the guide going to meet us here?”

“Yes,” he said. “And while we wait, we might as well make arrangements.”

A scowl was the only thing I had going right now. “What kind of arrangements?”

I regretted asking and walking into that barn. It smelled like you’d expect it to, only a million times fucking worse. My nose twitched, and my eyes watered. I almost gagged. I held my breath and fought to distract myself.

The only thing that worked—that I knew would work for sure—was the thought of Cali. I brought back into mind the fruity, clean scent of her hair. Then the way she smelled when I kissed her, how her natural scent got all honeyed up and so sweet. The memory stirred up my wolf. Suddenly, Ava’s face popped up in my head.

Where Cali’s scent was light, Ava’s was smokey, like burnt cinnamon. All that was needed for Ava to want me was a look. She was easily riled up, needy, ready to get fucked anywhere, anytime. I used to think that Cali wasn’t that way—that she was all about the romance, that she loved to be wooed. But in that dressing room, all I had to do was—

No.

I shouldn’t be fucking comparing my two mates. A wave of nausea hit me, followed by guilt. This was bad, all of it. But what pissed me off the most was that Ferlin looked like he had no care in the world while he conversed with the stable owner.

“You have to go down by twenty percent if you want us to do business,” Ferlin was telling the stable owner, who glared at him. He was taller than Ferlin and skinny like a stick, with hands like oversized bird legs, claws at the end. They quibbled over the price for a beat before finally managing to reach some kind of agreement.

The stench in here didn’t get any better.

In fact, it only got worse once we were led deeper into the stable and over to a strange-looking creature. It stared back at me blankly, not interested. It looked like a cross between a horse and a camel, only there was something almost sinister about it.

“You ever rode before?” the stable owner asked me.

“I have,” I said.

Though I didn’t mention that I’d never ridden one of these creatures. Whatever the hell they were. Horses were fine, usually, and I’d never dealt with a camel. But I doubted that these beasts would be as easygoing as either of their human-world counterparts.

I had to get this done, though.

“Let’s go,” Ferlin said before hopping up on one of the creatures. The beast that was meant for me didn’t even move, just stared at me speculatively.

I gulped, slowly moving toward it. It immediately reared up and made a hissing sound, snapping its square teeth at me.

Fucking great.

“That’s weird…” The stable owner looked puzzled. “Lord Fitzgerald has never done that before.”

I paused. “Sorry—*what* now?”

The stable guy waved at me to follow him. “Let’s try another one. Darling Rosalind is as easygoing as they come, and pretty as a peach.”

The stinking creature showed me its black teeth and spat at my feet when I reached for it.

The owner gaped. “What the fuck? I’ve never seen this before!”

Ferlin, the asshole, laughed. “Looks like Darling Rosalind rejected you.”

As if to underline his point, Rosalind reared back to kick me.

“What the fuck is wrong with your animals?” I demanded, jumping away.

“This ain’t right.” The stable owner narrowed his eyes at me. “My animals are amazing. What’s wrong with *you*?”

I opened my mouth to speak when a harsh voice echoed behind me.

“Hey!”

I whirled around to see a giant of a man who pointed a dagger toward me. Glaring, he snapped, “The animals hate him because he’s a fucking *werewolf*.”

**Episode 4708**

“But this is just a map,” Lola said conspiratorially. “The real question is: should we use it to go to the portal?”

I stared at my friend for a long beat, fighting to come up with an answer. The truth was, I hadn’t really thought this through that far. Maybe because I hadn’t believed that Lola would be able to find it so quickly. There was part of me that desperately hoped the Courier would’ve returned with Xavier by now, before I had to make a decision.

*And as everybody knows, I* hate *making big decisions!*

“Go to the portal and do what?” I plopped back on the bed, groaning. “Stare at it longingly while we all shout Xavier’s name?”

Lola shrugged. “It’s at least something, isn’t it? Maybe once we’re there we can figure out a way in or something.”

“And no way out,” I deadpanned.

Lola nodded solemnly, taking my hand in hers. “That’s true. Well, if you try to go in, I’ll stop you.”

I swallowed, taking a deep breath. “Okay, well, while I hate hanging out outside the portal, maybe different beings go in and out. We could try to talk to someone, someone who isn’t the Courier. Maybe they’ll know what to do?”

Lola nodded. “Yes! We can set up a picnic while we wait for people and then question them.”

“And, of course,” I added, “there is always the huge possibility that we will catch the Courier as he comes out with Xavier. That way we can have him turn straight around and take the ring back where it belongs.”

“Love it,” Lola clapped her hands together. “Look at you rationalizing everything and pushing through.”

“I guess I’ve seen you do that so many times it kind of stuck with me,” I admitted.

“This means one thing, and one thing only…” Lola grinned. “Road trip, baby!”

I looked over my shoulder. “Stop yelling about this. Besides, this isn’t going to be a fun trip at all.”

Lola frowned. “Didn’t you hear the part about the picnic? I thought we agreed on that.”

I took a deep breath. “Please remember that it’s highly possible that Adéluce is going to show up and ruin everything for us, Lola. Besides, our destination isn’t exactly Disney World.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “*Fine*, killjoy.”

“I’ll go let Greyson know,” I said, heading to the door.

Lola jumped up, blocking my way with a scoff. “Why would you do that? You *know* he’s not going to let you.”

I huffed. “First of all, Greyson does *not* order me around.”

Lola squinted. “I think that he did try to order you around earlier, while we were outside Big Mac’s house, so—”

“I’m not going to keep this from Greyson,” I said. “That would be lying, and I can’t do that. Aren’t you going to tell Jay?”

Lola shrugged. “He’s on a need-to-know basis.”

“We are going to the demon world portal, Lola,” I said, enunciating each word. “If that isn’t a need-to-know thing, then I don’t know what is.”

Lola sighed. “I promise to think about it. Besides, it won’t matter because Greyson will talk you out of it.”

“Excuse me?” I huffed. “When has he ever talked me out of anything?”

“Oh, come on.” Lola scoffed. “We both know you’d be in the demon world already if it weren’t for him. Always rational, that Alpha.”

I shook my head. “Greyson wants his brother back, too,” I said. “I’ll go talk to him.”

Going down the hallway, I was anxious by the time I reached the front of Greyson’s door. But it wasn’t like Lola was right, and Greyson had ever talked me out of anything. I was a person of my own, bad decisions and all. I had to be honest with him anyway, especially after the whole Xavier-dressing-room debacle.

*There’s no such thing as being too honest.*

“I know where the demon portal is,” I announced after finding Greyson in his study.

Greyson paused and immediately looked up. Arching an eyebrow, he said, “I thought I told you not to get into trouble.”

“I’m not, I’m gathering information,” I said firmly.

He nodded. “I don't even want to know how you found it. But you know I don’t want you to go.”

Lola’s taunts returned full-force, and my annoyance flared up.

“You’re not going to tell me what to do, and I didn’t come here to get your permission,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “We need to get your brother back. It’s as simple as that.”

“I’ve never assumed that you would follow orders, Cali,” he said. “I think all the times you’ve run off with Lola to do what you want are a testament to that.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Greyson sighed, leaning back into his chair. “That’s not what I meant,” he said in a quiet voice. “I was just saying that I’m against you getting so close to the demon world. For a whole bunch of reasons, most of which you already know.”

“I know it’s dangerous,” I admitted, my arms loosening around myself. “But isn’t sitting around doing nothing dangerous, too?”

Greyson glanced at his phone. “We should give the Courier more time. When we called him, he did say he was almost there.”

I huffed, taking a seat in the chair across from him. “But how long is long enough?”

Greyson shook his head, standing up from his chair. He rounded his desk, walked up to me, and then…

He made a move to kneel in front of me.

“Oh no,” I said, standing up from the chair immediately. “Don’t you dare!”

He looked bemused. “What?”

“You, with the kneeling and the eyes and the voice and your—*everything*!” I poked at his chest. “Do *not* try to be all charming and sweet-talk me out of this. I’m probably going regardless of what you say.”

He tilted his head to the side. “‘Probably’ isn’t for sure, is it?”

“*Greyson*.”

His expression sobered up. He took my hand in his. “I love that you think of me as charming, but I’m serious here. I’m just as concerned about Xavier as you are, not to mention I want to get rid of that thing on your shoulder ASAP. But going to the demon world when we know the Courier is there already after we’ve paid him to do it is not—”

“We won’t actually *go* to the demon world,” I said. “We’ll just go to the portal and, like, hang out. Wait for the Courier to come out with Xavier, give him the ring with the ashes, and it’s all done.”

“That’s not a bad idea…” He pressed his lips together. “But what about Adéluce? She’s going to want to get revenge on you, love. I bet the demon portal would be the best place for her to attack.”

I gulped. Greyson leaned closer, tucking my hair behind my ear. Staring deep into my eyes, he muttered, “Can’t you be just a little more patient? Give the Courier a chance to do what we hired him to do?”

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the mighty need to please and soothe him. I found myself nodding before I realized what was happening.

*Aha! This* is *a trap!*

I shook my head to clear it.

“Greyson, no,” I said, taking a step back. “I need to do this. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t,” he said. It looked like he was measuring his every word. “But I know I can’t stop you.”

His expression was blank, but I could sense the frustration and disappointment rolling off him. I wanted to get mad at him, to say that he had no right to make me feel guilty over this, but… he kind of did. He was my mate. He worried.

I had to stay strong.

Reaching up to kiss the corner of his mouth, I murmured, “I just need to do this. I wish you’d come with me.”

His eyes were downcast when I left the room, and I felt sick to my stomach.

*Stay strong, Cali!*

I would.

\*\*\*

Lola had printed out a paper copy of the strange map and studied it while waiting for me in the kitchen.

“So?” she said when I walked in. “How did it go?”

“Just as I told you,” I said seriously. “I’m going.”

She grinned. “Atta girl! You showed him!”

I sighed. “Greyson didn’t try to trap me, Lola. He just worries.”

“I’m sure he does, but I bet he *would* use sex as a weapon if you let him,” Lola declared. Then she ran a finger over the map. “Anyways, this is the route from the Redwood pack house to the portal. If we get going now, then—”

“Going where?” Ava asked. She and Marissa had just walked in, eyeing us in their usual snooty way. She glanced at the map. “What is this?”

“I thought we agreed to wait for Xavier?” Marissa asked.

“We’re done waiting. We’re going to the demon world portal, and this is the map,” I said.

Ava’s eyes flashed with determination. “I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 4709**

**Greyson**

I paced in my study, trying to keep my composure. Cali knew what she wanted to do was dangerous, and she’d thought that I would try to talk her out of it and *succeed*. Which was ridiculous, because I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d succeeded at talking Cali out of anything she’d put her mind to.

I wasn’t going to apologize for worrying about my mate when she wanted to do something that Big Mac and Rowena had repeatedly said should be off-limits. It just made *no fucking sense*.

I paused in front of the window, taking a deep breath.

Okay.

Despite everything, I trusted Cali. She may not think about the details of an operation, but I couldn’t ignore her gut instincts. She wanted to *act*. I understood that wholeheartedly. She just had a different approach than I did. Besides, it wasn’t like I was fucking infallible. Adéluce was still alive, and I was partly to blame.

We needed to find a compromise here.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts.

“Come in,” I said.

Jay entered the room.

“You heard,” I said, matter-of-fact.

“Lola told me,” he replied. “Once her mind’s set on something, she never budges. I won’t even bother to convince her otherwise.”

“Cali’s the same.”

“So what now? We’ll just watch as our mates ride into the sunset toward the demon world?”

“Cali said they’d only go to the portal,” I noted. “Wait for the Courier to come out with Xavier, then give the Courier the ring, and get this over with. End of story.”

Cali was smart. I knew she wasn’t trying to actually go into the demon world. That was thankfully something not on my concerns list.

Jay sighed, clearly agreeing with my private assessment. “Greyson, come on. Things could only escalate from there.”

I rubbed my face, shaking my head. “I know, and that’s why I don’t like it. One minute they’ll be hanging out outside the portal, the next thing we know a demon will come after them, or Adéluce, and suddenly they’re both through the portal and trapped there.”

Jay rubbed his jaw. “That’s what I’m worried about, too.”

I sat down at my desk. “I shouldn’t be underestimating them, though, if trouble arises. They’ve both proved themselves repeatedly.”

Jay cleared his throat. “You know you could still stop them, right?” he said. “You’re their Alpha. They might get mad at you for a while, but they’ll get over it. Both of them.”

“I can’t do that,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t play the Alpha card on Cali. I think of her as my equal, and I want her to be my real Luna one day…” I sighed. “Plus, this has to do with Xavier. It’s a special circumstance.”

Unfortunately for me and the *due destini*.

Jay took a seat across from me. He looked pensive. “It’s just hard when the person you love wants to do something that puts them in danger.”

“That mark on Cali’s shoulder is just another reminder of it,” I said.

“And there’s also Xavier,” Jay said. “Why hasn’t the Courier returned yet? I’m worried.”

We didn’t speak for a long beat, stewing in fear and apprehension.

But, of course, there was an obvious solution here. A risky one, because I was the Redwood Alpha, and I had more people to care for than just Cali and Xavier. But if anything happened to Cali and Xavier and I could’ve prevented it, what good would I be for the Redwood pack? What if Adéluce attacked Cali while she waited outside the demon gate?

That was out of the question.

My decision was made.

“We have to go with them.”

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Cali, Lola, Ava, and Marissa were hunched over a map at the kitchen table. Cali was staring at Lola as she spoke, while Ava eyed Cali only. I wasn’t surprised to see her here. Ava loved Xavier. She’d wanted to decimate the Bitterfang Alpha for harming Xavier, and where Cali acted from a place of worry and frustration, Ava acted from a place of anger, always.

I knew I had to keep an eye on her.

When she spotted me, she raised an eyebrow. Then she said, “Your mate’s here to talk you out of this, Cali.”

“No, Ava, I’m not,” I said. Then I turned to Cali and said, “Jay and I are coming with you.”

Her lips parted in shock before they formed a smile. “Really? You are?”

I nodded, pulling her into my arms. She hugged me tightly, and the relief I felt was giant. It was what she wanted, and it would make me feel better to go.

Lola, meanwhile, was still gaping. “Wait, you guys are really coming?” She gasped. “Or is this one of Greyson’s ploys to stop us from going?”

I had no idea when I’d built a reputation as some sort of scheming mastermind who set up “ploys” and “talked Cali out of things.” But I’d take it if it meant Lola settling down. Embrace the madness and all that.

“No, Lola. No ploys,” I said.

“We want to help get to the demon portal,” Jay said.

“We’re coming along as backup,” I said. “I won’t stop you from going. You two are on lead here.”

“We’re going to the demon gateway? Count me in!” Gabriel’s voice bellowed.

I turned to see him march into the kitchen, Mikah in tow. The vampire looked as long-suffering as ever when he turned to me. “Hanging out by the portal is a bad idea, Greyson. You know this.”

I didn’t say anything because Cali was still hugging me and nuzzling my neck like a cat, and I didn’t want to ruin it. I just gave Mikah a brief nod while Gabriel asked, “When are we leaving?”

Cali gasped, breaking our embrace. “You want to come, too?”

Gabriel grinned. “I’m not gonna miss kicking Adéluce’s ass, and I want to welcome my boy X back.”

“Are we going to kiss and hug or hit the road?” Marissa asked impatiently.

Cali looked up at me. “We need to get the ring back from Big Mac first.”

I told Cali I’d drive her to Big Mac’s and asked everybody else to get ready to go in the meantime.

Gabriel clapped his hands together. “We’re going to the demon portal, baby!”

He and Lola high-fived.

Definitely a red flag.

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“They look happy,” Cali said when I parked the car. Big Mac and Sabine were sitting on Big Mac’s porch, drinking what had to be white chocolate mochas and eating cookies. They looked so domestic it made me smile. This was what I’d always wanted for my mother.

And for myself, too, actually.

“You think it was the true love’s kiss that fixed things between them?” Cali asked.

“Not sure,” I said. “What matters is that they’re okay now. My mom deserves to be happy. They both do.”

Cali smiled. “You’re right.”

“Why are you two back so soon?” Big Mac asked with narrowed eyes a moment later. She was in love, but she was still Big Mac.

After Cali explained that we needed the ring and why, she was no longer happy.

“I’m not giving it to you,” she declared. “This is a suicide mission. Greyson!” She barked my name, and I almost jumped. Pointing at Cali, she said, “Tell her!”

“We won’t try to go into the portal,” I rushed to say. My mother looked vaguely green with worry, so I made sure to direct the next words toward her. “We will only wait outside.”

“Exactly,” Cali said. “No funny business!”

Big Mac sighed deeply before shooting a look at Sabine. My mother sighed as well.

Another red flag.

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“Promise you won’t take unnecessary risks,” Sabine said, looking up at me worriedly.

“I promise,” I said, wrapping her into a hug. She held me tightly. My eyes felt a little funny when she whispered in my ear, “Be careful. I love you.”

“Here’s the ring.” Big Mac plopped it in Cali’s open palm.

Cali clutched the ring tightly, as if she were worried it would fly away.

Big Mac looked between us, her face back to its usual severity. “The spell will block Adéluce from being able to locate it, but it won’t block her from coming after Cali.” She stared at me, only. “Don’t think for a minute that she won’t.”

I nodded. The message was clear. Keep an eye on Cali. It had always been my number one priority, anyway.

“You annoying, stubborn kids had better be careful. Keep your phone on you in case we call,” Big Mac said gruffly. Then she patted Cali’s shoulder and gave me the quickest hug known to man.

I was shocked.

But it had still been a hug, and the way my mother smiled despite her worry would forever be imprinted in my brain.

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“Everybody’s ready,” Jay said. He was holding a travel bag. “Did you get the ring?”

Cali showed it to him once we got to the front porch.

“I guess this is really happening,” he muttered.

Cali gulped. I wrapped an arm around her, reaching to cup her cheek and make her face me. “It’s okay,” I whispered. “I got you. We’re doing this.”

She took a deep breath, nodding. Turning her hand with the ring into a fist again, she looked at my lips, searching for a kiss. I leaned down for her, but then—

The sound of a motorcycle’s engine roaring pulled us both out of it.

When I turned around, I saw—

“*Colton?*”

Colton pulled off his helmet, grinning as he walked toward us. “Long time no see, brother. So what’s the plan to get Xavier’s ass back?”

**Episode 4710**

**Xavier**

This was ridiculous. I wasn’t about to just sit here and have a damn dagger jabbed at me. I was still an Alpha. I was still in charge of myself, even if I was lost in the fucking demon world with a bunch of creatures that looked like they’d been pulled out of a nightmare.

This one was big. Bigger than Ferlin, bigger than me. It looked dangerous, but I didn’t give a fuck. I was sick and tired of this shit. All I wanted was to get the hell out of here and push out of the way anyone who seemed intent on stopping me.

Like this motherfucker in front of me.

“Back the hell off,” I snapped, shoving the man holding the dagger.

He lost his grip, and the dagger fell on the floor. The rattling sound was loud enough to make the demonic camel-horse whinny.

“I’m outta here, and I’m taking Rosalind with me. Let me know when you’re done with this,” the stable owner said, leaving with the fussy creature.

The big guy—the guide—was still staring at me in shock. He looked like he couldn’t believe that I’d dared push the knife out of his hands. But then that was over, and he snarled, revealing multiple rows of jagged teeth. I was going to tear them out one by one and make him swallow them.

At this point, I didn’t give a damn.

“Everybody, relax!” Ferlin jumped in between us when I growled.

“Tell your friend not to wave weapons in my face if you want me to relax,” I snapped.

The guide sneered, showing off his teeth again. “I don’t do business with werewolf mutts!”

“That’s fine,” I spat back. “I don’t do deals with demons in need of dental work.”

The man snarled once more, grabbing the dagger from the ground and pointing it at me over Ferlin’s shoulder. “I’m not a demon, wolf.”

“Then what the fuck are you—other than ugly?” I mocked.

The creature hissed, ready to charge at me again. I went for it, too, fed up with this shit. Ferlin struggled to push us apart, shouting, “Steed, stop! Take it easy, man! My partner is just a little frightened, doesn’t mean what he says.”

He eased the dagger from Steed’s hand.

And now I was seething.

“I’m not fucking scared of him,” I snapped. “I don’t even know what he is!”

“Xavier,” Ferlin said, jaw clenched. “I said take it easy. You don’t want to piss off an important goblin like Steed.”

I paused, eyeing Steed. I snorted. “A goblin? I’m definitely not scared, then. I’ve killed goblins before.”

Steed’s razor-clad mouth turned into an *O*.

“What?” he bellowed, balling his giant hands into fists. He swung one of them at me, but I saw it coming and ducked.

“That’s the best you got?” I challenged.

Ferlin grunted and stepped in again. “Now, now, let’s all take it easy! I didn’t bring you here to fight—I brought you here to do business.”

Steed pointed at me accusingly. Again. “I’m not doing business with a werewolf. End of story.”

I glared at him. “I don’t want to do business with you either, dipshit!”

Ferlin pushed me back, staring at Steed. “Look, I get why you don’t like werewolves. I’ve had to travel a distance with this guy, and it’s been horrible.” He sniffed me pointedly and grimaced. “The odor is atrocious.”

I bristled, grabbing Ferlin by the neck to pull him around. “What the fuck did you just say about me?”

His eyes flashed with warning. He hissed, “Get over yourself and let me work on this.”

I let Ferlin go and breathed hard, forcing my anger down. I needed to keep my shit together here. He was clearly saying what he needed to get this done.

“See?” Ferlin said to Steed. “Werewolves have no manners at all. But helping this guy will help *both* of us.” He pointed between himself and Steed. “We can send the werewolf back into the disgusting human world where he can stink it up instead of ours.”

My hands turned into fists. I was going to make Ferlin pay for his words later. But right now, in order to get out of here, kill Adéluce, and get back home, I would have to put up with this bullshit.

“Fine,” Steed grunted. “What is it that you have to offer?”

Ferlin smiled. “I knew you would bargain. What do you want?”

Steed, the disgusting troll—or goblin, same difference—eyed me with obvious distaste. “I have little use for werewolves. But he’s from the human world?”

Ferlin nodded. “Newly arrived.”

Steed eyed me again. I had to stop myself from punching him in that mouth of his. “I’ll take some of his humanity, then.”

I froze. “What?”

Steed ignored me, turning to Ferlin. “I can get plenty for humanity.”

Ferlin grinned, patting the goblin on the shoulder. “Excellent. Do we have a deal?”

“Hold on one goddamn minute,” I said, stepping between them. “What kind of deal is this? Aren’t you supposed to ask me before you set it up?” I demanded, staring at Ferlin.

“It’s not like you have a choice, Xavier,” he said coldly. “If you want to find the Courier, we need a guide. The guide asked for his price, and that’s it.”

“But what does taking my humanity mean?” I asked. “*Explain.*”

Ferlin let out an impatient huff. “It’s fairly simple. In exchange for helping us locate the Courier, all you have to do is give up a wee bit of your human essence.”

The way he said it made the hair at the back of my neck stand. “That makes no sense. How is it even done?”

Ferlin scowled at me. “Why don’t you just do what you’re told and shut up?”

My voice was a growl. “I’m just asking to figure out what the hell is going on here!”

“Fine.” Ferlin rolled his eyes. “Steed will take some of your humanity through a certain… procedure.” He shrugged. “You won’t feel a thing, and it will replenish over time.”

I frowned. “So, what? It’ll grow back?”

Ferlin nodded. “Think of it as cutting your nails or hair.”

That sounded harmless. So harmless that it sounded awfully fucking suspicious. I eyed Steed, who showed me his rotten teeth again. First of all, fuck him. Fuck Ferlin, too, but I felt trapped here. I realized I would have to agree to anything right now. But when the time came, I would tell them both to go to hell and get back to the damn human world.

If they wanted to come after me for payment, then, let them.

Gabriel would love to kill Steed.

“Fine,” I said through clenched teeth. “Let’s just go.”

Ferlin’s lips twitched into a pleased smile that I didn’t like one bit. “We should mount our beasts and get going, then. Steed—”

The goblin’s meaty hand clamped down onto Ferlin’s shoulder. Squeezing hard. There was part of me that hoped he’d break it and I’d be there to watch and enjoy.

“No,” Steed said. “You’ll pay me first.” He turned to me, his gaze darkening. Leery, almost.

What the fuck?

“No fucking way,” I said. “Take me to the Courier first, and then I’ll pay.”

“You think I’m a rookie, wolf?” Steed sneered. “I know werewolves are tricksters! I won’t be fooled by your kind!”

“It’s not werewolves who are tricksters, it’s Fae,” I said loudly. “Get your shit together!”

“Stop this, right now,” Ferlin said sharply. He grabbed me by the shoulder. “Do you want to get out of here, or not?”

I felt like biting his fucking hand off. “You know the answer to that.”

“Then control your damn temper,” he said. Glancing at Steed, he said, “How about we compromise? You give half the amount now, and then Steed can collect the rest when we reach the Courier.” He gazed between us. “What do you two think?”

I glared at Steed. He glared at me.

“Fine,” he snapped.

“Fine,” I spat. “But how can someone take another person’s humanity? It’s not—”

Steed’s giant meaty paw grabbed at the back of my neck, nails digging in hard enough that I was surprised for a second or two. It was enough for a cylindrical object that tasted like metal to be shoved in my mouth.

I growled, fighting to push it off, but the goblin had me in a tight grip. He held me right at the scruff and pushed the cylinder down, choking me. My eyes watered. I gagged.

And then I couldn’t feel at all.

The cylinder started turning fast like a windmill. It burned through my throat and esophagus while it picked up speed, twisting and rolling. It carved up a space inside me, creating a current that stole my breath. It felt like my insides were being vacuumed clean.

Dark spots flooded my vision. My ears were ringing. My heart raced so fast I thought it would give out. And the cylinder kept twisting, going faster, sucking everything up, like—

Like I’d been tricked.

*Are they draining the life out of me?*

**Episode 4711**

Greyson was clearly stunned as he turned to face Colton, and I couldn’t blame him. I felt the same way. Colton had told Greyson he was coming, but he hadn’t mentioned *when*. And it had been so long since he’d been around, simply seeing him was a shock, in and of itself.

But if he noticed our surprise, Colton didn’t mention it.

Then, without waiting for Greyson to answer his question about how we were getting Xavier back, he turned away.

“Jay!” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

Jay returned the smile, and they threw their arms around each other, slapping each other good-naturedly on the back.

“How are you doing, man?” Jay asked. I could tell how glad he was to see Colton, and vice versa.

Colton finally released Jay and turned to me, scooping me up into a hug so crushing, it nearly squeezed the air out of my lungs.

“How are you, Cali?” he said, setting me down and looking me over. “You look as good as ever, girl.”

I smiled but felt self-conscious.

He grinned at me with a hint of his usual smirk. He looked good, too. He had a short beard, and the angles of his face looked sharper than I remembered. He looked rough around the edges—like he’d really seen and done things now—and it made him look hotter than ever.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of that thought. Objectively, of course, Colton was extremely hot. And admittedly, if *this* was what fatherhood did to the Evers brothers, I had to wonder what would happen if I ever had a child with either of my mates… Would they become hotter versions of themselves, too? Stronger and somehow more powerful?

“So,” I said, snapping out of *that* thought pattern. “You have babies now! Twins, right?”

Colton’s smile changed, and he beamed at me proudly. “Hell yeah. What’s better than one Colton Evers offspring? *Two.*” He shook his head. “Honestly, with the Evers genetics, I’m kind of amazed Maya didn’t have quadruplets.”

*Good lord.*

“Do you have pictures?” Jay asked.

Colton snorted a laugh. “Do I have pictures?”

He pulled out his phone, and I saw his lock screen was a photo of Maya holding two blanketed bundles. He pulled up his photos and started scrolling through literally hundreds of pictures of the twins. Twins eating. Twins bathing. Twins looking at themselves in the mirror.

“That one’s Lyra, and the one with the smirk is Orion,” Colton said with a laugh.

My heart gave a funny lurch as I looked at the photos. The babies were really cute. And there were lots of photos of Maya with a baby in each arm. She looked great, smiling and beaming at the camera.

*Have I ever really seen her smile?*

“How *is* Maya?” I asked.

“Never better,” Colton said. “Though she’s definitely thrilled that I’ve come here and gotten out of her way. She practically pushed me out the door when I told her I was coming—”

“Why don’t we go inside?” Greyson interrupted, and I realized he was looking around, scanning the area.

As we headed toward the house, Colton glanced up at the porch.

“Ava’s here?” he asked darkly, looking up at her as she watched our approach. He shook his head with disgust. “I can’t believe Xavier got back with her.”

I wasn’t sure what to say in response to that. Even now that I knew so much more about what had been going on with Xavier, I still found it hard to believe.

“I mean, you might not be perfect, Cali—a little annoying sometimes, no offense—but *Ava?*” Colton scoffed. “Come on. Did someone replace my brother’s brain with a melon? Has anyone checked?”

“I don’t think so,” I said with the ghost of a smile.

Colton was looking frustrated. “I just can’t figure out what he was thinking.”

I was tempted to tell him just how much I agreed, and I was glad to hear him talking like this. It always felt validating to hear someone else say that Xavier’s abrupt about-face had been as confusing to them as it had been to me. But I really didn’t want to get into it with Colton. There was too much to say, and the topic was way too distracting. I couldn’t focus on any of that at the moment. I needed to concentrate on what really mattered—i.e. getting Xavier back, and finally getting the ashes to the demon realm, once and for all.

Everything else—all my questions about Xavier and Ava—was going to have to wait. And it might have to wait a while, because even if we managed to deal with our *most* life-threatening problems, we’d still have to figure out what to do about Adéluce’s spell, and her chilling threat about what would happen to Xavier if we killed her.

Rubbing my tired eyes, I sighed to myself. There was a lot to tell Colton, but I kept it to myself for the moment. He’d only just arrived, and I didn’t want to overload him. Not yet, anyway.

“I’m just glad you’re here,” I said, smiling up at him. “We can talk about Xavier later, okay? I’ll fill you in on everything you’ve missed.”

“Fair enough,” Colton said.

When we got to the porch, he looked around at the assembled crowd and clapped his hands, his eyes sparkling. “So, where are we going?”

I shot a glance at Greyson, not sure how to respond. There was so much to tell Colton—about Xavier, and about our plan for the demon realm—but I wasn’t sure where to start.

Greyson opened the door and tilted his head, gesturing for everyone to head into the house. “Come on in. We can talk inside.”

Everyone started to file through the front door, but when Colton passed Ava, he stopped.

“Who invited you?” he demanded, his tone harsh.

“Your brother,” Ava responded coolly. Her gaze flicked down, taking Colton in. “And who invited *you*?”

The air on the porch grew thick with tension.

“Yeah, well, my brother can be a real idiot sometimes,” Colton snapped. He looked over at Marissa, who was standing next to Ava. “And who the hell is this?”

Ava’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and my heart rate kicked up. Colton clearly didn’t like the feeling of being left out of the loop on everything that was happening with Xavier, and I understood that, but I couldn’t let him take it out on Ava. I was no fan of Ava’s—and I knew the feeling was mutual—but the fact remained that we needed her. We were going to need her help to get Xavier—*that* was the reason why she was here with us.

“Tell me about the twins,” I said, grabbing Colton’s arm and pulling him inside.

The coldness in Ava’s eyes could’ve shattered steel, but the potential crisis seemed to have been averted, as Colton let me lead him into the house.

“They’re great,” he said, shaking his head like he was trying to shake off the encounter with Ava. “They’re really smart. And they’re so cute. Not just cute, either—like, beautiful,” he added as we walked into the living room. “Even more beautiful than their parents, which is incredible, right?”

Greyson overheard this and rolled his eyes. “Okay, we can talk about how hot you are when we’re in the car, Colton—”

“*Colton?!*”

Lola’s scream interrupted Greyson. She had the map in her hand and was standing in the doorway of the living room, her eyes wide.

Colton laughed. “Lola!”

She raced across the room and threw her arms around him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m here to find out which one of you is pregnant.”

“Oh god,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Why is everyone asking about babies lately?”

Lola rounded on me. “Why didn’t you tell me? Wouldn’t you tell *me* if you were pregnant?”

Before I could say anything in response to this, Gabriel and Mikah walked into the room.

“Who’s pregnant?” Gabriel asked, looking around.

“*Nobody*,” I said firmly, shutting down the speculation in an instant. “No one is having a baby.”

I glared at Colton, but he wasn’t even listening to me—he’d stepped over to Gabriel and pulled him into a bear hug. It was honestly nice to see—their friendship was so solid. The moment would’ve been sweeter if only Xavier had been here with them.

“Okay, everyone!” I said pointedly, seeing that Gabriel and Colton had started shadow boxing in what I assumed had to be some kind of male bonding ritual. “Now that we’re all here, we need to go.”

“Go?” Colton turned to me. “Where are we going? No one’s told me anything yet. You all have to fill a guy in.”

Greyson stepped toward his brother. “Well then, listen up. We’re going to the demon world to rescue Xavier”—he put his hands on Colton’s shoulders, spun him around, and shoved him out the living room door—“and we’re leaving right now.”

**Episode 4712**

**Xavier**

Dark spots swam in my vision as I struggled for air. I was gagging as the cylinder pushed at the back of my throat. I was fighting hard, but I could feel myself weakening. My strength was ebbing, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to stay upright much longer. But there was one thing I knew with absolute certainty—if I was going down, then that backstabbing fucking demon was coming with me.

Blinking hard, I tried to clear my vision, then lunged for Ferlin. But I stumbled, and the demon stepped back, out of reach.

“That should be enough, Steed,” he said. “We don’t want to take away *all* his humanity, do we?”

“Guess not,” Steed muttered. He turned me roughly around, popped the cylinder out of my mouth, and shoved it back into his bag.

I fell to my knees, gasping for air. It took me a moment to recover enough energy to look up and glare at both demons.

“What the fuck did you just do to me?” I rasped.

Ferlin shot a confused glance at Steed, then at me. “Uh, exactly what we agreed on?”

I massaged my throat, which still burned. “I thought the agreement was for me to pay half now and the rest later, when this asshole gets us to the Courier.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Steed said. “I’ll collect the rest when we get you to where you’re going.”

I stared up at him in horrified shock. “Hold the fuck on. Are you telling me that was only *half* of what you’re going to take?”

Anger coursed through me. What the hell was he talking about? I already felt like a wrung-out rag—how much more could they possibly take from me?

As I stumbled to my feet, I felt a sudden rush of energy. It swept away the pain from Steed’s extraction, and I knew that my wolf was stirring within me. I rounded on Ferlin, snarling, and Ferlin took a wary step back. But he was too slow. My hand shot out and I grabbed him by the throat, dragging him toward me.

“You could’ve killed me,” I growled.

“No—no!” he spluttered, and I was gratified to see that now *he* was the one gasping for air. He clawed uselessly at my hand. “You were never in any real danger!”

Next to him, Steed chuckled to himself, slipping the bag over his shoulder.

I released Ferlin with a shrug and glowered at the grinning demon. “I paid, asshole. I held up my end of this garbage bargain. Now it’s time for you to hold up yours. We’re leaving right now, and if we don’t find the Courier, I’ll kill you both with my bare hands.”

Steed held my gaze for a moment, then shrugged his meaty shoulders. “This is why I don’t make deals with werewolves,” he muttered. “Too much damn trouble.”

He climbed onto the back of his camel-horse in one quick motion, and Ferlin did the same thing. Then they both looked down at me.

I was still standing, thinking hard about the terms of this bullshit deal. Maybe I’d been an idiot to agree to this at all. I shouldn’t be putting my faith in a couple of demons. Maybe the best course of action would be to kill them both and find another way to reach the Courier.

*No*. I gave my head a hard shake. I couldn’t think like that. I didn’t know how the hell I’d find my way through the demon world if I tried to make it on my own—however much I wanted to be rid of Ferlin and every other fucking demon in this hideous goddamn world.

My wolf was pacing and howling, pushing me to try to go it alone, but I fought that instinct.

Steed glared down at me. “Hey. Werewolf. I thought you said we had to go right now. Why are acting like we’re the ones holding you up?”

I snarled at the demon, but I knew he was right, so I stepped toward the camel-horse I was supposed to ride. I kept thinking about how it had freaked out when I’d first gotten too close to it, and I was feeling very wary as I got ready to climb on.

The camel-horse shot me a nervous look and shifted on its feet.

Frustration gripped me—I wasn’t going to let this massive freak of nature stop me from getting the hell out of this place. I leaned forward, placing my face close to the camel-horse’s long, pointed ear.

“You fight me, and I’ll fight back,” I murmured. “You got me?”

The camel-horse whinnied, spat, then—miraculously—seemed to settle down. At the very least, it stood still while I climbed on.

“*Finally*,” Steed said heavily. He gave his camel-horse a kick, and it started walking.

Ferlin followed, then I dug my heels into the animal’s flanks and it started to lumber forward, following the swaying backs of Ferlin and Steed.

I looked over my shoulder at the dark barn we were leaving behind, then turned and looked at the landscape beyond Ferlin and Steed’s shoulders. All I could see was desert. Nothing but desert, with the wind whipping the sand up into tiny dust devils. I looked in every direction, but nothing changed. What the hell was up with this place, anyway? Was the whole demon world just one dry, hellish desert? I got the time and distance were fluid here, but I was going to need a few actual answers before we went any farther.

“Where are we going, anyway?” I asked, realizing as I asked that my ass was already hurting from sitting astride the strange animal. “And how long is it going to take?”

Ferlin pointed. “That’s where we’re going.”

I looked at where he was pointing, and spotted something dark and shapeless that stretched out in the distance. It seemed to engulf the horizon I could see.

“What am I looking at?” I asked. “What is that?”  
 “That’s the Wall.”

I groaned in frustration. I fucking *hated* talking to demons. They never answered a question plainly when they could respond with a damn riddle instead.

“Okay, I can see that there’s some kind of wall, but what is it?”

Steed nodded toward the dark stain on the horizon. “That’s where the Courier crosses over into our world from yours. And where he crosses back.”

Before I could think of a response to that, my camel-horse whinnied and shied away from something.

I looked down to see what had spooked the creature and saw that it had stepped away from the head and ribcage of a human-like skeleton. *A demon?* I looked around and saw that there were several more scattered around, half-buried in the sand.

“What’s up with those?” I asked, eyeing the bones that had been polished smooth by the sand.

“The bones?” Ferlin asked casually. “Those are the remains of everyone who tried to reach the Wall but didn’t make it.”

“I offered to help them, of course, but they refused to deal with me and went off on their own,” Steed said with a grim smile. “Too bad.”

I ground my teeth, wishing I could bash that twisted grin off his face.

“I’d better not end up as a pile of bones in this desert,” I growled.

Ferlin smiled. “You worry too much, Xavier. You’ll see—giving up some of your humanity wasn’t such a bad deal, when you compare it to the alternative,” he said, nodding toward the bones on the ground.

I wasn’t so sure about that, and I remained undecided as we moved onward.

We rode in uneasy silence. The heat was nearly unbearable, shimmering all around us, and there was no way for me to cool off. The camel-horse beneath me must’ve been at least a million degrees, so it was like sitting on top of a fucking furnace. But we kept going, moving slowly and laboriously through the desert.

After what felt like hours, Steed began to slow the pace even more.

“What is it now?” I demanded, feeling myself fraying more and more with every passing moment.

Ferlin peered into the distance. “Guards.”

I followed his line of sight and saw what he’d seen—a group of demons was approaching us, all of them mounted on camel-horses.

“What is it now?” I hissed.

“Just let Steed deal with them,” Ferlin said quietly. “You keep your mouth shut.”

The guards approached us quickly, blocking our way, and I felt my stomach tighten. They looked tough—as if they ate demons like the ones I was with for breakfast.

“What business do you have here?” one of the guards barked.

“None of your business,” Steed said coolly. And then, an instant later, he charged toward the line of guards, wielding a strange-looking sword that curved lethally and seemed to glow as he raised it above his head.

He attacked quickly and without mercy, and the guards—caught completely unawares—didn’t even have time to unsheathe their own weapons before he sliced them in half or cut their throats.

When the last guard was dead on the ground, Steed turned and looked back at Ferlin and me. “Well, now we *definitely* need to hurry.”

**Episode 4713**

I shifted, trying to get more comfortable, but comfort was an abstract concept when you found yourself wedged between Jay and Colton in the back seat of Greyson’s car. Greyson was up front, of course, in the driver’s seat, and Lola was sitting next to him, acting as the navigator. She was using her weird map she’d found to guide us—hence her shotgun status—but Greyson didn’t seem convinced of its power.

“Are you sure you’re reading that right?” he demanded after Lola had us turn around for the third time. “Or maybe that map is just a piece of shit. One way or the other, something seems off.”

“Some of my translations might be a little off,” Lola admitted, “but don’t worry about it. I should get us close enough to the demon portal, so everyone just needs to relax and trust the process.”

She sounded tense, and I didn’t blame her. We had no idea what we were heading into, or what was going to happen once we reached the demon portal. We’d tried to plan this out as well as we could, but I knew our plan had holes.

I glanced over at Colton, who was looking out the window, and I felt a pang of guilt. I wished we’d sent the baby gifts before Colton had shown up, so it didn’t look like we’d run out and bought them just because he’d shown up. Though, in our defense, we’d only *just* found out about any of this.

*Those kids will get spoiled their whole lives, it’s fine*, I told myself.

I elbowed Colton lightly. “Hey, thanks for giving us a heads-up about Maya and the twins.”

Colton shrugged. “You know how it is. If it’s not one thing, it’s another.”  
 I rolled my eyes. “I know, but these are your kids! If we’d known, we could’ve been there to help out.”

He pushed a hand through his hair. “Well, Maya and I have been pretty busy since we left the pack…” He trailed off and didn’t seem inclined to go into any more detail about what they’d been busy doing.

“We could’ve been there for you,” I said quietly.

“I know that,” he said. “I know the pack would’ve had our backs if we’d asked.”

I nodded, glad that he’d said so. Despite all the kidding around and the insults—some joking, some not so much—that went on between the Evers brothers, I knew that they were intensely loyal to each other. Though admittedly, I wasn’t completely sure if that loyalty always extended to Xavier and Colton’s older brother.

I glanced at the back of Greyson’s head and my heart ached for him, knowing as I did how much he longed for a closer relationship with his brothers. Silas had been a bastard, and he’d done exactly what he’d set out to do—drive a wedge between his sons.

Maybe if Colton had stuck around a little longer, he could’ve gotten to know his older brother better, like I had.

Though to be fair, Xavier had been around plenty, and that hadn’t seemed to draw him closer to Greyson.

Colton glanced over his shoulder at the car following behind ours, where Ava and Marissa were riding with Gabriel and Mikah. “I notice that Greyson was careful to make sure Ava went in the other car. Does that mean you can tell me what the hell is going on with Xavier, now? There’s a witch after him? Is that it? What’s going on? Why haven’t you killed her yet? Has the Redwood pack taken a ‘no killing witches’ oath or something?”

“It’s… complicated,” I said, not quite sure where to start.

“What’s complicated?” Colton demanded. “What’s even going on?”

Lola twisted around in her seat. “Xavier pissed off a vampire-witch,” she said, then flashed her fangs.

Colton jumped, clearly surprised. “What the *fuck*?” he burst out. Then he narrowed his eyes. “You know, I thought you smelled strange, Lola.”

She glared at him. “For your information, I am now a vampire-werewolf hybrid and know for a fact I don’t smell like death.” She raised an eyebrow. “You got a problem with that?”

Colton chuckled. “No, no problem, Lola. Actually,” he added with a grin, “I have to admit, it’s kind of hot.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Vampires like Adéluce give the rest of us a bad name.”

“So what’s the deal?” Colton asked. “If we know who she is, what’s stopping us from killing her?”

“She’s strong and powerful and, like, really smart,” I said. “Or sly, or whatever it is that makes her so hard to get. And she’s also put a spell on Xavier.”

“What kind of spell?” Colton asked.

“The kind where if we kill her, Xavier dies.”

Colton blew out a long breath. “Okay. *That* kind of spell.” He was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking. “So, what are we going to do to fix this?”

“Well, we’re starting with—”

“TURN HERE!” Lola screeched at Greyson, throwing her arm in front of his face to point to a tiny little avenue I hadn’t even noticed before that exact moment.

“Fucking hell,” Greyson muttered. But he whipped the steering wheel and swept the car across two lanes of oncoming traffic.

Everyone in the back seat was thrown against the left side of the car, and about half a dozen drivers honked at us as we turned onto the small road.

Greyson glared at Lola. “A little less small talk, a little more paying attention to your stupid map. Unless everyone here is looking to die in a car accident today, I’m going to need more of a heads up in future.”

“Sorry,” Lola muttered.

The turn had been so sudden, I wasn’t sure if the other car had been able to make it, so I twisted around to check. But I instantly regretted it—I could see Ava glaring at me icily.

I turned back around, my cheeks burning, and Colton leaned forward, peering over the back of the passenger seat at Lola’s map.

“So, we’re going to the demon world? That sounds like fun.”  
 “*No!*” I burst out, shocked. “We are definitely *not* going to the demon world, Colton.”

“So why are we going to the demon world portal?” he asked.

“We’re going to intercept the Courier—the guy we hired to bring Xavier back,” I told him.

Colton frowned, looking confused. “Wait, what? Why would we do that?”

Lola turned around again, though I saw Greyson glare at her. “So the Courier can take Seluna’s ashes into the demon world, where they belong. That way, Seluna—”

“Who the fuck is Seluna?” Colton asked, and I felt a wild urge to laugh. It was starting to feel like we were telling him the plot of an overly complicated movie.

“She’s the demon Lucian managed to bring back to life.”

“Lucian?” he asked.

Shit, that’s right, he’s been gone. “Another Alpha.”

“Kind of a jackass,” Jay supplied.

“Anyway, Seluna is dead now, but not entirely, unfortunately,” I said, trying to bring things back around to the point.

“But once we get rid of the last of her ashes, hopefully she’ll stop fucking with Cali,” Lola said.

Colton gave a low whistle. “Okay. Yeah, that’s… a lot to take in.” He shrugged. “I guess I’ve missed a *lot* since I’ve been away.”

“You have no idea,” I said, with feeling.

“Yeah?” he asked.

I nodded. “It feels like it’s just been one crisis after another. But I really hope getting rid of the ashes once and for all will put an end to all the drama. With Seluna, at least.” I had to hope this would work. The alternative was too terrible to think about. I couldn’t keep living like this. I just couldn’t.

“All right,” Colton said slowly, obviously trying to absorb all the new information we’d just hurled at him. “But what are we going to do about Adéluce’s spell? I mean, I’d love to kill her, but I was hoping the twins might be able to meet their uncle at some point, and right now I’m not sure how that’s going to happen if Xavier is dead. They need an uncle.”

Greyson glanced at Colton in the rearview mirror. “I’m also an uncle.”

I felt the temperature in the car drop a couple of degrees, but Colton just shrugged casually. “You’re a half-uncle, man. Xavier’s a one-hundred-percent uncle. A real uncle.”

Greyson looked away too quickly for me to see how that comment landed, but I felt its sting, and I cleared my throat.

“Anyway, we haven’t quite figured out what to do about Adéluce,” I said, hustling the subject away from the complexity of the Evers family. “Any suggestions are welcome.”

“Well, we’d better figure it out soon,” Colton muttered.

“STOP THE CAR!” Lola screamed.

My heart seemed to leap into my throat as Greyson slammed on the brakes. Everyone lurched forward, and I had to brace myself against the front seats to avoid hitting them with my face.

“What is it?” Greyson demanded, glaring at Lola.

But Lola didn’t catch his death glare. She was looking down at the map. She frowned, then turned it upside down, then turned it again. “Don’t get mad, but I think I’ve been reading it wrong.”

**Episode 4714**

**Artemis**

I kept my lips pressed to Marius’s, and cracked one eye open so I could peek over his shoulder. My heart was pounding, but I wanted to keep an eye on the three Dark Fae who’d just walked in. They were still by the door, looking around the tavern, and I immediately realized that I wasn’t the only person in the tavern trying to hide my face from the three figures at the door.

A large portion of the tavern’s patrons had developed a sudden and ardent interest in their drinks or were trying to subtly hide their faces behind shawls or scarves. I saw one woman holding up her drink, trying to hide her entire self behind a short tumbler filled with whiskey. At least I wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to be seen.

When one of the guards glanced my way, my heart started beating even harder. I closed my eyes properly and threw myself into the kiss, wrapping my arms around Marius and kissing him with everything I had, trying to bury my face in his and just *praying* that the guards would look away and move on. *Just two horny Fae, nothing to see here…*

Then, after a moment, I started to forget about the guards. Marius’s hands were moving on me, and suddenly, all I could think about was those hands, and his body, and his lips, and the heat of his mouth as his tongue pressed against mine.

I’d just shifted in my chair to get even a little closer to him when he pulled away, his face flushed, almost looking a little angry.

“That’s enough of that,” he said, breathing like he’d just been running. “You keep doing that, and we’re going to have a problem, Ari.”

It was my turn to flush, and I shoved him away. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the wild thoughts streaming through my brain. “Don’t get too excited—I meant what I said last night. And I only kissed you to avoid being spotted by the Dark Fae. So don’t lose your head.”

Marius raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Really? That’s the *only* thing you were thinking about during that kiss? I don’t know…” He smirked. “You must’ve been working on your acting skills, Ari, because that felt pretty genuine to me.”

The smirk on his face infuriated me because it was so *knowing*—as if all my thoughts were scrolling across my forehead like an electronic billboard.

I looked away, anxious to break eye contact. My gaze went to the Dark Fae guards, who were now sitting at a table at the opposite end of the tavern. I was glad to see that they’d stopped looking around. It seemed that they were now only interested in the pretty waitress. Not that I blamed them—the waitress was beautiful.

Gods, what the hell was *that*? The waitress was beautiful? What was I thinking? Ever since I’d run into Marius, my mind kept wandering off into places that were best left alone.

I got to my feet. “We should go,” I said in a low voice.

Marius frowned. “Go? No! We can’t go. What about breakfast? It’s the most important meal of the day, Ari—”

“Breakfast can wait,” I growled, grabbing his arm and hauling him after me as I headed toward the door.

I kept my eyes straight ahead, willing the Dark Fae guards not to look at me.

Somehow my prayers were answered, because they didn’t so much as glance over as we walked out the door.

“But I’m *hungry*,” Marius whined as we emerged from the tavern. “I *need* breakfast. I’m really not myself until I eat something.”

“Oh my gods, shut *up*,” I hissed.

“That’s easy for you to say—but when my blood sugar drops, watch out,” he said, shaking his head grimly.

I cast a glance around. “There,” I said, pointing to a peddler standing in front of a card laden with strange-looking meat. “There’s your breakfast. Go buy something from him. And hurry up.”

Marius looked over to where I was pointing, and his eyes widened. “Ari. You have to be kidding me. I can’t eat that!”

“Honestly, I don’t give a damn what you eat, or even whether you eat at all!” I exploded, finally pushed too far. “What the hell is wrong with you? We’re not on a fucking food tour, Marius. Have you forgotten the actual reason why we’re here?”

Marius sighed in a long-suffering way, then headed over the peddler. I watched as he eyed the meat, which was hanging on hooks. His face turned a little green as he examined it, but he finally pointed at something that looked like it might’ve died a century or two ago. The peddler stuck the meat onto a stick, and then Marius walked back to me, looking disgusted.

“Well, I think this is the lowest I’ve ever sunk,” he said dourly. He sniffed the meat, then pulled off a chunk and offered it to me. “The least you can do is try it first.”

Enraged, I slapped the meat away. “Get that out of my face! Now that you’ve got your precious breakfast, you little orchid, we have to go.”

“Why?” Marius asked.

“I want to get out of here before we run into any more Dark Fae,” I said, glancing nervously down the lane.

When I looked back at Marius, he was eyeing me curiously.

“What?” I snapped.

“What happened to you, Ari?” he asked.

“What are you talking about?”

He shook his head, looking perplexed—like he was trying to solve a complicated riddle. “You never used to be so afraid. What changed?”  
 “I learned that my father was alive,” I snapped. “And—for the record—there’s a difference between being afraid and being willfully stupid and reckless.”

He gave me an assessing look. “It’s nice to see you haven’t lost any of that caustic wit I love so dearly.”

“Right back at you,” I muttered.

“Well,” he said with a sigh, taking a big bite of the tough meat and ripping it off the stick, “if we’re going to go, then let’s go.”

He led the way toward the inn’s stable, where he climbed onto the back of the horse. I frowned, but knew I didn’t actually have a choice, so I climbed on, too, situating myself in front of him.

We headed out of town, Marius still gnawing on his meat stick. I suspected he was taking his time with it because he thought it would annoy me… And he was right.

“Stop chewing in my ear,” I growled.

He leaned closer to me. “What *would* you like me to do with your ear?”

I elbowed him, hard, and was satisfied to hear a pained grunt. “Shut up.”

He was never going to shut up, and we both knew it. He chuckled to himself and kept chewing on the meat, making satisfied noises with every bite.

“You know, I’m confused,” he said after a while.

“Big surprise there,” I said, looking around. We were moving away from the populated lanes where people tended to gather, but I didn’t know if that made us more or less vulnerable to attack. Seeing those Dark Fae in the tavern had set me on edge, and I couldn’t relax.

“It’s just that you keep kissing me—and snuggling me—but then you go and dream about someone else. What’s up with—”

“I told you,” I snapped, “I don’t want to talk about that. And stop talking about that stupid kiss. It didn’t mean anything other than what it was—a means of hiding my face from the Dark Fae. Nothing else, so drop it.”

That was true, but I also had to firmly remind myself that I could *not* fall for his roguish charm again. No matter what.

What bugged me about his teasing was that he was right—that kiss had started out as a defensive diversion, but it had ended as something else altogether, and that made me feel guilty.

Of course I felt guilty. How could I not? Rishika had implied that she would wait for me to come back from the Fae world, no matter how long I was gone.

But… who was to say that Rishika wouldn’t get tired of waiting? I didn’t know how long I’d be away, or how long it would take me to find the answers I was looking for. What if Rishika met someone else? What if she met her mate?

That question was always pricking at the back of my mind, but I knew I needed to get ahold of myself. This nonsense with Marius just felt… fast. Like no time at all had passed since I’d last seen him. Like we’d picked up right where we’d left off.

Which wasn’t good. There was a reason why I’d pulled away from him, back then.

I suddenly became aware that—behind me—Marius had tensed up. He’d stopped chewing, too, and I felt his arms tighten around me.

“What is it?” I asked, my heart rate ticking up.

“Be careful,” he warned.

“Why?”

“Because we’ve just crossed into the war zone.”

**Episode 4715**

**Xavier**

Ferlin and Steed had picked up the pace, urging our camel-horses on through the howling desert landscape. We’d left the dead guards behind to add to the collection of skeletons buried in the sand, but we had to travel for what felt like a long time before I stopped hearing their riderless camel-horses whinnying.

The Wall—dark and massive—loomed in front of us, and the closer we got, the harder my heart beat. As we approached, it seemed to get bigger and bigger until it absolutely *towered* over us. I blinked as I looked up at it, trying to keep my head from spinning, and twisted around to look down the length of it. It seemed to go on forever, an unbroken line. I didn’t see any doors, or any other means to pass through it.

“What the hell?” I snapped, my tone made sharper by the prickling of panic in my chest. “So what now? How am I supposed to get through this?”

We’d been riding along the length of the wall, but Ferlin suddenly pulled his camel-horse to a stop, looking around quickly.

“What is it?” I asked, my senses on high alert.

His eyes were wide. “We’ve got more trouble. Someone’s coming.”

I looked around and saw that he was right; another squad of guards was approaching, and this group somehow looked even *more* intimidating than the last.

The guard who was riding at the apex of the formation held up a fist, and the group came to a stop.

“What happened to the guards I sent to meet you?” he demanded.

Steed looked at Ferlin. “Guards?” he asked, feigning innocence. “Did we see any guards?”

“Nope,” Ferlin said, lying easily. “Didn’t see a soul out there. You must be confusing us with someone else.”

The leader of the guards looked over at me, his eyes narrowing. “Explain what a werewolf is doing here.”

Every muscle in my body tensed up. What was the deal with this place? Why did demons have such a problem with werewolves? What had we ever done to them?

All I wanted was to get the fuck out of here—I would’ve thought they’d be happier to see me hanging out near the exit, seeing as we both wanted me to leave.

“Well, you see,” Ferlin started, “it’s kind of a funny story. We were—”

“Silence!” The head guard glared at me. “I asked the werewolf.”

“I’m just passing through,” I said tightly, fury coursing through me.

The guard chuckled darkly. “Nobody passes through here. Not without a courier.”

The silence that followed statement was thick and tense. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Steed moving stealthily, in a way that I knew meant he was reaching for his sword.

“You three had better come with me,” the head guard said, his tone inviting no discussion.

“I don’t think so,” Steed hissed. He drew his sword and brought it down in a wide, lethal swing, killing the guard closest to him.

Once again, Steed moved so quickly that for a moment, the other guards were too stunned to react. But then the next moment, all hell broke loose.

The guards surged, drawing their own swords, and Steed leapt off his camel-horse to fight, swinging his blade and roaring ferociously.

As he did, Ferlin pulled his camel-horse back, retreating a few steps.

Internally, my wolf was going crazy. Pacing and howling and clawing to be let loose. He wanted me to fight, and before I was fully aware of what I was doing, I was shifting. I leapt down from my own frightened camel-horse and landed on the ground—but *not* on all fours.

I looked down, baffled. What the hell was happening? I’d heard the crack of bones, I’d felt myself shift—so why the fuck was I still standing on two human legs?

When I looked down, I saw that I’d fully shifted everywhere else, leaving me looking like a reverse werewolf centaur. But I didn’t have time to be horrified about that, because one of the demon guards lunged toward me. With a bellow, he struck me with something that burned my skin as it made contact.

Snarling, I lashed out at the guard, head-butting him and knocking him back, trying to get used to the half-and-half form I’d taken. This definitely wasn’t an appropriate moment for training wheels, so I fought to get used to it as I advanced on the guard. Luckily, my wolf was in his element, and he easily took the reins. The hunger to kill washed through me like quenching rain. I was so fucking *sick* of being pushed around by demons—it was time to fight back.

I lunged toward the demon guard, sinking my teeth into its neck and tearing. I went for the chest next, then made my way across the thing’s body, tearing it apart. The demon’s blood sizzled when it fell to the sand at our feet. I could taste the bitter tang of it, and it felt good on my tongue. I wanted to do it again, and I’d just turned to the next guard when a section of the wall just in front of us began to shimmer.

For a moment, everyone stopped and turned to see what was happening. An instant later, the air was filled with the sound of a roaring motorcycle.

The Courier blasted through the wall, then his bike slid to a screeching halt right in front of us, kicking up a curtain of sand.

The motorcycle seemed to stun the guards, and they all stopped to stare at it, including the guard just in front of me. Seeing this as an opportunity, I grabbed the guard with my paws, cut his throat with my claws, and let him crumple to the ground, dead.

Inside me, my wolf howled with pleasure.

There was only one guard left in the group, and Steed dispatched the demon with his sword, casually tossing the body aside.

The Courier looked around, his mirrored helmet gleaming in the low light of the demon realm.

“What’s all this about?” he rumbled, taking in the carnage.

Steed shrugged, then licked the blood from his sword with one long swipe. “They had questions we didn’t want to answer.”

The Courier eyed me. “That’s a strange-looking demon.”

Annoyed, I ground my sharp teeth. But when I tried to shift back to my human form, I couldn’t.

“Fuck,” I muttered. Then I caught myself, shocked that I was still able to speak, even though my head and throat were in my wolf form. It probably had something to do with trying to shift in the demon world—everything was all screwy. One more very good reason to get the hell out of the place.

“I’m not a fucking demon,” I snapped at the Courier.

The Courier managed to look shocked through his helmet. He drew his head back, and I could hear the surprise in his voice. “I know you, don’t I?”

“I’m Xavier Evers,” I said. “We hired you to bring the ashes back.”

The Courier nodded. “That’s right, that’s right. Well, aren’t you the lucky little wolf? I was hired to bring you back.”

Now it was my turn to be surprised. “Who hired you?”

“You got yourself some pretty good friends back in the human world,” he said.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

The Courier flipped open one of his saddle bags and pulled out a piece of paper. As he unfolded it, I recognized it as one of his contracts. I’d signed one myself, once—for all the good it had done me.

“Those friends agreed to give up fifteen years of life to get you back,” the Courier told me.

My stomach dropped. I looked down at the contract the Courier was holding out and saw Greyson’s signature, then Cali’s, then Ava’s.

I couldn’t breathe. *Fifteen years?* Why the fuck had they done that?

My head spun. What if I got out of this damn place and Adéluce found out and sent me right back again? Would the three of them have thrown away years of their lives for nothing?

I felt anger and frustration course through me, but this time, it was aimed at myself. I was why they were in this mess. If I hadn’t taken that damn job all those years ago, I might not be in this mess either.

“Well, you’re here, so that makes my job pretty easy,” the Courier said, folding the contract and stowing it in his bag. He patted the back of his motorcycle. “Hop on.”

I didn’t move.

“I don’t have all day,” he growled.

I had to do this—the fifteen years had already been paid. Staying here wouldn’t change that. But when I started forward, Ferlin moved with me.

“What?” I asked.

“There’s been a change of plans,” he said.

“What change of—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Ferlin drew his sword and swung it into the Courier’s neck.

**Episode 4716**

**Ava**

“And there’s the tallest tree in Oregon,” Gabriel said, pointing at a pine tree. A pine tree that—for the record—looked *exactly* like every other pine tree we’d passed. “And we’re about to pass Highland Falls, which has the world’s largest barber pole. Seventy-two feet high. The next largest barber pole is nearly half that height, and it’s in Texas, which makes it totally irrelevant.”

I ground my teeth with frustration. Mikah was driving, and Gabriel was sitting next to him in the passenger seat—and he was driving me crazy. He was just so *chipper*, and he kept pointing out landmarks, like Marissa and I had signed up for some kind of shitty “history of Oregon” tour.

Leaning back in my seat, I sighed and looked out the window. Marissa cleared her throat.

“So, Xavier’s brother—”

“His twin.”

“Okay, his twin,” Marissa amended. “I couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t seem to like you.”

“Well, the feeling’s mutual.” I shook my head. “He’s just an overgrown frat boy—despite never having been in a frat. He’s ridiculous. Thinks the world is just one big joke.”

“Still, he sure is easy on the eyes,” Marissa noted.

I rolled my eyes. “Xavier got all the looks in the Evers family.”

Marissa cleared her throat again but didn’t look like she was interested in arguing that point any further. “Hey, it’s none of my business, but why don’t you two like each other?”

“What?” I asked, looking over in surprise.

“You and Colton,” Marissa clarified. “He’s your mate’s brother. I mean, you grew up together, right? Were you two always enemies?”

That question hit me hard, because the answer was no, Colton and I *hadn’t* always been enemies.

“There was a time when we were friends,” I said, a wave of familiar sadness washing over me. “Me and Colton.”

“Really?” Marissa asked, surprised. Then a look of understanding crossed her face. “Oh. Right.”

Yeah, the fact that I’d killed his mother. I hadn’t only betrayed Xavier in that moment, but Colton, too. Of course, he was still mad about it. Plus, he hadn’t seen me since we’d fought Silas.

“Yeah.” I nodded grimly. I didn’t like talking about that, and I regretted it every day. Silas had sought out to create chaos during the first pack war, and he’d succeeded. Everything had been so crazy, and my brother Nolan had needed the Samaras to go on the defensive. It was pack above all else. And I’d believed in it. I’d believed in my brother over my own mate. That was the reality of the situation. But the past was the past, and I was moving on. I’d learned to forgive myself for what I’d done. At least somewhat.

“Xavier eventually figured out a way to forgive me for what happened, but Colton…” I shook my head.

“Not yet?” Marissa asked.

“I doubt he’ll even try.”

“Well, that’s his loss,” Marissa said stoutly.

I appreciated her support, and I gave her the ghost of a smile. “When we were growing up, the three of us used to hang out all the time. We were always messing around, getting into trouble. Even after Xavier and I got together, Colton would still come around with him sometimes, just to hang out.” I sighed. “But when I got back from the spirit world, things were different. He was just so cold to me—and he hasn’t thawed at all.”

“And then he left?” Marissa asked.

I nodded. “I was honestly glad when he left for good, chasing after Maya. Let her deal with him. As far as I’m concerned, Colton’s a lost cause.”

Marissa started to laugh, but she was cut short by a loud bang. I looked out the windshield and saw the car in front of us—the one Greyson was driving—swerve wildly, then pull off to make a sudden stop on the shoulder.

Mikah swore under his breath and braked hard, then pulled in behind him.

“Looks like they blew out a tire,” Gabriel said, eyeing the car’s rapidly deflating rear tire.

Mikah unbuckled his seat belt and opened the door.

“What are you doing?” Gabriel asked.

Mikah looked back at him. “I don’t know, I thought I’d try something really radical and maybe help them change the tire.”

He climbed out and shut the door behind him.

Gabriel shook his head. “Mikah’s way too nice.” Then he twisted around in his seat to grin at Marissa and me. “Which is part of what makes him so damn sexy. Alright, I’d better go, too—don’t want to miss the show.”

I groaned and rubbed my head.

“You good?” Marissa asked warily.

“I just hope it’s not too much farther to the demon portal, because I can’t take much more of this road trip from hell. It was bad enough that Cali was coming along, but then fucking Colton showed up and managed to make it so much worse. Which I didn’t even know was possible.” I shook my head. “Honestly, if things get any shittier, I might ask the Courier to take me into the demon world and leave me there, just to get away from this clown show.”

Marissa laughed. “Maybe we should go see what’s going on.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

I pushed my door open and climbed out.

Jay and Lola were crouching by the tire, looking at it closely. I crossed my arms, feeling annoyed that we were facing yet another delay. We needed to hurry, and everyone was looking at that damn tire like it was the most perplexing thing in the world.

“What are you looking for?” I snapped at Jay and Lola. “And why are we all just standing around? The tire’s shredded—everyone can see that. So just replace the thing so we can get moving. We’re in a bit of a time crunch, in case anyone’s forgotten.”

“I’ll get the spare from the trunk,” Greyson muttered, moving around the curious crowd.

While he pulled the spare from its hiding place under the upholstery, Colton leaned down next to Jay to examine the shredded rubber.

“Are we thinking Adéluce did this?” he asked.

I snorted.

“What?” Colton snapped, looking up at me.

“You’re literally the only person who would think that,” I told him.

“What the hell does *that* mean?”

“Listen, Colton, I don’t know what they told you about this vampire-witch, but she doesn’t fuck around,” I said. “For Adéluce, taking out a tire would be the equivalent of leaving a thumbtack on the teacher’s seat—and that’s not her style.”

“But if she wanted to stop us—”

“If she wanted to stop us, she could’ve just snapped her fingers and blown up the car, man. And she wouldn’t have given it a second thought,” I told him flatly.

Colton looked flummoxed by this, and I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of the car exploding and taking Colton—and Cali—out of my life for good. I knew I was venturing into real anti-social territory, there, but I was just so anxious to get going and find Xavier.

“I’ll take the jack,” Jay said, standing and accepting the tool from Greyson.

“Put it there,” Lola said, pointing to a spot in front of the tire.

“It goes here,” Jay said, putting the jack just behind the flattened tire.

“Are you kidding? It goes here,” Lola insisted, pointing more insistently. “There’s a plane of exposed metal that’s literally made for this purpose. Watch as I start to jack up the car, and it rises into the air, almost like magic, but not, because it’s just basic physics.”

Jay rolled his eye. “I hate doing car repair with you. You know that, right?”

Colton leaned against the car and pulled out his phone. I figured he was probably checking in on Maya and the babies. God, I didn’t envy Maya, but at least Colton was *pretending* to care about them while he was away.

“Colton!” Lola snapped as Jay fiddled with the jack. “If you’re not going to actually help with anything, get your heavy ass off the car.”

Colton looked up and happened to catch me watching him. We locked eyes for a moment, then he put his phone away and walked toward me.

Marissa noticed this and glanced at me. “You want me to stick around and referee?”

“No,” I told her, bracing myself. “I can handle Colton all on my own.”

“Okay,” Marissa said, then—with a quick glare at Colton—she walked away.

My shoulders tensed as Colton approached. He stopped in front of me and just stood there, like he was waiting for me to speak first.

“What?” I demanded.

“You tell me.”

I set my jaw. “I suppose you’re waiting for me to congratulate you on successfully breeding.”

“Not at all,” he said, shaking his head. “The only thing I want is for you to stay the hell away from my brother.”

“God, not this again,” I muttered. “It may have escaped your attention, Colton, but Xavier is a grown man, and he’s made up his mind about what he wants—and that happens to be me.”

Colton’s eyes flashed. “I know what you really are, Ava. And once we get my brother back, I’m going to make sure that he sees it, too.”

**Episode 4717**

**Xavier**

I just stood there, frozen with shock as the Courier crumpled to the ground. His head—still encased in his mirrored helmet—was partially detached from his body, and it lolled to the side as his blood pooled in the sand. The smell of it hit my nose immediately, making my hackles rise.

The hot wind of the demon desert blew against my back, and there was a ringing in my ears. What the *hell* had just happened? One second the Courier had been gesturing for me to get on his bike so he could take me back home, and then the next…

I rounded on Ferlin. “What the *fuck* did you do that for?!” I roared.

Unfazed by my anger, Ferlin stepped away from me and grabbed the Courier’s helmet.

“Give me a hand, would you?” he asked, looking up at Steed. “It’s stuck.”

Steed didn’t move a muscle. He looked so baffled that it was clear he’d been in the dark as well. He just stared down at Ferlin as he struggled with the helmet.

I leaned down, getting right in Ferlin’s face and roughly grabbing his shoulders. “Forget the fucking helmet and answer my question. Why the fuck did you do that? What about me? How am I supposed to get out of here now?”

With a loud grunt, Ferlin ripped the Courier’s head free of his lifeless body. He stood and shook the helmet until the head fell out. It rolled across the sand and came to rest at my feet, and I saw the Courier’s face—at least the face he’d had on this time—and he’d had long, greasy hair, and a grizzled face etched with deep lines. Was this his real face?

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snapped, looking away from the staring eyes.

Ferlin stared at me for a moment like I was an idiot. “What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with *you*? I’m in the demon world for a reason, Xavier. I’m a demon. Get used to it.”

“We had a deal,” I growled, furious. I gave Ferlin a shove, but he pushed my clawed hands away like I was barely an annoyance.

“Do you *mind*?” he demanded.

My wolf was growing steadily angrier. He’d been set loose when I’d shifted, and now he was furious, begging me to attack again.

Instead, I turned to Steed. “Did you know about this?”

“Hey, this isn’t my problem. I’m not that asshole’s keeper,” he said, nodding toward Ferlin. Then he pulled his bag around to his chest and flipped it open, pulling out the glass cylinder. “Come here. You still owe me.”

My fury was growing with each passing moment, and I felt like it was about to hit critical mass. When Steed took a step toward me, I knocked the cylinder out of his hand.

“You’ve got to be fucking *kidding* me,” I hissed. Did that asshole really think I was going to give him any more of my humanity?

“Hey!” Steed bellowed.

Ferlin wasn’t paying any attention to us. He was holding the helmet, gazing at it admiringly. He ran his hand along the inside of it, wiping out the blood the Courier had left behind, which he then wiped on his pants. He slid the helmet onto his own head and sighed contentedly.

“*Finally*. I can’t believe it. After all this time, it’s finally mine,” he said, his voice low and awed.

It was at that moment I realized the severity of my situation. This had been Ferlin’s plan all along. I’d only ever been a pawn. Ferlin had used me to get to the Courier. And I could tell from the stunned expression on Steed’s face that he hadn’t seen this coming any more than I had.

Ferlin had never had any intention of helping me.

Fun Guy’s words came back to me, hitting me like punches to the gut. I should have trusted Fun Guy—he was the only demon I’d ever met who’d told me the truth.

Rage surged in my chest and I charged toward Ferlin, howling with fury, focused on the demon’s throat. I’d almost reached him when pain exploded at the back of my head like a firecracker. I heard a metallic thud, and the impact reverberated through my head as I crumpled to the ground.

I flipped over as waves of agony crashed over me and saw Steed towering above me, the glass cylinder in his hand—though now, it was smeared with my blood.

My head was throbbing with pain, and I could feel hot blood running down my neck.

Steed bent and grabbed my cowboy shirt, yanking me to my feet. “Pay up, werewolf!”

He tried to stuff the cylinder into my mouth, fighting hard when I resisted. My head was still spinning from the blow, so it took me a moment, but I managed to shove him away. But he was determined, and he grabbed me again, pinning my arms down firmly.

Behind us, I heard the motorcycle’s engine sputter as Ferlin climbed on and kickstarted it. It died immediately. He tried again, with the same results.

I snarled with rage, which seemed to give Steed pause. He hesitated for a moment, slightly loosening his grip on my arms.

“You need to get the fuck out of my way,” I growled at him. “I don’t give a shit about you—it’s Ferlin I’m after.”

For an instant, I thought Steed was going to listen and let me go, but then he set his jaw and tightened his grip on me again.

“Forget it,” he hissed. “You owe me, and I want what I’m owed. I’ll be taking the rest of my payment, one way or another. I can still collect your humanity as you die, werewolf.”

Ferlin kickstarted the motorcycle again, and this time it roared to life.

Fury mixed with panic—I couldn’t let him get away.

I lunged for Ferlin, and had nearly reached him when Steed’s giant hands wrapped around my arms and yanked me backwards.

“My payment!” he bellowed.

But I’d officially had enough. I spun around and leapt, landing on Steed and driving him to the ground. I knelt on top of him, pinning him down. My wolf was beside himself and seemed to take over completely, only allowing a *tiny* corner of my rational brain to keep functioning.

“You shouldn’t have taken so much of my humanity,” I snarled at Steed, baring my teeth. “You didn’t leave me enough for me to show you any mercy.”

Steed’s eyes flashed, and I saw his anger turn to fear, then to panic—but I didn’t give a shit. Leaning down, I sank my teeth into his neck and yanked, ripping out his throat. I felt his body convulse, but that didn’t even slow me down. My wolf was in charge now, and I couldn’t stop him—not that I wanted to. I ripped the demon’s body to shreds, still working long after I knew the bastard was dead. When I finally stepped away, the demon’s blood was everywhere. I watched as it pooled for just a moment on the burning sand before it was sucked downward, leaving nothing behind but a series of muddy-colored stains.

I spat onto the ground and wiped my mouth, trying to get rid of the bitter tang of the demon’s blood. The haze of violence was still hanging over me, so it took me a moment to remember…

“*Ferlin!*” I hissed, spinning around.

I scanned the landscape until I spotted the demon, who’d taken off on the Courier’s motorcycle. He’d clearly never driven one in this demonic little life and was swerving wildly on the sand. I took off after him, wishing I’d managed to fully shift, so I could’ve run even faster.

The one thing I had going in my favor was the fact that Ferlin was a total mess on the bike. I was gaining on him and was close to overtaking him when I realized he was heading straight for the Wall.

“Stop! You’re going to crash! *Stop!*” I bellowed.

But Ferlin either didn’t hear me or just flat-out ignored me, because he gunned the engine. I stopped to watch what I expected to be a horrific crash, but to my surprise, Ferlin didn’t hit the Wall—he went straight through it, disappearing into a shimmering halo of light.

“What the fuck?”

I sprinted after him. The light was still shimmering, and I threw myself toward it, praying I’d make it through before whatever portal Ferlin had just used disappeared.

I hit the Wall hard. Pain shot through me like lightning, and I was thrown backward onto the hot sand. I grabbed for any kind of purchase in the sand but kept on sliding. Eventually I stopped and staggered to my feet.

When I looked up, the Wall was solid once again, and, looking around, I realized I was completely alone.

In the demon world.

With no way to get out.

**Episode 4718**

When I looked around, I spotted Colton talking to Ava. I couldn’t see Colton’s face, but I could see Ava’s, and whatever he’d just said to her, it had pissed her off.

I felt a shudder run through me as I took in the icy look in her eyes. In my experience, making Ava mad didn’t require much, but it was certainly a dangerous move.

As I watched them, Colton—apparently finished with whatever conversation they were having—stepped away and walked back over to me.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

Colton shrugged casually. “Nothing. Just catching up.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what the deal is with my brother, but this thing with Ava is no good.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I wasn’t about to argue with that statement, but I had my reasons for wanting Ava here.

“Can you at least *try* to get along with her?” I asked. “You must have liked her at some point, right? And we might need her help.”

“I don’t get it,” Colton said, frowning at me as he dodged my question about the past. “Doesn’t it bother you of all people that she’s here? Doesn’t it bother you that Xavier went back to her?”

The question hit me like a slap across the face, and I bit my lip.

“It bothers me more than you could possibly know,” I whispered, trying to fight back tears that sprang to my eyes. “But I want to help Xavier, and I want that more than I want to punish him. So I can’t think about any of the other stuff. Not now. We just have to focus on getting him back.”

Colton leaned against the car with a sigh. “I guess I’m just pissed. Xavier didn’t even bother to tell me about Ava until, like, this *week*. Didn’t say a word about going back to her, or about *any* of this stuff.”

“You knew she was back, though, right?” I asked, trying to remember what had happened before Colton had left, and what had happened afterward.

“Yeah, I knew she was back, but the last time I saw her before I left, Xavier still despised her—and with good reason,” he said.

“Will you just *let me* *do it*,” Lola growled. She grabbed the jack from Jay and put it in front of the wheel, then started pumping it. The car began to rise off the ground.

“Finally,” Greyson muttered. He’d been watching Jay and Lola argue but had seemed uninterested in getting involved. He crouched down and started removing the bolts that were holding the shredded tire in place.

Jay stood up and rolled over the spare, then helped Greyson set it in place.

I looked down at the ruined tire. It was nearly unrecognizable. The rubber lay in ribbons around the steel frame. I shuddered. “I just hope this isn’t some kind of omen for our mission.”

Colton snorted dismissively. “No way.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I don’t believe in omens,” he said confidently.

“You don’t?”

“Nope. If I did, I doubt Maya and I would’ve ended up together,” he said knowingly. “There were so many damn obstacles in our way you wouldn’t believe it even if I told you. Sometimes I still can’t believe the shit we went through together. But we’re here now.”

I took that in. “Do you have any regrets?”

“Are you kidding?” Colton demanded, grinning. “No fucking way. She’s super hot.”

“Okay, the tire’s fixed,” Greyson said, getting to his feet. “Let’s get going.”

I turned to Lola, who was wiping her hands on her jeans. “And you’re sure you’ve got the map figured out now?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Cali, if I can hack into the CCU student database, I think I can read a map, okay?”

“So you’re admitting that’s how you got us enrolled?” I demanded.

Lola gave me an innocent look that didn’t fool me for a moment. “I never said that. Anyway,” she added hurriedly, “we should go.”

“Lola, you need to tell me what you—”

Lola hurried away, grabbing Jay and towing him after her.

I stared after her for a moment, then I just shrugged with a weary sigh and followed. I supposed now wasn’t the best time to address Lola’s wildly illegal admissions shenanigans.

“Hey,” Greyson said quietly as I approached the car. “How are you holding up? You look pale.” He ran a gentle hand down my cheek.

“I’m fine,” I said. “And I’m determined to see this through. Xavier’s in the demon world, and he needs our help. And we have to get Seluna’s ashes out of this world, once and for all.”

The worried look didn’t leave Greyson’s face as he looked down at me. He pulled me close, wrapping me up in a hug. “You didn’t have to come, you know. You could’ve stayed back at the pack house.”

I pulled back so I could look up at him. “Greyson, you know I’d never agree to that.”

He gave me a small smile. “I know,” he said with a sigh.

He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. It was gentle and reassuring, and a warm feeling swelled in my chest. I was so glad Greyson was here with me, supporting me and loving me—

“*Hello!*” Lola yelled at us from inside the car. She rapped on the window and held up the map. “Are we going or what?”

Moment over. Greyson gave me one last squeeze, and we both climbed back into the car. Once everyone was in, he started the engine and we pulled back out onto the road.

As we drove, my thoughts kept drifting back to the blown tire. The image of the shredded rubber just refused to leave my mind.

Ava was right—it made no sense that Adéluce would try to stop us with something like that. I’d seen what she could—and *would*—do, and a blown tire seemed like small potatoes. A fiery crash seemed much more on-brand.

But this thought only served to put me more on edge than ever.

“You’re going to take the next exit,” Lola told Greyson.

Greyson nodded and switched lanes, then took the exit when it came up. When we left the highway, the road we hit was a mess. We were bouncing around the back seat, and I linked my arms through Colton and Jay’s, just to keep my head from hitting the roof of the car.

“Lola, what the hell?” Colton snapped. “This is some road you’ve got us on.”

Lola was gripping the handle above her window, trying to keep herself steady. “Um, excuse me, but I’m not responsible for road maintenance, Colton. I’m just reading the map—it didn’t indicate the condition of the road.”

I was starting to feel a little sick when Greyson braked, jerking to a stop.

“What is it?” Colton asked.

“There’s a toll,” Greyson said, pointing ahead.

“What? Seriously?” I leaned forward, and when I got a glimpse of what Greyson was pointing to, I felt even more unsettled. It was a small shed with a peaked roof, sitting in the middle of the road.

“What is that?” I asked. “Why would there be a tollhouse out here, in the middle of nowhere?”

“No idea,” Greyson said, so quietly it almost sounded like he was talking to himself.

Lola turned and shoved the map under my nose.

“Look!” she said, pointing out the road we were on. When I looked, I saw a dollar sign, indicating the toll. “Still doubt me now?”

“Does anyone have any money?” Jay asked.

“Nope,” Colton said.

Lola shrugged. “No cash.”

Jay groaned and dug his hand into his pocket. “Do we know how much it is? I might have some change.”

Greyson inched the car forward, and I saw that the shed had a sign—the kind that would usually have indicated the amount required for the toll. There were a few markings on the sign, but it wasn’t any lettering I recognized.

As Greyson slowed in front of the darkened toll booth window, a shadowy figure appeared, then extended a bony hand.

“How much?” Greyson asked, his voice tense.

There was no response.

Greyson’s shoulders tensed.

“This should do it,” Jay muttered, leaning across the front seat and shoving a handful of bills and some loose change into the extended hand.

The supernatural figure regarding the money for only a moment before flinging it back into the car. It held out its skeletal hand once again. *Shit.*

My heart beat fast, and I swallowed down a bitter taste in the back of my throat—I was pretty sure it was the taste of fear. “That’s not what it wants.”

“Then what *does* it want?” Lola asked, sounding as scared as I felt.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we have it,” I said. I looked up at Greyson. “How are we going to pass?”

**Episode 4719**

**Greyson**

I didn’t have to look back at Cali to know that she was stressed. I could hear the tension in her voice, even without seeing it on her face, but I didn’t know what to do about it. The figure in the tollbooth clearly wanted *something*, but I didn’t know what it was any more than she did. Though I did think that Lola could’ve mentioned the toll before we’d reached it.

I pushed a hand through my hair. We probably should’ve done some more research on what this journey was going to involve before we’d headed out.

“Why are we stopping?” Lola asked testily.

I stared at her, shocked. “What are you talking about?” I looked at the shack. “It’s a tollbooth, with a boom gate, and we have no fucking idea what we’re supposed to pay to get through.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, Greyson. What do you think they’re going to do if you don’t pay? Suspend your license? Send the demon police after you? Come on. Drive!”

“So what do you think we’re supposed to—”

Before I could say another word, Lola reached over and jammed her foot down on top of mine on the gas.  
 “Just *go*!” she screamed.

The car surged forward, plowing through the wooden boom gate.

Cali screamed, and when I twisted around to look at her, I saw why. The bony hand was still dangling from the window, having been ripped away from the figure in the tollbooth.

Cali closed her eyes and slapped it away so it flew out the window. I turned around and shoved Lola back, struggling to regain control of the car.

“Back off!” I growled.

As Lola resentfully slid back into her seat, I glanced at the rearview mirror. I wanted to be sure we weren’t being followed by anyone—except the car with the others—after our mad dash through the tollbooth.

Colton chuckled from the back seat. “Okay, that was pretty badass, Lola. I’ll give props where they’re due.”

I glared at him in the rearview mirror. “That was pretty *reckless*,” I snapped, unamused.

“Just relax, everyone,” Lola said breezily.

“What were you thinking?” I demanded.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?”

But I didn’t answer her. Instead, I felt my eyes widen as I looked out at the road—because it was about to end. The road was gone—*completely* gone. Up ahead, where there should’ve been wide, flat road, there was literally nothing.

Instantly panicked, I jammed on the brakes, but it was too late—the car left the pavement and flew into the air.

“Hold on tight!” I yelled. I wasn’t sure anyone heard me, though—they were all too busy screaming at the top of their lungs.

I was gripping the steering wheel, trying not to panic—but it was a fight. My mate and my brother were both in this plummeting car with me, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to protect them.

Lola was gripping the dashboard, her hands slipping around, fumbling with the dials. She must’ve hit the radio, because music suddenly flowed from the speakers, and “Crazy” by Patsy Cline filled my ears.

How apt. How horribly, beautifully apt.

“Turn that shit off!” Colton bellowed. “If I’m going to die, it’s not going to be to this fucking song!”

The car dipped, the front tires going off the edge, and I saw the ground rushing up to meet us… Only it didn’t look like solid ground—it looked like *lava*. What the fuck was I looking at? Were we about to land, only to be burned to death in a river of molten rock? *What the hell is happening?*

My mind spun, trying to make sense of what I was seeing while simultaneously trying to find a solution to the rapidly intensifying problem of our imminent deaths.

I jammed my foot on the accelerator. It was a Hail Mary move, but I was hoping that if we hit the ground with our tires spinning, they might propel us forward fast enough to keep us from sinking.

The car landed, hitting the lava with a forceful thud, and in an instant, I realized that it wasn’t lava beneath us, but red gravel. The tires squealed, and we shot forward onto a rough road, though I’d lost control during the landing, and for a long time, we just spun in increasingly fast circles, kicking up gravel, sparks, and dust until I could get my shit together long enough to slam on the brakes.

When I did, the car jolted to a sudden stop.

*How are we fucking not dead?*

Everyone in the car was eerily quiet. There was no sound except for rapid breathing, the popping and hissing of an extremely overheated engine, and the voice still drifting from the speakers, now staticky and distorted, warping until it sounded like a demon voice in a horror movie.

Honestly, I was amazed I could hear anything at all. My pulse was pounding so hard in my ears, I was sure everyone else in the car could hear it, too. Though I hadn’t been yelling as we fell, my throat still felt hoarse and desert-dry, like I’d swallowed a cactus. I realized I’d sweated through my shirt, which wasn’t surprising, considering the sheer volume of adrenaline still pumping through my bloodstream.

But as I fought to pry my cramped fingers from the steering wheel, I realized I wasn’t just sweating because of the fear—it was hot as hell. And—when I looked around—I realized that the place we’d landed *looked* like hell, too. Everywhere I looked, I saw nothing but more of that red sand. I’d never seen a place like this before.

I flipped off the radio, then turned to look at everyone else in the car and check for injuries.

My eyes went to Cali first—of course—but she looked okay. Shaken, but uninjured, which was a huge relief. When I looked at Colton, his stunned expression morphed into a wide grin.

“That was fucking *awesome*.” He laughed. “Better than any fucking roller coaster. When can we do that again?”

Jay leaned forward. “Lola? Are you okay?”  
 Lola didn’t answer. She was staring at the map in her hands. Well, the *pieces* of map in her hands. It had been torn in half, and she couldn’t seem to take her eyes off it.

“Is anyone hurt?” I asked briskly.

Everyone shook their heads, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

*I’m so sorry about that, love*,I told Cali*. I don’t know what happened. I didn’t see the end of the road until it was too late.*

*Greyson, I know it wasn’t your fault. I don’t know if we could’ve prepared for that whatsoever—*

“Hey!”

Everyone turned to Lola, who was still staring intently at the pieces of her map.

“What is it?” Jay asked.

She fit the two pieces back together, and when she spoke, it sounded like she was talking to herself. “So *that’s* why part of the map was blank. Huh. Who knew?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my tone sharper than I’d intended. “What the hell is that damn map telling us now?”

“I think we’re in, like, the demon world waiting room,” Lola said.

“Just great,” I said.

“Greyson,” Cali said, and I could hear the concern in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I just don’t have a lot of faith in Lola’s map that’s off the dark fucking web, and I don’t know what the hell we’re going to do. I don’t think Waze is going to help us here—wherever *here* is.”

Jay looked up and leaned forward, squinting his eye. “Hey, someone’s coming.”

We all looked up to see a motorcycle riding toward us. I thought the mirrored helmet looked familiar, but the bike was weaving back and forth as it approached, which seemed odd.

“Is that the Courier?” Cali asked nervously, leaning forward across the front seat. “Does he have Xavier?”

I frowned at the figure coming toward us. I *thought* it was the Courier, and I did recognize the motorcycle, but I didn’t see anyone else on the bike. He was completely alone.

“I don’t see him,” I said, my heart pounding. “And why is he driving this way? We hired him to go in and get Xavier.”

The leftover panic in my chest turned to anger, and—without another second’s thought—I pushed the car into gear and gunned the engine, heading straight for the bike.

“Greyson!” Cali screeched. “What are you *doing?*”

“I’m going to get some fucking answers,” I growled.

I jerked the steering wheel, making the car swerve in front of the motorcycle, forcing the biker to swerve as well, then screech to a stop. Without giving him a chance to recover, I leapt out of the car and sprinted over as the helmeted driver looked up.

I grabbed the guy by the shirt. “Where the *hell* is my brother?”

**Episode 4720**

The biker in the mirrored helmet tried to claw Greyson’s hands away. “Let go of me! Who the hell are you?!”

Who were *we?!*

My doubts that this figure was the Courier only grew when I heard the rider speak. He didn’t sound like the Courier we’d spoken to. That Courier had a low, gravelly voice, but this man’s voice was higher and thinner—almost a whine. I knew the Courier could change faces, but he hadn’t ever changed his voice before.

Enraged, I climbed over Colton, kicked the door open, and got out. Then I swayed. I hadn’t realized how wobbly I’d feel after the free fall and the bone-shakingly hard landing that had followed it.

Clinging to my balance, I marched over to the biker. But when I reached him and got a closer look at him—and his helmet—I gasped and jerked away. There were dark brown streaks along the mirrored surface that looked an awful lot like dried blood.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my stomach from revolting, and then I leaned in again. “Why are you asking who we are? Don’t you recognize us? We just made a deal with you, remember?”

The biker—who absolutely wasn’t the Courier—started stammering. “*Oh*, yeah. O-Of course I remember you. You’re…” He trailed off, obviously having no idea who we were.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “And *you’re* going to die if you don’t explain why you’ve come back without my brother.”

Colton had gotten out of the car and joined us. “Correct me if I’m wrong,” he said, giving the biker a cold glare, “but isn’t the demon world *that* way?” He pointed over the biker’s shoulder.

“Yeah—I mean no—I mean yeah. I was… lost,” he said lamely. “Thanks for pointing out the way. Now I can get going.”

The biker moved to start the engine again, but Greyson stopped him.

“I don’t think so,” he said, putting his hand over the clutch.

“W-What?” the guy sputtered.

Greyson’s grey eyes looked icy cold. “I think you’ve got some explaining to do.”

I knew the Courier was a shapeshifter of sorts, and that he could change his face when he wanted to or needed to, but I was almost positive this wasn’t him in another shape. There was just something *off* about him. The personality was completely different. The Courier we’d signed the contract with was slow and deliberate—almost stoic. This guy was nervous and jittery and not at all the straightforward person we’d promised fifteen years of life to.

“Take off your helmet,” I said flatly.

The biker turned toward me, hesitating. He did *not* seem to want to do what I’d asked.

“Take it off,” Greyson growled, “or I’ll take it off for you—and maybe your head along with it.”

The biker’s hands seemed to shake a little as he lifted the helmet. When it was off, I saw that the man on the bike was smaller than the Courier, with a narrow head and dark, darting eyes.

I was confused—I recognized the bike, but not the biker. And this guy was acting so weird… I didn’t know what it was—not yet—but I was sure that something wasn’t right.

I hadn’t kept track of the second car, but it must have followed us off the bridge, because Ava came striding over and grabbed the biker by the shirt.

“What have you done with him?” she demanded angrily, giving the guy a rough shake. “You were supposed to get him. Where the hell is Xavier?”

There was a flash of recognition at the sound of Xavier’s name. It was quick, but I saw it, and I knew Ava did, too.

The guy quickly tried to cover. “Who?”

“*Xavier Evers*,” Ava snarled. “Have you seen him?”

If the biker was trying to look innocent, it wasn’t working. He wasn’t answering any questions, and he was clearly holding something back. We needed to find out what.

“What happened to the Courier?” I demanded.

The biker turned to me and smiled, and the expression sent a chill down my spine. There was something so *off* about that smile, and the dead look in his eyes.

“So, it’s a funny story—”

“No one’s laughing,” Greyson snarled.

“Well, the other Courier was… killed.”

“*What?*” Ava, Greyson, Colton, and I all demanded.

“Not to worry, though!” he continued brightly.

“And why is that?” Greyson asked, looking pale but furious.

“Because I’m the new Courier! I took over the job! That’s why I got the motorcycle. That’s how it works in the demon world. It’s a hell of a system.”

I stared at him in horrified shock. “What about Xavier?”

The guy frowned. “Xavier…?”

“Yes, Xavier! The three of us”—I gestured wildly to Greyson, Ava, and myself—“each paid five years of our lives to get him back. If the Courier is dead, what does that mean? Is the contract void?”

“No, no, no,” the guy said. He was still smiling, and his eyes were still dark and cold. “All active contracts transfer to me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If that’s true”—and I had no idea if it was—“then you need to *get* *Xavier*. Those were the terms of the contract.”

The Courier also had said no guarantees, but this guy doesn’t need to know that…

“Well, yeah, of course,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I have every intention of fulfilling the contract. Obviously.”

“Then why were you *obviously* heading in the wrong direction?” Colton asked coldly. He crossed his arms over his broad chest, and the guy on the bike looked him over, clearly sizing him up. “You know, away from that weird shimmering wall back there?”

I followed Colton’s gaze. He wasn’t wrong, there was a huge shimmering wall out in the distance, almost like a mirage. Somehow I just knew that if we crossed that threshold, we’d be in the demon world.

We were so close to Xavier.

The guy seemed to decide that Colton was too big to take on, so he just shrugged. “It’s like I said—I, uh, got lost. A little turned around, that’s all. Came out of the portal, but no big deal. I can go back in.”

I frowned. I didn’t believe this story in the slightest, and I didn’t think anyone else did either.

“Try again,” Greyson said, taking a menacing step forward.

The guy opened his mouth, looking like he was about to double down, but then he just sighed. “Okay. Fine. I’ll go back in and get Xavier.”

I glared at the guy. Something in my gut was telling me that I couldn’t trust him. How did we know he wasn’t lying to us? *Again?*

“What happened to the other Courier?” I demanded. He’d been pretty vague on the details. “How did he die?”

The guy on the bike shrugged in a philosophical kind of way. “The Courier showed up at the right place at the wrong time. What can I say? The demon world is an unforgiving place,” he added, smiling at me again.

This smile was the same as all the others, and it set off alarm bells in my head. Every instinct I possessed was telling me that this guy couldn’t be trusted, and that I should get away from him as soon as possible. But that wasn’tpossible at all—we had to get Xavier back.

I suppressed a shudder and forced myself to keep looking at the new Courier. He clearly wasn’t telling us the whole story. Why was there blood all over the helmet? And I knew the helmet was the mirrored one the actual Courier always wore. I’d have recognized it anywhere.

“Okay, okay,” the biker said, sounding irritated. “If you let me go, I’ll go get Javier—”

“You can’t even remember his *name*,” Ava snapped, taking a threatening step toward him. “What makes you think you’re going to be able to fucking find him?”

“Sorry, sorry,” the biker said. “Names are hard for me. Anyway, I work with so many clients, and the way all of y’all are staring at me, it’s making me nervous. Just let me get going, and I’ll get your guy. Promise.”

He moved to start the bike again, and this time it was Ava who stopped him.

“And how do we know you’re going to actually do it and not just drive off?” she asked.

I looked at the guy, waiting for him to answer. He sighed in a long-suffering way. Great, this was going swimmingly.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“I’m the Courier,” he said.

I rolled my eyes with a groan. “Okay, what was your name before you *became* the Courier? Can you tell us that?”

The biker hesitated, and for a moment I didn’t know if he was going to answer me. But finally, he relented.

“My name’s Ferlin.”

Lola narrowed her eyes dangerously. “That sounds shady. Like Merlin, but not quite as good.”

Ferlin flushed. “I’m legit,” he insisted. “Listen, I want to show you something, okay?”

No one spoke.

“Okay,” I finally said, begrudgingly.

Ferlin leaned over and fished around in the saddle bag next to his right leg. He dug in, clearly looking for something and cursing to himself when he couldn’t find it.

Then, to my shock, he screamed and reared back. Something dark and fast flew out of his bag, casting a night-dark shadow over all of us.

**Episode 4721**

As quickly as it had descended, the darkness began to dissipate, swirling around us like a strong wind. I braced myself and looked up to see a shadowy creature hovering above us. Slowly, it began to darken and take shape until it drifted down toward the ground.

I yelped and skidded away from it, just as Greyson grabbed me and put himself between me and the creature.

“What the hell is that thing?” he shouted.

Ferlin jumped back in shock. “It’s a night demon!” he whispered, his face drawn in horror.

The shadows began to coalesce into a cat-like creature, but it was unlike any cat I’d ever seen. Its slanted red eyes fixed on me and it hissed, baring its sharp fangs and arching its back. It looked like it was seconds from pouncing.

Gritting my teeth, I summoned my magic, though I had no idea if it would be effective against the creature. For one thing, it didn’t even seem to have a body, which presumably meant it had no blood, or bones, or any of the other things my magic had been historically excellent at damaging.

“Stay back!” Greyson shouted.

He and Gabriel shifted and advanced on the creature, but it kept skittering back, its reflexes keeping it just out of their reach. It hissed at them both, expelling plumes of dark, cloudy breath that Gabriel and Greyson dodged.

Gabriel growled and launched himself forward to bite it, but all he got for his efforts was a mouth full of dark, smoky vapor before the cat demon reformed and slammed a paw into Gabriel.

Gabriel flew across the ground, and spat and coughed as he struggled to get his footing. He shifted back to human and joined the others.

“That cloud stuff tastes like burning flesh or something,” he choked out.

“Do something!” I yelled at Ferlin. “Stop that thing!”

But Ferlin was cowering behind the rest of us, clearly useless. He ducked his head and covered his ears with his hands, his entire body trembling.

Greyson took a running leap and pounced on the demon. But just like Gabriel, he wasn’t able to latch onto anything solid, and his unbroken momentum sent him sliding across the ground and slamming into a boulder. He yelped in pain, and I rushed to his side.

“Are you okay?” I smoothed a hand down his back, and Greyson inhaled sharply. Shit. “Did you hurt your back?”

Greyson nodded and shifted back. “I did, but I’ll be okay. Didn’t break anything. I just need to lie here for a second,” he grunted. “Got the wind knocked out of me.”

“Everyone surround it to keep it from escaping!” Mikah shouted. “Come on!”

We all rushed to form a circle around the demon, Greyson joining us a few seconds later, once he’d caught his breath.

The cat demon stalked around the circle, snapping at Lola and Jay and hissing at Marissa and Ava, though it seemed a little thrown off and thankfully didn’t attack. Maybe it had expected us to run, or to fight—but it was clear that it didn’t like feeling trapped.

I realized that I had the ring. I tried to slip it into my pocket just as the creature swatted at me, knocking it from my hands. *Shit shit shit!*

I shrieked as my shoulder started to burn like it was on fire. I was trying not to panic, but I couldn’t see the ring, and my vision was already swirling from the pain as I tried to find it.

*Where the hell is it? The demon cat thing didn’t get it, did it?*

I was still searching for the ring when Greyson’s voice rose up from behind me.

“Watch out!” he shouted.

I ducked, just as the demon cat took another swat at me. I hit the ground and immediately let out a little yelp of glee when I spotted the ring nearby. I scrambled after it and slipped it onto my finger before I jumped to my feet.

I clenched my jaw against the excruciating pain that was pulsing through my shoulder, and I had to concentrate extra hard just to conjure my sword.

*Will it even work against this thing? Guess there’s only one way to find out…*

The creature had turned its attention on the others, and was taking vicious swipes at them that they were only barely managing to avoid. They were scrambling every which way; Jay, Ava, and Marissa had shifted and were trying in vain to fight back, while Mikah and Lola were speeding around, dodging its attacks.

“Over here, you shadow bully!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

The demon cat didn’t even look my way, too busy launching attacks against Greyson and Gabriel, who were clearly getting more frustrated by the second at their inability to injure the thing.

“Hey! Over here!” I said, holding up my ringed finger to get the demon’s attention—but it stayed laser focused on Greyson.

*That thing had better not hurt my mate!*

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” I screamed, moving a little closer to make sure the demon cat got a good view of the ring. It had seemed so interested in it earlier that I was surprised it wasn’t already rushing toward me.

Finally, the light caught the ring just right, and I won the demon’s undivided attention. It turned to lunge at me once again, and I attacked, swinging my sword at it with all my might. The sword plunged through its shadowy underbelly, and for a moment, I was worried it hadn’t done any damage whatsoever, but then the demon shrieked in pain and dissolved into wisps of smoke.

“It’s back!” Lola shouted as it reformed a few feet away, clearly pissed off, its red eyes still focused on me.

*I don’t care how pissed off it gets—it’s wasting our time, and I’m going to get rid of it one way or another. We have to get to Xavier. He’s already been in the demon world way too long.*

Screaming with anger, I slashed at it again, only to miss and stumble, nearly falling to my knees.

The demon loomed toward me, grabbing at me, and I just managed to avoid its swipe. I knew it was just going to keep coming at me, so I turned and broke into a run. But instead of running away from the demon world—which was what I wanted to do—something was compelling me to run toward the shimmering wall in the distance.

*It almost feels like the ring is pulling me there…*

Greyson grabbed me and reached out via mind link. *What are you doing?*

*I—I don’t know…* I said. The pain in my shoulder had gotten so bad that it was taking every bit of concentration I possessed to focus on answering Greyson. I switched to speaking verbally. “It’s like I can’t help but move toward the portal. And my shoulder… I can’t…”

I trailed off and sagged against him.

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked as the demon cat stalked toward us.

“My shoulder,” I panted. “It’s on fire!”

Greyson held me tighter, and I could tell from the look in his eyes that he felt helpless. I didn’t know how to stop the pain, and neither did he.

Greyson yanked me out of the way as Colton lunged at Ferlin, pinning him to the ground. “You better stop that cat demon thing right now, or this will be your last adventure outside the demon world!”

“Get off me, and I’ll try!” Ferlin shot back, shoving Colton away.

I watched them both through a haze of pain, gasping for breath. I could still feel the strange tugging sensation emanating from the ring, and I was fighting the urge to walk toward the demon portal. The ashes wanted to go back. But *I* couldn’t step through.

Ferlin rounded on the demon cat. “Stop!” he shouted at it.

The cat turned to face him, and, to my absolute shock, it began to dissipate, and then it returned to Ferlin’s bag with a strange, unsettling, “Meow!”

Ferlin was stunned. “It *listened* to me? Wow!”

“And you’re real fucking lucky it did!” Colton snarled. “Now, what about my brother? You need to get him out of there, right now!”

I was still fighting through the pain, but it didn’t seem like it was going to stop anytime soon.

“I have every intention of rescuing Xavier!” Ferlin said indignantly.

“But what can we do to make sure it happens?” I said through clenched teeth, still holding back a scream of pain.

*Ferlin only just became the Courier, and I don’t feel all that confident in his abilities, especially after that little stunt with the demon cat.*

I buried my face in Greyson’s chest as he stroked my back.

“It’s going to be okay, Cali. Just breathe,” he whispered in my ear.

“I’m trying,” I said.

But all I could think about was Xavier. If Ferlin wasn’t capable of getting him out of that place, then what were we going to do?

**Episode 4722**

All at once, everyone started weighing in on what to do about Ferlin and Xavier.

“Let’s just go to the demon world ourselves,” Lola said. “We can at least *try*. Then we won’t even need a stupid Courier.” She threw a scathing glare at Ferlin.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” he grumbled. “You wouldn’t last a second.”

“Watch it,” Colton hissed at him, clenching his fists.

Greyson spoke up the loudest, drowning everyone else out. “Ferlin should take the ring with him and bring Xavier back. It’ll save time. Then none of us will have to risk going into a place that might not be too… hospitable. We want to save Xavier and get the ring back where it belongs, but we don’t want to die in the process.”

Colton was already shaking his head, clearly not convinced. “Why would we take that chance when we have no idea if we can trust this guy? For all we know, he’ll take the ring and sell it in some demon pawn shop. We should hold on to the ring and send Ferlin in to get Xavier first. Then, if he does that, we can have him take the ring.”

“No, that’ll take too much time,” Greyson shot back. “If Ferlin’s the new Courier, we should just let him do what we hired the original Courier to do. I just want this whole thing to be over and done with, and if he takes the ring back now, it will be.”

I looked between them, wishing they’d stop arguing. The scene reminded me too much of Xavier and Greyson arguing—especially since Colton and Xavier looked so much alike. Besides, we didn’t have *time* to argue. We needed to get the ring back and save Xavier as quickly as possible.

Ferlin puffed out his chest. “In case you’ve all forgotten, *I’m* the Courier, and that means I’m in charge here. I’ll just draw up another contract about the ring, and you’ll decide if you’re willing to pay up—let’s not forget that I don’t offer my services for free. That just doesn’t make good business sense.”

Clearly fuming, Greyson rounded on Ferlin. “Enough with the contracts. You owe us!”

Greyson looked like he was seconds away from pummeling Ferlin, and judging by the look in Colton’s eye, he’d happily hold the man down.

All at once, I realized that I was getting farther and farther away from the others.

*What the hell! I’m walking toward the demon portal again!*

I lifted my hand to look at the ring, realizing once again that it was drawing me toward the demon world. I skidded to a stop, alarmed, but only a second later, my feet started moving again. I couldn’t stop myself, and I couldn’t talk though the pain. I was helpless. I tried to mind link with Greyson, but my thoughts were getting all mixed up.

Seluna’s voice whispered in the depths of my mind. *Take the ashes through the portal, Caliana. Set me free! It’s the only way to end this—for both of us!*

*Shut up!* I shouted in my head. I didn’t know if she could even hear me. *I need to think!*

Not that the excruciating pain I was in was making that easy. It felt like my head was full of hissing white noise that was only getting worse as the pain increased.

*Big Mac warned me against going to the demon world. What if I go and get stuck there? What if I die crossing through?*

Greyson finally realized that I’d left his side.

“Where are you going?” he shouted, racing to catch up with me.

I aimed a shaky finger at the portal as I tried—and failed—to dig my heels in. The pull was too strong, and I was only getting closer to the glimmering portal. Fumbling with my hands, I tried to take the ring off, but it wasn’t moving. I pulled even harder, feeling for a moment that my finger was going to pop off entirely. *Shit, this thing isn’t coming off.* Soon, I’d be close enough to slip through, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Greyson rushed up. “Cali, stop! You can’t go through that thing! It’s dangerous! You heard what Big Mac said!”

I opened my mouth to explain, but I couldn’t. Seluna’s voice ripped through my brain. She was shouting now.

*Caliana! You must go to the portal! Now! If you don’t, the pain will never stop!* *You can do this. Don’t resist the pull. The ashes in that ring want to be laid to rest, and you’re the only one who can make that happen!*

My shoulder was hurting more than ever, and I whipped around when I felt my hand being tugged. It was Greyson. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled, trying to stop me from being dragged in, but he couldn’t.

“Help!” he shouted over his shoulders at the others. “Something’s pulling her in! Come and help me!”

Everyone gathered to help—save for Marissa and Ava—but it still wasn’t enough. We were way too close to the portal; I could practically feel it buzzing on my skin. The ring wouldn’t come off, and the pull was too strong, and not even the collective strength of Jay, Mikah, Lola, Gabriel, and Colton was enough to resist it. It was like Seluna herself was dragging me toward the portal. I was so close to it now, I could feel a strange heat pouring out of it.

Greyson snapped at Marissa and Ava. “Don’t just stand there, help us!”

The two Samaras finally jumped in to help, but it was no use—it was like I was in a game of tug-of-war, and my side was winning. It was starting to feel like I was going to be ripped in half at any second, and still I imagined that wouldn’t be as painful as the piercing pain in my shoulder.

I was only a few inches away from the portal, now, and if the others didn’t let go, they were going to be dragged in with me. I couldn’t let that happen. It was bad enough that crossing over might kill *me*—I didn’t want to be responsible for my friends being torn apart, as well.

“Let me go!” I screamed through the pain. “Now! Or I’m going to pull you all in with me!”

Greyson didn’t listen, only tightening his hold. “Cali, there’s no way I’m letting you go. I’ll go in with you if I have to.”

“Stop! Please just let me go!” I shouted at him, tears streaming down my cheeks, both because of the pain and because I was terrified that I was about to drag people I cared about—and Ava and Marissa—into the portal with me.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp tingle in the finger with the ring on it. Seconds later, a searing pain shot up my arm. My hand jerked toward the portal, and in a split second, my entire arm was swallowed up, disappearing into the churning, shimmering surface.

*I can’t let the others get pulled in with me. I have to keep them safe. I hope… I hope they understand why I have to do this. I have no idea what’s waiting for me on the other side of that portal, but I can’t lose anyone to it.*

I closed my eyes, summoned my magic, and hit my friends with a massive energy blast, sending them reeling away from the portal—and away from me. I let out a shuddering breath of relief as the rest of my body was slowly sucked into the portal. As I went, I watched as the others scrambled to recover, shock and surprise written all over their faces.

I wished that I could shut out the sound of their panicked screams—especially Greyson’s.

“Cali, no! Come back!” he roared, scrambling toward me.

Then his face disappeared as the portal swallowed me up completely.

For a while, I felt like I was floating… And then I was falling, and landing on hot, red sand, and tumbling across it. When I finally stopped rolling, I crawled onto my scraped knees, spitting out sand and wincing when the pain from the fall made itself known.

I looked up and squinted against a blinding, bright-red light… And then I realized it was the sun—or at least the demon world version of it.

It took me longer than it should have to realize that the pain in my shoulder had finally stopped. I glanced down at the ring, glinting on my finger.

*Did it stop hurting because I’ve finally brought the ashes back?*

“I can’t believe it!” I said to myself, then I started laughing until I was dangerously close to hysterics.

*I did it! I brought the ashes back! It’s over. It’s finally over. The pain is gone!*

I turned back in the direction I’d come from. The portal was still shimmering, but, same as on the other side, I couldn’t see through it to where I’d come from. I jogged toward it and pressed my hands against it, but it was solid and impenetrable.

My laughter faded as realization finally dawned. I was in the demon world. Alone. And, as far as I could tell, I was stuck here.

I looked down at the ring. *I just have to get this off so I don’t have this on when Ferlin gets here*,I thought. *Greyson will force Ferlin to come and get me out… Right? And he’ll get Xavier, too, wherever he is. He has to. Right?*

**Episode 4723**

**Xavier**

My fists were bruised and bloody from striking the wall over and over again, but I ignored the pain and kept punching, hoping that by some stroke of luck, I might open the portal again so I could go after Ferlin and make him pay for tricking me.

*Of course, even if I* do *find the portal, there’s no guarantee that I’ll be able to pass through it. Maybe I’m just wasting my time and ruining my hands for nothing.*

“Shit!” I shouted into the wind.

I turned away from the wall and stared at the sloping red horizon, wondering how the fuck I was going to get out of this place and back home. Being trapped in the demon world was one of the worst things that could’ve happened to me, and there was no telling how long I was going to be stuck here.

*If I ever get my hands on that fucker Ferlin, I’ll kill him a million times. I can’t believe I let him get one over on me. He’s a fucking* demon*,* *for shit’s sake!*

I backed away from the wall and looked around, trying to regain my bearings. I couldn’t even be sure where Ferlin had gone through the wall. Everything around me looked the same. The demon world was definitely the type of place that required a guide—someone by your side to ensure that you were making progress rather than walking in circles, falling into traps, or, god forbid, probably walking into a sun diver feeding ground as I’d had the lovely privilege of finding out earlier with Ferlin.

I stepped back to take in the height of the wall. I had to crane my neck a long way back to see the top.

*Could I climb it? Maybe being in this strange half-wolf form will have its advantages. Only one way to find out…*

I took a running start and jumped, scrambling up the wall a few feet before I dug my claws into the surface and used my legs to propel myself up. Keeping up my momentum, I climbed toward the top, stopping briefly to look back down at what I’d left behind.

The camel-horses and the bodies of Steed and the Courier were all I could see, which was a relief. I faced forward again and kept going, climbing as fast as my body would allow. The higher I got, the more exhausted I felt—but I couldn’t give up. The only thing left for me down there was the same fate as Steed’s. I had to keep climbing.

With a sigh of relief, I finally reached the top of the wall and pulled myself up. The top was about four feet wide, and the wall itself stretched off so far into the distance in either direction that I couldn’t see where it ended.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard shouting. I narrowed my eyes and spotted a bunch of demon guards down on the ground, running toward me and pointing upward. Shit, were there guards up here too?

“Fuck,” I grumbled. With the way I was feeling at the moment, they were playing a dangerous game, trying to go head-to-head with me. I was looking forward to tearing them apart one by one.

I was about to jump down and get started, but I stopped myself. I was a lot higher up than I was comfortable with. It would really suck if I made it this far to the actual portal to get out of here only to jump to my death. Dying in the demon world was certainly not part of the plan.

Taking my time, I crawled over the edge of the wall and started to carefully climb down the other side, but I quickly lost my grip. I scrambled, attempting to dig my claws into the wall, but I couldn’t gain purchase and they only scraped against the hard surface, sending sparks flying. My claws were slowing my descent, but only a little.

*Will this slow me down enough to keep me from exploding when I hit the ground?*

I pushed myself off the wall at the last moment and hit the ground hard. I tumbled head over heels across the sand before coming to a stop. I groaned and rolled over onto my back. There wasn’t one part of my body that wasn’t screaming in pain… But I didn’t care.

*I made it, and I’m alive. Doesn’t matter how banged up I am. And hopefully I’m one step closer to getting the hell out of here.*

Slowly, I got to my feet and paused to take a look around.

*What the fuck?*

My stomach dropped as a sick realization dawned. Nothing had changed. I was right back where I’d started—camel-horses, dead bodies, and all.

*Was that whole climb some kind of trick? An optical illusion? A present from Adéluce to trip me up and throw me off?*

But then I spotted the guards again. They were closer now, and gaining more ground by the second. A shadow passed over me, and I looked up just in time to dive out of the way of a screeching sun diver—but I wasn’t *quite* fast enough.

The diver’s needle-sharp talons tore into my back, and I screamed in pain, though I knew I had to keep moving. I felt blood trickling down my back, along with the satisfying sensation of my skin healing.

*You’re going to have to try a lot harder than that*,I thought grimly, looking up at the circling bird demons.

More of them were flocking toward me, and I knew that if even one of them got ahold of me, I probably wouldn’t be able to fight them all off. I’d barely escaped them last time, and I’d only had two to deal with, then—plus Ferlin had been there to throw fireballs at them from the ground.

I broke into a run, sticking close to the wall. I was forced to veer off course when I spotted a bunch of guards coming at me from the opposite direction, screaming at me to stop. Luckily, a couple of sun divers swooped into them, scattering them for a moment.

“Fuck!” I snarled, suddenly absolutely livid about the awful circumstances I’d been hurled into.

*If I make it out of this awful place, not only will I kill Adéluce for sending me here, but I’ll also hunt down Ferlin for abandoning me. They’ll pay—both of them. I’ll make sure of it.*

But first, I had to avoid being killed by the guards—and those fucking sun divers. Right on cue, I dodged another sun diver, only to have one of the guards pounce on me and drag me down to the ground.

Growling with effort, I flipped the guard over and, in one swift movement, crushed its windpipe and tossed its limp body away.

I rolled out of the way of another plummeting sun diver, narrowly avoiding getting clawed again. The sun diver got its claws into one of the guards instead, which screamed and thrashed as the creature carried it up and away, toward the bloodred sun.

*Maybe these bird monsters aren’t so bad after all. If they stick to eating guards, I might actually stand a chance.*

I braced myself to fight two guards, who were charging right at me. I planted my feet, already planning out the moves that would take them down the quickest—but then a strange wailing sound filled the air.

I glanced up toward the source and thought I could see a guard standing on top of the wall, blowing into a strange curved horn.

*That must be some kind of alarm… But for who? Or what?*

But I didn’t have time to find out because a horde of guards perched on camel-horses was galloping toward me. I wasn’t sure what to do. There was no way I could take them all on at once—especially not with the sun divers treating the area like their own private cheese board. If the guards didn’t get me, one of the divers definitely would.

The horn blast was abruptly cut off, and the strange instrument hit the ground as the guard who’d been blowing into it was bitten in half by another sun diver. Demon blood rain hit me in the face.

“Shit!” I hissed, swiping at the blood as it started burning my eyes.

I stumbled around, trying to regain my bearings—only to be tackled to the ground by another fucking guard. I still couldn’t see all that well, but all I had to do was avoid getting almost eaten again, and I’d spent enough time fighting over the course of my life that I could, pretty much, fight with my eyes closed.

I wrapped my hands around the guard’s neck and squeezed.

“Die!” I snarled. “Die, you asshole!”

*Wait a minute… What is that? That smell… Is that* Cali*? It can’t be.*

Assuming that my mind was playing tricks on me—which was really no surprise, all things considered—I swiped the last of the blood from my eyes, ignored the burning, and slammed the guard into the wall. The demon crumpled to the ground and lay still.

I lifted my nose to the air as Cali’s scent drifted by once again. There was no way that the smell was in my imagination—I knew Cali’s scent better than anyone’s… But its presence made no sense.

Unless… Unless it was a trick. This place was full of illusions and beings that fed on confusion and fear. But one thing was for sure—if a demon Cali showed up, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill her.

**Episode 4724**

**Ava**

I coughed and spluttered as I finally clambered to my feet, still reeling and pissed off that Cali had had the audacity to just blast me—and everyone else—with magic, like it wasn’t a big deal. What if she’d killed one of us? It wasn’t like Cali was all that great with her lame magic. I’d seen her in action plenty of times, and it was definitely amateur hour.

*That damn half-Fae gets away with* far *too much. Someone needs to sit her down and remind her that the world doesn’t revolve around her and her misadventures. We haven’t even been here an hour, and she’s already made a mess of everything.*

And now she was nowhere to be found. I had to admit, I wasn’t all that upset that Cali had been swallowed up by the demon portal. It served her right for using her magic against the people who’d been trying to help her.

*Who* does *that? She can* stay *in the demon world, for all I care. If I never see her face again, it’ll be too soon.*

When we’d first realized she was being drawn toward the portal—and of *course* that had happened to Cali, of all people—Marissa had suggested that we give her a little push into the demon world rather than work with the others to pull her out, and honestly, I’d been tempted. But in the end, it had all worked out—she was gone, and I didn’t have any blood on my hands. I only wished there was a way to seal her in there forever.

*But Xavier’s in there, too. The last thing I want is for Cali to have Xavier all to herself—even if it* is *in the demon world. In fact, she’s probably throwing herself at him as we speak.*

Maybe if I could get in there and save Xavier, I’d find a way to leave Cali to the demons—she’d probably fit right in. Demons were selfish and only cared about their own pleasure, just like Cali.

I laughed to myself, but then I remembered that Xavier would probably knock me over in his haste to get back to the demon world and save his beloved Cali. Xavier had admitted that he loved me, too, but I knew that he still cared for her. I couldn’t do anything that would jeopardize his love for me, even though it would be extremely fitting to leave Cali stuck in the demon world forever.

*In fact, I tried to help pull her out with the rest of her stupidly loyal friends, and look what that got me—a face full of Fae magic! Let that be the last time I allow myself to be drawn into her bullshit.*

I shook away all thoughts of Cali. She didn’t matter. The only thing I cared about was getting my mate back, and fast.

Greyson was still shouting and struggling with Colton and Gabriel, who were having one hell of a time trying to keep him from throwing himself into the portal after Cali.

*They should just let him go if he wants to. Now that Cali’s gone, that’s all we’re going to hear about, anyway. It would be a relief for him to get the hell out of here, too. Then we’d be able to get back to focusing on what’s actually important—saving Xavier.*

“Come on, man. Think!” Colton shouted at Greyson, straining to yank his brother away from the portal. “If you go in there, you’ll be stuck! And what would that accomplish? We’re trying to get people *out* of there, not throw a bunch more people in. Cali’s got her magic—I’m sure she’s fine. It’s obvious that she doesn’t want any of us to go in after, or else she wouldn’t have blasted us away—which I didn’t love, just FYI.”

“I don’t care about any of that!” Greyson snarled. “The demon world is no place for a Fae on her own. I can’t just leave her in there by herself. It’s not safe!”

Marissa leaned close. “Maybe if Greyson *did* go in there, he’d be able to get Xavier back?” she murmured.

“Eh, I don’t know,” I said doubtfully. “I’m sure that would backfire and somehow screw me over.”

Frustrated, I rounded on Ferlin, who was gawping at the portal fight.

“What are you doing? I thought you were leaving to go get Xavier!” I shouted at him. “What’s the holdup?”

“I will… But I’m having a little trouble starting this thing,” he said, pointing at his motorcycle.

“What? Do you even know how?” Lola demanded. “From the looks of it, you’ve never even *seen* a motorcycle before, let alone started one.”

Ferlin looked offended. “Of course I have! It’s not my fault the thing is crapping out on me. Maybe some dust or sand got caught in the engine or something.”

“Dust or sand in the engine? You’re kidding, right?” Lola said, with all the condescending disgust of a high school mean girl.

With a frustrated sigh, I shoved Ferlin off the bike, mounted it, and started it on the first try.

“Wow, you did it!” Ferlin shouted. “How *did* you do it? Was I being too hard on the throttle? Or… Maybe I shouldn’t have touched the throttle at all?”

Ignoring him, I glanced at the portal, wondering if I could use the bike to drive into the demon world and save Xavier all on my own. It would be nice to bypass all the geniuses out here who thought they knew what was best, even though they weren’t doing anything but wasting precious time. And now that Cali had goofed her way into the portal, I was sure that there’d be even more infighting about what to do.

Suddenly, I caught a whiff of Xavier’s scent. There was blood on the bike, but it wasn’t Xavier’s—his scent would’ve been way stronger if it were. I spotted more blood on the Courier’s helmet, and I snatched it off Ferlin’s head.

“Hey!” Ferlin protested. “That’s mine!”

The blood on the helmet didn’t belong to Xavier, either, but his scent was still strong. Which meant that Ferlin must’ve been with him—and left the demon world without him.

Well, that just wouldn’t do.

I whacked Ferlin in the head with the helmet, knocking him to the ground. I slid off the bike and stood over him, dropping the helmet on his stomach.

“Seems to me that you know exactly where Xavier is,” I snarled. “I want you to bring my fucking mate back. Now!”

Ferlin cowered away from me, clutching at the helmet and looking totally intimidated.

“Sure thing,” he said. He scrambled up from the ground and hopped on the bike, slipping on the helmet—probably to protect himself from any more of my attacks.

*Good. You should be scared*, I thought to myself.

With a wild shout, Greyson broke free from Colton and Gabriel’s hold and raced over to grab Ferlin before he could take off.

“Bring them both back!” he shouted. “Cali’s in there, too! She’s probably terrified!”

Marissa and I exchanged an exasperated glance. Leave it to Cali to somehow make this trip all about her.

Colton came walking over. “This guy looks like he’s never ridden a motorcycle in his life. How the hell are we supposed to believe that he’s going to make it there and back? He’s probably going to wipe out before he even reaches the demon world. Look at him!”

“You’re right,” I said begrudgingly. “Maybe one of us should take his place?”

Ferlin threw a nervous glance in my direction. I took a closer look at the dried blood covering the bike, the helmet, and Ferlin himself.

“You know what I think?” I said icily, staring him down. “I think you killed the original Courier and took his place. Which gets me to thinking—if I kill you, will *I* become the new Courier? That way, I won’t need you to go into the demon world. I’ll just handle it myself.”

Ferlin shook his head. “No! No, that’s not how it works! It only works if you’re a demon, like me. If you kill me, there’s no way you’ll ever see Xavier or Cali again.”

I smiled, and he reared back as if I’d hit him. “Guess I’m willing to call your bluff.”

Ferlin recoiled. “No no no, I can’t let that happen. I’ve wanted this role for too long, and I’m not giving it up without a fight.”

Without giving me another glance, he revved the bike and jerked away, wobbling and skidding and nearly wiping out as he went.

I watched him, not feeling at all confident about his chances. Not only did he suck at riding a motorcycle—which seemed to be an integral part of this whole Courier thing—but he was a fucking *demon*.

*Come to think of it, how do we know he’s not lying to us about everything?*

**Episode 4725**

The bleat of an alarm filled the air, and I froze.

*I’m going to take a wild guess and assume that the alarm is definitely because of me. What am I going to do? And who spotted me so quickly? I only just got here!*

I took in the hellish, red-tinged landscape that surrounded me on all sides. There was a vast emptiness to this place that I couldn’t remember ever having experienced anywhere else. It felt like I was stuck in some kind of void. It was unsettling, to say the least.

The only thing that was even slightly “human” about the place was the high wall that seemed to stretch on forever. What was even on the other side? My curiosity was certainly peaked, but there was no way I’d be able to climb the thing, and I had no idea how long it would take for me to walk around it—or if it was even possible. Plus, staying on this side was probably a better idea in the long run.

*Kind of strange, seeing a wall here. Who could’ve built it? Are there architects in the demon world?*

Shaking away those useless thoughts, I took a deep breath and summoned my sword. I nearly screamed in shock when it ignited with more intensity than it ever had before. It had always glowed, but here in the demon world, that glow seemed to surround me—it at least gave me another color to look at. Everything here was so… *red*.

*So the demon world supercharges my sword*, I thought to myself. *Good to know, good to know…*

I held the sword up so that I could get a good look at it. It had taken me long enough to get a handle on my normal sword—I had no idea how quickly I’d be able to get used to handling this turbo version.

I whirled around at the sound of shouting and saw a bunch of strange-looking figures running straight for me. They all seemed to be decked out in the same outfit. Were they soldiers or something?

“Stop! Intruder! Stop right there!” one of them shouted. “You’re under arrest!”

*Yep, definitely demon cops or guards or something. Shit! What do I do?* I took a frantic look around. *Where should I go? Can I outrun them?*

Ha, who was I kidding? Even if I did try to run, there didn’t seem to be anywhere to hide, and I wouldn’t be able to run forever—or, let’s be honest, for more than five minutes.

At that point, I realized it probably looked like I’d come to fight, so I held the sword down at my side. A little less threatening, but there if I needed it. Once the demons were in earshot, I called, “I really didn’t mean to come through the portal—it was a mistake, truly. I actually need a little help getting back, if—”

“Get the human!” one of the guards shouted. “Before it escapes!”

It was clear that they weren’t interested in helping me. They hadn’t slowed down even a little and clearly hadn’t registered what I’d said, so, with a yelp, I took off.

I’d only made it a few feet before I realized that some sort of shadow was following me. For a moment, I thought Ferlin’s demon cat was out of the bag again and had somehow followed me through the portal, but then I looked up and realized that it was something entirely different.

A group of fierce-looking birdlike monsters were circling above me, and I stifled a scream of terror when I realized just how large and utterly terrifying they were. One could swallow me whole if it wanted to.

Not wanting to become the birds’ lunch, I summoned my sword, and, once again, it all but crackled with power.

The birds screeched, and one dove right for me, opening its beak wide to reveal a forked tongue that was as black as its eyes. I dove to the ground and rolled onto my back, and then blasted the creature with every bit of magic I could muster up.

The bird was blown apart in a massive explosion that sent blood and feathers raining down on me. I was horrified, and the blood burned like hell, but I knew I had to keep moving, or else the guards would catch me. They were gaining fast—some on foot, and others riding strange creatures that looked like horses—or were they camels? I didn’t have time to figure it out.

“Whoa!” I burst out as I tripped over something.

I screamed again when I realized that the “something” was a massive body that looked like it had been ripped to shreds. I scrambled away from it, only to stumble and fall over another body, this one without a head.

I jumped up, fear coursing through me. It was the former Courier! I recognized the jacket. Ferlin hadn’t lied to us, after all… Abruptly, I remembered the blood splattered across Ferlin’s helmet—the same helmet that once belonged to the dead man lying at my feet.

*Ferlin must’ve had something to do with the Courier’s death… That’s the only way to explain why he’s running around with all of his stuff.*

But right now, none of that mattered. The guards were only a breath away, and I needed to get away from them while also avoiding the screeching creatures that were still stalking me from the sky.

I took off at full speed, but then I slowed when I spotted someone coming toward me.

*Great, is it another demon? Clearly I’m a hot commodity around here.*

I summoned my sword again and held it at the ready. I kept one eye on the guards and the strange flying creatures overhead, and the other on the person—or demon—who was approaching from the other direction. All I had to do was stay alive long enough to find Xavier, and then we’d be able to fight off all the strange creatures that came our way together. I hoped that time would come sooner rather than later.

The wind suddenly picked up, and a cloud of red sand swirled around me, obscuring my vision and stinging my eyes. I coughed as a bunch of it rushed down my throat. The wind was only getting worse, and I was starting to worry that the sand was going to choke me—which, to be fair, would’ve been objectively hilarious. Out of all the things that were currently attempting to harm me, I definitely wouldn’t have put my money on sand being the thing to take me out.

I knew that the demon had to be only a few feet away, now, so even though I couldn’t see so much as a foot in front of me in any direction, I held out my sword . With any luck, I’d impale the demon if it got too close. If I couldn’t see, then *it* probably couldn’t see either.

I grunted with the effort of raising the sword up to shoulder height—it was definitely heavier than usual and felt a lot more powerful than I was used to. In fact, it was almost *too* large, *too* heavy, and I suddenly couldn’t keep it raised for more than a few seconds at a time.

Another blast of sandy wind forced me to drop the magic altogether so I could cover my eyes. I was really starting to think that my theory about the sand blinding my pursuers wasn’t too far-fetched. I could barely build up any speed in the blinding sandstorm, and the guards should have caught up to me by now, at the very least. The sand must have slowed them down.

Over the howl of the wind, I heard the screech of the strange birds, the shouting guards, and the whinnying of their strange horses—and then a growl. There was something oddly familiar about it.

I squinted through the red curtain of sand and realized that the demon—or whatever it was—had gotten even closer. I wondered if my magic would be able to blast through the wind and the sand so that I could see. If my sword was stronger here, then that probably meant my magic was stronger in general. The exploding bird was evidence of that too.

*Let’s hope it keeps working like that.*

I summoned an orb of magic in the palm of my hand, just as the demon appeared only a foot or so in front of me, though I still couldn’t see it clearly.

I drew my hand back, preparing to blast the demon, but then a huge gust of wind rose up, sending another wave of sand right into my face, blinding me. I stumbled back and fell to the ground, inadvertently sending my orb of magic off into the sky, where it exploded.

The impact threw me back, but I could see again briefly. Sand stung my eyes, but what I saw made me gasp. *Is this real?*

Xavier was standing over me in a form I’d never seen before—he was stuck somewhere between man and wolf.

“Xavier!” I shrieked, relief rushing through me.

Xavier’s eyes were ice-cold.  “I’ll kill you for impersonating my mate.”

**Episode 4726**

**Greyson**

I hated the fact that Cali and Xavier’s fates were in the hands of this *very* suspect Courier. My misgivings were only underscored when Ferlin managed to stall the bike several yards away from the portal, nearly toppling over when he tried to jump start it.

“This is *bad*,” Colton groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Out of all the demons we could be working with, we end up with the one who can’t even ride the motorcycle he stole. Talk about bad luck.”

Ava shook her head, eyeing Ferlin’s struggles. “There’s no way we can rely on this guy. What are we going to do if he doesn’t come back with Xavier?” Then she looked at me and added, with much less conviction, “And Cali, of course.”

*Who does Ava think she’s fooling? I know she’d be happy as hell if Cali never came back. But there’s no way I’m going to let that happen. I’m going to get Cali out of that place, no matter what.*

Lola sighed with frustration. “Why couldn’t we stop Cali from being pulled in? We’re all pretty strong, but we might as well have been kittens trying to drag her back.”

I looked away, ashamed that I hadn’t managed to find enough strength to stop Cali on my own. I’d failed her when she’d needed me to be strong for her. But the pull had been too much for any of us to handle, and Cali had known it. That was why she’d blasted us back—to keep us from being dragged in, too.

“I can’t be sure, but I’m guessing it had something to do with the ashes in that ring,” I said—though I was far from certain. “Maybe they were trying to get back to the demon world, where they belong. They forced Cali through that portal, and I don’t think there was anything anyone could’ve done to stop her. I doubt strength was the problem.”

“Well then, Cali should’ve just taken the damn ring off,” Ava grumbled. Marissa gave her a nod of agreement, and both women huffed out exasperated sighs.

“It wouldn’t come off,” I snapped. “But thanks for your helpful two cents.”

*If only I’d kept the ring with me, then she wouldn’t have put it on for safekeeping. I should be the one in the demon world, not her. I would’ve been able to live with that. But* this*, knowing that Cali is trapped in the demon world and facing god knows what… It’s killing me. I have to get her out of there. Right now.*

“Greyson!” Ava shouted, like it wasn’t the first time she’d called my name. “What’s the backup plan? I’m sure you all came up with one, right?”

“Not one that I feel all that good about right now,” I said. I looked at Ferlin, who was still struggling to get the bike going. “I wish there were a million other ways we could do this, but unfortunately, our options are limited. We’re going to have to play the hand we’ve been dealt.”

To my relief, a second later, the bike purred to life, and the shifty demon gunned the engine and finally went speeding into the portal.

“I think we need to trust the new Courier for now, give him a chance to prove himself,” I said. “If he doesn’t come back with Cali and Xavier… Well, then, we’ll figure something else out. He’s at least made it through the portal. All he has to do now is find Cali and Xavier and bring them back. We just have to wait.”

Ava stared at me. “So pretty much, we do nothing? Whoa. What a surprise. I thought you pulled out all the stops whenever your mate got herself into predicaments like this—”

“That’s *not* what I’m saying,” I snarled. “But I don’t want to rush into some half-baked contingency plan and cause even more problems. We need to be smart about this, whatever we decide to do.”

*But I hate this just as much as Ava does. The waiting around, the doing nothing, the hoping for the best… I feel useless, and that’s the worst feeling in the world.*

I’d already decided that if Ferlin failed, I would go back to Big Mac and enlist even more witches to help, if that was what it took. I’d even make a deal with the sisters if I had to. I hated to use the word “desperate,” but I knew that was exactly what I’d be feeling if I didn’t get Cali back soon.

“I should’ve gone with that lame demon to make sure he does what he’s supposed to do,” Colton grumbled. “I do *not* trust that guy—just like he doesn’t trust himself to keep control of that bike and not be tossed over the handlebars.”

“True,” Mikah said, staring at the portal. “Maybe it was a mistake to leave this in his hands.”

But I shook my head. “The more I think about it, the more I feel like we made the right decision. If we’d sent you or anyone else with Ferlin, then we would’ve had three people in the demon world with no reliable way back.”

*And even if I’d approved of that plan, I never would’ve let Colton take that risk. I’m already worried about one brother—I definitely don’t want to have to worry about two.*

But that didn’t mean that I felt good about waiting around—even though that was really all I could do, for now.

Eager to hear her voice and confirm that she was okay, I reached out to Cali via mind link. I knew that there was next to no chance that she would answer, but I tried anyway.

*Cali, can you hear me? Are you okay?*

I was stunned when she responded, her mental voice shaking.

*I’m here, and I’m alive. It’s dark, and I’m so scared, Greyson. Why aren’t you coming to get me? I need you!*

Alarmed, I started toward the portal, determined to break through somehow.

Colton grabbed me before I could get very far. “Hey, what are you doing?”

I pulled out of his grip. “I don’t have time for this, Colton. Cali needs me.”

He looked puzzled. “You *do* know that the whole idea was that no one waltz right in there, right?” he asked. “Do you really think Cali would be down for you to follow in her footsteps?”

*I’ll follow her in a heartbeat*, I thought, my gaze plastered to the portal and Cali’s distressed voice still ringing through my head. If I hadn’t felt like a failure before, I certainly did now.

I glanced at Colton and shook my head. “I know that, and Cali knows that, but she’s in danger. She needs me.”

I wasn’t sure what to do. Cali didn’t often ask for help—she’d even blasted me to keep me from following her into the portal. But maybe things had changed. Maybe it was so bad in there that she was desperate for any help she could get.

I reached out to her again, hoping she was still able to answer.

*I’m going to leave and get Big Mac. She’ll know what to do.*

*There’s no time, Greyson*,came her desperate reply. *They’re coming for me! Help me! Please!*

Her cries cut me deep, and I started walking again, pushing past Colton, who kept jumping in my way and begging me to think straight.

“Don’t do this, man!” he shouted. “We don’t need more people in there!”

“Get out of my way!” I shouted at Colton before making a mad dash for the portal. But I stopped short when Cali’s voice melted into a mocking laugh. I immediately realized who I’d *actually* been talking to, and my blood began to boil.

Adéluce.

She’d been impersonating Cali. I should’ve known that mind linking was impossible, with her trapped in the demon world.

I looked around. Nobody else seemed to notice that anything was up, and Colton was just standing sentry between me and the portal, clearly ready to push me back if I tried to get past him again. Nobody seemed to be hearing what I was hearing.

*What have you done to Cali?* I demanded.

Adéluce cackled again. *Oh, relax, wolf. I haven’t done anything to Cali. What I’ve shown you is just a taste of what could happen if you refuse to work with me.*

I curled my lip in disgust and turned away from the others before I answered her. *Why would I ever work with* you*?*

*Because I can give you what you want, that’s why*,she said. *And you want Cali, don’t you? Doesn’t the thought of having her all to yourself sound good?*

I didn’t answer. I simply waited.

*I know that you’ve done all you could to accept the* due destini*, but it has to be hard to share your mate with your brother*,Adéluce continued. *But what if I told you that you don’t have to? What if Cali finally did the thing you’ve wanted most since the moment you met her? What if she finally chose you?*

**Episode 4727**

**Xavier**

Somewhere deep inside, I truly wanted to believe that the demon pleading for its life really was Cali, but it couldn’t be. How could she possibly have ended up here in the demon world? How could she have found me? This whole scenario made no sense, and I wasn’t about to fall for it. I was too smart to fall prey to such uninspired illusions, especially so late in this twisted game.

This was nothing more than a demon trick formed just to torment me—and admittedly, it was working—but I wasn’t going to fall victim to it for long. I knew better.

*This demon must’ve read my thoughts or something and made itself look like Cali. I’ve faced so much torment from Adéluce in the mortal world, and now I’m facing it here. It’s not fair, and I’m sick of it. I’m not going to fall for it. Not this time.*

My wolf was growing more restless by the moment.

*Kill the demon!* my own voice roared in my head. *This is just a dirty trick. Show them that they’re not going to get one over on you. Not now, not ever! Think of everything the demons have put you through! They’ve lied to you, tried to kill you. Get your revenge. You deserve it.*

I liked the sound of that. *Revenge*. It wouldn’t fix all my problems, but there was no doubt in my mind that it would feel really damn good.

“Stop using Cali!” I screamed at the demon. “She has nothing to do with this! Show me what you really look like, demon!”

I wondered if the demon would try to play with my feelings for Ava, next. Was she about to appear and try to throw me off? I wasn’t going to let that happen. I was tired of these cheap tricks. Tired of feeling helpless in the face of every single evil asshole who wanted to have a go at me.

*I’m done with this, and I’m not going to show any mercy. I’m going to end this charade right now—starting with making this demon pay for being a pawn in Adéluce’s games.*

I grabbed the demon and lifted it up off the ground, anger surging and roiling in the pit of my stomach. I could almost taste its blood on my tongue. I was going to kill this demon fast, and then get back to more important business, such as figuring out how to get out of here.

The demon started pleading with me again. “You don’t know what you’re doing, Xavier—you’re making a huge mistake. I’m not a demon! It’s me, Cali! Can’t you see that?”

I laughed, but it came out as more of a deranged snarl than any sound a human would’ve made. “I know a demon when I see one—but nice try. I like the special touches. You even smell like my mate.”

I opened my mouth, ready to take a life-ending bite out of the thing when suddenly, an unseen force burst to life between us, blasting us apart. When I recovered, I saw that the demon was holding up a shield—just like the one I’d seen Cali wield in the human world.

The demon was breathing hard and circling me as if it expected me to attack again at any moment.

I jumped at the sound of Cali’s voice in my mind.

*Xavier, I know you’re confused, but it really is me! I wouldn’t lie to you. I’m here to bring you home.*

I hesitated. The demon was right about one thing—I was definitely confused. It was one thing for the demon to look like Cali, even smell like her, but how the hell was it mind linking with me? Or was I imagining that? And how could the demon know that Cali had a magic shield? Could it have read my mind *that* thoroughly?

Then I heard Cali’s voice again.

*Everyone’s waiting for you, just on the other side of the portal. We’ve all been so worried about you.*

Demon Cali placed a gentle hand on my chest, and warmth flooded through me. And then a surge of memories raced through my head, starting with pleasant images of the first time I’d met her. She’d been so stubborn, so innocent… so not a part of this world. *My* world. But I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off her then, and I was having just as much trouble doing it now.

*I know those eyes—I’d know them anywhere. But here? It makes no sense…*

The wind picked up again, and Cali stumbled back and covered her eyes. I braced myself and moved forward to hold her, but the wind was too strong, and it drove us apart. I stumbled and fell, landing in a surprisingly deep crevice. The Cali demon tumbled into the crevice with me and ended up sprawled on my chest.

Above us, the sky was suddenly obscured by the raging storm of red sand. The crevice would protect us from the worst of it, but the guards most likely hadn’t found their own useful hiding spot, so the storm would keep them at bay for now. And as for the sun divers, their visibility would be shit as long as the air was clouded with sand.

But what about the demon? What was it going to do, trapped down here with me? I was vulnerable, but it was, too.

*This is my chance. Maybe I should just kill it now and put an end to this torture. This isn’t Cali. It can’t be. I can’t let a few kind words and memories lull me into believing its lies.*

But something was keeping me from killing it.

It was all too much. My head was spinning. With this demon version of Cali pressed against me in the small, dark space with the shield hovering just behind it, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that it was Cali, *my* Cali, lying on top of me.

*But it’s not. Don’t let your longing fool you.*

Cali’s scent flooded my nose.

*More tricks. It’ll do anything to pretend to be something it’s not.*

I snarled again. “As soon as this storm passes—”

“Stop it, Xavier,” the demon snapped. “I’m Cali! I know you don’t believe me, but I’m just going to keep saying the same thing—I’m Cali!”

I was surprised by the sudden shift in my wolf’s mood. Only moments before, it had been pushing me to kill this imposter, but now, even my wolf was confused about what was really going on.

“You’ve been through so much, Xavier,” the demon said. “I can see it in your eyes. And I can see that even though you’re not yourself, what makes you *you* is still there. I know you’re in there. Look at me, Xavier. Show me that you’re still the man I love.” The demon dropped its shield. “I don’t know what it will take to convince you, but here I am, Xavier. If you want to kill me, go ahead. I won’t stop you.”

I was surprised. I sincerely doubted that a demon would sacrifice itself this way… And suddenly, killing her was the furthest thing from my mind.

My wolf was antsy for another reason, now. *You don’t want to kill her. She’s your mate. It’s really her. Cali’s here—she’s really here, lying right on top of you. What are you going to do about it?*

It was like a fog had lifted, and I could finally see what was right in front of me.

*Could this really be Cali? Is she really right here with me?*

I took in a deep breath, drawing in her scent and holding it in, savoring it. It certainly smelled like her. It was a scent I would know anywhere—a scent I dreamed about. Then I looked into her eyes, and I knew. This was Cali. My Cali. My *mate*.

How could I have questioned it? How could I have ever thought to *harm* her? How could I have thought to *kill* her?

I was horrified at the way I’d just treated her, at the threats I’d made. This demon world and Adéluce had done everything in their power to turn me against the people I loved. It was all a ploy to rob me of my humanity, to force me to hurt the people who only wanted to help me—especially Cali, who’d never once given up on me.

*With my humanity stripped back by all these evil creatures who can’t seem to leave me alone, do I have any humanity left for Cali? Can I come back from what I’ve done?*

A smile spread across Cali’s beautiful face. “You finally see it, don’t you?” she asked, her voice quivering. “You know it’s me. Show me. Show me that you’re in there.”

My mind was suddenly muddled and uncertain again, and I couldn’t resist the urge to pull her even closer.

**Episode 4728**

**Artemis**

Marius and I had decided to walk for a while, giving the horse a break from carrying us.

“You want the rest of this meat?” Marius asked, holding it out to me. “It tastes really good. Filling, too. You eat enough of this, and you won’t have to worry about being hungry for a while.”

He’d nearly eaten it down to the bone, and I slapped it away. “I swear, if you ask me one more time to hold your meat stick, I’ll stab you right through the heart.”

“Touchy, touchy,” Marius said. “And keep your voice down. We don’t want to draw any unwanted attention.”

I glared at him. “Then stop asking me about your meat! I’ve said no a hundred times already, and my answer isn’t going to change—*I don’t want any*. You’ve almost eaten it all, anyway.”

Marius shrugged and kept gnawing on the bone. “Suit yourself, but I’m sure you’ll regret your decision later, when we don’t have anything to eat.”

I knew that shrug well. I’d seen it a million times before. It was his not-so-subtle way of saying “I told you so” in advance of actually telling me so later. It was all part of his smug charm.

*Even if I do get ravenously hungry later, I’ll* never *admit it to him. This is one battle I am not going to let him win.*

“So, tell me about the war,” I said, hoping to change the subject. “Has the situation changed at all since I left?”

It certainly didn’t seem like it, but wars were complicated. For all I knew, things were winding down.

“It was a mess then, and it’s probably even more of a mess now,” Marius said. “Neither side is claiming victory, and there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight. It might’ve been different if the Dark Fae court’s leader hadn’t run off like a coward.”

“Adair might be many things, but he is *not* a coward,” I snarled.

Marius tended to see things in black in white, and I knew better than anyone that there were often many gray areas to consider. I was sure that Adair’s reasons for leaving fell solidly inside one of those.

Marius eyed me closely, his meat stick hovering in front of his mouth. “How would you know that?”

I wasn’t about to trust Marius with information about my uncle. I’d been careful not to share too many details about what I’d been up to in the human world, and I’d already said too much about Adair. I had to shut up right now and not create a mess.

I shrugged. “I don’t. I just hear things.”

Marius started gnawing on the bone again. “Well, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but Adair left the Dark Fae army high and dry.”

“Well, if that’s true, I’m sure he had his reasons.”

Adair had definitely kept a lot from me, but he was allowed his secrets. We all were.

Marius suddenly stopped. “Wait. Did you hear that?”

I stopped and listened. I could hear something, but I wasn’t sure what it was. “Horses?”

“Maybe. Hold this.” He thrust the meat into my hands and took a few steps forward, on the alert.

I had to keep myself from hurling the meat at him. “You have a lot of nerve. I am *not* your valet.”

Warzone or not, traveling with Marius was exhausting, and I didn’t see it getting any better. We were falling into the same old patterns, and I wasn’t happy about it… Though there was something comforting about how familiar he was. Not that I’d ever admit that to him.

Marius didn’t seem to be listening to me. He was too focused on pinpointing the source of the sound. I joined him as we peered through the thick trees at the road just ahead. Then suddenly he held up a hand, indicating for me to stop. I did.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Light Fae scouts,” Marius said quietly. “Probably on patrol.”

I could see them now—four of them, all on horseback. They were talking amongst themselves, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying from this distance. I took a step forward, straining to hear anything.

“Careful!” Marius whispered, pulling me back. “Don’t let them see you. We should backtrack and come out on the other side—far away from them. We need to stay hidden out here.”

“I know that,” I hissed. “I was trying to hear anything useful!”

“Staying alive is useful!”

I couldn’t argue with him there, and we made our way back. I carefully led the horse down the road, and he stayed quiet and calm—until a weapon discharged loudly nearby. When that happened, he let out a loud, nervous whinny.

At almost the same moment, I heard someone coming up behind us and whipped around to look, just as something whizzed past my head.

Marius grunted and fell to one knee. I gasped when I saw the arrow sticking out of his lower back.

“You’re hit!” I said in a loud whisper.

“Tell me something I don’t know!” Marius shot back.

Someone was shouting behind us, and I heard horses approaching. Marius got to his feet, stumbling a bit as he tried to pull himself up onto our horse.

Cursing under his breath, he reached around to yank the arrow free, gritting his teeth against the pain as he did, and tossed the bloodied arrow to the ground. With the arrow out, he tried again to mount the horse, but he was still having trouble.

“You never did know when to ask for help,” I grumbled as I took over, swiftly mounting the horse before reaching down to pull Marius up after me.

Once he was situated, I nudged the horse forward with my heels, and it burst into a fast gallop.

We were going fast enough to lose whoever was chasing us, and the horse seemed just as relieved as I was to be escaping the very near and present danger. He was silent, except for the pounding of his hooves against the soft ground.

Now that I was sure the horse was calm enough to be trusted, I was free to worry about Marius, who’d gone uncharacteristically quiet.

“You good?” I asked, ducking as the horse wove between two trees with low branches.

“I’m fine,” Marius grunted. “Never better.”

“If you’re so fine, then why did I have to help you up onto this horse?” I retorted. “You looked like you were about to pass out. And now you’re lying across the horse on your stomach, like you can’t actually sit up straight.”

“Well, I *did* just get shot. What do you want from me?” Marius snapped. “Just keep heading west. We might’ve lost them already.”

Behind us, I could hear the sounds of fighting—clashing metal, explosions, yelling, screaming… Marius had warned me that we’d be passing through a warzone, but I hadn’t been prepared for this level of intensity.

“Even though we’re neutral, we have to be careful, being that we’re Dark Fae,” Marius said. Technically I was both Light and Dark Fae, but I wasn’t going to share that. “When you cut through a warzone—everyone thinks you’re on the opposite side. We should be extremely careful.”

I tried to think of something sharp to say, but nothing came to mind. Maybe we should have been more careful, but there was no use living in regret now.

After a harrowing few minutes, a swampy, wooded area came into view. The horse stopped suddenly, nearly tossing us both off his back.

“Make the horse keep going,” Marius grunted. “Don’t stop.”

I’d learned to trust animals, and Marius wasn’t in any position to give orders.

“Shut up, I’m trying,” I hissed. “But something’s spooked the horse.”

I took the meat stick and threw it. It hit the ground ahead of us, and immediately, a column of flames erupted from the earth, burning it to a crisp.

“So, do you still think we should plow ahead?” I asked.

Marius groaned. “Well done—that was a perfectly good piece of meat you just torched there.”

The horse reared back, and Marius and I went tumbling off. Marius landed on top of me, and I shoved him off with a grunt as our horse ran off.

“Great. Now we’re in the middle of a battlefield with no means of transportation,” I said.

I finally got to my feet and helped Marius up, yanking my hand free when he held on for a bit too long.

Marius didn’t seem to notice—he was in too much pain. He was bent over and, grimacing, reached back to clutch at his wound. “We should keep going. They’ll catch us in no time if we stop.”

He started ahead in the opposite direction from the swamp, but then I spotted something bright floating in the air and immediately recognized it as a wisp. I grabbed Marius and pulled him after the wisp as it floated right across the minefield that had scorched his meat stick.

“Come on, Marius,” I said. “We’re going this way.”

**Episode 4729**

I was trying really hard to maintain my composure, but on the inside, I was terrified. I’d never seen this side of Xavier before—and I didn’t think he had, either. I didn’t know exactly what the demon world had brought out in him, but it was nothing good. I’d never been so afraid of him, and even though Xavier had always been a little prickly, I’d never for one moment thought him capable of the dark things I could see swirling in his eyes right now.

*This is still Xavier, but it’s an extreme bloodlust-y version of him. It looks like he’s trying to decide whether or not he should rip me to shreds. But Xavier would never do that… Maybe I’m seeing things.*

I thought back to the first time I’d met Xavier. I’d been frightened of him then, too—which made sense, because back then, he’d been little more than a mystery wrapped in a handsome package. But the very moment I’d discovered who—or rather, *what*—Xavier was, I’d made peace with the fact that he was a mix of human and wolf.

For the most part, Xavier was fairly even keeled, and the human part of him usually held the reins. But now? I wasn’t so sure. But no matter what, I had to remember that the human was still inside him… even if it was buried very deep at the moment.

*What can I do to bring out of him? Can I even do that here in this place?*

I was holding out hope that he’d find his old self, but as he pulled me closer, I had to tell myself to stay strong. I couldn’t show him any fear, and I wanted to believe that I was right—that his humanity wasn’t so far out of reach. That he wouldn’t hurt me. Ever.

Xavier was so close, now—so close that whatever he wanted to do, I was at his mercy. I only hoped that I was right and that his love for me would overpower any effects the demon world was having on his behavior.

“*Cali*,” he breathed.

I inhaled sharply. “Yes, Xavier. It’s me.”

He put a clawed hand behind my head, and I was shocked when he kissed me. It lasted for a few beats before I pulled away.

“I knew you were in there somewhere,” I said, smiling despite everything.

The kiss had sealed it. This was him. Kissing him had felt exactly the way it was supposed to feel, and the last of my fear melted away. Xavier—*my* Xavier—was back.

Then, right before my eyes, Xavier shifted back to his full human form. Looking stunned by the transformation, he stared down at his hands, and then at me.

“How did you—”

Xavier cut me off with another kiss, and I leaned into it breathlessly, feeling almost like I was outside of my body and looking down at the two of us, locked in each other’s arms.

*I can’t believe I’m in the demon world with Xavier. I found him. Even in a hellish place like this, I found him. It’s official. Nothing can keep us apart. Nothing.*

I kissed him back, unable to help myself. I’d been wanting this so badly—just to see him, to know that he was alive. But I’d never imagined that I’d have the opportunity to kiss him, to touch him, to be with him in this way. It was a delicious cherry on top.

I went slack in his arms as he took the lead, obviously channeling all of his bloodlust from before into just plain lust that I could feel in the strength of his kiss and the languid swirl of his tongue deep inside my mouth.

Above us, the sandstorm was still howling, throwing so much sand into the crevice that it crept up to our ankles.

He paused to meet my eyes. “How did you end up here?”

“It wasn’t my intention, believe me.” I held up the ring. “This thing just wouldn’t let me resist. After we tracked down the entry point to the demon world, it pretty much dragged me through the portal.”

I thought about how I’d blasted my friends with magic to make them let go of me—certainly not my proudest moment. I could only imagine what Ava, Marissa, and possibly Colton had said about me. But if I ever saw them again—*when* I saw them again—I’d explain why I’d done it.

Xavier’s eyes went wide as he stared at the ring. “What the… How did you get that?”

I looked him right in the eye. “I cut off Adéluce’s hand. Not one of the prettier things I’ve done with my sword, but she left me no choice.”

Xavier whistled. “I wish I’d been there to see that.”

“It was quite the sight,” I said dryly. “Her severed hand started skittering around like a spider.”

“Very on brand,” Xavier said with an eye roll. “Always one for drama.”

“Do you think the last of the ashes really are inside this ring?” I asked. “I’m thinking that it might be the truth. Before I got to the demon world, the Seluna mark was hurting so badly, but the pain stopped the moment I made it through the portal. That has to mean something, right?”

Rather than answer right away, Xavier pulled down the collar of my shirt to look at my shoulder. “The mark’s completely gone.”

I felt the tickle of his warm breath on my skin, and I shivered, but not because I was cold—I’d just spent so much time thinking I’d never again get close enough to feel his breath on my skin. The sensation was maddening, and I had to force myself to keep my mind on more pressing issues.

“Great—it’s good to hear that it’s gone,” I said. “But what if there are more ashes out there in the human world? What if the mark comes back again?”

Xavier shook his head. “I honestly doubt that there are any more. My guess is that Adéluce took just enough ashes to cause a problem. And the fact that the mark has disappeared again, and the pain has stopped… I think that means the ashes are all here.”

Suddenly, it all seemed so simple. I’d brought the last of the ashes back to the place where they belonged, and now I was finally free from Seluna’s—and Adéluce’s—hold, once and for all. At least I hoped so.

*I’ve had this damn Seluna mark hanging over my head for so long… I can’t believe it’s finally over. It almost seems too good to be true.*

“Do you really think it’s over? Am I finally free?” I asked in a small voice.

“It’s true. I know it,” Xavier said. He pulled me into a hug as a steady stream of sand began to fall into the crevice and onto our heads.

I coughed and wiped the sand from my face. “Is the storm letting up at all? Can you tell?”

Xavier peered up into the red sky waiting just beyond the crevice. “I think the storm’s dying down,” he said. “I think this sand is the crevice, starting to collapse in on us.”

I suddenly felt something pulling me down—an invisible hand clawing at me from beneath the layer of sand piled in the bottom of the crevice. I recoiled, instantly terrified that demons were trying to drag me underground.

With a panicked squeal, I stooped down and clawed at the sand, pushing it away from my feet and half expecting to see a slimy, gnarly hand wrapped around my ankle… But there was nothing there but sand, sand, and more sand.

Xavier was still surveying the landscape beyond the crevice. “I think it’s best if we get out of here and face the wind before the crevice collapses and crushes us.”

He started to climb out, but then I realized my legs were stuck. Something *was* holding me back—though it wasn’t a hand.

“Xavier, I can’t move! It’s like quicksand!” I shouted.

The sound of rock grating against rock filled the air, and I saw the walls shifting.

“We have to get out of here, Cali—this thing is about to go!” Xavier said. “I’m almost at the top, just a sec!”

Seconds later, Xavier reached the top of the crevice and leaned down to take my hand.

As he tried to yank me out, I was reminded of how it had felt when the ring had forced me toward the demon portal and everyone had been tugging and pulling at me, trying to stop me from passing through. Once again, the sensation of being torn in half came to mind, since the sand around my feet just wasn’t letting go.

I started to panic in earnest as the sand kept pouring in, faster now. I was already buried up to my knees, and the sand showed no signs of stopping.

**Episode 4730**

“Keep looking at me, Cali!” Xavier shouted over the roar of the wind. “I won’t let go. I’m going to pull you out of there. Trust me.”

I did as he said, never moving my eyes from his as he yanked me out of the sucking sand, pulling me free inch by inch. Gradually, my panic began to subside, and I started to believe that not only was Xavier going to pull me out of the crevice, but we were going to leave the demon world together very soon. There was no other scenario I was going to even entertain.

I was getting my mate the hell out of here.

My feet finally left the sand, and as Xavier pulled me up and over the edge of the crevice, he used his body to shield me from the sandstorm.

“We should try to find some shelter by the wall,” he shouted. “It’s not good to be out in this sand for long. It gets in your nose, your mouth, your lungs—all the places you don’t want demon sand to be.”

As we started for the wall, I could barely see a thing. I clung to Xavier as the wind did all it could to knock me down. It was almost like the sand was a bunch of tiny demons, every one of them trying to kill me.

“I’ve got you!” Xavier said, scooping me up into his arms. His significantly more substantial frame was able to stand up to the wind, and before long, we made it to the wall.

We pressed up against it, Xavier still blocking me from the rushing sand while I stayed nestled in his arms. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d shared a tender moment like the one in the crevice without Xavier turning into an asshole and running off only moments later. It kind of felt like old times, and for a moment, it almost made me happy.

I could feel the pulse of a heartbeat, but I wasn’t sure if it was mine or Xavier’s. We were out of the crevice, and getting a bit of shelter from the sand by sticking close to the wall, but I was a little anxious about trying to navigate the demon world all on our own, so I was sure it was *my* heart that was going crazy.

“You can put me down!” I shouted at Xavier.

But either he didn’t hear me, or he pretended not to. And if he wanted to keep me secure in his arms, I couldn’t say I minded. It was nice to be so close to him again, and I felt safe for the first time since I’d stumbled into the demon world.

“We should keep moving. We might find a place that offers better shelter from the wind,” Xavier said.

He started to move, but I stopped him.

“Please, put me down,” I said.

“Why? We can move faster if I carry you! The wind is so intense right now, it’ll blow you away—”

“No,” I interrupted. “It’s time for me to take care of something.”

Xavier set me down, and I went for the ring on my finger. Luckily, it slipped off in no time. It had to be because we were finally in the demon world.

“I’ve done what I set out to do,” I said. “I’ve returned Seluna’s ashes to where they belong. Now it’s time to make sure that this ring can never be taken to the human world again so Adéluce can use it against us.”

I set the ring down on a large stone jutting up out of the ground, then I conjured my shield. It was large and cumbersome and very difficult to control in the relentless press of the wind. Still, I held it as steady as I could, raised it over my head, and then screamed as I brought it down on the ring.

It felt damn good to hit the thing with my shield. I was finally ridding myself of Seluna’s demonic grip and Adéluce’s torment with it. I was finally doing what had to be done. I was saving myself and my mate.

The ring shattered immediately on impact, but I didn’t stop there. I brought the shield down again and again. “This is for Adéluce, for messing with my mate! This is for Seluna, for never leaving me the fuck alone!”

I kept slamming the shield into the ring until it was reduced to tiny pieces—and even then, I kept going.

“Take that, you awful, evil bitches! Burn in hell!” I screamed.

“Cali, relax. That’s enough,” Xavier said, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from the pulverized ring and the freshly scarred rock.

We stood back and watched as the ring, not much more than dust now, was swept away by the wind and scattered in every direction.

I dissolved my shield and bent double, resting my hands on my knees and breathing hard. I was trying to catch my breath, slightly in shock over the fact that I’d actually done it. I’d destroyed the final traces of Seluna’s curse.

The wind suddenly died down, and the red sun reemerged, casting a bright scarlet light over the desert.

“Do you think that’s a coincidence?” I asked. “The wind stopping like that and the sun coming out?”

Xavier bit his lip and shook his head. “I can’t be sure, of course, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the storm’s stopping because the ashes are back. Regardless, it doesn’t matter now. We need to get out of here.”

He grabbed my hand and took off along the wall.

“Where are we going?” I asked. “Oh—and you should know that there’s another Courier in play. Greyson’s probably sent him to find us by now.”

Xavier stopped short and eyed me. “Ferlin?”

I was surprised. “Yeah, Ferlin. How did you know?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said darkly, stalking off again.

He led me along, determined.

“I know where the Courier came through last time,” he said. “But no matter where Ferlin comes through, we’ll find him.”

I took a fearful glance up at the sky. “But what about those bird things? And the guards?”

I shuddered at the memory of them pursuing me. The storm had been rough and scary, but it was nothing compared to the creatures who called this place home. I was lucky that the storm had descended when it had, or there was a good chance that neither me nor Xavier would’ve been alive to enjoy our reunion.

“Don’t worry about any of that,” Xavier said. “Hopefully we can avoid both until Ferlin gets back… Or rather, *if* he gets back.”

“You don’t seem like the biggest fan of Ferlin…” I ventured. “Not that I’m surprised. He didn’t strike me as the most trustworthy guy I’ve ever met.”

“He’s not a guy,” Xavier said. “He’s a demon. And if I get the chance, I’m going to set things straight with him.”

I was about to ask what that meant when I heard the rumble of a motorcycle.

Xavier’s grip tightened on my hand as he picked up the pace. Suddenly, he looked genuinely gleeful.

“I can’t believe it, perfect timing!” he said. “I can’t believe that bastard actually has the audacity to come back here after what he did!”

I was still confused. “But how do we know that he’ll take us back to the human world?”

“Don’t worry, Cali,” Xavier said confidently. “We’re going to get back one way or another, even if I have to strap him to the bike like a piece of baggage and drive it through the portal myself. It was one thing when I was the only one trapped here, but it’s quite another now that you’re here, too. There’s no way I’m going to let you stay in this hell hole. And fuck that backstabbing demon! He’s dead to me.”

Ferlin came roaring out of the shimmering portal, almost knocking us both down before he lost control of the bike and went careening across the sand before toppling over.

He popped up from the ground, dusting off the sand as Xavier rushed up to him.

“Where the hell have you been?” Xavier hissed, lifting the demon into the air.

“Put me down!” Ferlin shouted, kicking and squirming in Xavier’s hold. “I came back to help you!”

Then he looked from Xavier to me, and then finally to the bike. A look of concern passed across his face, then he swallowed loudly and quickly averted his eyes. He’d gone completely still, and wasn’t even trying to fight Xavier off anymore.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong with you? Why do you look like you’ve just seen a ghost?”

“Because…” Ferlin trailed off.

Xavier shook him, and his feet flopped around like he was a ragdoll—which, in Xavier’s hold, he pretty much was.

“Because what?” Xavier pressed.

Ferlin swallowed nervously again and threw a frightened glance at Xavier before continuing. “Because we won’t all fit on the bike. One of you is going to have to stay behind.”

**Episode 4731**

**Xavier**

I grabbed Ferlin by the front of his shirt. “What do you mean, *one of us has to stay behind?*”

I hadn’t crossed the fucking demon desert, been betrayed by the same guy who was now telling me he couldn’t take both Cali and me home, and reunited with my mate on the wrong side of the portal only to end up *here*.

Ferlin pointed at the bike. “Um… This thing has one seat, and it’s built for two, including the rider. You do the math,” he said. “And before you think of threatening me, only a demon can assume the Courier role. I’m your best option.”

He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world—like after all the impossible shit I’d seen in this literal hellscape, it was unreasonable for me to expect some kind of magical seating arrangement.

God, I wanted to punch this demon asshole so, so badly. I couldn’t stand his attitude, and I couldn’t risk that he was right about the stupid becoming-the-Courier-thing. That was the only thing keeping him in one piece right now. If I hadn’t literally needed him to take Cali and me back to the human world, I already would’ve torn him to shreds—which, to be fair, was probably exactly why he was dragging this out.

My murderous thoughts must’ve been written all over my face, because Cali rested a hand on my arm and pulled me back.

“It’s not Ferlin’s fault that the bike isn’t made for three people,” she said, lowering her voice so only I could hear. “I know you’re upset, but he’s our only way out of here.”

*Translation: don’t kill him. Yet.*

I gritted my teeth. “*Fine*.”

Cali was right, but she didn’t know the whole story. She didn’t know that Ferlin had murdered the Courier and then abandoned me here, leaving me to fend for myself in a world I knew almost nothing about.

“Okay, who’s gonna come through the portal with me first?” Ferlin asked.

“How about *you* stay here, and Cali and I can ride out?” I said coldly.

He scoffed. “It doesn’t work that way—you’re not a Courier, which means you can’t pass through without me.”

“If it weren’t for me, you’d still be a nobody,” I snarled. “You stabbed me in the back, and now you owe me.”

The bastard just shrugged. “I mean, I don’t disagree, but the fact remains that I can’t carry both of you at the same time. So, again, who’s going to go first?”

“There’s nothing to decide.” I nodded toward Cali. “Take her through first.”

But she shook her head. “No, Xavier. You’re going first. I’m not going through that portal until I know you’re safe in the human world.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said dismissively. “You need to get out of here, right now. Ferlin will bring me through once he drops you in the human world. Won’t you, Ferlin?” I narrowed my eyes at the demon, my tone promising to rain down hell on him if he double-crossed me again. I glanced at Cali again. “Come on. Get on the bike.”

I reached for her hand, but she jerked it back. “No! You have to go through first. I’m…” She swallowed. “I’m just so worried about you, Xavier. You’ve already been in the demon world far too long, and I’m terrified that if you don’t go back now, I might never see you again. So please, just… go with the Courier. I’ll be right behind you, okay?”

It went against everything I believed in, everything I felt, to let Cali stay behind while Ferlin took me through first. I didn’t know how I could possibly do what she was asking of me. She could be kind and selfless all she wanted, but that didn’t mean I was going to let her spend a single second longer in the demon world than she had to.

And then I realized, this wasn’t just Cali being stubborn and selfless. She was fighting for me. Despite all the crap I’d thrown at her to keep Adéluce from harming her, she was still putting me first. The guilt that slammed into me was worse than anything the demon world had thrown at me so far.

*I will never deserve this woman, even if I strive to be worthy of her for as long as I live.*

But I couldn’t let her do this. I had to get her through that portal first, one way or another. I didn’t trust Ferlin even a little—there was every chance that he’d renege on his promise to come back for whoever was left behind, which meant I had to make sure Cali made that first trip back to the human world.

“Cali, we’re not getting back together,” I snapped. “Even if I go through the portal first, I’m still with Ava. I don’t want you, so stop wasting your time trying to change my mind.”

I was falling back on my old tactics—acting like an asshole to push her away, to get her to prioritize herself first. But when she gave me a grim smile, I knew it hadn’t worked.

“You’ve said some pretty awful things to me, Xavier,” she said. “And when you went back to Ava, it hurt me deeply.”

God, I hated myself. I’d never *stop* hating myself for how badly I’d hurt Cali. I wished, more than anything, that I could take back every awful word and action.

“But I also know that Adéluce put a spell on you,” she continued, “so it wasn’t completely your fault. And whenever I ended up in a tough spot, you know who came to my rescue?”

I scoffed. “If I ever rescued you, it was due to sheer proximity—you have a supernatural ability to put yourself in stupid situations.”

“When the car blew up, you pulled me out before I was seriously hurt,” she said stubbornly.

“I did that because it was the right thing to do!” I burst out, “I would’ve pulled *anyone* out of that kind of danger.”

She eyed me skeptically. No matter what I said, it all just seemed to roll right off her.

“And what about the crew party?” she pressed. “Who just *happened* to be there to save me from drowning? Same goes for when we were trapped in the palace when the Bitterfangs were attacking. You still care about me, whether you can admit it or not. I know the truth.”

I didn’t have a response to that, and all I could do was look away from the intense expression on her face. I remembered each and every one of the situations she’s just mentioned, and in all of them, I’d been fucking terrified for her. Terrified that she’d get hurt. Terrified that I wouldn’t be able to save her. So every time, I’d stepped in to keep her safe—and I’d do it all again. And that was why I wasn’t going to go through that portal first. I had to know she was safe, and back where she belonged.

*Why can’t she just accept that?*

Cali closed the distance between us and cupped my face. I tensed, my pulse quickening, though I didn’t dare move. I didn’t know if I’d be able to control myself. I didn’t know if I *wanted* to control myself.

She pulled my head down so our eyes were level. “I know you care, Xavier,” she said. “And you know I still love you. We’ve always been there for each other, and that’s never going to change.”

A lump filled my throat.

Ferlin coughed. Loudly. “So, um, I hate to interrupt this chick flick situation you’ve got going on, but are we leaving or not? Now that the storm is over, the guards will be back—and so will the sun divers.”

Without giving her a chance to argue or come up with some asinine idea of how to fit both of us on the bike, I scooped Cali up in my arms and put her on it. My eyes locked with Ferlin’s. “Go. Now.”

“I’m not leaving first!” Cali protested. She tried to scramble off the bike as Ferlin revved the engine, and her foot slipped down the side. I was nearly knocked off my feet when a sidecar suddenly sprang out of the side of the vehicle.

We all stared at it for a beat before Ferlin said, “Oh. I had no idea that was there. Sorry.”

“Come on, Xavier,” Cali said. “Get in. We can all go through together.”

I only liked half of that idea—the part where Cali stayed close to Ferlin for the journey wasn’t acceptable; not when there was an alternative. I picked her up again and deposited her in the sidecar before mounting the bike behind Ferlin.

A shadow passed overhead. The sun divers were back.

“Let’s go!” I shouted over the roar of the motorcycle.

I took Cali’s hand as Ferlin popped the clutch and the bike jerked forward. Sun divers swooped toward us as Ferlin steered the bike toward the wall.

*Wait. Why is it still a wall? Where’s the fucking portal?*

“Ferlin, stop!” I shouted. “We’re going to crash!”

**Episode 4732**

**Greyson**

Adéluce was refusing to let up. She kept filling my head with images of Cali and me—kissing, living together, getting married, having children… She was showing me everything I’d ever dreamed of, everything I’d always hoped for, no matter how tough things got—and it wasn’t even real. Adéluce was hitting me where it hurt most, playing with my desires. Toying with me, manipulating me.

How the fuck had Xavier put up with this for so long?

*Enough!* I snapped at the vampire-witch. *I’m not buying whatever bullshit you’re selling, Adéluce. I know Cali will choose me without your intervention—and using magic to get the result I want would just take her choice away, anyway. You’re crazy to think I’d side with you. You threatened Cali and Xavier. I’ll never make any kind of deal with you. But I* will *make you pay for all the pain you’ve caused. And this time, I’ll make sure you stay dead.*

“Um, hey… Greyson?” Colton’s voice filtered through the mental war I was waging. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Adéluce’s voice overlapped Colton’s, gaining volume inside my head. *Don’t listen to your half-brother. Have you forgotten that he left you and the Redwood pack after you became Alpha? Doesn’t that prove what kind of brother he is? He doesn’t care about you. He won’t support you, or back you up. He wants his twin to be Redwood Alpha. You can’t trust him.*

I slapped my hands over my ears, as if that could make her stop.

Colton grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me so hard my teeth rattled. “Seriously, what’s *wrong* with you?”

I looked wildly around for Adéluce. She was in my head, but physically, she could’ve been just about anywhere, ready to attack. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if I were to turn around and find that bitch right behind me.

Colton stared at me, a crease between his eyes. “Do you want me to call Big Mac?”

I shook my head, trying to loosen Adéluce’s grip on my mind. “No… That’s… *No*.”

He nodded. “Listen, I know you’re worried about Cali, but you need to pull your shit together, or we’re going to lose both Cali and Xavier. Do you get that?”

Colton was right, of course. If Adéluce was putting this much effort into playing mind games with me, then we had to be close to getting Cali and Xavier back. As difficult as it was to ignore her when she’d burrowed into my mind, I had to try. I was the Alpha here, and one of Cali’s mates. I needed to take charge of this situation.

My brother’s brows rose, and he eyed me warily, like he didn’t trust me to not lose my shit again. Which, all things considered, was probably a reasonable response.

“Are you back with us?” he asked.

I nodded. “I’m going to call Big Mac.”

If anyone could help us get out of this situation, it was her. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and cursed when I saw I didn’t have service.

“Fuck. No service,” I said. “I’m going to have to head back until my phone starts working.”

“And how, exactly, are we supposed to *get* back?” Ava asked. “Have you forgotten the cliff we flew off of on our way down here?”

We all turned back to look, but the cliff was too far off to see. *Shit. Even if we do get Cali and Xavier out, how the hell are we going to get home?*

Ava was right to be concerned, but it grated that she was just shooting down my ideas without offering any alternatives. I knew she had to be worried sick about Xavier—and she probably wasn’t thrilled that he and Cali were in the demon world together, either. So why wasn’t she trying to help more?

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I don’t know how we’re going to get home. But I can’t worry about that, because the important thing right now is getting Cali and Xavier back. We all need to be careful, okay? I don’t think we’re safe out here.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you say that?”

I eyed the rest of the group warily. Was anyone else being taunted by Adéluce? She’d been inside my head—she could do the same thing to everyone else.

I didn’t want to admit that Adéluce was fucking with me—and with a certain amount of success, too. For one thing, acknowledging the homicidal elephant in the room would make everyone else nervous. They might decide that they couldn’t trust me, and they wouldn’t even be wrong to feel that way. I’d nearly lost control of myself.

And what if admitting that Adéluce was here with us—magically, if not physically—made her turn on someone else? Someone who didn’t have the mental fortitude I did? Someone who wouldn’t be able to resist her?

“We just can’t afford to let our guard down,” I said lamely. “We’re in uncharted waters here. We need to stay vigilant.”

Adéluce’s laughter thundered in my head, and it took all of my self-control to not flinch.

*You’re nowhere near as strong as you think you are, Greyson Evers*,she crooned. *You may be the older brother, the Alpha, but the truth is, you can’t protect anyone from what’s coming next.*

Fucking hell. Could this fucking bitch not just mind her own business and get the hell out of my head?

I knew I shouldn’t engage with her, that fighting with her in my mind would only make me look unhinged—but I just hated her so damn much. She’d put Cali through hell. She’d cast a spell on Xavier that had made him burn bridges with just about everyone in his life. Every instinct was begging me to fight back.

*What’s wrong, Greyson?* she taunted. *Cat got your tongue?*

I was about to respond when the low rumble of an engine filled the air. We all turned to see the air shimmering several feet away, warping our view of the area around us. Then a motorcycle with a sidecar burst through the portal and plowed right past me, sending me lunging to the side just in time to not be hit. I scrambled onto my hands and knees, spitting out sand and dust as the motorcycle skidded to a stop, throwing *more* sand and dust into the air, covering the group with a blanket of it.

Jumping to my feet, I got ready to tear the half-assed, clueless, should-never-ever-be-allowed-to-drive-again demon Courier in half. Then I saw Cali sitting in the sidecar, alongside Xavier and Ferlin. I froze.

*Cali. She’s back.*

She scrambled to get out of the sidecar and rushed over to me. “Greyson! Oh my god. Are you okay?” She threw a dirty look at Ferlin over her shoulder. “The original Courier didn’t mow people down.”

Ferlin shrugged. “Sure he did. That’s just what happens to people who are in the way when a portal opens up right in front of them.”

Irritation lashed at me, but I ignored it—Cali was back, and nothing else mattered.

Xavier hopped off the bike and glared at Ferlin. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Then he marched toward Ava, who rushed into his arms with a relieved sigh.

“Oh, thank god,” she breathed.

I pulled Cali into my arms, savoring the feel of her body against mine. But my relief didn’t last long. We still weren’t safe here. Adéluce was watching us, and there was no telling when, if, or how she’d make good on her threat.

We needed to get back to the pack house as soon as possible.

And then, as I held Cali in my arms, I caught a whiff of Xavier’s scent on her—and Adéluce’s voice returned in full force.

*You know Xavier isn’t going to settle for Ava. He wants Cali, too. Are you aware that time passes differently in the demon world? I wonder how long Xavier was alone with Cali, just now. Do you think it was long enough for them to fuck?*

I glanced at Xavier. Even from this distance, I could smell Cali on him. I could just picture their reunion in the demon world. My heart rate sped up, and I felt my blood pulsing in my head as my vision turned red. I didn’t realize I was walking away from Cali until I was already in motion, marching toward Xavier.

*Come on, Greyson*, Adéluce taunted. *How long have you been forced to put up with your brother? He wants to take your mate from you. Don’t let him. Throw Xavier back into the demon world while you have a chance, then kill the Courier and make sure Xavier’s trapped there forever. He’ll be right where he belongs, and you can have your happily ever after.*

Xavier frowned as I approached, clearly not liking what he saw in my face. “Greyson—”

I lunged, slamming into him and driving him to the ground.

**Episode 4733**

**Artemis**

Marius gaped at me like I’d just spoken gibberish. “Are you seriously saying we should walk *toward* the fireballs? Sorry, but that’s gonna be a no from me.”

I shook my head. He never listened to me before, so it wasn’t exactly a surprise that he was failing to listen to me now. Still, we didn’t have the luxury of thinking time. I’d just have to *make* him listen.

“You don’t get it,” I snapped. “There’s a wisp—it can guide us through! We won’t be harmed.”

I pointed at the wisp, and Marius turned around and stared right at it, his expression tightening before he turned back to me. “I don’t see a wisp.”

I frowned, confused, and looked *directly* at the wisp, which was very much there. In plain sight.

I sighed. “Is this supposed to be a joke?” I asked aloud.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“The wisp.” I gestured at it again, and he still looked confused.

“I could ask you the same thing, Ari—very funny, by the way,” he added sarcastically. “But now is not the time for joking around.”

My shoulders slumped. “Do you seriously not see it?”

“Not see what?”

“The wisp!” I was feeling so frustrated. Why was this thing only showing itself to me and not to Marius? We were talking about the same thing but kept splitting hairs.

“There’s a wisp,” I said again. “Right *there*.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Yes, there is!”

Marius threw up his hands in frustration. “It doesn’t matter! Wisp or not, there’s no way I’m going to follow you into that minefield. Do you know what would happen if we stepped on one of those things? It’d all be over. We'd be dead. End of story.”

I pulled in a slow, deep breath. How could I convince him to come with me if he couldn’t see the wisp? Wisps were fickle creatures, even by Fae standards, and they could be choosy about who they allowed to see them. It was entirely possible the wisp only wanted *me* to see it and was therefore maddeningly unhelpful.

*Annoying Fae shit*, I thought mutinously.

“Sorry, Marius,” I said. “You’re just going to have to take my word for it.”

I grabbed his hand and towed him toward the wisp.

“Ari, no! Don’t!” He tugged against my grip, trying to pull me away from the minefield, but he was weak, and obviously in worse shape than he’d led me to believe. Worry gnawed at my gut, but I still grabbed the advantage his injury was giving me and kept pulling him toward the fiery swamp.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he snarled. “Have you lost your damn mind? We can’t go that way! We’ll die!”

“Shut up!” I snapped. “I’d never knowingly lead you into harm, Marius. If you trust nothing else, trust that. It’s the only way we’re going to make it out of this alive.”

He stared at me for a long string of seconds before his shoulders slumped. “Fine. But if you kill me, I’m going to haunt you for the rest of eternity.”

Despite the mortal danger we were in, I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “I’ve never known you to be afraid before, Marius.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’ve got a thing about being cooked alive. Call me a coward, if you want, but personally, I can’t think of a worse way to die.”

I kept tugging him along, keeping my tone light. “Good thing you’re not going to be cooked, then.”

I glanced up at the wisp, still following the path it was laying out. I wished I actually felt even half of the confidence I was faking for Marius’s benefit. Right now, I didn’t see a better option than following after the wisp, but I was desperately hoping that I hadn’t made a mistake. I wasn’t exactly an expert when it came to wisps—despite all my time in the Fae world, I’d only come across them a couple of times in my life.

Cali had lots of experience with them, though, and they’d always been helpful to her. Hopefully whatever luck or connection she had with them, I had a bit of it, too. If we’d had any other options, I would’ve shared Marius’s wariness about chasing a wisp through a minefield, but the timing of this situation made me think I could trust it.

Plus, it would’ve been a lie to say that it wasn’t *incredibly* satisfying to have Marius under my control.

So we followed the wisp, moving through the swamp a little faster than I was comfortable with—though maybe it was better to move quickly. That way, there was a little less time to spend worrying about whether the next step we took would be our last.

Fireballs erupted around us as we traversed the swamp, but they were always *just* far enough away that they didn’t burn us. Still, that didn’t mean that we couldn’t feel the heat.

I took another step, and a fireball shot out of the ground, *almost* close enough to singe my hair. When this was over, I’d probably have some minor burns. This would be a huge improvement on being burned alive, but the threat of being scorched still didn’t exactly make for a peaceful or painless journey.

“You think you could steer us just a *little* farther from the fireballs?” I asked the wisp.

It bounced around for a moment, triggering several fireballs, then kept floating forward. I didn’t know how to interpret that response, so I just kept trudging forward, pulling Marius along behind me. All I could do was hope that wherever we found ourselves when we emerged from this swamp, it would put us one step closer to finding my father.

Marius’s steps slowed, even with my hand tugging him forward. He stumbled, and I grabbed him around the waist and pulled him out of the path of a fireball at the last moment.

“Stay close,” I reminded him. “There’s no telling how wide the safe path is.”

“Not a problem,” he said with a grin. But his eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he was leaning on me heavily.

My stomach clenched. If we didn’t make it through the minefield soon, he’d probably collapse—and I didn’t know if I’d be able to drag him without setting off enough fireballs to roast us alive.

We kept walking for a while longer, avoiding a few more eruptions before the swamp gave way to a clearing surrounded by woods on three sides. The wisp darted into the center of the clearing, hovering for a beat before it disappeared.

*Here’s hoping that means we’re out of danger for now…*

I guided Marius across a stream, putting a fair amount of distance between us and that fucking swamp.

“Do you want to rest?” I asked.

He shook his head, then crumpled against me and nearly sent me to the ground with his dead weight. My muscles screaming, I managed to steady him at the last moment and looked around for a place to set him down.

I dragged him to a patch of grass next to the stream, and he winced when I set him down.

“My ass is killing me.” He speared me with a look. “And no, that’s not an invitation for you to joke about me being a pain in *your* ass.”

I sighed. “Let’s turn you over. I need to see the wound.”

“It’s just a minor flesh wound—” he began, but I was already shifting my hold on him to see what was going on with his backside.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, that’ll do it.”

There was an arrow sticking out of his butt. Just how long had *that* been there?

“I’m going to have to pull it out and dress the wound,” I informed him.

Marius gave me a delirious smile. “You’re just using this as an excuse to see my ass. I should charge you.”

“Shut up,” I said, but there was no heat in it.

*Was that arrow laced with something? He’s certainly acting like he’s been drugged… Or maybe that’s just him.*

I helped him lie down on his belly, then grabbed a stick from off the ground.

“Bite down on this,” I said, then unceremoniously shoved it into his mouth. I gripped the arrow firmly, and he let out a muffled cry. “Okay, I’m going to pull it out on the count of three,” I warned him. “One—”

I yanked the arrow out before he could tense up, and he let out a scream. His teeth snapped the stick, and as he spat out the pieces of wood, he turned to me.

“I thought you said—”

“It hurts less when you don’t see it coming,” I said.

“I don’t think that’s true!”

“Whatever. It’s out now.” I showed him the bloody arrow. “Now I just need to clean the wound.”

“I need a healer.”

“Well, we don’t have one.” I scanned the ground for some sap flower, a plant known for its healing properties, but there didn’t seem to be any in this clearing.

*I wish Torin or Mom were here to help…*

“I have to go find the right plant to treat your wound, okay?” I said, already moving to stand—but he reached up and caught my hand.

“Please don’t leave me!” he burst out. “I just got you back.”

I frowned. *Is that really how he feels, or is he just delirious from pain and blood loss and possible arrow poison?*

I slipped out of his grip and turned to leave.

But before I made it more than a step, I heard rushing footsteps. Moments later, I found myself surrounded by Light Fae warriors.

**Episode 4734**

I rushed over to separate my mates.

“Greyson, wait!” I shouted.

*What on earth has gotten into him? One second he’s welcoming me back, and the next he’s tackling Xavier into the dirt?*

Colton beat me to the punch, rushing in and grabbing Greyson around the middle. Xavier wasn’t done fighting, though—when Colton tried to separate him and Greyson, Xavier drove his elbow into his twin’s ribs, knocking him away from Greyson.

From there, all hell broke loose.

“Dude!” Colton shouted, rubbing his ribs. “I’m on your side!

Ava leapt onto Greyson’s back. “Get the hell away from him!”

She slung her arms around his neck, and for a split-second, I was genuinely terrified that she was about to try to gouge out his eyes.

Jay managed to wrap his arms around Xavier and haul him away from Greyson, while Gabriel and Mikah stepped between the two brothers. Now that I didn’t have to worry about Greyson and Xavier hurting each other, I veered toward Greyson, who still had Ava on his back.

“Get off him!” I screeched at her.

Ava’s snarl was so furious, I half-expected her to shift on the spot. “He attacked my mate!”

Lola appeared out of nowhere to back me up. “And now *you’re* the one doing the attacking, so back the fuck off!”

Ava leapt off Greyson and rushed over to Xavier.

“Are you okay?” she demanded, then she kissed him without waiting for him to answer, her hands moving across his torso like she was looking for an injury.

My stomach twisted. Some part of me had wanted to be the one to check on Xavier. He’d been there for me countless times. I cared about him, too. I loved him, too, and it pained me to no end to see my mates fighting with each other.

“I’m fine,” Xavier told Ava, his eyes on me.

I looked away. I had to check on Greyson—make sure he was okay and find out what the hell had gotten into him.

*What could possibly have set him off like that? Did something happen to him while I was in the demon world?*

I turned to Greyson just as Colton moved in to stand with Gabriel and Mikah, fortifying the barrier between Greyson and Xavier.

“Get a grip, man,” Colton snapped. “Whatever the hell is wrong with you, just *walk it off*.”

Greyson didn’t take his eyes off Xavier as he wiped blood from his swollen lip. He glared at his brother but let Mikah steer him away.

I followed after them and sidled up to stand next to Greyson. He didn’t look at me, though I was sure he knew I was there. I didn’t know what to do. The fighting had stopped, but the tension hadn’t lessened, even a little bit. I knew either one of them would blow up again at the slightest provocation.

*Should I demand answers, or just wait for Greyson to speak?*

Xavier broke the silence that had settled over the group. “Hell of a way to welcome me back, brother.”

Greyson’s body tensed, like he was a predator about to pounce. “You—”

I stepped in front of him, planting my hand on his chest, over his racing heart. “Look at me.”

He didn’t take his eyes off Xavier, so I took his face between my hands and forced him to meet my eyes.

“*Look at me, Greyson*.”

His eyes finally shifted toward me, and his body relaxed. Maybe he hadn’t actually realized I was there, after all. I lowered his chin and gently wiped the blood from his lip.

“You’re back,” he whispered brokenly.

The way he said it sent chills down my spine. There was relief there, yes, but there was something else, too. Something dark and emotional and ugly.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice soft and low. “Why did you attack your brother?”

He scowled. “Why don’t *you* tell *me*? What happened in the demon world?”

The accusation in his voice rooted me in place.

“Xavier saved me and helped bring me back,” I said, feeling on edge. “That’s all that happened. And no matter what, you shouldn’t have attacked him. What were you thinking? We’re not out of the woods yet—now isn’t the time for infighting. Also, do you seriously want to fight him when you just gave up five years of your life for the chance to bring him back?”

Xavier and Greyson had a very charged history, but Greyson had been beside himself once he’d realized Xavier had been under Adéluce’s influence all this time. He’d felt responsible for everything Xavier had been through. He’d felt like he’d failed his brother. And now he wanted to pummel him into a bloody pulp? It just didn’t make any sense. Greyson was capable of jealousy, sure, but he’d never devolved into this kind of behavior—especially not when we were in such a dangerous situation.

He blinked, looking a little dazed. “I just thought…”

“You thought what?” I pressed. I had a pretty good idea of where his mind had gone, but I wanted to hear him say it.

Greyson shook his head. “Never mind. It was a mistake.” His arms slipped around me, and he pulled into a hug. “I’m just glad you made it back.”

There was a sea of omission in that response. Surely Greyson had to know that his non-answer just wasn’t going to cut it—especially when he was trying to explain why he’d just attacked his brother?

*Why did he react to Xavier like that?*

I’d never seen Greyson act like this before. Sure, he could get angry and frustrated and jealous, but never to such a dramatic extent.

I mind linked with him. *Whatever it is, you know you can tell me.*

He subtly shook his head. *It doesn’t matter. We need to get out of here.*

He turned to look at the others, meeting each of their gazes in turn. “It’s time to leave. I don’t want to be in this demon world waiting room any longer.”

Ava glared at him. “We can agree on that,” she said. “How are we supposed to do that? We can’t all fit on that thing.” She pointed at the motorcycle.

Ava had never exactly been on positive terms with the majority of this little group, but now that Greyson had outright attacked Xavier, I had a feeling he was just as much on her shit list as she was on ours.

Ferlin pulled on his helmet, tightening the strap under his chin. “Well, good luck, guys.”

“Hold on a second. We’re not done with you.” Xavier stormed over to him.

“Well, I’m done with you,” Ferlin said. “Per the contract, I not only brought you back”—he pointed at Xavier, then at me—“but I brought her back as well. I have no further obligations to fulfill.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you seriously just going to leave us here? I thought you were supposed to help us!”

Greyson marched over to him. I tensed at how close that put him to Xavier, but it didn’t seem like either one of them was interested in ripping each other’s throats out now that they’d found a common enemy.

“I don’t give a damn about the contract,” Greyson snarled. “I care about you doing your fucking job. Since you’re apparently new around here, allow me to remind you what that is—your job is to go back and forth between the demon world and our world. Now we’re stuck in this in-between place. We can’t get back to our world on our own. You have to take us back.”

Ferlin sighed. “Fine, fine—how about a compromise, then? I have no use for the fifteen years you gave up to bring Xavier back.” He pulled out the contract Greyson, Ava, and I had signed, and it burst into flames then turned into ash. “There you go. Five years back to the three of you. Is that good enough?”

“Of course it’s not!” I exclaimed. “Five years isn’t worth much if you strand us here next to the portal to the demon world—you have to know that.”

*If there’s a way to review this guy, he’s getting zero stars*, I thought. *What a huge disappointment.*

I scanned the area we’d ended up in.

*If Ferlin doesn’t help us get back home, how are we supposed to get out of here?*

Worst-case scenarios instantly popped into my mind, such as being forced to search for a way home forever, or being stuck here so long that we starved to death. I didn’t think I had it in me to eat one of my friends for survival.

*Well, maybe Ava…* I shook myself. *Focus, Cali!*

“Fine!” Ferlin ground out. “How about you all get back in your cars, and I’ll lead the way until you’re able to find your own way back? That sound fair to you?”

“Fine. Lead on,” Xavier snapped.

Before any of us could move, the wind roared, tossing my hair in every direction. The sky darkened, and Adéluce suddenly appeared out of nowhere, her beautiful face twisted with rage.

“You’re not leaving!” she screeched. “Not until I’m done with all of you!”

**Episode 4735**

**Greyson**

I instinctively pulled Cali back the moment Adéluce appeared. At this point, I’d have recognized her voice anywhere—it was the same one she’d used to try to trick me into turning against Cali and Xavier, into taking whatever deal she was offering to *force* Cali to choose me.

Adéluce’s left hand was covered with a black glove, and it hung limply by her side. She looked even more unhinged than usual—and that, more than anything else, gave me hope. If she was losing control of her emotions, maybe that meant she was less in control of this situation than she wanted to be. Maybe we were finally getting the upper hand.

Cali stepped out of my embrace and summoned her sword. “You’re too late—Seluna’s ashes are back in the demon world, where they belong.” Cali turned slightly to show off her unmarked shoulder before spinning back around. “And you should be there, too. I took your hand to get the ring, and now I’m going to take your head.”

I loved how fierce my mate could be—she was a sight to behold—but that didn’t mean I wanted her to provoke Adéluce. A cornered animal was deadly because it had nothing to lose. Adéluce was very likely the most powerful being we’d ever fought, and I didn’t want to see what a cornered Adéluce was capable of. I *definitely* had no interest in experiencing her version of a last resort nuclear option.

I glanced at Xavier. Was he going to do something about this? It would take all of us to stop Adéluce, but if this was anyone’s fight, it was my brother’s. Considering the impossible situation she’d shoved him into, I could only imagine how badly he wanted to kill her. But Adéluce had a vendetta at play here, too. Would she try to do the same thing to Xavier that she’d done to me? Would she try to turn him against us?

If Xavier turned against the group, Ava would probably just shrug and back him up. And Cali… Well, she wouldn’t raise a hand against Xavier. We’d descend into infighting, and Adéluce would be able to pick us off one by one. We couldn’t let her get into any of our heads.

I scanned the group, then looked at Adéluce again.

*Can we subdue her, somehow?* We had plenty of werewolves here, not to mention Cali, Lola, and Mikah. *Maybe if we can catch her, we can pin her down and do some serious damage…*

But she was just so damn fast—faster than the wolves—and I was sure she’d use that superior speed to her advantage. She knew as well as we did that if we couldn’t catch her, we couldn’t hurt her. As long as she could run away, there was no stopping her.

I wished I could mind link with Mikah. Out of all of us, he stood the best chance at matching Adéluce’s speed. If I could communicate what we needed to Gabriel, he could hopefully relay the plan. Then he’d just need an opportunity to make his move.

I glanced over at Colton, then at Xavier. We’d have to work together to take her down. Which would’ve been easier if Adéluce hadn’t just succeeded at getting me to attack Xavier. Shame and fury coursed through me in equal measure. She recognized the threat we posed as a united front, so she’d tried to tear us apart—and I’d played right into her hands.

I could only hope that Xavier would be able to set aside his anger at my outburst long enough for us to take this bitch down. We were only going to get one shot at this.

I tensed, about to shift, but then Adéluce’s voice filled my head again.

*My offer still stands, you know*.

I grimaced.

*Get the fuck out*, I snarled. *I’m not buying what you’re selling.*

*Don’t forget that I gave you a chance*,she said. *Never let it be said that I’m not generous. I can still give you everything you desire, Greyson.*

I shook my head and focused, blocking out her voice. She’d already gotten to me once. If I let her do it again, then whatever actions I took as a result would be completely on me. I wasn’t going to let her manipulate me a second time.

I shifted and lunged at Adéluce. Behind me, Xavier, Jay, Lola, Marissa, Colton, and Gabriel did the same, and we all attacked in tandem. Together, we jumped at her, dodged her attacks, and clawed and bit whenever we found an opening. She was managing to hold us back with blasts of magic and carefully crafted shields that kept appearing at the very last second, but she was severely outnumbered. Additionally, she was favoring her right hand, and she seemed weak. The best she could do was knock us back—a fraction of the damage she’d been capable of causing before.

Maybe we weren’t able to overpower her just yet, but we didn’t let her get the upper hand either. We kept up our flurry of attacks, working as a group and slowly backing Adéluce toward the demon portal.

I mind linked with the group. *Careful! We don’t want to kill her, or let her escape. We need her alive—no matter what.*

Xavier’s voice rippled through the communal mind mink, angry and raw. *Whose side are you on?*

I rolled my eyes. As usual, my hothead brother wasn’t thinking beyond his own bloodlust—but this time, I didn’t blame him. If I were in his shoes, I’d want Adéluce dead, too, no matter what it cost me personally. But I wasn’t going to indulge his shit.

*If that bitch dies, so do you*, I reminded Xavier. *We didn’t  pull your ass out of the demon world just so you can die with her.*

*I don’t care!* he snarled. *As long as she dies first, I’ll be happy. I’ve already been to hell—I’m not afraid.*

*Don’t be stupid!* Ava snapped. *Xavier, you’re not sacrificing yourself to kill that bitch. Greyson’s right. We have other options, so get that idea out of your head right now.*

Sometimes, Ava wasn’t so bad.

In that moment, she broke away from the group and tried to tackle Adéluce, but the vampire-witch sent out a blast of magic that knocked Ava back and sent her tumbling.

Xavier’s sad howl echoed around us, but I didn’t let myself get sidetracked. I’d seen Ava take worse hits—she’d be fine. In the meantime, we needed to stop this vampire-witch before she escaped again and kept wreaking havoc on our lives.

*Again!* I called to the rest of the wolves. *Keep going!*

But as I led the next charge against her, I was suddenly hit with the memory of Xavier and Cali returning from the demon world together. The way their scents were all over each other. How, when I held her in my arms, my brother was all I could smell. And I could *still* fucking smell Cali on my brother, even from several feet away.

Adéluce’s laugh echoed cruelly through my mind. *Is this what you’re willing to die for, Greyson? How many times have the two of them made a fool of you? How long have you suffered and seethed, knowing that your mate was being torn away from you by your own brother? Xavier already has a mate, and he still wants to take Cali away from you. Are you really going to stand by and let him?*

A hot ball of rage erupted in my chest. Adéluce was right, of course—I’d been a fool for far too long, playing along, wishing and hoping and waiting for Cali to make her choice, even though it was obvious that she never would.

*She could’ve chosen me at any point over the last few months, but she didn’t. She won’t. She had so many opportunities, and she did nothing with them.*

*But she loves me. I know she does. And I love her.*

While I’d been grappling with my thoughts, the others had managed to corner Adéluce. Cali had her sword extended, the point inches from Adéluce’s chest. Adéluce gestured with her good hand, and the wind swirled into a violent vortex that immediately started to drag Colton toward the demon portal.

Immediately, everyone stopped attacking Adéluce and rushed to grab Colton instead, dragging him away from the portal. But I couldn’t let that happen. Colton always took Xavier’s side, and he always would. They were twins, after all.

I pushed past the others, knocking them out of my way as Colton fought against the wind, his body sliding closer and closer to the portal.

“Greyson, what are you *doing*?” Cali screamed.

I ignored her and barreled toward Colton, who was using his claws to anchor himself to the ground.

*Greyson! Help me!* he begged. Dirt flew into the air as his claws began to slip.

*Just finish it*, Adéluce whispered. *Just push him in.*

I locked eyes with my brother, and in that moment, I knew what I had to do.

I sank my teeth into Colton’s scruff and threw him hard—away from the portal. His body skidded across the sand as I rounded on Adéluce.

*Stop fucking with my family!* I snarled—and then I lunged toward her.

It was time to end this.

**Episode 4736**

**Xavier**

Adéluce’s magic was weaker than it had been the last time we’d faced off, but she was still strong enough to force me back as I fought to reach Colton.

I skidded over the sand and had to dig my claws in to keep my footing. Just as I was getting ready to lunge forward again, Colton suddenly slammed into me. I broke his fall and got the wind knocked out of me as a result. We hit the ground just as Greyson charged toward Adéluce. She laughed mockingly as he snarled, clearly eager to sink his teeth into her throat.

Colton and I got untangled and scrambled to our feet as Greyson ran. He was seconds away from catching Adéluce. I was barely breathing, rooting for my older brother despite my very real desire to punch him for attacking me.

We all watched with eager anticipation as Greyson got closer, only to see Adéluce blip away at the last second. The wind vortex she’d created came to an immediate end. We all looked around as the sand settled and the air cleared. It was like the vortex had never happened.

While the rest of us were frozen in place, Greyson was still charging forward. His momentum was carrying him at this point. If he didn’t stop, he would end up running into the demon portal. That couldn’t happen.

Colton and I both charged for our brother, clearly having reached the same conclusion at the same time. Our feet kicked up the dust once again as we sprinted forward at full speed. We reached Greyson at the same time, sinking our teeth into his sides to slow his momentum. He slowed down and then finally came to a halt just in front of the shimmering portal. The three of us stared into it for a moment before I released him. Fuck, that had been too close.

“You saved Greyson.” Cali’s voice surprised me, and I was even more shocked to see how close she was to me.

Her scent engulfed me, I thought back to the kiss we’d shared in the demon world. I wished we were alone. That I could keep saying what I needed to say to her—that I was sorry, that I loved her… It had felt so good, so right… But I couldn’t do any of it.

Ava was watching us, and I didn’t want to add to her beef with Cali. I stepped back and turned to Greyson.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

I wasn’t sure what had come over Greyson in the first place, but it looked like he’d snapped out of it. He shook his head like he was still getting his bearings, but I had to wonder if there was more to it than that. As far as I was concerned, it was just as likely that Adéluce had gotten in his head and fucked with him. It was her goddamn specialty.

Greyson shifted back, and if he were shaken, he didn’t show it. “Thanks, everyone,” he said. “I’m sorry that Adéluce managed to escape again. That was on me. She was… She was messing with my head. For a second, I couldn’t tell whose thoughts were whose.”

Greyson opened his mouth, then shut it as he looked at all of us. He turned away and said his next words so quietly, it was like he whispered them directly into our ears.

“But I promise, I’ll always protect the people I love,” he said.

Not sure what to make of that, I kept my mouth shut and checked to see who my brother was looking at as he spoke. But, of course, he was staring at Cali, and she was staring right back at him. I cleared my throat, accidentally-on-purpose shattering their little moment.

“Yeah, the vampire-bitch loves to do shit like that,” I told Greyson. “I’m sorry that she got away, too—but her power has been weakened. She clearly can’t fight like she used to, and I’m sure that has something to do with Cali hacking her hand off.”

Colton grinned. “Nice move, Cali. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Oh, I only did it because I wanted her ring,” Cali said dryly. “Anything for some decent bling.”

The rest of us chuckled, but the mood was far from light. We’d all come very close to making the demon world our new home.

“Next time—and there will be a next time—Adéluce won’t get a chance to escape,” I said, and then I frowned. “But what was that you said before, about Adéluce being linked to me? If she dies, I die, too?”

Greyson nodded. “I’m not sure what to make of it, but Adéluce said as much after she sent you into the demon world. Who knows if it’s actually true?”

“Only one way to find out, right?” Mikah asked, only half-jokingly.

“*No*,” Ava said emphatically. “I’m not going to let anyone kill her until we know whether or not the threat is real.”

Cali glanced between me and Ava before looking away. Fuck. It was bad enough that Adéluce was still alive, but why did Cali have to keep suffering? I wished that I could hold her tight like I had in that crevice. I wished things weren’t as horribly complicated as they were.

But what good was wishing when it didn’t change things?

“At least Seluna won’t be hurting me anymore,” Cali said. “Returning the ashes to the demon world is a pretty good silver lining to all of this.”

As we all worked the last of the adrenaline out of our systems, Ferlin reemerged from wherever he’d been hiding to stare at all of us.

“What the *fuck* was that?” he demanded.

“What did it fucking look like?” Colton retorted. “Assuming you could see anything from where you were hiding with your head buried in the sand.”

“I’m not here to fight,” Ferlin said. “I’m here to fulfill my end of the deal, and I have. But we’re going to need a new contract if you want to get back to the human world.”

“Fuck that,” I said.

The demon had already betrayed me once—I wasn’t about to let him burn me twice.

I gestured at the group of werewolves, vampires, and Fae he was facing off against. “You just saw what we’re capable of,” I said. “Unless you want to be on the receiving end of all that, you’d better take us all back without any more of your contract bullshit. Do I make myself clear?”

Ferlin looked ready to argue—at least until the others started to close in on him.

“Fine, fine,” he said, eyeing us nervously. “Just get in your cars and I’ll lead you back. The sooner I’m rid of you, the better.”

“Huzzahs all around,” Lola said sarcastically.

I got ready to follow Ava to the cars, but then Ferlin stopped me.

“What?” I asked.

“In case you need a Courier in the future.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a flip phone that looked older than I did. He offered it to me, and I took it warily.

“Don’t share that with anyone,” Ferlin said. “It only reaches me.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I hope I never have to fucking use it.”

Ferlin stepped aside, and I followed Ava toward the car. Colton came jogging up beside me.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” he said. “You know, for saving your sorry ass.”

I grabbed Colton around the neck and hugged him close. “Thanks for making an appearance. It’s good to have you back.”

“You sure about that?” Colton said, fighting to get free. “Cuz this definitely feels like a chokehold to me.”

“A chokehold of supreme affection, bro,” I joked. “I have a million questions for you, by the way.”

“About?”

“About Maya, the babies, and how an ass like you grew up so damn fast,” I said. “But that can wait until we get home.”

We all got into the cars and waited for Ferlin to lead the way. He walked his motorcycle over to us and pointed into the distance.

“Just start driving, and I’ll do the rest,” he said.

He started the bike and waited for us to head off first.

I got in the car with Ava, Marissa, Gabriel, and Mikah, watching as Greyson helped Cali into the other car. As our door shut, Ava leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Is this really how it works? We drove off a cliff to get here.”

She had every reason to be paranoid. I remembered that my trip back from the demon world with the other Courier was a strange one, to say the least.

“Just… hold on tight,” I said.

Ferlin took off driving, and Mikah hit the gas. I watched the demon, but suddenly my mind blurred. In the time it took for my head to clear, we’d been transported back to the road at the top of the cliff.

“Fuck me!” Gabriel groaned. “Did that just happen? Wait, *what* just happened, exactly?”

“I’m dizzy. Anyone else?” Marissa asked.

As everyone got over the trippy experience of being transported from wherever the hell we’d just been, I thought about next steps. Adéluce had gotten away, but it wouldn’t be long before she struck again. We had to be ready.

“Where to?” Mikah asked. “The pack house?”

I shook my head. “No. We’re going to Big Mac’s. I need to find out if Adéluce’s threat is for real.”

**Episode 4737**

The cars stopped in front of Big Mac’s house, and we all poured out, ready for the next phase of our mission.

I nervously wiped my hands on my jeans. The relief that had washed over me the second we’d made it back from demon purgatory had been totally wiped out the moment I’d spotted Big Mac’s house.

It wasn’t that I was afraid of Big Mac—she was prickly and mostly unfriendly, sure, but she was also nowhere *near* as scary as those bird monsters that had tried to eat me in the demon world. No, I was dripping with sweat because of something else entirely.

We were about to find out if killing Adéluce would really kill Xavier, too.

*I don’t know what I’ll do if everything has been for nothing…* The demon world had certainly been a force of its own; I hated the idea that it might’ve been for nothing. Somehow, part of me was grateful for the time I’d had there with Xavier… When he’d held me close and kissed me, I’d found myself praying that time would stand still.

*If only we could spend some time together in* this *world*, I thought. *And figure out what the hell is going on between us anymore.*

The whole drive to Big Mac’s house, I’d daydreamed about all the *ways* I wanted to spend time with Xavier—even though I still had no idea if they’d ever happen in reality.

Yes, we’d confirmed Adéluce’s influence over Xavier, but Xavier had still said some horrible things to me. He also didn’t seem any more inclined to run into my arms than he’d been at the start of this whole mess.

There was also the Ava factor to consider. That problem in particular definitely wouldn’t just quietly resolve itself. Ava was more possessive than a dog with a bone. She’d never let Xavier go—not if she had a choice in the matter. And Xavier wasn’t going to let Ava go, either. He was just as in love with her as she was with him.

*Could Xavier love us both, just like I love both him and Greyson?*

I tried to imagine what it would feel like to live with that arrangement, and I didn’t like it. It was ridiculously unfair of me—and showed some *magnificent* double standards—but I didn’t want to share Xavier with anyone, and I didn’t want him to love anyone but me. It was selfish, but I couldn’t help how I felt.

*Neither can Xavier…*

Greyson gave me a brief smile as we walked toward Big Mac’s front door. My heart ached when I thought about how much he’d done and sacrificed for me. He deserved all my love. I *wanted* to give him all my love, but it wasn’t mine to give.

Somehow—despite the Seluna mark having disappeared, despite the fact that we’d rescued Xavier from the demon world—things had somehow figured out how to get more complicated.

My life always seemed so much easier to handle when I was surrounded by chaos. At least when we were in the middle of a crisis, I felt some semblance of control—mainly because it was usually easy to figure out what to do and who to focus on.

But with things returning to our version of “normal,” it felt like I’d lost control completely. My heart was pulling me in two very different directions. I was torn, and I didn’t think that feeling would ever go away. Everything had gotten so *emotionally* complicated. That wasn’t as easy to deal with, not by a long shot.

I snuck a glance at Xavier and saw that Ava had a possessive arm wrapped around his waist. Marissa was walking alongside them, looking for all the world like an attack dog, ready to protect her favorite ship.

As I followed them toward Big Mac’s door, I realized that my hand was resting on the cheek that Ava had slapped. She’d been absolutely livid when she’d found out what happened at the mall. What would she do if she found out that Xavier had kissed me in the demon world even more recently?

*Best not to think about it.*

Xavier raised his hand to knock on the door, but then it suddenly swung open and Big Mac stepped out, looking ready to tear us apart with her sharp tongue.

“Do you have any idea how late it is?” she snarled, glaring at each of us in turn. But when she made it to Xavier, she did a double take. “I can’t believe it,” she said, her eyebrows shooting up. “You actually did it. You brought him back.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” Ava asked, smiling at Xavier.

Big Mac didn’t bother to reply. Her gaze landed on Colton, and her expression immediately soured.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Colton grinned, stepping forward to hug her. “It’s fantastic to see you, too! Give us a squeeze!”

He gave her a kiss on the cheek, and Big Mac shoved him away. Colton just laughed it off, clearly delighted as ever by their one-sided friendship. Honestly, I was surprised that she didn’t hex his lips off.

“Keep those frat boy lips to yourself,” the witch snapped.

“Yes, ma’am,” Colton said.

Just then, Mrs. Smith barreled through the door, her eyes wide with surprise and relief.

“I’m so glad you all made it back!” she burst out. Then she gasped. “Colton!”

“The one and only,” he said.

She wrapped him up in a bear hug that he returned with gusto. Big Mac rolled her eyes.

“So good to see you, too, Mrs. Smith,” Colton said. “Do you have any of that white mocha stuff laying around?”

“Of course I do,” she said, then turned to the rest of us. “Come in, all of you.”

As we crossed the threshold, I could tell that Big Mac wasn’t happy about Mrs. Smith’s hospitality. She watched as we invaded her house, shaking her head like she wished she hadn’t opened the door in the first place.

“Treating my damn house like it’s an Airbnb,” she grumbled.

I pretended not to hear her, choosing to focus on the fact that it was so nice to see Big Mac and Mrs. Smith together again. Just seeing them in the same space was soothing. They’d managed to become a constant in my life—kind of like a second pair of parents.

Big Mac stopped me in the foyer, letting the others go on ahead.

“Why did you all come here?” she asked. “I know it wasn’t to reassure Sabine that you made it back in one piece.”

Deciding not to mince words, I told her about Adéluce’s threat and how we weren’t sure if it was legit or not. I also mentioned the fact that the vampire-witch had gotten away from us again. Big Mac glowered.

“I suppose I’d better put up a barrier to protect the house while you’re here,” she said. “The last thing I need is an angry vampire-witch coming after me because of you and your gang of idiots.”

She ushered me past her, then raised her hands and muttered something under her breath before slamming the front door shut. I didn’t blame her for being pissed. We’d come after hours, asking for a favor, and bearing more bad news.

Moving deeper into the house, I once again marveled at the interior. Outside, Big Mac’s house looked like a small, shabby bungalow. Inside, though, it was like a chic McMansion—and significantly larger than it should’ve been, given the exterior.

I joined the others in the kitchen. Big Mac was right behind me.

“I just put a protection spell over the whole property,” she announced. “I’m not about to fuck around. Not when I know how dangerous your problems always are.”

*She’s not wrong*, I thought.

Though Big Mac obviously would’ve been more than happy to kick us all out, I felt better knowing that we were under her protection. She was powerful, had more knowledge about magic than the rest of us combined, and wouldn’t let Adéluce anywhere near her home.

“What happens if we go back to our pack houses?” Lola asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Big Mac said. “So don’t assume that I’ll be able to protect both houses once you head out.”

“If that’s the case, then why don’t you all just stay here until we know it’s safe?” Mrs. Smith reasoned. “We could bring the rest of the pack here, too. Why take a chance when you’ll definitely be safe here?”

Big Mac sighed, likely horrified at the prospect. “I’m not running an orphanage.”

“Uh, we’re not orphans,” I said.

“I am,” Colton supplied.

“*You* can leave right now,” she informed him. “And then the rest of you can leave after you have your little white chocolate whatever. It’s late, and I don’t want a bigger headache than the one you’ve just given me.”

“But what about checking over Xavier?” I asked.

“Exactly. Besides, don’t be so heartless, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said chidingly. “They’ve just been to hell and back to find Xavier—surely they can stay here to catch their breath.”

“Surely they *can’t*,” Big Mac retorted.

They went back and forth until Mrs. Smith wore Big Mac down.

“We are *not* sending them back out there after everything they’ve been through,” Mrs. Smith said, putting her foot down. “We can’t.”

Big Mac sighed. “Fine. I guess I don’t have a say in my own home.”

“I don’t either, if it makes you feel any better,” Colton joked.

“You’re still leaving,” she said, hitching her thumb at the door. “Not even the vampire-witch would want to go anywhere near a pain in the ass like you.”

“At least let me finish my mocha,” Colton said, turning to Mrs. Smith. “Please?”

“You can *all* stay,” Mrs. Smith said firmly.

As Big Mac continued her campaign to rid herself of Colton, I kept stealing glances at Xavier. He seemed to be lost in thought. Was he thinking about our kiss? Adéluce? Ava?

“We should make sure that the protection spell is strong enough to keep Xavier safe from Adéluce,” I said. “*And* we still need to figure out if killing her will really kill him.”

“Then what the hell are we doing wasting time with hot chocolate?” Big Mac asked. “Let’s get this night over with.”

**Episode 4738**

**Xavier**

Big Mac had grabbed my arm and was now dragging me deeper into her house. Although it felt like she was about to rip my arm out of its socket, I was just as eager as everyone else to find out if Adéluce was bluffing.

If Big Mac confirmed that the vampire-witch was full of shit, I’d go after her as soon as I could. I was eager to wipe her from the face of the earth—properly, this time.

Big Mac led me to the living room, then abruptly stopped. She shook her head, scowling like I’d already done something wrong.

“No, this won’t do,” she said. “Not in here.”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked. “I’ve seen you cast spells in here before.”

“I’m not doing anything until you get my furniture out of here,” she said. “I don’t want Xavier splattered all over my decor if something goes wrong and he blows up.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “But—”

“And do you have any idea how long it took me to rebuild after Silas trashed the place?” Big Mac demanded with a visible full-body shudder. “*Too* long. I’m not doing it again.”

“What if we cover the furniture with a magical tarp or something?” Colton suggested. “That way, it’ll be easy to clean up Xavier’s chunks.”

“Quiet, you,” Big Mac said, pointing at him ominously.

“Xavier is *not* blowing up,” Ava said. Then she turned to Big Mac. “Right?”

The witch shrugged. “Anything is possible, which is why I want my furniture out of here before we get started.”

“How about we all just try to manifest the outcome where I *don’t* blow up?” I suggested. “I don’t want to mess up your furniture any more than you do, trust me.”

Eventually, Mikah and Colton just gave in and moved her favorite pieces out of the room so we could actually get started.

Everyone piled into the living room and sat on the furniture Big Mac had deemed unworthy of protection from possible Xavier chunks. It was a tight squeeze for everyone, which forced a few people to be friendly when they clearly didn’t want to be. Cali was jammed in between Greyson and Ava. I didn’t like how cozy she looked, leaning into Greyson, but her being next to Ava was actually more of a worry.

The looks that passed between them made me reconsider the whole exploding thing—it would probably be preferable to dealing with the mess that was my personal life.

Unfortunately, killing Adéluce wouldn’t magically put an end to all my problems. If anything, her death would probably make them worse. Once she was gone, I’d have no choice but to deal with the fallout from her meddling.

Yet another venomous glare passed between the two women in my life, and I cringed internally and looked away—only to catch Colton staring at me. He was smirking, and I could practically read his thoughts.

“Shut up, all of you!” Big Mac snapped. “Unless you want to be turned into dust, move back and give me room to work.”

“I’m really beginning to doubt that this is going to go well,” Lola muttered.

Everyone got up and pushed the remaining furniture to the edges of the room, then waited for Big Mac to bark more orders. She nodded, apparently satisfied, then pointed at me.

“Stand in the middle of the room,” she said.

I nodded and got ready to comply, but then Ava suddenly stepped forward to stop me. She looped her arms around my neck and leaned in for a kiss.

“It’ll be okay,” she said, then she kissed me again.

Naturally, I quickly and enthusiastically returned her kiss. Her tongue glided over mine as I pulled her close. Then an awareness crept over me; everyone’s eyes were probably on us. I knew Cali was watching us, too—that fact was directly responsible for the knot that had formed in my stomach.

Being with Ava felt right, but so did being with Cali. I couldn’t stop thinking about the kiss we’d shared in the demon world. She’d melted into me, and I’d nearly forgotten all about escaping.

*What the fuck is happening?*

I’d finally gotten used to being with Ava, but I was still dealing with the same doubts and worries as before. How much of my feelings for Ava were because of Adéluce and how much of it was me? These feelings—and the situation—were fucking with my mind so much that I didn’t know where one issue ended and the next began.

Ava gave me one last kiss, then stepped back. I turned to walk to the center of the room, but she grabbed my arm.

“It will be okay,” she said, her eyes locked with mine. “We’ll stop Adéluce no matter what.”

I winked at her, determined to put on a brave face. “I know. I’m not worried about that.”

*I’m worried about what comes* after *that*, I thought.

Big Mac cleared her throat pointedly. “Can we get this over with?”

“Go for it,” I said, finally stepping into the center of the room.

Big Mac handed me a large, glowing crystal that looked like it had been handed down from hippie to hippie for generations. “Hold it close to your heart,” she told me. “Make sure you keep it there.”

I rolled my eyes but did as she instructed. I’d learned a long time ago that it was better not to argue with Big Mac. If she told me to do something, I did it—regardless of how weird the order happened to be.

The witch stared at me as her lips started moving silently. I assumed that she was making progress until she shook her head.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s not working,” she said, scowling.

She took the party crystal out of my hands and stepped closer. She looked over every inch of me, almost accusingly—like my body was deliberately running interference to block her magic. Weirdly enough, her proximity actually made me more nervous than the idea of exploding. I had to fight the urge to step back.

“Uh, do you need to stand so close?” I asked tentatively.

“I’m trying to figure out if Adéluce left a mark on you,” she said with a huff. “If she did, she might be using it to maintain a connection with you.”

I was about to tell her to stop wasting her time when Ava spoke up.

“Look behind his ear,” she said.

That’s right. I remembered the mark that Ava spotted a while back, after we’d slept together. She’d wondered what it was back then, and I hadn’t been able to give her an answer.

I pointed at the ear where she’d found the mark. “It’s here. I’d forgotten all about it.”

“There isn’t an inch of Xavier’s body that I don’t know,” Ava boasted.

Lola groaned, and Big Mac rolled her eyes. I didn’t say anything, though I wished Ava wasn’t quite so eager to brag about that. I glanced at her to see her smirking at Cali.

Big Mac leaned in closer to my ear. “You’re right—there’s a crescent. But are you sure it’s from Adéluce?”

“Can’t you tell?” Ava asked, clearly frustrated. “Isn’t that your job?”

“Yeah, it’s my job to fix your problems for you and know every single thing in the universe,” Big Mac snapped.

“Easy, easy,” Mrs. Smith soothed.

“I’m sure,” I said. “I didn’t have it before—it must’ve been Adéluce.”

“I knew it wasn’t a birthmark,” Ava said. “I’ve seen every mark he has on his body, and that one is definitely new.”

“Okay, Ava,” I said, embarrassed.

While I was happy that she’d found it in the first place, and thought to tell Big Mac about it, I wanted to stop talking about how well Ava knew… all of me. I knew this topic of conversation was hurting Cali. She’d been staring at me since we’d arrived at Big Mac’s, but now, after Ava’s boasting, she was looking at the floor.

“Can we keep trying?” I asked Big Mac.

“Yep,” she said. “But this next part is going to hurt.”

I clenched my jaw as she started to scrape her nail over the mark. For several minutes, it felt like she was literally trying to scratch the mark off.

“That’s enough,” she finally announced, moving back.

“Great,” I replied, gingerly prodding the spot. I was half-surprised when I didn’t find it slick with blood.

“What did you find out?’ Cali asked Big Mac.

“I think the mark is what’s tying Xavier and Adéluce together,” she said.

“Then get rid of it,” Ava said. “What are you waiting for?”

“It’s not that easy,” Big Mac said.

“Of course it’s not,” I said bitterly. “What part of this ridiculous fucking nightmare has been *easy*?”

Colton grinned. “The part where you have two wom—Oof!”

Lola had dug her elbow into his stomach, cutting him off. I owed her one. My twin just didn’t know when to shut up.

“If you’d prefer, I can bullshit you about what it’s going to take to get rid of that mark,” Big Mac said. “But just be aware, the process isn’t going to be as straightforward as you might hope.”

“But can you do it?” Cali pressed.

**Episode 4739**

It was hard not to focus on the bond between Ava and Xavier when they were making it so freaking *obvious*. Their kiss, her words of encouragement… Ava was doing everything in her power to play the world’s most perfect mate, and it was making me grind my teeth so hard that I was kind of surprised I hadn’t reduced them to dust.

*Forget about them*, I told myself. *Focus on what’s actually important.*

Shoving Xavier’s connection with Ava to the back of my mind, I refocused on the connection that was somehow managing to worry me even more—the link between Xavier and Adéluce.

Big Mac hesitated for quite a while before she answered my questions. I’d never really seen her doubt herself before, and I had to wonder just how strong Adéluce’s mark actually was. Was Xavier still in the same amount of danger as before, even though we’d weakened the vampire-witch herself?

“I can get rid of the mark, but I need time,” Big Mac finally said. “On the plus side, I now feel fairly confident that Xavier isn’t going to explode, so you can put the furniture back. And after that, you can go to bed and get out of my hair—before you make it even greyer. Spare rooms are upstairs. Food is in the fridge. Don’t touch my macarons.”

We were all too exhausted to argue. I wanted the connection between Xavier and Adéluce gone ASAP, but I knew it would be safer to give Big Mac the time she needed to break the link properly—and safely. This was Xavier’s life we were messing with, after all.

After bringing the furniture back in, we all filed out of the living room. Ava was once again clinging to Xavier like she was worried to might make a run for it. I ground my teeth again as I battled my jealousy. How I wished that I could’ve been the one comforting him, whispering words of devotion in his ear. And it didn’t help matters that while Big Mac had been inspecting the mark, Ava and Marissa had silently taunted me the whole time. Ava wanted the world to know that she was Xavier’s mate and I was nothing.

Ava was hopelessly devoted to Xavier—and more than a little possessive of him. I was surprised that she hadn’t left her own mark on Xavier’s skin. And the fact that he was such an active participant in Ava’s PDA only gave me pause… Of course, I knew Adéluce played a part in this re-coupling, but he seemed pretty into the kiss…

Even if we were able to kill Adéluce, what would it mean for Xavier and me in the future? There was a real possibility that Xavier would choose Ava over me, even without Adéluce pulling his strings.

Greyson was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. The sight of him improved my mood, but I had some explaining to do.

“How are you holding up?” he asked. He looked uncomfortable despite the supportive question.

Watching Xavier and Ava had been rough, to say the least. But regardless of how I felt, I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. That would only hurt Greyson. I felt a pang at the knowledge that I’d *already* hurt him, time and time again, despite that being the last thing I ever wanted.

I put on a smile and said, “You’re here. I’m much better now.”

We walked upstairs and reached the second floor just as Ava and Xavier stepped into a room and closed the door behind them.

*Definitely not picking a room that shares a wall with theirs*, I thought.

Lola and Jay claimed a room for themselves, and Mikah and Gabriel took another. We were lucky Big Mac’s house was so huge.

Greyson and I made our way toward one of the rooms at the end of the long hallway. As we approached, Colton stepped out of one of the rooms and grinned at us, a little ruefully.

“Man, this is awkward,” he said. “Everyone’s with their mate except me.”

Marissa—who’d somehow managed to unglue herself from her mistress’s side—snorted obnoxiously. “Don’t look at me. I’m not your mate. And I have a boyfriend.”

She took the room Greyson and I had been aiming for and slammed the door behind her.

Colton chuckled. “And thank goodness for that,” he said, then he smiled at me. “I’d better go call Maya and let her know I’m not dead. Give her a taste of what she’s missing and all. Have fun, you crazy kids.”

He walked off down the hallway, whistling a happy tune. I wished I could’ve been as cavalier as he was, but all I could think about all of a sudden was the *many* times he’d walked in on Xavier and me. He probably thought it was strange to see us paired off with other mates.

Not wanting to dwell on that, I turned to Greyson. Though I was tired, I was also pretty hungry.

“Want to go grab something from the kitchen?” I asked. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep on an empty stomach.”

“I’m pretty hungry, too, actually,” he said, sounding a little surprised—like it had only just occurred to him. “Let’s go.”

“Think Big Mac still keeps her fridge packed?” I asked as we walked downstairs and made our way to the kitchen. “I think I’ll eat half of it if I’m not careful.”

“I hope so,” Greyson said. “She makes a fantastic lasagna—I can eat a pan of it all by myself.”

“Greedy,” I teased. “At least let me have a bit of that gooey cheese.”

“Only if you’re fast enough to snatch it out of my hand,” he said.

We shared an easy laugh and waved at Colton, who was lounging in the living room. He had his feet on the coffee table, like he was daring Big Mac to kick him out. Brave man.

When Greyson and I reached the fridge, my mouth immediately started watering. Just like the last time we’d stayed here, it was packed to the gills with meals, drinks, and so many desserts, I felt like I was falling into a sugar coma just by looking at them.

Greyson scanned the fridge’s contents and sighed. “No lasagna,” he said sadly.

“Probably for the best,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “I think lasagna is too heavy to eat just before bed. Why don’t we just grab something light for now, then stuff our faces tomorrow?”

“Works for me,” he said.

We grabbed a few things from the fridge and took them to the counter, then I sat down as Greyson fetched a couple of drinks. I watched him, wondering how I was going to tell him about what had happened between me and Xavier in the demon world.

I didn’t want there to be any secrets between us, but it felt wrong to hurt him with the truth. But I’d hurt him with the mall thing by not telling him, and that’d been one of my best fuckups yet… I didn’t know what to do. Greyson had been through so much already.

He joined me at the counter, sitting close as he handed me a drink. The two of us split a sandwich. Once I took the first bite, I realized exactly how famished I was and instantly reconsidered my decision to stick with a light meal.

Greyson’s leg brushed against mine as we ate in amiable silence. Being with him like this was so nice and easy, I was tempted to let myself forget about what had happened earlier, at the demon world portal. But I couldn’t just let that go—Greyson hadn’t been acting like himself, and I wanted to check in.

“Do you want to talk about what happened at the portal?” I asked.

“That… That was a mistake,” he said. “Just forget about it.”

I wasn’t going to forget about it. I’d seen the look in Greyson’s eyes, and his sudden—mercifully short-lived—determination to fight everyone and do Adéluce’s bidding. It had been scary to have someone as powerful as Greyson taken over like that.

“What do you mean, it was a mistake?” I asked. “It was Adéluce. That wasn’t your fault.”

“I guess, but I feel like I should’ve been stronger,” Greyson said. “She got inside my head and twisted things around so easily. The things she said… The things she tried to make me believe… She had me turn against Xavier. She wanted me to turn against everyone. Even you. And the scary part is, I almost fully fell for it.”

His words hung in the air, the silence between us suddenly so profound that I could hear Big Mac grumbling about spells somewhere else in the house. I waited until her voice faded away before I started talking again.

“But you *didn’t* you fall for it,” I said. “What stopped you?”

Greyson finished his half of the sandwich in silence.

“Funnily enough, I have Colton to thank for that,” he said. “I was ready to obey Adéluce and shove him into the portal, but then he begged me to help him, and I saw how scared he was. It was enough to make realize I was about to hurt one of the people I love most. I couldn’t let that happen. No amount of witchcraft could ever make me kill Colton, or Xavier. Or you, Cali.”

I rested my hand on his and stroked his skin with my thumb. He flipped his hand over and gave mine a squeeze.

“Protecting my brothers—what was left of my family—was the only reason why I came back from being a Rogue,” Greyson said. “But I have no regrets. I’m glad I was able to work with them to kill Silas in the end. I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

The sincerity of his words only made my guilt grow. Greyson was being so honest with me, and my heart hurt that he loved Xavier—and even Colton—in a way that wasn’t reciprocated. No matter what, he always stepped up as their older brother, fighting for them and keeping their best interests at heart. He deserved to have that returned back to him, but I understood that Xavier and Colton had been lied to about who Greyson was for a long time…

*I have to tell him what happened in the demon world*, I thought suddenly.

“Greyson…” I began. “There’s something you need to know. About when Xavier and I were in the demon world.”

**Episode 4740**

**Greyson**

Before Cali could say another word, I put my hand over hers. “Whatever happened in the demon world, that’s in the past, love,” I said, shaking his head. “We need to talk about what lies ahead for us.”

Cali looked both surprised and conflicted at my response. I knew she wanted to confess something to me, and I knew that I should’ve let her do it. Letting her confess would not only have kept things honest between us, but it also would’ve helped ease her very obvious guilty conscience.

So yes, I *should’ve* let Cali confess—but I just wasn’t strong enough to hear what she had to say. Not when I already had a good idea of what it was that she wanted to tell me. That my brother likely had pulled on her heartstrings again when he had no right to. Not when he’d treated her the way he had, Adéluce or not.

Logically, I knew that she really shouldn’t have been feeling guilty. She’d never asked to be a *due destini,* or to be caught up in such a crazy mix of emotions. I’d done my best not to make her feel bad about what she did as a result, but a man could only take so much.

I’d seen the look that had passed between Cali and Xavier when they’d returned from the demon world. It had spoken volumes and set me on edge—and *that* had nearly ended in disaster.

Though I still didn’t know exactly what had gone on between them, their scents had been all over each other when they’d first gotten back—it hadn’t been difficult to make an educated guess about how well their reunion had gone.

The *due destini* was so fucked, wasn’t it?

Perhaps it was wrong of me to make assumptions, and to deny Cali the chance to confess, but I had my reasons. Well, it was mainly one reason—the heartache that sank its claws into my chest every time my brother and Cali crossed paths.

As I stared at Cali now, I suspected that what she wanted to tell me would only confirm my guess about what she and Xavier had gotten up to in the demon world. And honestly? At this stage, I was happy to stick with my still-possibly-false assumptions and avoid having them confirmed.

I could at least spare myself the pain of *hearing* about what she’d done with Xavier in the demon world.

“I can’t stop you and Xavier from feeling what you do for each other,” I said steadily. “But, for the record, I think that would be utter bullshit, spell or no spell. Xavier treated you horribly, and I don’t think he deserves a second chance with how things stand. I can’t forgive him for what he did to you, but I can’t prevent you from forgiving him, either. Or from seeing him. I know the *due destini* doesn’t work like that.”

I paused to clear my throat. Cali was still holding my hand, and I brought her palm to my lips and kissed it gently.

“This is your decision, and I can’t tell you what to do,” I said. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t want to. But if you do rekindle things with my brother, I… I don’t want to know.”

Cali opened and closed her mouth a few times before she was able to speak. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

“I’m so sorry I’ve hurt you,” she said. “I wish things were different. I’m so sorry.”

My heart ached for her, and I reached out to brush a tear from her cheek, wishing I could take all her pain away. She deserved better than what fate was subjecting her to.

And what it was subjecting me to.

I wasn’t immune to what happened between her and Xavier, and it was time to protect myself a little. If she went back to Xavier, I didn’t want to hear a constant stream of agonizing confessions. I was done with total honesty—at least when it came to this particular matter. The less I knew, the happier I would be. I was strong, but I wasn’t invincible. If Cali shattered my heart, I doubted I’d have had the strength to mend it. Or the will to try.

“You don’t need to apologize,” I told her, shaking my head. “I’m not blaming you. I’d never blame you.”

“Stop. Greyson, please stop,” she said, tears flowing. “You’re being too understanding about this. It’s okay if you’re angry. You’re allowed to feel how you feel, too.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to be angry with you, love. I’m angry at the *situation*, I’ll admit—but not enough to let Adéluce win. I’m not telling you to choose me, Cali. But I do need you to start thinking about what an Adéluce-free world will look like.”

Cali nodded, and I could tell that she’d already given it some thought.

“Whatever you decide to do, whatever happens afterward, I don’t want to end up resenting you or my brother,” I said. “I came back to the pack to save my family, and I want to repair my relationship with my brothers. But no matter how hard I try, no matter what I do, the *due destini* will always be a wedge between me and Xavier. Honestly, that wedge was probably there before we even met you, but it will always keep me from getting what I want.”

Cali’s eyes widened, and I saw the hurt and the worry in them. She was right, though—I was allowed to feel how I did. As she sat there, clearly reeling, I knew I had two options—I could look away and pretend that I wasn’t causing her any pain, or I could face up to it and deal. The former would’ve been easier, but I wasn’t a coward.

Unlike Xavier, I wasn’t okay with hurting Cali. I cared too much about her. But fixing me and Xavier was beyond her. There was nothing Cali or I could do to fix that problem. I could choose whether I let the wedge along with the *due destini* impact me and Cali, though.

I took Cali’s hand again. “No matter what the future holds, I love you. And I always will. I want you to know that.”

Cali wiped the tears from her eyes. “I love you too, Greyson.”

Her words made me feel like my heart was soaring out of my body.

“I already know,” I said. “I never doubt it. What we have is… It’s special. It’s beyond anything else I’ve ever felt. It’s what keeps me going.”

Cali’s eyes filled with tears again. “Me too.”

Heart still in the clouds, I leaned in and kissed her. She kissed me back, and I pulled her closer. I kissed her passionately, thoroughly, and with everything I had. I loved her more than words could express, but I hoped my kiss would show her.

While my brother seemed happy to hurt her, I would protect her until I took my last breath.

Cali moaned into my mouth as my hands ran up and down her back. Unable to help myself, I pulled her into my lap and wrapped my arms around her waist. I had her exactly where I wanted her, and I intended to give her all of me.

If it were up to me, I’d never let Cali go. I’d always love her, no matter what. I didn’t want to lose her, but once Xavier had been freed from Adéluce, I was terrified that I would. Cali loved us both, yet she would always choose him.

This realization threatened to tear my heart in two, but even as it settled into my bones, I made a silent vow to never give up. I refused to hand her over to my brother and walk away. I loved Cali far too much for that.

Cali and I kissed each other until we gasped for breath. Her hands slipped into my hair and gripped it tight. Her hips swiveled ever so slightly against mine, and I rushed toward the point of no—

“Son of a bitch!” Big Mac shouted, moments after something heavy dropped to the floor somewhere else in the house.

Cali and I stared at each other. The haze of lust in her eyes dissipated as we came back to our senses. The moment had been broken, but our feelings for each other were as strong as ever.

I tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Should we go to bed?”

“Yeah, we should get as much rest as we can,” Cali said, her voice an octave lower than usual.

She slid off my lap, and I nearly pulled her right back. Fighting the urge to pin her to the closest wall so we could finish what we’d started… Instead, I helped her clean up, then followed her out of the kitchen.

Cali took my hand as we made our way upstairs. We were halfway up when an uncomfortable thought slipped into my head. Given what had happened at the portal, I had to keep my guard up, or Adéluce’s mind tricks would easily turn fatal.

She’d preyed on my weaknesses, using my insecurities to try and destroy us all. I had to be careful if I wanted to avoid becoming her pawn.

I had to be ready for whatever trouble lay ahead.

**Episode 4741**

**Xavier**

Ava walked around the room slowly, looking out the windows, pulling the dresser drawers open, peering into the closet. I understood the instinct—we were in a new place, a strange place, and she wanted to get the lay of the land.

I knew how she felt. It felt extremely weird to be spending the night in this place. And it wasn’t just that I was away from the Samara pack house. This was *Big Mac’s* house. Big Mac, who didn’t like people to get too close to her—we were in her house now. Not only that, but the witch was marrying my brother’s mother. And up until recently, she’d been living in the Redwood pack house.

Everything about being in this place just felt strange and awkward and wrong.

Ava had stepped into the bathroom to look around, and when she walked back out, she frowned. “What’s wrong, X?”

I pushed a hand through my hair with a sigh. “I was just thinking that I’d rather be back at the Samara pack house tonight.”

I’d spoken without thinking, but I was surprised by the truth of what I’d said. I *would* rather have been back at the Samara pack house, though the Redwood house had always been my home.

Ava nodded. “I know, I’d rather be there, too, but it’s not possible. It’s just not safe—not until Big Mac can break the spell on you.”

“*If* she can,” I said, a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Ava eyed me for a minute, then stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. “If Big Mac can’t figure out how to break the spell on you, X, then I’ll just find someone who can.”

I wanted her certainty, so I borrowed some of it and nodded. “Yeah. Okay.”

She pressed a light kiss to my lips, then stepped away. She kicked off her shoes and unbuttoned her jeans, getting ready for bed.

I watched her for a moment, my gaze sliding down her lean legs as she tossed her jeans onto a chair. Then I walked to the window and looked out into the night. I was thinking about Big Mac and the depth of her magic. I was thinking about Adéluce, too. I couldn’t believe the secret was finally out. Everyone finally knew about the vampire-witch and the hold she had over me. They’d figured it out without my having to explain it, but that didn’t mean we were safe.

I searched the dark woods that surrounded Big Mac’s house. I scanned instinctively for movement or light, but there was nothing. It was a dark night, and I wasn’t really even paying attention. I was too busy wondering when Adéluce was going to make her next move. I was sure she’d try something sooner or later—it was really just a matter of what. I could only hope that Big Mac’s ward would be powerful enough to protect everyone from Adéluce’s vengeance.

“Xavier?”

I’d been so deep in thought that I jumped when I heard Ava’s voice.

“What?” I asked, turning around.

She was eyeing me carefully. “Don’t you trust Big Mac?”  
 I stared at her, amazed by the question. It was like she could read my mind—but I knew she was just reading the worried expression on my face.

I shrugged. “I do trust Big Mac—and she’s definitely powerful—but she’s still a witch.”

“What do you mean?” Ava asked.

“I mean that I’ve learned not to put all my faith in witches or their magic. Big Mac is powerful, but she’d tell you herself that she’s not *all-powerful*. And…” I wanted to add that Adéluce’s magic was powerful, too, but I couldn’t get the words out. Fuck. Her damn spell was still muzzling me, keeping me from even mentioning her name. Finally, I just shrugged again. “It never hurts to keep an eye out,” I said, tipping my head toward the window.

Ava stepped forward, positioning herself between me and the window. “Xavier, you need to stop worrying—about me, about you, about everything. There’s nothing you can do right now. Okay?” She leaned forward and kissed me. “Maybe you should just come to bed. You look like you need some sleep.”

She was right, but standing so close to her made me think of the fuss she’d made earlier, clinging to me, making pointed remarks about being with me, all in front of Cali. The whole scene had been awkward and difficult, and I didn’t want a repeat of it, so I decided to address it head-on.

“Are you feeling insecure, Ava?”

Her dark eyes widened, and she took a step back. “What?”

“Downstairs, you were all over me—in front of Cali—”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. “Why the hell would you bring her up?”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t want this to blow up into a fight, so I softened my tone. “You were just, frankly, possessive… In front of everyone. And I know you missed me and were worried, but I think your behavior was about more than that.”

Ava didn’t respond for a moment. She’d gone pale, and when she did speak, her voice was tight with fear and tension. “You say you know I was worried, Xavier, but I don’t know that you do. Do you have any idea how fucking scared I was when you were gone? How it felt to believe that you were trapped in the demon world with no way to get out? That you might be gone forever?”

New weight pressed down on me as I looked into her anguished eyes.

“No,” I admitted, “I guess I don’t.”

“You have no idea how awful it was,” Ava said, her voice distant now. “And that’s why I was acting like that. You should understand that I’m acting possessive *because* of those feelings, Xavier. I don’t want to let you out of my sight, but that doesn’t have anything to do with *her*,” she finished, refusing to even say Cali’s name.

I nodded, though I wasn’t actually convinced. I believed Ava when she said that she’d been terrified when I was gone—I could see that was true, and she’d offered up five years of her life to get me back, after all—but I didn’t fully believe that Cali had *nothing* to do with her behavior. Ava was always telling me how well she knew me, but I think she sometimes forgot that I knew her just as well.

“I know it was horrible to not know what was going to happen,” I said quietly.

She turned to face me and looked me square in the eyes. “I want you to understand one thing, Xavier Evers—you are *everything* to me. I came back from the dead to find you. You are my *one*.”

I could feel the energy radiating from her as she spoke, and I pulled her into my arms, holding her close. “I’m here now,” I whispered, my face buried in her hair. “I’m here, with you. You and me. I love you.”

She wrapped her arms around me. “I love you too, Xavier,” she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “And I’m never going to let anything like that happen again.”

I leaned down and kissed her, and my wolf immediately reacted to the contact. He howled with pleasure and begged for more. Much, much more.

Ava opened her mouth, inviting me in, deepening the kiss. I could feel her want—her need—and so could my wolf. I didn’t want her to feel insecure, and I hoped the kiss would make that feeling go away, but my wolf’s reaction to the kiss wasn’t nearly so nuanced. He just wanted Ava. He pushed me, wanting me to take her, to dominate, to possess, to ravage.

I dug my fingers into her hair, then wrapped my free arm around her waist, lifting her off her feet. I stepped over to the bed and tossed her onto the mattress.

She gasped and looked up at me, her eyes fiery with hunger.

“Xavier,” she breathed, tossing her head back. “Take me. You’re what I want.”

I lunged forward, covering her body with mine. I kissed her, hard and hot and fast, driving my tongue deep into her, making her gasp for breath.

She moaned into my mouth, and my wolf went wild. I reached down and dug my fingers into the lace of her panties, ripping them off. I threw the shreds of black lace to the ground and slipped a finger into her pussy.

“Oh fuck,” she moaned, but I cut her off, covering her mouth with mine and kissing her until she was panting for breath.

“Take my clothes off,” I commanded, and Ava did as she was told, though her fingers fumbled with the buttons as I brought her closer and closer to climax.

She was shaking—a hair’s breadth away from orgasming—when I pulled my fingers out and shoved her knees apart. I knelt over her and was just about to drive my cock into her when the door burst open.

I spun around and saw Colton standing in the doorway.

**Episode 4742**

As I washed the shampoo out of my hair, I eyed Greyson. His eyes were stormy as he scrubbed his shoulder.

“Let me get that,” I said, taking the soap from his hands. I ran it across his shoulder, then across his broad chest, but he didn’t even look at me.

“I’ve got it,” he muttered, taking the soap back from me.

I tried again.

“Excuse me,” I said, slipping past him. I pretended I was reaching for the body wash, but it was really just an excuse to slide my naked body against his.

But Greyson just stepped back, giving me room to pass.

I sighed. He was distracted and distant, and I was worried that he was still upset with me about what had happened with Xavier. I wanted to bring him back to me, but I wasn’t sure how.

I stretched onto my tiptoes to kiss him, but he wasn’t even looking at me, and before I could reach him, he turned off the shower and stepped out.

“I’ll grab some towels,” he said without a backward glance.

I stood there dripping in the shower, staring after him, baffled. I wasn’t sure what to do or say. Wordlessly, I took the towel he offered and dried off while he headed back into the bedroom. When I joined him in there, the towel wrapped around me, I found him standing still, staring silently at the bed.

On impulse, I walked up behind him and wrapped my arms around him. I enjoyed the warmth that emanated from his body, but he just stood there stiffly, not responding to my touch.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head, laughing. “I have a girl in my room, and it feels like I’m not supposed to.”

“What?!” I sputtered, surprised. “Why? We’re mates.”

He chuckled and, without turning, reached to pull me closer to him. “But I can’t get it out of my head like I’m sneaking a girl into my room.”

That made me laugh, and I felt the knot in my stomach loosening. “I see. Because it’s Big Mac’s house, not ours?”

“Yeah,” Greyson said. “And the fact that she probably has eyes everywhere.”

“Oh shit, you’re right,” I said, eyeing the room warily. This idea hadn’t occurred to me until that moment, but that did sound like something the witch would do. “Would you be more comfortable if we slept in separate rooms?” I asked hesitantly.

Greyson finally turned to face me, a smile on his lips. “I didn’t say that, love.”

“It doesn’t seem crazy to me,” I assured him. “I get it.” I remembered how awkward I’d felt when my mom and dad had first learned about my relationship with Xavier. And then they’d found out I had not one, but *two* mates… That had been a struggle, and there had been times when I’d wanted to die of embarrassment, so I understood where he was coming from. “But I really doubt that Big Mac or your mom are going to be upset that you’re here with me. We *lived* with them at the pack house.”

He chuckled. “I know that—logically. But it’s still hard not to dwell on the strangeness of it.”

“Well… try not to,” I said, and stretched up to kiss him. I wanted him to forget about everything. “Anyway,” I said, pulling back and raising an eyebrow, “aren’t you interested in breaking the rules? Being a little naughty?”

His grin widened, and he slipped his arm around my waist. “I think I can handle being a little naughty for a little while.”

He leaned down and scooped me into his arms, kissed me, and stepped toward the bed.

“Greyson, wait—”

He stopped, his brows knitting. “Oh—I thought you wanted to—”

“Close your eyes,” I instructed.

He stared at me in obvious confusion. “What?”

“Close them.”

“Seriously?”

I pressed a kiss to his lips, lingering for a drawn-out second. “If you want to be naughty, you need to close your eyes, Greyson.”

He closed them with a sigh.

“Okay, put me down,” I said, and he carefully set me down on the floor. Then I pushed him back so that he was sitting on the bed.

“What are you doing?” he asked, bemused with my antics.

“Don’t peek,” I told him, then quickly looked around the room. I dropped my towel and pulled on a pair of panties and my T-shirt, which clung to my still-damp body. I looked around for a prop, then grabbed the desk chair and straddled it, my heart pounding. “Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

Greyson’s eyes opened, then went wide. They were dark; stormy. “What’s all this, love? Not that I’m going to complain.”

“Shush,” I said gently as I traced my fingertips up my bare thighs. “I’m trying to get lost in the moment.”

“What?” he asked, but I didn’t reply.

Humming, I let my hands make their way up my body, teasing the wet shirt up a little higher as I reached my hips. When I cupped my breasts and rolled my hard nipples, Greyson inhaled as his gaze raked down my body. My entire body thrummed with heat as it gathered in my core. Putting my hands on the back of the chair, I leaned back, letting him get a good view.

“Cali,” he warned.

I pulled myself back up and found his gaze. Slowly, I teased the shirt off of one shoulder, enjoying how his lips parted as I did. In one fluid motion, I stood up, turning the chair so when I sat on the edge of it, I was face-to-face with Greyson, our knees almost brushing.

“Get over here,” he said, his voice rolling deliciously over me.

“Not yet,” I said. “And no touching.”

“What?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. Slowly, I spread my thighs wide. “Do you see how wet I am for you?”

“*Cali*,” he growled, palming at his erection.

“I said no touching,” I said. His jaw locked as he obeyed me, resting his hands in fists on his thighs. “And you’d better be quiet. Colton is here. He’s got a habit of bursting into people’s bedrooms—he could walk in at any moment.”

I started to pull up my shirt, lifting it just a little at a time as I watched him. But suddenly, he stopped working himself and leaned forward. I opened my mouth to ask what was going on, but he put his finger to his lips and held up a hand for me to wait.

“What is it?” I asked, blood pounding in my ears.

“Someone’s at the door,” he said.

Gasping, I stood up and started to yank down my half-off T-shirt, but then Greyson reached for me, lifting me up against him. He tossed me back down onto the bed. I sank into the mattress as he hovered above me.

“That’s quite enough of that,” he said as one of his knees pressed down between my legs. “Take your shirt off. Now.”

Heart beating fast and my entire body pulsing, I obeyed. Before the shirt was fully off me, Greyson’s hands and mouth descended on my breasts. Then, he moved up to kiss me. Hard. His body sank into me, his thigh pressing between my legs. I couldn’t help it—I broke the kiss, moaning at the pressure.

“You’d better be quiet,” Greyson whispered into my ear. “You don’t want anyone coming up here and finding us together.”

“Would your mom throw me out?” I asked as my whole body flushed with heat.

“She might,” Greyson said, reaching between us to push my legs further apart. He sat up for a moment, taking in the sight of me before he trailed his middle finger along the outside of my panties. “You *are* wet.”

Then, without warning, he took the panties in his hands and tore them off me. I reached for him again, desperate to kiss him. His lips found mine and he drove a hand into my hair, pulling. I ran my hands up his arms, loving the feel of his muscles, before I wrapped them around his neck. He bit my bottom lip, sucking on it before kissing my neck.

“Greyson,” I panted, unable to stop the way my hips rolled against him. “I can’t take much more of this.”

“Me neither,” he said roughly. “Are you ready, love?”

“My god, *yes.*”

Despite being ready, I moaned when he drove his cock into me, and he had to cover my mouth with his hand.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” he said, laughing quietly.

“You feel way too good,” I said.

Then we were silent after that. My brain was quickly turning to mush as he pumped in and out of me. I was no longer capable of jokes, so I pulled his fingers into my mouth and sucked them, making him moan.

It was like I hadn’t realized just how turned on I’d been, but I could feel my climax building. I wrapped my legs around his hips, opening myself up and pulling him deeper.

“Harder,” I begged as I arched against him, the wave of my orgasm breaking over me.

“*Fuck*,” Greyson groaned as he sped up his pace. He began to come as my orgasm continued through me in waves.

This time I clamped my hand over *his* mouth, feeling his breath heaving against me.

Spent now, he wound down, clutching to him as he shook his head and whispered my name before kissing me once more.

Both of us satisfied, I pulled him down to lie next to me, snuggling into him. He wrapped his arms around me and sighed contentedly. I felt his heartbeat thrumming through me, so I knew when it slowed, and before long, I felt his body relax as he fell asleep. I could feel myself relaxing, too, lulled toward sleep by the comforting warmth of Greyson against me.

But, though so much in my world was right, it was also complicated. Xavier was back, and his motives for leaving me were finally out in the open. One move from him could change everything and send us fully back to *due destini* hell.

The only real question was: would he?

**Episode 4743**

**Xavier**

I glared at Colton, who stood framed in the doorway. Something about this moment felt sickeningly familiar, and a moment after I had that thought, I realized why. He’d done these fly-bys all the time when Cali and I had first gotten together, but it had been a while, and I’d hoped he’d changed. He was a fucking father now—I’d figured he might’ve matured some. Obviously, I’d been wrong.

Colton looked past me at Ava, who’d grabbed a blanket from the bed and pulled it over herself. His expression darkened when he saw her.

I scowled at him. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re do—”

“Just let me know when you’re done with her,” he snapped, then he walked away, leaving the door open behind him.

“Fuck,” I spat, then stomped over and slammed the door shut.

Ava’s face had gone pale with Colton’s words, but she shook her head. “Forget about him. Come over here,” she said, reaching out for me.

I wanted to take her hand and let myself be pulled back into bed—I wanted to finish what we’d started—but Colton’s words rang through my head. *Just let me know when you’re done with her.* With *her*. A bitter taste rose up in the back of my throat. How dare he talk about Ava with so much contempt? This woman was my mate, not some disposable toy. And my brother needed to fucking act like it.

My blood began to boil, and I balled my hands into fists. I stared at the closed door, anger settling over my vision like a red mist. I wanted to find Colton—I wanted to march out that door and find him and beat the living shit out of him—but when I looked over at Ava, I felt torn. She’d thrown the blanket off again and she was so beautiful, lying on the bed. So alluring, so open to me. She wanted me, and I wanted her.

My wolf was torn between two primal drives—hunger for her, and the desire to defend her.

“Come on, X,” Ava said softly. “Colton will cool off.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, he’s my brother, but I can’t just let that shit go. I need to settle things with him. Now”

“Xavier, *no*, don’t. It’s not worth it—”

But I was already grabbing the robe hanging on the back of the door and pulling it on. “I’ll be right back,” I said, and stormed out of the room. “Colton!”

He’d just reached his own bedroom door when he heard me bark at him. He turned to me as I marched down the corridor toward him, his expression sullen. “What?”

“*What?*” I glared at him. “That’s what *I’m* asking. What the fuck was that about?”

His gaze flickered down, taking in the robe I’d grabbed—which turned out to be silk and covered with flowers. He smirked. “Nice robe. Was that your choice, or did Ava pick it out for you—”

I grabbed his shirt and slammed him hard against his door. “Where do you get off, talking about her like that? Or *anyone* like that?”

Surprise flickered in Colton’s eyes, and he held up his hands in surrender. “I’m not going to fight you, man. I’ve made it clear what I think of her.”

My heartbeat was thunderous in my ears, and anger coursed through me in a way that freaked me out a little. I let Colton go and took a step back. I could feel my wolf getting the upper hand, and I needed to control that. Was I acting this impulsively because part of my humanity had been taken in the demon world? I needed to be really careful, or I was going to end up fighting everyone.

“So what’s your problem?” I asked angrily.

Colton narrowed his eyes. “Did that vampire-witch do something else to you?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I don’t know, you were just about to rip my throat out—”

“For good fucking reason—”

“—and other than some kind of curse or something, I can’t figure out why. What’s the explanation?”

“The explanation for *what*?” I demanded.

“For you being so goddamn pissy right now,” he snapped. “You know damn well what my problem with her is, Xavier. She murdered our mother.”

My wolf reared up inside me, surging anger making it hard to think. I took a deep breath, fighting to control the growing rage.

“You haven’t been around, man,” I ground out. “Things are different. Ava’s changed—”

“I think the only one who’s changed is *you*,” Colton said, looking at me like I was a stranger. “Did you even for a *second* think about anyone other than yourself?”

“What the hell are you—”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like for me to see you with her?” Colton demanded. “You might have forgiven Ava for what she did, but I haven’t. And I never will.”

“You don’t get it,” I said harshly. “You don’t understand what we’ve been through.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should explain it to me, because I can’t stand being around her,” Colton said, his voice rising. “And last time I checked, you couldn’t stand it either.”

“Just like you couldn’t stand being around Maya?” I fired back.

“Let me be clear, brother: there is *no* fucking comparison between the mother of my children and that woman,” Colton hissed. “Maya didn’t *murder our mother!*”

“*Hey*.” Greyson stepped out into the hall from his chosen bedroom. He was pulling on a T-shirt and looking darkly between Colton and me. “You two good out here?”

“Fine,” I growled.

Greyson glanced down at my robe. “Nice.”

“I’m really not in the mood,” I told him. When he stepped closer to me, I smelled Cali on him, and that was like sandpaper to my nerves.

“I can see that,” he said warily.

If Greyson was going to butt into the conversation, he might as well make himself useful. So I turned to him.

“Okay, you’re always trying to play the older brother,” I said. “What’s your take on Ava?”

Greyson looked taken aback by the question. He looked at me, then at Colton, then back at me, clearly unsure how to answer. “Why are you asking—”

“Whatever,” I snarled. “Fuck you, too, Greyson. I don’t give a fuck what either of you think about her.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Colton said, looking satisfied, like he’d proved his point. “Greyson’s trying to be tactful, so he won’t tell you what he really thinks about Ava. What we *all* really think about her.”

I took that in. It was strange, because I’d never actually considered what Greyson thought about Ava. I didn’t spend a lot of time wondering what Greyson thought about things—but I’d always kind of assumed that he wanted me to be with Ava. If I was with Ava, it cleared the way for him to be with Cali, which was what he’d always wanted.

I looked at my brothers and felt fury welling up inside me. It was like a wildfire burning in my chest, and I couldn’t seem to tamp it down, no matter how many deep breaths I took. Everything about this conversation felt strange and wrong. Colton had always been on my side, but now it felt like he was siding with Greyson—against me. And it was pissing me off. Colton, Greyson—the whole fucking *world* was against Ava and me.

The worst part was that I hadn’t even asked for this. I hadn’t asked for any of this. I hadn’t asked for Ava to come back from the spirit realm, or for Cali to be *due destini*, and I certainly hadn’t asked for Adéluce to show up and burn down my whole fucking life. No one liked the way I was doing things, but what the hell did that matter? I was doing my best with the cards I’d been dealt, and I didn’t need either of my brothers’ blessing to keep doing it.

“Why don’t you both just go fuck yourselves,” I growled, my wolf pacing in my chest.

Greyson took a look at the dangerous expression on my face and put a hand on Colton’s shoulder. “It’s late, and it’s been a long day. Maybe we should just call it a night.”

Seeing Greyson speaking to Colton like that—like they were close, like brothers—made the fire in my chest burn even hotter.

Colton shrugged. “Fine by me. I was just heading to bed anyway.”

“Make sure you get there,” I snarled. “I hate to think what’ll happen to you if you keep opening doors that don’t belong to you.”

Colton’s eyes flashed. “And why don’t you—”

“There you are.”

We all spun around and saw Big Mac walking down the hallway toward us. She looked at the expressions on all of our faces, then ignored them. “I’m glad you’re all up.”

“Why?” Greyson asked.

“Because I just figured out an answer to Xavier’s question.”

“Which question?” I snapped, thinking about the dozens of questions constantly spinning through my brain.

Big Mac fixed me with her signature glare. “The one about breaking the death link between you and Adéluce.”

**Episode 4744**

**Artemis**

I reached for my dagger as the Light Fae group moved cautiously toward Marius. They had their own weapons drawn and were creeping through the underbrush.

“What are Dark Fae doing in our territory?” a woman demanded. She was standing at the head of the squad of Light Fae, and I figured she was probably their leader.

Marius was clearly tense, but he shrugged casually, like he’d just been asked directions but didn’t know the way.

“We must’ve gotten lost,” he said, flashing the Light Fae his signature smile, though it was tinged with pain. “You know how it is—the boundaries are always changing. But we’ll be happy to get out of your territory and head back to Dark Fae land, if you’d be so kind as to show us the way.”

“Shut up,” I snapped. My heart was beating hard as I looked around, doing some quick calculations. I hadn’t made it this far only to have to retreat—or to be captured as a prisoner of a war that had nothing to do with me.

I turned to the Light Fae leader. “I’m a Light Fae bounty hunter, and I’ve just captured a target.”

My pulse was racing, and I was silently praying that I’d get away with this ruse. Anyway, I wasn’t lying about being a Light Fae—I was just choosing to leave out the part about my Dark Fae side. It wasn’t a new trick for me; I’d often passed myself off as one or the other while I was working for the Kollector, but I hadn’t known why people mistook me so much for the other. I usually just chose the option that would get me out of trouble or into a place I needed. I’d done it even before I’d learned that I actually *was* both.

The Light Fae leader looked at me, sizing me up. She looked skeptical, which meant I needed to embroider my story.

“This prisoner is going to get me a big reward, so I’d appreciate it if you let me go collect it,” I added.

“Is that right?” the leader asked warily.

“Yep. The Wrenthorns have been looking for him for quite some time.”

The unsubtle name drop had the intended effect—the Light Fae all flinched and looked at each other, their expressions suddenly uneasy.

The leader cleared her throat, looking a little nervous. “You’re working for the Wrenthorns?”

“You don’t believe me?” I shrugged. “That might be a mistake, but if you want to see my contract…”

I reached for my bag as though to draw out the contract, but I was really reaching for my dagger, which I hadn’t had a chance to draw earlier. I didn’t want to have to use it, but if this situation went south, Marius wouldn’t be much help. Fighting my way out could end up being my only option.

“No, no,” the Light Fae leader said, “that won’t be necessary. We don’t need to see any contract. And if the Wrenthorns want your prisoner, then we have no desire to get in your way.” She was speaking quickly, clearly nervous now.

Marius coughed, then—the effort having thrown him off balance—he stumbled a bit, groaning as he fought to get his feet back underneath him.

The Light Fae leader eyed him. “You sure your prisoner’s going to make it back to the Wrenthorns? He looks badly wounded.”

I shrugged. “He is. I had to shoot him when he refused to surrender. You know how it is.”

The leader nodded slowly, her eyes on Marius. “And you’re sure he’s going to survive?”

“That’s not your concern,” I said sharply. I didn’t like how closely the leader was examining Marius. And I didn’t need the questions, either.

Marius looked up at the sky. “Why is there no owls? The owls bring the cheese.”

Shit. Incoherent babbling. That wasn’t great. The Light Fae leader wasn’t wrong about Marius—he was in bad shape. Far worse shape than I’d originally thought.

My stomach tightened with anxiety as that truth settled in. I needed to do something. But what?

Cleaning the wound would have to be the first step.

“Is there anything else?” I asked sharply, trying to infuse a dismissal into my tone.

The Light Fae leader heard it and nodded. “No, nothing else. Go ahead and tend to your prisoner. We’ll stand guard while you do.”

“Is that necessary?” I snapped.

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “There are a lot of Dark Fae operating around here. You can’t stay vigilant if you’re working on your man’s wound.”

“Fine,” I said shortly. I didn’t need an audience, but I’d have to take what I could get.

I grabbed Marius by the arm and helped him sit down. I propped him up against a tree, trying to make him as comfortable as possible, but he yelped when he rested his weight on his backside. *Shit*. I hadn’t meant to do that.

“Can’t sit,” he muttered, his gaze hazy.

Not great. It was worse than I thought it was.

I laid him down, then rolled him onto his side so I could see what I was working with. I looked around, hoping to find something to use to clean the wound. There was nothing around, so I’d have to make do with what I had.

I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and yanked, ripping off a long strip of fabric. I heard the babble of a stream nearby, and found it was only a few paces away. I jogged over, submerged the fabric strips in the water, then hurried back to Marius and placed them onto the wound. I pressed them down carefully, trying to clear the wound, even as I kept my ears sharp. The Light Fae were watching us, and I strained to hear what they were saying to each other.

It was abundantly clear that I needed to get rid of them, or get away from them, but I wasn’t sure how I was going to manage that. I was doing all I could for Marius, but he was in no condition to go anywhere anytime soon.

He’d flinched when I’d put the cold cloths on his wound, but now he twisted around to smile up at me, his eyes unfocused. “You’re so beautiful, Ari. Did you know that? I think everything about you is beautiful. Your hair, your lips, your face, your body—*that body*,” he groaned, reaching up to stroke my hair.

I slapped his hand away. “*Stop*,” I hissed. “They’re going to hear you. Shut up, Marius.”

But he was delirious, and I knew that nothing I said would convey the gravity or our situation.

I looked around again, scanning the ground. Marius was feverish, and I needed to find the right plants to apply to the wound. But which plants were the right ones? My mom was the plant expert, not me.

Marius was clutching my hand now, his own sweaty with fever. I wracked my brain, fighting to remember anything that might be useful.

Then I spotted a plant with three long, shiny leaves that looked familiar. I tried to pull away from Marius, but he held me fast.

“Don’t leave me,” he whispered.

“I’m not leaving you,” I told him, keeping my voice low. “I’m trying to help you, okay? I’ll be right back.”

I yanked my hand back and stepped toward the plant. It was dark green with scarlet veins running along the leaves, and I was sure I recognized it. I’d used it when I’d been wounded a few years back. I’d fallen out of a tree where I’d been hiding and slashed my calf on a rock. I didn’t think the leaf would heal Marius—that was going to require something more powerful than leaves—but I was hoping they might keep him from getting worse. At the very least, they might buy us some time.

As I bent down to pick the leaves, I thought of my mother. The mother I hadn’t even known existed for most of my life. It was a happy thought, and it filled my anxious heart with hope. I needed to remember the family I’d left behind when I’d come here—Orla, Tom, and Cali. Adair. And Rishika, of course.

Buoyed by thoughts of them, I brought the leaves back to Marius and pressed them to his wound. It was hard to get to with his blood-soaked pants in the way, but I did my best.

“We’ve been talking.”

I looked up to see that the Light Fae leader had approached me and was standing nearby. “Yeah? What about?”

“The journey to the Wrenthorn palace is dangerous,” she said.

“I know that.”

“It would be wrong of us to leave you on your own,” she said.

“What?” I looked up from my work. “What are you saying?”

“We’ll take you to the Wrenthorns ourselves.” She raised an eyebrow and watched me closely. “That won’t be a problem, will it?”

**Episode 4745**

I felt a yawn coming on, but I tried to swallow it. I rubbed my eyes, which felt scratchy as sandpaper. Wondering what time it was, I fumbled around for my phone, but it was too far away. Based on the color of the sky outside the windows in Big Mac’s kitchen, I had to assume it was sometime in the early, early morning.

I’d thought—well, *hoped*—that we might all have been able to get some sleep after our long, grueling day, but that didn’t seem to be in the cards. I’d almost been asleep when I’d felt Greyson get up, then heard angry voices in the hallway outside our door. It was hard to tell in my half-asleep haze, but I could’ve sworn the voices had belonged to Xavier and Colton. But that didn’t seem right.

I’d meant to ask Greyson about it, but when he’d come back into the room, he’d woken me up properly to tell me that Big Mac had some news—news that had startled me fully awake. She hadn’t been specific, but it seemed she’d made some kind of discovery about the connection between Xavier and Adéluce and the curse that bound their lives together.

That news hadn’t woken only me up—everyone had gotten up then and trooped down to the kitchen to see what was going on.

Now, we were gathered around the table, and I looked around at the tired faces and wondered if anyone had managed to get any sleep at all. Mrs. Smith—bless her heart—was walking around with a tray, passing out white chocolate mochas, which seemed to perk everyone up.

Colton grabbed a mug from the tray and took a long sip. “Ah, fuck yeah!” He clinked his cup against Gabriel’s, with enough enthusiasm a splash of coffee spilled into Gabriel’s lap. “This is the fucking shit,” Colton said, holding up a hand to offer Mrs. Smith a high five.

She looked at him for a moment, clearly bemused, then hesitantly slapped his hand.

After this exchange, I looked up, wondering where Xavier was if he wasn’t with his twin and good friend. I found him standing on the other side of the kitchen, as far away from me as possible. He was standing with Ava and Marissa, and his expression was dark, and twisted into a scowl. I was surprised to see him looking so mad, and I wondered again what had happened between him and Colton out in the hallway, because it was definitely strange that Xavier wasn’t sitting with him and Gabriel. Greyson hadn’t given me any details, but I guessed it had to have been a bad interaction last night…

But my train of thought was cut off when Big Mac walked in.

“Okay, if refreshment time is over, it’s time to get down to business.” She glared around at all of us. “Is it okay if I get started now that *all* of you are here, or are we waiting on anyone else? Should I be expecting the Queen, too?”

Greyson gestured to Big Mac. “We’re all here. Take it away.” Then he looked away, and I saw his gaze flick between Xavier and Colton.

I’d heard their voices in the hallway, and I knew that Greyson had stepped in for some reason, but I hadn’t had a chance to ask him about it. Maybe whatever had happened was the reason why they weren’t sitting together now.

The kitchen was chilly, and I wrapped my arms around myself, wondering if there was something going on between the twins that I didn’t know about.

Big Mac didn’t look happy as she glowered at the group gathered in her kitchen. “This community meeting is absolutely unnecessary. I don’t need all of you here.”

“We all want to know what you’ve found out,” Greyson said.

“I found out that I can break the connection between Xavier and Adéluce—without killing anyone in the process.”

Everyone in the room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Hooray! I call for a toast!” Jay said, raising his mug of white chocolate mocha. “To Big Mac! The smartest witch in the world!”

“You really figured out how to do it?” I demanded incredulously.

Big Mac rounded on me. “You sound awfully surprised, Caliana. Do you find it so hard to believe that I was able to figure it out?”

“N-No! No, that’s not it,” I stammered, feeling like an idiot. “Of course not. It’s just—it’s not that I doubt your skills as a witch, it’s just…”

“*Yes?*” Big Mac asked, her stare boring into me.

“It’s just, if you know how to break the bond between Xavier and Adéluce, why couldn’t you break the bond between Greyson and Elle?” I asked, feeling my face flushing.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes at me in a way that made my stomach—already anxious—twist into knots. I’d seen that look before, and it never meant anything good.

“Did I say anything about a bond?” Big Mac asked icily.

“Um…” I wracked my brain, trying to remember the exact words she’d just used. “No?”

“No. I did not use the word ‘bond,’ because it is not applicable to this situation. I used the word ‘connection.’ Words matter, Caliana, and a sire bond is very different to the magic that connects Xavier and Adéluce.”

“What’s different about it?” I asked.

Big Mac sighed in a long-suffering way. “I’m not teaching a magic workshop here, and I’m not in the mood to explain the nuances of the two. Suffice it to say that those kinds of magics are different—*fundamentally* different, in ways you wouldn’t understand. Is that enough of an explanation for you?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “Thanks for the clarification.”

“You’re welcome,” she snapped. She glared around at the others. “I hope there aren’t any more questions before I—”

“I have a question,” Ava said boldly.

“*What?*” Big Mac hissed.

Ava crossed her arms over her chest, looking utterly unintimidated. “There are always strings attached to spells, aren’t there?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Sometimes, not always.”

“What about now?” Ava asked. “Could the magic you intend to use backfire and put my mate in even greater danger?”

I bit my lip as Ava spoke. I couldn’t help but think of her the night before. She’d been all over Xavier, preening like a peacock. And now she was at it again, referring to Xavier as her mate. Voicing her concerns about his fate as if I didn’t matter at all or factor in at all. Like Xavier and I were no longer mates.

I felt the urge to point out that we were, in fact, still mates, but I kept my mouth shut. I just thought better of the idea, especially after the intense conversation I’d had with Greyson.

Big Mac gave Ava a withering look. “Of course there’s a risk of complications, girl. That’s how magic works. But unless you’re a witch—which you’re definitely not—it’s best to just accept that whatever happens will still be far better than the situation Xavier is in right now.”

Ava’s expression darkened, and I could tell that she wasn’t happy with Big Mac’s answer.

I had to fight to keep a smile off my face. Maybe it was petty, but I couldn’t help but enjoy seeing Big Mac getting in a shot or two at Ava.

“But what really matters is that *you* agree to all of this,” Big Mac went on, turning to Xavier.

“What do you mean?” he asked warily.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who’s going to be affected by this magic—one way or the other. I don’t want to get any shit if things go sideways—”

“No, I’m in,” Xavier said quickly. “Do whatever you have to do, Big Mac, I’m ready.”

Big Mac gave him a close look. “You’re sure? Because there are risks. You have to understand—”

“I understand,” Xavier growled, his eyes flashing. “I want you to break the connection. And when you do, I’m going to kill Adéluce.”

The kitchen erupted. Everyone cheered. Jay raised his mug, Lola pumped her fist, Gabriel and Mikah whistled, and Greyson nodded in agreement.

“Just tell us what we can do to help, Xavier,” he said.

“I love staking!” Gabriel called. Then he glanced quickly at Mikah. “Only bad vampires, though.”

“I’m ready to bury that evil vampire!” Lola called. “Just give me a shovel.”

I smiled as I looked around. It was clear that everyone in this room really cared about Xavier, in spite of everything he’d done under Adéluce’s influence. Seeing it made me feel good, even if Ava *was* grasping Xavier’s hand.

“Okay, okay, enough! Shut up!” Big Mac bellowed over the cheering.

“We’re just relieved, Big Mac,” Lola said. “Can’t we celebrate?”

“There’s nothing to celebrate yet,” the witch retorted. “And there never will be, unless you do a favor for me.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s something I need in order to cast this spell, and I need you to go get it for me.”

**Episode 4746**

**Greyson**

The group responded to Big Mac’s announcement with alarm, but I wasn’t surprised by her words. That was just the way it was—there always seemed to be something else that we needed. One more thing to collect that would always end up complicating matters. Nothing was ever simple.

“We’ll get you whatever you need, ” Cali said. “So what is it?”

“Nothing much. Just a small quantity of hellebore,” Big Mac told us.

I frowned. I had no idea what hellebore was—though Big Mac’s tone made it sound like she was asking us to go to the store to fetch a carton of milk. “Is that a plant?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Why did I ever think you’d know what hellebore is?” she muttered to herself, then raised her voice again. “Yes, it’s a plant.”

“You can lead with that next time,” I said. My mom gave me a look, but I shook it off. I was used to Big Mac’s gruff attitude, but now wasn’t the time. “What does it look like?” I continued. “What should we be looking for?”

Big Mac sighed and waved a hand in front of her. A hologram-like magical image appeared in the palm of her hand, showing a plant with a small, reddish flower. It had five pointed petals surrounding a yellow nub. Cali stepped forward, clearly transfixed by the illusion.

“It’s beautiful,” she said softly.

“Well, don’t get too attached,” Big Mac deadpanned. “It’s poisonous. For everyone, but as you probably aren’t likely to eat any random flowers, it’s mostly just dangerous for cats and dogs. That means I don’t want anyone to bring it anywhere near Lion.” She glared at Cali, who took a step back.

“No one will expose your cat to the hellebore,” I assured her. “We’ll be careful.”

“I don’t get it,” Colton called from the end of the table. “If you know you need this hell-flower, why do you need us to get it for you? Why can’t you just wave your hands around and grab some?”

Big Mac turned an icy gaze on Colton. “Every time you speak, I’m reminded that not every member of the Evers family is blessed with the gift of intelligence. The hellebore I need doesn’t grow on every corner. If I knew where it was, I’d already have it.”

“Okay,” Cali said slowly, “but do you know where we should go to find it?”

“I know of a place where it might be, but I can’t just blip around looking for it. It’s not like driving around in a car. It takes psychic energy—energy I’m reserving to keep you from dying,” she added, looking at Xavier.

Colton’s question hadn’t helped Big Mac’s mood, and I spoke quickly, hoping she wasn’t about to change her mind about helping us. “If you can just tell us what type of environment hellebore usually grows in, I’m sure we’ll be able to track some down for you.”

“For sure,” Cali said, nodding.

“For cosmic, spellcasting reasons, hellebore must be harvested at noon. *Exactly* noon,” Big Mac said with a pointed look. “Not a minute earlier or later. It’s most often found growing on the sides of ravines, but the variety of hellebore I need can only grow in the shade of a pine tree.”

“Oh, is that all?” Xavier asked, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Big Mac shot him a look. “It’s your ass I’m trying to save, boy, but if you don’t care, then I have plenty of other ways to spend my precious time.”

“I think they understand, MacKenzie,” my mother said softly, putting a gentle hand on the witch’s arm.

“Yeah, I get it,” Xavier said. “I’ll got get it—”

“No!”

Ava and Cali looked at each other in surprise, having both spoken at once. There was a beat of strained silence as they looked at each other and everyone looked at them.

“I just think—”

“You really shouldn’t—”

“It’s going to put you in more danger—”

“Enough!” Big Mac shouted as the two women spoke over each other. “Cali, what do *you* want to say?”

Big Mac allowing Cali to speak first solicited an angry glare from Ava, but that landed squarely in the “not my problem” category.

“Xavier can’t leave your property, Big Mac,” Cali said. “If he does, he won’t be protected by your wards.”

“I’ll be fine,” Xavier said dismissively.

“No, Cali’s right,” I said. “Having you go would be an unnecessary risk. It doesn’t make sense—not when there are plenty of others who can go—”

“Who?” Xavier asked.

“I’ll go!” Ava said quickly.

“I’ll go,” Cali added.

“*No!*”

This time it was Xavier and me who shouted simultaneously.

“I’m going,” Ava said firmly, but I shook my head.

“That’s not safe for you, either,” I pointed out. “Ava, Adéluce has already gone after you, and Cali, she’s used to Seluna mark to punish you,” I said, looking at Cali.

“Well, then you can’t go either,” Cali said.

“What?”  
 “She tried to manipulate your mind, remember?” Cali said.

This made Xavier refocus on me. This was new information for him, and he raised an eyebrow questioningly, but before I could say anything, Lola stood.

“Well, since I appear to be one of the only people here with no connection to the vampire-witch, I’ll go.”

Jay stood up and put his arm around her shoulders. “*We’ll* go. Together. Adéluce has no issues with me, either. Yet.”

“Yeah, we’ll go too,” Gabriel said, nodding toward Mikah.

“That should work,” I said, nodding. “Four should be more than enough.” I glanced at Xavier. “That okay with you?”

He shrugged. “I guess. I don’t want anyone to go in my place, but if I can’t leave, this is fine.”

I glanced over at Colton, wondering why Xavier’s twin had stayed quiet. He’d been mad at Xavier in the hallway, sure, but was he so upset that Xavier was back with Ava that he wasn’t even offering to help save his life?

“Okay, now that you know who’s going, shoo!” Big Mac said, waving us all away. “Out of my kitchen. I still have preparations to make—alone. Get out of my hair.”

Jay and Lola headed out of the kitchen, followed by Gabriel and Mikah—probably all heading upstairs to get ready to go hunt for the hellebore. Cali walked away, but I pulled Colton aside before he could leave.

“What’s up with you and Xavier?” I asked him, pulling him into an alcove near Big Mac’s pantry.

“What the hell business is it of yours?” he snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “As your older brother—”

“*Half*-brother,” Colton corrected me.

I tried to ignore the dig, especially after I’d saved his ass with his twin last night. “Listen, I know you’re not my biggest fan, but we *are* related, and we are all brothers, and we should be there for each other. You said you were coming to help Xavier—why didn’t you offer to help find the hellebore?”

Colton leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. “Okay, whatever. Fine, I’ll go.”

“You will?” I asked. Something about his attitude made me think this was a trap.

He nodded. “I’ll go—*if* you tell me what you really think of Xavier and Ava being together.”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I was pretty shocked when it happened, to be honest, but it’s not the worst thing in the world. And, to be honest, it’s also good for Cali and me.”

Colton smirked. “I’m glad to hear you admit to that.”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “Listen, I don’t know if him getting with Ava was part of the spell, but it *is* what seemed to bring them back together.”

Colton’s eyes were cold. “She killed my mother—*our* mother.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I get it.” If someone killed my mother, would I ever be able to forgive them? I remembered wanting bloody revenge on Dick Wigbert for doing less—though he *had* shot at my mother. “I get where you’re coming from, Colton, but I have to admit, Ava’s changed. She’d volunteered to give up years of her life to save Xavier. Hell, she probably would’ve given up the whole fifteen by herself without blinking.”

Colton eyed me in sullen silence.

“Anyway, I don’t think you actually have to like Ava, and I don’t know that I do either,” I told him. “But it might complicate things with Xavier if you keep acting like a dick about her. Honestly, all I’ve ever wanted is for our family to come together and get along.”

He smirked at me. “And *are* we getting along?”

I smiled, feeling hope rising in my chest. “Yeah, maybe.”

Colton pushed himself away from the wall. “Well, I’ll think about it. I guess the most important thing right now is to save Xavier.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. But as I watched Colton walk away, I had to wonder what he’d meant by that. Did saving Xavier mean finding the hellebore, or did it mean breaking him and Ava apart?

And if it *did*—and if Colton succeeded—would Xavier come back for Cali?

**Episode 4747**

“I can’t wait to go,” I said to Lola as I stood in front of the mirror. “I’ve been looking forward to this date with Greyson for what feels like ages.”

“Well, you look great,” Lola said, giving my outfit a once-over. I was wearing tight black jeans and a red top with a strappy back. She smirked. “Though I bet Greyson will like it even better once it’s on the floor.”

“*Lola*,” I groaned, rolling my eyes.

“What? All I’m saying is that you’re going to have a great time,” she said, feigning innocence.

As I stepped into my shoes, there was a knock on the bedroom door.

I glanced at the time on the wall clock. “He’s early,” I said.

“Or eager,” Lola teased.

I glared at her. “Maybe something came up. We’re not supposed to leave for another half an hour.”

Lola shook her head. “He would’ve already burst in here if something were wrong,” she said. “Greyson should know that you should never show up for a date early. You show up on time, or you don’t show up at all.” She got to her feet. “Finish getting ready—I’ll tell him to wait.”

I nodded and headed to the bathroom to finish doing my makeup, but when Lola opened my bedroom door, it wasn’t Greyson’s voice I heard—it was Xavier’s.

I turned to look at him, surprised. “What are you doing here?” I asked. “Shouldn’t you be with the Samaras?”

Xavier stepped into the room, and his gaze swept down my body, taking me in. I felt a warm, tingling sensation when his eyes met mine again and he smiled.

He was holding a bouquet of flowers, and he stepped forward to hand them to me. “Are you ready for our date?”

I looked at the flowers. There were white daisies and pink roses, and the smell was heavenly. But I was baffled. I looked to Lola, who started backing toward the door.

“Um, I think I hear Jay calling for me… Bye!” she said, then turned and hurried out of the room.

“Is something wrong?” Xavier asked me. “Do you not like the flowers?”

“No, I love them,” I said hurriedly.

“Do you not want to go out?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer this. What the hell was going on? Had I mistakenly planned a date with Xavier instead of Greyson? How could that have happened?

“I—I think there’s been a mistake,” I stammered. “I’m supposed to go out with Greyson tonight.”

Xavier shook his head. “Don’t you remember the rules, Cali?”

“The rules?” I repeated.

“Tonight is my night, and I don’t want to waste a single second of it.” He smiled. “We have a lot of time to make up for.” He took a step toward me and slid his arm around my waist, pulling me close.

I pulled in a sharp breath, nearly overwhelmed by the desire to give in to him and let myself melt against him. But there was another part of me that was warning me to put a stop to this before the situation spiraled out of control. This couldn’t be happening.

“What rules?” I asked, trying to clear my head.

Xavier frowned as he looked down at me, confused by my confusion. “The rules of the *due destini*.”

I stared at him, baffled. I had no idea what he was talking about, or what he was doing here, or what to say to him.

Then my phone started to ring.

My heart started racing in my chest as I looked around for my phone. Maybe it was Greyson calling, wondering where I was. I spun around, searching for my phone.

“Where is it?” I muttered to myself.

“Forget about your phone,” Xavier said softly, pulling me close again. “It doesn’t matter. Whoever’s calling can leave a voicemail. It’s time for us to go.”

“I just need to find it,” I said, squirming out of his arms. I searched the room, throwing pillows to the side and pushing stuff off the top of my dresser. I pulled drawers open and searched under piles of clothes, but the phone was nowhere to be found, and it was stillringing.

I dropped onto my stomach and inched under the bed—and there it was. How it had made it under the bed, I had no idea, but I was so relieved to find it I didn’t even care.

“Hello?” I asked breathlessly, accepting the call.

But no one replied. The phone kept ringing.

I swiped to answer it again. “Hello?”

It still kept ringing.

“Cali, let’s go,” Xavier said, pulling me to my feet and tugging me toward the door. “I’m ready to go.”

I dug my heels in and looked down at my phone, which *just kept ringing*.

My eyes snapped open, and I sat up in bed, breathing hard. I looked around the room, which was bright with morning light. Xavier was nowhere to be seen, but my phone really was ringing.

I shook my head, trying to knock out the remnants of the dream, and looked around. But I couldn’t see my phone.

On a hunch, I dangled my torso over the side of the bed and looked underneath it.

“Ah ha!” I exclaimed, grabbing my phone and holding it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, Cali. It’s Gael.”

“Oh, hi, Gael,” I said, trying to organize my thoughts. “How are you?”

“That’s what I called to ask you, actually. How are *you* doing? I hope you’re feeling better, because Coach is getting worried.”

Oh, right…

I faked a cough. “I’m feeling a little better, thanks, but I think I’ve still got this bug. I don’t want anyone else to catch my awful cold.” I coughed again.

Gael was silent for a few seconds, then: “I thought it was a headache.”

Shit. He was right.

“Yeah, it was, but then the headache turned into a cold… Like they do,” I said lamely. I cleared my throat. “Anyway, I’m on the mend, and I promise to come back as soon as I’m feeling better.”

“That’s fine,” Gael said. “About half the team is sick anyway. I think they all caught something at the party. I’m just lucky I haven’t come down with it.”

“Oh, that sucks,” I said.

“I’ll talk to Coach and let him know what’s going on,” he said. “Feel better! I’m looking forward to seeing you out on the water.”

“Thanks, Gael. You too.” I ended the call and hung my head, guilt washing over me. He’d sounded so happy and so hopeful—I hated lying.

Shaking off my sudden gloom, I tossed my phone onto the bed and stretched. It was actually kind of amazing for me that half the team was sick.

I rolled my eyes at myself. *What a thing to think, Cali. Can you maybe* not *be glad half the crew team came down with something?* Especially because they were *actually* sick, whereas I was just lying about it.

*But I’m going to make it up to them*, I thought to myself, balling my hands into fists. As soon as this mess with Xavier was straightened out, I was going to be the teammate the crew team needed. I was going to be the best coxswain to ever coxswain. I was going to work my tail off for them.

That determined thought propelled me out of bed, and I reached for my clothes. Once I’d pulled on jeans and a sweater, I headed downstairs.

I found Jay, Lola, Gabriel, and Mikah near the door. They were all dressed for the weather, and Lola had a backpack hanging from her shoulder.

“Are you heading out?” I asked.

Lola nodded. “Time to bid a fond farewell to your hellebore hunting expedition team.”

I couldn’t believe I’d almost slept through them leaving.

“Thanks for doing this,” I said, putting my arms around Lola.

She hugged me back. “We’re going to find this stupid flower, Cali. Don’t you worry.”

“Do you know where to look?” I asked, feeling anxious.

Jay nodded. “We talked to Big Mac. She gave us a lot of good ideas about where to start.”

I looked over into the living room, where Greyson was speaking with Xavier. Ava was standing nearby, her head bent as she spoke to Marissa. I frowned as I watched them. Seeing my two mates together reminded me of the strange dream I’d just had. I thought it through, trying to figure out what it could mean. Was it that the dream was exposing the very real worry I had about what was going to happen to the three of us once Adéluce’s hold on Xavier was finally gone?

Because… What *was* going to happen?

I couldn’t pretend that being with Xavier didn’t matter to me. It *did* matter to me. It mattered a lot more than I was willing to let anyone know—or even willing to admit to myself. What was going to happen to the three of us? Were we going to fall back into our old way of doing things, back when we’d tried using rules to stay sane, like Xavier had mentioned in the dream?

Or was everything going to just become an untenable mess?

**Episode 4748**

After the hellebore hunting team set off, I made my way into the kitchen. I poured a cup of coffee and sat down at the table, basking in the morning sunshine and thinking about the odd dream I’d had. The stress of it came back to me, filtering to the forefront of my memory in bits and pieces.

“Hey-o!” Colton said loudly, plopping down into the chair next to me and startling me out of my thoughts.

“Hi,” I said, smiling up at him.

He took a long drink of white chocolate mocha.

“How many of those have you had?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

He grinned at me. “Who knows? I lost count a while ago.”

“I don’t know if that much caffeine and sugar is good for you,” I said doubtfully. “Even if you are a werewolf.”

“I’m fine,” Colton said airily. “I have to make up for all the white chocolate mochas I’ve been deprived of since I left the pack house with Maya. There’s no coffee like it out there—I’ve tried it all, Cali.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Smith will be glad to hear that—” I started, but I stopped talking when Xavier stepped into the kitchen, Ava by his side.

“If anyone needs us, we’re heading out for some fresh air,” Xavier said, addressing this announcement to no one in particular. He seemed to be specifically avoiding looking at me.

Seeing him and Ava together made my stomach drop, but I forced a smile, then stared into my cup as they walked away together.

“That must really suck for you,” Colton said.

I shrugged, trying to keep my expression neutral. “I’m getting used to it.”

He laughed. “You’ve always been a terrible liar. No, you can lie to yourself, Cali, but you can’t fool Colton Evers.”

“I don’t know…” I said vaguely.

“Admit it,” he said, leaning toward me. “Every time you see my brother with the mother killer, you die a little inside.”

Instantly, I looked up in surprise, thrown by Colton’s blunt words. Though, I didn’t know why I was surprised. Colton always said what was on his mind, everyone and everything else be damned. He prided himself on having no filter.

Before I could respond to his comment, Colton’s phone buzzed with a call, and when he picked it up off the table, he smiled. “It’s Maya.” He accepted the call and shoved the phone in front of my face. “Say hi!”

I choked a little in surprise, wiped coffee from my mouth, and smiled as Maya’s face appeared on the screen.

She frowned at me. “I called Colton, right?”

I laughed. “You did, but you got me.” I was glad to see Maya, and even gladder to have a reason to stop talking about Xavier and Ava.

“Show Cali the babies!” Colton bellowed into my ear. “She doesn’t want to talk to you, Maya!”

I glared at Colton. “Of course I want to talk to Maya.”.

Maya turned the phone on the twins, who were lying on their backs on a play mat with toys dangling above them. I stared at them—Orion and Lyra.

“They’re so big!” I burst out. In a moment, I realized I was going to have to return the gifts I’d bought for them. From the looks of the babies, they’d already outgrown them. I hadn’t really thought about the growth rate of werewolf babies, but it was clearly crazy fast.

“Aren’t they amazing?” Colton said, leaning in to look at the screen. “Look at their eyes. Nothing like good genes, am I right? Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, if you know what I mean.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Shut up, Colton. How are you, Cali?” she asked.

“I’m fine, fine—but forget about me. How are you?” I asked. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you. You look amazing, and those babies are beautiful. You must be doing a great job with them. It’d be so wonderful for us all to see each other again.”

Maya gave me a strained smile. “Yeah… Sure.”

Her response was a little less enthusiastic than I would’ve liked—but it was Maya I was talking to, after all, and I needed to take that into account. Even if she actually *did* want to see me, she’d never let me know. I couldn’t believe I was actually talking to a female Alpha. That was amazing, and I couldn’t help but wonder what it was like. I glanced at Colton—if Maya was the Alpha, did that make Colton her Luna?

I was insanely curious, but I decided to keep that question to myself. For now.

Orion started to cry, and Maya looked over at him. She looked tired, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

“I have to go,” she said. “Colton, I haven’t had a moment’s rest since you left. You’d better get your ass back here soon.”

“Yeah, I know that’s not the only reason you want it back either,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I’m going to kill you,” she said.

Colton looked at me. “She always says that.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, it was great seeing you, Maya,” I said, jumping in quickly. “I’ll talk to you later. Bye, babies!” I waved and blew kisses to the little twins.

Colton took the phone from my hand. “Maya, hang on.” He stepped away from the table.

I watched him for a moment. For so long, he’d pretended that he wasn’t into Maya. He’d fooled no one but himself, but regardless, that seemed to be over now. Now, Colton seemed to be very much in love. He had his mate and his two beautiful babies—the whole package. It made me wonder if I was ever going to have that.

Was it even possible for *due destini* to find that kind of complete happiness? It seemed like its main goal was fucking me and my mates over time and time again. There were moments of happiness, yes, but then reality always came crashing back.

“Okay, bye,” Colton said. He ended the call and moved back toward the table. Grabbing his mug, he shot me a grin. “I never thought I’d be in a position to say this, but I miss my family. I know Maya needs me, but I’m not going anywhere until this mess with my idiot brother gets straightened out.” He drained the last of his mocha and slammed the mug down on the table. “Anyway, it was good to catch up—you’re a lot less annoying than I remember.”

I blinked. “Thank you?”

He nodded. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

Getting to his feet, Colton headed out, just as Greyson walked in.

“Have you seen Xavier?” he asked me.

I stood and picked up the empty mugs on the table to take to the dishwasher. “He and Ava went out for a walk or something. Fresh air was mentioned.”

Greyson nodded. “That sounds pretty good, actually. Do *you* want to go for a walk?”

“Really?” I asked, turning to look at him.

“Yeah, we could go check out the hot spring.”

I loaded the mugs into the dishwasher, then turned to face him.

“I do really hate just waiting around,” I said. “Yeah, let’s go.”

There wasn’t anything I could do until the hellebore team got back, and I did love spending time out of the house with Greyson, so I let him lead the way outside.

He slipped his hand into mine, and we walked across the thawing ground. There was a trail near the house that led right to the hot spring, and we followed it.

We were quiet for a while, and I took a deep breath, breathing in the cold morning air. There were birds out, and I listened to their songs.

Finally I looked over at Greyson. “Are you planning on talking to Xavier about whatever’s going on between him and Colton?”

“What?” he asked, looking over.

“You know what I’m talking about,” I said. “I was planning on asking Colton about it.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. “You should stay out of this, Cali.”

“Stay out of it?” I repeated, surprised. “What do you—”

“You should let them handle it themselves—whatever itis.”

“But, Greyson,” I started, “there’s obviously something going on, and I think—”

“If anything, I should be the one to handle it. I’m their older brother, after all.”

I bit my lip but let the conversation drop. There might’ve been some truth in what Greyson was saying—maybe it would be better to let Xavier and Colton work things out for themselves—but if they didn’t figure this out soon, there was a chance I’d have to ignore his advice and do something.

“I was thinking we could walk around toward where the rocks split—” Greyson started, but then he stopped speaking, and we both froze when we heard the unmistakable sound of people having sex.

Immediately, I froze. Only one thought came to mind, but it seemed almost too absurd to even think it… But I couldn’t stop myself.

*Holy shit, is that Xavier and Ava?*

**Episode 4749**

**Artemis**

My heart pounding, I looked up at Marius, wondering if he’d heard the Light Fae’s offer to escort us to my grandmother’s estate. If he *had* heard, he didn’t react—Marius was too far gone. His eyes were glazed over, and his mouth moved, speaking words I couldn’t hear. He was lost in the fever of his infection and blissfully unaware of the danger we were in. The haze must’ve been nice for him—but it made him completely useless to me.

Shit. Under my hands, I felt the heat of his fever all over his body. It was radiating from him. This wasn’t good. I should’ve taken his wound a lot more seriously, but to be fair, he’d been actively downplaying how bad it was. I’d been worried, of course, but he’d been pretty insistent. I looked down at his flushed face and felt anger mixing with the fear in my chest. If he *did* end up dying from his ass wound, it would be completely his fault.

Glancing at the Light Fae leader, I considered her offer, and what it could mean. My thoughts went to my grandmother, and I felt fear rising up in me again. I had no idea what Hera’s reaction was going to be to seeing me—we’d only met once, after all. Besides that, she didn’t even know I was her granddaughter, only that Cali was. Hera had asked me whether I was a Mauvais, but that didn’t mean she’d buy that her granddaughter—Orla’s first child—was alive, and me. She could assume it was a trick and order me to be killed on the spot.

But at this point, Hera wasn’t my most pressing concern. If I didn’t get Marius some help, and *soon*, he was going to die, so he was at the top of my priority list at the moment.

Going to Hera was a risk, but it was one I had to take, so I looked at the leader of the Light Fae.

“All right,” I said. “I accept your offer.”

The leader nodded and stepped toward us. She effortlessly lifted Marius, and one of her soldiers helped her carry him to the horses. They laid him across the back of a large grey mare. He was limp and nearly unresponsive as he was moved, and it freaked me out to see it.

“Just so you know,” I said, mounting the grey mare and positioning myself just behind him, “the Wrenthorns might not appreciate having a whole group of strangers showing up at their estate, unannounced.”

The leader nodded. “Yes, we understand that—but we wouldn’t dare impose. We only want to help.”

I let the leader’s lies wash over me. I had some serious doubts about the purity of their motives. Marius and I needed help, and this group had seen an opportunity for themselves to get into the good graces of a powerful family, and they’d taken advantage of it. But that wasn’t a surprise to me—it was simply how the world worked.

We started walking through the woods. I went slowly, keeping a close eye on Marius.

“Of course,” the leader began, striking a casual tone, “it wouldn’t *hurt* if you mentioned this kind turn of ours to the Wrenthorns, and put in a good word for us.”

“No,” I said slowly, feeling instantly vindicated. “I don’t suppose it would.”

“The Wrenthorns have a lot of power in these parts.” She smiled at me—but it was a cold, calculating smile, and I could read the quiet threat behind it. We’d entered an agreement, and we both knew it.

I smiled back at her. “Of course,” I said. “I’d be glad to help.”

We continued on in silence. The path was narrow, so it wasn’t hard to let my horse fall behind. When there was a safe amount of space between me and the last rider, I looked down at Marius.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

His face was ashen, but when he looked up at me, his eyes were focused. “Have you lost your *mind*, Ari?”

“What?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes. “We’re both bounty hunters, Ari, and you’re taking us to the *Wrenthorns*? We’re not exactly the type that they like to associate with, in case you’ve forgotten. They won’t hesitate to kill us. The last time I checked, the Wrenthorns aren’t exactly fond of Dark Fae.”

I studied his face, which was pale and pinched with pain. But he did seem lucid, and I was suspicious.

“So, which is it?” I asked him.

“Which is what?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Were you faking how bad the wound was, or are you just having a lucid moment?”

“What?”

“I’m only asking because this is the first intelligent thing you’ve said in a while. Not that I minded the lack of inane chatter, though the moaning was getting old.”

“Ari—”

“It’s not like I had a lot of choice back there,” I snapped. “I don’t know if you were paying attention, but things were getting a little tense. If I’d played that moment wrong, this crew could’ve gotten suspicious and killed us both, just to cover their asses. I did what I had to do, and I don’t want to hear any shit about it.”

The path we were on had turned rough and, though we were going slowly, the horse was bouncing us around enough that Marius was wincing with every movement. His breath caught, and I could see that he was starting to sweat.

“Well,” he said, his voice tight with pain, “you’d better think of something before we get to the Wrenthorn estate.”

I gritted my teeth and turned the horse sharply, making Marius groan in agony. I’d told him I didn’t want to hear any shit about my decision, and I’d meant it.

“You’re in no condition to doubt me,” I snapped. “Just leave it to me, okay? You go back to groaning and let me take care of everything else.”

“I really think—” he started, but then I saw the last rider look back at us, his expression curious, and I jabbed Marius in the side. “Start moaning!” I hissed.

He sighed and moaned, but he was a terrible actor. He sounded like a tortured goat, and the last rider frowned.

“Take it down a notch!” I whisper-shouted at Marius. “Make it sound real!”

He tried again, but still sounded absurd. The last rider slowed and fell back to ride next to me.

“Is he okay?” he asked, tipping his chin toward Marius.

I shrugged. “That’s… hard to say,” I said vaguely. “He looked like hell before I shot him, so I can’t tell if he’s worse or not, you know?”

Another guard dropped back, joining the conversation as the path widened.

“I hope this is one of those dead or alive deals,” the woman said, eyeing Marius dubiously. “It doesn’t look like he’s going to make it.”

I scowled. “Unfortunately, I’m supposed to bring him in alive.”

The leader of the group had joined us, and she shook her head. “I don’t know. He looks half-dead already.” She looked up at the rest of her squad. “Stop!”

The announcement sent a shockwave of fear through my body. Why was she calling for everyone to stop? Had she figured out who I really was and that I’d lied to her?

My heart started racing and I reached for my side, gripping the hilt of my dagger. I wanted to be ready to strike if I had to.

“I want to look at his wound,” the leader said, nodding at Marius.

“That’s really not necessary,” I said quickly. “I looked at it back in the clearing. I did what I could.”

“No, no, I’ll look. I have a knack for healing. My grandmother was a healer.” She pulled her horse to a stop and dropped to the ground.

I didn’t know what else to do, so I stopped the grey mare and sat still as a stone as the leader walked over. Marius was positioned in a way that made it easy for her to move the bloodied fabric of his pants aside and look at the wound on his ass.

She frowned. “This doesn’t look good.”

I’d been slowly pulling my dagger from its sheath, inch by inch, ready to attack if I had to. But the leader’s words stopped me.

“What doesn’t look good?” I asked.

She looked up. “This wound. There are signs of infection.”

“I treated it with—”

“I hope you weren’t counting on the money from this bounty, because I don’t think your man here is going to survive the journey to the Wrenthorns.”

I swallowed hard. That was exactly what I was worried about, but not for the reasons she thought. I schooled my face into a bored expression.

“Well,” I said with a shrug, “I guess I’ll just have to take that chance. Unless…”

The leader looked up at me. “Unless what?”

“Unless you know of an *actual* healer nearby.”

**Episode 4750**

**Ava**

The path from Big Mac’s house was steeper than I’d expected, but when we reached the hot springs, I immediately saw that it was worth it. The ground was solid rock—a strange, marbled brown—and the springs themselves were a shockingly bright aquamarine blue. The color of the water was so vibrant it almost looked unnatural.

But I wasn’t interested in the natural wonders. Since Xavier and I had been interrupted the night before, I’d been going out of my mind. It felt like my skin was on fire, and I was consumed by desire for Xavier. Desire wasn’t even the right word—*panting need* came closer. I was so horny for him that I couldn’t think straight.

I was just glad I’d been able to convince him to take a walk with me. We were still protected by Big Mac’s wards here at the springs, so we were safe—I’d checked with Big Mac before we left.

“Let’s stop here,” I said breathlessly, pulling Xavier to a stop next to one of the larger pools. It was six feet across and had jagged edges. The water steamed in the morning air, and I could feel the heat of it. But it was nothing compared to the heat coursing through me.

“What are you doing?” Xavier murmured as I pulled off my shirt.

I didn’t answer him. He’d realize what I was up to soon enough. I watched his gaze range down my body, taking me in as I unbuttoned my jeans and let them drop. I kicked them aside and stood in front of him, fully naked.

His blue eyes widened, and I could see the heat burning in them. *This* was the desire I’d been wanting to see—the same full-body, all-consuming want that I’d seen in his eyes the night before. I just couldn’t shake the feeling I’d experienced last night. Xavier had been so aggressive, so dominant. The way he’d ordered me to strip him, to spread my legs, to shut up… It had done something to me, and I was craving more. I loved this side of Xavier, where it felt like if he didn’t take me, he was going to *die*. I liked it because it was how I felt, too. All the time.

And if it hadn’t been for Colton walking in on us… Colton’s timing sucked. Actually, Colton just sucked in general.

The cool morning air wrapped around me, and I took a step toward Xavier, who was still staring at me, transfixed. I needed this—I needed to be close to him. Being away from him had been agony. I’d been so terrified that I might never see him again, and now that he was back, I wanted to show him how much I cared. More than that, I wanted to prove to myself that he was really here—really back with me.

Xavier reached for me, his hands warm on my skin. He slid his hands down my naked back, reaching down to grab my ass and jerk me close to him. I loved when he touched me like this—all *need.* There was no questioning what he felt for me at moments like this. He desired me.

He loved me.

He kissed me hard, his tongue pressing past my lips and plunging into my mouth. I let him in and wrapped a leg around him, arching against him, trying to find more pressure.

Still kissing me, he tightened his grip on my ass and lifted me, then lowered me onto the warm, wet rock at our feet. He slipped his hand down my stomach, then slid a finger along the seam of my sex, nearly driving me wild. I wanted to cry out, but his mouth held mine tight. He did that again, teasing me, then drove a finger into me. Another followed, and he circled my clit, making me vibrate with pleasure.

My hands were clumsy with want, but I managed to pull up his shirt. He broke the kiss just long enough to duck out from underneath it, then kissed me again as I threw it away. I fumbled with his belt, then the buttons of his jeans. His fingers felt incredible inside me, but I wanted more. I wanted him.

I loved him.

I broke away from the kiss, pushed his hand away. I eyed the hot spring and, without another thought, went into it. The hot water enveloped me, making every inch of me ache even more. Xavier stood at the edge and kept eye contact with me as he slowly stepped in. I watched him sink down into the water, putting his head under.

When he came up, it was right in front of me. He grabbed for me, pulling me back into him and his lips finding mine. Pushing him against the rocks on the side, I climbed on top of him. My whole body felt like it had been lit on fire, and I straddled him, ready for more. He’d just grabbed hold of my hips when the wind kicked up, and I caught a scent.

*Cali?*

An idea occurred to me, and I smiled down at Xavier, whose eyes were dark with want. I circled over his cock, teasing him. He groaned, and I could feel throbbing for me even in the hot water, but I didn’t let him enter me.

Not yet.

“You want this?” I whispered, goading him.

His eyes narrowed, and his grip on my hips tightened. He pulled me down, entering me with so much force, I gasped. He drove into me again and again.

“Say my name,” I panted, rocking against him.

“What?” he asked breathlessly.

I stilled my hips and looked down at him, staring into his eyes. “Say my name, Xavier.”

He held my gaze and started rocking into me, daring me to stop again. “You think *you* can give *me* orders?”

“Say it,” I pleaded, practically begging now. “I need to hear it. I need to hear you say it.”

“Say *my* name,” Xavier growled, grabbing a fistful of my hair and pulling hard as he pushed himself deeper into me. “Say it. You know you want this cock, so beg me for it.”

Another gust of wind blew past us, and he turned his nose into it, like he’d caught a scent.

“Xavier!” I panted, throwing my head back. “Xavier, *fuck me.*” I dug my nails into his shoulder, drawing him back to me.

It worked. His eyes came back to me, hungrily taking me in. He reached up to grab my breasts, cupping them in his hands.

I was getting closer. I could feel myself coming apart. Xavier’s hands on me tightened, and I knew he was close, too. I loved the feeling of us together, and I wanted everyone—Cali most definitely included—to know it.

“Oh fuck!” I cried out as I orgasmed. I bucked against Xavier, throwing my head back—just as Cali and Greyson came into view in the distance.

I looked down at Xavier, my heart beating fast in my chest. “Say it! Say my name!”

“Ava,” he panted. “*Fuck*, Ava.” He closed his eyes and gripped me tighter as he came.

He pulled me down to him, kissing me as I trembled in his arms. We were gasping for breath, and when I looked up again, it was right into Cali’s astonished eyes.

“Cali! You pervert!” I shrieked, feigning surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Still straddling Xavier, I wrapped my arm around my breasts as Cali took a step back.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” she sputtered. “We didn’t…”

Greyson put his arm around her and was just starting to lead her away when Xavier turned around.

“Cali?” he burst out, gawking at her.

He jumped, like he was about to get out of the water and go to her, but I was still straddling him, and I held on tight.

Greyson’s expression darkened as he looked at us.

“Let’s go,” Cali said, pulling on his hand.

Greyson turned the two of them around, and they walked away without another word.

I stared after them, amazed by how perfectly that had gone. If Cali had any lingering doubts about how close and connected Xavier and I had become, they had to be gone now. And it served her right—she kept trying to claw her way back to Xavier, but she should’ve learned by now that I was never going to let her take him from me. He was mine. He always had been, and he always would be.

Xavier grabbed my hips and moved me off him. He got out of the hot spring, snatched up his jeans, and pulled them on as he got to his feet again. “We should get back to the house.”

“Back to the house?” I asked, disappointed. “Why? We just got here.”

“I know, but we should go,” he said, looking around for his shirt.

I let my hands skim the surface of the water, considering his words. “I don’t want to go back. You’re my mate, Xavier. My Alpha. And we deserve some time together—alone.” I hesitated. “Unless you’re more worried about Cali.”

He looked at me in surprise. “Why would you say that?”

“The math isn’t hard, Xavier,” I said. Frustration and fear were building in my chest, making it hard to talk. “You were moaning my name a minute ago, but as soon as *she* showed up, you’re ready to leave.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “Hang on. You *knew*?”

“What?”

His eyes flashed. “You knew she was there, didn’t you?”

‘

**Episode 4751**

**Xavier**

I could see that Ava was doing everything in her power to remain calm as she answered me. “I knew that you would be upset about Cali seeing me and you together in the hot spring, but it was a small price to pay for making it clear to Cali that you’re with me now.”

I didn’t read one ounce of remorse in Ava’s eyes, and that only made my anger grow. I was so tired of these games—and so over Ava using our relationship to torture Cali. She’d really crossed the line this time.

“Yeah, and you didn’t give one single thought to what I might think about throwing our relationship—our *sex*—in her face like that?” I replied.

I was fucking pissed. And embarrassed. For all I knew, Cali thought that I was on board with Ava’s little display. That couldn’t be further from the truth, and I had to resist the urge to mind link with Cali right now to apologize and tell her that I never meant for her to see that. But I had to deal with Ava first. And if Ava got even an inkling that I was mind linking with Cali, there would be hell to pay.

Ava shrugged. “I was pretty sure I’d be able to smooth things over with you after the fact… and I can argue that I didn’t have the slightest idea that Cali and Greyson were going to show up. I’m not a witch or magician. I didn’t just conjure them up out of thin air. Are you really going to blame me because Cali and Greyson decided to take a walk?” She snorted a laugh. “Give me a break, Xavier.”

*She has a point. But she could have stopped, tapped me on the shoulder, something. It’s enough that Cali was exposed to it, but it’s not like I want my brother to see me fucking, either. It’s awkward all around.*

“Honestly, I can’t believe you’re even attempting to give me shit for this. How can you even suggest I’m to blame for this fluke? How could I have known? And look at you, you’re upset even now.” Ava shook her head and turned away from me. “This is such bullshit. It really is. I can’t even believe we’re having this conversation.”

I looked away from her, trying to choose my words carefully. I wasn’t in the mood to fight with Ava, but I wasn’t about to let her off the hook, either.

“All of that’s true enough, but that doesn’t mean that you didn’t take advantage of the situation. And no, you had no way of knowing that Cali and Greyson were coming to the hot spring, but you had to have known that Cali was right there. You were facing them. I wasn’t.”

“Oh? And why are you so sure of that? If you didn’t see them, how the hell do you know when I saw them? What, do you have eyes in the back of your head, now?”

“I don’t need eyes in the back of my head, Ava, because we’ve slept together enough times for me to know when you’re playing up your reactions. You’re usually loud, but not *that* loud.”

I cringed internally thinking about how much of a show Ava had put on. I could only imagine how Cali was feeling right now after coming across a display like that. If I’d gotten wind that Cali had walked into the hot springs, I would have cut things short—or at least tried to—and showed a bit of modesty.

“All I’m saying is that you weren’t being normal in that moment, and that makes me think that you knew. Telling me to say your name, all that screaming. What does that say about you?”

“You tell me,” Ava fired back. “I’m sure you have a few choice words to describe me—words that you would never use to describe your precious Cali. So, tell me, Xavier, what *does* that say about me?”

“I think it shows how insecure you are. And frankly, I find your insecurity to be unattractive. You treat me like a fire hydrant sometimes, Ava. You don’t need to piss all over me to mark your territory. You don’t need to flaunt what we have in front of Cali every single chance you get. I didn’t think that you felt like you needed to do that, but I guess I was wrong.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Ava hissed. “You’re not just my mate, and I’m not just your Luna. You’re my *boyfriend*!And that means that I have every right to be jealous or protective or whatever when it comes to others who don’t respect it. Not to mention all the times you and Cali have snuck away to suck face and suck other things, too. You have a lot of nerve calling me insecure when I have every reason to be, *if* we’re being honest.”

I couldn’t argue with her there. It wasn’t like Cali and I hadn’t crossed the line multiple times… only for Ava to forgive me for it multiple times. It had to be difficult for her to know that the *due destini* made it almost impossible for Cali and me to stay away from each other, but that still didn’t mean that I wanted to make love to Ava right in front of Cali’s face just to make Ava feel better. It was all just in bad taste.

“Tell me something, X. If Ravi or someone else tried to disrespect you by moving in on me, you’d do a hell of a lot worse than what just happened, wouldn’t you? You know what? I admit it. I saw Cali a few moments before you did, but everything I did, everything I said, every single sound of pleasure I made, that was all real, not just some kind of act to hurt Cali. Honestly, I don’t even think about Cali enough to care to go to all that trouble.”

I took that with a huge grain of salt. There wasn’t a sliver of a doubt in my mind that when it came to her claim over me, Ava cared a lot about Cali.

“Listen, I can believe that you didn’t plan what happened, but you definitely exploited our private moment at Cali’s expense. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you this, Ava, but I’m with *you.* Not Cali. I made that choice. And while it hasn’t always been a clean break between me and Cali—and how could it be?—there’s no need for you to go out of your way to hurt Cali. It’s just not right. It’s cruel and unnecessary.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “Xavier, why do you care so much about Cali’s feelings? Do you ever stop to consider what it feels like for me when you get all bent out of shape over your ex?”

*Once again she has a point, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to admit it. I’m too angry with her right now and still too concerned about Cali. Cali seeing us like that isn’t going to do anything but push her further into Greyson’s comforting arms, and I can’t take the thought of that.*

I had no idea what was in store for me after all of this shit with Adéluce was over—if it ever ended—but I’d be a fucking liar if I denied that my feelings for Cali would die with Adéluce.

“We’re going back to the house,” I said.

Ava eyed me coolly. “Why? So you can rush and try to go make up with Cali?”

I whirled on Ava, barely able to keep my anger in check. “I told you to leave Cali out of it!”

Ava gave me a look that could kill, but said nothing.

Eventually Ava got out of the water and pulled her clothes back on. We turned and made our way back to the house with an awkward, uncomfortable tension resting between us. I didn’t care. All I could think about was how everything I’d done to Cali since Adéluce made a mess of my life was to protect her, to keep Adéluce from harming her. And through it all, I’d always planned—always hoped—to come back to Cali.

I hadn’t been able to tell that to anyone. I’d said horrible things, did things to Cali that were cruel in order to protect the woman I loved—the woman I *still* loved.

The only thing that had changed was that I fell in love with Ava again along the way. I never wanted that to happen. Hell, I thought it would be impossible. But it was the reality of things and that meant my life was majorly complicated right now.

We reached the shack, and I wasn’t surprised to see Greyson waiting for me with a dark expression on his face.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Great. Here we go,” I grumbled.

Greyson glanced at Ava. “Go inside, Ava. I need to talk to Xavier alone. “

**Episode 4752**

I heard Greyson storm outside, and I knew exactly why. I could almost feel his anger hanging in the air, like a thick vapor.

Ever since we’d walked back from the hot spring—which had been the walk from hell, given how much I’d been freaking out on the inside—I’d done my best to downplay how upset I was after seeing Ava and Xavier hooking up right out in the open. It had gutted me—ripped the air right out of my lungs—and I was only just starting to catch my breath.

My mind had gone to such bad places. Even now, I couldn’t stop comparing Xavier’s groans to the ones he used to let out when he made love to me. Maybe it was all in my head, but it seemed like he was more into Ava, enjoying himself in ways he never had with me, having a better time running his hands over Ava’s perfect body instead of mine.

It was driving me crazy to think that he enjoyed making love to Ava more than me.

And how could I ignore the way Ava had relished it? She’d deliberately made direct eye contact with me while she was moaning like crazy and clawing at Xavier like a wild animal.

It had only been seconds at most, but it felt like I’d spent an hour watching their feverish love making, and I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get the image of their bodies writhing together in perfect sync out of my mind.

*Ugh. I can’t believe I’ll have to live with that image forever. How am I ever going to get over seeing that?*

I’d thought that seeing them make out at the summit was bad, but this was far worse. And it wasn’t like I didn’t know that Ava and Xavier were sleeping together—I’d known for a while—but it was one thing to know it, and quite another to see it happening right in front of my face. I never would’ve predicted that I’d be so boldly confronted with the proof of Xavier and Ava’s intense physical connection.

Maybe I didn’t have any right to point fingers or lay claim to Xavier, but this *was* Ava. She was the closest thing I had to a nemesis. Sure, Adéluce was bad, and Seluna had been awful, too, but that was different. I’d never admit it out loud, but watching someone trying to steal the man you loved was almost as bad as watching someone try to kill him.

*Also, I* killed *Seluna, and we’re going to get rid of Adéluce, too. Then they’ll be out of our lives. With Ava, I can’t just up and kill her. I have no real way to get rid of her, and that’s driving me crazy.*

There had been moments in the past when I’d *maybe* flaunted my relationship with Xavier in Ava’s face, but I’d never done it like that! Never to such a tasteless extent. The most I’d ever done was kiss Xavier in front of her—not have a full-blown sex session.

*Ava did it all on purpose. She wanted me to see. She even made Xavier shout her name when he came! She wanted to cut me deep, and she managed it. She knows just how to get under my skin.*

I groaned with frustration and covered my ears, as if that would erase the sound of Xavier’s voice being pulled out of his mouth by Ava’s toned body thrashing against him, her hips rolling, her beautiful hair falling perfectly between her breasts. They’d looked like an erotic painting.

*God! I have to get that image out of my brain! If I don’t, I won’t be able to concentrate on anything else!*

Though I’d tried to pretend that witnessing Xavier and Ava like that hadn’t bothered me to such an extent, Greyson hadn’t made any attempts to hide how affected he was. It wasn’t fair to him, being caught in the middle like this. Ava had gone out of the way to hurt me, and in doing so, she’d inadvertently hurt Greyson, too.

*Not that she cares.*

I started to go outside to try to prevent a fight between Greyson and Xavier, since this was yet another point of contention between them, with me caught in the middle. But before I could reach the front door, Ava came walking in, her hair still wet and twisted over her shoulder.

I couldn’t help but shudder as images and sounds from the hot spring came back to haunt me.

Ava raised a brow in my direction, barely acknowledging me before she swept past me and headed for the stairs.

Again, I started toward the front door, not wanting to even be under the same roof as Ava right now.

Just before my hand touched the knob, Ava called, “I wouldn’t do that. Greyson said he wanted to talk to Xavier alone. That means without you.”

She turned and headed up the stairs, and I watched her go, my magic boiling.

*It would be so easy to blast her. Just give her a little taste of the pain I experienced when I saw her banging* my *mate. Bet she wouldn’t be so smug, then.*

But I knew that I couldn’t do that—I wouldn’t. At least not yet.

I turned back to the door and heard the sound of Xavier and Greyson’s voices. I was still considering going out there. It wasn’t like I had to listen to Ava. I just wanted to stop any bad blood from spilling over.

*Maybe Greyson* does *want to talk to Xavier alone, but who is Ava to tell me what to do? If there’s any trouble between Greyson and Xavier right now, it’s due to Ava and her never-ending machinations.*

Angry, I turned and stomped back to the foot of the stairs.

“Hey, Ava, stop!” I yelled up at Ava.

Ava turned around slowly to look at me, an annoyingly bemused expression on her face. “Once they’re done with their little brothers chat, you should take Greyson to the hot spring, now that X and I have heated it up for you.”

*Is she serious?*

I couldn’t take it anymore. I marched up the stairs, unsure of what I was going to do when I reached Ava. I just knew that I refused to be intimidated and pushed around for a second longer.

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded. I did my best to keep my voice tremor-free, but I wasn’t sure if I was doing that good a job.

Ava seemed surprised. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you asking why I’m fucking Xavier? Because when two people really love each other—”

“Stop with the bullshit,” I snapped. “You’re not stupid, and despite what you might think about me, I’m not either. You know exactly what I’m talking about. You’re cunning, and you’re doing everything you can to hurt everyone around you just so you can feel better about yourself and your relationship with Xavier.”

I went up one more step so that I was standing level with Ava. I didn’t want her to have a single advantage over me.

“The truth is, Ava,” I continued, “you don’t give a damn about anyone but yourself.”

Ava didn’t seem fazed at all. “Think what you want—I don’t care, because I know that’s not true. The only person I don’t care about is you. And while we’re discussing proper behavior, look who’s calling the kettle black! You’re all freaked out because you saw Xavier with me, his mate and Luna. Why should you care? I bet it made Greyson feel amazing to see you agonizing over another man right in front of his face.”

“Leave Greyson out of it,” I warned her.

“What? I’m just pointing out the obvious.”

I gritted my teeth, fighting to contain my anger—and my guilt. No matter how much I didn’t want to admit it, Ava was right.

*My reaction did hurt Greyson. But none of this would’ve happened if Ava weren’t such a manipulative bitch!*

“You got what you wanted.” I paused, taking a moment to get my voice under control. I didn’t want to let Ava know that she’d shaken me up, even a little. “Xavier’s yours. Why not leave it at that? Are you so insecure that you can’t even stop to enjoy what you fought so hard to get?”

Ava’s cool façade broke for just a split second. “You’re right, Cali. I have no reason to be insecure. You can steal kisses and whatever else from Xavier, but at the end of the day, no matter what scraps you collect from him, your ‘relationship’ pales in comparison to what I have with Xavier. He’s chosen to be with me. He *loves* me. I came back from the dead, and he still loves me. Maybe you should try it.” She stepped close, and her eyes flashed wolf gold. “I’d be happy to help you with that.”

**Episode 4753**

**Lola**

Gabriel and I just weren’t seeing eye to eye about where to start looking for the hellebore. Our strong personalities were clashing in a big way, but I was determined to win.

“We should split up and explore every nook and cranny with the slightest resemblance to the places Big Mac mentioned,” Gabriel said. “I’m sure we’ll find plenty of ravines with pine trees by noon.”

“No. That’s way too aimless. If we just keep wandering around, we’ll be out here all day. We need to be more methodical,” I said. “Why don’t we all put our heads together and figure out where all the ravines are, and then narrow them down to the ones that have pine trees—”

“Who the hell knows that?” Gabriel interrupted. “And how would we compile all that information? Are you about to break out charts and graphs?” He shook his head. “What a waste of time. If we had all day, then maybe that would work. But we don’t.”

I glared at him. “Proper planning and strategy are not a waste of time, and I find it a little surprising that you think they are. But I guess it figures that you’d want to strike out without a plan. You *are* Xavier’s friend, so that must mean you’re not too sharp.”

“Oh no, don’t go there—I’ve seen Greyson do some pretty dumb shit,” Gabriel retorted. “And he’s the leader you follow, by the way, so I wouldn’t judge, if I were you. We all have our moments.”

“Yeah, and you used to follow Xavier around. It’s a wonder you two ever managed to track anyone down when you were mercenaries,” I grumbled.

“Not to state the obvious, but if Xavier and I were as bad at our jobs as you’re trying to make it seem, Adéluce wouldn’t be after us right now. Xavier tracked her down pretty damn well,” Gabriel said. “And now he’s paying the price.”

“Okay, stop it, both of you! Instead of arguing, why not just start looking?” Mikah cut in. “Sitting around bickering isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“He’s right,” Jay added. “Big Mac offered lots of suggestions, so we should try to follow them… methodically.”

He was clearly trying to put Gabriel and me on common ground, and I gave him a death glare. He should’ve been on my side in this. Instead, he was being all diplomatic.

“Let’s just start with the closest spot—the ravine near Three Devils Point,” Mikah said. “That’s the one place I know that matches Big Mac’s description for sure.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. It wasn’t that I was above considering other people’s opinions—it was just that mine were usually the right ones.

“Sounds good to me,” Gabriel said brightly.

We shifted, then headed off in that direction. Mikah was perched on Gabriel’s back, and we all fell into step, moving quickly. I tended to run a bit faster than the others because of my vampire blood, so I took the lead, following Mikah’s directions as he shouted them from Gabriel’s back.

*Remember that we have to find the hellebore before noon and not pick it* until *noon*,I mind linked to the group.

I didn’t even want to think about how screwed we’d be if we missed the small window to pick the flowers and had to come back tomorrow to try again. Xavier didn’t have time for us to mess this up.

*Roger that. We have plenty of time*,Gabriel replied. *Relax. Everything’s under control.*

*It better be*,I replied.

There was a bit of silence before Gabriel spoke to me again. *So, what do you think about Xavier and Ava?*

*What do* I *think? Are you seriously asking me that? I thought it was obvious. I don’t trust Ava, and I never will. But at the same time, I’m not about to forgive Xavier for what he did to Cali. As far as I’m concerned, the best thing would be for Xavier to be alone. He’s toxic—not just to himself, but to the people he claims to love.*

It was sad to think that I used to call Xavier a close friend, and now I could barely stand to look at him. It was crazy how quickly things could change.

*Wow, that’s a little harsh*,Gabriel said. *Sentencing a man to spend the rest of his life alone for what amounts to a bad breakup?*

*Okay*, I conceded. *Maybe I* am *being a little harsh—but it was way more than a bad breakup. You haven’t seen the full extent of what Xavier’s done to Cali. And not just Cali. The stunts he’s pulled have affected Greyson, me—everyone in the pack house. Why can’t Xavier see that?*

*But we won’t know everything until we break whatever hold that vampire-witch has over Xavier. He might surprise us*, Jay interjected.

I paused, mulling that over. *That might be true, but I’m still not going to be quick to forgive him. Not after he hurt Cali so badly. And not if he doesn’t apologize. Plus, like, did he have to run right into Ava’s arms the way he did? Abandon the Redwoods to become Samara Alpha? And what about taking it a step further and making Ava his Luna? Do either of you have any idea how badly that hurt Cali?*

*I’m confused. Aren’t you and Colton responsible for Xavier and Cali meeting in the first place?* Gabriel asked.

I groaned internally. *Yes, and it’s possibly the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.*

*Well, maybe you should learn from that mistake and stop trying to be a matchmaker*,Jay said. *Though personally, I don’t think it was a mistake. And they probably would’ve met anyway. They’re mates. You didn’t make* that *happen.*

Jay always seemed to be the voice of reason, and even though it drove me crazy sometimes, I really liked that about him. He balanced me out perfectly.

*Anyway, back to the Luna thing*, I said. *Not every mate has to be—or even should be—a Luna. Did Xavier seriously have to take things that far and make Ava his? Even if he does go back to Cali one day, he can’t just un-Luna Ava.*

*That’s not true*, Gabriel said. *You most definitely can un-Luna someone.*

*Really?* Jay and I asked in unison.

*Sure. An Alpha in a pack I used to know did it—before I was born, though, and the reasons behind it are a little hazy. And I’ve heard of it happening in other packs, too. It’s not even all that unusual. I think the people who do it think of it as something a divorce. Or they think of being a Luna as like holding any other title, which can be lost or stripped away.*

I took a moment to think that through. I wondered if I should mention it to Cali. My friend was heartbroken over Xavier, but would telling her that Xavier could break his Luna link with Ava make Cali more determined to get back together with Xavier? Did I really want that to happen?

And it wasn’t like Ava would take something like that lying down. Then again, she was pretty good at taking *Xavier* lying down…

“Wait, isn’t that the hellebore?” Mikah asked, pointing.

Everyone turned to look. Growing outward from the wall of the ravine was a small growth of flowering plants. We all shifted back and moved closer to get a better look.

“I’m no expert, but it sure looks like what Big Mac showed us with her magic hologram,” I said.

Without delay, we all climbed down into the ravine. Gabriel reached for one of the flowers, and I slapped his hand away.

“Wait,” I said. “We have to check the time first!”

Mikah glanced at his phone. “We have a couple of minutes. I set an alarm to notify us five seconds before noon.”

While we waited, Jay pulled me aside. “I really don’t think you should get too mixed up in what happens between Xavier and Cali. Let them figure it out. Don’t force anything.”

I sighed, barely resisting the urge to argue. “I’ll try, but it won’t be easy. Especially if Xavier does something stupid to hurt Cali again.”

*And he will*, I thought to myself*. That’s just what Xavier does, these days—he makes stupid decisions that fuck Cali over, along with everyone else he still claims to care about*.

The blare of the alarm startled us, and we rushed back over to the flowers. We counted down in unison, and then Mikah quickly picked several of the flowering buds. He dropped them into the silk sack that Big Mac had given us, and we all peered inside to stare at the pretty flowers before Gabriel spoke.

“Let’s get these back as fast as we can. Once we break the link between Xavier and Adéluce, we’ll kill that bitch of a witch and finally find out what Xavier is and isn’t responsible for,” Gabriel said.

“Can’t wait,” I said dryly.

But as soon as we started climbing out of the ravine, Adéluce appeared at the top. “I’ll give you all an A for effort, but you won’t be making it back.”

**Episode 4754**

**Greyson**

I was patiently waiting for an explanation from Xavier, but whatever it was, I knew I wasn’t going to like it. Xavier was just as tense as I was, and I was worried that a single ill-conceived word would be enough set us both off like a powder keg. But even so, he needed to answer for his behavior.

“I’m waiting, Xavier,” I said tightly. “Why did you and Ava have to do that? There are plenty of places for you two to be alone. Why would you choose to do it there, in public? Or was it on purpose, so that just anyone could stumble upon you? Normally, I couldn’t care less about what kinks you and Ava share, but I do care when they hurt Cali.”

Xavier glared at me. “You really think I set out to hurt Cali?” His lip twitched, and he opened his mouth like he was about to say something else, but then he thought better of it.

*Seems like he might be trying to keep this from spiraling into a fight, too. Surprising.*

“Don’t you dare stand there and act like the idea is totally farfetched—not when you have a history of hurting Cali,” I pointed out. “Everyone’s here to help you right now. Couldn’t you, I don’t know, find a better use for your time than hooking up with Ava in a hot spring?”

Xavier laughed. “You really have a lot of nerve. Did I say anything when you hooked up with Cali last night?”

That caught me off-guard, but I tried not to show it. If I displayed even a sliver of weakness, my brother wouldn’t waste any time exploiting it.

*How could Xavier possibly know that Cali and I had sex last night? There’s no way Cali told him.*

Xavier shook his head, looking quite pleased with himself. “That’s what I thought. You’re so full of shit, Greyson, and the funny part is that you don’t even realize it. You’re out here acting all high and mighty, confronting me like you’re some saint when that couldn’t be further from the truth. It’s such a double standard! It’s okay for you to hook up whenever and wherever you want, but when Ava and I do it, it’s a big deal. You’re such a hypocrite, Greyson. Fuck you.”

“Look, I don’t want this to turn into a screaming match,” I said. Xavier was getting heated, and I wasn’t far behind him. “But there’s a fucking difference between me and my mate, my girlfriend, having sex alone in a bedroom and what you just did out there. I’m telling you this because I believe you still have feelings for Cali. This whole rekindling thing between the two of you hasn’t exactly been happening in a vacuum.”

*Quite the contrary. Your little moments have been happening right in everyone’s faces*,I thought to myself. I was still trying not to be bitter about it, but it was difficult when Xavier was behaving like the world was his own personal bedroom.

“Do you even hear yourself?” Xavier said with a bitter laugh. “You’re trying *really* hard to make me the villain here, but I’m not going to make it easy for you.”

“I don’t need to make you into the villain, Xavier,” I said. “You do a damn good job of that yourself.”

He scoffed. “Of course you’d say that. Whatever fits your narrative, right? And anyway, how the hell was I supposed to know that you and Cali were coming to the hot spring? Huh?”

“Maybe your heightened werewolf senses? Though you don’t seem to be using any sense lately, do you?” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “Despite what you think, the world doesn’t revolve around you. I don’t sit around keeping track of your every move. We told you we were going outside. You could’ve stayed inside, but you didn’t. If anything, it’s almost as if you *wanted* to find us, so that Cali would come running to you. If anything, this helps your pathetic cause.”

I wasn’t about to take the bait. Xavier wanted a fight, but all I could think about was how hurt Cali would be to see the two of us ripping into each other.

“Nothing about my love for Cali or her love for me is pathetic,” I said coolly. “Far from it. And just so you know, this isn’t just about Ava. You’ve managed to piss Colton off, too.”

Xavier chuckled and shook his head. “Oh, and now you’re fighting for Colton’s feelings, too? Against big bad Xavier, who dared to fuck in a hot spring?” He rolled his eyes. “That’s rich. Let me tell you something—even on our worst day, I’ll always be closer to Colton than you will ever be. Remember, Colton and I grew up together and formed a bond that won’t be broken by your whining. No matter how loud it gets.”

That stung, but I bit back every instinctive response. I was still trying to do everything I could to keep this from turning into a brawl.

“I suppose there’s some truth to that,” I said, “but that doesn’t excuse the way you’re treating anyone. Colton, Cali, or your former pack.”

Xavier shook his head and started for the door. “I’m going to take a shower. You can bitch and moan out here by yourself, if you want. The trees certainly give more of a fuck than I do.”

I cut him off before he could reach the door and grabbed him by the arm. “We’re not done.”

Xavier grabbed me back, and before I knew it, we were grappling and slamming each other into the side of the house. After a long struggle, I finally managed to pin Xavier against the wall.

“What do you want from me?” Xavier screamed in my face. And then, in a quick move that I definitely didn’t see coming, he got the upper hand and slammed me back against the side of the house and held me there.

“I want the truth,” I burst out. “I need to know where we stand. Are you in love with Cali?”

Xavier grinned. “Does the answer to that question frighten you?”

I shoved him off, and we stared each other down.

His words echoed in my head, no matter how much I tried to dismiss them.

*Is he right? Am I scared to hear what he has to say?*

It wasn’t fear, exactly, and I was pretty sure I already knew the answer. Maybe it was dread that I felt. Maybe I was hoping that he would say no, so that I could take that back to Cali and see if it changed anything for her. But I knew that I wouldn’t be lucky enough to get that kind of admission tonight of all nights. Xavier was having too much fun keeping me in suspense.

“Why don’t you actually answer the question instead of deflecting and trying to turn things around?” I shot back.

“Why does my answer matter?” Xavier asked. “I’m sure you’ve already formed an opinion about it.”

I clenched my jaw and balled my hands into fists. I was really starting to get fed up. “Let me spell it out for you, little brother. What I *think* is that it’s not that you love Cali—it’s that you don’t want *me* to be with her. It’s always bothered you that she could love me, that she was always going to choose me, and these actions are your cruel way of dealing with it.”

Xavier laughed. “Wow. You really are delirious, aren’t you? If that’s true and I’m so *worried* about Cali choosing you, then tell me—why hasn’t she already done it? I’m with Ava, have been for a while now. There’s nothing standing in Cali’s way. And yet she still hasn’t made that choice.” Xavier stepped close. “And we both know why, don’t we?”

“Because you took her choice away from her the moment you walked away,” I snarled.

The door flew open before Xavier could reply, and a big part of me was grateful for that. I didn’t want to hear his comeback. I was afraid that it would kick off a fight that I wasn’t prepared to have with him—not right now.

Colton came walking out and looked between the two of us. “Why wasn’t I invited to the Evers family reunion? I feel left out.”

With his eyes still on mine, Xavier said, “You didn’t miss a damn thing. Trust me. Just a bunch of Greyson’s whining and lecturing.”

Colton winced. “Yeah, you’re right—I didn’t miss anything.”

I shot Colton a look before I turned my gaze back on Xavier. “I’m going to say this one more time, and then I’m done with you. Stop playing games with Cali, Xavier. I’m warning you.”

“I’m not playing games with her. I would never do that!” Xavier shot back. “And you should be careful handing out warnings, or you might get one of your own.”

We stared each other down for a few beats before I turned and went for the door. My phone buzzed in my pocket just before I went inside. I pulled it out and found a text from Mikah.

*We need help. Adéluce*.

**Episode 4755**

My stare down with Ava was broken when Greyson burst into the house, shouting, “I need everyone in here, now! It’s an emergency!”

Ava rolled her eyes. “So much drama. Don’t you people ever get tired?”

Ignoring her, I turned and made my way back downstairs. Xavier was just coming through the door to stand next to Greyson, and I was relieved to see that neither of them looked like they’d been in a fight.

*No blood. At least for now. That has to count for something.*

Colton came in to join everyone else as Marissa, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac came walking in.

“What’s the emergency now?” Big Mac shouted. She rounded on Greyson. “And where the hell do you get off, calling meetings in *my* house? How the hell am I supposed to craft this spell you’re all yelling and banging around?”

“I’m sorry, Big Mac, but this is important,” Greyson said. “I got a text from Mikah. Adéluce found them. They’re in trouble.”

“Of course they are,” Big Mac said with a shake of her head. “Adéluce is nothing if not persistent.”

“Where are they?” I asked. “We need to get to them right now!”

I was already panicking. If Adéluce had managed to keep Xavier under her thumb for so long without him even being able to tell anyone about it, then I could only imagine how she was flexing her muscles against the others right now.

Greyson frowned in frustration. “Mikah was able to send me their location. I think I know where they are. It’s by a ravine, not too far from here. I’m going to go there now.”

Xavier arched an eyebrow at him. “I wouldn’t be so eager if I were you. You need to be a little more careful. This could be a trap.” He turned to Big Mac. “Why don’t you just blip over there and see what’s going on?”

Big Mac scowled. “Are you serious? In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m still in the middle of doing a bunch of *other* shit for you! Or did you forget, because you have so many other demands piling up? I can’t just drop what I’m doing—unless you want all the work I’ve been doing all day to go to waste!”

Xavier took a step back. “My mistake,” he grumbled. “I was just thinking it might be the easiest option.”

“I doubt you were thinking at all,” Big Mac shot back.

“MacKenzie, take it easy,” Mrs. Smith said, stroking her arm—which seemed to calm Big Mac down, though her face was still creased with annoyance.

“If you’re going, I’m going,” I said to Greyson, taking a step toward him. “You’re going to need all the help that you can get, and I’m happy to lend a hand.”

“No, Cali,” he said. “I’m perfectly capable checking this out alone. Xavier’s right—it could be a trap.”

“Exactly,” Xavier said. “And Greyson’s a big boy—he can handle it on his own. You should stay here. We shouldn’t send anyone else into Adéluce’s circus if we don’t have to.”

“But if it *is* a trap, I can just blast Adéluce with my magic,” I countered. “She doesn’t have anything over me anymore, and now I know that I can hurt her. We need the hellebore, and we can’t let Adéluce stop us. And our friends are in trouble! I can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

“Oh brother,” Ava grumbled behind me. I didn’t even give her the satisfaction of turning around.

“You’re right, Cali,” Greyson said, also clearly ignoring Ava. “If it’s a trap, you *would* be a great asset against Adéluce. You can come. But you have to stay close—and don’t do anything rash. We need to be careful.”

“I’m going, too,” Xavier said. “None of you would be in this mess if it weren’t for me.”

“Of course,” Ava muttered. “Cali rushes into danger, and Xavier has to dive in after her, every single time.”

*Please. Can she never get over herself?* Even I knew not everything was about me, but not according to Ava. Xavier didn’t have any visible reaction to that. Maybe he was just as tired of her antics as I was.

*Though their little interlude in the hot spring didn’t make it seem like he’s tired of her at all.*

I pushed that thought away. This wasn’t the time.

“No, Xavier,” Big Mac said. “It’s way too dangerous. You’d be walking right into Adéluce’s crosshairs. And why? To prove yourself? You’re the one who *really* needs to keep a wide berth from her. She’s got it bad for you, and at this point, you’ll only endanger yourself by going up against her.”

“MacKenzie’s right, Xavier. You’re safer here,” Mrs. Smith said. “You’ve already spent more than enough time fighting Adéluce, I’m sure.”

Xavier didn’t argue, which was surprising.

“And I’ll stay here with you,” Ava added. “And, of course, I’ll be here to help Big Mac if she needs anything.”

I rolled my eyes.

*Yet another desperate move from Ava. Doesn’t she ever get tired of being a hypocrite? She chases after Xavier and tries to be his savior and protector all the time, but when I try to protect him, I’m a slut or a horrible, selfish bitch. Well, which is it? Pot calling the kettle black, much?*

While it had been interesting to hear Ava admit how she *really* felt about me, I wasn’t all that worried about the way she’d threatened to kill me during our little row on the stairs. Ava wouldn’t dare try, and I knew that. Xavier would never forgive her, and Ava wouldn’t risk landing permanently on his bad side… Though it wasn’t lost on me that he’d forgiven her for killing his own mother.

*And it’s not like I haven’t fantasized about blasting Ava into vapor more times than I can count. At least now I know that we’re on the same page. We hate each other—maybe more than ever.*

“I’m coming, too,” Colton said. “I’d like to see my brother’s tormentor again. Maybe stake her if I get the chance.”

I glanced at Colton. “You *do* remember that if you kill her, you’ll kill your brother too?”

Colton winced. “Oh yeah. I forgot. Sorry, bro.”

“Definitely not the smartest of the bunch,” Ava muttered.

I rounded on her. “Will you shut up? No one needs all your snide comments.”

“You shut up,” Ava said in a bored voice. “If you even know how.”

I balled up a fist and was about to get in her face again when Greyson cleared his throat, interrupting us.

“Come on, let’s go. We’ve already wasted enough time.” As he led the way to the door, he stopped in front of Xavier. “Tell me again how I don’t care about you?”

Xavier said nothing, but I saw his jaw tense.

I looked between the two men, not sure what to make of Greyson’s comment. It must’ve been related to whatever they’d been arguing about out on the porch.

Outside, the werewolves wasted no time undressing and shifting. I climbed onto Greyson’s back, and he checked to make sure I was holding tight before he took off into the woods at top speed.

Colton came racing up beside us, and I looked between the two brothers, noticing the similarities between their wolves. I wished that all three of them could get along and stop fighting, but now wasn’t the time to focus on that. I was too worried about what might’ve happened to the others in the time since Mikah had texted.

*How long ago did you hear from Mikah?* I asked Greyson.

*About ten minutes ago*, he said.

Ten minutes didn’t seem like all that long, but I knew that when it came to Adéluce, it was more than enough time. And I also knew that the vampire-witch probably had a good idea of what we were trying to do with Xavier.

*And that means that this could very well be a trap, just like Xavier thinks. All the more reason why it’s good that he didn’t come with us. She’s clearly watching us. As long as we keep him away from her, she’s not getting her main target.*

*Found their scent*, Greyson mind linked, a short while later.

I braced myself as Greyson picked up the pace.

We reached the ravine in no time and immediately spotted Adéluce, surrounded by three snarling werewolves—Lola, Jay, and Gabriel. Mikah was standing a little off to the side holding a silk bag.

Lola lunged toward Adéluce and the witch immediately blasted her back, causing Lola to shift back to human. Lola cried out in pain, clutching her shoulder.

“Lola!” I called out. I couldn’t stand to see my friend attacked and in pain like that.

Without another thought, I jumped off Greyson’s back and yelled at Adéluce. “Hey, bitch! I destroyed your ring, diamond and all. Bet that pisses you off, huh? So what are you going to do about it?”

**Episode 4756**

**Greyson**

“Cali, no!” I shouted.

It was one thing for her to want to protect her friends, but taking on Adéluce directly? That was DOA, as far as I was concerned. This wasn’t the time to underestimate Adéluce’s power. We’d all done that before, and it was what had gotten us into this predicament in the first place. I wasn’t about to let Cali throw herself right into Adéluce’s crosshairs.

But Cali wasn’t listening, and she didn’t stop, and Adéluce wasted no time turning her attention right on her.

The hate on the vampire-witch’s face was visceral. It was obvious that she would kill Cali, given the chance—and she was wasting no time trying. Adéluce slowly raised her hand, clearly getting ready to send some kind of magic toward Cali, but Cali surprised me—and probably everyone else—by striking first, lashing out with a blast of magic that knocked Adéluce back and sent her skidding across the ground.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough, and Adéluce recovered quickly. The vampire-witch moved so fast that I didn’t see her until she already had Cali in her grasp.

“I’ve been looking forward to going toe to toe with you again, Caliana!” Adéluce hissed, tightening her hold on Cali and backing away from the rest of us.

I bolted into a sprint and lunged at the vampire-witch, knocking Cali free before she could hurt her. Adéluce and I tumbled to the ground in a tangle of limbs. I fought to get the upper hand before she found an opening to take me out.

I wanted nothing more than to end this—to tear out Adéluce’s throat and be done with this whole thing so that Cali and I could get on with our lives and Xavier could get on with his—but that wasn’t an option. I couldn’t kill her without killing Xavier, but I *could* hurt her, and I was determined to try.

*I have to act fast. I know that it might’ve been safer if I’d stayed back at Big Mac’s house and sent someone else in my place—and that coming here was a big risk, since Adéluce was able to manipulate my mind before—but I’m not about to let Cali fight someone so dangerous without me.*

Rather than engage in a physical fight with me—which I was sure I would win—Adéluce blipped out of my reach and reappeared a few feet away, only to be plowed into by Colton, who threw her against a tree. She cried out in pain as Colton rounded on her, growling, baring his fangs like he was about to go in for the kill.

I reached out to him via mind link. *Remember, Colton, we can’t kill her. Beat the fuck out of her, sure, but don’t make it fatal, or Xavier could die. We didn’t come all this way to mess up now.*

Colton snapped his head my way and was about to respond when Adéluce reared back, bared her fangs, and clamped down on Colton’s neck. She sank her fangs in deep, jerking her head like she was trying to tear out a chunk of his flesh.

Colton yelped and bucked, throwing Adéluce off. She went flying, sending his blood splattering across the ground. Colton stumbled back and sagged against a tree, waiting to heal.

I did a quick check to make sure that Cali was okay, then I heard the guttural rumble of Jay’s growl. He was standing over Lola, who still looked mostly out of it from Adéluce’s attack. Lola was still in human form, and it was obvious that she was in excruciating pain.

Jay looked from Lola to Adéluce, who was regaining her bearings. She’d clipped the side of a tree after Colton had thrown her off. I saw the look on Jay’s face—pure hate and violence—and obviously Cali saw it, too.

“You have to stop Jay!” Cali shouted at me. “He’s going to murder Adéluce!”

I leapt toward Jay, tackling him to the ground and pinning him there. *I know you want to, but you can’t kill her*,I told him. *We have to keep our cool right now, no matter how hard it is.*

Jay was growling and snarling like crazy. It was almost like he couldn’t even see me.

*She tried to kill Lola! She has to pay for that*,he finally said. *She has to be stopped. She’s kicking the shit out of us. What if she ends up killing one of us?*

*We’re not going to let that happen*, I said. *And we’re putting up one hell of a fight, Jay. Believe me, she isn’t going to make it out of this alive, but we can’t kill her until we know that Xavier will survive her death.* *We just have to bide our time for a little longer. Don’t worry, she’ll get what’s coming to her when the time is right.*

Lola came crawling over, the color finally returning to her face. “Don’t worry, Jay—I’m okay,” she said. “Takes a lot more than that to knock me out of the fight.”

I released Jay, just as Adéluce turned her magic on Gabriel, who jumped out of the way of her blast. He skidded across the ground, lost his footing, and went tumbling down into the ravine.

“Gabe!” Mikah shouted. He jumped into action, sprinting to the edge, grabbing Gabriel by the paw, and pulling him up to safety.

“Leave my friends alone!” Cali shouted, charging toward Adéluce and summoning her sword.

A flash of real fear crossed Adéluce’s face. I was proud that my mate was able to bring that kind of fear to the vampire-witch’s eyes—but that didn’t mean Adéluce wasn’t ready for her. She shoved her left, gloved hand behind her back and then gestured with her right, and Cali froze in place.

We all rushed Adéluce at once, but, with another flick of her good hand, she blasted us back and then focused on Cali.

Adéluce had thrown us all a good distance away, and as soon as I regained my footing, I raced toward the vampire-witch as fast as I could. I picked up speed when I saw Adéluce pull a jagged dagger from her waistband and hold it out in front of her.

“Nice little trick, slicing off my hand like that,” she told Cali. “I’m sure Xavier would be proud to see you fighting for him like this. But now it’s time for you to pay—with interest. You took one of my hands? I’m taking both of yours. We’ll see how well your Fae magic works then!”

Adéluce glided toward Cali, the dagger raised. Cali’s eyes were wide with fear, and I could see the stress on her face as she struggled against the spell keeping her paralyzed and helpless.

I was finally close enough to attack, and I growled as I lunged for Adéluce. I hit her hard, my teeth sank into her arm, and we both went sprawling. Suddenly, as I tried to lunge again, my bones started to crack against their will. I was shifting back to human—the witch was doing this. I fought against it, clinging to my wolf, but I had to act regardless.

I jumped at her, my human arms grabbing ahold of hers. I jerked Adéluce’s arm violently, trying to force her to drop the dagger. She screamed in pain as her bitter blood flowed into my mouth and splattered onto the ground, but she held on to the dagger.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Adéluce rearing back, her fangs bared.

*Shit. She’s about to bite me. Colton took one of her bites only a minute ago, and it took him a while to recover. If Adéluce bites me like that, she could put me out of commission and go after Cali again. I can’t let that happen.*

Then something barreled into both of us, and seconds later, an anguished howl filled the air. I jumped up and turned to see Adéluce stabbing Colton over and over in the chest with her dagger as he pinned her to the ground.

With another loud, anguished howl, Colton stumbled back and collapsed. Cali and I both rushed to his side.

“He’s bleeding really badly!” Cali panted, leaning close to examine the slash marks in his chest. “We have to get him out of here!”

“She’s getting away!” Lola screamed .

I twisted around to see Adéluce speeding toward the woods. I was torn between helping my brother and stopping Adéluce, who was still clutching at her bleeding arm. I was happy to see that I’d done some actual damage, but it wasn’t enough to stop her.

The vampire-witch turned to Mikah and gestured at him with her good hand. A huge bolt of fire shot out and struck Gabriel and Mikah—and the silk bag that Mikah was holding burst into flames. *Fuck, that’s the bag Big Mac gave them to put the hellebore in.*

“Good luck finding more of those,” Adéluce hissed, and then she blipped away.

**Episode 4757**

As soon as I saw Gabriel’s fur ignite, I rushed toward him, remembering what I’d learned in grade school—stop, drop, and roll. Only I didn’t have quite enough oomph to get the job done, and I only managed to bounce off him.

Jay took over and tackled Gabriel to the ground, extinguishing the fire quickly as Gabriel cursed in surprise.

“Forget about him, save the flowers!” Colton panted. “That’s what we’re here for, right? Gabriel can take a little heat. Can’t you, Gabriel?”

Colton was joking around—as usual—but it looked like he was seconds away from passing out. He was covered in blood, and it looked like it was taking a lot out of him just to breathe and talk.

“Take it easy,” Greyson told him. “I’ll never hear the end of it if I don’t bring you back to Xavier in one piece… And I’m definitely in for an earful once he sees that we didn’t get the hellebore.”

Mikah was stomping on the burning flowers—or what was left of them. When he stopped, all that was left was a smoldering heap of stems. Adéluce had done what she’d intended. She’d destroyed our chances of breaking her connection to Xavier—at least for now.

My heart sank as I took in the scene. This entire expedition had been a total disaster from start to finish. Colton had nearly died, and I had to wonder, given all the blood he’d lost, if someone should go back to the pack house and bring Torin back before he *did* die. On top of that, Adéluce had been *this* close to cutting off my hands, and Lola had been blasted hard enough to knock her back into human form.

*And after all that, Adéluce just slipped away. Now we’ll have to wait to get more flowers tomorrow, and who’s to say she won’t come back to mess everything up a second time? She makes it her business to ruin our plans.*

I took a furtive glance around, wondering if she was somewhere nearby, watching us and biding her time. I wondered what she did when she *wasn’t* making our lives a living hell.

I was feeling overwhelmed, and mad at myself for letting Xavier down. If I’d been quick enough, I could’ve blasted her with magic and kept her from destroying the flowers. It was starting to feel like the only thing we’d achieved here today was confirm Adéluce’s suspicions about what we were up to.

We’d followed Big Mac’s instructions perfectly, only to watch our prize literally go up in flames. I should’ve known that collecting the hellebore wasn’t going to be that easy.

Gabriel peered over the edge of the ravine. “Looks like we’ll have to try again tomorrow—but we’ll have to find another patch. Adéluce torched the rest of these. A goddamn shame. She really knows how to ruin a person’s day—it’s a real talent.”

Now I was really worried. “That means Adéluce has at least another twenty-four hours of control over Xavier.”

I doubted she was going to waste her chance to torment Xavier, though Big Mac’s wards seemed to be keeping her safe, for now.

Now that Adéluce knew we were taking steps to break her connection with Xavier, I wondered what she might do next. The vampire-witch was probably feeling backed into a corner, which meant she might lash out and do something desperate.

“Not to mention another twenty-four hours to torment everyone around him, too—though we might’ve tired her out for now,” Mikah said. “Let’s hope for that. I don’t know if we’ll be able to handle another round with her any time soon.”

“I’m ready for another go at her,” Colton rasped.

“I think you should sit the next one out,” Lola said. “She kind of kicked your ass.”

“That’s your opinion,” Colton retorted.

“And I think you’ll get another shot at her, even if you take a breather—I don’t think she’ll ever get tired of terrorizing us,” Lola said. “I’m sure it’s her favorite pastime, next to ruining Xavier’s life.”

We all regrouped and gathered around Colton, who’d shifted back to human and propped himself against a tree.

“Why are you all looking at me like that?” he asked. “I’m not going to die. Maya would kill me.”

“That’s for sure,” Greyson said, helping him to his feet. “She’d probably kill you if she found out just how close you came, too. Let’s get you patched up.”

Everyone grimaced once Colton was standing upright. There was a huge, bleeding hole in his chest, though he barely seemed to notice.

He looked down at himself once he realized we were all staring at him in shock. “What, this thing? It’s just a flesh wound. I’ll heal in no time.”

Gabriel frowned at him. “I know you’re hardcore and all, dude, but that is *not* flesh wound. That’s officially a *wound* wound.”

“And who knows if she might’ve put a spell or something on that dagger,” I said. “We really should have Torin heal him, just in case.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “And since there’s nothing more we can do here, we should get back to Big Mac’s—Adéluce won’t be able to reach us there.”

Lola was leaning heavily on Jay as we made our way back toward Big Mac’s. I could tell from the way she was walking that her back hadn’t quite recovered, though it was obvious that she didn’t want to make a big deal of it.

“You sure you’re okay?” Jay asked her. “You’re walking kind of funny.”

“Adéluce hit me pretty hard, and I tweaked my back, but overall, I’m fine. It could’ve been way worse.” She snuck a glance at Colton. “I’ll be healed in no time. I just need some rest—and maybe a stiff drink.”

“That makes two of us,” Colton said.

“Wait a minute!” Gabriel said. He crouched down and lifted something up.

I couldn’t make it out at first, but when I moved closer to get a better look, I was stunned. It was a hellebore flower. Or rather, a single petal from a single flower. Everyone just stood there and stared at it in disbelief.

“Will that be enough?” I asked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Greyson said. “We need to get it Big Mac. If anyone can pull a miracle out of a hat, it’s her.”

Gabriel handed the petal to me. “You’d better carry this. Guard it with your life—and let’s hope Adéluce isn’t watching.”

I took the petal and held it in the palm of my hand, leaning in to examine it. It was so small and insubstantial.

*I don’t know how Big Mac plans to use this, but I’m not sure it’ll be enough to craft the spell. Let’s hope I’m wrong about that.*

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A short while later, we got back to Big Mac’s. I was exhausted, and feeling a little demoralized that we had nothing to show for our fight but a single flower petal, but I was trying to stay positive.

“I promise no one’s going to notice your singed fur,” Mikah reassured Gabriel as we made our way into the house.

“Oh, they’re going to notice,” Gabriel said. “It’s obvious. Maybe I’ll start some kind of werewolf fashion trend.”

Lola scowled. “No offense, but I doubt it. Nobody’s going to go for burnt fur. It stinks. You should use my scented shampoo.”

Xavier was waiting just inside. He took one look at Colton and asked, “What the hell happened, man?”

“You owe me is what happened!” Colton said weakly. “I took a fucking witch blade for you.”

“Appreciate it,” Xavier said, slinging Colton’s arm over his shoulder and helping him to the couch.

Big Mac stomped in and eyed the single petal sitting in the palm of my hand. She looked up at me and scowled. “Seriously? Where the hell are the rest?” She huffed and crossed her arms. “I ask for hellebore flowers, and you literally bring me a single petal. Why send werewolves to do a witch’s job? When will I learn?”

I shifted uneasily, flashing back to how much we’d gone through to collect even this much. “We tried our best to bring more, but things got a little crazy.”

“Obviously,” Big Mac said.

“Adéluce torched the rest of them, and nearly killed Colton,” I added.

Under Big Mac’s glaring eyes, I felt like I was turning in an incomplete school assignment.

“I’m sure they all tried their best,” Xavier said.

I glanced at Xavier, grateful that he at least seemed to appreciate everything we’d just gone through for him.

Big Mac sighed. “I know you tried.” She put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “I never thought for a second that you wouldn’t give it your all.”

I took some comfort from the rare gesture of kindness and understanding from Big Mac. But then Big Mac and I both looked down at the pathetic little petal lying in my hand.

“Is it enough?” I asked. “Can you still do the spell?”

**Episode 4758**

**Xavier**

I’d been on the verge of asking Big Mac the same exact question as Cali. *Would* the single hellebore petal be enough? It wasn’t like she’d told us just how much of the flower she needed. Hopefully the petal would do. If not, we’d have to go looking for more flowers tomorrow.

*If that happens, they’ll have their work cut out for them trying to make me stay behind. I’m not going to let everyone put their lives on the line for a second time while I kick back and relax. When it really comes down to it, this is my problem. I’m the one Adéluce wants.*

Mrs. Smith put a hand on Big Mac’s shoulder. “You’ve got this, MacKenzie. I know you can do it. You’ve done more with less.”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow and nodded. “Well, you’re right about that.” Big Mac took the petal and sniffed it. She scowled. “As usual, it won’t be easy… But I think I might be able to do something with this wimpy little petal. If it wasn’t a challenge, it wouldn’t be fun, right?”

“Right!” Cali said cheerfully.

“Wrong!” Big Mac shouted, making Cali jump. “It would be a hell of a lot more fun if it were easy. But either way, I think I can work with this.”

I was silently grateful, and relieved. If Big Mac could really do this, if she could break Adéluce’s curse, then I’d finally be able to go after her. I was so close to killing her, I could almost taste it. I only hoped that the tiny petal in Big Mac’s hand wouldn’t stand in my way.

Ava came walking over to me. “That’s good news, right? Big Mac will have the spell ready in no time, and then this will all be over.”

I gave her a stiff nod, which—given the way I was feeling about her right now—was pretty generous. I was barely in the mood to *look* at Ava, let alone speak to her. I walked away from her without saying a word, and I could feel her eyes burning holes in my back.

*Fine. Let her sweat it out for a while. She deserves it, after the stunt she pulled.*

I waited until Cali stepped away and then hurried after her. “Hey, I need to talk to you.”

Cali turned to face me. Her face was streaked with dirt, and she had someone’s blood smeared on her shirt. Seeing her like this only made my anger toward Ava intensify.

I instinctively reached out to brush some of the dirt from her face. She flinched away, which tore at my heart.

*I get it, though. I wouldn’t want to be touched by me either, right now.*

“You risked your life to get that flower and help our friends,” I said. “Maybe it won’t turn out to mean that much in the end, but either way, it means a lot to me.”

Cali was quiet for a moment, and then her expression softened. “Thanks.”

An awkward silence fell between us, and Cali started to turn away. “I should go get cleaned up. I’ve got Colton’s blood all over me.”

I reached out and put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. This time, she didn’t flinch.

“And about what happened at the hot spring—”

Cali’s eyes flashed with hurt. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

I tightened my grip. “You don’t have to say anything, Cali. Just hear me out?”

Cali glanced down at my hand and I quickly released her. But she didn’t leave.

“I should’ve been—I should *be* more tactful about how I behave with Ava when you’re around. But more importantly, I never would’ve done anything like that if I’d known you’d see us.” I dropped my head. “I wish I could take it all back.”

I stood there in the silence, wondering if Cali was going to say anything. I thought back to the lengths I’d gone to to protect her from Adéluce—like telling her that Ava and I had slept together. At the time, it had been a lie, meant to hurt her and push her away. Now, I was telling her the truth, and it hurt just as much now as it had then.

*I have to find a way to make this up to her if I’m ever going to win back her trust. I can see in her eyes how uncertain she is of me. She doesn’t know what to expect anymore. I’m unpredictable, and that’s not what I want to be.*

I had no idea what lay ahead for me. For us. Things with Ava were a little rocky at the moment, but that didn’t mean I could just up and run back to Cali.

“Thank you for being honest,” Cali finally said. She turned and started toward the stairs, getting halfway up before she stopped and turned back. “Make sure to thank your brothers. They came through for you today, too.”

I watched her go, wishing I could follow her up the stairs and take her in my arms. But I knew better. That wasn’t going to happen. At least not for a while. For the moment, that ship had sailed… Though I could still see it in the distance, and it felt like there was a chance it might loop back around.

I headed back to join the others and spotted Jay standing near Lola, who was sprawled out on the couch with an ice pack balanced on her back.

Jay caught my eye and gave me a nod. “Torin’s on his way over to heal Colton. He needs it. Adéluce did a number on him with that dagger.”

I nodded at him. “Looks like it. Sorry it was so rough out there—and thanks for doing this for me.”

“It wasn’t just for you—it was for all of us. Adéluce can’t be allowed to run amok for much longer. She’s going to kill someone if she keeps this up,” Jay replied. “She damn near killed Lola today.”

“Well, I’m glad you both pulled through,” I said.

“Same here.”

I gave Jay a nod and turned to go check on Colton. On my way over to him, I ran into Greyson.

*Cali’s right—as much as I want to tell him to get the hell out of my face, Greyson really came through for me today. I should thank him. Cali’s always right about this kind of thing.*

“Thanks for putting it all on the line out there,” I said gruffly. “I know how… deceptively dangerous Adéluce can be.”

Greyson nodded. “I’ll admit, I’m a little surprised to hear you say that, but you’re welcome.”

I was about to rush past him, but I hesitated. “I’ve been dealing with this Adéluce stuff on my own for so long… It’s nice to know that my brothers have my back. I’m really lucky.”

Greyson smiled wistfully. “We always will. And you’re right—you’re damn lucky to have brothers like us. Maybe you just never realized it until now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Some things never change.”

I finally went to check on Colton, who I knew wouldn’t get all teary-eyed and sentimental on me. I found him in the living room, sipping a white chocolate mocha—probably his hundredth since he’d arrived—and talking on the phone with Maya.

“I was never in serious danger, Maya, trust me,” he was saying. “That stupid vamp-witch just got one over on me, that’s all. I won’t let her get that opportunity again.” A brief pause. “Well, of course I’m going to try and kill her! But I can’t yet. X has some kind of link with her that will kill him if we kill her. I know, never a dull moment around these parts, right? But I promise I’m fine, and that this isn’t a big deal.”

I hesitated in the doorway, listening. I couldn’t help but think about how we all lied to protect the ones that we loved. Judging by the obvious damage Adéluce had done to Colton, he’d been in very real danger, and until Torin arrived, we couldn’t even be sure that he was out of the woods.

*I wonder if lying to our loved ones so they don’t worry about us is an Evers thing—something we can’t help but do.*

I slapped Colton on the back, just hard enough to make him wince, then left him to keep spinning lies to Maya. If I knew Maya, she was probably seeing right through him and just choosing not to call him out.

I knew that Colton would recognize my actions as a way of saying thank you. He and I did a lot of our communicating without talking. Maybe it was a twin thing. Conversely, Greyson and I could barely communicate effectively even when we were yelling right in each other’s faces.

I was just about to head off to continue avoiding Ava when Big Mac cornered me near the front door. “Xavier, there you are. I’m ready to do the spell.”

**Episode 4759**

**Artemis**

I kept checking on Marius as I rode along with him draped over the horse. He was in really bad shape. He’d had a few moments of lucidity, but they were few and far between.

He was delirious, and most of his words were nonsense. I was worried that if we didn’t reach the healer soon, he wouldn’t survive. He’d gotten under my skin a lot since we’d reunited, but I didn’t want to see him die.

I sighed and surveyed the group of Light Fae, wondering how I was going to get rid of them. I needed their help to find the healer, but once that was done, I’d have no need for them. If they stuck around, it wouldn’t be long before things came to a head. It wasn’t like I could keep my ruse up indefinitely. At some point, someone would recognize me, or I’d slip up and expose myself. It was only a matter of time.

*I don’t want to kill them, though. They’re only doing their jobs. I didn’t come back here to kill innocents, but if they won’t let us go…*

I glared at Marius’s limp body. I wished like hell that I was on my own. Maybe if I were, I’d be that much closer to finding Kadmos.

The Light Fae leader fell in alongside me and nodded toward Marius. “How’s he holding up?”

“Rabbits and pickles and blue skies!” Marius babbled before falling unconscious again.

“I guess that answers my question,” she said. She held out a hand. “I’m Danae.”

“Nice to meet you, officially,” I said, deliberately not revealing my own name. The less these Light Fae knew about me, the better. With a little luck, I’d be free of them soon.

“Artemis, watch out for the ogre!” Marius shouted. “He’s got a knife!”

I kicked Marius, and he grunted and fell silent. For a split second, I wondered if I’d killed him, but then he babbled another string of nonsense—to my relief.

“Artemis is a pretty name,” Danae said.

*Is she hitting on me? Right now, of all times? I mean, I guess she’s kind of cute, but isn’t she in the middle of a war?*

“My husband and I were thinking of naming our firstborn Artemis… If the war ever ends, that is.” She frowned. “But from the looks of it, we won’t be having a baby for a while. I’d never want to bring a child into this. Though we’ve talked about how there never really *is* a good time to have a child. Seems like you just… do it.”

“I guess there’s never really a good time,” I grunted.

Danae smiled at me. “Sorry, I’m rambling. Just been thinking about kids a lot lately, with the way this war keeps dragging on.”

I grimaced.

*Okay, she’s not hitting on me, which is great. But dammit, this woman has a husband, and she’s fantasizing about having kids. And she’s nice! There’s no* way *I can kill her, now!*

“So, where are you from?” Danae asked.

I shrugged. “Here and there.”

I grimaced again. That was probably the sketchiest possible way to answer that question, but I wasn’t exactly at the top of my game right now. There were too many unexpected variables—otherwise known as Light Fae—swirling around me, and I hated that I was this far off track. It was all I could do not to take off at a gallop and try to lose the Light Fae—but with Marius so badly injured, that would be a death sentence for him.

I could feel Danae staring at me, and I was reminded of a game Cali had taught me—twenty questions. It seemed like Danae would love playing that—but this wasn’t a game. I needed to give up some information, or Danae was definitely going to get suspicious.

*My “here and there” answer probably already has her on high alert. Good one, Artemis.*

“I was born not far from the Wrenthorn estate,” I said, trying to keep things vague.

Danae lit up. “So was I!”

I cringed internally. *Shit. Seriously? My luck can’t really be* this *bad, can it? I really* am *off my game right now. Shit! Why did Marius have to go and get shot in the ass?*

“I’m surprised we never crossed paths before now,” Danae said excitedly. “I love it there. And I have a lot of friends around there, too, though I won’t ask you if you know any of them. Unless—”

“I travel a lot,” I interrupted. “Never really called anywhere home, which is probably why we never ran into each other before—and why I definitely won’t know your friends.” I plastered on a smile when I realized I might’ve sounded a little harsh. “But I’m sure they’re great.”

Danae frowned. “Well, that’s a pity. Everyone needs a place to call home.”

I went quiet, thinking. I’d never really had a home, that part was true. But I’d started to understand what home felt like, now that I’d met Cali, lived with the Redwood pack, and met my mother.

And fallen in love with Rishika.

*Man, I miss her so much. I wonder what she’s doing right now…*

A flood of memories came rushing in, but I quickly steeled myself against them. As much as I loved thinking about the good times, I still felt more like myself here in the Fae world than I ever had back in the human world.

Maybe that was good enough. A whole world to call my own.

Marius started up again. “Ari! Ari! Where are you, Ari?”

I kicked him again.

*Why won’t he just shut up? Teaming up with him was a big mistake. He can’t even be injured properly. I can’t have him announcing all our secrets.*

One of the Light Fae hurried over to us, pointing ahead. “The healer lives just over there, beyond that large tree.”

I spotted the tree he was referring to, looming in the distance. Soon, I was going to have to come up with something good enough to get rid of them without causing them any harm.

As we approached a small cottage, stable, and barn, Danae slowed a little and motioned for me to do the same.

“I should warn you,” she began. “Lancaster can be a little… difficult.”

One of her companions snorted and shook his head. “Difficult? Really? Lancaster is a huge pain in the ass. If he wasn’t one of the best healers around, someone would’ve thrown him off a bridge by now.”

“It’s true,” Danae said, then she glanced at me. “It might be better if I talk to him first, just to pave the way for you.”

*I guess that’s not a bad thing. I should probably take whatever opportunities they offer me. But all this chatter is… a lot. When I was a bounty hunter, I was usually on my own. If I wasn’t working to make some kind of deal, the only conversations I had were usually with myself. I definitely prefer that.*

I looked around, feeling antsy. I couldn’t wait to get rid of them all. Danae was nice enough, but she talked too much. And I wasn’t in the mood to come up with more idle chatter and lies about myself to throw her off my scent. I had enough to worry about without having to charm my escorts so that they didn’t attack me.

We finally came to a stop, and everyone dismounted. Danae motioned for some of the other Light Fae to help me get Marius off the horse. I helped him down and slung his arm over my shoulder so I could help him walk.

“If you can hear me,” I hissed in his ear, “then keep your mouth shut! You’re going to blow our cover!”

Marius lifted his head and smiled at me, a string of drool dangling from his lip. He bobbed his head and attempted to make a zipping motion across his mouth, but then his hand dropped like a stone and he passed out cold.

Danae went ahead of me and knocked on the cottage door. Someone opened it, and I couldn’t quite make out the ensuing conversation.

Finally, Danae walked over to me. “Lancaster wants to talk to you. We’ll stay over here with the horses.”

I walked over to the door with Marius, and attempted to give the Light Fae healer what I hoped was a friendly smile. His expression remained blank.

*Okay, so he isn’t the friendliest. That’s okay. I’m not either. Maybe we’ll get along.*

But before I could say a word, Lancaster glanced at Marius and backed up, his expression dark. “What the—are you mad? Why the hell would I help a Dark Fae? Haven’t you noticed that there’s a war going on out there? That man is one of our enemies!”

“But—”

“But nothing! I don’t want him anywhere near me, and he certainly isn’t coming into my house. Why would you bring him here? Let him die!”

**Episode 4760**

**Xavier**

My heart leapt, but I tried to remain clam. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

This was music to my ears. I’d assumed it would take Big Mac a lot longer to prepare the spell—especially with the small amount of hellebore that the others had managed to rescue from Adéluce.

But finally, it was time. I was more than ready to disconnect myself from the vampire-witch. In fact, it was long overdue. It almost felt surreal, realizing that if this worked, we’d finally be able to kill Adéluce. This awful, painful, torturous chapter of my life would finally be over, and I would be free of her, once and for all.

*It almost doesn’t seem real. What will I do with myself once I have my life back? Will I even be able to make my own decisions?*

I laughed to myself. Of course I would—but it was strange to think about how much control I’d lost since Adéluce had reappeared in my life.

But my life would still be in complete chaos after the fact. Adéluce had made sure of that. And today’s Cali and Ava drama was proof of the mess she’d made. Even if Adéluce died tomorrow, she’d probably die happy with what she’d done. She’d probably consider my enduring suffering her legacy.

I shook that thought off, not wanting to fall into a dark mood when something so good was about to happen. Even if Adéluce died with some sick satisfaction about what she’d done—and the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that she would—there was still pleasure to be found in keeping her from hurting the people I loved and finishing her off for good.

“Where are we going to do this?” I asked Big Mac, hoping that we wouldn’t have to travel into the woods, or to some sacred spot that would leave us exposed to Adéluce.

“Here,” Big Mac said, leading me to the living room, where Gabe, Mikah, and Jay were already moving furniture to clear a space for the spell. “My living room’s the best place to perform spells like this, and with our crappy luck, we definitely shouldn’t leave the house for this one.”

“You read my mind,” I said.

Big Mac produced a piece of chalk and used it to point at the center of the room. “Stand right in the middle there.”

I did as I was told, excitement bubbling in my chest. Everyone began to filter into the room as the last of the furniture was cleared away. There was anticipation in the air. I looked around at all the people who’d come to help me—even Lola—and felt warm inside. I was finally about to get my life back—even if it *was* a lot more complicated now.

I watched as Big Mac drew a circle around me and then began to write something.

“What’s that writing?” I asked.

“It’s to bind you to the floor so you can’t move,” Big Mac muttered, not even bothering to look at me.

“That sounds encouraging,” I grumbled.

“You won’t be frozen in place or anything, but this will keep you within the bounds of the spell zone,” she said.

“Sounds good to me,” I replied. At this point, she could’ve told me that I’d have to stand on my head naked and spin like a top, and I would’ve done it if it meant that Adéluce’s claws would be pulled out of me.

I watched for a while as she put the finishing touches on all the strange symbols and words she was writing, and then my mind wandered back to Adéluce.

*There are so many ways I could kill her. So many tempting methods... How will I do it? I want her to feel a lot of pain. That’s a must. She deserves to suffer after all the pain she’s inflicted on me and everyone I care about.*

I sighed happily as I pictured Adéluce, dead at my feet. No matter how I chose to kill her, it was going to be one of the most satisfying things I’d ever done.

Big Mac got up from the floor, dusting the chalk off her hands.

“So, there’s one thing you should know.” She looked around the room. “All of you.”

We all exchanged anxious looks. Statements that started off like that rarely ended well.

“In order to do this spell, the protection around the house will have to drop—at least temporarily,” Big Mac said.

Cali gasped. “That sounds like a terrible idea!”

Big Mac hit her with a glare. “It might be terrible, but that’s the way it is. If you don’t like it, I can *not* perform the spell. Is that what we want?” Big Mac went silent and looked around the room like she was talking to a preschool class. “I’m waiting. Just say the word and I’ll nix the spell.”

No one said a word.

Big Mac might not have been sympathetic, but I understood Cali’s concerns. Most of our group was fresh off a pretty horrible fight with Adéluce, and justifiably nervous about her storming in and attacking again. I wished that I could allay all Cali’s worries—comfort her, let her know that even with the wards down, I’d still have her back—but I couldn’t do that here. Not in front of everyone, and especially not in front of Greyson and Ava.

“What about Xavier?” Ava demanded. “Is the spell going to hurt him?”

Big Mac glared at her. “If you keep interrupting me, then yeah, it might.”

Ava went quiet, but I recognized the look on her face. Ava was pissed off. But that was fine by me. She was pissed? So was I.

“Okay, let’s get to it,” Big Mac said, taking a big step back. “Now, I usually wouldn’t say this, but in present company, it’s a must. You all need to shut the hell up. Once I begin the spell, don’t make a sound, don’t cry out, don’t scream anyone’s name, don’t ask me any more questions. Please, just shut up. Okay?”

Everyone stayed quiet.

“Good,” Big Mac said. “Just how I like it—not a peep.”

She approached me slowly.

“Now, Xavier, please stay still. Don’t even blink.” She smiled pleasantly—which, coming from Big Mac, was kind of chilling. “You ready?”

I didn’t nod, didn’t say yes, didn’t move.

“You’re doing well so far—keep it up,” Big Mac said.

She closed her eyes and started chanting quietly, moving her hands through the air around me. I watched her out of the corner of my eye. I knew that I had to trust her, but it was hard to get comfortable around Big Mac, even when she was helping me.

She lifted the hellebore petal and stepped behind me. I almost flinched when she pressed it behind my ear, right up against the crescent mark, but I stayed still—even when I was rocked by blinding pain.

When my vision—and the searing pain—finally began to clear, I heard laughter and saw a family having a picnic. It didn’t take me long to realize that it was Adéluce, her husband Henri, and their son René.

Seconds later, the scene transformed into a graduation, with Henri and Adéluce wiping tears from their cheeks as an older René received his high school diploma. Then Adéluce and Henri were dancing under a banner announcing their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary while René held his phone up, recording them.

I could feel the love between them. It was shocking—disorienting, really—to see this side of Adéluce. I’d only ever known her as a mean, vindictive vampire-witch out to destroy my life. Was this what her life could’ve been if I’d never accepted the job to track her family down?

I was succumbing to an overwhelming rush of guilt when I realized there had to be a reason why her family had been killed. Some dark secret that I didn’t know about. But before I could really consider that, I was suddenly in a kitchen with Cali, teaching her how to make stir-fry.

And then, in a flash, we were celebrating Cali’s birthday at the Redwood pack house with the pack all around us, smiling and clapping and shouting “happy birthday.” While everyone watched, including Greyson, I recorded Cali as she laughed and blew out the candles.

And then Cali and I were in bed, our hands all over each other as we kissed. Cali laughed and moaned as my mouth explored her body.

Her cheeks flushed, Cali rolled me over onto my back and mounted me, throwing her beautiful hair back as she writhed against me. And in that moment, I could feel her warmth, the pleasure of her skin against mine. I missed that feeling so much.

I wanted to feel it right now, but I knew that this wasn’t real, no matter how much I wanted it to be.

And then the moment suddenly ended, and I was back in Big Mac’s living room, clutching at the spot behind my ear. I could feel my blood pumping through my veins, and my head was throbbing.

I turned to Big Mac. “So, can I kill her now?”

**Episode 4761**

I anxiously waited for Big Mac to answer Xavier’s question. Was the connection between him and Adéluce severed? *Could* we kill her now?

The witch looked around the room, her expression reminding me of a hawk. I held my breath when she opened her mouth. “Technically, yes,” she replied.

“Great,” Xavier said. His voice was icy cold, same as his rigid stance. But then he marched forward toward the door.

*Wait, what?*

I didn’t have to say that out loud, because Colton grabbed him by the arm. “Whoa, where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Xavier—eyes dark, jaw clenched—shoved Colton off. His voice was a growl. “I’m going to fucking kill her.”

“No!” I blocked his way. It felt like my heart was going to vibrate out of my chest when our gazes locked. His eyes were furious, but I didn’t back down. “I mean yes, kill her, but you can’t just run off without a plan, Xavier. We’re not going to let you do something like that.”

*We just got you back…*

A lump formed in my throat at the thought. I didn’t move closer to Xavier, even if I wanted to touch him so badly right now that my entire body hurt. I could feel Greyson’s eyes on me. When I glanced at him and saw his blank expression, guilt twisted inside my gut.

“This isn’t right,” Xavier said. His voice had become gruff, but I could still see the rage all over his face. Pointing at his chest, he said, “I should be the one dealing with Adéluce. *I’m* the reason she’s hurting so many people, and there’s no goddamn way I’ll—”

“No.” I had to suppress a flinch at Greyson’s gravely tone. He stepped forward, staring at Xavier. “We have to stick together. We’re stronger together, Xavier.”

I looked around the room. Jay and Lola nodded, followed by Gabriel and Mikah.

“I’m with Greyson on this one,” Colton said. It was the wrong thing to do, because Xavier bristled.

Glaring at Greyson, Xavier told Colton, “Too bad our big brother isn’t the fucking boss of me.”

Before anyone else could speak, I barreled ahead, “Greyson and every other person in this room is trying to help and support you, Xavier.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Ava said in a low voice, “but Cali’s right.”

“Do we even know where Adéluce is?” Marissa mused. “Like, what’s your plan here, Xavier? Just roam around and hope you stumble upon her?”

Everybody made comments of agreement, while Xavier’s scowl intensified. He kept glaring at Greyson, who didn’t back down, didn’t move out of his brother’s way. In the end, Xavier stomped away, flopping back into a chair.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “*Whatever*.”

I wanted to go to Xavier, to comfort him and tell him that everything would be okay. And another part of me wanted to hug and kiss him, crawl onto his lap and whisper in his ear that he’d be safe soon. Tahat I would give my life for him to be safe. Most of that was still true. I cared about Xavier and would likely never stop. But I loved Greyson, whom I’d hurt so many times already. And there was Ava, who definitely already wanted to kill me. I stayed in my place and looked away from Xavier.

“Perhaps roaming around and hoping to stumble upon her isn’t a bad idea, though,” Ava spoke up, suddenly. “She’ll come to us that way. She always seems to find us anyway.”

“True,” Marissa noted.

“We still need a plan for when she does appear,” Greyson said.

Ava crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes flickering to Xavier. “What about our packs? What if she tries to get them to hurt us?”

Greyson’s eyes widened at her question. “Fuck.”

My stomach dropped, but Big Mac said, “While you were all playing at the edge of the demon realm, I put up magic wards at the pack houses. They should at least act as advance warning systems for both packs.”

Ava shook her head. “That’s not enough. The Samaras are still getting our footing as a pack. We need to go check on them.” She said the last words while staring at Xavier, and I realized she meant…

*Together.*

She and Xavier.

Luna and Alpha of the Samara pack.

I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. Laugh at myself, actually, because what the hell did I expect? That once Xavier was “back,” everything would be back to normal? It was like I’d shoved the fact that he had a whole other pack to take care of completely out of my brain.

“Xavier, did you hear me?” Ava moved closer when Xavier didn’t respond. His gaze flickered up to her as if he’d only just been shaken out of his thoughts. Impatiently, Ava added, “We need to go check on *our* pack, Xavier.”

He stood up, hands fists at his sides. “I can’t. Adéluce is targeting me—if I go back there, it puts the Samaras in danger.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Are you serious? So you won’t check on your own pack now?” She shot me a pointed look, like I was at fault here.

*Is she for real? I haven’t even said anything!*

“I can’t go to the pack house,” Xavier repeated, shaking his head. “If Adéluce—”

“What if that’s her plan?” Ava demanded. “What if she wants to separate you from your pack?”

Xavier eyed her. “I can’t risk it.”

“Well, *I’m* going to check on them. I’m their Luna. We have a responsibility here,” Ava snapped, turning her back on him.

I saw Xavier wince. I noticed how much her anger affected him, and I felt sick to my stomach. It became worse when he called, “Ava, come on!”

But she’d already grabbed Marissa, leading her out of the house without looking back. He made a move to follow her but seemed to regret it. Kicking at a chair, he hissed, “*Son of a bitch*.”

“Hey!” Big Mac barked. “That’s cherrywood.”

Xavier plopped back on the chair with a groan, and quiet conversations sprang up all around. Gulping, I glanced over at Greyson speaking with Jay and Mikah. He was occupied, so I quietly walked over to Xavier. He had his face buried in his hands. Part of me itched to comfort him once more, and the memory of our kiss in the desert burned through my brain.

I settled for asking the dumbest question of all time. “Are you okay?”

Xavier shook his head, looking down at the floor. “Maybe Ava’s right. Maybe I need to be with my pack.”

“We’re your pack, too,” I whispered. I didn’t think about the words before saying them, and I definitely didn’t think before I slipped my hand into his.

We both looked at each other, surprised by the action. We pulled back at the same time. My heart beat so fast I thought it was going to cave in.

He cleared his throat, standing up. He turned to face me, towering over me. His anger had taken a back seat. Now all I could see was bitterness. “Things are different now. We can’t ignore that.”

“I know that. But we know about Adéluce now. We’re going to fight her. She’s the reason you left us.” I hated the way my voice cracked, but I couldn’t help it. My eyes burned. “We can stop her together, Xavier.”

Xavier’s eyes were fixed on me. He suddenly looked sad.

And, somehow, that was the worst thing of all.

“Even if we kill Adéluce, things have happened between us that make it hard to go back.”

His words were throaty. I felt the truth of them like a knife to the gut.

“Right,” I said quietly.

I turned and walked away quickly before he could see the tears brimming in my eyes. Before anyone could see. The bitterness I felt was staggering and harsh. I rushed down the hall, holding my breath until I was certain that neither Xavier nor Greyson hadn’t followed. I didn’t want either of them to see me like this.

*Just breathe, Cali*, I reminded myself before walking into a small powder room at the end of the corridor. It was ornate, with high-end tiles and a tiny chandelier. The only thing that my eyes lingered on, though, was the mirror. My reflection looked back at me. I looked like I was about to cry. That was the last thing I wanted to do right now. Sniffling, I splashed water on my face.

I hated it, but Xavier was right. I’d thought it myself so many times—that he’d hurt me too much, that there was no going back. And my pride wouldn’t allow me to beg him to come back, not to me or the Redwoods. Besides, there was Greyson. I loved Greyson. But I couldn’t help but think that I’d fought so hard and for so long to figure out what was going on with Xavier, and for what? Things were still ruined between us, between the brothers, between the packs…

*One step at a time, Cali*, I reminded myself. *First, we need to get rid of* *Adéluce…*

A tap on the door startled me. I called, “In a minute!”

I hoped it wasn’t Greyson—the last thing I needed was for him to see me like this over his brother. Again. I quickly leaned down to wash my face again to get rid of the puffiness around my eyes.

When I looked up, the door was slightly ajar.

*That’s weird.*

Frowning, I looked out into the hallway, but there was no one there. With a sigh, I turned and stepped back in to find a towel to dry my face when I felt something light land on my shoulder. A bug? Slowly, I turned to look in the mirror and saw—

A disembodied hand perched there like a fucking parrot.

“*Oh my god!*”

Screaming, I flung the thing against the wall.

**Episode 4762**

**Xavier**

I felt like shit. Cali was upset with me. Ava was upset with me, too, and I wondered if I should’ve gone after her. Why the fuck had she been so defiant in front of everyone earlier? I knew the answer to that, of course. She was acting out because of Cali. She knew it wasn’t safe to go back to the Samaras, and yet she’d just marched out of here like it was nothing.

I understood what she meant about the weight of our responsibility, though.

Was I being a bad Alpha by not going with Ava? I once thought that having the Samara pack would give me power against Adéluce, but now I wondered if my being involved with anyone, ever, put everybody who was near me at risk.

“Oh my god!” Cali’s scream pierced the air, cutting through my thoughts and every conversation in the room. All the blood rushed to my head as I burst into the hallway, Greyson on my heels.

“What the f—”

I never finished my sentence. Something flew out of the bathroom, hitting the wall before dropping on the floor with a loud *plop*. At first, I thought it was a rat or something, but then I got a better look at it.

“It’s—it *looks* like a hand,” Greyson said incredulously, pausing next to me.

Then the thing jumped up and scurried away like a fucking cockroach.

“What the fuck was that?” Colton bellowed, shoving past Greyson and me to attack it. Too late, Gabriel jumped over the three of us—shouting, “Parkour, bitches!”—before landing in front of the hand. He tried to stomp on it, and his maniacal cackle seemed to freak out the hand as much as his giant feet did. The thing flexed and flailed before slipping past him and toward us, fighting for its life.

“*Son of a bitch*,” I growled, diving down the hall to pin the hand down. It escaped by an inch while Greyson fought to grab and crush it, followed by Colton, Gabriel, and Jay. Lola was on a chair, looking around, shouting, “Oh my god! Wait, is that a mole rat? Aren’t those supposed to be cuter?”

Jay shouted at her, “It’s a freaking hand, Lola!” And we all scrambled to get the damned thing. Mikah pulled out a knife and threw it at the hand. He missed by half an inch, just as the hand turned around the corner and vanished.

“Over there!” Jay shouted. Mikah pulled out another knife, readying to attack. I was ready to follow him and Jay when I heard a shuffle of movement behind me.

I spun around to see a pale Cali walk out of the bathroom.

I made a move to reach out to her when Greyson stepped forward first. She didn’t even glance at me when his arms wrapped around her, burying her face in his chest. Jealousy burned through every inch of me, but what the fuck did I expect? This was how things were now.

I’d pushed Cali away so many times—of course she was going to instinctively turn to Greyson. But when I watched him soothe her and whisper, “I got you, it’s okay,” and she clung to him tighter, I was ready to snap at him to stop fucking touching her.

I knew I couldn’t do that.

I had to deal with these shitty emotions right now without exploding all over the fucking place. As calmly as I could, I asked Cali, “What was that? What happened?”

Cali gulped, taking a step back from Greyson to look between us. “I don’t know…” She sounded incredulous, shocked. “That *hand* just attacked me.”

“Right? It’s nuts!” Gabe threw his hands up in the air. “Like, what kind of Addams family bullshit is this?”

 “We can’t find it,” Mikah said just then, returning to the hallway, Jay on his tow. “It can’t have gone too far, though.”

“It has to be Adéluce, right?” Colton asked.

Of course it was. I wanted to tear out her fucking spine.

“How did this happen?” Greyson asked, looking among us.

“It must have come in with you all when I put the wards down.” Big Mac’s voice sounded from the end of the hallway. Where had she been while we’d chased the thing around? Mrs. Smith was next to her, grabbing Big Mac’s hand tight, as if unsure of what the witch would do next out of spite. I didn’t blame her. Big Mac *hated* it when things snuck past her defenses.

“Come on,” Cali told Greyson, “let’s find it and kill it.”

Greyson looked like he was about to protest when Mikah pulled him by the arm and told him something quietly. I didn’t listen—too busy staring at Cali as she passed by me. Grabbing her by the arm, I asked, “You okay?”

She didn’t shiver at my touch. She didn’t melt like she normally would, and I wanted to bring this entire fucking house down. Pulling away from me, she said, “Yeah. Just gotta get rid of this thing if it’s from Adéluce.”

I watched her move past me again, toward the big sitting room. My heart hurt inside my chest as I followed. The rest of the group did as well. Mikah said that was the last place he’d seen the hand. Big Mac had been standing guard at its entrance, so there was no way the thing had left the space without her noticing.

“Do you think it’s a spy?” Lola asked while dropping to her knees to look under one of the tables.

“We have to assume so, right?” Colton said. He was holding a fire poker, looking around and prodding at furniture. With everybody else focused on finding the hand, I kept an eye on Cali, my gut urging me not to look away from her for a damn second.

What kind of fucked-up game was Adéluce playing?

As if in answer to my question, I saw the thing scurrying across the ceiling, just above Cali’s head.

“There!” I growled, pointing at it. “Cali, be careful!”

The hand sent a green spark of magic toward me, but I darted to the side to evade it. At the same time, Lola shouted, “That creepy little shit can do magic!”

“It’s not the only one!” Her face full of determination, Cali raised her hands and shot a blast of magic at the thing. *Fuck*, she missed. The impact made plaster fall down, and Big Mac barked, “Careful with my house!”

Panting, Cali winced. “Sorry.”

“Found it!” Lola screamed from the corner of the room, starting to stomp on something.

“Incoming!” Colton raced over with his fire poker, banging it against the floorboards. At the same time, Gabriel grabbed a lamp and chucked it at the running hand, screaming, “Prepare to die, bitch!”

Neither of them got the hand.

It was chaos.

“Stop ruining my house!” Big Mac screamed, when I noticed something at the corner of the room, a few feet away from Cali.

The hand was hiding behind the foot of a chair.

It looked like it was watching Cali.

Swallowing hard, I forced myself to ignore the shouting and searching all around. Slowly, quietly, because maybe that fucking thing could *feel* my steps and that was how it’d gotten away before, I stalked over to it.

Before it could notice me, I pounced, dropping on the floor, finally capturing the hand. It was clammy and cold, taking me into a disgustingly spooky handshake. It shivered before clamping down on my palm like a vise. I recognized the grip, the bloody nails.

It was Adéluce’s severed hand.

I opened my mouth to tell the others, to warm them, but the hand sparked with magic, silver and black lines drawn under my skin, shooting up my arm. I hissed in agony, the pain so bad that I dropped the thing and still couldn’t speak. I whirled around to see it run over to where Cali was standing, searching near the fireplace.

I finally managed to find my voice.

“Cali!” I shouted.

It was too late. She spun around just as the hand started to race in a circle around her. Sparks flew and rose where it touched the floor. Cali panicked, whirling around as the thing surrounded her. “What the hell is it doing?” she screamed.

“Get out of that circle!” Big Mac shouted.

I fought to push through the horrid pain still lingering in my shoulder when Cali aimed and shot at the hand.

She missed.

“Get to Cali!” I roared at Greyson. He’d lunged forward already, but the hand shot out more sparks. Red ones this time, like flames, that hit Greyson right in the chest. The impact threw him against the far wall so forcefully the plaster cracked.

I was breathing hard, shaking. The pain still echoed through my body while I fought to stand. Cali aimed at the hand again, but it was running around her so fast, it had become a blur. The sparks rose higher and higher—silver and black and red.

They started spinning all around her.

*No.*

I wasn’t going to let Adéluce hurt her.

With a roar, I pushed through the pain and got to my feet. I lunged for Cali to shove her out of the circle. But the moment my shifted hand made contact with the magic, more agonizing pain lanced through me. I fell backward like I was nothing but a pile of flesh.

*Useless*.

When Cali and I locked eyes, sparks like red lightning had formed a high circle around her. A cage. She shouted, “Xavier!”

The ground under her feet shook, and a portal opened.

In the blink of an eye, she disappeared into the abyss.

**Episode 4763**

**Greyson**

Cali dropped through the portal, the hand leaping into it behind her as the opening shrunk and closed. It left a perfect circular burn mark on the ground, nothing else, and Cali—

She was gone.

I was going to lose my fucking mind.

Anger overcame the pain I felt after Adéluce’s attack, and, adrenaline coursing through me, I jumped up and raced to the spot Cali had just disappeared from. I dropped on my knees, placing my shaking hand on the singed floorboards. Nothing there, only warmth that evaporated the longer I touched it.

“Cali…” Xavier’s heaving, broken voice pulled me back to the present.

I turned to see him panting, grabbing at a chair to stand, flexing his hand and arm in the wake of Adéluce’s attack. Adéluce had attacked, because she wanted to make him hurt, and she could only do that if Cali was hurt. And Xavier was here, but Cali was gone, nowhere in sight, and when I looked at my brother, I could only see—

*Red*.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked. My voice was low, but I didn’t sound like myself. I got to my feet and moved toward him. Xavier was still panting, blinking as he watched me.

Defensively, he rasped, “Are you kidding me right now?”

Cali could be anywhere. Adéluce could have taken her to the demon world; she could have been torturing her as we spoke. Xavier had Ava as a mate, as well—a convenient, fucked-up backup—but I…

All I had was Cali.

I grabbed Xavier by the collar and slammed him against the nearest wall, hard enough for me to hear his bones rattle, I was all anger, nothing less, nothing more.

“*Where did Adéluce* *take her?*” I roared.

“I didn’t do this!” Xavier shouted in my face, grabbing at my wrists. “It’s not my fault!” He shoved me off him, watching me with wide eyes, like he hadn’t expected me to attack. Like I was his older brother, and even when he gave me shit and wanted my woman, he had never thought that I could *truly* hurt him. But my wolf craved violence. He wanted me to hurt Xavier, draw a bit of blood, just for Xavier to see how much *this* hurt *me*.

“This *is* your fault, Xavier,” I said. “It’s all your fault.”

The words seemed to wound him more than any punch could’ve. Suddenly he looked smaller, with his shoulders hunched, younger. He was my little brother that I’d sworn to protect.

But how the fuck could anything else matter to me when Cali was gone?

I was ready to attack him again when I felt someone grip my shoulder.

Colton, both hands on me like claws, pulled me back. “Hey! You two need to stop fighting so we can figure out where Cali was taken!”

“I didn’t do anything,” Xavier snarled, pointing at me. “He’s lost his fucking mind!”

I hadn’t. Not yet.

“Greyson, please calm down.” My mother’s voice grounded me. I stood there, breathing hard, and a moment later I saw her. She held me by the arms, staring up at me. She looked worried, so much so it bordered on fear. The sight jarred me. If my anger were a physical, real thing, I would’ve grabbed it right then and shoved it inside a bag. Only because I couldn’t stand for my mother to be afraid of me. I wasn’t going to let that happen. Ever.

“Okay,” I said to Sabine, fighting to even my breathing. “Okay.”

Her eyes glistened when she looked over at Lola. Cali’s best friend had been asking Big Mac questions, I realized. “… but could you trace the energy to see where the portal leads? Is that a thing?”

Big Mac’s face was severe. “I need some supplies first.”

She glanced at my mother and headed out of the room, down the hall. Sabine squeezed my hand in hers. “Don’t worry. MacKenzie will do everything she can.”

I breathed better now. In and out, just staring at my mother, feeling her soothing presence. Thank god she was here. I didn’t look at Xavier or Colton. Yes, I knew I’d overreacted, but I wasn’t going to apologize right now.

The anger wouldn’t let me.

“I can’t lose Cali, Mom,” I whispered. “I just can’t.”

Sabine wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into a hug. In a calming voice, she said, “MacKenzie will find out where she is. She always does.”

I swallowed hard, holding her tight. Everybody’s murmurs all around me felt heavy, but I tried not to listen. Lucky for me, Big Mac returned to the room quickly, and now everyone’s attention was on her. I watched as she placed four crystals and three seashells shaped like ears around the singe mark on the floor. She added something purple that smelled like salt in the middle of it.

Then she sat at the edge of the mark.

Nobody had spoken a word. My mom’s hand was tight in mine when Big Mac started her incantation. More like a humming. The circle on the ground glowed, suddenly, a faint yellow.

“Is it working?” I whispered to my mom.

She shook her head. “Just wait…”

The longer I waited, though, the harder Big Mac frowned. She continued chanting, the circle continued to glow, and Lola whispered, “Is the portal going to open again?”

I tensed up, scenarios running through my head. They all ended with my wolf biting Adéluce’s head off.

“What’s happening?” Xavier asked Big Mac when the witch stopped chanting.

“She’s trying to fight me,” Big Mac said between clenched teeth, her hands hovering over the circle. It kept glowing, but it was like a flickering light. The witch was struggling, and Sabine went to her, kneeling beside her to study her face.

“MacKenzie, don’t push it,” my mom said. “We’ll find another way.”

Big Mac glanced at me, her jaw set. Her outstretched hands were shaking, and the light kept flickering. “I’ve almost got it. It’s—”

The wavering light of the circle became a beacon suddenly. It made me flinch, my eyes burning, as I took a step back only to bump into Colton. Both of us turned at Xavier’s grunt of pain. I watched—in slow-motion—as Colton grabbed our brother before Xavier could fall on the ground. The glow of the circle cut out.

Fucking hell.

“MacKenzie!” my mother gasped when Big Mac slumped into her arms. Xavier slumped into Colton’s, both at the same time.

“I couldn’t find her,” the witch said.

“What happened to him?” I asked, motioning to Xavier while Colton forced him to sit down in a chair.

Xavier shot me a sharp look, groaning. “I don’t know… It was like a burning in my chest.”

“That’s not good,” Gabriel announced.

“No shit,” Lola said.

They started bickering, but I stayed silent, processing. Adéluce had escaped with Cali, and I had to focus on my breathing. Otherwise, I’d fucking snap and attack Xavier again. I looked between him and Big Mac, who pushed up to her feet despite my mother’s protests. She came to stand in front of Xavier, pressing a thumb to his forehead. She closed her eyes, and everyone fell quiet.

“What is it?” I asked.

She opened them and frowned. “Strange.”

“Strange?” Colton huffed. “That’s all you have to say? Explain what the fuck that means!”

Big Mac shot Colton a look. “He’s still connected to Adéluce.”

My stomach dropped.

God-fucking-*dammit*, Xavier.

“You said you severed that bond,” I told Big Mac shakily. “You said we could kill her now! You said—”

“Greyson.” Sabine said my name firmly, resting her hand on my arm. My voice had climbed to a panicked shout, so I breathed again. In. Out.

I reined it all the fuck in again.

“You said that we can attack her without killing him,” I told Big Mac, gulping.

“I did. You can still kill her, and it won’t kill your brother. But a spell like what Adéluce cast on Xavier leaves echoes, and this one is strong.” She glanced at my brother. “He could still get hurt, but not lethally. In theory. There’s only a remnant of a connection between them.”

“Hear that, man?” Gabriel said, patting a grunting Xavier’s back. “You’re not gonna die! In theory.”

Lola asked, “The remnant of the connection between them, that thing you mentioned—can you use it to track Adéluce?”

Big Mac nodded. “Yes. But I need to replenish my energy first.”

“You should lie down,” Sabine said, wrapping an arm around Big Mac.

I was silent again. Still standing there, breathing, trying to focus on my breath to stay calm. Because I wasn’t allowed to shout—not when everyone was upset—or to attack Xavier, obviously.

Even though Cali was with Adéluce.

Cali was gone, and Big Mac was hurt, so we couldn’t try the spell right now, and the clock kept ticking while—

“Big Mac!” Torin’s voice came from outside. “Greyson!”

I ran to the front door to see it burst open. Torin and Ravi came in, dragging a limp Marissa.

“What happened?” I asked.

Marissa’s eyes were wide in terror. There was blood on her cheek, a dark line around her neck. She grabbed at my arm, wincing in pain. In an unrecognizable voice, she choked out, “We were ambushed!”

**Episode 4764**

**Artemis**

There was no way I was going to let Marius die. He knew where my father was. I couldn’t leave the Fae world without answers—it was out of the question. The stakes were high, and I was going to do everything I could to get this damn healer to cooperate.

“Let’s just go,” Marius croaked, hanging onto me.

“The healer will help us,” I told Marius in a whisper. “I’ll have to, uh, talk to him.”

Marius’s eyes flickered closed, and I looked around. Danae and the other Light Fae were far ahead, with the horses. They were talking among themselves, not paying attention. The only people witnessing this were the healer, Marius, and me. And Marius was out of it, unfocused and in pain.

There was only one way to save him.

It was a risk to use my manipulation magic around Marius, though. The gift was rare, and he was a bounty hunter and an opportunist above all. Our history didn’t guarantee anything. There was a chance that he would find a way to use the knowledge of what I could do against me. I couldn’t simply *trust* him in any way. Yet, he was the key to finding my father.

And the Light Fae healer in front of me was the key to Marius staying alive.

“Didn’t you hear me?” The old man huffed. “I’m not healing a Dark Fae. Get him out of here.”

The healer was stern, but he hadn’t shouted, so the other Fae hadn’t heard us.

Thank the gods.

“Right. I understand,” I told him, appeasing. Then I made sure to keep eye contact, feeling the air between us pick up when the healer’s gaze met mine. I could feel the magic course through me, starting from deep within my chest. It climbed into my esophagus, my throat, only to tangle up and lace itself with my vocal cords.

And then I spoke.

“But you are mistaken. This man is not a Dark Fae,” I said. “He’s a Light Fae, and you are happy to heal him. And you won’t tell anyone you saw us.”

The healer’s face suddenly turned unfocused and dazed. His frown came upside down, changing into a giant smile. “Of course! Come on in! Happy to help!”

My magic had worked. *Phew*.

He led us into the cottage, and I dragged Marius with me. He startled awake, still appearing delirious when he looked up. “What—what just happened?”

“Shush, it’s nothing,” I said quickly. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Follow me,” the healer said, gesturing to a small room in the back. “Put him right on that cot, please. Yes, good job!”

Marius frowned, squinting at the healer. “Why’s he so nice suddenly?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I deposited Marius on the cot like a sack of potatoes, facedown. He grunted and hissed in pain. Bustling about while he picked up various things, the healer added, “Now, just take off his pants, and we’ll be good to go.”

I jerked back from Marius, gulping. “Wait, *what*?”

The healer paused, turning to smile at me. Marius might have had a point here. Why was the healer smiling so much?

“I need to access the wounded area, my dear.” The healer clapped his hands together. “I’ll go grab my supplies—be right back! You take off his pants in the meantime.” And out he went.

Marius groaned. He was still lying on his stomach, his eyes shut. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and his skin looked vaguely green.

I needed to take his pants off in order for him to stay alive.

“I can’t believe this,” I grumbled under my breath, reaching under him for the clasp of his trousers.

He moved when my fingers made contact with his sides. Eyes still closed, he smirked and mumbled, “I knew you wanted me…”

I sighed deeply. “We’re not going there. I need to take your pants off.”

He let out a sound that was somehow both a groan and snicker. “I *bet*.”

The fact that this man was at death’s door and still had the audacity to go there said a lot about him.

“I need to do this, or you’re going to die,” I said, psyching up both him and myself. I acted fast, quickly reaching under him, practically hugging him from behind to undo his pants. He let out a low moan of pain as I pulled the trousers down to expose his backside.

His undergarments were yellow, with embroidered ducks decorating them.

Wow.

Despite myself, and the imminent danger of our situation, a dubious snort escaped me.

“Whazzit?” Marius grumbled, opening one eye.

“Where the hell did you get this underwear?”

“Oooohhhh,” Marius slurred. “A trader from the human world, bought a five-pack. You like ’em?”

I covered my mouth to stop the laughter from escaping. “Mm-hmm, love them.”

“There he is!” the healer exclaimed, eyeing Marius’s butt. “Those ducks are so cute! Good for them!”

I started to wonder if I perhaps overdid it with the manipulation magic. I’d told the healer to “be happy” about helping us out, but I didn’t mean that I wanted the man to hum under his breath, compliment Marius’s underwear, and bustle about like an excited bee.

Well, at least he was helping Marius.

“Now, this is it,” the healer said, pouring some powder he’d just crushed into a bowl. He added steaming water, grabbed the bowl, and stretched it toward Marius. “Drink up, boy!”

Marius opened both eyes just to frown at him. “Do I look like I’m in any condition to—” He groaned in pain again, and I huffed. Grabbing the bowl and a spoon from the healer, I took a seat next to Marius. “Open up. I’ll feed you. Do *not* spit it out.”

He closed both eyes and smirked before opening his mouth.

Was this infuriating monster *enjoying* this?

“Ah,” the healer said cheerily after lowering the duck underwear. “This is a particularly nasty wound! And the poison, phew!” the healer went on with a chuckle. “It surely would have necrotized the skin and been excruciatingly painful as you died!”

I winced. I had definitely overdone it with the manipulation magic. Or maybe this healer was always upbeat when he told his patients they could have died. Who knew?

“*What?*” Marius sputtered out after finishing the tonic. He dazedly tried to look over his shoulder at his butt. “I’m dying?”

“No, he didn’t mean it that way,” I said while the healer whistled and cleaned Marius’s wound. “It’s going to be okay.”

Marius huffed and fell back onto the cot again.

“Well, then, that is all,” the healer said, sticking a bandage on the wound. “Now, don’t you go anywhere. You have to let the tonic work its magic, or else you could collapse and be vulnerable to any number of attacks by vicious beasts out in the wilds! Ha ha!”

Then, with a final little whistle-giggle, the healer left the room.

Marius huffed, nuzzling his pillow. “Remind me to kill him before we leave.”

I shook my head. “No, Marius. No killing the annoyingly happy healer who’s *helping you*.”

He pouted, opening one eye to look at me. “Does it look bad?”

I refused to look at Marius’s half-exposed backside. No way. But I knew that he wasn’t going to let this go, even while he was in pain, so I just lied. “It’s fine.”

He sighed. “Do you think it’ll scar?”

I rubbed my temples to fight off a headache. “I have no idea. Maybe?”

Marius, eyes still closed, smirked a little. “Really? You think so?” He seemed to perk up at the idea, and I realized that he *wanted* a scar. I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. His good mood seemed to evaporate anyway. He sighed again, groaning softly before muttering, “Thanks… for saving my life, Ari.”

“Your life wasn’t in danger,” I said, lying. He grabbed my hand before I could get up from his side. His grip was pretty strong for someone who had, indeed, almost died. His eyes were open, and he stared at me strangely.

“No,” he said in a throaty tone, “you heard the healer, I almost *died*.” He was still slightly slurring, and I could see the real fear in his eyes. “I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t been there…”

Marius had a lot of emotions, it seemed. I, on the other hand, wasn’t very good at them. But I could try, I guessed. A little, at least.

“You can be grateful if you want to,” I said, patting his arm awkwardly. “Don’t forget that you’re going to lead me to Kadmos.”

Marius nodded, lying down again. His pout was back. “Yes, of course. Don’t forget to remind me that you’re ever the bounty hunter.”

I frowned. “What do you want me to say?”

“Well, how about, ‘I’m glad you’re alive, Marius’? Or, ‘Nice underwear, Marius!’”

“I *did* compliment your underwear.”

With a petulant huff, he twisted his head to the other side of the pillow, away from me.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, fine,” I said. “Maybe… I don’t want to see you die. At least not in front of me. Happy now?”

He twisted his head again to face me and grinned. He seemed better now, actually. “I knew it! You *do* like me.”

I rolled my eyes again. “Okay, you’re obviously delirious. Get some rest, and I’ll figure out how to get us out of this Light Fae territory.”

I made a move to stand up when Marius said, “I have an idea. Why not just use your super clandestine manipulation magic to do that?”

**Episode 4765**

Every inch of my body hurt when I opened my eyes. My head was pounding, and my vision was blurry.

*Where am I? What’s happening?*

I felt across the hard wooden floor, and suddenly it all came back to me.

*The creepy hand running around, Xavier screaming my name, the sparks, the portal—*

I jerked upward, breathing hard as I scrambled to my feet. My heart was racing. I was alone. The room was dark, cold, and when I took a single step forward, I banged into something solid and stubbed my pinky toe.

“Motherfu—!” I groaned, pain shooting up my foot. I pulled out my phone and tapped on the screen to see the light turn on. There was no reception in here, but at least I could turn on the flashlight to figure out where the fuck I was. I swept it around, illuminating the space.

*Oh, no…*

The room was like something out of a haunted mansion thriller, gothic and sullen. The sitting room was filled with dusty old furniture and creepy-ass paintings with those oil-painted faces that seemed to watch you no matter where you went in the room.

*Did that one just blink at me?*

I gulped, shivering. This place gave me the creeps. It had the same vibes as the creepy Duquette house, and that hand had definitely been Adéluce’s.

*What kind of game is she playing this time? Can she see me in here? What the hell do I do next?*

I had no answers to those questions apart from the last one. Feeling my temples thudding at the sides of my head, I spotted a door up ahead. I raced to it, praying it wasn’t locked.

“Yes!” I said under my breath when the door creaked open…

Only to reveal *another* gothic sitting room with *more* creepy paintings. I could see how this could become an unfortunate pattern, but at least in here there was a lit lantern. I turned off my flashlight and lifted the lantern to see around. Another door loomed up ahead. I took a deep breath and moved forward.

I breathed a sigh of relief when this door opened as well, and I found myself in a dark corridor. This place was so cold I could see the fog of my breathing, the quiet so eerie it sent chills down my spine. Light melted from the lamp through the hallway, revealing a dark red carpet. The floor made no sound when I stepped on it.

*Xavier?* I mind linked. *Are you here?*

Nothing.

*Greyson?*

It didn’t work. I should’ve known it wouldn’t. Bracing myself, I used the lamp to light my way and headed toward another door. Same creaking sound, same cold air, same scent of wet wood and incense. Only this room looked like a bedroom. I spotted a candelabra on one of the nightstands. Three candles were better than one, so I used the lantern to light it up and take it with me.

*Okay*, I thought. *I can see. Kind of.*

My hand gripped the candelabra tighter as I looked around.

*Why hasn’t Adéluce appeared yet? Will she kill me?*

I wasn’t so naïve to believe that. She wanted to torture me for chopping off her hand. She wanted to torture Xavier, and what better way to do that than hurting those he—

“Go to hell!” A scream broke through the quiet, through my thoughts. Gasping, I spun around and raised my free hand, reaching for my magic, but…

*It’s not working! Oh my god, it’s not fucking working!*

I was hyperventilating. I didn’t have my magic, and that was a bad, bad thing. How the hell was I supposed to protect myself if—

“Help! No, please, help me!”

The voice was familiar, but my brain couldn’t pinpoint it. With no time to contemplate the absolute fucking horror show that was the fact that I didn’t have my powers, I raced toward the sound of the ruckus.

*No, Cali! You’re like those girls in horror movies that walk straight into danger!*

I couldn’t turn back now. I’d already burst through the door to yet another sitting room, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. My already heightened pulse throbbed hard enough to hurt.

I whispered, “Ava?”

Ava was backed against the wall, screaming at the top of her lungs like a trapped animal. And even if this was Ava, even if I knew she wanted me dead, I couldn’t stop myself from running to her.

“Ava, it’s okay!” I shouted. “You’re fine!”

Ava growled at me, shoving me away when I tried to touch her, shouting, “No!”

“Seriously?” I grabbed both her wrists, shaking her. “It’s me, it’s Cali!”

Her eyes were unfocused when they landed on me. Her entire body was heaving, and she’d stopped screaming, but she didn’t stop trying to push me away. She hadn’t shifted to her wolf, though.

“No,” she choked out. “You’re not real!”

“What the hell are you—”

“She’s just making me see things! I’m hallucinating people I want to see!” she shouted.

I shouted back, “Oh my god, then why would she make you see *me*?”

That stopped Ava mid-struggle. She blinked. Her gaze became less hazy when it finally focused on me. Breathing hard, she said, “You’re right…”

Nobody spoke for a beat. At least her hatred of me came in handy sometimes…

I gulped, letting her go. “How did you get here?”

Ava pushed her hair back, looking around the room wildly. She swallowed audibly before saying, “I was on my way back to the Samara pack house when this freaky hand thing started choking Marissa. I went to pull it off of her, and it pulled me into a…” She sounded incredulous as she said, “Portal. A real fucking portal.” She took in her surroundings. “I woke up here.”

“Same thing happened to me,” I said. “It was Adéluce. Using her own severed hand to trap us.”

Ava paused, disgust flashing across her face. It was quickly replaced by apprehension. “Why did she bring us here?”

I didn’t have an answer. The scenarios were all horrid. I tried to channel my magic again, but it didn’t work.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I didn’t dare ask Ava if she had her wolf. I wanted to hope—stupidly or not—that this was temporary. That I’d get my magic back before Adéluce came here. I said, “The hand must have stowed away during that battle so we’d take it with us to Big Mac’s house.”

Ava shuddered. “That vampire-witch has *got* to go.”

Suddenly the air seemed to turn colder all around us. The small light of the candelabra I’d set on a nearby table flickered.

“Have you explored this place at all?” I asked.

Ava shook her head quietly.

“It’s weird. Rooms leading to more rooms.”

Ava looked up at me. Her pale skin had a yellow hue under the candlelight. Beads of sweat had gathered on her forehead. She didn’t look like her usual self—confident, powerful.

She was stuck in here just as much as I was.

My stomach twisted.

“Well, there has to be a way out,” she said finally.

“Right,” I agreed, picking up the candelabra. “Let’s go find it.”

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This place was like a messed-up jigsaw puzzle. Some rooms opened up to other rooms, others opened up to short sets of stairs, but none of them led anywhere. In every single space we entered, there were sets of stained glass windows that let in minimal light. Most of the windows depicted gruesome deaths.

“How pleasant,” Ava said wryly when she noticed two women getting burned at the stake. “Why is Adéluce so fucking weird?”

That wasn’t the right word. Adéluce wasn’t just *weird*—she was monstrous. Fucked up. But then I thought of something else. “Probably has to do with her entire family getting murdered…”

Ava’s eyes narrowed on me. “That doesn’t excuse her torturing Xavier.”

“When the hell did I ever say it’s an excuse?” I snapped.

Ava grunted, moving forward. She continued moving from room to room, staying close enough to me and the candelabra that she could see, but far enough to remind me that we weren’t friends.

*Fine by me!*

Stewing, I kept on walking behind her, when I realized something. One of the doors up ahead, in one of the many sitting rooms, had a bit of light peeking through the cracks. Could it be sunlight? Flooding with relief, I placed the candelabra on the floor and reached for the handle.

“Ava!” I shouted, fighting to shove it open. It felt stuck. Ava returned to the room, and I said, “This looks like sunlight!”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, thank god.” She stepped forward, helping me to pull on it. We grunted and cursed, but finally, with a final heave, we yanked it open.

“Finally,” Ava said with a huff, stepping out.

Over her shoulder, I spotted a white shape ahead that looked like cotton but reminded me of a—cloud?

*What the—?*

“Wait!” I lunged forward, grabbing Ava’s arm just as Ava lost her footing and…

*Dropped*.

I was yanked down with her, falling on my hands and knees as I caught her. Ava was screaming. And she was dangling off the side of a tower, so high up that all I could see was clouds.

**Episode 4766**

**Xavier**

Pacing up and down in one of Big Mac’s guest rooms, I kept my hands in fists tight enough to hurt. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I’d been freed from Adéluce just to have her snatch away Ava and Cali. I had to find them *now*. Right this instant. Otherwise, I didn’t know what the fuck I’d do.

I couldn’t even let myself *think* what Adéluce was doing to them right now.

And all that, because of me.

“Can you please sit your ass down?” Colton said, rubbing his face. “You’re giving me a fucking headache.”

I paused in front of Colton, glaring. “How the fuck can I calm down when both of my mates are missing?”

My brother shook his head. “We have a plan, Xavier. We just need to wait for Big Mac to rest up to use your connection to Adéluce to find them.”

I growled, starting to pace again.

“Xavier, if you just wait and calm down—”

“What if it’s too late?” I snapped. The second my hands were no longer fists, the urge to strike took over, and I swiped at a candle on the dresser. It slammed against the wall, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

“What if they’re both hurt?” I asked. “What if she’s fucking torturing them as we speak? You still think I can calm the fuck down?”

Colton eyed the broken candle with arched eyebrows. “Big Mac is not going to be happy about you breaking her stuff. That candle smelled like lavender, and we all know how she feels about lavender.”

I whirled toward him, pushing him on the chest. “Colton! Focus!”

He sighed, falling back into a chair. “I am focused.” He looked up at me. “We have a plan. You just don’t like how long it’s taking.”

I scowled. My entire body ached like I’d been attacked. Every muscle was tight. My heart pounded so fast I thought it would break. “If Adéluce fucking touches them—”

Colton huffed. “Xavier. *Stop* thinking about it. You can’t do anything right now.”

His severe expression was so unlike him. My throat felt raw, and I looked away from him. My legs felt weak suddenly, and I dropped to the edge of the bed. My heart rate slowed, everything inside my chest turning heavy. Same as my head.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, my forehead in my palms. This was a nightmare. The people I loved the most were in danger, and all I could do was fucking *wait*.

“Greyson’s right,” I said. I sounded raw. “This is all my fault.”

Colton stayed silent for a beat. Then he said, “Greyson is just freaking out over Cali…”

I offered a bitter snort but kept quiet. What the hell was I supposed to say?

Colton came over and sat next to me. “I know this is hard, man. I know how much you love Cali, but you have to preserve your energy. From what I’ve seen of this Adéluce, she’s no joke. You have to be in your top condition to get Cali back.”

I looked up at Colton. “And Ava.”

Colton frowned. “What?”

It pissed me off how he excluded my Luna from the conversation. “And Ava. She was taken, too.”

Colton raised his eyebrows. “I mean, we’ll try to get her back, but Cali is the real goal, right?”

I felt like biting my own fist. “They *both* are. I know Ava can take care of herself, and Cali’s a lot better off than she once was… but you saw what Adéluce is capable of. She could kill them.”

Colton stared at me for a beat. It was as if he was weighing what he was about to utter next. In the end, he said, “Would it be so bad if Ava died again? She did kill our mom, Xavier. She’s not even supposed to be alive.”

My jaw clenched right along with my fists. “Don’t fucking talk about my Luna like that. Okay?”

Colton’s eyes narrowed. “Your *Luna*? Are you fucking serious?”

I gritted my teeth, looking away.

His voice came out low. “But you only made her your Luna because Adéluce forced you to,” he said slowly. “Right?”

I didn’t reply.

Colton grabbed my arm. “*Right*?”

I yanked myself out of his grip and faced him. I didn’t know what the fuck to say to him. I understood where he was coming from. God knew I’d had the worst time dealing with my conflicted feelings about Ava as well. But *still*.

“Colton, I can’t do this right now with you,” I said with a shake of my head. “She’s my mate—you know this. You’ve always known this. What do you want me to say?”

Colton’s expression darkened. “Well, the last time I was here, you wanted her dead.”

“She’s changed, Colton. You haven’t seen her the last few months.”

He snorted, shaking his head bitterly. “Can people really change that much that fast?”

I paused at his question. Everything Ava and I had been through came rushing back. We’d worked together to rebuild the Samara pack, and she loved them so much. She’d put her life in danger so many times to protect me. She loved me, and ever since Adéluce, it had felt like her love was all I could ever have.

I knew that she would never leave me.

“I’ve seen Ava change right before my eyes,” I told Colton. “She’s become the woman I used to love.”

Colton frowned, looking away. I reached over, resting my hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “I know what she did to our mother is inexcusable, but I did kill her once for it already. We have to let it go.”

Colton didn’t say anything. Just stared at the floor.

“Being with her complicates things, but I do love her,” I went on. “What she and I have might be flawed, but it’s real.”

Colton glanced at me. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And I know I’m gonna keep loving her and Cali, even after Adéluce is dead. This isn’t a spell. It’s real.”

Colton looked at me again. He seemed to think for a long beat, skeptical in a way that wasn’t like him. I could feel him weighing things in his head, trying to figure out what it all meant. What it all meant for us as brothers as well. When his expression lightened, I wanted to breathe a sigh of relief.

“So, what?” he asked. “You’re really doing this? You’ve accepted that you have two mates now? And I thought having one of them was tough.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I have to get them both back first.”

Colton nodded, standing up. Patting my shoulder, he said, “Well, I still hate Ava. But if you love her…” He paused. His expression sobered up again, the struggle in his face obvious. The next words seemed to come out of him with difficulty. “If you love her, I won’t harm her in any way. I’ll help you get her back.”

“Thanks, brother,” I said, hugging him.

I’d missed this dickhead so much.

“I should check on Marissa,” I told him a moment later. “She’s part of my pack.”

“Right,” Colton said, swallowing hard. “Because you’re no longer part of the Redwood pack. You’re a Samara…”

He trailed off in a weird way. Like he was sad.

I’d rarely, if ever, seen Colton like this.

“Anyway.” He shook it off, looking away from me before clapping his hands together. “Let’s go see what’s going on with the others.”

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“How are you feeling?” I asked Marissa after kneeling down next to her. Torin was wiping her brow with a cloth.

Marissa just offered a nod.

“The hand choked her and used its magic to singe her,” Torin explained. “She can’t talk right now. She needs to heal. It might take a minute.”

Ravi squeezed Marissa’s hand. “She’s better, though. The color’s come back to her cheeks,” he told me, his expression full of hope.

“We’re going to find Ava and rescue her,” I told Marissa. “Don’t worry.”

Marissa nodded, moving her hand in a gesture for me to come closer. I frowned. Did she want to whisper something? There was nothing secret in a room full of werewolves. Either way, I leaned in, watching her.

Suddenly, her eyes darkened.

She reached up and grabbed my face, the move so fast it was shocking. Her strength was shocking, too. I couldn’t force her to let me go.

Torin let out a shout of shock. “Marissa? What are you doing?”

“Marissa,” I grunted, “what the fuck—”

“Hey, let him go!” Colton said, grabbing at my shoulder while Ravi said something similar and grabbed Marissa’s wrists. She wouldn’t let go, and I couldn’t break free no matter how much I struggled. It had to be Adéluce’s magic that gave her this disturbing strength. Because when Marissa opened her mouth, it was Adéluce’s angry, sinister voice that I heard.

“Come find your mates, Xavier Evers. Come find them before I kill them both.”

**Episode 4767**

I was fighting to drag Ava up as she dangled over the void, but I didn’t have the strength.

*It’s really hard to not think we’re fucked right now!*

I gripped her one hand, and with my other I grabbed the frame of the door for dear life.

“Don’t you dare let go!” she screamed.

*As if that’s something I can control!* I wanted to shout in her face. Though perhaps this wasn’t the best time to do that. I refocused, ignoring the pain in both my arms as I fought to keep her alive.

“Try to get another handhold!” I shouted. “I can’t pull you up!”

She swayed a bit, attempting to reach up to the doorframe. It didn’t work. “I can’t!”

I groaned, straining as my grip on her slipped half an inch. Ava gasped, her eyes wide with fear. “Okay, okay! I’m sorry for being such a bitch to you, just don’t let go!”

*Easier said than done!*

My arms were hurting, head pounding, chest heaving hard from my rapid breaths. But I wasn’t going to let Adéluce win.

*No. Fucking. Way.*

Letting go of the casing, I used both my hands to quickly grab hold of Ava’s. Twisting my body, I slid forward but hooked my feet against either side of the doorframe so I didn’t slide out. Ava let out another scream before we jerked to a stop.

“What the fuck!” Ava panted, looking up at me like I’d lost my mind. “How the fuck did you do that?”

I wasn’t going to waste time by patting myself on the back for my *Mission Impossible* skills right now. Maybe later.

“Shut up and try to pull yourself up! I don’t know how much longer I can hold you!”

Ava nodded vividly, reaching with her other hand to grab and circle both of mine as I held onto her. My arms and wrists burned with Ava’s added weight, but I breathed through my nose and pushed through. Soon, Ava managed to hook her feet over the top of the ledge, and the pressure eased. With a grunt, I kept one hand in hers. With the other, I reached back to grip at the door to pull Ava in with me the rest of the way.

*Oh my god! Look at me! Look what I’m doing!*

In the end, with Ava still alive by some miracle, both of us lay on the ground. We were breathing heavily from the exertion. I was woozy, and my arms hurt, but at least we were both alive.

“Fuck,” Ava muttered, heaving. “That was close.”

I nodded, still trying to catch my breath. With a grunt, Ava crawled to the door to slam it shut. She did it with so much menace I wondered if she worried that we’d get sucked in and out of the house. Knowing Adéluce, that could actually fucking happen.

Ava came back to fall on the floor next to me, and for a moment, we just tried to catch our breaths. She did not thank me for this, which was very Ava. But who gave a damn what *she* thought when I was internally hyping myself up to the moon and back?

She looked around. “Seems like there’s no way out of this damn place.” Standing up, she came over and held out her hand to me.

This was probably going to be the most gratitude Ava was gonna give me, so I accepted the gesture and got to my feet. But then, to my surprise, Ava murmured, “Thanks.”

She wasn’t even looking at me while she said it. I couldn’t resist poking her.

“Did you just say something?” I asked innocently.

She rolled her eyes, elbowing me. “You heard me. Now, come on—let’s go and see if we can find any clues about how to get out of this hellhole.” She picked up the candelabra and marched out of the room.

*Eh*, I thought, following her. *That’s good enough, considering it’s Ava.*

I was pretty sure she was still rattled by the whole near-death incident. She seemed to want to get the hell away from that door as quickly as possible. As for me, my arms still throbbed slightly, but otherwise I was fine. Though, when I reached for my magic and my fingers flexed to bring up nothing, the pit in my stomach grew.

*It’s fine, Cali*, I thought. *You’ll get through this. Greyson will come find you.*

I hoped when Adéluce showed up, my magic wouldn’t fail me—no matter what fucking spell she’d put on me. Ignoring the drumming of my heart, I stuck close to Ava and the candelabra. Neither of us spoke, because what was there to say?

We needed to get out of here.

The next semi-identical bedroom we encountered had more of those creepy stained-glass windows. A faint glow framed each one of them, as if there was daylight outside. But when I reached over to touch the glass, it felt double-paned and thick. I wasn’t sure where that bit of light came from.

I poked at the glass again. Was that a hum of energy? Fearful but also intrigued, I knocked on it.

“Be *careful*,” Ava snapped from up ahead.

“I *am*,” I snapped back. Who the hell was *she* to tell *me* to be careful when she was the one who’d literally almost jumped out of the house? I decided not to tell her that as to avoid any more friction. Our best bet to get out of here would be to work together. But would Ava agree to that?

I doubted it.

With a huff, I turned to the glass again, moving closer to inspect the picture depicted. It was a man whose intestines were being eaten by crows. I winced.

“Adéluce needs to hire a new decorator,” Ava said flatly. I turned to see her stare at the other stained-glass window of a man being beheaded by a grinning witch.

*Well, then. Charming.*

“I think we should—”

A sudden scuttling sound was heard from above me. My stomach dropped as I looked up, taking a step backward. “Did you hear that?” I hissed.

Ava nodded, scanning the ceiling.

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

The skittering happened again, and I saw the shadow of something move in the darkness of the ceiling. A rat? A giant spider?

*God, this is so bad!*

“I hate this place so much,” I said in a whisper.

“That’s why we need to get the fuck out,” Ava replied.

“But if we don’t find a door—” I cut myself off when I heard the sound a third time. Something moved again, racing across the ceiling and down the wall.

It was Adéluce’s disembodied hand.

“Not *you* again!” I shouted, jumping backward when the hand charged forward, as if to grab me. At the same time, though, Ava came between the hand and me, batting it away with the candelabra. The hand fell backward with a sickening flop before it scurried away toward the exit.

“Leave us alone!” I screamed, thrusting my hand forward to blast it into pieces.

Nothing happened.

*It’s not fixed! My magic is still not fixed!*

“It won’t work,” I told Ava, panting.

Ava looked at me like I was crazy. “What?”

I tried again, looking ahead as the severed hand ran out of the room like a bug. No energy had spilled from my fingertips.

“My magic’s not working!” I told Ava, shaking.

Denial about how bad a situation could only get me so far.

*Now, I’m starting to panic!*

Ava scowled, squinting ahead.

“What are you trying to do?” I asked. “The hand left!”

“What does it look like? I’m shifting,” Ava snapped.

I glared at her. “Honestly? It looks like you’re constipated.”

Ava rolled her eyes and focused again. In the meantime, a question burned through my head.

*If Ava can really shift, wouldn’t she have done it when she was dangling out the door to help herself claw her way back inside more easily?*

I didn’t dare ask that out loud. Instead, I backed up to give her more space to become a wolf. I tried to get as far away from her as possible, focusing on not freaking out. I leaned against the nearby window, but when my hand brushed against the stained glass, the hum of energy from earlier returned.

This time, it felt like a spark, and I jumped away.

*What the hell is happening with these windows?*

“Okay,” Ava announced, turning to face me. “I can’t shift.”

“Great,” I said. My fear and apprehension started to get clouded by anger.

*How* dare *Adéluce do all this to us? Leave us alone!*

“So, we’re trapped here with that severed hand, and we can’t use magic,” I said, flailing my hands around. “This cannot get any worse!”

I’d spoken too soon.

I accidentally brushed my elbow against the window when I’d flailed around, and a shock coursed through me.

“Ouch! What the hell?” I rubbed at my skin, jumping away from the stained glass just as something next to it moved.

The *wall itself* moved.

A spectral figure appeared, bursting right out of the wall and zooming directly toward me.

**Episode 4768**

**Greyson**

“What the hell is going on?” I asked after rushing into the room. I found Ravi and Colton holding back Marissa as she grabbed at Xavier. Her eyes were slits.

“Marissa? What the—”

Big Mac blocked my way before I could reach them. Her face severe, she told me, “She’s under a trance. You can’t bring her out of it until it’s done.”

Her fingertips digging into Xavier’s neck, Marissa spoke in a hushed voice that wasn’t hers. “Go to the Malheur Forest if you want to save them, Xavier. Come alone.”

This was Adéluce.

The second the words were out of Marissa’s mouth, her grip on Xavier loosened. Her hands fell to her side, her eyes closing and her head lolling back. Distraught, Ravi shook her shoulders, but Big Mac and Torin explained to him that she’d be okay.

Colton’s attention was fixed on Xavier.

Our brother had sat back down on the floor after Marissa let him go, breathing hard. A wave of shame overcame me when I recalled the way I’d attacked him earlier. My wolf had wanted to hurt him, kick him while he was down, blame him for all this shit.

He was my little brother, and I’d failed to protect him so many fucking times.

“You okay?” Colton asked Xavier, extending his hand. Xavier nodded while Colton hauled him up. He didn’t look at Colton or me.

He still looked shaken.

I hated it.

“It’s a trap,” I said, staring at Xavier. “First of all, they could be anywhere in the forest. And besides, the moment Adéluce gets you alone—”

“I know,” Xavier cut me off. “But I think that’s really where Ava and Cali are. They’re bait for me.”

“But you’re not going to actually go alone… are you?” Lola asked from the door. Jay was next to her, looking sullen. Xavier frowned at Lola’s words. Jay shook his head, his eye flickering from Xavier to me. It felt like he expected me to do something.

Not as the Redwood Alpha, but as Xavier’s oldest brother.

“You can’t go,” I told Xavier.

My brother’s severity bled into fury when he glared at me. “You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do!” he snapped, pushing past me.

“This shit again,” Colton said with a sigh in the background.

I blocked Xavier’s way before he could get out of the room. “I’m not saying this as some kind of Alpha contest, Xavier. I’m saying this because it’s too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“You don’t fucking think I know that?” he snarled. “How useless do you think I am?”

“I never said that—”

“I know what you’re thinking, Greyson.”

Was this really about me, though? Or was it about what Xavier thought of himself?

I could feel the frustration and despair rolling off him. And if my wolf wanted to crush him before, now it stilled. Now, it allowed me to think clearly.

“Come on,” I told my brother, glancing at everybody around us. “Let’s talk in private.”

Xavier glared at me, opening his mouth to no doubt say no, but Colton stepped in.  Firmly, he told our brother, “Go with him, X.”

Xavier’s face said he was pissed at Colton, and that he wanted to kill me. Plain and simple. But when he stomped away and toward the nearest side room, he left the door open. This was as good as it was going to get, so I would take it.

I walked in and closed the door behind me before turning to see him glaring daggers at me.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” he snapped.

“Just do it,” I said, waving a hand. “Go ahead.”

He looked at me like I was nuts. Maybe I was.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he spat.

“You’re feeling too many conflicting emotions at once, Xavier,” I said. “So much shit has happened to you in the last few weeks, and you’re not thinking straight right now. So go ahead. Yell at me, punch me, whatever. I’ll take on your excess anger, and then your head will be clear enough to make a sane decision.”

Xavier paused, his chest heaving.

Then he stormed toward me, fists lifted.

I waited for a blow—I thought I kind of deserved it after the way I’d attacked him earlier. But it never came. Xavier came to a sudden halt in front of me, shaking all over, fist still raised. He stared at me while lowering his fist. His voice broke when he spoke. “You think I don’t know this is all my fault? You think I don’t know I’m the reason Cali was taken?”

“I shouldn’t have said that—”

“So what?” He sneered. “You’re sorry now?”

“I am.”

“*Fuck*. *You*,” he spat, accentuating every word with his index finger as he pointed at my face.

“Hit me, Xavier. It’ll make you feel better.”

He eyed me some more, up and down. And all the turmoil I saw in his face, all the pain, made me feel almost as sorry for him as I felt for myself.

I’d lose my mind if anything happened to Cali.

I didn’t know what I would do.

And I did not want to know what Xavier would do if he lost both her and Ava.

“Shit,” Xavier said under his breath. He squeezed his eyes shut, looking away and shaking his head. He took a deep breath, and I saw his shoulders ease, the tension bleeding out of him bit by bit.

“Feeling any better?” I asked quietly.

Xavier shook his head again. He glanced at me. “You’re really a son of a bitch, you know that?” he said, but there was no fire to his words. He just seemed accepting.

Less out of control.

“I know,” I said. Cautiously, I moved closer. I patted him on the back briefly, hesitating. It felt like a miracle when he didn’t flinch away.

“I need a minute,” he said, voice terse.

I nodded. “I’ll see you out there.”

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“What the fuck was that?” Colton asked when I returned to the room. “What happened?”

“I just gave him the outlet I thought he needed,” I said.

“An hour ago you wanted to throttle him, Greyson. Now you’re helping him out with, like, his feelings and shit?” Colton scoffed. “You two have gotten so fucking confusing since I’ve been gone.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “Could’ve been worse.”

It could’ve been much, *much* worse.

When Xavier came back into the room, he gave me a nod of acknowledgment.

“I won’t be going to the forest alone. We’ll go as a group,” he announced. “But I have to be the one to face Adéluce. There’s no arguing that.”

Big Mac eyed Xavier, then me. “And how do you expect to get to the forest?”

I cleared my throat, giving her an apologetic look. “Any chance you have enough strength to blip us?”

“I can only blip five people,” Big Mac said. “I have no energy for more.”

I’d expected her to tell me to go to hell, so this was progress.

We decided to split into groups. Ravi, Gabriel, Jay, and Mikah would go by foot. Xavier, Colton, Lola, Marissa, and I would do the blipping. Torin had healed Marissa, and she felt much better now. She insisted she come with us. “Ava is my best friend,” she told Xavier. “My Luna. I can’t stay back.”

“But what if the creepy Adéluce thing happens to Marissa again?” Colton asked Big Mac. “*Could it* happen again?”

The witch said, “We can never be sure.”

Xavier allowed Marissa to come with us anyway.

Gabriel looked among Mikah, Ravi, and Jay before his eyes settled on Xavier. “The guys and I will head out now and meet you there,” he told Xavier.

“Good. Thank you, Gabe,” Xavier said.

His eyes flashing, Gabriel said, “Adéluce needs to fucking die.”

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Just a few moments later, I found myself—along with Xavier, Colton, Marissa, and Lola—far away from Big Mac’s cozy house. Big Mac had blipped us in seconds. I was disoriented from the magic, my head feeling muddled. A cold gust of wind hit me in the face when I looked around. We were on a ridge somewhere in the forest. Snow crunched under my boots when I took a few steps forward to scout the area.

“It’s this way,” Xavier said, his voice sharp.

I faced him. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Big Mac says I’m still kind of connected to Adéluce. I can sense that this is the way.”

I didn’t question him. In silence, I followed behind Marissa, Lola, and Colton, with Xavier leading the way. We walked down the slope of the ridge, toward the woods. The trees started out healthy and tall, but as we continued on, they changed, becoming gnarled and shrunken. It was creepy, almost, like something you’d see in a horror movie. There were no birds or animals anywhere in sight. No sound anywhere at all, only the cold air and us.

And then, up ahead, I saw a tall building rising above the trees before us. The top of it vanished in the thick clouds.

“Look over there,” I said, pointing ahead.

Everybody turned.

“It’s a tower,” Xavier said. His voice was cold. “It has to be Adéluce’s.”

Lola wrinkled her nose. “What an ostentatious choice of a residence.”

Everyone else nodded stiffly. My heart was beating fast inside my chest.

*Cali, we’re coming*,I mind linked.

Could she hear me from so far away? I doubted it. But I still needed to say the words.

“Remember what I said,” Xavier said. “I go in first. Adéluce is mine.”

Before Xavier could move, Marissa grabbed him by the arm. “Wait,” she said, looking around. “Something feels weird here.”

Xavier scowled. “Is it Adéluce? You feel her magic?”

Before Marissa could respond, a shriek, at once booming and shrill, echoed all around, shaking the trees.

“What the fuck?” Colton sputtered.

As one, we looked up as a shadow crossed over us.

A bat-shaped creature, as big as a dragon, flew above our heads.

**Episode 4769**

Ava and I screamed in unison, a fucked-up little chorus of horror. I lifted my hands instinctively, ready to blast the specter. But once more, nothing happened. No spark. No magic.

*Shit. Something about this place doesn’t let me use my powers.*

The creature had dark holes for eyes. It flew straight at me, like it was a bullet and I was there for shooting practice.

*Get out of the way, Cali!* I screamed at myself. *Move!*

Before I could force my frozen body to do so, Ava dragged me out of the way.

“Snap out of it!” she shouted, shaking me.

The ghost missed, zooming past Ava and me before it whirled around and faced us. I choked when I realized that the ghost’s guts were hanging out, my stomach churning. Looking back at the stained-glass window, I gasped out, “Is that… you?”

The ghost flinched at the question. Its narrowed eyes flashed a milky white, but it didn’t attack again. It zoomed away, leaving Ava and me alone in the room.

We were both shaking.

“Shit,” she rasped. “Why the hell did that ghost look so pissed at you?”

I gulped, glancing at the window. “Maybe because I touched the stained glass?”

“Overreacting much?” Ava scoffed. “It’s not like you did anything that bad for that thing to get so mad. We can’t pin the blame on your personality for this one.”

The fact that we’d nearly died like fifteen million times today but Ava still had the energy to drag me was almost admirable.

*Am I impressed, or do I want to throttle her?*

I had no time to answer the question. Ava said, “I feel that we need to steer clear of the windows from now on. Just to be sure.”

“You think?” I asked wryly.

“Let’s just get out of here.”

I nodded, shooting one final look at the window before following her out. My head and chest were aching, and I had to focus on my breathing. I couldn’t lose my shit here. But it really didn’t help that we had to worry about ghosts and that damned severed hand while roaming around this house like lambs waiting to be slaughtered.

*When the hell is Adéluce gonna show up?*

I both dreaded and anticipated her arrival. I’d rather implode than show her I feared her, but what I felt on the inside was another matter. Adéluce had stripped us of our powers. Ava couldn’t shift, and I was not able to use my magic to fight the vampire-witch. As far as shitty circumstances went, those two things were a fucking catastrophe waiting to happen.

*Don’t think about it, Cali*, I told myself. *Not all hope is lost. Maybe your magic will break free when Adéluce appears. It’s gonna be—*

My thoughts were interrupted when we entered the next room, and I spotted another one of those stained-glass windows. Another gruesome scene was depicted in it, framed by that hint of glow.

And then it hit me.

“I think the windows are holding them,” I blurted.

Ava grumbled something. I turned to see her studying a fireplace that looked like it had been bricked off.

“What?” she asked distractedly. “Who is holding who?”

“The windows,” I said, gesturing around. “I think they’re holding the ghosts of the people dying in them!”

Ava paused, facing me. She raised an eyebrow. “First of all, that’s fucked up.”

“That’s Adéluce.”

“Second, where the hell did you get that theory?” Ava added.

“When I touched the glass, I could feel the energy in it,” I said, “and it wasn’t only Adéluce’s energy. I don’t think so, at least.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest, glancing at the window. “Okay. But why would they be in the glass?”

I paused, pondering. I felt like a detective in a gothic novel, only much lamer, because I had no idea what the fuck was happening here. “Maybe they’re all people who’ve died magically?”

A sudden breeze picked up, followed by the sound of a chilling voice.

“*Oh so close*.”

My entire body went rigid at the sound of Adéluce’s voice. I spun around to face the vampire-witch, and the first words out of my mouth were sharp.

“Let us out of here. Right now.”

Adéluce laughed. The shadow of her was shaking. I realized, now, that she was not her real self. She was a projection that had arrived here to toy with our minds, and even if I’d had my magic right now, I wouldn’t have been able to harm her.

My anger only grew.

“*What* was close?” Ava asked Adéluce. I had no idea what the fuck she was talking about. But then, when the vampire-witch sauntered over to the window, I understood.

“Cali’s theory about the stained glass,” Adéluce said simply. This one showed a man being held by his toes over a bunch of sharks. “These windows depict the deaths of all my foes.” She turned to Ava and me, her eyes dark. “Some of these men worked with Xavier, in fact. They were all partially responsible for the death of my Henri and René.”

There were *so* many windows in here, and I was filled with dread at the thought of Adéluce getting her hands on Xavier. Ava looked pale and jarred, like she’d just had the same thought. But Adéluce wasn’t looking at either of us. She kept on speaking, eyes on the window.

“Death would’ve been a mercy for those who took away everything I loved, you see,” she said, her voice cold. “I had to think of another way to torture them. For eternity.”

My throat hurt when I spoke. “So you trapped them here? In this creepy tower in the middle of nowhere?”

Adéluce turned to me, eyebrows arched. “What better way to punish your enemies than to torture them in their afterlife and beyond?”

“Ghosts are powerful, Adéluce, even against someone like you,” I said. “This is a fucking—” I looked around. “Magical hazard.”

Adéluce snorted. “Silly girl. My magic keeps them tethered to their stained-glass windows. They cannot free themselves enough to hurt me. They’re my little pets.”

I couldn’t believe her arrogance.

*I feel it, in my gut, that somehow this will be her downfall…*

My hands were shaking, so I turned them into fists. Spine straight, I asked Adéluce, “And now you want to put *us* in one of these windows?”

Adéluce laughed. “Oh no, you’re not my true foes…” She looked between us, her smile turning sharp. “Though, don’t get me wrong, you *have* pissed me off.”

“We’re bait, then,” Ava said flatly.

Adéluce’s shadowy projection started to walk toward us, her hands clamped behind her back. It was a slow self-indulgent stride. “Oh, Ava,” she said. “You’re a smart one.” She paused, tilting her head to the side. “I did kind of like you, you know. That’s why I gave you what you’ve always wanted.”

“What?” Ava bit out.

Adéluce’s smile was all teeth. “Xavier, of course.”

My heart dropped and shattered on the floor at that. Ava looked like she’d been slapped in the face. Neither Xavier nor Ava had ever admitted to Adéluce having anything to do with them getting together. To witness the vampire-witch saying that so casually, like a condescending little gift to Ava, made me want to scream.

*What the hell happened to Xavier while he was under Adéluce’s spell? How is any of it connected to Ava?*

Ava didn’t say anything, as if she refused to dwell on the weight of Adéluce’s words. The vampire-witch didn’t see this as a conversation, anyway. She was all too happy to continue with her little villain’s monologue.

“Your relationship with him was interesting while it lasted, Ava,” she said. “But unfortunately, right now, you’re more useful as bait. I’m sorry to cut your honeymoon period short, but you have to die.”

Ava flinched.

“Wait!” I gasped out.

Adéluce’s cold eyes fell on me. “Or maybe *you* should die, Cali.” She grinned at Ava. “Wouldn’t that be fun? Xavier would be devastated, of course.”

Ava’s gaze was cold as ice.

“That’s…” My voice cracked. “What— what are you saying?” e

Adéluce laughed. “Don’t you see? There is no other way. One of you has to die, just so Xavier knows I mean business. Otherwise things get boring, and boredom is the worst torture of all.” She glanced at the gruesome scene on the window behind us. “Even worse than getting eaten by sharks.”

Ava sputtered, “You can’t just—”

“Oh, but I *can*,” Adéluce cut Ava off. “I feel I should let you two decide who should die. The suspense is delicious, don’t you think?”

I froze. I thought all that was left in me was a readiness to fight, but I had underestimated Adéluce’s sick cruelty.

She looked between us, her mouth stretching into a sinister grin. “You have an hour to make the decision, girls. Who gets to live, and who dies? Good luck!”

And with that, the vampire-witch’s shadowy figure disappeared.

**Episode 4770**

**Xavier**

Cursing under my breath, I glared up at the giant bat. It was hovering over us, circling like a shark. It twisted its neck downward, and its eyes flashed red.

“Oh my god!” Lola screeched. “Duck!”

The bat swooped down over us a moment later, and we all dove out of the way. As I rolled onto my back and came to a stop, I thought that I had no fucking time for this bullshit. I needed to save my mates. I shifted into my wolf, and the rest of the group followed suit. The bat let out another angry shriek. It seemed infuriated that it hadn’t caught anyone yet.

Adéluce had a sick sense of humor.

*We should return to the woods. The trees will cover us*,I mind linked Greyson.

*That’s what I thought*, Greyson agreed, and we both broke into a sprint. Lola, Colton, and Marissa followed. We ran until we were hidden under the thick canopy of tall trees. The bat screamed again above us.

*I think it can feel where we are, even if it can’t see us*, Lola mind linked. *Don’t bats have echolocation?*

*That doesn’t work the way you think it does, Lola*, Colton said with a scoff.

Talons pierced through the foliage above us, cutting off the conversation. And then, that damn demon bat tore out a whole tree with its feet just to spot Lola and attack. Her wolf yelped and leaped to the side, ducking under a rock formation.

It wasn’t enough to hide her.

The bat tore off the tops of the trees in a circle around Lola’s location, creating enough so it could see her. It dove in again, getting close enough to Lola that the bat’s talons scraped her shoulder. Jay’s face flashed through my mind. My friend’s mate was not going to die on my watch. No fucking way.

*It won’t stop targeting her*, Greyson mind linked. *We have to fight it off.*

He’d taken the words right out of my mouth.

*Okay, everyone form teams!* I mind linked.

Greyson and I came to one side of the rock formation that Lola had hidden under. Marissa and Colton came to the other. When the bat screeched and swooped in again, trying to catch Lola, I raced ahead. Visibility was shit, with tree barks of ravaged trees scattered everywhere in the wake of the bat’s destruction, and Marissa and I accidentally crashed into each other.

The bat noticed us and attacked, but we were ready to fight back, jaws open, our claws out. The bat flew up, startled and screaming, when I swiped at it. At least that gave me the opportunity to get Lola out of that rock formation. The scratches she sustained had already healed, thank god.

*What does this thing even want from us?* Lola demanded. *I mean, other than our horrible death, obviously.*

*I don’t think it’s gonna give up*, Greyson said.

*I agree*, Colton said*. We need to get rid of it before it gets rid of us.*

*Our line of sight here is not clear enough to attack it*, I mind linked. *We need to get closer to the tower, too.*

*The trees open up over there*, Colton said, looking ahead. *Follow me!*

He led the way to what looked like another small clearing. This one was much closer to the tower. The building looked so tall, so massive, I wondered how I’d be able to find Ava and Cali in there. Could I climb it? How far up did it go?

I was ready to mind link with Cali when another searing scream came from that damn bat. It had spotted us in the clearing and was charging closer. My wolf growled when I noticed that the bat went straight for Colton.

*Colton!* I mind linked as the monster swooped down.

Colton’s wolf didn’t reply. He was too busy clawing and biting at the bat after it scraped him with its talons. I raced toward them, letting out a long howl of fury. Immediately, the bat let Colton go, screaming once more before it wobbled into the air. It flew off, but in a weird way, slamming into the tops of the trees before righting itself and flying up again.

*The howling*, Greyson said, looking over at the bat. *I think it upsets the bat’s flight!*

*It must affect the sonar or something!* Lola replied.

*I’ve never heard of that happening with wolf howls before*, I said.

*Maybe it has a different effect because the bat is so giant*, Lola said.

*The sonar receptors would also be giant and more sensitive*, Marissa spoke up.

I wasn’t sure if there was any science about any of that, but I wasn’t going to question it. If the howling worked, it worked. We’d use it to our advantage like a weapon before the beast attacked any of us again.

*You okay?* I mind linked Colton.

*I can’t believe that ugly thing got me*, Colton mind linked. His wolf looked annoyed more than anything. A little embarrassed.

*Are you okay, though?* I pressed.

He nodded, standing tall and wincing slightly. *I’m fine. Gonna rub some dirt on it.* He looked around for the bat*. I don’t get the sonar thing*, Colton said. *If it hates noise so much, why won’t it stop screeching?*

*It’s coming again!* Lola exclaimed, her wolf yipping.

The bat swooped down toward the clearing, immediately aiming for Lola. Greyson and I exchanged a look and let out howls at the same time. It was as if an electric shock went through the creature. It swerved, shuddering, its talons hitting dirt instead of Lola. With yet another angry shriek, the bat flew up once more.

*It’s working*, I told Greyson. *It’s now or never—use the howls to confuse it as we get closer to the tower! I’ll take the front.*

*I’ll take the back*, Greyson said, turning to Lola, Marissa, and Colton. *You three run between Xavier and me like before.*

A moment later, I charged ahead toward the tower. The bat tried to attack us two more times, but Greyson’s howls helped fend it off.

*I think we’re gonna reach the tower soon*, Marissa mind linked as we ran. *It’s only a few—*

Marissa’s mind linking was cut off by Greyson and Colton screaming, *Xavier! Marissa! Careful!*

A moment later, the bat dove in and dug its claws into Marissa’s back.

Her wolf roared in pain, and I raced over to her. Marissa was Ava’s best friend and part of my pack. Without a second thought, I jumped upward, biting into the bat’s talons. I was lifted into the air with Marissa, hovering over the ground. I still held tight with my jaws. That thing wasn’t going to get rid of me so easily.

Colton and Greyson howled while I chomped on the bat’s feet. The bat kept on screaming, but it still flew us several feet forward. I bit down even harder, and that did the trick. A moment later, the bat let go, and both Marissa and I went tumbling down. I hit a tree’s branches before landing on the snowy ground with a thud.

*Xavier!* Greyson mind linked. *Where are you? Status update?*

I looked over at Marissa. *A little banged up, but I think we’re okay. I can still see the tower from here.*

*We’re coming to find you*, Greyson said.

I limped over to Marissa. Her wounds were healing, and I could almost fucking taste the relief I felt. Ava’s friend, a Samara like me, was alive.

*Are you okay?* I mind linked.

*I think so*, Marissa said. *Got a bad gash in my side, but it’s already healing.*

I nodded. *Okay, good. Come on now, let’s go.*

Marissa started to stand but then shuddered and fell to the ground again. She let out a whimper.

*Hey*, I mind linked. *Are you sure you’re okay?*

Marissa shifted to human, moaning in pain as she fell back onto the grass. “No,” she gasped, reaching for her leg. “My leg hurts so bad.”

I huffed and tried to gesture with my snout for her to climb on my back. She shook her head. “No,” she said, breathing rapidly. She had to be in terrible pain. Panting, she added, “I need you to help me as a human—carry me. Shift back.”

What the fuck? This wasn’t protocol. You didn’t shift back to human in the middle of a battle if you could help it. I looked around. At least the bat wasn’t close by anymore; I could hear its screams in the distance. So I shifted and grabbed Marissa, pulling her arm over my shoulders to carry her weight.

She winced. “Hold on, it—it hurts. I need to sit somewhere…”

I looked all around us. What looked like a well was only about twenty feet away. I headed over slowly, letting Marissa put her weight on me. When we got to the well, she leaned against the ledge before bending slightly to check her leg.

“How bad is the pain?” I asked.

Marissa slowly looked up at me. Her eyes were black as onyx.

I gasped. “What—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Marissa pushed me hard.

So hard that I fell backward, dropping down into the well.

**Episode 4771**

*Adéluce wants us to fight each other?* Really it shouldn’t have shocked me. If either Ava or I died, it would be a huge blow to Xavier…

*And to Greyson.*

No, there had to be a way around this. Just because Adéluce thrust us into the situation didn’t mean that Ava and I actually have to comply with it. There was no question in my mind whether Ava hated me—she loathed me, in her own words.

I glanced over at Ava, who looked ready to kill me. Which, I guessed, wasn't all that unusual—except this time, she’d just been given the green light to do exactly that.

I backed up. “Ava, we don’t have to do this—any of it!”

“No. We’ve been against each other for as long as we’ve known each other.”

She started to circle me, and I moved to keep as much distance between us as possible, raising my hands in case she decided to strike. I didn’t want to kill her, but I wouldn’t hesitate to protect myself. Thankfully, Ava couldn’t shift. If she could, she would probably already be ripping my throat out, no warning. Still, I wouldn’t put it past her to rip my throat out with her human teeth if it meant saving her own life.

I had to de-escalate this situation before one of us ended up seriously hurt. “Ava, Adéluce is doing this to us on purpose. She wants us to go at each other’s throats! Attacking each other isn’t going to help us get out of here.”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know about that. It sure sounds like killing you will help *me* get out of here.”

Ava took a step toward me, and I held my ground. Anger coursed through me. “You want to hurt me, is that it?” I demanded. “Well, if you hurt me, you know you’ll just be hurting Xavier, right? That’s what Adéluce wants, but that’s not what you want, is it? Hurting me would cut him deep. More than you will ever admit.”

Ava’s eyes flashed, and, for a brief moment, she looked even more furious than she had before.

*Oh shit.*

She let out a cruel laugh. “Right, because hurting *you* will always be the best way to get to him, right? Because, somehow, after everything, you still believe you’re his one true mate. *I’m* the interloper here in your eyes, right?”

“I—”

She cut me off. “Here’s the thing, Cali. You’ve never even stopped to consider that I knew Xavier first. I was his mate first. We loved each other long before you ever came into the picture!” Her voice rose louder and louder until she was screaming at me. Her eyes were wide with rage. “So, if *anyone* is the interloper here, it’s you!”

Sweat slipped down the back of my neck. Ava’s words echoed in my head, and for a moment, my vision went red. I shook with anger, feeling suddenly dizzy. Then, my eyes locked with Ava’s, and I saw the fury written on her face. The pure hatred. She *wanted* to hurt me. This wasn’t about Adéluce letting her out if she killed me—that was just a convenient excuse for Ava to do what she’d always dreamed of doing—killing me and finally having Xavier all to herself.

*These past few weeks must have been heaven on earth for her*, I realized. *Xavier was keeping his distance from me, trying to protect me, and that gave her a chance to sink her claws into him.*

“You really think that, don’t you?” I said with a scoff. “You don’t think there’s any reason he moved on to me? Do you think it’s because life is unfair to you specifically or something?”

Ava was never going to make peace with Xavier and me having our own mate bond. She was never going to so much as tolerate me. Because, despite all the shitty stuff she’d done, *I* was the villain in her story, and I always would be.

“Life has never been fair to me!” she snarled. “My mate fucking killed me. And I *literally* came back from the dead for Xavier. What have you ever done for him?!”

My frustration boiled over and morphed into a fury that was all my own. “You fucking killed his mother!” I shouted back. My voice echoed around us in the tower room, and I saw momentary shock take Ava aback.

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t you—”

I cut her off. “I’ve got a newsflash for you, Ava. You were *dead* when I became Xavier’s mate! Why? Because you’d *killed his mother!*” I plowed forward, anger fueling me. All the things I’d always wanted to say to Ava were rushing forward. What did I have to lose now? She was probably going to try to kill me anyway. Might as well get some licks in while I still could. “You seem to conveniently forget that fact every time you want to be the poor innocent victim. Maybe you got what you deserved.”

She let out a scream of rage and charged at me with her candelabra. I threw up my own, blocking her initial blow, but she kept delivering hit after hit. I swung back at her, the metal clashing together until both candelabra went flying from our hands. For a moment, Ava and I stared at each other. Then she lunged.

Instinctively, I tried to throw up a shield. Nothing happened.

*Oh. No magic. Right.*

*Shit.*

I braced for the impact a split second before Ava barreled into me. She was a being of pure rage, trying to hold me down, slap me, punch me, kick me. All I could do was roll around and try to wriggle away and hit her right back when the opportunity arose.

But goddamn it. Ava was strong. She might not have access to her wolf form, but her lean, fury-powered muscles were almost too much for me to fight against. But she wasn’t the only one running on anger. This fight had been a long time coming, and neither one of us was going to make it easy for the other.

She pinned me down and pulled back her fist to strike me. I threw up my arm at the last second and caught her fist. I kicked her off me, and, my vision shifting to a red haze, I slammed her into the floor, my knees pinning her arms down as we grappled with each other. Why couldn’t she stay down? I felt like I just kept seeing red, one thing running through my mind.

I wanted her fucking dead and out of my life for good. And this was my chance. Maybe I was looking for an excuse, too.

Ava kicked and thrashed, knocking me square in the jaw. I reared back, and she scrambled for me again. I popped her one in her chin, grabbing for the candelabra, but she got ahold of my hair, pulling hard.

“Get off me!” I screamed. She sank her nails into my arm, not letting me go. I cried out with the pain, but was able to grab the candelabra and hurl it into her. She reared back, and I raised the metal above my head—

And then, a brief second of clarity broke through my murderous haze.

*Wait. I don’t want Ava dead.*

No matter what terrible stuff Ava had done—and there was plenty of it—I would never want her to *die* for it. That wasn’t my call to make. She’d made some awful decisions, yes, but she’d also been through incredible heartache. Ava wasn’t innately bad or good. She was just… Ava. We would *never* be friends. But I’d always hoped that, at some point, we could stop being enemies.

I didn’t want to kill her. It certainly wouldn’t help things with Xavier if I killed the other person he was mated to. And, more importantly, I could never live with myself if her death was on my hands.

But, even as I thought all this and knew in my heart it was the truth, something whispered at the back of my mind, telling me to end Ava. Reminding me of everything she’d done to hurt me, hurt Xavier, hurt so many people I loved.

*Kill her now. Remember all the time she’s hurt you.*

*Kill her now, and you’ll never have to share Xavier again*, the voice whispered.

*Kill her now. She’d do the exact same thing to you if she could.*

*Kill her.*

*NOW.*

I released the candelabra, and it clattered back to the ground. I scrambled backward, finding my feet, and putting as much space between us as possible.

She curled onto her side, gasping and wheezing, her hands going to her throat. To the red ring left by my hands.

“Wait, stop!” My back hit the wall. “Ava, we need to stop! I think we’re under a spell. I think Adéluce is… I don’t know. Making us angrier! Heightening our emotions!”

Ava slowly rose to her feet. Her expression was cold, and a trickle of fear slipped down my spine.

“This has nothing to do with that witch and everything to do with you ruining my life!” She sped forward, and all I could do was raise my arms in self-defense.

It wasn’t enough. I didn’t know if Ava was just *that* angry, or if Adéluce’s spell was making her stronger, but Ava slammed into me, knocking the air clean from my lungs. I went flying backward. I felt glass shatter and give way behind me as I slammed into the wall.

Then the world went black.

**Episode 4772**

**Ava**

Satisfaction unlike anything I’d ever felt before rushed through me as Cali collapsed to the ground amidst the broken shards of the stained-glass window I’d just sent her flying into. I waited, a smirk tugging at my lips, for her to rise to her feet with another impassioned plea.

But Cali wasn’t moving.

*Must have hit her harder than I thought.*

My smile widened. “Come on, Cali. Is that really all you’ve got?”

She didn’t move. Didn’t so much as twitch.

My smile dimmed, and I took a hesitant step forward. *Just what game is Cali playing here?*

I took another step closer, and a chill rushed through me. All the anger burning in my veins was suddenly snuffed out, and something like horror was creeping into the edges of my mind. It was like my head had suddenly cleared from a fog, and now I was left with a reality of my own making, but I wasn’t totally sure how I’d ended up here.

I kicked at her foot, but she was still unresponsive. “Cali!” I said sharply. “Come on. Stop playing around. I didn’t hit you *that* hard.”

*What if I—*

I couldn’t even allow myself to complete the awful thought swirling around my head.

I dropped to my knees beside Cali, mindful of the broken glass littering the floor, and rolled Cali over onto her back. A trickle of blood was running down the side of her face.

*Shit! Did I actually kill her? What the hell was I thinking?!*

Cali was right, I realized. Adéluce must have been messing with our minds, amplifying our normal dislike of each other. Because, yeah, Cali wasn’t my favorite person in the world. Or, fine. I hated her guts most of the time. But I got over my desire for Cali to be dead a long time ago. Sometimes I daydreamed about a world in which Cali never existed in the first place, had never been born to throw a wrench into my mate bond with Xavier, but that wasn’t the same thing as wanting her to be dead, or, even worse, wanting her dead at my hands.

And as much as I hated to admit it, she was right about Xavier, too. He would be devastated if Cali died. And I loved him too much to ever put him through that much pain and misery. Even if, in some ways, it would make my life happier, easier if Cali were out of the picture.

I shook my head, fighting against the lingering thoughts that whispered to me to end her now—if I hadn’t already.

“Fuck.” I blew out a breath. “Cali, this isn’t funny! Wake the fuck up!” I shook her roughly, but she didn’t respond.

Suddenly, a visceral and long-buried memory rushed to the forefront of my mind. The night I killed Marlene. The taste of her blood in my mouth. The way her flesh and bones and sinew crunched beneath my teeth. The way her body went limp and lifeless.

*No, no, no, no.* I shook my head again, pounding my fist against my temple like that could push the thought out. But it had happened, much as I tried not to ever think about it. I’d done that unforgivable thing, and now history was repeating itself.

Somehow, Xavier had found it in himself to forgive me for what I’d done to his mother. But in the face of this awful mistake? He couldn’t. He wouldn’t. I’d just blown up our future. Hell, I’d probably just blown up my own future, too. Because if I’d killed Cali, it was almost a sure thing that Xavier would kill me all over again. And if he didn’t, Greyson certainly would.

*No! Xavier wouldn’t hurt you again. And he wouldn’t let Greyson hurt you either. He forgave you once already, right? He can do it again. And killing his mom… that’s so much worse! Cali’s just—*

I gulped.

*Just his mate.*

I covered my face with my shaking hands. Yeah, he’d forgiven me for killing Marlene. But that was only after living with the guilt of murdering me. Oh, and I can’t forget the part where I literally came back from the dead and spent months earning back his trust and love.

I was pretty sure I couldn’t do all of that a second time.

*What am I going to do?!*

Next to me, Cali let out a groan. All the breath rushed out of my lungs in a heave of pure relief. I dropped my hands away from my face.

“Cali? Oh my god. Thank fuck. You’re okay,” I said, my breathing shaky. “Can you hear me?”

She groaned again, and her eyes slowly opened. She blinked sluggishly, again and again, like she was trying to get her eyes to focus. She turned her head slightly, and I put a hand on her shoulder. Panic gnawed at me when she winced at the contact.

*How did I go from wanting her dead to desperately needing her alive?*

“Shit. Sorry. Just—don’t move yet, okay? Tell me, how many fingers am I holding up?”

She squinted. “Either two or four. Ava?”

I gulped. “Yeah?”

“When did you grow a second head?”

I frowned. *Shit. Did I give her a concussion?*

Cali sat up, and I reached for her again, stopping short of physical contact. “Careful! You’re, um… not in the best shape.”

Cali waved me away. “I’m fine.”

I sat back on my haunches and watched her. “I don’t expect you to believe me, but I didn’t mean for that to happen. Hurting you, I mean. I—I just… kind of lost it. I’m sorry, Cali.”

She nodded. “It’s okay. I wanted to hurt you, too. I think Adéluce cast some kind of spell over us that would feed off our anger.”

“I think you’re right.” And I’d fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker. *Stupid Ava.* Cali even tried to warn me, but I was too caught up in my own feelings to listen. That must’ve been exactly what Adéluce wanted—my hatred for Cali to overpower everything else.

I stood and held my hand out to Cali. She met my eyes, and even slightly concussed, I saw she recognized what I was doing. It was an olive branch. A kind of reluctant truce. The fight had exposed all of our ugliest thoughts and feelings for one another, and there was no getting around that, but at least we could set all that aside long enough to try to get out of here.

Cali took my hand, and I helped her to her feet. Then she looked up at the ceiling and shouted, “You’re going to have to try harder than that to kill us!”

*She’s shouting at Adéluce.* I liked the sound of that. Showing that vampire-bitch who had made Xavier’s life hell that we weren’t afraid of her. “Yeah! Come face us in person, you coward!”

Cali looked at me with wide eyes. “Um… maybe don’t go that far? She *is* a very powerful witch.”

I shrugged. “I’d rather just get the chance to rip her throat out now and be done with it. She’s done so much to Xavier. She deserves nothing less.”

Wind gusted through the room. *Is Adéluce* *about to make an appearance?*

But then something swooped down from the ceiling that could only be a ghost.

“Great.” I groaned. “Another complication.”

The ghost swirled around us, and I lifted my fists in defense, although I knew it probably wouldn’t do much good against a spirit. But then the ghost stopped, hovering mid-air. He looked down at us with a confused expression.

“Are you the ones who broke my window?”

I glanced over at the shattered glass on the floor and cursed. “Yeah, but we didn’t mean to.”

He floated closer, and I could see his skull was partially caved in, like he’d died from a blunt-force trauma to the head. Probably someone slamming something against his head in a killing blow. *What a horrifying way to die.*

The ghost smiled. “Yes, thanks to the two of you, I’m free now! I’m very grateful for your actions.”

“Uh, you’re welcome,” Cali said. “But we weren’t knowingly trying to free you, so I don’t know if you really need to thank us.”

He grinned again. “Nonsense,” he said. “My name is Victor, and I am eternally grateful to you two.”

“But wait, you’re saying if I smash all these windows, then a shit ton of ghosts who hate Adéluce will be free?” I asked. I could already feel the plan forming in my mind. It was a simple enough one, after all.

Cali looked at me. “What are you thinking, Ava?”

“Uh,” I said. I supposed I shouldn't be so surprised she wasn't following me since I'd really smacked her before. “I’m thinking we should break all the windows and free these ghosts. They’ll go after Adéluce, and we can escape. Done and done.”

She frowned. “That seems risky.”

I shrugged. “Staying here like a couple of sitting ducks is even riskier. It’s the only plan we’ve got.” I headed to the nearest window and raised my fist to smash it.

Cali grabbed my arm. “Wait! I can’t let you do that.”

**Episode 4773**

**Xavier**

I stared up at the shaft of sunlight beaming down on me from the surface. *What the fuck just happened?* My head spun, and my body ached from the long plummet and the collision with the hard-packed dirt. After a beat, I stumbled to my feet and looked up at the top of the well. It was so far up—or I was so far down—the sunlight was weak enough for me to look straight up at it.

*Fucking great. I’m trapped at the bottom of a well like some horror movie.* I started forward, then jolted when I bumped into something. No, some*one*. It was Marissa.

With a flash I remembered: *she’d* pushed me down here.

“What the hell—” I stopped my indignant speech. Something was wrong. She was just… standing there, staring off into the distance. She wasn’t even looking my way. She hadn’t given any indication that she knew I was there, even after bumping into her.

*What the fuck is happening now?*

“Marissa?” I asked.

She didn’t reply.

I inched around in front of her—no response there either—and waved a hand in front of her face. She didn’t even blink.

I was right before. Something was very, very wrong. And it was starting to freak me the fuck out. “Marissa? Hello! Can you hear me?”

If she could, I had no way of knowing it. She hadn’t moved an inch. Hadn’t spoken. Hadn’t so much as blinked or flinched.

“Marissa!” I barked. “Wake the hell up! Whatever is going on, snap out of it!”

Again, nothing. Just Marissa standing there, looking like some kind of creepy, deactivated robot. I moved back into the shaft of weak sunlight and called up toward the opening above. “Hello?! Can anyone hear me?”

Silence answered me. Because of fucking course it did. Of course I was stuck down here with a catatonic member of my pack—who’d shoved me down here in the first place. Of course this rescue mission was as insanely hard as possible. We were dealing with Adéluce, after all. Why wouldn’t every single fucking step be like pulling teeth?

I turned around, my eyes adjusting to the cramped, dark well bottom.

*Fuck. How am I going to get out of here? And what about Marissa? She’s no help in her current state—not even to herself.*

Suddenly, Marissa let out a ragged gasp, and I spun to face her just as her body began to slump. I caught her before she hit the ground.

“Hey, Marissa. Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“What?” she groaned. Her eyes rolled in her head for a moment before focusing on me. “Where are we?”

I looked around the dark, dank well bottom. “I don’t know for sure, but I think something bigger happened to you when Adéluce’s hand attacked.”

She frowned. “What are you talking about?” She lifted a hand to touch the bruise on her neck. Even in the dim light, I could tell it hadn’t faded at all. The mark was angry and red, the handprint with all five fingers still clearly visible on her skin.

A loud, echoing screech of the giant bat above yanked our attention upward, to the entrance of the well.

Marissa gasped. “Holy shit! That’s the thing that tried to carry us away!”

I nodded. “Seems like your memory is coming back. That’s a good sign.”

She frowned. “I remember getting picked up, but then it’s all blank. I… I don’t remember anything else. What am I missing?”

I sighed and considered keeping the truth from her. None of the crazy shit that had happened to her was her fault. She hadn’t been at the steering wheel or whatever. And I didn’t want her to feel badly about what had happened.

But at the same time, didn’t she deserve to know what was happening to her? What might *keep* happening?

“I think you went into a trance or something,” I explained. “You, um, pushed me down here and then must have jumped down after me yourself. I don’t think you fell.” It certainly didn’t seem like she’d gotten the wind knocked out of her like I had.

Marissa’s eyes widened. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry, Xavier. I had no idea… I didn’t mean to. I swear!”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it. I know it wasn’t really you.”

She didn’t look comforted, though, and I didn’t blame her. It had to be a hell of a jolt to realize something *or someone* was taking your body for a joyride and you had no memory of it, no way to stop it. And, if I hadn’t told her the truth, she’d just be walking around with gaps in her memory and no idea what was happening to her.

I took her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure this out, okay? We’ll find Big Mac and have her check you over again. You won’t have to live like this forever.”

She gulped, then nodded. “So how are we gonna get out of here?”

I looked up at the walls of the well. They looked slick with something slimy and smooth. Because of course they were. Why *wouldn’t* the bottom of this horror movie well be covered in a layer of disgusting mystery slime?

I sighed, hating what I was about to suggest. “I could try climbing.”

I half shifted so claws grew out the tips of my fingers and then started pulling myself up. The slime caked beneath my claws immediately, and I tried not to think about how fucking gross it all was. *This is our only way out. I’ll have to grin and bear it.* But then, only about three feet above the well bottom, the stone crumbled under my claws, and I lost my grip and plummeted backward. I landed on my ass with a thud.

“Fuck.”

Marissa hurried to my side. “Are you all right?”

“Just fucking peachy,” I grunted. Then I stood and examined the rocks. “Maybe if I try another spot.”

“If you think so…” she said, trailing off.

I started climbing again, but the same damn thing happened. I hit the ground again. “Fuck! The stones are just too old and weak!”

“Hey, come over here!” Marissa called. She was standing on the far side of the well, and when I reached her, I saw she’d found a wobbly stone set into the side. “Do you think this is something?”

Privately, I didn’t see how one wobbly stone would be of any help in getting us out of here, but she sounded so desperate. Hell, I was desperate, too. Cali and Ava were still out there somewhere, at Adéluce’s mercy. And that made me desperate enough that I’d try just about anything.

I reached out and pushed on the stone, and it fell away like the stones I’d tried to climb. Then, the rest of the stones around the first one fell away like dominoes, revealing an opening that led to a tunnel.

I jumped back and yanked Marissa away with me, just in case something awful popped out of it. But nothing happened.

I peered inside. It was a long, dark tunnel. With my wolf vision, I could see it was pretty narrow. It wouldn’t be an easy path to navigate.

“Where the hell does this lead?” I murmured to myself.

Then Marissa’s voice, monotone and empty, sounded behind me. “To the ones you desire.”

“What?” I turned and saw that her eyes were glazed over again. “Oh shit.” I hurried to Marissa’s side. “Hey. Snap out of it!”

She lifted a single finger and pointed toward the tunnel. “It is the only way to reach them in time. Hurry before they’re both gone.”

A chill raced down my spine, and I lifted my head to the sky. “Enough with your manipulative games, Adéluce! I’m the one you want! Leave her alone!” I was so fucking tired of these games, of the run-around and the puzzles. Adéluce’s issues were with me and me alone.

Predictably, there was no answer, but after a beat Marissa let out another gasp and dropped to her hands and knees. She looked up at me as I reached out to help her stand.

“It happened again, didn’t it?” she asked.

“Don’t worry. I won’t leave you alone. I’ll protect you.”

She nodded, then let out a hiss, slapping a hand to her neck.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The bruise, it’s burning!” She lifted a hand, and I watched in horror as one of the finger marks glowed before fading from her neck.

I frowned. “What the hell?”

“We need to get out of here. What did I do in the trance?” Marissa asked.

“You told me to go down that tunnel.” I nodded in the direction she’d indicated.

She gulped, then nodded once. “Well, then I guess we have no choice,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Marissa stepped into the tunnel, and I had no choice but to follow after her.

**Episode 4774**

**Greyson**

I raced toward the tower with Lola and Colton running beside me. Trees blurred past us as we made our way closer and closer. Anxiety thrummed in my veins. I knew I wouldn’t be settled until I was reunited with Cali again. But the closer we got to the tower, the more wary I felt. Adéluce surely wouldn’t let us just run up and rescue Cali and Ava. She had to have laid some traps for us.

I mind linked to Colton and Lola.

*Do you see the bat thing?*

*I don’t!* Lola replied after a beat. *Last I saw, Xavier was fighting with it.*

*Xavier?* I reached out to my brother through the mind link, but there was no response. The sound of someone crashing through bushes and the undergrowth caught my attention up ahead.

*Xavier?* I called out, my mind link trying to connect with the newcomer.

Ravi and Jay emerged from the trees. *Nope, just us!* Ravi replied.

They fell into step beside us, continuing toward the tower without missing a beat.

*Great, you made it*. *Just be careful of the giant flying bats*, I warned them.

*Giant* what*?* Ravi replied.

*Fuck*, Jay muttered.

I felt the same way. Adéluce and her seemingly endless trials and traps could get fucked. I was so damn tired of the vampire-bitch making mine and my family’s lives hell. This time, she was going to stay dead. I’d personally make sure of it.

Finally, we reached the base of the tower. Gabriel and Mikah were standing at the base, their hands on their hips.

“Took you long enough,” Mikah said.

Gabriel just grinned. I didn’t know him all that well. Not like Xavier did, in any case. But it didn’t take much to recognize the competitive glint in his eyes. I’d seen that look on my brother’s face enough to have it memorized.

I shifted back to my human form so I could also speak with them.

“Where’re the others?” I asked.

That wiped the smile right off Gabriel’s face. “What do you mean? Aren’t *we* the others?”

I shook my head and looked around. “My brother and Marissa aren’t here.” I turned back toward the trees, but Ravi and Jay also shifted back to human and stopped me.

“We’ll loop back around to find him,” Ravi offered.

Jay nodded. “Stay focused on the task at hand. We don’t have time to waste here.”

“Fair enough.” I nodded. “Let us know if you run into any problems.”

I looked up at the tower. It was so tall I couldn’t make out the top through the cloud cover. *Right. Why wouldn’t she stash Cali in the tallest tower on the fucking planet?*

“I already scouted the base,” Mikah said. “There’s no door. No windows. No access short of flying in. I imagine she’s enchanted the tower to only open for her.”

I growled. “Well, we knew it wasn’t gonna be easy. Not when Adéluce is the mastermind.” I looked back up at the tower. “I have a feeling she’ll be keeping them at the top.”

“What do you want to do, Greyson?” Colton asked me.

“I want to get my mate back,” I snapped.

Lola hummed. “It’s too bad Cali doesn’t have longer hair.”

Everyone frowned at her.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Gabriel asked.

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve all heard of Rapunzel, right?”

I just shook my head. “This isn’t the time for fairy tales.” But I could tell Lola was using humor as an emotional shield right now. I was sure I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed how her voice shook. She was worried about Cali, too. We’d all feel a hell of a lot better once Cali was safe, back where she belonged.

I looked up at the tower again. “But you do have a point.”

“Um, I don’t think hair is actually strong enough to hold a person’s weight,” she said, sounding confused.

“No, but climbing up the outside of the tower might be the only way to get to the top.”

She groaned and looked up at the tower again. “Are you sure? That’s a long way to climb.”

“I know, but I have to try. She’s my mate.”

“Fine, but I’m coming with you,” Lola said.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s risky. What if you fall?”

“What if *you* fall?” she pressed, rolling her eyes. “Come on. Two people climbing means two people have a chance to make it into the tower, right?”

*I guess I can’t argue with that.* I sighed. “Fine, we’ll both go up.”

“Okay, and not that you two won’t do just fine, but Mikah and I will stay down here as spotters for you,” Gabriel offered.

Mikah frowned. “But really, try not to fall, okay? Once you get high enough, you’ll make just about anyone below—werewolf, vampire, or hybrid—go splat.”

Lola winced. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. And the imagery.”

I wasn’t a fan of the thought, myself. It was chilling to imagine coming so far, fighting against so many powerful enemies, only to meet my end by falling off the side of a fucking tower. But I couldn’t think like that. I was going to beat this thing. Climb it all the way to the top, find Cali, and hopefully find a way out of the tower that involved a long, winding set of stairs. Because if free-climbing the exterior with only my own body weight to hold up was dangerous, it’d be impossible with Cali clinging to my back.

And if one damn thing was certain, it was that I would *not* let her “go splat” like Mikah said.

I turned to Colton. “Can you go help the others find Xavier? Once you find him, let him know what our plan is.” Hopefully by the time Xavier was found, Lola and I would be making our way into the tower.

“Okay.” He headed off into the woods to find his twin.

I turned to Lola and shifted just enough that my fingertips turned to razor-sharp claws.

“You ready to be Cali’s Prince Charming?” I asked.

She gulped but nodded. “I was born ready.” She partially shifted as well as we approached the base of the tower.

I pulled in a deep, centering breath. It was now or never. I reached up and sank my claws into the stone, half-expecting some horrible spell to trigger. All that happened was my claws sank an inch or so into the stone. I climbed up a few feet, and the holds I was making stayed sound.

*This plan might just work.*

“You good?” I called to Lola, who was only a few feet away.

“Yeah. It’s like this stone was made for climbing!”

I’d felt the same way. The thought unsettled me a bit. Since there was no door at the bottom, Adéluce had to have guessed we would end up climbing the tower. So why was she making it so easy for us?

*Don’t get ahead of yourself*. *This is a tall-ass tower. There’s no telling how high it goes. Nothing about this is going to be easy.*

I pushed the thoughts aside. Trying to anticipate Adéluce’s traps was like going up against a master chess player in your first ever game. She had too much advantage on her side. I’d waste my time—Cali’s time—trying to figure out how to outmaneuver her.

“Are we doing this, or what?” Lola called.

I nodded. “We’re doing this. Let’s go.”

And with that, we started up the outside of the tower. My claws made excellent handholds and footholds in the stone, and we ascended quickly.

*Maybe we* can *do this. No, no maybes. We* have *to do this. I have to get to Cali.*

Before I knew it, we were up among the clouds. The wind whipped at our bodies, trying to peel us off the stone. I chanced a look down. Mikah and Gabriel were only dots down below.

Vertigo hit me, and I sank my claws farther into the stone, breathing deeply. We’d easily passed into the *splat* zone.

*No, don’t think of that. And from now on, only look up.*

My muscles shook as I continued pulling myself up, but I ignored the burn, the growing exhaustion. I’d powered through worse before.

But as I continued to climb, the weakness grew exponentially. I had to pause to take a break before I fell right off.

Lola called out. “We need to find a fucking window! I’m not sure how much farther I can climb.”

“Just keep going! Don’t think about it!”

We kept climbing, and I kept getting weaker and weaker. I dug my claws in as hard as I could, and pain lanced up my fingers. I looked down at my hand in disbelief and horror. Blood ran in rivulets from my fingertips. My nail beds were shredded. But the gore wasn’t the terrifying part.

My hand was entirely human again.

I tried to shift back, but it didn’t work.

Lola let out a scream, and I looked over to see her hanging from one hand. The hand that flailed in the air was human, not wolf.

“I’m shifting back!” she screamed.

Fuck, something was stopping us from shifting up here.

**Episode 4775**

Ava jerked out of my hold. “Don’t fucking grab me!”

“Okay, okay!” I held my hands up and stepped back, still a little unsteady from the header Ava had given me. “But let’s just talk this over before we do anything rash.”

Her scowl deepened, and a thrill of fear slipped down my spine. Was her anger overtaking her again? Was she going to attack me again? I was even less equipped to fight back with the pulsing ache in my head and the way the world sort of spun on its side every time my eyes moved.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to ignore the ache in my head, and pulled in a deep, calming breath. *Relax, Cali. Getting freaked out by what-ifs isn’t going to help anything. That’ll probably just play right into Adéluce’s hands.*

She wanted Ava and me to lose control. She knew the history we had—Xavier’s two mates—as well as the ongoing enmity. Adéluce had put us together for a reason, and she wouldn’t be pulling this trick if she didn’t think it had a pretty damn good chance of working.

Nobody could ever accuse the vampire-witch of not doing her homework.

I opened my eyes and met Ava’s gaze. “Okay,” I said again, as calmly as I could. “Let’s just take a breath. Take a beat. For all we know, that anger spell is still lingering, okay? And we don’t want to do anything we’ll regret.”

She looked like she wanted to fight me—which, again, wasn’t unusual—and I couldn’t tell if that was Ava or the spell at work. She crossed her arms over her chest with a huff. “So, talk then. Why don’t you want to use a literal army of ghosts to free ourselves?”

“Because we don’t know if the ghosts will be on our side or not. I get where you’re coming from—logically, all these ghosts should have a vendetta against Adéluce—but there are too many unknown variables here. And if we break those windows, there’s no unbreaking them. We just don’t know if this will have bigger consequences. We’ve done stuff like this before, remember, and it’s gotten us in big trouble.”

She sighed. “Cali, I say this with all due respect, but what the hell kind of situation do you think we’re in right now? We are trapped, at the mercy of a psychotic vampire-witch who wants nothing more than to make Xavier suffer—using us. There’s apparently some spellwork going on that may or may not make us try to kill each other at any second. You can’t use your Fae magic, and I can’t shift. We don’t know where we are. We don’t even know if we’re in our own fucking dimension!”

Her words hit me like a pound of bricks poured over my head.

*Or maybe that’s just the concussion…*

Either way, Ava wasn’t wrong. We had no idea where this tower was located, and Adéluce clearly had the ability to travel between realms at will. For all we knew, we could be somewhere we’d never been before—far, far away from any help.

“It doesn’t feel like the Fae realm here,” I said after a beat. “Or the demon realm.” I shuddered, thinking of the short time I’d spent in the demon realm. If there was one silver lining in this total shitshow, it was that Adéluce hadn’t sent us there.

“Yeah, but there are probably dozens of realms out there. I’m sure there are plenty we haven’t heard of, and who knows how many of them Adéluce has access to?”

The ghost, Victor, piped up, making me jump. I’d completely forgotten he was there. Had he listened to our entire conversation?

“You are on earth,” he said. He smiled as we turned to face him. “In Oregon, to be exact.”

Relief flooded my limbs, making my knees weak. “How do you know?”

The ghost shrugged. “There’s literally nothing for me to do here, being tethered to this tower. So, I examine the terrain and talk to the other ghosts. And I listen in on Adéluce whenever she’s here. I know we’re in the mountains of Oregon, but that’s about it.”

“That’s incredibly helpful. Thank you.” I turned to Ava. “At least we’re close to home.”

“Being in Oregon isn’t going to help us get out of this damn tower,” she said. “I mean, I’m glad we’re on earth. But this tower could be right outside either of our pack houses, magically cloaked, and we still might not make it out.”

God, she was such a buzzkill. Irritation lashed at my insides. Would it kill her to look on the bright side for once? I just wanted her to shut her mouth until she was ready to actually be helpful.

*Oh, hi there, anger spell.*

I pulled in another deep breath, then turned to Victor. I didn’t trust myself to keep trying to reason with Ava and not lose my temper.

“How long have you been trapped here?” I asked. He’d just said he spied on Adéluce. Maybe he knew something that could help us get out of this tower.

“I think I’m the newest ghost. Some have been here for years. Decades. And me…” He frowned, seemingly deep in thought. “You know, time is funny when you’re dead, but I believe it’s been a few weeks since Adéluce locked me in the glass. Maybe a few months? It all runs together.”

I nodded. “If you spy on Adéluce whenever she’s here in the tower, have you ever heard her talk about her plans for someone named Xavier Evers?”

Victor’s eyes widened. “Xavier Evers? He was an associate of mine back in the day. A fellow mercenary.”

*Wow. What are the odds?*

And then I remembered Xavier telling me that a bounty hunter was killed trying to look into the Duquettes. *Oh. I guess the odds are pretty good then.*

“Do you know how to get out of this tower?” Ava asked.

He shook his head. “It’s never been something I’ve had to worry about, being a ghost trapped in a stained-glass window, and all.”

I sighed. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy. Adéluce wouldn’t lock us up with someone who would know how to set us free.

“Could you help us look?” I asked. Now that he was free, maybe three heads would be better than one. Plus, he was a ghost. He could float around and go through walls and stuff, couldn’t he? That had to be useful in looking for a way out of here.

He shrugged. “Sure.” And then, just like that, he zoomed away into the wall.

I turned back to Ava, who was eyeing the other stained-glass windows with a look I didn’t like.

“Please don’t,” I said as gently as I could. “I’m not saying your plan won’t work, but we need to think it through a bit more.”

“And I’m just saying that I’ve fought in and survived enough wars to know how to make a killer strategy at the last minute.”

I nodded, but I didn’t say anything else. Arguing with her didn’t seem like the right call. Already, I could feel tension building between us again. I couldn’t tell if it was just our natural antagonism, or the spell of this place was kicking in again. Adéluce had already outmaneuvered us in a hundred different ways—inciting another fight, one I would almost certainly lose—would put the odds even more in her favor. We had to push back against this. Be better than this. Adéluce had more than proven that she was out to get us, and she was smart enough and powerful to be the greatest threat we’d ever faced. Just look at what she’d done in the few weeks she’d been controlling Xavier. We couldn’t afford to be careless about this.

“Ava, can we just *try* to see if there’s another way out of here first?” I said calmly. “That’s all I’m asking. Let’s try to find another way, and if it doesn’t work, we’ll go with your plan—and hope Adéluce doesn’t come try to kill us since we refuse to kill each other…”

She scowled again. Was this a pride thing? Did she seriously want to put everything at risk because she didn’t want to risk me being right?

*Come on! How petty is she going to be here?* I got that she didn’t like me, that she viewed me as a threat to her happily ever after with Xavier—and the feeling was mutual—but did she really hate me that much? Was it really that important to her to prove herself superior to me in every single way that she was willing to risk both our lives?

“Please,” I pressed.

She sighed. “Ugh, fine. But once we hit a wall on your plan, we go straight to mine.”

“Yes, of course!” I said quickly, holding out my hand for her to shake it.

Before she could clasp my hand, a giant claw crashed through the window, and Ava let out a scream as its talons scraped down her back.

**Episode 4777**

My scream echoed off the walls as I watched Ava fall to the ground with a thud. I rushed to her, terrified that whatever got her from outside had just killed her. Using all my strength, I pulled her away from the razor-sharp claws that wanted to tear her in half.

I set Ava down, then tried to find something I could use as a weapon. The beast let out a shrill scream, then disappeared. Unsure of what was going on, I ran to the window to see if it was getting ready to attack again or if there were more like it outside.

*How the heck did it get all the way up here? And why is it so freaking ginormous?* I wondered.

As I scanned the clouds outside, I got my answer. The beast shrieked as it flapped its leathery wings, gaining momentum to mount another attack.

*Oh great, a monster bat. Just what we need right now*, I thought.

I ran back to Ava, who was still splayed out on the floor, looking like the star of her very own grisly crime scene. She groaned with pain as her shirt went from a soft grey to a dark red. She was bleeding heavily, and I wasn’t sure how much more blood she could stand to lose.

“Let me see,” I said, bracing myself for the worst.

Ava turned over slowly, jerking in pain as I pulled the tattered pieces of her shirt away from the vicious claw marks. I winced when I saw that a piece of that beast’s claw had broken off inside Ava’s back.

“A piece is still stuck in your back,” I said. “I have to pull it out, okay?”

“Just do it!” Ava said through gritted teeth.

I wrapped my hand as firmly as I could around the broken claw. Ava hissed in pain and muttered a colorful string of curse words.

“On three,” I said. “One!”

I pulled the claw out immediately, taking Ava by surprise. She cursed so loud my ears began to ring, but at least I had removed the claw from her back.

“Shit,” I said.

The broken claw was huge. It looked like a long, jagged dagger capable of gutting creatures twice our size. I wiped Ava’s blood on my pants, then pocketed the claw. It made for a good weapon, and I was in dire need of one since my magic wasn’t working. I didn’t want that beast finding me empty-handed when it came back for round two.

And I sure as hell didn’t want Adéluce to find me defenseless either.

“Fuck, are you sure there was just one?” Ava asked.

“I’m sure,” I said, ripping the hem of my shirt.

I paused to take a look at Ava’s wounds and winced. They looked awful. Almost like they were getting worse by the minute.

“Why aren’t you healing?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Ava said, wincing as she sat up. “Maybe it’s the same thing that’s stopping me from shifting. It’s keeping me from healing, too.”

*Fuck. This isn’t good*, I thought.

Ava and I were already at a massive disadvantage in this tower. If we wanted to stand even a slim chance against Adéluce, Ava needed to be at full strength. She winced as she redistributed her weight.

“Okay, let’s definitely try to find a way out of here, then,” I said.

I wrapped Ava’s wounds as best as I could. She bled through the cotton of my shirt, and I wondered if I was wasting time trying to bind them. As I debated adding another layer of cloth, I reached into my pocket to grab the claw shard. My fingers tightened around it, and I felt the jagged edges biting into my skin.

*Ava’s injured. She’s a liability. What if she slows me down during the escape?* I wondered.

She groaned as I tightened the makeshift bandage. I started to pull the shard out of my pocket.

*It would be more humane to put her out of her misery now, right?* I asked myself.

With a firm grip on my impromptu dagger, I raised it high over my head and got ready to strike. Just as my arm began to drop, I broke free from my thoughts and dismissed my intention. With the claw back in my pocket, I scrambled away from Ava.

*No! This is just part of Adéluce’s spell!* I thought, snapping out of my violent reverie.

The urge to end Ava was so strong that I had to fight myself to keep from moving back to her. I bit my tongue and focused on the pain to keep the dark thoughts at bay. I had to be strong. I couldn’t let Adéluce sway me.

Thankfully, Ava was none the wiser. She was woozy from the pain, though still with it enough to be a grouch to me.

“Are you done, or what?” she asked.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “All done.”

I reached out to pull the remains of Ava’s shirt back down. She looked paler than before as she struggled to get to her feet.

“Let’s see if we can find Victor,” I said. “Maybe he discovered something.”

Ava groaned as we made our way down a narrow passageway. I called out for Victor, praying I wasn’t attracting some kind of gnarly beast instead.

As we walked, I noticed Ava putting more of her weight on me. She seemed to struggle to keep her head from dropping, and I worried she was going to pass out. I called for Victor again and heard the desperation in my voice.

Victor popped his head through a wall. “Were you calling for me?”

“Yeah, did you find a way out for us?” I asked.

Victor shook his head, causing me to curse. Ava groaned in pain and slumped down further like her energy was being drained. She was hot to the touch and drenched in sweat.

*Shit, her wounds might be infected*, I thought.

“Did you find anything?” I asked.

“Yes. I found this secret room,” Victor said. “It looked… uh, magical.”

“Take us there,” I said.

*Maybe I can use something in there to heal Ava. Or at least get us out of here*, I thought.

I followed Victor down the hall, carrying an ever-weaker Ava. I was practically dragging her along at that point. We reached a dead end, and Victor popped through the wall without a second look.

“Victor!” I screamed, annoyed.

He popped his head back and gave me a sheepish grin. “Right, right… you can’t walk through walls.”

I scowled. “Correct.”

“No problem! It’s right through here,” he said. “Just have to get through this wall.”

Despite his unhelpful advice, I nodded and propped Ava against the wall. Convinced she wasn’t going to collapse like a rag doll, I began to touch the panels of the wall. Each seemed pretty solid. If there was a hidden lever, it was too well hidden for me to see it.

“That frame,” Ava croaked.

“Huh?” I asked.

“That frame is thicker than the others,” Ava said, nodding her limp head toward it. “See it?”

Since Ava was propped against the wall, she had a different vantage point than I did. She was staring at the side of a huge, macabre painting on the wall. I pressed my cheek against the wall and saw that Ava was right.

The side of the frame facing the corner of the wall was thicker than the others by at least an inch. I walked over to it and touched it. My fingers tingled with a hum of energy that was unmistakable.

*Magic!* I thought triumphantly.

I pushed the frame, drawing power from it like I did with my Fae magic. I took the power and used it to conjure my Fae sword. It was weak and flimsy like a limp noodle, but it was there for a brief second. Progress.

Closing my eyes, I focused on drawing more power to call my sword. I opened my eyes to see a stronger version than the first one I had made, but it wouldn’t last long. Quickly, I jammed the sword into the crack between the painting and the wall. With a good push, I was able to jimmy it open. The frame opened with a creak to reveal a room.

“Wow,” I said.

“Told you,” Victor crowed. “Magic!”

The room was filled with all manner of vials, potions, and jars. There had to be something here that could help Ava. Letting my sword fade away, I went back to Ava and hoisted her against me before we walked into the hidden room.

Victor zoomed in ahead of us with a big smile on his face. “Can you feel that?”

I nodded. I could feel the spark of my Fae magic again. Whatever this room was, it was the only one in the tower that didn’t block my magic. It was the only room where I stood a chance against Adéluce.

As I tried to think of a way to use the room to my advantage, I saw something scurry toward me. I screamed and let Ava drop to the floor as the severed hand that had sent me to the tower in the first place leapt at me.

**Episode 4778**

**Greyson**

*Why do things always go from bad to worse?* I wondered.

Shifting back was the worst thing that could have happened to us up there. Not only did we have to scale the tower as humans, but Lola and I also had to fend off a bloodthirsty bat hell-bent on gobbling us up.

The more my hands slipped, the harder I fought to stay on the wall. Sweat poured from my brows and into my eyes, forcing me to blink them away before my vision was compromised. Lola and I had climbed a few hundred feet up the tower and were both exhausted.

*Should have tried to get in on the ground floor*, I thought.

It was far too late to change that, so I doubled down and gripped the wall tighter. My limbs were shaking with the effort it took to stay pressed against the unforgiving exterior of the tower. I took a deep breath, then cursed when I slid down half an inch. With the air burning in my lungs, I had to grit my teeth to keep from sliding down farther.

*You don’t need your claws. You have the strength to stay up*, I told myself.

My words of encouragement and the sheer force of will I was exerting were the only reasons I wasn’t falling to my grisly death. I glanced up slowly at Lola, who was struggling as much as I was.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said. “And I think I found something!”

The hope in her voice gave me the energy boost I needed. The thought of having to scale the entire height of the tower was enough to make my hands fly off it on their own.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a ledge,” she said, then grunted. “It’s a window! It’s boarded up, but still! A window!”

I sent a silent thank-you to whatever was responsible for answering my desperate prayers. It was far better to face off with a boarded-up window than a perilous climb to the top.

“Stay there, I’m coming to you!” I said.

I started to inch my way to where Lola was, careful not to move too fast or recklessly. Circumnavigating the tower was enough of a challenge already, no need to make it worse for myself. But just as I caught sight of Lola, I heard the piercing cry of the bat. It was close enough to make my ears ring.

*Dammit.*

It was only a matter of time before it returned to attack us again, but I had hoped it would have taken at least a few more minutes. I looked up in time to see it cutting through the clouds with its claws outstretched and ready to snatch me up. Its dark eyes were on me, and I had nowhere to go except onto the ledge or straight down.

Digging one hand into the tower, I lifted my other arm to deflect the bat’s attack. Acting on instinct, I tried to shift back, but couldn’t. The bat’s claws dug into the flesh of my arm, tearing some of it away. I cursed loud enough to rival its ear-piercing shrieks as the pain radiated up my arm and throughout the rest of my body. It hurt like hell, but at least it was just a surface wound.

“Greyson! Greyson, talk to me!” Lola said, sounding frantic.

“I’m okay, just sit tight!” I said, speaking with more confidence than I felt.

“Like I have a fucking choice!” Lola called back.

With a wry smile on my lips, I scanned the sky for the bat. Unfortunately, the clouds were so thick up here that it was hard to make anything out. The only consolation I had was that the bat probably couldn’t see me either.

Not wanting to waste time, I shimmied over to where Lola was waiting for me. She was holding onto the ledge firmly with one hand, with both feet doing their best to keep from swinging off the tower. Just above her, I could make out the shape of a rounded window with a wooden board over it. Compared to our current situation, it looked like paradise.

“Can you pull yourself up?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. No problem,” she said through gritted teeth. “All I have to do is a single-arm pull-up. A thousand feet in the air. With a giant bat trying to eat us. No problem.”

“Exactly,” I said, mirroring her enthusiasm.

As Lola did her best to pull herself up onto the ledge, I scanned the sky and tried to prepare for the bat’s next attack. It emitted another shriek seconds before I saw its dark wings outlined behind the clouds.

“Hurry, Lola!” I said.

“I *am* hurrying!” she said with another grunt.

She wasn’t exactly, but I needed to push her without derailing us from the plan. The bat lunged through the clouds and went straight for Lola. I gripped the wall and kicked out at its wing, catching the edge of it with my heel. Lola ducked as the bat veered off its trajectory. It looped around, screeching as it prepared to come at us again. Fuck. We needed to get away from this thing.

Lola struggled to lift herself up, cursing a blue streak as the pressure mounted. The dragon bat wouldn’t stop until either one or both of us ended up as its meal. Without thinking, I reached up and pushed Lola toward the ledge.

“Hey, whoa—whoa! Careful there!” she said.

“What do you think I’m doing? We don’t have the time to worry about being proper, Lola!” I said. “Either I push your ass up, or we hang here for that bat to get us.”

“Fine! Push my butt,” she said. “But don’t linger!”

“I’m not trying to!” I said back.

“Good because Jay will have something to say!”

“Lola, shut up!”

I reached up and pushed her ass higher. The second my palm made contact with her, the bat zoomed out of the clouds again. Its timing was fucking impeccable.

I shoved Lola, and she scrambled onto the ledge. Before I could join her, the bat’s claws hooked around my arm and tugged on it. As I fought back, my other hand started to loosen. The bat was going to pull me off the wall and carry me away to have as its dinner.

With a Herculean effort, I twisted out of the bat’s grip. I managed to get free, but I pulled too hard, and my fingers slipped. My stomach dropped a split second before the rest of my body joined it. It all happened so fast that I didn’t have a chance to shout.

Suddenly, a hand wrapped around my wrist and swung me back against the tower. I slammed against the hard wall with a thud that caused the air to rush out of my lungs.

*Better than being a stain on the ground*, I thought.

Dazed and eternally grateful, I gazed up to see Lola hanging out of the smashed window. Her face was contorted from the effort of holding me up, but she didn’t waver.

*I’ll definietly tell Jay about this*, I thought. *Assuming we make it out alive.*

“Can you get to the ledge?” she asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” she groaned, holding on.

I could feel her arm shaking, so I needed to act fast. I swung my injured arm up and grasped the ledge with every bit of strength that I had. The pain was intense, and a wave of nausea made the world spin on its axis for a second. Ignoring it, I pulled myself up with Lola’s help.

Exhausted, we tumbled through the window and fell onto a landing. Looking around, I saw that we were ensconced in a circular stone stairwell. It was pitch-black inside, too dark for me to make anything out in the void. I wrinkled my nose as it was invaded by the dank smell of moisture and mold in the air.

The tower was just as unforgiving on the inside as it was on the outside, but at least we were inside. It was a huge improvement over dangling outside as bat bait.

I got to my feet with a grimace; the pain in my arm felt worse with every second. I glanced at it and watched as my blood ran down my forearm. Lola got to her feet, too, and dusted herself off as she took a look around.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, but your wrist looks bad. Why isn’t it healing already?”

It was a valid question, but not one we had time to consider. We were inside the tower and that much closer to finding Cali. I would worry about my wound after she was safely in my arms.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” I said. “Let’s go find Cali. The sooner we do, the sooner we can get the hell out of here.”

“I second that,” Lola said. “Lead the way.”

**Episode 4779**

Horror washed over me as the severed hand clawed at my face. Its grip tightened as it tried to smother me and gouge my eyes out at the same time. Getting over my initial surprise, I dug the nails of my hand into it and managed to wrench it off my face. With an angry cry, I flung Adéluce’s hand across the room.

As it sailed through the air, the murderous appendage shot a spark of power at my chest. I dove to the side at the last second and closed my eyes as a glass bottle shattered overhead. Shards of glass rained down on me as I heard the hand scurrying away across the floor, no doubt gearing up for an encore.

*Magic works in this room, which means the hand can use Adéluce's* *magic against me*, I thought. *That’s at least something we didn’t have before…*

Ava groaned on the ground, and I scuttled over to her to make sure she was okay. I had dropped her like a sack of grouchy potatoes and hoped that I hadn’t made her injuries worse. She rubbed a hand over her wound, and I wondered if she was still in a lot of pain.

“Do you think you can stand up?” I asked.

Ava nodded, looking more alert. “Yeah, I think my healing powers are back.”

“Good. What about your shifting?” I asked.

“Yep,” Ava said, holding up a wolf’s clawed hand.

“Great,” I said. “Try to grab whatever you can, and let’s get out of here before that thing comes back.”

“On it,” Ava said.

We got to our feet at the same time, wary of Cousin Itt’s evil twin’s next attack. I reached for a vial on the table that seemed to be glowing. I reasoned it had to be more powerful or at least more valuable than the other potions. If nothing else, it would sting like hell when I threw it in Adéluce’s eyes.

*Wait, can you even blind an apparition?* I asked myself.

As my fingers got ready to wrap around the small vial, Adéluce’s detached hand scurried across the table at full speed to knock the vial out of my grasp. Stunned, all I could do was watch as it wrapped itself around my wrist. Suddenly, it felt like I had placed my wrist on an open fire. The searing pain shot up my arm and made me scream as I tried to shake the hand off me.

I slammed it on the old table a few times, hoping to weaken it. My wrist was burning so much that I expected to see flames sparking from the hand. Eventually I managed to shake it off. It landed on the floor with a thud, then sprang back onto its agile fingers. I raced to the other side of the room before it grabbed me again.

“Come on! Let’s go!” Ava shouted from the doorway.

Not needing a second invitation, I ran for the door. My feet slowed as I glanced back at the potions and spells. I wanted to grab at least something to be able to use as a weapon against the vampire-witch. My magic would be gone the second I stepped out of the room, and I would be defenseless once again.

As I tried to decide what to grab, the hand popped up again and fired another spark of magic at me. I tried to create a Fae shield, but I was too slow. My shield was only half-formed when I took the spark on my side. It knocked the breath out of my lungs.

I cursed, grabbed a pile of parchments from the table and ran out of the room. I could hear the hand scurrying after us as I stuffed the old papers into my pocket.

Ava and I ran down the hallway in the direction of Victor’s broken window. Though she was still running fast, Ava was limping again.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Fine. I just didn’t have time to heal fully before we had to get out of there,” she said. “I’m still half injured and no longer healing out here.”

She nearly lost her balance when we took a sharp turn. I reached out to steady her, but she batted my hand away. The scowl on her face and the sharp stinging on the back of my hand made me want to push her down.

“Just keep up!” she said.

We ran into another room just as the diabolical hand leapt off the ceiling. It landed on Ava’s shoulder and dug its gnarled fingers into her wounds. Ava screamed in pain and dropped to her knees as she desperately tried to get the severed hand off her body.

I ran to her and grabbed the hand with both of mine. It tried to wrestle out of my grasp, eager to attack me and finish what it had started before. Unsure of what else to do, I hurled the damn thing out the open window. It wouldn’t be the last we would see of it, but at least I had given us a few minutes reprieve from it.

Or so I thought.

Before I had a chance to regroup, the room Ava and I were in began to fill with thick smoke. It was like someone had set an invisible fire and was fanning the smoke directly into my eyes and lungs. I started to cough uncontrollably and tried to wave the smoke away. Ava was coughing and waving, too, but the smoke kept coming.

“You shouldn’t have done that!” an angry, disembodied voice said.

The smoke in the middle of the room thinned enough for us to see Adéluce’s familiar figure standing there. The vampire-witch was blocking the only way in and out of the room. If we wanted to get out, we would have to go through her.

*Fine by me*, I thought.

I pulled the broken claw out of my pocket and wielded it like a dagger. The shard felt warm in my hand, but I didn’t have time to wonder why. I was too focused on ending Adéluce’s miserable life.

“What are you waiting for? Just do what you’re going to do to us already!” I said, challenging her. “Stop with these bullshit games!”

“We’re ready for you, vampire-witch!” Ava said, taking a defensive stance.

Adéluce looked ready to unleash on us. Her lips curled into a vicious but short-lived smile. Her eyes landed on the claw and narrowed.

“Where did you get that?” she hissed. “Where?”

For a second, there seemed to be genuine fear on her face. It made no sense to me. Why would Adéluce be afraid of some bat’s broken toenail? I glanced at the shard, but it was no more menacing than it had been a moment prior.

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth or its broken nail, I stepped forward. Adéluce’s eyes were still on the shard as I tightened my grasp on it.

“Out of the way,” I said. “Right now. Let us go.”

Adéluce scowled as anger washed over her face. The rage in her eyes was almost palpable, and I braced myself for a savage attack. Instead, she smiled.

“No, I don’t think I will,” she said. “In fact, I think my next guests are about to join us.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” Ava asked.

Instead of answering, Adéluce smiled viciously as she held up her only hand. She wiggled her five fingers gleefully, then began to count down.

“Five… four… three… two… and one,” she said.

Just then, Greyson ran through the doorway looking frantic. My heart soared as our eyes locked.

“Greyson!” I said.

“Cali!” he panted, his relief palpable.

He started to run toward me, but Adéluce flung out her hand and shot Greyson in the chest with her magic. I screamed as he fell to the ground. My heart lurched when I saw that he wasn’t moving.

“Greyson! Greyson!” I screamed. “Wake up, Greyson!”

Adéluce loomed over him with a satisfied grin. A second later, Lola ran through the door. Without hesitation, Adéluce shot magic at her, too. Lola dropped next to Greyson as I screamed again.

“Let them go!” I said, glaring at Adéluce. “Let them go!”

Adéluce laughed as her plan continued to come together seamlessly. Without my magic and with Ava unable to shift, we were in deep shit. I tried to mind link with Greyson, but there was nothing coming from his side. He and Lola were out cold, trapped in Adéluce’s spell until she decided to release them.

“Let them go!” I said.

“Sure, I’ll let them go,” Adeluce said, surprising me. “But first you have to do something for me.”

My stomach filled with dread. “What do you want me to do?”

“Oh, nothing big,” she said. “All I want you to do is formally reject Xavier and choose Greyson.”

“What?” I balked.

“If you want these two to live,” Adéluce said, “end the *due destini* now.”

**Episode 4780**

**Xavier**

I shifted into my wolf form and leapt over to the rock pile to dig Marissa out. My claws scraped the rough stones as I desperately tried to loosen them. I wasn’t sure if Marissa was okay on the other side and didn’t want to risk losing a member of my pack by hesitating. She trusted me as her Alpha, and I was going to do everything I could to get her out.

Pain shot through my paws as I beat and scratched at the rocks. I called Marissa via mind link over and over again. Every time she didn’t answer, the dread in the pit of my stomach grew. I tried again and finally got a response.

*I’m here! I’m okay*, Marissa said. *The rocks just made a wall and trapped me.*

*Okay, good*, I said via mind link. *Just hold on, and I’ll get you out soon.*

*No, you’re running out of time*, Marissa said. *We don’t know what Adéluce* *will do to Ava and Cali. You have to find them.*

*No. Absolutely not*, I mind linked. *I’m your Alpha, and I will not leave you here.*

*I can dig myself out, Xavier!* Marissa said. *Just* go.

Ignoring her, I continued to dig into the rocks until I was able to make a small opening. The tension in my body eased slightly when I saw her wolf staring back at me through the hole.

*See? I’m fine*, she said. *You made an opening for me. I can take it from here.*

Marissa was technically right, but I couldn’t force my legs to move. She was still trapped and still very much vulnerable to another one of Adéluce’s attacks. What if she went into a trance and hurt herself somehow? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to Marissa because of me.

Marissa huffed. *Xavier Evers. If my best friend dies because you are too late, I will never forgive you! Go! Now!*

Despite not wanting to, I nodded. *Okay. I’ll go.*

*Good. I’ll see you up there.*

With a final nod, I took off down the right hallway toward Ava and Cali. I stayed close to the wall and did my best to avoid running in a circle. My sense of direction was a little wonky since I didn’t have the sky or sun above to guide me. Still, it felt like I was running toward the direction of the tower just like I had been above ground.

The farther I ran, the harder it was to take deep breaths. The air was rank with the smell of rotting flesh mixed with all kinds of shit. I ran toward the sound of running water and found a small stream that looked like it was a part of the tower’s sewage system. I turned my head away from it and kept going. The sooner I left that smell behind me, the better.

Following the small stream, I eventually reached what looked like a metal gate. Just as I got ready to ram it open, the gate began to swing back like a silent invitation.

That’s when I realized that Adéluce wanted me inside the tower. She surely had something horrible in mind for me and couldn’t wait for me to get there. The thought sent a shiver down my spine, but it didn’t stop me from running to Cali and Ava. I had to get to them before it was too late.

My panting breaths echoed off the walls as I raced up the well-worn stairs. The stone stairwell was narrow. I had just enough space to run, but not an inch more on either side. Keeping my head up, I climbed higher and higher, wondering just how high the tower soared into the sky.

Once I reached the twentieth story or so, I felt something strange. I looked down to see that my paws were hands again. I had shifted back into my human form.

*What the hell?* I wondered.

I tried to shift back, but I couldn’t. Before I got the chance to wonder why, I heard someone screaming my name at the top of their lungs.

“Xavier! Xavier, run!”

I turned to see Colton racing up the stairs behind him. He was in his human form, too, and drenched in blood. His eyes were wide with fear and adrenaline as they locked onto mine.

“How did you get inside?” I asked. “What happened to you?”

“Run, Xavier!” he shouted.

Suddenly, a massive demon like the ones I had seen in the demon world lunged for my twin and bit down on his shoulder. Colton screamed in pain and tried to fight off the demon as it dragged him back down the stairs.

“Colton!” I screamed.

I raced after them, shouting my brother’s name as his cries echoed off the walls. By the time I caught up, Colton’s lifeless body was lying on the ground. The demon was nowhere to be seen as the pool of blood beneath my brother spread beyond his body. I dropped to my knees to grab him, but my hands went through thin air.

I blinked, and my brother was gone.

*Dammit!*

It had only been a hallucination. Adéluce wanted me to get to the tower, but she was going to have her fun along the way and make sure I wouldn’t get there in time. I got up and raced back upstairs. It wasn’t long before every muscle in my body started to scream for mercy. I was exhausted with no respite in sight. I pushed myself past the point of exhaustion and forced my body to keep moving.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t shift or mind link with anyone. It was like there was a jammer keeping me from tapping into my abilities. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Of course Adéluce would make it so that only she could use her powers. That vampire-witch always stacked the odds in her favor.

“Xavier!”

I stopped when I heard Ava’s voice. It was unmistakable. My heart rate spiked as I thought about all the ways that Adéluce would make her suffer because of me.

“Ava! Ava, where are you?” I called out.

She replied with a bloodcurdling scream that made my hair stand on end. I raced toward the sound of her voice and saw Adéluce pushing Ava through an open window.

“Xavier!” she screamed as she fell.

I ran to the ledge to grab her, only to feel my hands slam against a plank of wood. I stepped back and saw that the window was boarded up.

*Another fucking hallucination*.

Somewhere in the tower, Adéluce was no doubt laughing at my expense. I was making it too easy for her to trick me. I had to focus.

After taking a deep breath, I continued my never-ending trek up the narrow stairs. I reached a landing and paused to catch my breath when I heard Cali’s cries. It was no doubt another hallucination meant to slow me down.

Still, I followed the sound of Cali’s voice until I reached a small room at the end of a hallway. Inside I saw Adéluce standing over Greyson and Lola as they lay unconscious on the floor. Cali was at their side, willing them to wake up. Ava was a few feet away on the ground. She looked hurt but was glaring at Adéluce like she was getting ready to strike.

It was all pretty elaborate for a hallucination. I could no longer trust my senses to guide me. Cali looked up and locked eyes with me. The fear I saw in hers sent a dagger through my heart.

*But is she real?* I wondered.

With my eyes narrowed suspiciously, I stepped into the room. My foot bumped against Lola’s leg. I tapped it again and realized immediately that it was all real. What I was seeing was really happening.

“Cali!” I said. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Adéluce replied. “And you are just in time. Cali was about to choose Greyson over you.”

The vampire-witch’s words were like a slap to my face. If I hadn’t bumped into Lola, Adéluce’s declaration would have convinced me that I was hallucinating again.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked, then turned to Cali. “What is she talking about?”

“She’s making me choose,” Cali said. “Xavier, I don’t know what to do!”

“Do it, Cali,” I said. “She’ll kill you all if you don’t. This is all my fault. This is the price I have to pay to keep you safe. Do it!”

Cali let out a sob that resonated with my own pain. Adéluce had forced my hand and made my life a living hell. As much as I hated her, I would have gladly spent an eternity suffering her torments if it meant keeping my loved ones safe.

Adéluce cackled as she watched the drama play out. “Oh, this is all just too delicious!”

“Don’t do it!” Ava shouted from the corner.

We all turned to her, shocked beyond words. Ava was the only one there who I thought would have been on board with Adéluce’s ultimatum. Instead, Ava pushed herself up until she was standing and glaring at the vampire-witch.

“That bitch can’t control our lives,” Ava said. “Don’t fucking give into her, Cali.”

Ava’s support was all Cali needed to make her decision. Surprisingly. She turned to Adéluce and shook her head.

“I won’t do it,” she said with resolve.

Adéluce sighed as she shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Fine. It seems you’ve made your choice.”

With a flick of her wrist and without a bit of hesitation, she lifted Greyson’s limp body off the floor. Then we all watched in horror as Adéluce flung him out the window.

**Episode 4781**

I screamed as I watched Adéluce toss Greyson out of the window like he was little more than a rag doll. I raced to the window and leaned out to look for him, but I saw nothing but clouds.

Greyson was gone.

Despair welled up inside me as tears filled my eyes. My rage building, I whirled on Adéluce. “What did you do?! How dare you!” I shouted.

I started to lunge at her, but Xavier was there immediately, grabbing me by the arms and stopping me cold.

“Cali, you have to calm down. This isn’t the way, and it won’t end well,” he said.

“Stop it, Xavier. Let me go! She killed Greyson! She has to pay!” I shrieked as I tried to push him away. My rage was the only thing I was beholden to now. I had to kill Adéluce. There was no other option. I had to avenge Greyson.

“No, *you* stop it, Cali! Do you think she’s going to stand by and let you attack her? Take it from me, it’s a trick!” Xavier shouted. “Just relax and wait for the right time. Rushing won’t work.”

Adéluce’s laughter invaded my ears, and that shrill, evil sound was what finally made me stop fighting Xavier. I calmed down and turned to face the vampire-witch, my anger washing through me in hot waves.

“Listen to your mate, Cali. He knows better than you what I’m capable of!” Adéluce hissed.

“You have no idea what you’ve just done,” I said, my voice low, unrecognizable to even my own ears. “We’re going to kill you!” I gritted my teeth as images of the ways I hoped to make Adéluce suffer ran through my mind.

The vampire-witch’s laughter reached a fever pitch before it finally died down. “You’re going to kill me? Why don’t you come and try?”

Adéluce lifted a hand and shot a churning ball of magic energy right at us.

At the last second, Xavier turned so that it struck him in the shoulder. He let out a grunt of pain but stayed strong on his feet and shifted his weight, so that his bulk shielded me even from Adéluce’s sight.

*Xavier protected me from the blast. He took the hit for me. He saved me once again, and I’m thankful for that, but I can’t let Adéluce hurt him, too.*

“Xavier!” I shouted. “Don’t—”

“Let me handle this, Cali!” Xavier said through clenched teeth. I could see that he was still in pain, but I also knew that he wasn’t about to back down. “This is my fight. I have to be the one to take her down, and I will. Right now!”

Visibly steeling himself against the pain, he turned and leapt at Adéluce. But the witch was too strong, and her magic was still active, making it so that Xavier couldn’t shift. He landed on the ground, his face twisted in frustration.

I watched in horror as Adéluce, her bloodcurdling cackles rising from her throat once again, flung Xavier against the wall with a flick of her wrist. He hit the ground hard and lay there, moaning in pain.

*No. I can’t lose another one of my mates. I can’t let her murder Xavier, too, right in front of me! I’m going to stop her. But how?*

Xavier got to his feet quickly. “It’s going to take a lot more than that to put me down, you bitch!”

With his teeth clenched, he grabbed a chair and hurled it at her, grunting loudly with rage.

Adéluce barely batted an eye and flung the chair away with her magic before it came within even a foot of her.

She smiled and shook her head at Xavier. “A chair? Really?” She threw her head back and laughed. “Honestly, this is too easy, Xavier. I’d expect all your friends to try and have a go at me with these puny attacks—but you? Don’t you remember how hard it is to hurt me? No matter how hard you try, I’m always two steps ahead of you. That’s the way it’ll always be, Xavier. Give up!”

“Fuck you!” Xavier hissed, circling Adéluce with his fists clenched.

“Language, Xavier! I don’t think you’d want those to be your last words, would you? And I’m sorry to tell you that I foresee a slightly anti-climactic death for you.” She shrugged. “But, oh well. It can’t be helped.”

I couldn’t just stand by and watch this. I had to do something—anything—to shift Adéluce’s attention away from Xavier. Out of everyone here, her hate for Xavier was the greatest, and that meant that she would stop at nothing to torture him. I had to kill her before she could cause him any more pain.

*But what can I do? Adéluce said it herself: she’s too powerful. She’s proven that repeatedly. If there was a way to beat her, wouldn’t Xavier have done it already? If he couldn’t do it, what makes me think I can?*

A groan caught my attention, and I looked across the room to see that Lola was regaining consciousness. She was clutching her ribs and trying to sit up.

“Lola!” I raced to my friend’s side and quickly helped her sit upright. “Are you okay? How do you feel?”

Lola winced. “I’m alive—barely. What did that witch do?” Lola asked groggily.

Then she spotted Xavier across the room, still doing his damnedest to fight Adéluce, who was easily evading his attacks and laughing as if she were having the best time doing it.

Xavier was relentless, throwing attack after attack at her, but it wasn’t enough. Adéluce was too fast and too powerful and nothing Xavier did was slowing her down.

“When will this witch quit?” Lola shouted as she got to her feet. She was just about to leap at Adéluce, but I grabbed her arm and forced her to stay put. Now wasn’t the time to get between her and Xavier—especially without a plan.

“No, come with me instead,” I said, tugging her in the opposite direction.

Lola frowned. “Are we running away?” She smirked. “That’s not like you, but I have to admit that Adéluce is a force to be reckoned with, so I kind of get it—”

I shook my head. “No. We’re not running away. We’re going to give Xavier a fighting chance.”

Lola flashed me a confused look but didn’t ask any questions and just followed me. She’d obviously decided to trust that I knew what I was doing, and I appreciated it.

I moved fast and looked straight ahead, not trusting myself to look back for fear of what I might see. If Xavier was having too hard a time, I might be tempted to get involved and that would put both our lives in danger. I had to focus on fighting smart. That was the only way we were going to beat Adéluce.

I led Lola into the hidden magic room. “Here we are.”

Lola let out a sigh of relief as she stepped inside. “Okay, *there’s* my healing ability. I was starting to wonder if it was gone for good.”

“This room is the only place where our magic works. We need to take advantage and look around for something that can help us fight Adéluce, or better yet, something that can stop her!”

Lola nodded and started flipping through books and scrolls. I was examining the potions, but none of them were labeled and I hadn’t the slightest idea what any of them did. For all I knew, the potions only worked to Adéluce’s benefit.

“Got anything?” I asked Lola after picking up and putting down what felt like my hundredth unlabeled potion bottle.

Lola sighed. “No, nothing. A lot of this in languages I don’t understand, and the stuff that’s in English I still can’t comprehend. Sorry.”

“Fuck, we need to stop her! She threw Greyson out of a window!” I yelled. “And she has Xavier under some kind of spell, and who knows what fresh hell she’ll unleash on us once she realizes that we’ve left? It’s now or never.”

“What about this?” Lola said, holding up an ornamental dagger.

“Pocket it,” I said. “That might actually be useful.”

I walked over to a large crystal ball. Smoke was swirling around inside, and I could feel the pulse of its energy when I got close. There was definitely magic in there, but I didn’t know how to get it out or use it. I pressed my hand against the smooth surface, and the prickle of static electricity raced through me.

I frowned as I tried to pull on the energy like I pulled on my Fae magic, but nothing happened. I sighed.

*I wish I could call a witch for help.*

Suddenly, the smoke inside the crystal ball turned red and began to swirl. I yelped and jumped back as the crystal ball started glowing.

A loud burst of static tore through the air just before a voice echoed out, “Hello? Who’s summoning me?”

**Episode 4782**

“Hello? Who is this? Big Mac?” I squinted into the crystal ball, but I couldn’t see anything.

“Big Mac? Do I sound like a hamburger to you?” the voice asked.

Whoever it was sounded really pissed off, and, suddenly, I realized who it was.

Shocked, I squeaked out, “*Clementine?*” I remembered the witch from New Orleans and had a distinct image of the last time I’d seen her… But how had she gotten into this tower? And inside a crystal ball?

“Hi, uh, this is Cali, and… I thought you *died*?” I winced, realizing that it might be a sensitive subject for her.

“Oh no, it would take a lot more than that to kill me, dear. I planned my own death. It was the only way I was going to make it out of there and get out from under the influence of all those bitchy New Orleans witches. But then I went into hiding. Adéluce knows who I am, and she would’ve killed me for sure if I stayed out in the open,” Clementine said.

I looked at Lola, who was staring at the crystal ball in confusion. She shrugged. “A friend of yours?”

“Something like that,” I replied.

I looked back to the crystal ball and leaned close to it. “Can you help us, Clementine? We’re trapped in this tower that Adéluce created—yes, she’s still around. She threw Greyson out of it, and Xavier is—” I paused, getting choked up at the thought of Greyson.

*I haven’t felt anything through the mate bond—no sense of our link being severed. Does that mean… Could he have survived? But how high up are we, anyway? What if he’s still… falling? Please, let him be okay. I don’t know how he* could *be after that, but* please*.*

Clementine’s voice broke through my thoughts. “A tower? If Adéluce is the one who created it, it’s likely impenetrable.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not buying that shit. You’re a witch, there must be *something* you can do. Please.”

Lola stepped up. “If you can’t get us out of here, then at least tell us how to kill her. She’s fucked with us and our friends long enough.”

The Clementine crystal ball erupted in rumbling laughter. “I don’t want to be on the run for the rest of my life. I’ve heard what she does to those who’ve wronged her. If I help you, then I’ll be next on her list. I wish you the best, but respectfully, this isn’t really my problem.”

I was getting pissed off. “If you’re not going to help us, then why even bother answering when we called into this crystal ball for help? What’s the point if you’re not willing to *do* something?!”

Clementine sighed. “Fine. You’re right. I do know something that might help you get out of there. But I make no promises.”

I shuddered, the weight of everything crashing down on me at once. Greyson. Xavier. All of it was too much. As far as I knew, Greyson was dead. I didn’t want to even let that thought take shape, but what else was I supposed to think? The only thing holding me together right now was the thought that somehow, some way, I would be able to get us out of here and save Greyson.

My voice broke as I said, “Please. Anything. Any guidance or advice you can give us will help us.”

“You might have a way to kill her if you turn her own magic against her. It’ll make her more vulnerable and crack the layer of magic that she uses to shield herself from physical and magical attacks—her invincibility barrier, as it were. Once that’s gone, you’ll be able to kill her just like you’d kill any other vampire. You *do* know how to kill vampires, right? Or do you need tips and tricks for that, too?”

“We know,” Lola shot back.

“Okay… but how do we turn her magic against her?” I asked.

“She either has to give her magic over to you willingly, or you have to be powerful enough to reflect it back at her.”

*Give her magic over to us willingly? That’s never going to happen. I’m going to have to find some way to reflect it back on her.*

I thought about my Fae shield. It seemed like it would come in handy for something like that, but I couldn’t even use it right now. None of my magic worked in this tower save for in this room.

“What about this tower?” Lola said suddenly.

“What *about* the tower?” Clementine replied.

“It’s made of magic, right? So, could we draw her magic out of here? Out of the walls or something?” Lola asked. “If the tower’s magic is tied to Adéluce—and I can’t imagine why it wouldn’t be—then maybe that means we can tap into it without having to bother with Adéluce herself. Do you think that might work?”

“How should I know? I’m not Magic Google,” Clementine shot back. “I can only tell you what I know. You *are* aware that witches aren’t all-knowing, right?”

“This is life or death for us, Clementine!” I shouted.

Clementine sighed again. “That may be, but I can’t know how the magic works in that tower unless I’m there. Surely you realize that.”

“Then could you blip here?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? You want me to *blip into her lair*? No. Not happening.”

“And how do you think *we* feel being here? You were going to help us find her and stop her once before. Help us now.”

Clementine went silent for long enough that I started to wonder if she’d bailed. “Clementine?” I said tentatively.

“I’m here. Just thinking.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Think about it this way, Clementine. If we stop her, then you’ll be free of her, too,” Lola pointed out. “You help us, we’ll help you.”

Begrudgingly, Clementine finally said, “Fine. Carry the crystal ball around.”

I frowned. “What?”

“I *said*, carry the crystal ball around so I can see the space!”

“Oh,” I said, rushing to obey. I picked up the crystal ball—using two hands, since between it and the ornate metal stand that it was attached to, it weighed a ton.

I slowly walked the perimeter of the room, hoping that this was going to work—and fast, since my arms were starting to shake from lugging the heavy thing around.

“Stop! There. That crystal,” Clementine said. “Well, I’ll be damned. You girls are lucky.”

“We are?” I asked, leaning close to the crystal. I hadn’t noticed it before, but it was protruding from the wall like it was embedded in the stone. I reached out to touch it but stopped when I felt a sudden spark of energy from Clementine’s crystal ball.

“Stop!” the witch shouted. “No, don’t touch it. You must find the others. If those crystals are what I think they are, and I’m pretty sure they are, there should be three more.”

“Found one!” Lola called out from the other side of the room near the potions.

“And here’s another one by the door,” I pointed out. “So now we only need to find one more!”

I sat the crystal ball down, and Lola and I set about searching the room for the final crystal.

“Here it is!” I said, clearing away a stack of rolled parchments and revealing the crystal glimmering on the wall behind them. Maybe we *were* finally running into a bit of luck, and hopefully that luck had transferred to Greyson as well, wherever he was.

“Well done! These types of crystals are used for magic wards. Adéluce must have embedded them in the stone to infuse the tower with magical protections. If you break them all at the exact same time, the wards will fall,” Clementine explained.

“Yeah, but how do we do that?” I asked. “Each of the crystals are so far away from each other, and there are only the two of us in here.”

Clementine sighed and muttered something under her breath before saying, “You do have use of your Fae magic in that room, right?”

“Um… yeah?”

“Great, then just use your magic to blast them all. Easy.”

I hesitated. *Easy* wasn’t generally a word that got thrown around.

“Or, don’t take the advice you begged me for, and just die. Your choice,” Clementine replied.

I finally gave in and moved to stand in the center of the room. I was going to have to time this just right if it was going to work. I closed my eyes and reached down deep to draw in my Fae magic. I concentrated on separating it into four equal parts, visualizing each one as its own separate ball of energy.

“I hope I’m doing this right,” I muttered to myself.

And then, after a silent prayer, I released the energy balls at each of the four crystals. My magic made impact, creating four small explosions of equal size. Crystal shards flew through the room, and Lola and I ducked for cover.

Only seconds later, I heard Adéluce’s enraged scream echoing down the hallway.

**Episode 4783**

**Xavier**

I was fighting Adéluce with all my might, channeling every bit of built-up aggression I had toward the witch to throw as much power as I could behind every strike—but it was becoming painfully obvious that I didn’t have a chance in hell of beating her. Adéluce was too fast, too powerful, and the few hits that I managed to land barely seemed to do any damage at all.

*But I can’t give up. I’ve got to do whatever I can to protect the others. They wouldn’t even be in this mess if it weren’t for me. There must be a way to kill her, and now’s my chance to give it everything I’ve got.*

I glanced toward the shattered window that Adéluce had tossed Greyson through.

*And I have to avenge my brother. There’s no way I can let Adéluce get away with hurting Greyson.*

Adéluce sent a spiraling wave of magic at me, and I dove out of the way. I landed hard behind a red velvet love seat with ornate gold trim. I scrambled to hide from Adéluce’s view just as she shot another ray of magic at me that missed and hit the wall behind me, exploding in a spray of stone.

As I ducked to avoid getting hit by debris, I bumped into someone and realized that Ava was crouching behind the love seat, too, gripping a broken wooden leg from one of the chairs.

“No, Ava. Take it easy, you’re hurt,” I said to her. “Let me handle this. I just need a second to think.”

Adéluce blasted the love seat, leaving a smoking hole between me and Ava. “That was close,” I breathed.

“Feel free to think things through all you want, and I hope you come up with something—but in the meantime, I’m going to try, too. The only thing I know for sure is that she’s going to kill us both if we don’t fight,” Ava replied. “I have to do my part.”

I nodded, but my fear for Ava was intense. I knew that this might be the end for us and that gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

*To think of all we’ve gone through to hinder Adéluce, only to fall short in the end. There’s a good chance that we’re going to die right here in this tower.*

“Ava, I’m sorry,” I said. “I wish that you’d never gotten involved in this. If I could go back and change anything, I would. I just want you to know—”

Ava shook her head. “No. Don’t you dare do one of those sad last goodbyes. Just fight your ass off to survive, and we can talk after this. Neither of us is the type to go down without a fight.”

I nodded and started to stand when Ava reached up and grabbed my arm to stop me. She pulled me close and gave me a long, hard kiss.

I blinked at her after she pulled away. “I thought you said no goodbyes.”

“That was for luck,” Ava said with a wink.

Then Ava stood up and hopped over the love seat. She had the chair leg raised high over her head, the sharp end aimed right for Adéluce’s heart.

For once, Adéluce wasn’t quick enough.

Ava let out a triumphant scream as she jabbed the stake into Adéluce’s chest.

Adéluce braced against the attack and countered with a magic wave that hit Ava and sent her flying through the air. Ava crashed into a table, shattering it to pieces. Her cry of pain struck me in the gut, and I edged out from behind the love seat to go to her, my eyes on Adéluce.

*But wait, Ava did it! She managed to stake Adéluce. Is this it? Did we finally do it?*

Then, to my horror, I watched Adéluce yank the wooden stake out of her chest and toss it on the floor. Blood was seeping out of the gaping wound in her chest, but in a matter of seconds, it had healed.

Adéluce turned her attention on me and laughed. “What, you really thought a simple wooden stake could take me out? Sorry to tell you that you’ll need a much stronger weapon than that to stop me!”

Adéluce took a step forward, her hands glowing brightly as she gathered her magic. It felt like the air was being sucked out of the room, and I realized that if she unleashed that blast, it would be so big that there would be no way for me to avoid it. This was her final move, and she was going to make it count.

Struggling to breathe normally as panic rose up from the pit of my stomach, I sank down lower behind the couch. I clenched my eyes shut as my mind cycled through thoughts of Ava and Cali. And of my brothers. I didn’t even know if Greyson was alive, and all at once, a deep feeling of despair overtook me.

*This is all my fault. If I’d never taken that job and gotten tangled up with Adéluce, she wouldn’t be here terrorizing me and everyone I care about. Everyone I love is dead or dying because of me, and now, this will be my end. Adéluce will get what she wants. Her final revenge.*

I pushed all thoughts out of my head and focused on gathering the courage to make *my* last stand. I readied myself to leap at her with a final futile attack that I knew wouldn’t work. But just as I was about to stand up for my final face-off with the vampire-witch, her angry scream cut through the air.

I leaned out from behind the couch to look at her.

Adéluce’s face was drawn in pain. She stumbled back and clutched at her head, still screaming at the top of her lungs.

I moved back behind the couch, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. But then I felt my wolf come to life inside of me again, and without another thought, I shifted.

*It feels good to have my wolf back. Now I might have a chance against her.*

I rounded the couch and leapt at Adéluce. I could almost taste her blood in my mouth. It was going to feel so good to kill her, and I was finally going to do it. Her guard was down, and I was going to rip out Adéluce’s throat and end her.

But just before I made contact, Adéluce blipped away. I landed on my feet and frantically searched the room.

*Shit! Where did she go? And why was she screaming like that? And why can I shift all of a sudden? Oh fuck, Ava.*

I quickly shifted back to human and rushed to Ava’s side. I grabbed her under her arms and sat her upright so that she could lean back against the wall.

She frowned up at me as she cradled her wrist. “It’s definitely broken, but I can feel it healing,” she said through clenched teeth. “Though it’s taking its sweet time.”

“Something must have happened,” I said. “Something hurt Adéluce bad and sent her running, though I have no idea what.”

“Whatever it was, I’m glad for it. It wasn’t looking very good for us,” Ava said.

Cali and Lola came racing into the room. I connected eyes with Cali, and she came rushing over to kneel next to me and Ava.

“What happened?” she asked me. “Are you both okay?”

“I can heal again, I’ll be fine,” Ava said.

Cali let out a sigh of relief. “Good. We ran back here as fast as we could.”

“Do you know what happened?” I asked Cali. “Adéluce freaked out and then blipped away. It seemed like something was hurting her.”

Cali nodded. “We broke the wards.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Really? That was smart.”

“It wasn’t my idea. We got a little help from Clementine—you remember the witch from New Orleans?” Cali explained.

“What? *Clementine?* She’s alive? And she was here?” I asked. “How—”

“I’ll explain later. I’m just glad that it worked. We had to do something. I won’t let her win.”

“Neither will I—though she’s making it hard to get the advantage over her. I never thought defeating her would be easy, but I certainly didn’t think it would be this difficult, either.”

I thought back to all the other threats we’d faced. Adéluce was quickly moving to the top of the list as the most powerful of them all. No matter how many times we tried, we just couldn’t seem to get the upper hand.

“Same, but there has to be a way to beat her, and hopefully, breaking the wards is a start,” Cali replied.

I got up and looked around. “We have no idea how long we have until she comes back. Because make no mistake, she *will* be back.”

“No question about that, and it looks like a wooden stake can’t kill her like it would a regular vampire,” Ava said.

“I might have a clue about that,” Cali said.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Actually, me too.”

Cali looked surprised. “Really? What’s your clue?”

“Marissa told me that Adéluce has to ‘die by her own hand.’”

“Marissa?” Cali asked, confusion on her face.

I nodded. “It’s a long story. Adéluce put some kind of spell on her that led us here and kept… talking to us.”

Cali nodded, taking my words in. “By her own hand… That sounds like what Clementine told me. She said that we have to use Adéluce’s magic against her. That’s the only way to destroy her.”

Ava let out a frustrated sigh. “Great. But how the hell are we going to do that?”

**Episode 4784**

**Colton**

I ran through the woods, my paws barely touching the ground as I picked up speed. I was still trying to mind link with Xavier, but my brother was nowhere to be found. He had to be close, but hell if I knew where he was.

*How does Xavier get himself into this much shit all the time? It’s like he has a talent for getting wrapped up in bullshit. Whoa, wait a minute, could that be him?*

I slowed just a little when I picked up a hint of Xavier’s scent. It was super faint, but I would know my brother’s scent anywhere. I raced toward it, still calling out for him via mind link.

*Xavier! Can you hear me? Tell me where you are, I’m coming to save you… or at least help!* I mind linked.

Shit. Still no reply. Where was he?

Suddenly, I heard a voice. It was faint and echoey, and I didn’t immediately recognize it. Confused, I slowed to a stop and looked around.

“Help! Somebody, help!” the voice cried out.

*Where is that coming from?*

I took off again, racing toward the sound. I tore through a tangle of brush and spotted an old, decaying well. I walked over to it and peered into its depths—and was surprised to see a bruised, dirty Marissa lying sprawled at the bottom.

I shifted back to human and called down to her. “Hold on! I’ll get you out!”

I looked around, wondering how the hell I was going to pull her out of there. The well was so damn deep.

I shifted back to wolf form and ran to find something that I could use to pull her out. I was just about to give up when I came upon a tall sapling.

*This will have to do.*

I bit into it and yanked it out of the ground with my wolf strength, then rushed back to the well. Standing up on my hind legs, I maneuvered it into the well and shoved the entire sapling inside.

I felt the tug of Marissa grabbing ahold of it. Digging my feet into the soft earth and clamping my jaws down hard on the sapling, I pulled as hard as I could, hefting Marissa up.

She grunted with pain when she slammed against the wall as I awkwardly hauled her out. The sapling was extremely hard to wield, but it was doing the trick.

As soon as Marissa reached the mouth of the well, she let go of the sapling and then hooked her arms over the edge and scrambled to pull herself up and out. She landed on her back on the ground and sighed.

“Thanks,” she breathed.

I shifted back to human. “Don’t mention it. Any idea where Xavier is?”

Marissa nodded. “We found a tunnel down there, and he took it to get to the tower. At least that’s what his plan was. I would’ve gone with him, but I got trapped behind a rockslide and had to double back. I hope he made it.”

I nodded at her, processing everything that she’d told me. “Okay, well… maybe we should head back to the base of the tower and then regroup with the others.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Marissa responded.

We both shifted and raced toward the tower. We ran right into Ravi and Jay, who were pacing at the base of the tower, looking up toward the top where the tall structure disappeared into the clouds.

“Glad to see you two are okay,” Mikah said as soon as he saw us.

Ravi pulled Marissa into a hug. “I’m so happy you’re safe. Everything okay? You look a little banged up… and super dirty.”

Marissa winced. “I was trapped in a well, so I’ve been better, but yes, I’m good.”

I watched the two of them interact, realizing how much I missed Maya. I knew that this was where I needed to be, but as soon as I helped Xavier and the others through their latest catastrophe, I was going to race right back to Maya and our babies.

“Anyone seen Greyson or Lola?” Jay asked.

Gabriel pointed to the top of the tower.

Jay wrinkled his brow. “But how? Is there a door or something?”

“Um, they climbed up the outside,” Mikah said.

Jay’s eye went wide. “*What?*”

Jay looked really upset, and I totally understood why. I knew all too well how it felt when your mate took risks without checking in first.

“Well, we’ve been here the whole time,” Mikah continued. “So, I figure that since we haven’t seen them, they must still be climbing. Or maybe they’ve made it into the tower by now.”

“Maybe? You want me to risk my mate’s life on a *maybe*?” Jay shot back.

Mikah gave Jay a hard look. “I’m standing in the same place as you are. I don’t know any better than you how far they’ve made it. I’d say since they’re not down here on the ground that that’s a good sign.”

“Mikah’s right, man. There’s no use getting all bent out of shape,” I said to Jay. “There’s nothing we can really do right now.”

Jay whirled on me. “The hell I can’t! I’m going to go up there after Lola and give her a piece of my mind. How dare she go climbing up the tallest tower in the world without even consulting me first?” Jay rushed over to the tower and began climbing.

“Jay, wait. Don’t be rash.” I raced over to stop him just as Gabriel started shouting.

“Wait, what the hell is that?” Gabriel was pointing up toward the top of the tower, and we all looked up.

“What in the—is that a *bat*?” I squinted up at what looked like one of the hugest bats I’d ever seen. “It can’t be—it’s way too big!”

And it was heading right for us, its mouth open in a deafening screech.

I began backing toward the trees. “Everyone! Run for cover!”

We all raced under the trees just as the bat swooped down over the spot we’d only narrowly escaped.

“Shift!” I shouted. “Howl at it!”

We all shifted, and moments later our howls filled the air.

Spooked, the bat swooped back up the way it came.

*Holy shit!* Gabriel mind linked. *What the hell is* that*?*

I looked up, expecting to see another bat, but this time, it was a human figure hurtling down through the air. I edged out from under the canopy of the trees to get a better look.

*Fuck, that’s Greyson!* I mind linked to Gabriel.

I started to run back toward the tower so that I could try to catch him—although, truth be told, I didn’t know if that was the best idea since the velocity of Greyson’s fall would probably kill us both.

Then I saw the bat swoop back and dive right toward me since I was the only one stupid enough to be out in the open. I was just about to dive out of the way when the bat’s trajectory collided with Greyson’s. I watched in shock as Greyson landed *on the bat*.

Greyson’s impact sent the bat off balance. It teetered and wheeled in the air, screeching and flapping its wings hard in a desperate attempt to throw Greyson off—but Greyson held on tight.

*Shit, he’s holding on now, but for how long? He’s going to fall again if that thing keeps freaking out like that!* I thought to myself.

I rushed out to stand right below the bat and Greyson, hoping that if the bat succeeded in tossing Greyson off, I’d be in the right position to catch him. It was a long shot, but I had to try.

*Wow, he’s holding on. I can’t believe it!*

The bat’s screeching and wild flapping around had finally stopped, and if I weren’t mistaken, it looked like Greyson was *riding* the creature. But that was short-lived. With a louder screech than ever before, the bat flipped upside down, dropping Greyson off its back.

Greyson reeled for a few moments before he shifted and landed gracefully as a wolf. Seconds later, he’d shifted back to human. He was breathing a little heavily and looked just a tad shell-shocked, but other than that, he seemed fine.

I shifted and raced over to join Greyson. The others followed.

“How the hell did you do that?” I asked.

“Not sure. I just ended up trying to mind link with it,” Greyson said. “Talking to it, I guess.”

Jay shifted back, his face drawn in surprise and awe. “And that worked?”

Greyson shrugged. “Yes and no. It seemed to calm it for a second, but then, as you could see, I wasn’t able to hold the connection.” Greyson peered up at the tower. “I have to get back up there.”

“But why were you falling in the first place? What happened?” I asked.

“Adéluce threw me out of the window,” Greyson said matter-of-factly. “And she’s still up there trying to kill everyone we care about.”

“And what about Lola? Is she okay?” Jay asked.

Greyson frowned. “Last I saw her, she was okay, but Adéluce is relentless. We need to get back up there and help them before it’s too late.”

I looked up at the tower. It stretched up so high that I couldn’t even see the top—let alone whatever window Adéluce had tossed Greyson out of.

“That thing is tall as shit! You can’t climb it again, it’ll take too long,” I said to Greyson.

He nodded. “I know. I think I’m going to have to use another method of transportation.” Greyson looked toward the sky just as the bat came swooping back toward us.

**Episode 4785**

Lola came running back in, lugging the crystal ball and its stand behind her. She looked around. “Wait, what did I miss?”

“Well… destroying those crystals definitely got rid of the magic block on the tower, and from what Xavier said, Adéluce was pretty pissed about it. But, for now at least, we have a second to recoup,” I explained.

“Oh, and Xavier and Cali both have cryptic clues about how to kill Adéluce… except we still don’t have the slightest idea about *how* to do it,” Ava added.

Lola looked at me. “Clementine told us to use her own magic against her, right? Maybe there’s some of her magic in that secret room?”

I nodded. “Okay, that’s a good idea. Let’s go search it again. Couldn’t hurt, right?”

Clementine’s voice rose from the crystal ball. “Wait a second, what’s that in your pocket, Caliana?”

“What the fuck? Who was that?” Ava asked, looking around before her eyes zeroed in on the crystal ball. “Who’s in there? Is that a demon or something?”

“No, it’s Clementine—the witch I mentioned. She’s helping us,” I said.

Clementine huffed. “Yes, but only because you promised to kill Adéluce so I’ll be safe again. Seems like a long shot, but who am I to crush your dreams?”

“Okay, if you’re serious about helping us, give us a better clue,” Xavier said.

“I *am*! Don’t rush me. Keep in mind that if I decide I don’t like your attitudes and leave, you won’t be able to find me once I’m gone, and you’ll be on your own,” Clementine snapped.

“Sheesh, got it,” Ava retorted.

“Good. Now, Cali, empty your pockets!” Clementine shouted. “Let’s see if my hunch is correct.”

“Hunch?” I repeated, confused. Not wanting to rile the witch any further, I didn’t ask any more questions and just did what I was told. I was starting to realize that Clementine’s attitude was strangely reminiscent of Big Mac’s.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bat claw.

“Good. Now that we’re away from all the other magic in that room, I can clearly see that it’s giving off an energy,” Clementine said. “The energy isn’t strong, but it’s there.”

I held up the claw to examine it. “So… bats are magic?”  I looked closely at the bat claw. It was strange-looking—and since I’d never really seen one up close before, I assumed that a bat claw from even a normal-sized bat would seem pretty strange to me. Either way, it was a pretty peculiar thing to be holding in my hand.

“*That’s* from a bat?” Clementine asked, incredulous.

“Yes, a freakishly giant one,” Lola said. “And as I’m sure you can guess, it wasn’t the friendliest bat, either.”

“I don’t think even normal-sized bats are all that friendly,” Ava added.

“Hmm… do the bats wield magic?” the witch asked. “Did you see or feel anything strange when you were near it? Anything magic or magic adjacent?”

“Not that we’ve seen,” I responded. “But the bats were way bigger than they should have been, so… maybe?”

“You got hit by that magic from Adéluce’s freaky severed hand, though. Right where you were keeping that claw,” Ava said. “That might be why it’s got magic in it, or whatever. Maybe the bat doesn’t even have anything to do with it.”

I remembered that moment, and the residual ache in my side was proof of how hard the magic had struck me. I was lucky that the claw had taken the brunt of it.

“What? Adéluce hit you with her magic? Why didn’t you tell me?” Xavier was visibly upset and bounded over to grab my arm.

Instinctively, I looked over at Ava. I couldn’t ignore the flash of hurt in her eyes as she watched Xavier fuss over me. Ava wasn’t my favorite person, but I was all too familiar with how crushing it felt to see Xavier show another woman attention.

I pulled out of Xavier’s hold. Now wasn’t the time to cause problems with Ava when we all needed to work together to get out of this tower.

“I guess she kind of hit me with magic, yes, but I’m okay,” I replied. “Nothing to worry about. Like Ava mentioned, the claw served as sort of a barrier against it.”

Xavier nodded slowly and let his hands drop, obviously put off by me pulling away from him.

*I can’t get distracted by this strange dynamic between me, Xavier, and Ava right now. There will be plenty of time to figure that all out when we get out of this tower. Or maybe I should say,* if *we ever get out of this tower.*

“So, that must be it,” Clementine said.

I looked at the crystal ball. “What’s it?”

“If Adéluce used her magic on the bat once to enlarge it, then its body is familiar with her magic. When Adéluce’s hand’s spell hit the claw, it infused it. That means it’s the perfect weapon since it holds a bit of Adéluce’s magic.”

I looked down at the claw. Was this really all that powerful?

*Maybe our luck really is turning around. We’ve struggled to find a way to destroy Adéluce, and all the while I had the solution in my pocket.*

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yup!” Clementine said. I could hear the smile in her voice. “But use it wisely. There’s only a small bit of magic infused in it. If you drain it before you’re able to make the kill strike against Adéluce, it’ll be useless.”

I nodded. “Okay… at least we have some of a plan—and something to carry it out with.”

Xavier moved close and held out his hand. “Let me have the bat claw. When the time comes, I’ll stake her.”

I held it just out of his reach. “Wait, let’s just think this plan through a bit more first,” I said. “This isn’t something you have to do on your own.”

“No, I know what I have to do. I’ve been terrorized by this vampire-witch for what seems like an eternity. Enough is enough. She had full control of my life for way too long, and everyone around me suffered because of it. And it’s not even over yet. So if anyone’s going to kill her, it’s going to be me,” Xavier said.

“Xavier—” I started.

“No, Cali. I’m taking care of this myself. I don’t want you two to come. It’s not worth the risk. I’m going to fight her alone.”

“But working together is what’s gotten us this far!” I said, frustrated that Xavier wanted to go full lone wolf on us. “Why would we change things up now? And if we’re not with you when you face off against her, who will have your back if something goes wrong?”

“I said no. I appreciate all your help up to this point, but it’s too dangerous, and I don’t want to risk either of you. Not when I’m perfectly capable of killing her myself,” Xavier said. “Just let me handle this, for once, Cali. I can do it, and I don’t need both of you—who’ve already suffered enough under Adéluce—in the middle of it.”

Ava sighed. “I get it, Xavier, but I want you to be safe, too. And besides, I was successful in staking her once already… So if we’re basing this decision on who has actual experience doing it—”

“And then she blasted you right after!” I interrupted.

Ava scowled. “So what? I survived, right? Even more reason for me to do the staking since I’ve proven I can withstand a direct attack.”

“Anyway, Xavier, I know you have your reasons for wanting to kill her on your own, and I know that a big part of it is not putting me or Ava in harm’s way, but you can’t let your guilt—or your pride—make you vulnerable. We can work together, just like we have been.”

Xavier frowned at me, and it was clear that I’d hit the nail on the head. He wanted to protect us, and his pride was pushing him to be the one to make Adéluce pay for all the pain she’d caused him, but hopefully he wasn’t too stubborn to see that he needed our help.

If it weren’t for us, he might still be under Adéluce’s thumb—but I wasn’t going to throw that in his face.

“I won’t let you risk your lives for this, and that’s it,” Xavier pressed.

I nodded at him. “Okay, but I can fight, and you know it. I’ve held my own on many occasions. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Haven’t I proven myself a million times over by now?”

Xavier sighed. “Fine. You can come along. I know I’m not going to change your mind, anyway, so there’s no use arguing.”

I smiled. “You’re right, you’re not. So, we’re agreed. We’ll work together to take down Adéluce.”

“Now, let’s find the bitch,” Ava said, rising to her feet.

A loud voice echoed around us. “No need to find me, my dears. I’m right here.”

And then Adéluce appeared right beside Ava and stabbed her in the chest.

**Episode 4786**

**Xavier**

Lost in the horror of witnessing Adéluce’s brutal attack on Ava, I realized that the vampire-witch wasn’t done with her just yet. She flicked her wrist, sending Ava crashing into a wall. Ava’s leg broke with a loud snap.

The knife was still protruding from Ava’s chest, and she didn’t move an inch after she hit the ground.

“That’s payback for thinking you could stake me!” Adéluce hissed at Ava’s limp form.

Red-hot rage overtook me in an instant. I yanked the bat claw from Cali’s hands and raced forward, ready to stake Adéluce in the heart.

Adéluce’s eyes widened. “Where did you get that?”

*I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so afraid. I’ve been waiting a long time to see that look in her eyes.*

Grim satisfaction mingled with my blinding anger. This was it. It was all about to end right here, right now. I was mere inches away from putting an end to one of the worst chapters of my life.

“Fuck! Not again!” I hissed as Adéluce blipped away.

I spun around, hoping to predict where she was going to appear next.

“Where the hell is she?” Lola said, joining in with Cali and me as we combed the room looking for the vampire-witch. But Adéluce was gone without a trace.

“Ava!” I cried out, rushing to her side. I knelt beside her and cradled her head in my lap. “Ava? Are you okay? Please wake up! Can you hear me?”

Cali and Lola rushed to my side.

“She’s losing a lot of blood,” Lola said.

Cali put a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Xavier, we’ll watch over her. You’ve got to go after Adéluce. For all we know, she’s escaping as we speak.”

“Go after her? I don’t even know where she is!”

I looked back down at Ava, feeling torn. Cali was right—I had to strike Adéluce while I had the opportunity, but how could I just leave Ava here?

I pulled her bloody body close to me and smoothed her hair out of her face. I leaned down and pressed my lips to her ear. “Ava, come back to me. You’re strong, you can heal.”

Ava didn’t react.

I looked around the room, feeling lost. I had no idea what to do about anything. I was mad at myself for not being quick enough to stop Adéluce from stabbing her. I’d wanted to protect her from Adéluce, and once again, I’d failed.

*I should’ve known that Adéluce was still lurking around, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. How could I have been so stupid?*

“Why isn’t she healing?” I shouted, leaning close to examine the wound. I was too afraid to remove the knife. I didn’t want to make things worse.

“I think it’s silver, Xavier,” Lola said.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Then what are we going to do?” I demanded. “It can’t end this way.” A tear worked its way out of my eye as I ran a hand down Ava’s cheek. My stomach dropped when I realized how cool and clammy her skin had become.

“Xavier, I’m going to give her my Fae blood, but you have to listen to me.”

Cali was speaking, but I wasn’t paying attention. I couldn’t take my eyes off Ava. She looked so pale, and her chest was only rising intermittently.

*Ava. Ava. Answer me. You’re still alive, so I know you can come out of this*, I mind linked. I knew it was probably a hopeless attempt, but it was all I could think to do.

“*Xavier!*” Cali shouted. “I know this is hard, but you have to listen to me. With my Fae blood, Ava might have a chance.” She stooped down beside me and cupped my cheek. “But you have to go find Adéluce and kill her. That’s what you wanted, right? To be the one to end this? Now this is your chance. Go *now*! End her!”

I looked deep into Cali’s eyes, my emotions churning in a confused swirl in the pit of my stomach. “Cali—”

Cali shook her head as she grabbed a piece of glass on the ground and raised it to her arm. “We’ll watch over her, and we’ll save her. Then I’ll come find you.”

“O-okay,” I sputtered. I slowly moved away from Ava and laid her gently on the floor. “I’ll go.”

*I trust Cali. If she says that she’ll watch over Ava—that she’ll save her—then I believe her.*

Still, I hesitated.

*What if I never see Ava alive again? What if Cali’s blood isn’t enough?*

Cali gave me a knowing look. “Please, trust me on this, Xavier. Ava will be fine. I’ll guard her with my life. Now go. We’ve got her. *Go*.”

I nodded and took off in a haze of still-raging anger. I had no clue where to begin, so I just started barging into each and every room in the tower. With each empty room, my anger and frustration grew.

Then I felt a strange sensation prickling at the back of my neck. Part of me wanted to go to an area of the tower, but why? What was drawing me there?

*I’m not having much luck here, so following my instincts can’t hurt.*

I started walking, turning to go down a narrow hallway. As I started moving, the urge to hurry grew stronger.

*Big Mac told me that I still have a residual connection to Adéluce from that mark she gave me. This must be the connection at work. It’s leading me to her.*

I picked up speed, racing down the hallway and readying myself for the confrontation—what I hoped would be our final face-off.

I’d tried to kill Adéluce so many times. Lately, it was about all I could think about, all I dreamed about—but it had never come to fruition. But this time felt different than every time before. It was like I’d made up my mind that she was going to die today. There was no other option.

*This is it. I can feel it. Call it instinct, call it a premonition, but I’m going to kill Adéluce today. There won’t be any blipping away, and there’s no way I’m going to miss. She’s as good as dead—and* I’m *going to kill her. Or die trying.*

Adéluce wasn’t going to step one foot outside of this tower while I still had breath in my lungs. If not for the strange sensation tingling in my body, I might have worried that Adéluce could be anywhere in the world. But the mysterious feeling was telling me otherwise. I knew she was here somewhere. I just had to find her.

A sudden echo of laughter drew my attention. It bounced off the walls of the narrow hallway and seemed to penetrate my mind. It was like nails down a chalkboard.

“Adéluce, I know it’s you. Show yourself. No more games. Face me. We need to end this.”

“Finally, something we both agree on, Xavier Evers,” Adéluce said, her voice still nothing but an echo since she had yet to reappear.

I turned at the sudden sound of shoes clicking down the hall. The same instinct that had convinced me that today was the last time I’d face Adéluce also confirmed that the figure climbing toward me was Adéluce in the flesh. This was no hallucination or apparition—it was her.

*This is it. This is my chance. If I blow it, we’re all as good as dead.*

“You know how long I’ve waited for this moment?” Adéluce asked.

“Well, here it is. Do you want to stand here chatting all day, or are you going to try to kill me?”

Adéluce grinned. “With pleasure.”

She flew toward me with her hand outstretched, reaching for my neck.

I spun out of the way to avoid her and slammed into the stone wall of the narrow hallway. I wanted to shift, but I knew that if I did, I would lose all ability to maneuver and avoid Adéluce’s attacks. I was going to have to do this in human form—especially since I needed to be able to hold the claw and drive it into Adéluce’s chest.

Still holding the claw, I partially shifted my hands to claws.

Adéluce was still coming for me, shooting beams of magic my way that I only barely avoided. One of the beams went bouncing off the wall and a bit of magical shrapnel struck me in the leg.

I fell to one knee as a sharp pain ripped through my body.

“Gotcha!” Adéluce hissed. She flew over to me, grabbed me by the neck, and squeezed, her magic searing my skin.

“You took *everything* from me!” she shouted. “You’re the reason it’s all gone!”

My vision was beginning to dim, and I could feel my body getting weak, but with the last bit of strength I had, I slammed a fist into Adéluce’s throat, and she fell back, choking.

Ignoring the lingering pain in my throat from Adéluce’s magical chokehold, I leapt forward and tackled her to the ground and pinned her there.

“And you tried to take everything from me, too! But I won’t let you,” I grunted as I tightened my hands around her throat.

Adéluce made loud choking sounds as she thrashed against me, her eyes bugging out of their sockets.

I felt nothing for her but pure rage. “You tried to destroy everything I love. You tried to kill Cali and Ava. You killed Greyson,” I hissed. I bore down on her, hungry to see her take her last breath. I wanted to rip her to shreds, make her suffer the way she’d made me and the people I loved suffer.

And then, with cold realization, I saw exactly what I was doing—exactly what Adéluce had done to me.

I loosened my grip, and Adéluce gasped in air with big greedy breaths.

“Adéluce, maybe we don’t have to do this,” I said. I looked her in the eye. “Maybe we can end this another way.”

**Episode 4787**

**Greyson**

“Are you insane?” Colton demanded.

I looked at my brother and then back up at the bat. “No, I’m not, but I need to do whatever I can to get back up there right now. Adéluce has Cali and Xavier.”

“I’m with you,” Jay said, coming to stand beside me. “Lola’s up there, too, and I need to get to her.”

“We’ll stay down here,” Gabriel said, looking at Mikah. “No offense to the bats.”

“Agreed,” Ravi said. “I’ll stay with you two and Marissa.”

“I’m fine, Ravi,” she said, but she was still leaning on him for support.

“Works for me. I want to keep some people on the ground, just in case. We don’t know if we might need it,” I said, nodding. “Well, here goes nothing.” Then I pivoted my gaze back up to the sky, watching the bat circle overhead before swooping lower.

Tense with concentration, I tried to mind link with the bat again.

*Hey, uh… Bat. Mind taking me up to the top of the tower?*

*Fuck*, *I sound insane.*

The bat didn’t respond, and I barely managed to leap out of the way before its sharp claws plowed into the dirt where I’d been standing only seconds before.

“That was close,” Colton said. “Maybe we should think of a better plan? The bat doesn’t seem to like you all that much. Just saying.”

“Unless it uses its claws to say hello,” Gabriel mused.

“No, that’s Maya,” Colton said.

“Maybe it’s too much of a risk. It’s too unpredictable,” Ravi said to me.

“I agree. There might be another way to get up there, Greyson,” Mikah added.

“No, I can do this,” I said. “I *have* to do this.”

“I’m still in,” Jay said, looking determined.

I stood up again, nodding at Jay, and partially shifted. “Come and get me!” I called out to the bat.

I had no idea if the bat could even understand me, but either by coincidence or in response, it looped back around and dove straight for me.

This time, I really focused. I was holding onto my wolf as hard as I could, tapping into that power to send my mind link to a creature that I shouldn’t have been able to mind link with in the first place. But it seemed to work before, so there was no reason why it shouldn’t work again.

I reached out once more and got a spark of what felt like the strange animal’s consciousness. It wasn’t like any link I’d ever felt before. It wasn’t easy and organic like mind linking with my pack, or even like when I’d talked to natural wolves from Elle’s former pack.

*It’s like trying to talk to someone through two cans connected by a string, except that string is old and frayed.*

My head began to throb as I pushed the connection. And then, when I opened my eyes, I saw the bat slowing as it began to descend. It wasn’t screeching and didn’t seem to be in attack mode as it drifted down for a softer landing.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Gabriel said as everyone took a cautious step back and regarded the hulking creature in front of us.

“Not too fucking bad, Greyson,” Colton said, slapping me on the back.

“You seriously want to ride *that*?” Marissa asked.

The bat looked super confused, like it didn’t have the slightest clue about what it was doing. It wasn’t like I could explain outright what I needed from it. I’d quickly realized that I couldn’t speak to it through the bond with words, so instead, I just kept sending it waves of soothing feelings and hoped that would be enough to keep it calm.

The bat let out an uncertain screech but otherwise remained calm if not wary.

I took a step toward it, and it reared back and bared its pointy fangs.

“Be careful, man. I’m thinking that whatever link you have with this thing is a shaky one at best,” Colton warned.

“Yeah, I’m not sure about this, Greyson,” Jay said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be okay. I think we’re starting to understand each other.”

Colton gave me a skeptical look. “Yeah, sure. I guess that’s why it’s looking at us like it wants to rip all our eyes out? Because you two understand each other?”

“Hopefully it doesn’t want to *eat* us,” Gabriel added dryly. Marissa snorted.

Ignoring him, I took another careful step toward the bat. I made sure to maintain eye contact, and the bat’s dark eyes glittered as he glared at me.

*I wonder what it’s thinking. Hopefully it’s not planning the perfect moment to rip our eyes out, as Colton so eloquently put it.*

Once again, I reached out to the bat through our unstable bond. I saved the words, knowing that they wouldn’t make much of a difference. Instead, I transmitted memories of Cali, trying to show it why I needed help and that I meant it no harm.

The bat’s energy didn’t change, and I wondered if anything I was doing was working. This could all just be a trick—and a really good one, at that. The bat had been trying to kill me before and had failed, so maybe it was just taking a different approach.

But I had to trust the fact that the bat was simply standing there waiting. It didn’t snap at me as I approached, and it didn’t bare its fangs again, thank god. I was going to have to take that as proof that we’d entered an uneasy alliance.

Finally, I made it close enough to press a hand to the bat’s chest. Its fur was warm and way softer than I thought it would be.

“May I?” I murmured, keeping my eyes trained on the bat’s and not making any sudden moves.

The bat didn’t respond at all—it was a bat after all—but I thought I saw it lower its back just a little so I could climb on.

“I guess I should just go for it,” I said to Colton.

“Knock yourself out. Better you than me,” Colton said, taking another step away from the creature.

With one swift leap, I climbed onto the bat’s back. I felt the large animal tense beneath me as I settled in, and I waited with bated breath to see if it was going to attack. To my overwhelming relief, nothing happened.

It let out a low screech and flapped its wings a little but remained calm.

“Holy shit, it worked!” Colton said. “I can’t believe it!”

I smiled, but in my excitement, I accidentally kicked the bat.

And just like that, the bat freaked out and took off.

It immediately started spinning and flying, diving toward the ground before pulling up sharply as if trying to scare me off. I held on tight and felt the bat’s anger through our precarious bond. A fraction of a second later, the bond cut off altogether and I felt no connection with it at all.

“Fuck!” I swore as that bat flew erratically, all the while twisting its head around and trying to snap at me for daring to attack it.

“I didn’t mean to!” I yelled out.

All I got in response was a maniacal screech as it took another torpedo-like dive toward the ground. I would’ve covered my eyes if both hands weren’t busy clinging for dear life to the animal’s fur.

*Shit, this isn’t good! This thing is powerful.*

I needed to get control of it before I was fucked for good.

The bat kept wheeling through the air, screeching and twirling around and trying to throw me off. If it went topsy-turvy again like last time, I was going to fall to my death. It was as simple as that, so I had to do something.

I pushed my fear down and concentrated. I reached out to the bat with my mind, using something beyond words to communicate that I was in charge and that it should listen to me. I felt peaceful and calm and tried to communicate that to the incensed animal, tapping into my most confident, powerful self so that the bat had no choice but to recognize me as Alpha.

Finally, the bat began to calm a bit.

*I’m sorry*,I said through the mind link.

The bat seemed to calm even more, so even though I knew the bat couldn’t understand the meaning of the words, I kept saying it. It was clear that it understood the sentiment behind what I was saying.

*I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Yes, calm down. I’m not going to hurt you.*

The bat stopped screeching and smoothed out its flying pattern, and finally, it was calm again.

“So, do you think you can help me and my friends?” I asked aloud, again feeling like I was losing it, but what was I supposed to do at this point?

Seconds later, I heard screeching, and two more giant bats appeared out of the clouds and swooped down. I was worried at first that they were going to attack Colton and the others, and it was obvious that they felt the same since they all dashed for cover as the bats swooped lower to the ground.

I let out a sigh of relief when the bats landed as calmly as my bat had only a few minutes ago.

“I think they’re going to help,” I called down. “Come with me and Jay, Colton!”

Colton scowled as he came out from under the canopy of the trees, following Jay. “Fuck that! I’m not riding this thing!”

“Come on, man, your brother is up there,” Jay reasoned.

“You can either get on the bat or stay down here,” I said. “Your choice.”

Colton sighed and shook his head. “You all really get into some messed-up shit. You know that, right?”

I watched Jay and Colton approach the bats closest to them with a surplus of caution. Colton’s hands out in front of him as if he were preparing to block an attack at any second. Which, to be fair, was a possibility.

The bat remained still and lowered itself down so that Colton could climb on. Jay was a little less cautious and hopped confidently on the back of the third bat.

“This is so cool!” Jay shouted.

“Yeah, but don’t get too excited and make the same mistake I did,” I warned.

“Good luck!” Ravi called out. I turned to see him, Mikah, Gabriel, and Marissa standing a little closer.

“You’re going to need it!” Gabriel added.

“We’ll be ready on the ground if anything happens,” Mikah said.

Then without waiting another second, I reached out to my bat via mind link and showed it an image of the tower.

It seemed to work, and with a screech, the bat lifted higher into the clouds and coasted toward the tower.

*I’m coming, Cali*, I thought grimly. *Hold on.*

**Episode 4788**

**Xavier**

Adéluce scowled at me, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. “What the hell are you talking about? Is this some sort of trick?”

“No, I’m trying to figure out a way to resolve this so that no one else has to die,” I shot back.

Adéluce laughed. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

She raised an arm and tried to send out a magic blast, but I quickly slammed both of her arms back down to the floor, and the magic went whizzing past me and hit a wall with a loud rumble that sent a pile of small stones raining down on us.

“Get off me, you dirty wolf!” Adéluce screamed. She used her vampire strength to push me away, and I had to hold on tight to avoid being thrown.

“Stop that,” I hissed.

To remind her of who had the upper hand, I pulled out the claw and held it against her chest. I applied enough pressure to make it clear that if she tried anything else or pushed against me, she would pierce her own heart.

Her eyes went wide as she looked down at the claw, but she stayed still. “Just try and kill me!” she spat. “I know you want to. What are you waiting for?”

“Adéluce, I need you to know that I never meant for your family to die,” I said honestly. “I know that you won’t believe me, but I just need you to know that.”

I was surprised at the thoughtful look that crossed Adéluce’s face as she seemed to consider what I’d said.

“So, you mean to tell me that you *never* thought about what would happen if you revealed our hiding place?” she asked, speaking slowly. “You never thought about why we were hiding in the first place?”

Guilt was weighing heavy on my heart. “I never wanted your family to die. I didn’t know—I didn’t think—”

“Stop,” Adéluce said, shaking her head as tears welled in her eyes. “Don’t you realize how that just makes it much worse?”

And then, with an ear-splitting scream, she pulled her hand free and shot a bolt of magic right at my chest.

The pain was excruciating, and the sheer power of the blast sent me flying back to land on the ground with a heavy thud.

Adéluce let out another piercing scream as she shot another volley of magic beams right at me. She wasn’t letting up, and it was so intense that I couldn’t do anything but retreat. I raced down the hallway, ducking to avoid the blasts that were whizzing all around me without pause.

The blasts were hitting the walls, tearing out chunks of stone and sending some of them raining down to hit me hard on the top of the head. After one particularly large stone smacked me on the temple, I stopped running and sagged against the wall, dazed.

An avalanche of stones fell in front of me, blocking my path.

Still ducking Adéluce’s magic beams, I turned to face the vampire-witch with the bat claw clutched tightly in my hand.

“Nowhere to go but down,” Adéluce hissed. She looked almost demonic. Her eyes were larger and darker than I’d ever seen them. Her skin had gone a deathly pale, and her single hand held a giant, churning spark of magic.

“I will make you suffer as you die, and then I’m going to go find Ava and Cali and make them suffer, too. And after I kill your mates, I’ll hunt down every single person you love, anyone you call a friend, every member of any pack you’ve ever called home, and I’ll kill them, too. There won’t be a trace of anyone you know after I’m done.”

“No. I won’t let that happen,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Xavier, I’m sure you realize that you don’t have a choice in the matter,” Adéluce said with a bitter cackle.

My ears were still ringing, and my head was still pounding from the impact of the stones, but I could already feel my healing powers taking hold. In a matter of seconds, the pain would be nothing more than a memory. In the meantime, I had to do what I should’ve done when I had the chance: kill Adéluce.

I slipped the bat claw into my pocket and raced toward the vampire-witch, dodging a barrage of magic blasts that would have blown me apart if they’d made contact. I dropped low and jumped on her, tackling her to the ground again.

In one swift blast she blew me back, and I landed hard. I struggled to get to my feet, fighting to catch my breath.

“This really has been fun,” Adéluce said as she advanced, once again building up a powerful blast in the palm of her hand. “But all good things must come to an end.”

She raised her hand, and with a scream, she let it rip.

I rolled out of the way of the blast, but I wasn’t quite fast enough. The magic clipped me, slicing into the side of my abdomen and leaving behind angry red welts that burned like fire.

Moaning with pain, I got up and ran at her again. I tackled her against the pile of rocks that had fallen from the force of her magic and sucker punched her in the stomach. Adéluce’s body jolted as she dissolved into a coughing fit, clutching at her stomach and trying to catch her breath.

I pinned her against the fallen stones and reached into my pocket to grab the claw. But then Adéluce leveraged her vampire strength once again and pushed me off before hitting me with another magic beam, though this blast was noticeably weaker than the others since she was still recovering.

I landed hard once again but shook it off and rolled over and got to my feet. Wanting to keep the pressure on for as long as I could, I charged her again and drove her back down to the hall we’d been in. I partially shifted my hand into a claw and raked it down her stomach, tearing her tunic to shreds and sending a spray of blood into the air.

“Not so strong without your magic barrier protecting you, huh?” I hissed.

She was screaming in pain and had her eyes squeezed shut, but that didn’t stop her from evading me. Every time I got close, she used her magic and vaulted herself away from me so that she was always just out of my reach.

“I’m tired of this cat and mouse shit!” I shouted. With both claws shifted, I ran and jumped on top of her, dodging her lazy bursts of magic on my way down.

I landed on top of her and pinned her to the ground. I knew I had to be quick, or she would recover and use the combination of her magic and her vampire strength to throw me off once again. With that in mind, I quickly reached into my pocket and grabbed hold of the claw.

“It’s over!” I screamed, bringing the claw down.

Just before the claw made contact, she blasted me in the hand with her magic, and the claw went clattering down the hallway. I raced after it but was forced to veer off course to avoid another of her magic blasts, which whizzed past me, barely missing my head.

I turned and leapt at Adéluce, my claws outstretched, but then she hit me with another energy ball, and I went hurtling into one of the stone walls. I heard my ribs crack as I made impact, and I landed in an awkward heap on the ground, seized by pain.

Another torrent of stones rained down on me, one landing just right and breaking my leg. Another stone hit my shoulder, dislocating it. I let out an angry howl and reached over to try and push my arm back into the socket, but Adéluce stepped on my free hand and pinned it against the ground.

“Wow, Xavier, you don’t look so good.”

She leaned over and yanked at my dislocated arm. I let out a scream of pain as she dragged me out from under the fallen stones.

I clawed at the stone floor, trying to resist her and regain my footing, but then Adéluce hit me with a series of blasts, and each shot felt like a bullet through my flesh.

I stopped fighting and just lay there. I was bleeding and broken, and there was no way I was going to be able to stand up, so I didn’t even try.

I knew what I wanted to do, what Cali told me to do—end this. But it was starting to feel like I’d finally reached my limit.

What would I say to the others right now? “Sorry for the trouble”? “It was all for nothing”?

*No. None of that will work. And if I die right here, they’ll be right behind me. I can’t let that happen. I have to fight through this.*

I gritted my teeth and tried to gather all my strength. If I was going out, I would at least take Adéluce with me. I managed to roll over onto my back, and I hissed in pain at the movement. My ribs were nearly healed, but my leg and shoulder were another story.

Adéluce loomed over me, her hand lifted in the air with a churning ball of magic hovering over her palm. “Goodbye, Xavier Evers.”

**Episode 4789**

I knelt beside Ava and held out my arm, positioning the piece of glass. “Okay, I’m doing it.”

“You’re not doing it,” Lola said. “And you need to hurry.”

“I’m going to do it!” I said, but my hand felt frozen in place. I told Xavier I was going to help Ava, so what the hell was I waiting for?

“Let me do it,” Lola said. “I don’t want to slip and cut too deep.”

I nodded as I handed Lola the piece of glass. She ran the sharp surface across my arm, cutting me just deep enough that a thin line of blood appeared and dripped into Ava’s chest wound. I winced against the pain and studied Ava’s pale face, hoping that this was going to work. *Fae blood should heal her…*

*I told Xavier that I would save Ava, and that’s what I’m going to do. I don’t want to lose Xavier to Ava, but I also don’t want to get him by default if Ava were to die. Now I’m truly getting a taste of how Xavier and Greyson probably feel being in the* due destini *with me.*

Of course, there wasn’t any love lost between me and Ava, not to mention that she’d tried to kill me like an hour ago.

*But that wasn’t Ava—not really. It was because of the spell that Adéluce put on us. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have tried to kill me… right?*

I thought back to the many dust-ups Ava and I had had since she’d come back from the dead. We’d made too many threats to count—especially Ava—but had I ever really thought Ava would actually kill me?

*No. I don’t think she’d go that far, and neither would I.*

I was just going to have to do the right thing and hope for Ava’s recovery. I would never forgive myself if I didn’t try—even if it *was* Ava, the woman who had literally taken one of my mates right out from under me. It hurt to think of that, and it was even more troubling that even once we got out of this mess, we’d have this whole complicated dynamic to unravel.

I shook my head, suddenly feeling very overwhelmed by it all.

But now wasn’t the time to be thinking about something that was trivial in the face of what we were dealing with in the here and now. It was too early to worry about what would become of us all in the future. At this point, I wasn’t even sure if we had a future to worry about. For now, I needed to focus on protecting that future for all of us.

Ava groaned, and her eyes began moving around beneath her lids.

“I think it’s working,” Lola said. “Now I just need to pull the dagger out of her chest so she can really heal.”

I winced. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Lola wrapped her hands around the handle and then pulled the knife out with a clean jerk.

Ava’s eyes shot open, and she lurched up from the floor and let out a scream.

Lola quickly reached out to hold her down. “Stay calm, Ava!”

Ava’s eyes were glazed over, and she was shrieking, obviously delirious from the pain.

The cut in my arm was still bleeding, and I tried to hold it steady over Ava’s wound so that more of my blood could drop inside. Some of the blood splattered into the gash in her chest, and I watched the wound start to knit closed.

Ava was breathing heavily, sweat soaking her collar and forehead. She closed her eyes again and started to relax.

Lola sat back and sighed. “I think we’re past the worst of it.”

I nodded, pressing a rag to my cut.

“I can wrap that for you,” Lola offered.

I nodded and yawned. “Thanks. I’m suddenly feeling really exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

Lola started wrapping the wound in silence at first, but then she cleared her throat and asked, “Are you okay? I didn’t get to ask earlier.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m not injured or anything, and you didn’t cut too deeply, so it should heal—”

“No, I don’t mean physically. I’m talking about Greyson.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “I’m okay. There’s nothing to worry about. He survived. He had to.”

Lola frowned at me.

“I know you’re thinking that I’m in denial, but I promise I’m not. If something had really happened to him, I would have felt it. We’re mates. If he were dead, I’d know.”

I felt a sting in my eyes. “But not knowing whether he’s injured and alone somewhere…”

Lola quickly gathered me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Cali.” She hugged me tighter, and I clung to my friend, finally allowing myself to cry.

I hadn’t really processed what might have happened to Greyson. There’d been so much going on between fighting Adéluce and worrying about Ava and Xavier. But now, in this quiet moment, fear was all I felt.

*What if he really is dead? What if I never got to say goodbye or tell him one last time how much I love him?*

I couldn’t even handle the thought of that. It was too much.

Lola smoothed a hand down my back. “Please, Cali, calm down. You’re right. If he were dead, you would know it. We’ll find him.” She pulled away and looked me in the eye. “He’s an Alpha. He’ll be okay.”

I nodded and wiped my cheeks, grateful that my friend was right by my side at a time like this.

And then suddenly Ava jerked upright, her eyes still glazed from the pain. “Xavier!” she called out. “Xavier!”

“Ava, calm down,” I said as Lola and I rushed to push her back down. “You’re hurt.”

“No! We have to go to him, now,” Ava shouted.

“I want to, Ava, but I told Xavier that I would stay behind with you and make sure that you’re okay.”

And if for any reason Ava wasn’t okay, I couldn’t go back on my word and leave her here. Caring for Ava after Adéluce’s attack was the one thing Xavier had asked of me.

“I’m fine,” Ava said. “I’m healing, and I’m not going to just stand by while he fights that bitch all on his own. You and I both know that she won’t fight fair, especially when it comes to Xavier.”

Lola and I exchanged a glance.

“Then let’s go,” I said.

We rushed through the door, and I reached out to Xavier via mind link, hoping that he was in a position to respond.

*We’re on our way, Xavier. Hang in there!*

Suddenly there was a loud crash. We raced down the hallway toward the sound, where I could hear Adéluce’s voice, though I couldn’t make out a word she was saying since we were still too far away.

I gasped when we finally reached the mouth of the hallway.

Xavier was lying bent and broken on the ground, and Adéluce was standing over him, a ball of magic sparkling in her hand. She drew her hand back, preparing to strike Xavier while he was down.

Ava growled and shifted, and Adéluce’s attention snapped to where we stood watching at the end of the hallway. Without moving her hand, she sent Ava slamming down to the floor. Ava groaned and lay still, knocked out or dazed and still in no shape to fight after her silver poisoning.

Lola quickly pulled Ava out of Adéluce’s view. “What the hell are we going to do?” she shouted at me. “Xavier looks like he’s knocking on death’s door!”

I looked between Xavier’s crumpled form and the vampire-witch, who looked like she would cut me down just like she had Ava with the slightest provocation. The stakes were laid out right in front of me, and I could see the promise of more violence in Adéluce’s eyes. One wrong move from me, and Adéluce could kill Xavier.

*I don’t think I’ve ever been this scared in my life. What are we going to do? I can’t lose Xavier like this. I won’t.*

Then, suddenly I heard Xavier’s weak, raspy voice. “Cali, get out of here. *Run*,” he said.Then suddenly, he mind linked to me, *I’m so sorry. I never stopped loving you. I need you to know that.*

*What?* Did he really just say that to me?

Shocked, I shouted, “Xavier, please don’t give up!”

I ran toward him and Adéluce, and Lola was right on my heels, shifting mid-stride.

With my jaw clenched in anger and concentration, I sent a blast of magic right at the vampire-witch. She easily deflected it, sending the orb of energy flying right back at me and Lola. It hit us hard, sending us both slamming into the wall of the narrow hallway.

My vision swam, but I knew there was no time to waste. I struggled to my feet and spotted Lola out of the corner of my eye, groaning as she slowly got up and growled in Adéluce’s direction.

*Is this really the end? First, I lost Greyson, and now I’m going to lose Xavier, too?*

I couldn’t let that happen. I had to do something.

A strange energy was welling up inside of me, fueled by my despair. I could feel it gathering in my chest like a pressure cooker. This wasn’t going to end like this.

No. Fucking. Way.

I planted my feet as a burst of grief magic flew out of me, shattering every stained-glass window in the tower as I screamed.

**Episode 4790**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t move. Even though I knew it wasn’t the case, it felt like every bone in my body had been broken. But more than that, I was tired of fighting. Or maybe it was just that I was in way too much pain to fight. Either way, I was sprawled out on the ground at Adéluce’s mercy.

Cali, Ava, and Lola were here, but it was clear that Adéluce still had the upper hand.

I couldn’t recall the last time my body had been in such bad shape. The pain was blinding, and at that moment, I would give anything to make it stop.

The only thing to do now was wait for death to come.

But just as Adéluce let out a shrill battle scream, I heard a strange chorus of other screeching voices.

I opened my eyes as a dozen spectral figures descended around us. All the windows had been broken. Had all of the windows had ghosts trapped in them? Seemed like they were free now.

Adéluce’s battle scream quickly turned into angry shrieks as the ghosts surrounded her and began to attack.

Adéluce started shooting her magic at the swirling ghosts. She managed to incinerate one, but that still left eleven of them, and they sprang upon her, in full attack mode.

“Xavier!” Cali shouted.

Warmth filled my chest as I watched her rush over to me.

“Are you okay?”

“I am,” I croaked. “Or, at least, I will be.”

She stroked the side of my face. “You look like hell.”

“I know. I feel like hell, too. Thank you for coming… even though it was really stupid.”

Cali smirked. “Is that really what you want to talk about *now*?”

“No. We need to target Adéluce. We need the bat claw, but I dropped it while fighting her, and I don’t know where it went.”

“I’ll help find it,” Cali said, her eyes already scanning the room for it.

“It’s somewhere in this room.”

“Okay,” Cali said. She got up and was about to dash off when I grabbed her hand.

“Cali, be careful, okay?”

She nodded. “I will—don’t worry about me. You just take it easy and heal up.”

I grunted as I pulled myself up, readying to defend against the ghosts. It didn’t take me long to realize that they only seemed to be interested in Adéluce.

A ghost drifted over to me, and I lifted an arm to fight it.

“Wait! It’s me, Victor!” the ghost said.

I blinked as the face came into focus. “Victor?! I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen you in—” Then it dawned on me. Victor was dead. Adéluce had killed him.

“I can tell by the look in your eye that you’re putting two and two together,” Victor said. “Yes, Adéluce killed me and trapped my soul in the stained glass of her wacky tower of horrors.” He shook his head forlornly. “It hasn’t been a pleasant stay, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Have you really been trapped here all this time?” I asked.

Victor nodded. “I have, and that’s all the more reason why you have to end this now, Xavier. We’ll distract her for you, and you’ll have to do the rest.”

I nodded as Victor floated away.

I was still in quite a bit of pain, but I felt my wounds slowly healing. With some difficulty, I got to my feet and prepared to shift, but I realized that finding the claw was probably the most important thing right now.

*The bat claw will take Adéluce down like nothing else has been able to. Once I find that, the rest will be easy… ish.*

I spun around, trying to locate it. There was debris everywhere because of the shattered windows, but eventually I spotted it underneath a huge chunk of window. It was on the floor nearby to where Adéluce was shrieking and throwing wild bursts of magic at the ghosts.

*I need to grab it before she realizes it’s there.*

I jumped up and raced toward it, ignoring my pain as best as I could. Adéluce might have been distracted by the attacking ghosts, but that didn’t mean she’d forgotten about me. I ducked a volley of magic bolts she sent my way, my body crying out in painful protest with every sudden move. It wasn’t until I had to roll out of the way of a particularly large blast that I realized that my shoulder was still dislocated.

I scurried out of Adéluce’s view and gritted my teeth as I snapped my arm back into its socket. I held in the scream of pain, not wanting to draw Adéluce’s attention.

*I see it*, came Cali’s mind link. *Let’s just hope she doesn’t.*

*I see it, too*, I replied. *But I’m going to have to stay low so she doesn’t realize what I’m doing. Everything hinges on this.*

*I know, and I think you have a chance. Adéluce is busy defending herself against the ghosts, so if you’re going to do it, do it now! You might not get another opportunity!*

*You’re right*, I responded.

I crouched down and moved closer to Adéluce, ducking out of the way when the ghosts started a round of attacks that began pushing her in my direction.

I’d almost reached the claw when something jumped onto my back. I wrenched around to see what had latched onto me and nearly shouted in surprise.

“It’s the severed hand!” I wailed, trying to smack it off.

It quickly scrambled up to my head and began pulling at my hair and clawing at my scalp. I tried to spin around and get a grip on it, but my shoulder was still healing, and I couldn’t reach it.

“I’ve got it!” Cali shouted as she raced toward me. She had a candelabra in her hand, and she used it to whack Adéluce’s hand off my back.

“Thanks,” I panted before turning around and slamming my own fist against the wall, crushing the severed hand in the process. I felt and heard the crunch of the finger bones breaking, and I picked it up by one ruined pinky and slammed it against the wall again for good measure.

The hand fell to the ground, its broken and bent fingers twitching. Black, crusty blood oozed out of the gashes crisscrossing the shattered knuckles. I’d even managed to rip a few of its fingernails off, and I winced in disgust as I took in the sight of the oozing nail beds.

“The claw!” Cali shouted.

I didn’t waste another second. I stooped down and grabbed the claw and held it at the ready.

Adéluce was still busy defending herself against the ghosts, but I could tell that she was keeping one eye on me.

I tightened my grip on the claw, remembering Clementine’s warning that I would only have one shot. I couldn’t waste the spark of magic in the claw, so I had to make my strike count.

Unfortunately, it was hard to see Adéluce through the confusion the ghosts were causing. She looked like she was in the eye of a ghost tornado, and the ghosts were getting good at dodging her attacks.

I let out a loud whistle. “Victor! Think you could clear a path for me?”

The ghosts all seemed to stop at once. They cleared away to reveal Adéluce in full vampire mode, her fangs bared and hissing like a punctured tire.

Adéluce seemed a little confused by the ghosts’ fast retreat, and then she saw me standing there with the claw, and her face went red with rage. Still hissing, she leapt at me, her claws out and her eyes flashing.

I leapt at her at the same time.

*It’s now or never. I have to get this right.*

Putting every ounce of strength behind it, I stabbed the claw through Adéluce’s heart. The impact pushed her back against the wall, and then I used both hands to push the claw in so deeply that it was almost fully embedded in her chest.

“This is the end, Adéluce!” I shouted.

Adéluce opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Her eyes were wide with surprise and pain, and I stepped back as a web of cracks appeared in her skin.

Cali came to stand beside me, clutching my arm as a strange bright light began to seep out of the cracks.

“What’s happening?” Cali shrieked as sparks began to fly off Adéluce, some of them striking my skin and burning like hell. I jumped back, pulling Cali with me.

We stood a safe distance away and watched, shocked, as Adéluce’s body began to quake and spasm as if she’d been seized by some invisible power that imbued her with white-hot electricity. The more she shook, the more cracks formed along her body, allowing more light to burst through.

Adéluce dropped to the ground as her entire body lit up like a lantern. A crack formed across her face, so wide that it shattered one of her eyes. The other eye zeroed in on me, and finally she spoke through her broken lips.

“I might be dying, but I’m going to take you and everyone else with me.”

Adéluce flung out her arms, and a burst of magic exploded out of her body, smashing the walls around us and reducing them to rubble.

And as Adéluce’s body burst into a swirl of magic dust, a deafening crash sounded all around us.