**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 37**

**Episodes 4791–4880**

**Episode 4791**

I stared into the darkness. Then I blinked. I could see the pile of dust on the ground just in front of me, but I couldn’t believe what I was really looking at. “Is that it?” I muttered, so low no one else heard me. The air around me wasn’t quiet. All around me I could hear the ominous creak of the tower as it was buffeted by the wind, and the heaving breath of my friends.

Looking around, I took stock of everyone. Lola was just behind me. Her eyes were big as dinner plates, and she was looking dazed, like she couldn’t believe what had just happened either. Ava lay near Lola. Ava was pale, but her eyes were open, and she seemed to be waking up. They were both looking a lot worse for wear, but no one seemed to be on the verge of death anymore, which was a step in the right direction. Considering where we’d come from, I was going to take that as a win.

Lola caught my eye. Then, slowly, a grin spread over her face. “*Yes!*” she screamed, pumping a fist into the air. “We did it! We fucking did it!”

The expression moved slowly, but a smile came to my face, too. I couldn’t believe it. It didn’t feel real.

“We did do it, didn’t we?” I asked.

Ava stood, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her take a shaky step toward Xavier. He hadn’t said anything yet. Why hadn’t he said anything yet?

He was looking at Ava—as I watched him, he turned toward her—but I had this strange sense that he was deliberately avoiding looking at me.

I opened my mouth to say his name, but before I could get a word out, the rumbling all around us grew deafening, and the ground beneath my feet began to shift. I stumbled and pitched forward—directly into Xavier.

Instinctively, his arms slid around me, catching me and holding me tight. I looked up at him, and for a millisecond, all that existed in the world was Xavier looking down at me, moments after admitting that he had never stopped loving me. The energy between us seemed to sizzle, but before either of us could speak or move, the floor shifted again and I stumbled once more, this time with Xavier’s arms still around me. But there was no one to stop our fall this time, so we fell forward together. I screamed as we slid straight toward the open window and the darkness below.

I felt Xavier’s hands tighten on me, then something jerked beneath my feet, and his hands were tugged away. My heart was thudding like a jackhammer, and I closed my eyes, bracing for whatever was coming next. The deafening sound of the tower shaking and crumbling dimmed as fear dulled my senses, but I could feel air rushing around me. But then the quality of the air changed, very suddenly. My stomach dropped as though I was on a roller coaster.

Against my better judgment, I forced my eyes open and realized that I was no longer falling but was being *lifted* into the air. I looked around in wonder, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. My heart was hammering in my chest, my fight-or-flight response in full activation. I took a few gulps of air, trying to force oxygen back into my lungs, and looked around. I had been caught by—

“A *bat*?!” I said aloud, looking around in confusion. That seemed to be the case, but I just couldn’t wrap my mind around it. It was a large bat with leathery wings flapping on either side of me. I twisted around and found Greyson sitting behind me, looking remarkably calm, considering he was sitting astride a freaking bat.

A huge sense of relief flowed through me when I saw him, so much so that tears filled my eyes. I had *known* he wasn’t dead. He couldn’t have been.

“Greyson,” I breathed, tears welling in my eyes.

*He’s alive…*

“Hold on tight,” he said.

I grabbed onto him as my stomach lurched. “How are you doing this? What happened when you fell?” I asked. “Where did you come from? How are you controlling this thing?”

Greyson gave his head a quick shake. “I’ll explain everything later.”

I was about to protest—wanting to know how I’d ended up riding a bat seemed pretty important—but when I glanced over Greyson’s shoulder, I saw Colton, Xavier, and Ava all riding atop another massive bat, and Jay and Lola on another, and I decided to keep my mouth shut. For the time being, it was enough that everyone was safe. Hell, it was enough that everyone was *alive*.

“It’s over!” Colton bellowed, catching me looking over. “It’s fucking over! That witch is dead!”

He let out a cheer that Greyson returned. I could feel the sound vibrating through his chest. Then everyone was yelling and whooping and screaming with nearly hysterical happiness. Tears filled my eyes and flowed down my cheeks as we flew through the chilly darkness. The bats flew swiftly and silently, so the air was filled only with the sound of our celebration. When I turned to look behind us, I saw a cloud of dust, visible in the darkness. Yet, even as I watched, it was starting to settle. This felt like closure. The dust would settle. This would be forgotten. This was over.

I looked forward again, leaning back into Greyson’s warmth and bulk, taking deep breath after deep breath, trying to center myself. The bat beneath me felt steady, but it was flying fast enough to be exhilarating. It felt like victory.

I gripped the bat with my legs and dug my fingers into its velvety fur. The bat’s wings pumped on either side, moving the night air in a way that felt both powerful and peaceful. I took another deep breath, trying to settle my stomach, which still felt like it was on a roller coaster.

*Are you okay, love?* Greyson asked. *Are you hurt anywhere? Did she hurt you?*

I shook my head*. No, I’m fine. I think we’re all fine. Ava was hurt, but she’s healing. She’ll be okay.*

*You did a good thing*, Greyson said.

I took a shaking breath. *I know. I just can’t believe this is over. I’m not sure it feels like it is.*

*Don’t say that, love. It is over. You’re safe now*,Greyson said.

I nodded. *I know. I’m back with you.*

Greyson didn’t respond right away, just put his hand on top of mine, squeezing. We were both quiet. Everyone else had grown silent, so the only sound was the wind whipping past us as we flew through the air.

*How did it happen?* he asked me.

I sighed heavily. I was still processing it all, so it felt strange to relive it, but I filled him in as best I could, only hesitating at the point when I had believed that Xavier was dead. I swallowed hard, remembering what that moment had felt like. Greyson had just disappeared—thrown out the window, gone in an instant—and then Xavier. The moment had felt more cruel than anything I had ever experienced. I didn’t think I could relive what it had felt like to believe that I had lost both my mates.

More than that, I didn’t want to think about Xavier’s admission—about how he had never stopped loving me. I didn’t want to hear the words again replayed in my head, or feel the rush of emotions again. I didn’t want to think about why it took him almost dying to tell me that he did really love me.

*Cali?* Greyson asked.

I realized that I had stopped speaking through the mind link.

*Sorry, I—I’m still processing. Xavier finally was able to kill her, and she exploded into this cloud of dust. It was awful and great and still so hard to believe.*

Greyson nodded*. Finally.*

*Yeah*, I agreed. *Finally.*

*We can get back to normal.*

*Yeah.* I turned to look back at him. *You sound kind of weird when you say that. Is there something—*

But before I could finish my question, there was a yelp to the side of me, and I looked over to see that Jay and Lola had pulled up next to us on their bat. But their bat—once huge like ours—had shrunk back to the size of a normal bat. And as I watched, they dropped. One moment they were next to me, then next they were plummeting downward.

I screamed, but the next second, the bat beneath Greyson and me seemed to disappear. Somewhere in a distant corner of my panicked brain, I knew it had shrunk back to normal size as well, but all I could think about was that—for the second time in a very short space of time—I was dropping into open air with absolutely nothing beneath me.

**Episode 4792**

It felt like the darkness was swallowing me up as I plummeted downward. Fear had turned my mind into a strange blank, but my body sprang into action, and I didn’t think I had ever moved so fast in my life. I only had one thought—*Greyson*.

He must have been thinking along the same lines because next to me, he reached out, feeling for me in the darkness. I reached for him, but even with both of us stretching, we couldn’t quite reach each other. The fall was pulling us apart. Our fingers touched once… then twice… and my heart fluttered in my chest. I was terrified I wasn’t going to be able to reach him. Was this how I was going to die? With my mate just beyond my reach?

Just as I was spiraling into a full-blown panic, Greyson let out a deep bellow of frustration, stretched across the distance, and he grabbed my wrist. He yanked me toward him—none too gently—and wrapped his arms around me.

“Thank god,” I breathed to myself. I’m sure he didn’t hear me, but it didn’t matter. I wasn’t talking to him. It was a prayer, and I held onto him tightly as my chest heaved with terrified sobs.

As we continued to fall through the air, I could feel him twisting around me, and I was confused, wondering what the hell he was doing—until I realized that he was trying to move so that he was under me and could break my fall. I knew he was acting instinctively, but I knew it wouldn’t matter—not from this height. When we landed—whenever that happened—we were both going to die.

We were all going to die. How many people fell from this high up and lived to tell about it? Not many since I didn’t know of any stories.

I could hear Lola screaming somewhere in the distance, and I added my voice to hers. I was screaming out of fear, but also out of anger and pure frustration. We were *so* close. We were so fucking close. Adéluce was gone, dead, and Xavier was finally free.

Why did this have to happen to us?

I pressed my face into Greyson’s chest as tears poured from my eyes again. At least I had this. At least I had *him*. I had reached for him without even thinking about it. He was the one my body reached for now on instinct. The wind was rushing too fast, so I couldn’t open my eyes to see if Xavier was even nearby, and now we were going to die. This was it. This was the end, and it wasn’t fair.

And what he’d said to me earlier when he thought Adéluce was going to kill him…

Holding onto Greyson tightly, I let the anger and fear course through me. I didn’t even try to stop myself from feeling it. What was the point?

We must’ve been close to the ground now. It felt like we had been falling for hours. I was exhausted by fear, but I braced for the impact, wrapping myself more tightly around Greyson. All I could hope was that it would be over quickly and that no one would linger. I didn’t want to feel pain, and I didn’t want anyone to suffer.

The wind whistling past my ears changed, and I knew we were nearing the end.

“Greyson—”

*Trust me, love*, he said. *And don’t let go.*

Then he enveloped me in his body, and his back hit first as we made contact with the water below.

Ice-cold water. It engulfed me in an instant, and Greyson was ripped away from me.

Water filled my ears and my mouth and my eyes. I struggled, pushing it away, looking wildly around, trying desperately to figure out which way was up. It was so dark and so cold. So damn cold. I couldn’t think. It felt like my brain had shut down the instant I’d hit the water.

Shouldn’t I have been knocked out? Was it because Greyson had taken the brunt of the impact? Where was he?

“Greyson?!” I called out, sloshing around in the water. I felt so disoriented and scared. “Greyson! Where are you?!”

I kicked my feet and shot forward, praying I was headed in the right direction. I had been through so much and fought so hard. I was tired as hell, but I was still alive, and if this was what it took to stay that way, then I was going to keep trying. I was going to survive.

My lungs started to tighten as I moved. One way or another, I was going to need some air soon. I had been panicking in the air and not breathing deeply, so I didn’t have reserves of oxygen. This was like the storm all over again. But I had to keep fighting. I couldn’t lose consciousness. Not down here. Not after the strain that was already put on my mate bonds.

Something pulled at me. Fear wrapped around me, and I yanked back, trying to wrench away from the pressure.

*Cali!* Greyson’s voice came into my head, as calming as a deep breath. *Cali, it’s okay, I’m okay. I’m coming to you.*

*Greyson?*

*It’s me. Relax. We’re getting out of here, okay?*

I looked around, and through the murky water I could see that Greyson had shifted to his wolf form. He reached toward me and grabbed my shirt in his jaws, then kicked upward, swimming with powerful strokes and dragging me along. Finally—when I felt like my lungs were about to burst—we broke through the surface, and I sucked in a deep, gulping breath. Then another. And another. Head still swimming, I looked around.

Lola was a few yards away, paddling toward a rocky shore. Distantly, I knew we needed to do the same, but even as I watched her move, I felt the last of my strength draining away.

*Love, you need to get onto my back*, Greyson said, his voice coming strong and powerful.

*What?* I asked, looking over at him.

His eyes were looking steadily at me*. I’m going to swim us to shore.*

I swallowed hard. *Can you do that?* I asked.

He nodded, and—shivering—I pulled myself onto his back, only relaxing when I felt him moving, starting to swim through the icy water. I knew I could put my trust in Greyson. He would get us to safety.

His body was warm, but even he had begun to shiver by the time we made it to the rocks of the shoreline. The water felt like daggers of cold, but when we stepped out, the air was somehow a thousand times colder. I wrapped my arms around my soaking wet body, but I was shivering so hard I thought I was going to pass out. I looked around and saw that Gabriel, Mikah, Ravi, and Marissa were already there, waiting for us. Gabriel, Ravi, and Marissa were in their wolf forms.

Greyson bent so I could slide off his back and onto the ground, and—by some unspoken signal—the three wolves closed in around me, enclosing me in a hotbox of wolf-body heat. It took a moment, but after an aching moment, I did stop shivering enough that my teeth no longer rattled. I nodded to them, indicating that I was all better, but that was a lie. I might not have been on the very edge of hypothermia any longer, but I was still so cold I was struggling to focus.

I blinked hard, trying, and noticed that there was movement nearby. I couldn’t see what it was or what was going on, but I got the fuzzy impression that something was wrong. What was it?

*Greyson?*

*What is it, love? Are you okay?*

*What’s going on?* I muttered. I shook my head, trying to clear it. Trying to think.

*Cali—*

*We need to get out of here*, I insisted.

*Everything is fine*, Greyson said, his voice soothing. He moved next to me, pressing his grey bulk against me. He was warm and steady, and I leaned into him, willing to believe him. I was just so cold. It felt like death.

But there was something wrong. I could feel it.

*Greyson—*

*Just stay here and get warm with Gabriel, Ravi, and Marissa. Mikah will help too, as much as he can*, he added. He wasn’t fooling me. I could hear the edge to his voice. He was worried.

I flexed my fingers. Then I tried to move my arms. They felt like baseball bats, almost like they weren’t even connected to my body. I struggled to get to my feet. I needed to see what was going on.

Gabriel was next to me, and he tugged gently on my sleeve, trying to keep me down. He was trying to get me to stay.

But I shook my head. “No,” I said insistently. “I need to see what’s going on.”

There was a sudden howl of agony, and the sound of it cut through me as sharply as the cold. Painfully, I stood, though the ground seemed to shift beneath my feet. “What was that?”

And then I saw it. I gasped, my eyes going wide. Over the heads of the wolves, I could see what I had missed when I’d been pulled from the water.

It was Xavier, lying on the ground.

And he wasn’t moving.

**Episode 4793**

**Xavier**

Fire raged up my throat. I tried to yell, to move, to do anything, but I couldn’t. Nothing was happening. And then—without meaning to—I shifted back to my human form. This was a mistake. The ground was icy beneath me, and the pain of it seared my skin, which felt thin and fragile compared to the thickness of my wolf coat and fur. Ava was on one side of me, and Greyson appeared on the other. They were leaning over me. They were both in their human forms, with twin expressions of concern on their faces.

“What’s wrong with him?” Ava demanded. She looked desperate and terrified. “Why is he not moving?!” Her hands were on my face, cupping my cheeks. She looked into my eyes. “Xavier? Oh god, Xavier? Can you hear me? Say something! If you can hear me, please, please say something!”

I *could* hear her, but I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t answer her.

“I don’t know if he can hear us,” Greyson said, his voice tight with worry. I could see he was as terrified as Ava. Both of them looked grey with fear.

Was this it? Adéluce was gone—I had finally managed to kill her—but maybe this was her last gambit. I hated the witch, but she was smart as hell, and maybe she had put some kind of second failsafe into place in case she died. Something to prevent me from ever winning. From ever being free of her. That seemed like something she would do.

Anger surged through me. I knew I should be scared or worried, but all I could feel was rage. I had thought this was finally over. That I was finally free of that vampire-witch and her infernal scheming.

Was this where I died?

Pain coursed through my veins as powerfully as poison. And then—just like that—it was gone. The pain disappeared. I tried my fingers and found that they moved. I blinked my eyes.

Ava gasped. “Xavier?”

I reached up and grasped her hand, twining my fingers through hers. “I’m okay,” I said, my voice like sandpaper. “It’s—I’m okay.” It was like my vocal cords had been strained, and I remembered the feeling of fire in my throat.

Relief washed over Ava’s face like a cleansing rain, and tears gathered in her eyes. “Oh god, Xavier,” she whispered. She shook her head as tears began to flow. “I thought…”

“What the hell was that?!” Greyson demanded. His voice was harsh, but I could see the relief in his face as well.

I shook my head experimentally. “Fuck if I know. I could hear you, but it was like I was in a coma or something. I couldn’t move or speak. And there was so much fucking pain.”

Ava and Greyson exchanged a worried look.

“Maybe it was because of the fall,” Greyson suggested, not seeming convinced.

“Or maybe it had something to do with the spell. Something to do with Adéluce finally being dead,” Ava suggested.

I thought about that for a moment. “Like an aftershock?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Big Mac said it was powerful magic. She said that when you killed her you weren’t going to die, but it wasn’t going to be easy on you. There was still going to be some residual connection between you two.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I said slowly, taking it in. “Maybe it was the last of the magic leaving—now that she’s gone. I fucking hope so,” I said, shaking my head.

Greyson had gotten to his feet, and when I looked over, I saw that he was holding Cali in his arms. She was soaked to the bone and shivering so much her teeth were chattering, but she had run toward me, wanting to make sure that I was okay.

And now that I was, I wanted to reach for her. I wanted to be there for her like she wanted to be there for me. But that wasn’t my place. Not anymore. *Right…?*

“It’s gone.”

My attention snapped back to Ava, who was still crouched down at my side.

“What?” I asked her.

She ran a light finger along the back of my head. “It’s gone, X. The mark that was there. It’s not there anymore.”

“It’s gone?” Greyson asked curiously, stepping over to get a good look. Cali stepped with him.

I shrugged. “That must have been what it was, then. I hope so. I hope that means the last of the spell is gone for good.”

Greyson must have been thinking along the same lines. “We should make sure,” he said, his brow furrowing. “And we could all do with getting warmed up,” he said, looking down at Cali, who was burrowed into his arms.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Let’s get back to Big Mac’s house and have her make sure Adéluce is really, truly dead.” He gave me a dark smile. “We don’t want to make the same mistake twice.”

“Sounds good,” Jay chimed in from over my shoulder.

“I’m all for getting out of here,” Lola added.

“Let’s locomote then, people,” Gabriel said.

I nodded and got to my feet, then shifted back to my wolf form, which helped me feel less vulnerable.

*Are you okay, X?* Ava asked, stepping next to me so she could press her shoulder against mine.

I nodded. There was still a weakness in my muscles, and my throat still felt the echo of that fiery pain, but all I wanted was to get the hell out of this place and back to Big Mac’s house. I knew Adéluce was dead, but I wanted to hear it confirmed.

*I’m fine*, I told Ava. *Let’s go.*

She looked at me for a moment. She didn’t look completely convinced, but when the group began running, she shifted and took off after us.

She caught up with me and ran easily at my side, keeping an eye on me as I ran.

*You sure you’re okay?*

I looked over at her. *I should be asking you that, you know.*

She snorted a laugh. *Give me a break. I’m not the one who just killed a vampire-witch.*

*Yeah, well. Thanks for coming to help, Ava. I know I can always count on you.*

*Not that I did much. Adéluce* *got me pretty good.*

*I know*,I said quietly, remembering the feeling of seeing Ava flying through the air when Adéluce attacked her.

*I don’t know how much help I was*, she went on.

*That doesn’t matter*, I said. *You came. You always come.*

Ava looked at me for a long moment but didn’t say anything. The woods around us were quiet, save for the sound of the werewolves running swiftly. The quiet left me alone with my thoughts—and there was so much to think about.

Up ahead of me, I could see Cali on Greyson’s back. Even from a distance I could see that she had warmed up. I could tell by the set of her shoulders, she wasn’t huddled down the way she had been by the shore, and I was relieved to see it. I’d been so scared when we’d fallen into that lake, but Cali had been the only one I’d been really worried for. All of us were werewolves except for her, so we could take the brunt of that fall, even from so high up. Cali was only half-Fae… She could have died… *again.*

My mind spun as I thought about the day we’d just had. It had been a series of potential loss after potential loss. Just a series of near misses. Calls so close it made me shiver with fear. First it had been Cali disappearing through that terrifying portal, then Ava. Then watching Ava being stabbed. Then Cali nearly drowning in the freezing cold lake while I was frozen, unable to help. My whole body ached. I just wanted it to be over. I just wanted them to be safe. All I wanted was to get back to Big Mac’s house and listen to that grumpy witch tell me that Adéluce was really dead, once and for all.

I could admit that watching the vampire-witch bursting into a cloud of dust had felt good. Hell, it had felt fucking *great*. It had felt final, too, but I wasn’t willing to go with my gut on this one. It was like Greyson had said—we’d been wrong about this before, with lethal results. I’d thought it was over at Crater Lake, and that mistake had come back to bite me in the ass.

I dropped my head and ran harder. I was tired, but I sprinted onward, heading toward Big Mac’s place with renewed vigor. I needed this to be over. Now.

When we broke through the woods and into the clearing of her cabin, I saw that she was standing outside, waiting for us. I pulled ahead of the rest and shifted to my human form, then stepped in front of her.

She looked me over. “Well, glad to see you’re not all dead. I wasn’t sure.” She didn’t wait for a response but reached forward, touching her fingers to my throat. She muttered something in a low tone, the words in a dialect I didn’t recognize.

I waited—heart pounding—as she did whatever the hell she was doing. I was terrified to hope, but I couldn’t stop it from bubbling up inside me.

Finally, after what felt like hours, she took a step back and looked up at me. For a moment her face was unreadable, and I could feel my stomach dropping.

Then—unbelievably—she broke into a grin. “It’s done.”

“It’s… done?” I repeated, not sure if I had heard her correctly.

“She’s gone,” Big Mac confirmed. “You’re free, Xavier.”

**Episode 4794**

Finally warm, I felt my shoulder muscles unknitting as I sat curled into the corner of the couch in Big Mac’s living room. The lights were on, and a fire roared in the fireplace, but Big Mac herself was nowhere to be found. After she’d greeted us on our return, she’d headed back inside and disappeared upstairs. I assumed she was resting. This ordeal had been hard on her, too.

A warm quilt tucked around my shoulders, I had my hands wrapped around one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas. She’d made a big batch as soon as we’d all gotten back and passed them out as we’d filed into the house. As soon as Big Mac had announced that it was over—really and truly over—and that Adéluce was actually dead, there had been such a rush of relief. Joy and elation, and mostly relief. Then Mrs. Smith had herded us all inside to recuperate.

I looked around. I’d sort of lost track of people after we’d gotten back, and I saw that not everyone was with us in the living room. I thought Mikah and Gabriel might have been upstairs resting, Ravi and Marissa were eating in the kitchen, and Jay had muttered something about needing a shower. But Lola was with me now, sitting next to me on the couch. She had let me tuck my freezing feet beneath her in an effort to warm them up. Greyson was standing in the corner of the living room near the fireplace, speaking to his mother, his hands wrapped around his own mug of white chocolate mocha.

There was some movement and the shuffling of feet behind me, and I twisted around to see Xavier and Ava walking past the doorway to the living room, heading outside.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I started to get to my feet to follow after him.

“Cali? What the hell are you doing?”

The voice stopped me in my tracks, and I turned to look at Lola, who had spoken.

“What?” I asked.

Lola was looking at me, a knowing look on her face. “Cali.” She looked past me, toward where Xavier and Ava had just been.

With a groan I dropped back onto the couch. “I don’t even know what I was doing. I thought I could… finally…” I shook my head. “I thought I could talk to him.”

Lola gave me a sympathetic look. “What do you want to say to him?”

I leaned back into the couch and thought about the question. To be honest, I wasn’t actually sure what I would have said to him. There was almost too much to say—too many questions to ask. I didn’t know if I would have known where to start.

Shivering again, I pulled the quilt back up over my shoulders and took a drink of my mocha, letting the warmth of the sweet drink flow through me. I took a deep breath, trying to think that impulse through.

Xavier had killed Adéluce, and Big Mac had confirmed that she was really gone. That she no longer had any hold over Xavier. So if the vampire-witch really was dead, then the curse was really broken. And that meant I should be able to just stand up and go talk to my mate, didn’t it? After all, Xavier was *still* my mate.

*Ugh, this whole situation is so difficult…*

I looked over, in the direction he and Ava had walked, trying to imagine where they were going and what they were talking about. A mean, small voice inside of me imagined that they had walked out to be alone so that they could break up. I imagined Xavier admitting to Ava what he’d said to me when he thought he was about to die.

But I knew he would never do that. The words “true love’s kiss” echoed in my head, and I frowned at the memory of them. Xavier had brought Ava back to life, and no amount of my fantasizing could make that untrue.

“You look pissed about something,” Lola noted, taking a sip of her drink. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was just thinking that fairy tales are bullshit,” I said sourly.

Lola sighed. “I’m sorry, Cali. This all sucks. I wish it could be easier. I really do.”

“I know. Me too. I just don’t know what I’m going to do. Or what any of this means.” I glanced over at Greyson, who was still talking to his mom, then leaned closer to Lola and dropped my voice. “I know Xavier still loves me.”

Lola shrugged, looking unsurprised. “Yeah, I know. But the first thing you need isn’t any of this.”

“What do you mean?”

Lola gave me a hard look. “The first thing you need is an apology.”

“I know what you’re saying, Lola, but it’s complicated. The spell made things so—”

“Stop,” Lola said firmly, putting her hand up. “I’m not going to listen to you making excuses for the guy, Cali, so just knock it off. I know what that spell did, but the way he spoke to you and the things he did to you were not okay. He has plenty to explain, and he needs to apologize.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. I mean, it’s not that I don’t agree with you, but…”

“But what?” Lola pressed.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just not sure if I’m even ready to know everything yet.”

Lola nodded slowly, taking this in. “I get it. I really do. And you know I’ll do anything you need. So if you want me to pull him in here by his ear, just let me know, okay?”

That made me laugh, which felt strange after the few days we’d just had. But it also felt good. “Thank you. But I don’t think I need you to do anything just yet.”

Behind me, the front door opened, and there were footsteps and murmurs in the front hall, announcing that Xavier and Ava had returned from outside.

I turned to see them step into the doorway and felt a stab of annoyance when I saw they were holding hands, but I tried to shake it away. I was looking over at Xavier, but he avoided my gaze.

The rest of the room had turned to look at him as well, and there was a strange quiet. There was a heaviness to it, and it felt uncomfortable. I could feel it settle on my shoulders, and I had just opened my mouth to say something—anything—to break the unbearable silence, but Jay spoke first, calling in from the hallway.

“So, Xavier, are you going to tell us what the hell happened and how we all ended up at a giant enchanted tower in the middle of the forest?” he asked.

“Yeah because that pretty much sucked,” Lola added.

A pained expression flashed across Xavier’s face, but it was gone as quickly as it had come, and by the time he turned to face his friend, his features had settled back into a neutral expression. “Um…” he said slowly, “I guess I’m not really sure where to start.”

No one said anything, and all eyes were on him.

I watched as Xavier glanced around, then took a deep breath. It was clear he was really struggling to find the words, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it was because he had spent so long under Adéluce’s curse—literally unable to speak the words—that he wasn’t able to get it out now.

But it was clear he needed to. Everyone was waiting for him to speak. We all needed to hear what he had to say.

He looked up at Ava, who was watching him carefully, and then he pulled her closer to him, holding her hand even more tightly. My stomach dropped when I saw that. It was clear he wanted her closer for comfort. It made sense, of course. It was Ava who had been by his side for the last few weeks, and now she was still with him. When he looked at her, it looked like he was hoping she would hold him together. I understood it, but it still sucked.

He glanced quickly at me, and I could see a flash of fear in his eyes before he looked away again. I thought of what Adéluce had said to me, about how she had made Xavier break up with me.

“Xavier?” Jay pressed, because Xavier hadn’t said anything.

Xavier looked miserably tense. Finally he shook his head. “Listen, I want to tell everyone everything. I do, but it’s a long story, and I know we’re all tired. It’s been a brutal night. Why don’t we get some rest tonight, and we can meet up tomorrow? I… I just need some time.”

I frowned. That wasn’t what I had wanted to hear. “No, wait. We deserve to know *something* Xavier,” I said, feeling all eyes on me. “What’s your next move now that you’re free of Adéluce?”

**Episode 4795**

**Greyson**

Another heavy silence blanketed the room as Cali’s question sank in. I looked at Xavier, not sure what his answer was going to be. There were quite a few courses of action he could take now that Adéluce was gone. He could renounce his position as Samara Alpha and try to come back to the Redwood pack. He could stay with the Samaras, of course. He could go Rogue.

I couldn’t ignore the part of me that knew that there was nothing keeping him from being with Cali now.

I was so grateful that Xavier was safe and that Adéluce was finally dead, but… what was this going to mean for Cali and me? For whatever it was worth, I had to admit that I’d gotten used to having Cali all to myself, without having to compete with Xavier for her attention. It had been kind of easy, frankly. Not with how Xavier had acted, of course, but it was easy to be with her and to not have to share her with anyone else. I didn’t want to go back to what it had been like before. I wasn’t sure I was ready for that. Hell, I wasn’t sure I would *ever* be ready for that.

We were all looking at Xavier, who cleared his throat.

“I’m not coming back to the Redwood pack house,” he said.

I don’t know what I’d been expected to hear, but I was surprised to hear him say this.

He clasped Ava’s hand tightly. “I’m the Samara Alpha. I have to go check on my pack.”

I glanced quickly at Cali and tried not to notice that her face had fallen in response to this. I was sorry to see it, but it didn’t stop the feeling of relief I felt running through me, hearing that Xavier wasn’t stepping right back into his former life. I wasn’t sure what it meant going forward, but I had at least one more night with Cali all to myself. It wasn’t much, but I was going to take it.

Cali didn’t say anything in response to this. She turned back to look at Lola, who reached out to squeeze her hand.

I cleared my throat. “That’s fine,” I said, my voice breaking the silence in the room. “We can all get some rest tonight and meet somewhere tomorrow. Either at the Redwood or Samara pack house—whatever you want,” I said to Xavier.

Xavier nodded, and I couldn’t help but feel a slight twinge of guilt for my earlier thoughts. He looked so tired.

“We’re going to go find Colton and Marissa, let them know what’s going on,” Xavier said, nodding at Ava.

“Okay.” I stepped back over to my mom.

She looked up at me for a moment, then rested a hand on my arm. “You know that it’s going to be fine, don’t you?”

I smiled at her. “I appreciate your optimism, but I’m not even sure what ‘fine’ would look like right now.”

“All that matters is that Cali loves you, Greyson, and that you love her. Everything else, well”—she waved her hand airily—“the rest of that works itself out. In whatever way it has to.”

I sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

She smiled. “You just trust me.”

I hugged her. “We’re going to take off, but I’ll see you soon. And please thank Big Mac for all her help when she wakes up. She really helped us out.”

“I will,” she said, hugging me back.

Cali and Lola had already gotten to their feet and had started toward the door. When I joined them and we walked outside, Jay was waiting for us, along with Gabriel, Mikah, Xavier, Ava, Ravi, and Marissa.

“This is probably goodbye,” Gabriel said, regarding me.

“For now, I’m sure,” Mikah added. “We have to get back to the job we were on before the trail goes cold.”

“Wouldn’t want that, would we?” Gabriel said.

“Thank you both for your help,” I said. “With everything.”

“Yeah, you both didn’t have to come,” Xavier said. “But I appreciate you doing it. Thank you.”

“Ah, don’t mention it,” Gabriel said, playfully punching Xavier in the arm. “But we’ll make sure you get home safe. I’ll tuck you in myself.”

“Wait, where’s Colton?” I asked, looking around.

But before anyone could answer me, I heard his heavy tread in the hallway behind me.

He brushed past me to join the rest of the departing Samaras, but he shot me a grin. “Don’t worry, I’m not heading out just yet. I won’t leave without saying goodbye.”

I grinned back. “You better not. We need to figure out when I can meet my niece and nephew. I’d like to see them.” I paused for a moment. “*And* your Alpha,” I finally added.

Colton laughed. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Maya’s the one who calls the shots, if you know what I mean.”

I rolled my eyes. “Something tells me I don’t want to know what you mean.”

“Maybe not,” Colton agreed. Then, before I could say anything, he reached for me and grabbed me, pulling me into a quick, one-armed hug.

I was so surprised I didn’t respond for a moment. Then I wrapped an arm around my brother, pulling him close.

He slapped my back once and released me, turning and jogging to catch up with Xavier.

I watched him for a moment as he and the rest of the group shifted to their wolf forms. I watched until they disappeared into the trees, and then I turned to my own pack.

“You ready?” I asked, looking around.

Everyone nodded. I had a feeling Xavier had been trying to dodge explanations for the evening, but he’d been right about it being a long night and everyone needing rest before we met back up. The faces that looked back at me were pale with exhaustion.

After everyone in my group said goodbye to Gabriel and Mikah, I turned to them. “Let’s get out of here.”

With the sound of cracking of bones, we shifted to our wolf forms. I lowered myself so Cali could climb onto my back. I hoped she was warm enough to withstand the ride back to the pack house without too much discomfort. It had been a long, hard night for her.

We started off, running at top speed toward the Redwood pack house. The woods were quiet, and thankfully we didn’t run into anything that slowed our journey home.

When we emerged from the trees into the clearing surrounding the pack house, I was surprised to see Rishika standing on the porch of the house.

We shifted when we reached the house and walked up the porch steps.

“You head in,” I told Cali, my hand on the small of her back. “Take a shower and warm up. I’m going to talk to Rishika.”

Cali—yawning—nodded. “Okay. I’ll meet you upstairs.”

When everyone had filed into the house, I turned to Rishika. “Hey, how have you been doing?”

“That’s just the question I was going to ask you,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s going on? You just left, man. None of us had any idea what the hell was going on. The whole pack is unsettled. Want to fill me in?”

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. “Yeah, sure. So after Cali disappeared, she went through a portal—”

“A *what*?”

“Just hold on,” I warned her. “The portal is really just the beginning.”

“Oh god.”

“Spoiler alert—there’s an enchanted tower involved here, a disembodied hand, and really big bats.”

Rishika looked at me for a long moment. Then she sat on the wooden porch bench, settled in, and gestured at me. “Well, go on.”

I leaned against the railing and started the story. Her eyes got wider and wider as I went on.

“And then Xavier finally killed her. The bats shrank, I thought we were going to die, but we ended up in a freezing lake. Then I thought Xavier was dead, but he was okay, and apparently free of his enchanted connection with Adéluce. When we got back to Big Mac, she confirmed it. It’s over.” I took a deep breath. “It’s finally over.”

Rishika blinked slowly. “And you’re sure—really, *really* sure—that you’re okay? Like, in all ways?”

“I think so,” I said. “I know we left in a hurry, and I know this has been really disruptive to the pack. I want to fill everyone else in on what’s been going on. Let them know that everything is okay now, and we can finally get back to normal. But I don’t think I have it in me to tell that story again. Would you mind doing it?”

“I can do it,” Rishika said promptly. “No problem.”

“Thanks. I’m going to head upstairs,” I said.

“Sure. You take care.”

I nodded and walked into the house. I headed up the stairs, and when I got to my room, I found Cali in the bed. Her hair was wet from the shower, and she looked partly asleep already. I smiled to myself. This was what I had wanted. A quiet moment with Cali.

Stepping to the dresser, I pulled on a pair of sweats and climbed into bed next to her. It was already warm from her, and I pulled her close. She sighed softly and relaxed into my arms. I held her close, letting my face drop into her still-damp hair. I took a deep breath, taking in her smell, the feeling of her in my arms, the warmth of her in my bed. Everything about her in this moment. Us—together.

But even as I savored this moment, I couldn’t shake the thought that all of this was about to change.

It was just a matter of when.

**Episode 4796**

**Xavier**

My mind was reeling as I headed back toward the Samara pack house, trailed by the rest of the crew. I was still processing the insane night I’d just had. Or*, trying* to process it. Jay had cornered me back at Big Mac’s place, but his questions weren’t unexpected. I knew everyone was waiting for answers from me about Adéluce. I knew I was going to have to deal with everyone tomorrow, but just for tonight, I needed to decompress. I wanted to let it sink in that I’d finally killed Adéluce. That she was actually dead, that her connection to me was finally broken, and that she was never going to be able to hurt anyone I loved ever again.

I’d had only a brief moment to do that. Ava must have sensed that I needed it, because she had pulled me outside at Big Mac’s house, and we’d sat out on the porch. It had been dark and quiet, and I’d tried to let the silence of the place calm the racing of my thoughts. It had helped some, but we hadn’t had long enough, and I was still so lost in my thoughts as we headed back that the run flew by, and we emerged into the clearing of the Samara pack house sooner than I expected. I shifted back to my human form, and, next to me, everyone else did the same.

“I can fill in the rest of the pack, if you want me too,” Marissa offered. “Let them know what’s been happening.”

I nodded gratefully. “Yeah, thanks, Marissa.” I really did appreciate it. I knew my pack was waiting to hear answers, too, but I didn’t think I had the words for that either. Not right now.

“Well, you got back in one piece,” Gabriel said. “I’d say that’s progress.”

I snorted. “Thank you for coming, man,” I said. “Seriously.”

Gabriel slung an arm around my shoulders. “What are friends for?” he asked, grinning. “But try to stay out of trouble for a while.”

“Believe me, I’m not looking to piss off any other witches,” I said. Then I looked at Mikah. “And really, thank you, too. I know you deal with enough werewolf shit because of this guy here.”

“I’m glad we were able to come and help,” Mikah said, smiling.

“Us too,” Ava said.

After a few more minutes of saying goodbye to both me and Colton, Gabriel shifted, Mikah climbed on his back, and they went into the woods. My chest felt tight—what had I done to deserve friends like that? Friends who risked their lives to save mine?

As we watched them leave, Ava gave my hand a squeeze, and I was about to follow her into the house when Colton reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back.

I groaned. “What?” I asked. “I’m tired, and I just want a shower, man.”

“Just give me a few minutes,” he said. “Then you can go after *her*,” he added, glancing after Ava, who had disappeared inside.

I clenched my teeth but stepped after him onto the porch. “What?” I snapped.

Colton turned. “Okay, now that you’re out of this situation with Adéluce, you need to get this shit together,” he said, launching right in.

I stared at him as a wave of rage broke over me. “Holy fucking shit,” I exploded. I was furious—at the day, at Colton, at Adéluce, at everything that had spun out of my control. “Don’t you think I fucking know that? You’ve got to be kidding me. If it’s so fucking easy, why don’t you tell me what I’m supposed to do? Go ahead, Colton! What should I do?”

He took a wary step back and put up a hand. “Okay, man. Relax. I’m just saying you have to think about it. I can see you’re trying to avoid it. You won’t be able to. I’m going to be heading back to my kids and to Maya tomorrow. But I won’t stay away so long this time. You won’t have to deal with this alone.”

He looked at me for a moment, then stepped away and headed inside the house. I shook my head, running my hand through my hair, and walked into the house, too.

I headed straight up the stairs and into my room, where I found Ava. She had changed into a pair of shorts and a soft, worn T-shirt. She’d been uncharacteristically quiet, even when we’d been outside at Big Mac’s together. We hadn’t spoken at all, just sat and stared up at the stars in silence.

It was strange—I’d been waiting for her to yell at me. To say *something*.

I stepped toward her and pulled the collar of her shirt away from her neck, searching for any sign of a mark or a scar, but there was nothing there. Cali had done her job well.

I ran a gentle finger across the place where Adéluce had stabbed her, feeling her skin, soft as satin.

She shivered and pulled away from me.

“Are you okay?” I asked, frowning. “That silver almost killed you.”

Her blue eyes were distant. “Well, luckily Cali was there to save me.” She said this flatly, without emotion. I wasn’t sure how to interpret it.

She stepped away from me and lay down in our bed. She turned on her side, her back toward me. She looked small on the giant bed, and I sat next to her, putting my hand against her back, just to feel the rise and fall of her breath.

It felt like the conversation was over, so I was surprised when she went on.

“I wasn’t sure if she’d save me, you know.”

“Why wouldn’t she save you?” I asked, surprised.

She hesitated for a moment. “Because Adéluce used my anger—she used my rage—and I almost killed Cali,” she blurted out, all in a rush.

My stomach dropped like a stone. I took that in, though it made my mind spin. I didn’t know what I would do if I had lost Cali. Then I looked down at Ava, resting quietly beneath my hand. I didn’t know what I would do if I had lost her, either. And if she had killed Cali under Adéluce’s possession, I would have lost them both. And I knew I couldn’t have lived through that.

I slid my hand down so it rested on her hip. “It’s over, Ava. We don’t need to worry about Adéluce. Not anymore.”

Ava’s body felt tense beneath my hand. “Did you hear what I said? I almost killed *her*.”

“I heard you,” I said with a sigh. “Listen, Ava, if there’s one thing I can understand, it’s the kind of anger you were feeling. Especially now. Adéluce did all of this because she was punishing me for hurting her family.”

“The way I hurt *your* family?” she asked. She chuckled, but it was mirthless. “It’s obvious Colton still holds that against me. He hates me. Don’t you want to punish me, too?”

“Don’t worry about Colton.” I reached out and stroked her dark hair. “And as for me, I might have wanted to get back at you once, but…” I paused, thinking. “This whole experience with Adéluce—seeing the results of her anger, the way it ate her up inside—it was like she had swallowed poison, and it was burning her from the inside out. I killed her, but she’d been killing herself for a long time, letting her anger and guilt consume her like that. It was like… like…” I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

And I *didn’t* know. I was trying to put the thoughts together, but I didn’t know how to say it. It was no surprise. I was fucking exhausted and running on fumes. I had been through so much since the start of this, but… I looked down at Ava. At the soft curve of her hip and her dark hair spilling onto the white duvet. All through this shitshow, Ava had been at my side. She’d had my back every step of the way.

“Listen to me,” I said, my voice a rasp. I was exhausted, but I wanted her to hear this. “I’m glad you’re here with me. I wouldn’t have survived any of this without you, and that’s just a fact.”

She didn’t answer, so I gently pulled her shoulder so she was laying flat and could see me. She looked up into my face, but I could see that she wasn’t convinced.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. She responded for a moment, opening her mouth and slipping her tongue along mine. Her mouth was warm and inviting, and I sank into her, lowering my body onto hers.

Then—an instant later—she wrenched away, drawing back across the bed. She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest, and I was surprised to see tears coursing down her pale face. But—despite the tears—her eyes flashed. She looked furious.

“Ava? Why are you crying?” I asked.

She dashed her tears from her cheeks quickly and furiously, like they’d betrayed her. “I don’t understand,” she ground out, like the words were costing her.

I stared at her for a confused moment, wondering if my muddled brain was having a hard time, or if she really wasn’t making sense. “You don’t understand what?”

She glared down at the duvet, like it had done her wrong. “I don’t understand why you’re here, Xavier. I just—” She stopped, cutting herself off with a shake of her head, like she was angry with herself.

“Ava, just tell me what’s going on,” I said quietly.

She took a shaking breath. When she looked up at me, her blue eyes were wide and so plaintive, my heart ached to look at them.

“Xavier, why are you still here with me when you don’t have to be?”

**Episode 4797**

**Artemis**

I wasn’t asleep. I *couldn’t* sleep. I hadn’t been able to sleep since Marius had asked me about my magic manipulation, revealing that he had seen me use it.

*Shit.*

I glanced over at the Light Fae guard and her crew, who had decided to stay at the healer’s house with us to recuperate. I hadn’t been able to think of a way to get rid of them.

When I looked out the window at the darkness of the night, I wondered if now would be the time to do it. For Marius and me to slip away, with the cover of night on our side.

The only problem with that plan was Marius. I glared at him, lying next to me. He hadn’t moved. He was fast asleep, snoring at my side.

Typical.

But we were running out of time, and I could feel the tick of the clock in the back of my head. I had no idea how long Danae and the other Light Fae would sleep, and I couldn’t spend any more of my time worrying about Marius knowing about the manipulation magic. He had been really out of it, and I just had to hope that he wasn’t going to remember it when he woke up. But now was the time to act.

I gave Marius’s shoulder a rough shove. It was time to get a move on. If we didn’t, we might not be able to.

He started, then blinked and glared at me. “What?” he demanded. “I am *recuperating*, remember? Please handle me with care, Ari.”

“Give me a break,” I muttered. “It’s finally quiet, so we need to get the fuck out of here. *Now*.” I grabbed for his pants and tossed them toward him. “Get dressed.”

He sighed, then smirked and shifted a little. “Don’t you want to look at my wound first? Make sure it’s all healed up?”

I refused to answer that and got to my feet and stepped quietly across the room. I’d had enough years of bounty hunting to know how to walk silently, and I didn’t make a sound as I crossed the room toward the door. I peeked into the hall, but everything looked quiet.

“So you really don’t like to talk much, huh?” he said.

“Hmm,” I said, humming in agreement. I was barely paying attention to him, too distracted by listening to the low thrum of silence in the house.

“Not that you ever liked to talk from what I recall. Much more interested in action, if I remember right,” he went on.

“And I remember that you liked to talk *too* much,” I shot back.

There was a sudden buzz of sound from somewhere deep in the house. Listening hard, I heard it moving closer to us.

“Shit. Hurry,” I hissed, turning around to Marius. “We’re going to lose our chance.”

Marius groaned as he got slowly to his feet and tugged his pants on.

But when I looked out the door, I saw the glow of a lantern from around the corner, and my heart leapt into my throat. I closed the door softly. Looking down, I watched the darkness beneath the door. The warmth of the lantern light grew brighter and brighter as it drew closer, until it stopped just in front of our door.

*Shit.*

I took a step closer to Marius, my heart beating hard in my chest. “Once it’s dark again,” I said, my mouth barely moving, “we can sneak out.”

Marius nodded. “Whatever you say.” He looked over at me with a suggestive grin. “And I mean, really—*whatever* you say, Ari.”

I glared at him. I was *not* in the mood for his antics at the moment. Not that I ever was. “So you must be feeling better.”

His bright eyes went wide, the way they did when he was trying to feign innocence. “Why, whatever could you mean? How could you possibly tell?”

I rubbed a hand over my face. I was feeling edgy and punchy, and being needled by Marius was the last thing I needed. “I know you know about the magic, okay? You can stop screwing around.”

He grinned at me. “You know, I’ve been *dying* to ask you about it. I mean, I’ve never even *heard* of anyone having manipulation magic before. How does it even work? I mean, can you make anyone do *anything*?”

I rolled my eyes. I could hear the suggestive tone in his voice, clear as day, but I ignored him. I wasn’t going to answer him. All I could focus on was the warm light, cast by the swaying lantern, still creeping in from under the door.

“Okay, okay, one more question,” Marius said. He turned to face me and leaned in, his voice going low. “Have you ever used it on me?”

“*Never*,” I said, jerking away from him involuntarily. “God no. I don’t use it like that.”

“Really?”

“No,” I hissed. “I try not to use it at all, if I can help it.” I narrowed my eyes. “But I could make an exception.”

I could feel his eyes on me, and I turned to face him, looking him fully in the face.

He was looking at me, staring at me, searching my face like I was a puzzle he was trying to put together. “*Who* are you?” he asked.

I frowned. “You know who I am. We’ve known each other for years, asshole.”

He shook his head, not taking the bait of my insult. “No, I don’t think so. I know someone who says her name is Artemis. And, apparently, she has an incredibly rare form of magic she just never thought to mention to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, trying to shake off the weird feeling his look was giving me.

He looked at me for a moment longer, then his eyes narrowed, going from curious to suddenly shrewd. “Hang on.”

“What?” I asked, glancing quickly at the door. The light was still there.

“Why are you really looking for Kadmos?”

“What?” I gasped.

“He’s the only other person who’s ever been known to have that kind of magic, you know. And we all know how much people hated that he could do it. That he could manipulate the people around him, make them feel things they hadn’t felt before, change their minds, change their hearts. His life was in danger because he had that magic. People feared him, and now everyone thinks he’s dead.” He tipped his head as he looked at me. “Except you.”

I shifted between my feet, uncomfortable. I wondered if I should tell him. It would be nice to be able to confide in him, and I could sure as shit use a true ally in the Fae world. But… was that wise? Could I ever really trust Marius?

Heart thudding in my chest, I looked toward the door again, but I wasn’t checking the light, I was just nervous and anxious and scared out of my mind.

As though he could sense all this, Marius reached out for me and grasped my chin, turning it gently so I was looking at him. He stared into my eyes, his own expression unreadable.

My mouth felt dry as a desert as I looked back at him, waiting for him to speak, wondering what he was going to say.

Finally, he grinned at me, and the smile was crooked and familiar and completely disarming. “Well,” he said, “you’re more compelling than ever, Ari.”

I stared back at him, completely thrown. I didn’t speak—I had no idea how to respond to that.

But, as it happened, I didn’t get the chance anyway, because the next instant, the door to our room was thrown open and Danae stood, framed in the doorway.

“Not to—” she stopped, looking at the two of us, standing so close together, and raised her eyebrows. “… *interrupt*, but it’s time to go.”

Marius dropped his hand from my face. He touched my wrist as a signal, but he didn’t need to. I could feel it too. It was in the air, nearly as tangible as rain. There was something off.

But what could we do? We had no real options, and—as Danae looked at us—I knew we all knew it. So we followed her out of the room.

“Are we going to the Wrenthorns now?” I asked her.

Danae nodded. “Yeah, that’s the plan,” she confirmed as she led us toward the entrance.

But I wasn’t so sure.

I was even less sure when we stepped into the night and Marius and I found ourselves surrounded on all sides by Danae’s soldiers. I turned to look at her and found her glaring at me.

“We know you’re lying,” she spat, her voice hard. “The Wrenthorns aren’t expecting you at all.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could speak a word, her hands flicked out, throwing a magical net and trapping us both.

**Episode 4798**

When we’d gotten home, I’d come upstairs and practically sleepwalked into the shower. I’d brushed my teeth on autopilot and fallen into Greyson’s huge bed, wearing only my underwear and a T-shirt of Greyson’s that was comically large on me . The room was dark and quiet, and I had been almost asleep when he’d slid into the bed next to me. As he wrapped his arms around me, I snuggled into him. I loved the feeling of him and his arms and the beat of his heart against my back.

Turning in his arms, I faced him and tilted my chin up to kiss him. He hummed softly as I pressed my lips against his, the sound sleepy and contented.

I pulled back and looked into his grey eyes. “I’m so glad you’re safe, Greyson.”

“Me too,” he said, laughing softly.

I shivered slightly in his arms, even though I was warm. “I was so scared, you have no idea… Watching Adéluce throw you like that—like it was nothing. Like it was so easy for her to take you away from me.” My whole body felt cold again at the thought. It was the same kind of bone-deep cold I’d felt when we’d crawled out of the lake. “Something happened, too,” I said. “At the tower, I mean.”

Greyson went still. “What?”

“I looked up into his face. “Adéluce tried to use the *due destini* against me. Against Xavier. She tried to force it. I’ve never felt so awful. Even with everything we’ve gone through, I’ve never felt so terrible as that moment, watching you being torn away from me.” I shook my head, feeling the sting of tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. “I never want to feel that way again.”

He didn’t respond for a moment. The darkness of the room seemed to hum around us. The house was quiet outside our room, and it felt like we were suspended in our own little universe.

Then he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. He slid his hands up my back, tangling his fingers into my hair, his kiss deep and passionate. It seemed to contain so much—it spoke to me somehow—and the tears in my eyes flowed down my cheeks. It had been such an incredibly hard, emotional, wrenching day, and I felt those emotions bubbling up inside of me.

I pushed at Greyson’s chest, breaking the kiss. I took a deep breath, almost like I was coming up from deep water. “I couldn’t stand losing you, you know that, right?” I looked up into his eyes. “I don’t think I’d survive it.”

His eyes turned stormy as I spoke. “Love, you can’t mean that.”

“I do mean that,” I insisted. “How could I not?” Watching him being ripped away from me… I still felt it like a fresh wound. I pulled him close, pressing our bodies together—aching for more contact—and kissed him again.

I needed to feel him—to feel he was here with me.

As we kissed, I felt like I was in a sleepy, dreamlike haze—half-exhausted, still half-terrified from the day we’d had—and nothing felt fully real. Then he slipped his hands beneath the soft fabric of the shirt, removed it, and then made his way down my skin, stopping when his hands cupped my breasts. He caressed them, then thumbed each nipple, slowly, his lips back on mine. Heat coursed through me, and I moaned against his lips.

When I opened my mouth and his tongue entered, I welcomed it. Methodically, his hands left my breasts and traveled downward, brushing down the soft skin of my stomach, then slipping inside my panties. He hooked his fingers around the band and pulled them down. I kicked them the rest of the way off and pressed myself against him. He was like a furnace next to me, and I wanted to envelop myself with him.

I had almost lost Greyson. I *had* lost him—he’d only come back because he’d fought his way back to me—and I just couldn’t get close enough to him. If it had been possible, I would have crawled inside his chest.

“I love you,” I said, pressing myself into him. “So much you don’t get it.”

“I do,” he said as he grabbed my hips, locking me into him. “I really fucking do.”

His mouth found mine again, and his hands sank into my skin, squeezing hard. My hands tangled into his hair as I kissed him back more urgently than how we’d started. My hips began rocking against him, trying to stay in this euphoria with him.

He stroked two fingers along the seam of my sex. I arched back, breaking the kiss as I sucked in a breath. Our eyes connected, and he leaned in closer.

“Open your mouth,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I listened without hesitation. I trusted this man with everything I had. Slowly, Greyson pushed two of his fingers in my mouth. I responded enthusiastically, sucking on his fingers until he took them out. Needing what I hoped he was giving me; I opened my legs wider. He slipped his fingers inside me, making me moan.

“Was that what you were wanting, love?” he murmured.

I nodded against the pillow, my eyes closed as colors bright as the sunrise swam inside my eyelids. He pumped his fingers into me, and I reached for him to steady myself. His skin was smooth and hot, like he was burning from within. Then, as if to really tease me, he stopped, moving his attention—and both hands—up to my breasts. I whimpered as his mouth closed around one nipple, my body aching, needing to be filled again by him.

“Greyson,” I begged.

“Hmm?” he hummed against me.

Growing desperate, my hands went to the waist of his sweats, and I tugged them down.

“*Fuck*,” he said as I slipped my hand inside his pants and my fingers wrapped around the shaft of his cock. He groaned as I started to stroke him.

He kissed me again, then moved his mouth down my jaw, over to my ear, where he bit my earlobe. He moved down my neck, then nibbled my shoulder as he caught me up and moved me on the mattress, so I was positioned beneath him.

“I love you so much, Cali,” he whispered, pushing my legs apart with his knees. “You’re my whole life. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

He positioned his cock in front of me, and then slowly entered me. “Fuck,” I breathed, wrapping my legs around him.

“You don’t know what it does to me when you swear like that,” he said. “Knowing it’s because of me.”

“It’s for you,” I moaned as he hitched one of my legs up onto his shoulder. “Yes, *deeper*. Please, Greyson, fuck me deeper.”

“Anything for you,” he whispered, thrusting into me. “I would do anything for you, Cali.”

I wrapped my hand around the posts of the headboard and hung on as he drove into me, harder and faster. He was a man possessed, and I opened myself up to him. He needed this, and I needed it, too. We had come so close to losing each other, and we needed this now, to remind ourselves that we were still here. We were together, and in love, and very much alive.

“Greyson,” I panted, arching against him. “Oh my god. *Yes*.”

Wave after wave of pleasure broke over me. It didn’t let up as Greyson pounded harder, shaking the whole bed frame and cursing as he came after me.

I was surprised to find that there were tears in my eyes as Greyson collapsed on top of me, spent from the effort of his orgasm.

He frowned when he saw them and wiped them away. “Love, what is it? Are you hurt? Did I hurt you? Fuck, did I—”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly. “That was amazing. I’m not hurt. I’m just…” I shook my head, not even sure what to say. “Today was just a lot.”

The fearful look left his face, and he nodded. “Yeah, today was a lot.” He dropped down to lay by my side and pulled me into him with a contented sigh. “But we’re okay. We made it out. Everyone did. We’re okay.”

“I know,” I said softly. “Grateful for you.”

Settling back in, I kissed his shoulder and snuggled into his arms. I felt warm and contented and—most of all—safe. Today had been hell, but Greyson was right—it was over. I knew that whatever was coming with Xavier—trying to work out what our future was going to look like—was going to be hard. Xavier continued to confuse me at almost every turn.

Shaking off my thoughts, I wrapped my arms around Greyson as sleep began to settle over us both. I’d had a peek at what it would be like to lose him, and I wasn’t ever going to go through that again. I wasn’t ever going to lose him. That much I knew.

No matter what the *due destini* wanted me to do.

**Episode 4799**

**Xavier**

*Xavier, why are you still here with me when you don’t have to be?*

Her words were echoing in my head, and I stared at Ava, stunned. I was completely thrown by her question. Tears were still rolling down her cheeks, and instinctively I lifted a hand to wipe them away, but she twisted out of my reach.

“Stop,” she shot, moving farther away.

My hand hung in the hair between us, frozen.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, Ava. I want to ask you something. You’ve known me for a long time. Longer than almost anyone else. When have you ever known me to do anything I didn’t want to do?”

She stared at me, a flat look in her blue eyes. “One instance comes to mind right away.”

I gritted my teeth. “Okay, *without* magic involved.”

She shrugged a shoulder and almost smiled, though the expression seemed to be against her will. “None, I guess.”

I was gratified to see that she’d stopped crying. I tried again.

“You know me,” I said, leaning toward her. “You know what kind of man I am, don’t you?  
 She hesitated for just a moment, then nodded. “Yeah,” she whispered. “I know what kind of man you are. I always have.”

“When Adéluce burned my life down, I had to leave the Redwood pack, that’s true, but she did leave me with some options. I wasn’t a fucking puppet. I didn’t *have* to come to the Samara pack. I didn’t have to stay in Oregon at all. And I sure as hell didn’t have to come to you. I came because…” I paused, thinking about what had drawn me to that dumpy little trailer on Samara land. “I don’t know, it was like instinct, somehow. I wanted this. I’ve never lied to you about that. I care about this pack, and I care about our lives. I wanted to be here. You have to know that’s true, Ava. I wouldn’t have been able to become the Alpha if I didn’t.”

She looked at me for a moment longer, then sighed.

I narrowed my eyes. “Why do I have this feeling that I’m missing something?”

“No, it’s just…” she shrugged. “I believe in you as the Samara Alpha, Xavier. I know you want to be the Alpha. You’re right. You wouldn’t have been able to take on the role if you didn’t. And your loyalty to the pack is clear. You’ve been good to the pack. You’ve made good decisions for us. You’ve been a strong leader in times of crisis…” she trailed off.

“But?” I asked when she didn’t go on.

She looked up at me, and I could see the pain in her crystal eyes. “But you never stopped loving her.”

“Ava—”

“No, Xavier. Don’t. You wanted to be Alpha, but you never actually wanted *me*.”

She stood suddenly, her usually lithe movements jerky. It was almost like she was in pain. She turned toward the door, like she was going to leave, and I moved toward her, reaching for her. I grabbed both her hands in mine and held her fast.

“Listen to me,” I said, my voice low and intense, “if you had asked me six months ago where I would be right now, this is not where I would have guessed. Hell, this is probably the *last* place on earth I would have expected—”

“*Xavier*—” she started, trying to tug her hands from mine.

“No, listen to me. I can finally be honest with you, and I want to.”

Her eyes went wide. There was fear in them. Ava was rarely scared, but she was scared now. Her whole body went still as she looked at me, like she was watching a predator pace. Like she knew I could hurt her.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I knew she was waiting for me to pounce, but that wasn’t what I was doing.

I pulled her gently toward me. “You are my *Luna*, Ava. You are my *mate.* We are together. I love you.”

“But what about Cali?”

That was the question, wasn’t it?

“Look, I know we’re going to have to deal with the situation with Cali and Greyson. It’s there, and I can’t ignore it. This is the one thing I couldn’t tell you before. I…” I hesitated. I swallowed, then took a deep, steadying breath. I knew Ava wasn’t going to like what I was about to say, but I couldn’t let that stop me from saying it.

I glanced quickly out the window, taking in the blackness of the night. I was exhausted, this night felt like it had lasted a thousand years, but we were going to have this out. We had to. I couldn’t keep this from Ava anymore. I’d meant what I’d said. I loved her, and I couldn’t keep this from her anymore. It wasn’t fair to her—or to me. It was eating me up inside, like a fucking poison.

Some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face because Ava grabbed my chin and turned my face to look at her. “You can say it, Xavier,” she said, her face set. She took a deep breath of her own. “I want to hear you say it. I’m ready.”

I nodded. “I still love Cali. I never stopped.”

She might have thought she was ready to hear it, but she still flinched at the words.

I had to keep going.  “I love her, and I love you, Ava. Both of those things are true.”

The room was quiet around us. I didn’t know what the rest of the Samara pack was up to, but the house seemed quiet, too. The night was quiet, and we were quiet in it. The only thing that seemed loud was the war of emotions fighting its way across Ava’s face. Her face was usually well controlled, but now I saw everything—the pain, the joy, the anger, the frustration. There was hurt, and love, and fury, and for a moment, I really wondered what was going to win.

And I wondered what she was going to say.

But—in the end—she didn’t say anything at all. She reached for me and slid her hand around the back of my neck, threading her fingers into my hair. She dug them in as she pulled me down, pressing her lips to mine, hard.

There was a lot to her kiss, a lot of what had been fighting across her face, and I felt it as I leaned into the kiss, deepening it. It felt vast and wide and deep, like she was kissing me from the depths of her soul. I was swimming through something, and it nearly took my breath away. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight, like I was holding onto a buoy. I held her tightly against me, feeling her body fit into mine. It was intense. Like we’d scaled a mountain together or jumped off a cliff or faced death—which we had.

Her hands spanned my shoulder blades, then her fingertips pressed down, her nails digging into my back. I growled against her, the sound deep in my throat, and kissed her harder. This pushed her on, and I could feel her nails scoring my skin.

I walked her back, then pressed her down onto the bed. As I hovered over her, feeling her writhing beneath me, I had this strange sense that I was floating on top of an ocean and looking down. Like I could see everything below me, all the possibilities if I were to take the plunge. If I wanted to—if there was even a way to let go of Cali—*this* was how it could be. Ava and me, together. Just the two of us. I would be hers, and she would be completely and utterly mine. I wouldn’t have to think about having to share her or wonder about how this was going to affect my relationship with my brother. It would just be us, together, against the world.

But I knew it was just an illusion. It wasn’t really possible. A life without Cali wasn’t a life I could imagine living, but even the glimpse of that swirling sea below me gave me a strange, heady feeling. It made my mind swim.

Ava arched into me, making a low, murmuring purr in the back of her throat that told me she liked where I was heading, and she wanted to keep going. But I was so fucking tired. Kissing her was making me feel like I was floating in and out of consciousness.

I pulled slightly away and rested my forehead lightly against hers.

“Xavier,” she breathed, her body warm beneath me.

“Ava. I’m here,” I said quietly. “I wanted this, and I want this. I’m not walking away. I love you. Whatever happened at the beginning of all this, whatever started this—none of that shit matters now. This is where we are now.” I kissed her softly. “Right here.”

**Episode 4800**

When I opened my eyes, bright morning sunlight was streaming into the room and across the bed. I reached up, stretching my arms over my head with a giant yawn.

There was a chuckle from the doorway, and I looked over to see Greyson leaning against the doorframe. He was already up and dressed in dark jeans and a grey T-shirt. His light hair was damp, like he’d just gotten out of the shower, and he was grinning at me.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded, pretending to glare at him.

He shrugged. “Nothing. You’re just cute when you’re sleeping.”

“It’s not polite to stare, you know,” I told him, though I couldn’t help but smile at him.

His smile slipped from his face, and his expression grew more serious. “Xavier texted this morning.”

“What did he say?” I asked, pushing myself to sitting.

“He and Colton are heading over.”

“Over here?” I asked, surprised.

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, they’ll be here soon to talk to everyone. Maybe we’ll finally get the whole story about everything that happened with Adéluce.”  
 “Yeah,” I murmured, privately wondering if Xavier was going to bring Ava with him, but I didn’t ask. “I’m looking forward to finally finding out what the hell that vampire-witch actually did to Xavier.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows at this.

“What?” I asked, feeling suddenly defensive, as though he had just accused me of something—though he hadn’t said a word.

He shrugged one shoulder. “Whatever Adéluce did, Xavier made a lot of choices as to how to deal with shit all on his own, and I hope he knows that he’s going to have to deal with the ramifications of that.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, thinking about the conversation I’d had with Lola the night before, and how it had a very similar tone. “But there was a lot that happened that was out of his control, you know. And I don’t think we should be too hard on him. I’m just ready for this all to be over, you know?”

  And I missed the old Xavier, the one who worshiped me, though I didn’t say that part to Greyson.

He stepped into the room and grabbed a sweatshirt from the dresser. He pulled it over his head, then leaned over to drop a kiss on my forehead. “I’m heading downstairs for some coffee. I’ll see you down there. They’ll be here soon— probably by the time you’re ready.”

I nodded and, as Greyson shut the door behind him, threw back the covers and stepped out of bed. Compared to the bed, the room was chilly, but I hurried into the bathroom and stepped into a warm shower. I’d just taken one the night before, but I’d had a busy night, and thought it was for the best—especially if Xavier was coming.

I threw on jeans and a sweater, pulled my wet hair up into a messy bun, and headed downstairs to find the rest of the pack gathered in the living room. Everyone had mugs of coffee and bowls of cereal or plates of eggs, but everyone looked ready for Xavier’s appearance.

People were holding their breakfasts, but I noticed no one was really eating. The atmosphere was tense, and everyone seemed jumpy, looking over often at the door, which stayed firmly shut.

The air in the room felt strangely electrified, and as I sat down on the couch next to Lola, I wondered to myself how much Rishika had shared with everyone the night before. I knew Greyson had told her the whole story, but it was so strange and so unbelievable. So much of it didn’t even really make sense, I could understand how people were wary.

I looked over at Lola, who was holding an uneaten bagel.

“This is weird,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“It feels like we’re waiting for a court case to start or something,” she said. “Like Xavier’s going to be led in by his lawyer.”

“It kind of is,” Zainab piped up, looking over at us from farther down the couch.

“What?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I mean, not the thing about the lawyer, but it kind of is like a court case. I mean, it’s Xavier coming here to explain himself to us. That’s what—”

“That’s exactly what I’m here to do.”

Everyone looked over at the sound of Xavier’s voice. We’d been so busy talking, we hadn’t even noticed that he and Colton had come into the house. They were standing in the doorway of the living room, and Xavier was looking around at the gathered pack, with Greyson standing beside him.

Zainab sat back on the couch, her face burning with embarrassment, and I looked over at Xavier. He was wearing jeans and a black sweater. His hair looked sleep-tousled, and he still had a scruff of a beard on this jaw, but he looked a lot better than he had the day before. Like he’d gotten some rest. That was an improvement.

But he was uncharacteristically fidgety. He kept shifting back and forth on his feet and didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. It didn’t suit him, and it was unnerving to watch someone who had always been so confident and so sure look suddenly so completely uncertain. It was like everything that had happened with Adéluce had changed something about him. It had shaken him—of course it had. How could it not?

Looking around, he took a deep breath. “The first thing I want to do is tell you all that I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t tell how the pack responded to this statement. I did know that the air was still tense, and so quiet I could have heard a pin drop. I wasn’t sure that he needed to apologize to us at all… It wasn’t like he’d wanted any of this to happen, but people had put their lives at risk.

Xavier—flanked by both his brothers—went on. “I know what I did hurt you—leaving you the way that I did. I hope you know that I never wanted to do it. And I want to explain why it all happened the way that it happened.” He took a deep breath. “It really all started with Seluna’s ashes.”

He began, talking about the ashes, and how he had paid years of his life to have them delivered to the demon realm, only to find out that delivery wasn’t guaranteed, and they hadn’t made it. He spoke of Adéluce, her thirst for revenge, and her single-minded pursuit of him. How he had believed she had been dead at Crater Lake, only for her to find him again.

My heart broke for him as he went on and on, telling the story of how she had threatened him and controlled him. He had been so alone, so isolated in his fear and pain. He’d been forced to make every decision completely on his own, trying so hard to keep everyone he loved safe. And when he failed, he was alone with that, too, without being able to do anything about it.

I hated that I hadn’t been—no, that I *couldn’t* have been—there for him. And I hated that it was Ava who had gotten to help him through some of the worst of this.

All around me, the room was quiet. That in and of itself was no small feat. The pack was never quiet and hardly ever really listened to anyone. They were all listening now, although I still couldn’t tell how they were feeling or reacting to Xavier’s story.

I shot a glance at Lola, who was looking intently at Xavier, but I wasn’t sure if that was due to her anger with him about how he’d treated me, or because she was feeling as badly as I was about everything he’d had to go through—not just yesterday but also all the weeks before that.

“And I know Rishika filled you in on what happened yesterday at the tower. Adéluce created a portal, and she took Cali through that. Then Ava. That’s what got us all to that creepy-ass tower of hers. But that was a miscalculation on her part, because that’s where I was finally able to take her down. With a lot of help,” he added. He was quiet for a moment. “I really wish I could blame Adéluce for everything that I’ve done wrong. For every word I said, for everything I did—but that’s not fair. Don’t get me wrong—she’s a bitch, and I’m glad as hell that she’s dead. But she came after me because of something I did wrong. Really wrong. It was inadvertent, but it was still unforgivable. And I’ve had a lot of time to think about what that really means. She might have started all of this by putting a spell on me, but there were moments when I fucked up just because I fucked up. Moments when I caused pain for everyone here just because I made the wrong choices. So I have to ask you all a question.”

He looked around the room, and several pairs of eyes were staring up at him. His own blue eyes were anxious, but he looked determined as he spoke again.  
 “Can you forgive me?”

**Episode 4801**

**Greyson**

Xavier’s words hung in the air between us, and for a moment, all I could do was blink. *That was… a lot.*

I couldn’t quite believe what I’d just heard. Not the story itself—I believed every word Xavier had said. What I struggled to wrap my head around was the idea that Xavier had to go through all of this on his own. He must have been in agony this whole time, and we’d had no idea until just recently. And even then, we hadn’t even scratched the surface on all the shit Adéluce had put my brother through.

When I’d made my deal with the three witches, I’d made the choice not to involve other people. It had been important to me to break the killing curse the *due destini* had morphed into, and I’d been willing to pay the price the witches demanded. But that was my choice and nobody else’s. Xavier hadn’t had that option, from the sound of things. He’d been forced into that isolation by Adéluce. She’d made him burn all those bridges. Made him turn himself into a pariah, made him hurt everyone around him…

I tried to imagine what I would have done if I were in Xavier’s shoes. I absolutely would have done anything to save Cali. Xavier’s deal with Adéluce had saved Cali’s life, had given us the time and the opportunity we needed to finally break her free from both Adéluce and Seluna’s curse. But what about the cost? Xavier had come back from making that deal, faced Cali—who had just come from the hospital—and then broke her heart into a million pieces. Then he’d burned bridges with just about every member of the Redwood pack, his family, and he’d left us.

For as long as I lived, I’d never forget Cali’s heartbroken sobs. They’d undone me in this way that no one would understand. He’d left me with a mess, hurt the woman I loved, and expected me to clean it up. Not only. Had he hurt her, he’d hurt the entire Redwood pack. He’d abandoned them without another word. He’d abandoned me as his brother.

If the tables were turned, if I were the one being targeted by Adéluce, and I was the one who’d made this deal, could I have done it without turning my back on the Redwoods? Without hurting Cali the way he had?

I didn’t know for sure. I wanted to say I could have done it better, without hurting so many of the people I cared about, without burning just about every bridge I had, but… Wasn’t that the point? Adéluce had backed Xavier into a corner and required one thing of him: absolute cruelty. And she dangled Cali’s life in front of him as collateral if he ever refused.

If I’d been put in the same situation, if I was required to hurt Cali to keep her alive, I’d do it. In a heartbeat. If the choices were breaking her heart and living in a world without her, well, there was no choice.

It didn’t make it any less fucked up.

Xavier was still standing in front of the rest of the Redwoods, waiting to hear their verdict. Colton stood at his back, unfailingly supportive. The silence grew more and more tense the longer it dragged on, but I couldn’t make this decision for my pack. They’d all been hurt in their own ways by my brother’s decisions, and while having the context behind it likely helped, they had to decide on their own whether or not to accept his apology.

The longer the silence dragged on, though, the more uneasy I became. What would happen if the pack didn’t forgive Xavier? Did I want them to? He was my brother, and I cared about him, but I’d be lying if I said I was ready to just forget everything he’d said and done, all the things he’d done to hurt the people I cared about most.

Maybe the rest of the pack felt similarly?

Then Cali stood up and approached Xavier slowly. “Of course we forgive you. None of this is your fault, Xavier,” she said. “Besides, you saved everyone in the end. You did what you had to do.”

Suddenly, something hot and ugly twisted in my gut as I watched my mate forgive my brother. His mate, too. Still. But there was something else there, too. I liked to think I knew Xavier pretty damn well by now, and there was a tension in his shoulders I hadn’t seen before.

*He’s holding himself back… but why?*

I would have thought he’d be over the moon to be properly reunited with her. To have the threat hanging over her head removed and to clear the air between them, to offer an explanation of everything he’d done and said.

But before I could question it further, Jay jumped up and pulled Xavier away into a hug. Torin, Ravi, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab all piled in for a group hug. Almost the entire pack was enveloping Xavier now. Wrapping him in their love and acceptance and forgiveness.

My teeth ground together at the sight. I scanned the crowd and noticed Lilac, Violet, and Charlie were hovering at the edges of the group. Lola, on the other hand, was still sitting. That wasn’t all that surprising. She was Cali’s best friend, but had been friends with Xavier too. She’d been pretty vocal of her disapproval of how Xavier had acted.

*I’m glad Cali has someone so fiercely protective in her corner. Well, someone other than me.*

Cali turned to catch my eye and beckoned me forward with a nod. The message couldn’t be more clear. She wanted me to come up and assure Xavier that I’d forgiven him, too. I followed her lead and moved over to the group, but I stuck to the edges. Any closer and I’d have to put on a show, which was the last thing I wanted to do right about now. I knew it was important to Cali that her mates be on good terms, but there was still so much fallout from everything that had happened. I didn’t know if I was ready yet to just move forward and play nice.

I was glad Xavier had gotten through this—that he was free from Adéluce. Of course I was. He was my brother, and I loved him—even if he didn’t return it. I’d be a monster to not feel relief that he wasn’t suffering at the hands of a sadistic vampire-witch. To say nothing of my relief that, moving forward, Xavier’s actions would be his own. I had to assume that meant things would be better for the Redwoods and for Cali. They’d certainly be better for Xavier. I could only imagine what it was like for him, day after day, living with the knowledge of the pain he’d caused, the pain he had to *keep* causing, no matter how many times Cali or I or another Redwood pack member begged him to explain what was happening, what had changed for him.

I wouldn’t wish his experience on anyone, and I was beyond proud of my pack for being able to forgive Xavier and welcome him back. It showed empathy and kindness and maturity—showed how much they cared and how much they’d grown through all the things we’d faced together.

And yet, as I watched them all embrace Xavier, I couldn’t help but wonder…

I had nearly lost Lilac to the Samara pack, and Ravi was getting closer with Marissa, of all people. It seemed like every time I turned around, new connections were being forged between my pack and the Samara pack. And while I’d normally welcome those ties between our two packs, with my mother and Big Mac gone, Gabriel and Mikah off doing their own thing, Artemis off in the Fae world, and losing Kira and Jacqueline… The room looked emptier than it had in a long time. Longer than I could remember.

Plus, Xavier was the Samara Alpha thanks to this shit with Adéluce. He wasn’t even really one of us anymore, even though we all knew that leading the Redwood pack was what he’d really wanted. How long had Xavier and I fought over the leadership of this pack? And would that fight resume now that Adéluce wasn’t pulling his strings anymore? Or had Xavier changed? Was he satisfied now that he was the Samara Alpha?

It would be the dickest of dick moves for him to abandon the Samaras after becoming their Alpha while under Adéluce’s control. Ava was a strong leader, but the Samaras needed an Alpha to thrive. And right now, with Xavier, they seemed to be the closest to thriving they’d been since Silas started the pack wars.

But none of that changed the fact that Xavier had become the Samara Alpha under duress. It wasn’t something he would have chosen for himself. He could make all the choices he wanted now. He was a free man. So, what did that mean for the Samaras and for the Redwoods? And what did it mean for me?

Now that Adéluce wasn’t in the picture anymore, was I going to lose leadership of the Redwood pack to Xavier?

**Episode 4802**

**Artemis**

*Oh my gods. Everything hurts.*

I groaned, my bones aching as I tried to shift, tried to find some relief in the weird position Marius and I had been stuck in for… I didn’t even know how long. I shifted maybe an inch, and then the ache increased twofold, like my body was punishing me for failing to find anything resembling comfort.

“Watch it there,” Marius murmured. “I like you and all, but I’d prefer not to have all those pointy bones of yours digging into me. Well, any more than they already are.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Because you’re such a pleasure to be trussed up to.”

“You know you love it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think you’ve mixed up ‘love’ and ‘loathe’ again.”

We’d been tied up together in this stupid magical net in the back of a very bumpy wagon for too long. I hated that Danae had gotten the upper hand on us. I thought I’d had a handle on the situation, but clearly I had underestimated her.

Now, we were at her mercy. I didn’t know where we were going, or even what direction we’d set off in. Danae hadn’t given me any information beyond the fact that she knew I wasn’t telling the truth. We could be headed literally anywhere right now, and I was helpless to do a single thing.

Marius shifted, and his elbow dug into my ribs. And he had the gall to accuse *me* of having “pointy bones.”

“Be careful,” I hissed.

He rolled his eyes. “So sorry. Next time we’re tied up together, I’ll try to make it better for you.”

I glared. “There won’t be a next time.”

“So, you think she’s going to kill us then?”

My stomach bottomed out. “What? No! That’s not—” I blew out a breath. “Has anyone ever told you how absolutely maddening you are?”

Marius’s full lips curved up. “Perhaps. Once or twice.”

We were so close together his breath was hot on my cheek. Something warm twisted low in my belly. Disgust. It had to be disgust—because I wasn’t entertaining any other possible option.

*I better not be blushing. Because I have no reason to blush. Disgusted people don’t blush.*

Maybe the strain of our situation was causing me to feel flushed. From stress. That had to be it.

“Do you have any idea where we might be headed?” I asked him, desperate to get my mind onto something else.

He gave the slightest shake of his head. “It could be anywhere, honestly. Maybe they’re taking us to Kadmos himself?” He raised his brows, but I frowned. It wasn’t a real guess. It was a calculated move. A way to see how *I* would respond to that possibility, what I knew or didn’t know.

Was he seriously digging for intel right now? *Stupid man. Now is not the time for games!*

“You’re not usually so clumsy in your attempts to get information out of me,” I finally said.

He sighed. “Yes, well, I’m not usually trying to do it with one hand cramping and a knee shoved up against wooden boards rough enough to cut through my pants. It’s giving me slivers, Ari. *Slivers*. Don’t you have any way of getting out of this damned net?”

I wanted to ask why he was under the impression that freeing us was my job alone. It wasn’t me alone who had got us into this situation. But I bit back the retort and took a deep breath, looking for some kind of calm in this sea of discomfort and frustration.

*This situation is shit, but it won’t help either of us to be bickering right now. We need to save our energy and focus—*

Marius’s fingers brushed along the underside of my jaw in a surprisingly soft caress. *He must be trying to stretch out his cramping hand.* But the touch left a trail of heat behind, and I felt my face flush deeper.

*We* really *need to get out of here.*

I turned my attention to our immediate problem: the net. The binding locked around us seemed very similar to the net I’d used in my bounty hunting days. I suddenly had a flash of empathy for all the people and creatures I’d trussed up in my own net.

But I couldn’t think about that now, either. I scanned the back of the wagon. On the bright side, it seemed Danae was relying entirely on the net alone to keep us bound. There were no guards back here with us. No secondary level of containment we’d have to get through. Once we were out of this net, we’d be home free.

“I know what to do,” I said quietly. “We have to relax.”

He scoffed. “Oh, of course. There’s nothing more relaxing than being trapped like a fucking animal.”

I ground my teeth together. “Will you please shut up so I can explain how we’re going to escape?”

*That* shut him up. I’d never seen Marius’s jaw snap closed so quickly. It was a shame I couldn’t bottle this moment. “If we can relax against each other, the net will relax, too,” I explained. “It’s responsive to the quarry within it. Once the net goes slack, we can create an opening.”

“Okay… what do you mean by ‘relax,’ though?”

“The more we struggle, the tighter the net will be. We need to just… sort of… um, melt into each other.” Heat flared across my cheeks. “And then we can get out.”

He pulled in a breath. “Fine. I’m willing to try it if it’ll get us out of here.”

“It will. I know it will. So… let’s just be quiet for a second and… relax.”

Silence settled between us, heavy and awkward at first. I tried to ignore all the places our bodies touched. All the aches in my own body from being confined—or being jabbed by Marius and his own pointy bones.

*No, don’t think about that.*

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to focus on the rise and fall of my chest. Next to me, Marius seemed to be doing the same. Slowly, we began to breathe in unison, and then we finally started to relax. I adjusted ever so slightly in Marius’s arms, not a fight for more space, not something that would trigger the net’s magic. Just a way to get slightly more comfortable while moving even closer.

I tried to ignore how Marius’s breathing skipped a beat, going arrhythmic for a moment before calming. After a moment, he fell back into rhythm with me.

My eyes fluttered shut, and my world narrowed to the feeling of our chests rising and falling in unison. My heartbeat echoed in my ears, and moments later, I realized I could hear Marius’s too.

He was the first one to break the silence, and his voice was deeper than usual. Calm. Like he’d just woken up from a long rest. “I’m sorry about all this mess.”

“Don’t be,” I said easily. “I helped, didn’t I?”

Suddenly, the net went slack around us. Marius tensed, and I wrapped my hand around his arm, the closest bit of him in reach.

“No sudden movements,” I warned. “Or we’ll have to do this all over again.”

“What a tragedy,” he teased, but his breathing was a little uneven.

Slowly, gently, carefully, I worked at the net, widening the strands until there was a gap large enough for me to slip out. I stepped out of the net and disarmed it completely, freeing Marius.

He let out a long sigh. “Thank the gods.”

“Shh.” I pressed a finger to my lips. Quietly and carefully, we hopped out of the back of the wagon and landed on a hard dirt road. It was nightfall, and darkness wrapped around me as I ducked into the tree line without waiting to see if Marius would follow. Sooner or later, they’d realize we weren’t in the back of the wagon anymore, and I didn’t intend to be an easy target for them to capture again.

I moved stealthily through the woods, trying to put as much distance between myself and the road as possible. Marius’s footfalls sounded behind me, followed by his whispers, but I paid him no mind.

Finally, a hand latched onto my wrist and Marius spun me around to face him.

“What is it?” I asked, exasperated.

“I’ve been whispering for you to stop for several minutes now.”

“I know. I was ignoring you. We need to get—”

“Do you know where we’re going?” he asked.

“Well, no, but it doesn’t matter right now. We just need to put distance between us and Danae.”

He looked back the way we’d come. “I think we’ve actually made quite a bit of distance.”

I followed his gaze, and surprise struck me. We had gone pretty far. “Okay. Maybe there’s time for a short rest so we can figure out what to do next.”

He nodded and gingerly dropped down to the ground, leaning back against the trunk of a wide tree. He still hadn’t let go of my wrist, and he used the leverage to pull me down next to him, so we were shoulder to shoulder.

I flushed again, reminded of how we’d been pressed up against each other in the wagon.

He turned to look at me. “Maybe it’s time to pick our conversation back up before we were so rudely interrupted?”

I tensed. *Is he going to ask about Kadmos again?*

I really didn’t want to talk about that right now. I was tired and sore, and I still didn’t know if I could trust Marius with the truth. Deep down, I wanted to, but…

My eyes darted down to his lips. When I looked back up at him, his eyes had darkened. He’d noticed.

“Come on, Ari. Talk to me…”

And then our lips crashed into each other’s.

**Episode 4803**

**Xavier**

Never in my life had I been more thankful to Jay than I was when he stepped up and put more space between me and Cali. After all this time, all the ugliness between us, all the tears and anger, all the times she’d begged me to explain what had happened between us, what had changed so drastically, *now* I could finally hold her and savor her and show her just how much I loved her, how I had never stopped loving her. And yet… I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t give in to the need that drove me to pull me to her, to hold her close and never let go.

But I wasn’t strong enough to resist, either, and that was where Jay came in. Saving my ass by pulling me into a hug and making space for the rest of the Redwoods to rush me. I wasn’t really a hugging type of guy, but their forgiveness was a huge relief. It gave me a reason to avoid meeting Cali’s gaze, even though I felt her eyes on me. It helped me remember to keep my hands to myself where Cali was concerned.

Because, as much as I wanted to pick up where things had left off with Cali, I couldn’t. I couldn’t do that to Ava. Not so soon. Not after last night. She deserved better than for me to run off into the sunset with Cali just because I could. I needed to be good to her—after all, I loved her, too—and we hadn’t even made any decisions about how to move forward from here now that Ava knew everything.

*Fuck me.*

Not to mention I couldn’t—and shouldn’t—do that to Cali. Give her hope of a future for the two of us when I still didn’t know if that was going to happen. Adéluce’s hold on me had set events into motion, and there was no going back, even if I was free to choose now. I’d already jerked Cali around enough when I was under Adéluce’s control. I needed to move forward carefully now, not let my emotions run the show.

It was a huge relief that everyone seemed to be okay with me again, that they had it in their hearts to forgive me after what I’d done. I cared about these people. They were my family in a lot of ways.

But they weren’t my pack anymore. Because I wasn’t a Redwood anymore. If I was being honest with myself, I probably wouldn’t be a Redwood ever again. It was a bitter thing to try to accept, but it was the reality in front of me. I wasn’t going to abandon the Samara pack. They were finally becoming strong again, finally recovering from all the shit that had happened to them since Nolan had been killed.

Admittedly, I’d become their leader under less than fantastic circumstances, and Adéluce would always cast a pall over my decision to become the Samara Alpha. That would probably never change. But they deserved a strong Alpha who would prioritize them, and I wasn’t going to be the guy who bailed on them the moment I got my free will back.

Plus, I wasn’t sure I deserved to come back to the Redwood pack after how I left them so high and dry.

The weight of all their gazes on me, all those smiling faces and hopeful expressions, all those hugs, felt heavy all of a sudden. A bead of sweat slipped down the back of my neck. Maybe I really hadn’t deserved their forgiveness so quickly. Maybe it would’ve been better if they would’ve yelled at me. I did deserve it, didn’t I?

*I need some air.*

I tried to smile, but it felt wrong somehow. Cali was looking at me strangely. Suddenly, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder, and I turned to see Greyson standing next to me, opposite Colton. I’d never been so thankful for Greyson interrupting something.

“I think we should talk,” he said. “Alpha to Alpha.”

My sense of relief disappeared as quickly as it had come. Greyson was right, though. We did have some things to sort out now that I was out from under Adéluce’s thumb. I swallowed and nodded.

Colton shifted on my other side. “Do you want me to come with?”

Before I could answer, Greyson smirked. “I thought your mate was the Alpha? I’ve got it. Xavier and I just need to touch base on some pack stuff.”

Colton looked at me, his brows raised. He wouldn’t leave unless I said so.

I nodded. “It’s fine.”

I followed Greyson into the den and closed the door behind us. I wasn’t totally sure, but the energy I was getting from Greyson told me this conversation would probably be better in private.

When I turned to face him, he was just standing there, watching me with a look I couldn’t decipher. Immediately, my hackles raised. *Why isn’t he talking? He’s the one who suggested this meeting. Does he think I’m some child who will start rambling to fill the silence?*

If that were the case, he was about to be dead wrong. Greyson and I were equals now. And, what’s more, I’d just spent the last several weeks under a conniving vampire-bitch’s control. Greyson was a puppy dog compared to Adéluce. Whatever game he wanted to play, I’d play it. And I’d win.

I stayed quiet, and finally, Greyson spoke.

“I don’t want to have some big emotional scene. This isn’t—” He stopped, seeming to weigh his words. “I just want to know how this is going to work. Are you completely with the Samara pack now? A hundred percent? I know it might not have been totally your choice… but you did make it.”

I frowned. There was a fucking ocean of subtext beneath my brother’s words. What was he leaving unsaid? His words were clipped, and I could tell Greyson was angry about something, but his words didn’t let on what that might be.

*What the hell is going on with him? And why did he pull me away to have* this *conversation anyway?*

He talked like we were hashing out the details of our pack leadership moving forward, but we’d already talked about that yesterday. *What, exactly, is he looking for here? What is he hoping I’ll say?*

I slowly shook my head. “I already told you yesterday—I wasn’t lying to you. I’m the Samara Alpha now. Why would I come back here to play as one of your pack members?”

He growled, then gritted his teeth. “That’s not what I meant, and I think you know that.”

I shrugged. He could assume whatever the hell he wanted about me—and he clearly was—but that didn’t mean I’d be playing into his games. And since I wasn’t a fucking mind reader, I actually didn’t know what he was thinking. All I knew was that he was mad about something.

I watched my brother take a deep breath, like he was trying to calm himself. Silence settled between us again, and I waited for him to be the one to break it. Then, suddenly, the fight drained out of Greyson.

He shook his head. “Listen, Xavier, I just want to be clear about how we’re going to be working together moving forward. Now we can actually talk without some witch pulling at your strings—”

“Excuse me?” I snarled, baring my teeth. “I wasn’t her fucking puppet. I was her prisoner.”

Greyson frowned. “What’s the difference?”

“Seriously?” I huffed. “The difference is that she was blackmailing me, threatening everyone I cared about. It’s not like she was influencing my choices—she was controlling them. There were no fucking strings to pull. It wasn’t like I wanted any of that to happen.” I sucked down a breath. Suddenly, there wasn’t enough air in the room and sweat broke out on my skin again.

How could he act like he knew *anything* about what I’d gone through? He’d never been under someone’s control like that. Hell, he hadn’t even known the whole story until about ten minutes ago when I told him. And now he was pulling me aside, getting all pissy and worrying about pack business? Would it kill him to not give me a fucking day to get my head on straight? To try to make amends and fix some of the damage Adéluce had forced me to cause before he started up any more petty Alpha bullshit? This was too fucking much to handle right now.

“Xavi—”

I held up a hand. “You know what? I don’t want to deal with this right now. We can figure this shit out later. I need to get out of here.”

Without waiting for Greyson’s response, I turned on my heel and stomped out of the den, heading straight for the front door.

Cali stepped in front of me. And she looked pissed.

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath.

She frowned. “Why are you avoiding me?”

**Episode 4804**

I don’t know what kind of resolution I was expecting when Xavier showed up and told us he was ready to share the whole truth of what had happened to him, but this was not it. He was being weird, and I was *not* into it.

I thought this would be our happily ever after. That we’d get to make up for lost time. I mean, he’d shown up here asking for forgiveness. So, why, then, was he keeping me at arm’s length? I had seen the tension in his body when I’d gotten close to him. It was like he was being so careful with me, cautious with how he interacted with me. And that was pretty much the exact opposite of what I wanted from him.

And then, when he and Greyson left to talk, I decided to do something about all these feelings roiling inside of me. I could play nice. Give him space and hope that he came around eventually. But wasn’t that sort of how it had taken so long for us to realize that something witchy was going on with him?

No, I was done waiting and hoping for Xavier to give me what I wanted. I had to at least tell him. And then, if he wanted something different, well, we could face that. But at least I’d know what he really wanted, and at least he’d know what I wanted, too. So, I decided once Greyson was done with him, I was going to have it out with him, too. I didn’t have a lot of time to spend on this today—I’d agreed to return to crew practice this afternoon—but this needed to happen. Now. It couldn’t wait.

Xavier stood in front of me, pensive and quiet. He wasn’t even looking *at* me. His gaze was focused on a spot over my shoulder.

“Well?” I pressed. “Aren’t you going to answer me?”

His body thrummed with tension. He looked so, so uncomfortable, and that hurt as much as it pissed me off. Why was he acting this way around me?

“Xavier, say *something*.”

“I’m not ignoring you,” he finally said, his tone flat.

*Well, that settles it. Definitely answers all my questions.*

I scoffed. “Really? You expect me to believe that? You’re not even looking at me right now. What is going on? I thought—” My voice faltered as a million different insecurities rushed in, but I powered through. “I thought we’d be able to at least talk about things between us once Adéluce was gone. I know things have been… difficult. But I want to work through everything that happened. I want to clear the air. Talk about it. Don’t you?”

I had a pretty good guess that I already knew the answer to that one. He didn’t want to talk. Not about what happened when he was under Adéluce’s control, or not to me. Maybe both. But I couldn’t let this stand. I couldn’t let him pull back like this. Not now. Not when we’d been through so much together. Not when he’d told me he still loved me. What was I supposed to do with that?

Xavier turned away with a growl, running a hand through his hair, and I had the sudden sense that if I weren’t physically blocking the front door, he would have just rushed out and bailed on this conversation all together. He still wasn’t looking at me.

“You don’t get it, Cali. Just because the spell was broken, doesn’t mean we can just pick up where things left off. It’s not that simple. It’s *never* been that simple with us. And exactly what normal are we supposed to be going back to?”

All the words swirling through my mind poofed into dust. I didn’t know what to say. Sure, our lives had always been complicated. They’d been complicated since the day Xavier and I met. But even when things were at their worst, we always took comfort in being together. I didn’t want to be at odds with him, whatever that really meant for us right now.

And he was wrong. I wasn’t asking for things to go back to how they were. I might be naïve sometimes, but that was too far, even for me. There’d been too much said, too many confusing kisses… Even if everyone in the Redwood pack was ready to welcome him back with open arms, which I wasn’t sure was the case, Xavier was still the Alpha of the Samara pack. They needed him, didn’t they?

I didn’t really know where Xavier and I stood. I loved Greyson, but I couldn’t deny that I still loved Xavier, despite how hurt I’d been by him. And he loved me too. But where did we go from here? With the *due destini*? With the fact that he was Samara Alpha? The fact that he was with Ava now?

“Are you acting this way because of Ava?” I asked.

I couldn’t quite bring myself to ask the *real* question that had rushed to the forefront of my mind. If it was about Xavier being more in love with Ava than he was with me. I tried to shake the thought. It wasn’t fair to Greyson, or to me. I didn’t want to say those words out loud. And I definitely didn’t want to hear the answer to that question.

He finally faced me again. “It’s not about Ava.” Then, he grimaced and shook his head. “Well, Ava *is* a part of it.”

I swallowed, nodding.

Xavier’s frown deepened at my reaction. “See? That’s why I’m trying to be careful here. To prevent you from looking at me like that.” He blew out a ragged breath. “I just have no idea what we’re supposed to do. Everything has changed so much. I’m not even—”

He cut himself off, and, despite my brain screaming at me to protect myself, my heart made me step forward, into Xavier’s space. I didn’t have answers, and Xavier didn’t seem to have any either. Whatever was going on with him, we could work it out. We could get to a place where we at least talked again. I knew it, deep in my heart. We’d been through worse, hadn’t we? Surely we’d get through this, too.

“You’re not what?” I asked gently.

He leaned back like we were locked in some kind of weird game of keep-away. “It’s too different now. It’s too much. And I can’t talk about it yet because I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” I cupped his face in my hands and leaned forward, my eyes fluttering shut.

I felt the heat of his breath on my face, and then he wrenched away from me. My mouth met empty air, and my eyes snapped open to the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut in quick succession.

Xavier was gone.

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I threw the car into park and practically tripped over myself getting out and crossing the parking lot. As if today hadn’t already been an epic fail, now I was running late. After the… *whatever the hell* that was with Xavier earlier—no answers, per freaking usual—I was glad to be getting out of the house, to get a chance to take my mind off all this new drama with crew team practice. But I did wish I’d managed to get out of the house a little earlier.

I’d been so shocked and hurt after Xavier left that it had taken me a while to pull myself together. I’d even thought about bailing on practice, but I just wanted something normal and steady to latch onto. Plus, I’d already been so flaky with the team. They deserved better—but they had me. So, *I* had to be better.

I rushed through the gym doors, panting from my sprint across the parking lot. A stitch in my side made me bend over to catch my breath.  *At least I’m warmed up, I guess.*

“Glad you’ve finally deigned to join us, Hart,” a cold voice said in greeting.

I glanced up to find Codsworth sneering down at me.

“I’m sorry,” I panted. “Today has been… a lot. I’m catching up with everything since I was, uh, sick and all.” I cleared my throat and stood upright. “It won’t happen again.”

He looked taken aback by my apology. I frowned. “Is something else wrong?”

After a beat, he shook his head. “I wasn’t looking for a genuine apology, Hart. I wouldn’t expect that much from you.”

*What is this guy’s problem with me? Is it just his brand to be a raging dick or something?* It sure seemed like he got a kick out of making my life a living hell, and honestly, I could do without it. I got enough of that treatment from the supernatural world. I didn’t need it in the human one.

Before I could muster a response, Gael’s voice cut in moments before I felt his heavy arm wrap around my shoulders.

“We’re so glad to have you back, Lil’ Hart!” he beamed. “The whole team is finally back together! Everyone’s healthy, feeling good, and just in time to kick ass at the regatta this weekend.”

My stomach dropped.

*A regatta? I’m not ready for that!*

**Episode 4805**

**Greyson**

I didn’t know what went down with Cali and Xavier earlier, but she walked away from it looking upset and Xavier was nowhere to be found. Later, Rishika mentioned she’d seen him shift outside in the yard and head in the direction of the Samara pack house. He’d certainly been in a hurry to get the hell out of here when I’d tried talking to him, and apparently speaking with Cali didn’t change that. If I never saw her walk away from an interaction with Xavier with tears in her eyes again, it’d be too soon.

It shouldn’t come as a shock to me that Xavier had a certain amount of control over Cali’s mood—the past several weeks had given me plenty of proof of that—but I hated that Xavier could affect like that so much. It always felt like a personal affront to me, even when I wasn’t involved. I always had to shake it off. I’d told Cali that if she and Xavier resumed their relationship, I didn’t want to hear about it. And I still meant it. So that meant letting Cali be sad if that was how she felt.

Adéluce had finally been defeated. Xavier was free, yes, but so was Cali. Adéluce wouldn’t be targeting her again, and all of Seluna’s ashes had finally been returned to the demon world. Cali’s future looked brighter than ever—it was a shame my brother’s inability to pull his head out of his ass was dampening the celebrations.

Fortunately, Cali was now off at crew practice now. I was glad she had something to distract her from Xavier. I’d retreated back to the study for some privacy, mulling over my earlier interaction with Xavier. To say it hadn’t gone as I had hoped was an understatement. But then again, when were things with my brother ever easy?

A dull ache throbbed behind my eyes, and I pressed at my temples. A tension headache was brewing. Fucking great. I guessed I could thank Xavier for that, too.

Personally, and selfishly, I was relieved that Xavier and Cali didn’t seem to be picking up where they’d left off before he’d made that deal with Adéluce. But I’d never tell Cali that, and it didn’t matter anyway, because I knew that, sooner or later, Xavier was going to want Cali back. The *due destini* pretty much required it.

But how was *I* going to get used to living like that again? How did I ever get accustomed to sharing Cali in the first place? It felt like we’d *just* fixed that messy situation with the sire bond between Elle and me. Maybe it was naïve, but I’d sort of hoped that Cali and I would have more time together, just the two of us, without having to worry about anyone else complicating things.

The truth was, while Xavier was off with Ava and the Samara pack, I’d gotten pretty attached to the idea that things were finally settled, that Cali would choose *me*. That she’d become my Luna.

But now I knew the truth. That wasn’t really true. It had never been the truth of the matter while Xavier was gone. It was a dream, no matter how real it had felt. Because Xavier had never left of his own accord. He’d never stopped wanting Cali. And she’d certainly never stopped wanting him deep down. *Thanks again* due destini*.*

I let out a long, ragged breath. *What the fuck am I going to do?*

A light knock sounded at the door frame, and I turned to see Colton leaning against it.

“I thought you and Xavier got out of here,” I said.

“I let Xavier go on ahead. I’ll catch up with him at the Samara pack house before heading back to Maya. I, uh, I actually wanted to say goodbye to you first.”

Colton’s words brought a smile to my face. If nothing else, this whole thing had given Colton and me a chance to build a relationship of our own. It was no small thing, and I’d gladly take it.

“I’m really glad you came out here and that you and I got to talk again,” I said. “I was serious about meeting my niece and nephew, by the way.”

“Can’t wait,” Colton deadpanned. “The kids are going to need all the adult supervision they can get. I may or may not be well suited to the whole responsibility part of being a parent. At least, that’s what Maya says.”

I laughed. “I’ll take her word for it. And I’m sure the kids will be fine. They’re lucky to have two parents who care so much about them.”

Neither my brothers nor I had had that, and we were still cutting ourselves on the broken pieces of childhood all these years later.

Colton smiled. “I think so, too. And they’re especially lucky to have a fun parent like me.” His smile turned into a roguish grin. Then his expression sobered. “I actually wanted to talk to you about Xavier before I left. Nothing big,” he added quickly. “I just… wanted to ask about something.”

I cocked my head, surprised. Xavier and Colton had always been thick as thieves, and I’d always had the pleasure of being on the outside of that dynamic. It was rare for one of them to come to me about the other one. “What are you concerned about? Ava?”

He let out a dry laugh. “Ha. I’m no fan of her, that’s for sure. She’s a snake. But there’s no question about that.”

I held my tongue. My perspective on Ava was… complicated. But I’d known her long enough now that I didn’t think she was inherently evil like Colton seemed to think she was. Then again, if Ava had killed my mother, I’d probably hate her forever, too.

“But no, this isn’t about her,” Colton continued. “I just want you to keep an eye on Xavier for me.”

My brows rose. “Any specific reason? It seems like Xavier might finally be in a place where he doesn’t need to have eyes on him anymore.”

Colton shook his head. “No, he’s not there yet. I know Xavier, and I know there’s some shit stirring with him. I won’t go deeper than that. His secrets are his own. But… I spent most of my life with him, you know? I can tell when he’s about to spiral.”

I winced. I definitely didn’t like the sound of that. “I’ll watch out for Xavier.” After all, he was our brother. Xavier and I might have a hundred different points of tension between us, but I’d never wish him ill. And I certainly would never want him to spiral.

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder what Colton meant, and if it had anything to do with the strange way Xavier had acted around Cali earlier.

*The last thing we need is another Xavier mystery.*

“Thanks,” Colton said. “I should probably go and check in with Xavier so I can start heading back to my family.”

I stuck out my hand to shake Colton’s. “Safe travels.”

Colton just laughed and went in for a hug. It was nice. And I didn’t know how much I’d wanted it until it was happening.

I choked out a laugh and patted his back before he released me. “We should plan something. Maybe a trip, just the three brothers.” As soon as the words slipped out of my mouth, I had to bite back my surprise. *Where the hell did that come from?* But then again, it wasn’t a bad idea. Quality time with Xavier and Colton, away from everything else, might be exactly what the three of us needed.

Maybe then I could get to the bottom of whatever the fuck it was that Xavier wanted now that he was free of Adéluce.

Colton shrugged. “I’m always down for a good time. See you around, bro.”

He headed out, and I was left in my own company again, considering Colton’s request. As frustrated as I was by what it meant for Cali and me now that Xavier was back and free to be with whomever he wanted, I had to admit the growing closeness between the Redwoods and Samaras was a great opportunity for our two packs to create a strong and lasting alliance. As long as Xavier stuck with the Samaras, and he’d said he would, there would be no leadership roles to fight over because we were both Alphas. Both leading our own packs.

I thought back to the vision I’d had when I was under the witches’ spell to try to fix the *due destini* curse. Things with Xavier had been a mess for a long time now, and I wanted to fix things with him once and for all. It would be better for our packs, better for Cali. Hell, it’d be great to just have an uncomplicated brotherly relationship, like the one I was building with Colton.

To live in peace with Xavier… what a dream.

But how could I possibly do that?

**Episode 4806**

Gael’s simple declaration sent my stress levels from a manageable four to a hissy-fit-inducing ten. After all I had just gone through, there was no way that I would be ready for a regatta. Hell, even without everything I had just gone through, I still wouldn’t have been ready. The one and only time that I went out onto the water, I had fallen into it.

Truth be told, I wasn’t even sure what a regatta entailed. For a second I thought Gael was talking about some kind of water-related cotillion. Just as I opened my mouth to ask, Codsworth whispered in my ear so that only I would hear him.

“Wait, do you even know what a regatta is?” he asked, his tone dripping with disdain.

“Of course I do.” I glared at him, which only made him smirk imperiously at me. It was like Codsworth had made it his life’s purpose to be a complete ass to me. Shaking my head, I turned back to Gael.

“This is going to be a super important race for us,” he said. “All of our training has been for this.”

Gael’s gaze was intense as he took the time to look at each of us. I was surprised to hear him speaking so seriously about anything. I was so used to him being the lighthearted, funny guy that I didn’t think he had a serious bone in him.

“We’re going against our biggest rivals,” Gael said. “We’re up against the Fringeheads, and there’s no way we’re going to let them win this one.”

While the other guys started to do their macho hype up routine, I wondered if Gael was pranking us. The Fringeheads? I didn’t think it was possible for a real team to be called the Fringeheads. Of all the things to name your team…

“The Fringeheads?” I asked, voicing my doubts. “Is that for real?”

Gael nodded, his expression grave. “This isn’t a joke. The Fringeheads are for real, and they are the absolute worst, Cali. Ruthless and shady as fuck when it comes to securing a win.”

“How shady?” I asked.

“Shady. The Kangarats have to be on guard twenty-four seven,” Gael said. “The Fringeheads always pull some weird prank or find any way to screw over the other team the night before the regatta.”

“Last prank they pulled sent a guy to the hospital,” Schmiddy said.

“Seriously?” I asked. “They beat him up?”

“Nah,” Bear said. “The guy has Celiac disease, and one of the Fringeheads allegedly, but most probably, spiked his food with gluten. They’re evil.”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” Kayden said. “A few years ago, I heard their captain got caught up in some shit after paying some weirdos off Reddit to make threatening calls to the other team’s coxswain.”

“Psyched him out and left him with the kind of trauma doctors publish about,” Jayden said with a shiver.

“There ya go,” Gael said. “They’re straight-up assholes who think they deserve to win every race because they come from a bigger school and have more funding than most teams.”

“Fuck ’em,” Bear said. “They’re not better than us.”

“Damn right they’re not,” Gael said. “They can’t use their money to push us around. We’re gonna win this regatta and prove they ain’t shit on the water.”

“Hell yeah!” Jayden said.

The other guys joined in until they were all jeering and calling the Fringeheads every nasty name in the book. As my ears turned red, I was taken aback by how much my team hated our evil rivals.

“Wow, you guys really hate them, huh?” I said, when they quieted down. “You guys are all so nice, but you sound like Rambo after ten shots of espresso.”

“There’s no ‘nice’ when it comes to a sports rivalry, Lil’ Hart,” Gael said. “And there’s no point in being nice to a bunch of cheating assholes. It’s got to be all or nothing.”

The weight of Gael’s words sat on my shoulders like a ton of bricks. The team was counting on me to do my part, and I couldn’t let them down.

*Shit, I have to get good at this coxswain thing, and pronto*, I thought.

I clasped my hands together and nodded. “In that case, we better get training ASAP.”

Gael clapped me on the back with so much enthusiasm that I nearly lost my balance. He pulled me right back and patted me on the back again, but with less gusto.

“You heard the lady! Everyone pair off, and let’s get these gains in,” Gael said.

“Let’s go, killer!” Bear said.

I followed Gael toward the weight room, ready to come out of it sorer than I had ever been. While strength training wasn’t my strong suit, so to speak, I knew that it could only do me worlds of good. Being stronger physically as well as mentally was never a bad thing.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Codsworth asked, stepping in my path.

*The hell away from you*, I thought.

“To train for coxswaining,” I said. “What else?”

Codsworth laughed heartily in my face. “First of all, it’s called *coxing*. You should at least know that much. Second, we don’t do weight training. We’re not trying to pack on heavy muscles. Coxswains have to stay light. Our training is all about cardio, Cali. Jeez, don’t you know anything?”

Before I could answer, he shook his head and answered for me.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know shit, because you’re a fake and shouldn’t be on this team at all,” he said.

Had he been a total bitch to me any other day, I might have gritted my teeth and let it slide. Unfortunately for Codsworth, he had picked the wrong day to get in my face. The residual anger I still felt after my confrontation with Xavier mixed with the anxiety I felt about the upcoming race. It created the perfect storm of emotions, and I took it all out on Codsworth.

“Thanks for the insanely condescending lesson,” I said, stepping closer. “But you do realize that you don’t have to be an asshole about everything, right? Like, we can have a normal conversation where I don’t have to fight the urge to slap you every five seconds. Oh, wait, that’s right. We can’t, because you really are just an asshole.”

Codsworth took a step back with his eyes so wide it was like he was seeing a ghost instead of me. He took a second, then raised his hand like he was getting ready to apologize… or draw first blood. His eyes locked onto mine, and for the first time since I had joined the team, he looked at me with something other than disdain.

“Huh. Glad to see you have some bite in there after all, Hart,” he said. “Come on.”

I frowned. One second he was all in my face about being a fake and the next he was commending me for not taking his shit. To say that I was confused was an understatement.

But he had just called me by my last name, which was at least some kind of improvement. Instead of looking a gift horse in the mouth, I shrugged it off and decided it was all in the name of team spirit. With the Fringeheads as a mutual enemy, Codsworth had no reason to be on my ass about every little thing.

*If only this regatta thing was every week*,I thought.

I followed Codsworth to the far side of the gym where the elliptical machines were lined up against the wall. He hopped on one and started without me. I hopped onto the one next to him and got started, too.

We spent the next few hours switching from one machine to the next, making sure to keep our heart rates at optimal levels. Though my legs were on fire and my lungs were begging for mercy, I kept my lips sealed and trained as hard as Codsworth. By the time we were finished, I was ready to be taken home on a stretcher. I had never been so exhausted in my life, and that included the times when I’d had to fend off demons and vampire-witches.

Even showering became an extreme sport. My muscles were so worn out that the water splashing down on me felt like pebbles hitting my skin. I was going to be so sore the next day that I considered sleeping through it until my body recovered.

*If only*, I thought glumly.

After showering and getting dressed in fresh clothes, I left the locker room to find the rest of the team waiting for me just outside.

“Hey, she’s here!” Bear said.

“Great. Now we can start our unofficial team meeting,” Gael said.

“What’s going on? What are we meeting about?” I asked, lost as always.

“We’re trying to decide where we want to go for our team bonding night,” Schmiddy explained. “Usually we get pizza and beer. Nothing too crazy. What? Nobody told you about it?”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t hear about it.”

Not wanting to call him out, I cast a furtive glance Codsworth’s way. I had a feeling he had a hand in keeping me in the dark about the bonding night.

*If the Fringeheads do attack, I hope they get him first*, I thought.

“I’m not sure if I can go,” I said. “I might have plans.”

*Plans that involve making Xavier tell me everything he’s keeping to himself*, I mused.

“What? No no no. You cannot be saying this to me, Lil’ Hart,” Gael said, looking distraught. “Not during the week before the regatta against the Fringeheads. I don’t need this kind of stress. Please. So just say you’re coming with us, okay?”

**Episode 4807**

**Artemis**

Marius’s tongue tangled with mine as I slipped my hands into his hair. He groaned into my mouth as he pulled me onto him. He kissed me with everything he had, and I returned his sudden passion in kind.

He pulled my hands out of his hair and brought them behind my back. I pulled away and stared into his lust-filled eyes with a naughty smile on my lips. Marius smirked, then closed the distance between us to kiss my breath away.

I slipped out of his grasp and pressed him against the trunk of the tree he was leaning against. We were still in the middle of a dangerous situation, yet too caught up in our own dangerous game to care.

As my desire got the better of me, I started to push Marius down so that I could straddle him. Of course, he noticed what I was doing and immediately pushed back. We wrestled each other for dominance even as we lost ourselves in passionate kisses and caresses.

Eventually we gave up on trying to beat the other and just gave into temptation. Though I didn’t trust Marius, I couldn’t resist him. My only consolation was that he couldn’t resist me either.

I sighed as his hands slipped beneath my clothes. The feeling of his calloused hands over my soft skin was enough to make me shiver. Desire rolled through me, and I closed my eyes, bracing myself against him. I wanted Marius so badly that I could hardly think straight.

Just as his hands brushed against my breasts, I heard a twig snap a few meters away from where we were. We sprang apart and got to our feet just in time to see three Light Fae guards step out of the thick brush. Their swords were drawn and ready to cut us down if we made a false move.

*Shit, this day keeps going from bad to worse*, I thought.

“You two are trespassing on Wrenthorn land,” the first Light Fae guard said.

My stomach, which had been filled with lust-crazed butterflies before, filled with dread. After all Marius and I had been through, we had ended up on Wrenthorn land anyway.

Marius stiffened beside me, no doubt getting ready to fight or flee for his life. His panic was almost palpable. We had done everything possible to avoid the situation we were in. With Marius’s reputation preceding him, there was no doubt in our minds that the Light Fae wouldn’t take kindly to his being there. They would view him as a threat and handle it accordingly.

“We had no idea,” Marius said, raising his hands as he stepped closer to me.

“Stop moving,” the second Light Fae guard said.

The three guards took a step nearer, looking ready to attack if Marius didn’t listen. I put my hands up and offered them a sheepish smile that I hoped looked genuine.

“Apologies,” I said. “We had no idea this was Wrenthorn land. We were just passing through.”

As the guards contemplated my weak excuse, Marius stepped closed enough to whisper in my ear.

“Use your manipulation magic on them,” he said, his tone bordering on desperate. “What are you waiting for?”

I shook my head and muttered a curse. It was too risky, and I wasn’t in the mood to take unnecessary risks. Not when there might have been an upside for me.

*This might be a good thing after all*, I thought.

While it might have been nothing more than wishful thinking, I reasoned that it was possible that my grandmother, Hera Wrenthorn, remembered me. I thought back to the first time we had met. The woman had asked if I was a Mauvais. It was Kadmos’s family name but used so rarely that it had surprised me when I heard it coming from Hera’s lips. Had part of her somehow known who I was?

Though it hadn’t been our intention to end up on Wrenthorn land, I was starting to look at it like a blessing in disguise. Maybe Hera would know something that could help me in my search for Kadmos.

While I focused on the silver lining, Marius was dead set on getting the hell out of there as quickly as possible. He leaned in to whisper in my ear again.

“Why won’t you just use your damned magic, Ari?” he asked. “Get us out of here. I can’t end up in a Light Fae dungeon!”

He had every reason to be paranoid, but that wasn’t going to change my game plan. I shoved an elbow into his stomach, making him step back.

“Shut the hell up and let me handle this,” I muttered, then turned to the guards. “Can you take us to the lady of the house? I’m a bounty hunter, and I brought this man here at the request of the Wrenthorns.”

“What?” Marius balked. “Ari, what the fuck?”

He was completely against my plan, but it didn’t change my mind. I wanted to get us out of here without having to use my magic. It was the safest option for both of us.

“Fine,” the first Light Fae guard said. “But if you try anything, we will cut you down where you stand.”

“Understood,” I said. “Lead the way.”

The guards marched, and we followed them through the thick woods. One stayed up front while the other two flanked Marius and me. Their swords were still drawn and enough of a threat to keep us in line if we were thinking about doing anything stupid. I certainly wasn’t, but I could tell that Marius was eager to get away from the guards.

I could feel his eyes on me just as easily as I could feel his desperation. Marius glared daggers my way, no doubt cursing me, my decision, and the fact that he hadn’t just taken off on his own. He probably thought I was setting him up so that I could claim Kadmos’s bounty all for myself.

*You’re just going to have to wait and see*, I thought.

After what seemed like an interminable trek through the woods, we stepped out into a small clearing whose main feature was a large house sitting in the middle of it. It seemed… familiar to me. As I took in the tall windows and steep roof, I wondered why I remembered it. Had someone told me about it before, or had I seen it when I was a young child? Regardless, it felt like I had been there already.

*Maybe I have*, I mused.

The guards at the door let us step inside. Our Light Fae escorts led us into the main hall of the home. Servants whisked by carrying all manner of items and looking like they had millions more to transport. The house was buzzing with activity, and the servants were too busy to take the time to attend to us.

The head Light Fae guard stopped one of the servants and whispered into her ear. She nodded briskly and took off again to deliver his message. The five of us stood there, waiting for something to happen.

A few minutes later, the same servant returned to give the guard whatever answer he had been waiting for. He nodded, then turned to us. The head guard gave a signal to the two guards still flanking Marius and me.

One of them grabbed my arm and started to pull me in one direction, while the other started to drag Marius the other way.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “Where are you taking him? He has to stay with me.”

“Let me go! Let me go right now!” Marius said, trying to fight off the guard tasked with taking him away. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing!”

None of the guards gave us an explanation. They just continued to pull us apart, eager to carry out the head guard’s orders. I wasn’t sure what to do. I only knew that I didn’t want to fight the guards. Neither Marius nor I would have been able to take on all the Light Fae in the house without sustaining serious injuries or dying outright.

While getting separated wasn’t ideal, I didn’t think that the guards had any reason to kill Marius. As long as he didn’t attack them, they wouldn’t attack him.

Hopefully…

Marius’s belligerent protests echoed off the walls as I was led farther into the house. The guard pulled me through a wide door and into a large, ornate room. Before I could give in to my feelings of déjà vu, my eyes landed on a stately, sharp-looking woman who was sitting on a plush settee near the other end of the room.

She stared at me through a pair of eyeglasses perched atop a very long handle. It masked her expression, which made it impossible for me to get a read on the woman. All I could do was stare back at her and hope that what she saw on my face didn’t make her want to lock me up in the dungeon alongside Marius.

The guard dragged me forward until I was standing directly in front of the intimidating woman. With their task completed, they left me there and exited the room. The quiet sound of the door closing behind them was deafening in the ensuing silence.

My heart raced as I continued to stare at Hera Wrenthorn, one of the most powerful Light Fae in the realm. She could have torn me asunder with a single flick of her wrist. Instead, she quirked a brow as she leaned forward in her seat.

“And what, pray tell, are you doing here?” she asked.

**Episode 4808**

**Xavier**

My lungs burned, and my legs begged for mercy as I ran hard through the woods that led to the Samara pack house. After my conversation with Greyson and after being confronted by Cali, I felt like my thoughts and emotions were going to strangle me. The only way to clear my mind was to run as fast as I could and wear myself out.

I was so caught up in trying to forget what had happened that I didn’t hear Colton until he was nearly on me. I slowed down and shifted back to my human form alongside my twin. We were both drenched in sweat but barely winded despite the distance we had just run.

“Did you and Greyson have a nice chat after I left?” I asked.

When I had walked away from Cali, Colton had been waiting outside the Redwood pack house. He told me to go on ahead, and I figured it was because he wanted to speak with our older brother without me around. Probably for the best.

Colton nodded. “I did. We had a pretty good chat, actually.”

I waited for a moment for him to elaborate, but Colton didn’t say anything else. It only made me more curious to find out what they had talked about when I wasn’t around to hear.

“A pretty good chat about what?” I asked. “Or am I not supposed to know?”

“It wasn’t anything major,” Colton said, then grinned. “Actually, Greyson did mention something about taking a trip… just the three of us.”

I snorted. “That sounds fucking terrible.”

Colton gave my shoulder a lighthearted shove. “Come on, man. A trip could be fun. Or at least, interesting.”

“Whatever,” I said, knowing full well I would not go.

“I can tell by your total lack of enthusiasm that you don’t want to go, but a trip might be good for all of us,” Colton said. “Especially after this whole mess, right? We could all use some good old-fashioned bonding time. Maybe we can give Greyson more of a chance.”

“I can think of at least a million other ways I’d like to spend my time,” I said.

“Whatever. That doesn’t change the facts,” Colton said, undeterred. “But our family trip aside, I’m glad that things worked out with the Redwoods. They were quick to forgive you once you explained what was going on. It wasn’t like you meant for shit to go down the way it did, after all.”

“Yeah, I’m glad they were so understanding, but that’s not the point,” I said. “I might not have meant to do the things that I did, but I hurt them regardless. That *is* on me.”

Cali’s face popped into my head. I had hurt her time and again. At the time I told myself I was doing it for her own good, but I hurt her regardless.

“See? This is your problem,” Colton said. “You need to let go of some of that guilt before it crushes you. You did what you thought was best given everything.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the idea of forgiving myself so easily. Had it just been one or two things that I felt guilty about, then letting go would have been simple. But it hadn’t been just a thing or two I had done. Thanks to Adéluce, I had become a monster to the people I cared about most.

“It doesn’t feel right. After all the things I did, the things I said,” I explained. “I can’t shake the feeling that I don’t deserve to be forgiven so easily.”

“You have—” Colton said.

I raised my hand to cut him off. “I’ll do what I can to get past this.”

“Baller,” Colton said, clapping me on the back. “Well, it’s about time I get back to Maya before she forgets how addicted she is to this D.”

I rolled my eyes. “And here I thought you were dying to get back to your kids.”

“I mean, of course,” Colton said. “I thought that was implied.”

“Good man,” I said with a laugh. “I’ll miss having your ass around, you know.”

“It’s a great ass to have around,” Colton said. “But, hey, I’ll be back in no time for our super awesome brotherly bonding trip.”

I groaned. “We’re not doing that.”

Colton laughed. “We’ll see about that.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stick around for a little bit?”

Colton considered it. “Maybe I’ll grab something to eat first. Can’t see Maya too hungry, if you know what I mean.”

Together we turned  and walked to the Samara pack house. Once we got to the door, I let Colton in first. Then, for a moment, I stood with my hand wrapped around the doorknob. A part of me felt like Adéluce had won after all. Despite all the times that I had hoped to be rid of her so that I could return to the Redwood pack, here I was returning to the Samaras as their Alpha.

Even without Adéluce blackmailing me into staying away, I hadn’t been able to return to the Redwoods. My time with them was done, no matter how much I lamented it.

I stepped inside the Samara pack house and was surprised that it was so quiet inside. It had been early when Colton and I had gone over to the Redwoods’, but I expected there to be more activity when I got back. Usually, the house was abuzz with pack members and all kinds of goings-on.

*Weird*, I thought.

I went up to my bedroom to find it empty, too. The only noise came from my phone, which was vibrating on the dresser. I grabbed it and scrolled through the slew of missed text messages and calls that had come in while I was out.

The first one to catch my eye was from Ava. She and Marissa were heading into town. She said she wouldn’t be long, and I reasoned she was already on her way back. I got another message as I started to reply to Ava’s text. It was Greyson. Hoping against hope that it wasn’t him inviting me to that shit idea of a bonding trip, I opened his message and read it.

*We’re having a party tonight to celebrate Adéluce being dead. I think it would be a good way for our packs to come together and welcome a future where we leave all of our differences behind us.*

I rolled my eyes. What the hell was Greyson even talking about? A party? After all the shit we had gone through? Greyson must have been losing his mind.

As I resisted the urge to tell him to fuck off, I thought about his proposal and saw the benefit of it. While the idea of a party seemed stupid to me, it was a good way to help both packs get back to a sense of normalcy. It would also help reiterate my leadership of the Samara pack, which I owed to everyone in my pack.

*But maybe Colton will stick around for a little longer…*

I texted Greyson back. *Fine.*

Then I frowned at my phone, annoyed that Greyson had been the one to come up with the idea first. Then I was annoyed at myself for being annoyed in the first place. Of course Greyson had come up with the idea. It was what Alphas were supposed to do. It didn’t matter that he beat me to the punch, all that mattered was what was best for our packs.

Besides that, Greyson had stuck out his neck to help me. The least I could do was be grateful and go along with his idea without being a dick about it.

As I scrolled through my other messages, I realized that by agreeing to go to the party I had essentially agreed to spend more time near Cali again.

With a groan, I fell back onto the bed.

Though the vampire-witch out of my life, things were still so fucking complicated. It was damn near impossible to be around Cali and not want to pull her into my arms and kiss her until the rest of the world fell away. I had been so tempted to do just that earlier when she had confronted me.

But how could I?

She was with Greyson, and I was with Ava. And even if that weren’t the case, I had still done and said horrible things to Cali thanks to Adéluce. I had taken it upon myself to be as ruthless as possible so that she would forget about me.

*I don’t deserve her. Not now*, I thought.

I closed my eyes, and the first thing that came to mind was when she fell from that bat. My heart had slammed to the ground a million times as I watched Cali plummeting to the earth. I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali dying at Adéluce’s hands. It was all my fault, and no amount of apologies, regrets, or spells broken would ever change that.

The sound of the bedroom door opening pulled me out of my bleak thought spiral. I picked up Ava’s scent and opened my eyes to see her walking toward me. I sat up as she sat down next to me.

“How was your errand?” I asked, giving her a shaky smile.

She leaned in to kiss me. “Good. How did your morning go?”

Not wanting to get into too many details, I told Ava how things went down at Redwood house. She listened, but she wasn’t as excited as Colton had been about how easily the Redwoods had forgiven me.

“I think it’s good that they’re open-minded,” she said. “But I’m still worried.”

“Me too,” I said. “And get this. Greyson wants us to have a party for the Redwoods and the Samaras to celebrate Adéluce’s death.”

Ava arched a brow as my words sunk in. I could practically read her thoughts before she opened her mouth and voiced them.

“So, you, me, and Cali all in one room?” she asked. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

**Episode 4809**

After Gael’s mini guilt trip took its toll on my conscience, I ended up going to the bar with the team for some major bonding. I sat in a booth next to Patel with Bear and Codsworth sitting across from us.

Though I hadn’t wanted to come out with them, I knew that I had to accept their invitation to hang out. Even with everything that was going on at the pack house, I couldn’t let my team down again. They were all so nice and seemed to genuinely like me. I owed it to them to put in some effort to be a full-fledged member of the crew team.

The second we got to the bar, Gael and Schmiddy commandeered the entire area in the back for our team. I drank enough beer and ate enough pizza to feed a small army. It was the most fun I’d had in a long time, and I was glad that I had come out after all.

Bear leaned forward with his hands cupped around his glass. “So, last time we saw you before you got sick, you were getting all damseled off by some super handsome dude none of us knew. What’s that about? Is he your boyfriend?”

I choked on my beer, and Patel had to pat my back until I finally calmed down. With everything that had happened, I’d forgotten all about the pool party incident. Xavier had saved me that night and no doubt left my teammates wondering about my aquatic knight in shining armor.

Not wanting them to dig too deep, I shook my head. “No. He’s just a friend.”

“Sure,” Bear said, not buying it.

“Wait, didn’t you have another guy hanging around?” Patel asked. “The one you brought for orientation?”

*Greyson*, I thought.

I silently pled the fifth by taking a long swig of my beer. Bear and Patel laughed as I tried to avoid any more awkward questions.

“Well, shit, Cali. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you have a hobby of collecting really good-looking guys,” Bear said, then waggled his brows. “And if that’s the case, just know that I am totally cool with being added to your reverse harem.”

I laughed. He was so ridiculous. While Patel started to tick off Bear’s handsomest attributes, Codsworth gave Bear a quick once-over before he rolled his eyes.

“You might be missing a few qualifications to be on that list, bro,” he said, then got up to go to the restroom.

I watched him walk away, utterly confused as to why anyone would want someone like Codsworth on the team. He was unnecessarily hostile to everyone, especially me, and all too happy to tear us down.

“Can someone tell me why and how Codsworth is on the team?” I asked. “He seems like a… well, like someone who hates working with others.”

Bear just grinned. “That’s just how he is. It’s how he shows he cares. Trust me, his bark is way worse than his bite.”

Considering how much his bark stung every time he opened his mouth, I highly doubted it. I finished my beer and shook my head.

“I’m not sure I buy that, guys,” I said. “I have yet to see his caring side.”

Patel patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, it’s there. With him, you just have to give it back as good as you get it. Codsworth is the kind of guy who respects a solid burn.”

“Like third degree and up,” Bear elaborated.

I remembered how Codsworth had reacted when I had snapped at him earlier. Instead of being angry, he’d seemed almost pleased. I nodded. I could work with that.

“I guess I better learn some ‘yo mama’ jokes, then,” I said.

“At the very least,” Patel laughed.

“I’m getting another round,” I said. “You guys want one?”

Bear and Patel shook their heads as I slid out of the booth. I made my way to the bar to get another beer. The bartender was taking his sweet time to come to the side of the bar where I was standing, so I had to wait.

As I did, I felt someone sidle in a bit too close to me. Since the bar had plenty of space for us to stand, I was more than a little irked by the inconsiderate space invader trying to get in my face. I turned to see a tall man smiling at me like he had just hit the jackpot.

“Mind backing off?” I asked. “You’re standing too close to me.”

The guy grinned at me in a way that made my skin crawl. He knew he was standing way too close and seemed to enjoy making me feel uncomfortable.

“I thought you’d enjoy getting a little close,” he said.

I frowned. “You thought wrong. I’m not interested. At all. So, thanks, but no thanks.”

I took a step away from him, but he closed the gap instantly. He got close enough for me to smell his cheap cologne.

“How about we get to know each other until you are interested?” he asked. “Or we can just get out of here…”

Suddenly, I felt someone come up on my right side. I turned to see Codsworth glaring at the man trying to hit on me.

“I don’t think there’s anything particularly manly about cornering a girl at the bar,” Codsworth said. “What do you think, Cali?”

Surprised, I stammered the first thought that came to mind. “Um… it’s not very nice?”

“Yeah, not at all,” Codsworth said, still glaring at the guy. “Maybe you want to learn some new pick-up skills that won’t have you ending up in a jail cell.”

“And who the hell are you?” the guy asked. “Her boyfriend?”

“No, I’m the guy who’s about ten seconds away from getting all his friends to stomp your ass,” Codsworth said. “You want to wait around and see what happens, or do you want me to cut to the chase?”

“Yo! What’s going on?” Kayden called out.

“Should I tell them?” I asked, staring at the creep. “Or do you want to leave right now?”

“Choose wisely, if you’re even capable of doing anything wisely,” Codsworth said.

The rest of the team turned to face the bar and added some weight to Codsworth’s threat. The creep glared at him, then gave me one last look before he took off. The bartender finally came by, and I got a beer for myself and Codsworth. Teaming up on that creep was the only time we had ever worked together, and it was awesome. As we walked back to our table, I turned to him.

“Thanks for that,” I said.

He gave me a sharp smile. “I don’t mind helping a teammate now and then.”

His tone was acidic, but I was learning to read between his snarky lines. Codsworth was being intense with me because he cared so much about the other guys and the team as a whole. His way wasn’t the best way to go about things, but at least I had a better sense of who Codsworth was now.

“I look forward to learning how to speak Codsworth fluently,” I said.

“Famous last words,” he said with another smile.

We made it back to our table, but before I even had the chance to sit, my phone started to buzz in my pocket. I set down my beer and pulled out my phone to see that I had a missed call from Greyson. I excused myself to step outside before calling him back. The guys on the team didn’t need to overhear me talking about werewolves or vampires.

“Hey,” I said when he answered, “what’s up?”

“Hey, where are you?” he asked. “I thought you were coming back home after practice.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Didn’t you get my text?”

I heard a ding on his end, and he chuckled.

“Now I did,” he said.

“Crap, I’m sorry. This place must have horrible reception,” I said. “The team wanted to go out for some bonding thing at a bar for beer and pizza. I couldn’t miss it.”

“That’s fine, not a problem,” Greyson said. “I’m glad you’re having fun. But I was calling to let you know that the Samara pack is coming over to celebrate with us tonight.”

It took me a second to process what he had just said. For a second, I thought I had misheard. A party with the Samaras?

“What? And Xavier agreed to that?” I asked.

“I was as surprised as you are,” Greyson said. “They’ll be here soon.”

I turned back to the bar and saw Gael and a few of the other guys waving at me to come back in. Crap. I hated to have to ditch them so soon. It was all I had been doing lately, and I didn’t want them to think I wasn’t a full member of the team.

Apart from that, there was also Xavier. The thought of facing him and talking to him again made my stomach twist up. It was too soon. With Xavier it would always be too soon. There was no way I could handle being in the same room as him… or Ava.

“Do you think it’s okay if I don’t come?” I asked.

**Episode 4810**

**Greyson**

Cali’s answer hung in the air as I tried to make sense of what she was feeling.

She wasn’t the kind of woman who spoke her mind if she thought it would inconvenience someone, so I was surprised by her candor. Surprised and a bit pleased. I thought she would have been over the moon when I told her about the idea. The fact that she wasn’t was curious indeed.

*Does she not want to see Xavier?* I wondered.

The possibility was a change of pace and one that I welcomed with open arms. I wanted to forge a good relationship with my younger brother, but whatever he and Cali had would always get in the way. Likewise, it was difficult to get closer to Cali when Xavier was always a factor.

Though I had no problem with Cali wanting to miss the party, I wanted her to be there by my side. She was still the closest thing I had to a Luna. Without Cali, I wouldn’t be able to make the show of unity that I had been hoping for.

*Why do things have to be so damn complicated for us?* I asked myself.

We had been so good about our partnership that I was hoping things would continue to come together. I wanted us to be there for each other more and more, but I didn’t want to force the issue. Cali struggled to balance being a member of the crew team while also being a member of the Redwood pack.

After what seemed like an eternity, I replied and hoped that she wouldn’t hear the disappointment in my voice.

“I mean, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“Ugh, I feel awful,” she said. “I’m so sorry for not coming home. I’m sorry for not knowing about the party until now—”

“Hey, there’s no reason to be sorry. You don’t have to apologize,” I said. “Don’t stress about it, okay? I’m sure the party will go on pretty late, so you can definitely take your time to make a grand entrance. If you want to. For now, though, have fun with the team. Relax a bit. You deserve it.”

I waited for Cali’s reply and was met with silence instead. The awkwardness that immediately set in made me wince.

*Shit, did I say something wrong?*

Cali and I hadn’t really had a moment alone since she spoke with Xavier earlier. I still wasn’t sure what had happened between them, and the lack of information was starting to drive me crazy. It felt like there was an itch in the back of my brain that wouldn’t go away until I knew. I did my best to ignore it along with everything else that was only meant to be between Xavier and Cali.

“Okay, thanks,” Cali said finally. “I’ll be home when I can. I’ll text you a heads-up, and hopefully it’ll reach you before I head out.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Cali,” I said. “I love you, and I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you too,” she said, then hung up.

The line went dead, and I stared at my phone. Fighting the urge to call her back, I tucked it in my back pocket and sighed. Things were strange between us, but could I really blame it all on Xavier? How much of it was really because of him and how much of it was because of me?

I knew there was something going on with my mate bond. Rowena had told me as much even if I had tried my damnedest to deny it. She mentioned something about branching or whatever it was. I didn’t want to think about what the hell that could mean if it wasn’t the sire bond mess with Elle.

Maybe the situation with Adéluce and Xavier had just exacerbated things. What she did to him affected both the Redwood and Samara packs. It made sense that the effects would keep rippling down the line.

Or it would if Xavier hadn’t always had multiple mate bonds. Same thing with Cali.

So, what did it mean that my own mate bond was branching toward someone else? Who could it be, and how was it even possible? I didn’t understand what was going on, but I knew without a doubt that I could never love anyone as much as I loved Cali.

Cali was the only mate I had ever had, and the thought of loving anyone else made me sick. Even when things were at their worst with Elle and all the confusion with the sire bonds, it could never compare to what I felt for Cali.

For a time, I thought I was in love with Maren. And maybe I was. The time I’d spent with Maren had been great. When we were together, I’d seen a future for us and worked toward building a life for us. But it didn’t work out for a variety of reasons.

While I had lamented the end of that relationship, the supposed love I had for Maren paled in comparison to the love I had for Cali. No one could ever compare to Cali, and I didn’t want to see if anyone ever could.

Things with her had always been different, and I had gotten used to rolling with the punches. What we had wasn’t the usual mate bond, but it was ours, and I never had to worry about something taking over the love we shared. As far as I was concerned, no woman on Earth could ever replace Cali in my heart.

*Screw the branching. It’s never going to happen*, I thought.

Before I could go down another rabbit hole in my head, a loud crash downstairs pulled me out of my thoughts. Worried that someone was hurt, I ran out of my room and rushed downstairs to see what was going on. I found Torin carrying a big box of cooking supplies and staring at a second box on the ground next to him. Spice bottles, cast iron skillets, tongs, and all manner of cooking items were scattered all over the floor.

“Having a bit of trouble here?” I asked.

Torin grinned sheepishly. “I thought we could barbecue for the party. Who doesn’t love burgers and hot dogs, right?”

“Yeah, that’s works. I appreciate you thinking of it,” I said. “You go on ahead. I can bring the second box out to you.”

“Thanks,” Torin said.

I got down on a knee and made quick work of picking everything up and jamming it into the box. I didn’t know what half the items were meant to do, but I packed them in anyway. Torin, the grill master, would know what to do with them.

With the box in hand, I stepped out into the yard and followed Torin to the grill. I set everything down and let him do his thing. Lola and Jay were also out in the yard setting things up. I caught sight of Violet and Charlie doing the same on the other side of the house. It made me happy to see the pack getting behind my idea. While Xavier and I still had our issues to get through, there was no reason our packs had to be at odds with each other.

Lola gave me a tight smile as she wiped sweat from her brow. I remembered how she reacted to Xavier’s apology earlier, and I walked over to see if she still had hard feelings about the whole thing.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“I can safely say that I am excited to drink away my feelings tonight,” she said. “How about you, Alpha? Feeling peachy keen?”

I grinned. “Also feeling excited to drink away my feelings tonight.”

“Awesome. I’ll save you a bottle,” Lola said, getting back to work.

“How about you, Jay? All good?” I asked.

Jay stared at me for a second before he finally shrugged. The dark look in his eye took me by surprise, and I wasn’t about to let it slide. Jay was usually a pretty mild-mannered guy, but the hostility radiating from him was hard to ignore.

“What? Is there something you want to say to me?” I asked.

Jay shook his head like he didn’t want to talk about it. He turned away from me and started to walk away before I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked.

He spun back around and batted my hand away like he couldn’t stand me touching him. Not one to let any kind of aggression slide, I stared Jay down. His lack of respect wouldn’t be tolerated.

“I would watch yourself, Jay,” I said. “I’m not just a member of the pack. I’m the Alpha, and you’d do well to remember that.”

Jay snorted. “Right. You’re supposed to be our Alpha, and you were supposed to be Xavier’s Alpha.”

“Make your point and be very careful as you do,” I said, ready to bare my teeth.

“Fine,” Jay said. “Be honest, Greyson. Did you really not know what was happening to him? Or is that what you want us all to think?”

**Episode 4811**

I stared at my phone for a beat after my call with Greyson ended. Getting Xavier, Ava, and me under the same roof hardly said “Party time!” but I would have to suck it up. The Samaras were coming over tonight, and the Redwoods would be their gracious hosts. I would look at Ava without thinking about how she’d been fucking my mate.

Even worse, he was *in love* with her. And, allegedly, me.

*Party time!*

I winced. I wanted to disappear—dive into the nearest trash can and make friends with the raccoons. Snapping out of it, I took a deep breath before turning to head back inside the bar. From the corner of my eye, I spotted a familiar male figure in the shadows.

The Tall Man, the jackass from earlier who wouldn’t take no for an answer, hovered a few feet away, smoking. I could feel him watching me in the dark like a creep. He was lucky he was human and there were a few people hanging out in the parking lot, otherwise I would’ve blasted him just to teach him a lesson.

*Imagine if Xavier or Greyson were here…*

Xavier had a very specific way of dealing with creepy guys who disrespected me. And that method was murder. As for Greyson, he’d never had to deal with that kind of a creep, but he had threatened Codsworth for his hostile behavior toward me. I didn’t think Greyson would ever go as far as murder, but it felt like he would find other…*interesting* ways to deal with those types of men.

*Just ignore that douchebag, Cali*, I told myself, walking back inside.

“Obviously the biggest goal ever is landing a spot on the Olympic team roster,” Gael was saying as I took a seat between him and Bear. “Like Damien the Great, Kangarat King himself, did in 2004, and we—”

Bear’s gigantic fist landed on the table, forcing a surprised squeak out of me. “We won the motherfucking gold, baby!”

All the boys broke into cheers and downed their shots. Rodrigo got us another round of drinks as the team went on and on about Damien the Great. About how he was a true Kangarat through and through, and how it was in the team’s blood to find eternal glory.

“You and us, Lil’ Hart,” Schmiddy told me seriously. “Eternal glory.”

*I feel like I might not even survive this weekend’s regatta*, I thought. *Eternal embarrassment, more like it!*

I nodded sheepishly and pretended to know what the fuck they were talking about. The conversation was all, “Damien’s favorite boat was the coxless quad,” and, “Damien preferred sweeping over sculling.” That quickly turned into the guys talking about their own favorite techniques and boats and whatever. I politely nodded and enjoyed my drink. But just when I started to think I was safe and nobody was paying any attention to the team’s secretly mostly clueless coxswain—a.k.a. *me*—Gael turned and pinned me with his stare.

“What do you think, Cali?” Gael asked.

I blinked at him. “Uh…”

Bear nudged me, prompting. “What’s the ideal stroke rate?”

“I—” I sputtered. “I think—”

“That’s a dumb question,” Codsworth said, cutting me off. “Ideal stroke rate for what? Training or winning? Winning over the Fringeheads or winning in the Olympics?”

The conversation turned toward Codsworth, and I breathed a sigh of relief. This was the second time in the same hour that I’d felt grateful to that grumpy boy.

But, of course, I was still in dire danger.

“Say, Lil’ Hart,” Kayden said, grinning at me while he knocked my shot glass with his, “you been awfully quiet tonight.”

“I think she misses her cox box,” Bear teased. “Bet she’s not having fun talking to us unless she’s barking out orders, huh?”

The others snickered. Despite being flustered, I managed to recall that the cox box was a circular device the coxswain monitored with a microphone or a headset attached. It was connected to speakers located throughout the boat, so all the rowers could hear my instructions.

“That’s true,” I said, trying to relax and tease him back. “I wish we were back in the time when they used a megaphone, so I could yell right in your ear, Bear.”

He smirked, looking around the group. “See, guys? Told ya I’m her favorite!”

I had to grin, shaking my head at him. The others burst into laughter before they started talking about Bear having the bow seat, the one closest to me, in the boat. They kept on going with all their terminology talk, but now that I managed to focus, I realized that I did know quite a few of the things they mentioned. After all, I’d studied very hard after I had decided I would become the best coxswain around.

*Eternal glory will be mine!*

Maybe if I survived this weekend’s regatta.

All in all, I would never forgive Lola for signing me up for crew, but being around these guys did feel nice. They thrived in loud chaos, which was amusing, and they were welcoming, sweet, and helpful. Even Codsworth had been helpful on a few occasions, like when he’d told off the Tall Man or saved me when I fell off the boat. Besides, this entire situation had made me feel hopeful that maybe one day I could actually succeed at something athletic, which was a first for me.

“What do you guys want? More of the usual?” Schmiddy asked, his loud voice breaking through my thoughts. I saw him stand up and reach for his wallet, looking over at the bar. I checked the time on my phone, and my stomach dropped. The Redwood party would start soon.

“Don’t get anything for me,” I said. “I gotta head back home.”

Everybody broke into a collective protest. Apart from Codsworth, who raised an eyebrow at me. “Dipping out already, Hart? Aren’t we good enough for you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Cut it out.”

He scoffed. “Well, then, what is it? It’s way too early to go to bed.”

“It’s just that I…” I paused. “I have to…”

*What? Go to an inter-pack werewolf party that celebrates the murder of an all-powerful vampire-witch?*

In the end, I decided to tell half the truth.

“Sorry,” I said, “I’m having an amazing time with you guys, but I have another party that I have to make an appearance at. More like a social obligation, you know?”

Everybody huffed their displeasure, but at least they didn’t ask any more questions. I thanked them for everything, gathered up all my stuff, and headed outside. To be honest, I did wish I could’ve stayed with the boys and avoided real life as long as possible after my last talk with Xavier.

*He seems lost*, I thought. *Like he doesn’t know what to do, or what he wants right now. Or where we go from here…*

He was still with Ava, though. At the Samara pack house. That was enough to make my chest ache. I rushed to my car, shaking my head to myself, when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see the Tall Man heading toward me.

What the actual fuck?

“Hey there,” the man said, his eyes greedy all over me. “You and I have some unfinished business, sweetheart.”

Anger rose up inside of me. I was outside the bar, alone, with no witnesses right now. He really was pushing his luck here.

“What’s that?” He laughed, coming closer. “Cat got your tongue?”

Moving closer to my car, I snapped, “Leave me alone.”

*You could just blast him, Cali*, a little voice in my head said. *There are no witnesses right now…*

But just as the man said, “Aww, come on now,” and I started to draw my magic, the door of the bar burst open, and the crew team stumbled out. Codsworth saw us first.

“Hey, Hart!” he barked. “Is that dipshit bothering you again?”

The entire team twisted toward me. Their full attention landed on the Tall Man like they were a pack of hounds.

Gael’s expression was severe. “Is that the same guy who wouldn’t leave her alone at the bar?”

“It’s just a misunderstanding,” the Tall Man said, moving his hands in an appeasing manner. *Coward*. “She and I were just talking—”

“You better get the fuck out of here before we break your face!” Bear snapped, with Gael backing him up as the entire team moved toward the Tall Man. He paled, and in seconds, with the team shouting obscenities at him, and someone—Patel?—throwing a rock at him, the Tall Man broke into a run.

I was impressed. “You guys are…”

Schmiddy winked at me. “Badass, epic, and fucking hot?”

“And extremely humble, yes,” I said with a grin.

Kayden leaned against Jayden, both tilting their heads to the side. “We’re your knights in shining armor, my queen. At your service, free of charge!”

“Fuck that.” Codsworth scoffed, raising his eyebrows. “I’m doing nothing for free.”

Patel started, “As we all know, Codsworth is a little bitch—”

Codsworth huffed. “Fuck you, man.”

“—but he’s got a point there,” Patel continued. “There *is* a way that you could repay us for being the best teammates ever, Cali.”

I snorted, nodding. “Sounds good. What way?”

Bear grinned at me. “Why don’t you invite us to your party?”

**Episode 4812**

**Xavier**

Ava wasn’t wrong. Her, Cali, and me in one room? It wasn’t a great idea—it sounded like some kind of torture. Or a keg of dynamite ready to explode. Throw in Greyson, too, and who knew how things would go?

The situation was probably not ideal.

I couldn’t promise Ava that the party would be all flowers and sunshine. But at the same time, I just wanted her to stop obsessing about it and stop fixating on my other mate. It was enough that *I* was consumed by thoughts of Cali.

I wasn’t going to tell Ava that.

Instead, I was going to try and… soothe her. I’d never been good at this kind of feelings shit, but I was pretty sure that I had gotten much better at it lately. Probably because I really did care about Ava and her feelings. Also because the consequences of an angry Ava were always Not Good.

“Ava, come on,” I said, leaning in to kiss her. It was brief, but Ava still moved closer to me. My confidence grew. “I don’t want you to worry, okay?” I muttered against her mouth, my eyes locked with hers. Stroking her cheek, I said, “It’s just a stupid party. Just relax.”

For some reason, she immediately stiffened.

“Don’t fucking patronize me, Xavier. I’m not a child.”

“All I’m saying is that you should calm down. It’s not going to be—”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” she said, pushing me away. “You need to see things from my perspective. I know what happened between you and Cali at the mall, and I know how you two feel about each other. And yet”—she gestured at herself—“here I am, by your side. Because I love you, and it’s obvious that the *due destini* thing is bigger than you, so—”

“Where the hell are you going with this?”

“I’m just saying that considering all the shit we’ve been through, I think I’ve been pretty *calm*, Xavier. Am I wrong?”

Ava did not seem calm at all. But I sensed that if I told her so, she’d probably lose her shit. That was the last thing I needed, so I had to backpedal immediately. I didn’t want to fight with her. I had spent months dealing with the monster that was Adéluce, and all I wanted right now was less drama.

I’d never admit it out loud—an Alpha never would—but I was fucking *exhausted*.

“I know that, and I appreciate it,” I told Ava. “What I meant to say is that I just think you’re making a bigger deal out of this party scenario than it is. That’s all.”

Ava took in my expression. Whatever she saw there made her cross her arms over her chest. But at least she looked less irritated, so I’d count that as a victory.

It was short-lived.

“You did just admit to me that you are still in love with Cali, right?” Ava went on. “And Greyson is still in love with her, too, so whatever jealousy existed between you two hasn’t been resolved. That sounds like a bomb about to go off to me—not a reason to throw a party. What do you plan to do about all this?”

“I’m planning to go to the Redwood house and smooth things over between the two packs,” I said. “I want to make sure nobody’s still upset with me.”

“That wasn’t my question, Xavier,” Ava said icily.

I scowled. “What do you mean? It’s in our best interest to keep things good with the Redwoods. Plus, after killing Adéluce, I wouldn’t mind having a good time. I think we all deserve a party.”

She scoffed loudly, dropping her arms to her sides. “You still haven’t answered.” She took a step closer. “I didn’t ask about the Redwoods. I asked about you and Greyson and the jealousy that exists between the two of you because of Cali. What are you going to do about it? About you and me and Cali and Greyson—our little fucked-up foursome?”

I paused, gulping when I felt sudden pressure in my chest. My heart had picked up speed. Ava’s question was similar to the one Cali had asked me earlier. She’d looked at me with so much longing and hope that it had almost fucking crushed me. Ava’s approach was more hostile, like desperation wrapped in anger. Because that was Ava.

Either way, I still didn’t have an answer.

“That vampire-witch nearly destroyed me and everyone I care about,” I told Ava. I fucking hated the way my voice cracked. “Can’t we just have some time to enjoy the fact that I’m finally free?”

Ava’s expression didn’t soften at my words. “And then what?” she asked. “What happens after the party is over? What happens next week with the four of us?”

My jaw clenched. Ava just kept fucking pushing, and my patience was running thin now.

“Do I look like I have an answer to that?” I asked sharply.

She scoffed. “That’s just like you! To push off the uncomfortable stuff, to avoid dealing with the things that should matter the most to you.”

I took a deep breath, reminding myself not to snap at Ava. I owed her more than my anger after everything she’d done for me lately.

“I just want this night to be drama-free,” I said. My voice was tight. “Is that too much to ask?”

Ava snorted bitterly. “Our lives are never drama-free, Xavier. Don’t fool yourself.” She shook her head. “I’m going to play along for now, but you can’t put off dealing with this forever.”

“Ava—”

“I’m going to get ready,” she said in a cold tone, turning her back on me to head to the bathroom. At least she didn’t slam the door in my face. And the fact that I’d managed to buy myself some time to… what? Talk to Cali? To Greyson? And tell them what?

I had killed Adéluce, and I was supposed to be relieved. I was supposed to feel like this was a brand-new hopeful beginning for me. But all I felt was pressure, coming from Cali, Ava, and Greyson. Even Colton and Jay had something to say about our outrageous relationship clusterfuck. Ava was right about one thing: I needed to figure this mess out before it blew up in my face.

I needed a drink.

Shaking my head to clear it—which didn’t help—I headed downstairs for a whiskey. Marissa was hovering in the kitchen. She didn’t look happy.

“Have you talked to Ava yet?” she asked.

I couldn’t believe this. Cali, Ava, Greyson, Jay, Colton, and now Marissa? Did all these people just want me to fucking magically suddenly have all the answers?

My chest felt tight again, a pressing weight blooming right in the middle of it.

“Talk to Ava about what?” I asked, avoiding and evading.

Marissa glared. “Don’t play games with me, Xavier. You know damn well what I’m talking about.” She pointed at my chest accusingly. “Ava has dedicated herself to helping you through this, and now that it’s over, you need to stop fucking around and devote yourself to her.”

I was ready to snap at Marissa—to tell her to keep her opinion to herself and watch how the fuck she talked to her Alpha. But then I remembered all the shit she’d done to help during our battle with Adéluce, and how much she cared about Ava. She was a valuable pack member through and through.

“I’m dealing with it,” I said in the end. It was better than telling her to shut up, so I saw that as progress. I made a move to leave, but Marissa didn’t let me. Her expression had softened, though.

“I know you just came out of… all that stuff with Adéluce,” she said. “I know how horrible it is to have her magic bind you…” Marissa had been a victim of Adéluce’s magic, too, I knew. At least she understood that part. “But I really think you should establish some ground rules for yourself here,” she added. “Just to make things less intense for everybody.”

I didn’t ask who she meant by “everybody.” Me, Ava, and Cali? Greyson too? Or just the Samaras, knowing how upset they would be if there were strife between their Luna and Alpha? I didn’t even know where to begin with any of this, so maybe she did have a point about setting down some rules.

“Thanks,” I told her. “I’ll think about it.”

She was gone a moment later, and I grabbed that bottle of whiskey and a glass. As I poured myself a drink, I wondered what sort of ground rules would help with this messed-up situation. And why the fuck did everyone seem to believe that it was up to *me* to figure out those rules? How the hell could anyone think that, after all the shit I’d done to hurt Cali, I still deserved her and her forgiveness?

She and the Redwoods had forgiven me way too easily.

The weight on my chest intensified at the thought.

“Hey,” Zipper’s voice said, catching my attention. I turned to see him enter the kitchen, followed by Blaine and Knox. Neither Blaine nor Knox said anything. What the fuck was that about?

“Aren’t you three supposed to be getting ready for the party?” I asked, eyeing them up and down. I wasn’t the fashion police, but even I knew that baseball shorts weren’t fit for a night out.

“Why does the party have to be at the Redwood house?” Blaine asked. “Aren’t the Samaras good enough?”

I took a gulp of my drink. “They offered to host it. Who cares?”

Knox’s neutral expression turned into a scowl. “It matters, Xavier. From what I’ve heard, you are the one who killed Adéluce. You are the Samara Alpha, so we should be the ones throwing the party.”

I frowned, looking among them. “You guys are seriously mad about this? What are you planning to do about it?”

Blaine crossed his arms over his chest, looking as stubborn as a mule. “We decided we’re not going to go to the party.”

**Episode 4813**

**Greyson**

I looked around. Violet and Charlie were watching us, looking both upset and surprised. When I stared back at Jay and his scowl, I couldn’t figure out where the hell this whole thing was coming from. Why would Jay think that I had known about Xavier’s curse earlier but done nothing about it?

Jay was Xavier’s friend, but I used to think that he trusted me.

For fuck’s sake, Xavier was my brother.

“Babe,” Lola said, blinking at Jay in obvious shock. “What the hell is happening right now? What are you saying?”

At least Lola was as surprised as I was. I didn’t want to get into a heated argument with Jay in front of everyone, especially if I would have to put him in his place. That wasn’t the kind of relationship Jay and I had.

This made no fucking sense.

“We clearly need to talk,” I said to Jay in a cool tone. “Follow me inside.”

With a scowl, Jay followed me to my study.

The moment I closed the door behind me, Jay plopped down on the chair across from my desk. He wasn’t acting like his normal self, which was red flag number one. But between the two of us, I knew I had to be the one to keep a level head as the Alpha.

“I need you to explain to me why you just went around peddling baseless accusations,” I told him.

Jay huffed. “They’re not baseless—”

“They are,” I said. I tried to keep the irritation from seeping through my voice. “You’re acting as if I’d known about Adéluce all along and didn’t help my brother on purpose. The secon”

Jay peered at me. “I just can’t believe that you didn’t even suspect it. You’re *you*, Greyson. You’re the Alpha and his older brother—you should have known somehow.”

 I shook my head. “Xavier has a history of acting like a dick. I knew that something was wrong with him, but how was I supposed to guess that magic was involved? The second I found out what was going on, I stepped in.”

Jay opened his mouth to reply, but I wasn’t finished.  “What are you really upset about here, Jay? That Xavier’s not here in the Redwood pack? That he’s a Samara now? Or that he’s not the Redwood Alpha?”

Jay looked at his lap, huffing. “I’m Xavier’s friend. That’s no secret. But when push came to shove and Xavier was making his move to become the Redwood Alpha, I put my loyalty to my pack over my loyalty to my friend. Now, I’m wondering if I made a mistake.”

His words jarred me, but I took a calming breath.

I still couldn’t fucking understand what had caused Jay to act so out of character.

“I’ve always been grateful to you for that, Jay,” I said. “You’ve backed me up during a lot of hard times. You said that I would be the better Alpha for the Redwoods. It wasn’t an easy thing for you, but you did it because you trusted me. Where did all that trust go?”

Jay swallowed loudly enough for me to hear. He still wasn’t looking at me. I waited for him to answer, itched to push him for an explanation for this out-of-the-blue attack. In the end, he muttered, “I knew something was wrong with Xavier, too…”

I stared. “You did?”

Jay nodded. “Yeah. But I never imagined any of this. I didn’t help him when he was at his worst. As his best friend, I should’ve known…” He glanced at me. “I should’ve protected him.”

The realization dawned on me. Jay wasn’t just mad at me. He was mad at himself and misplacing that anger on me, a figurehead. He still wasn’t looking at me, as if he were ashamed.

“There was no way either of us could’ve known the truth,” I told Jay. “Adéluce’s magic was strong. Xavier was forced to keep it a secret. Not even Cali realized what was going on, and she’s his mate, Jay.”

He paused, taking that in.

I continued, “When I did learn what was happening, I stepped up and guided the Redwoods through it. I led our expedition to that tower and, for yet another time, almost got myself killed trying to save my brother. I did what an Alpha is supposed to do. Do you disagree with that?”

 Jay’s gaze flickered up to me. “No…”

I pushed forward.

“I know living without guilt is easier said than done,” I muttered. “But you didn’t know what was happening either. And when you did find out, you came to Xavier’s aid like I did. You helped like any good friend would.”

Jay stayed quiet, as if processing my words, when there was a knock on the door. A moment later, Lola walked in. Looking concerned, she eyed Jay and me. “Is everything okay here?”

“I don’t know,” I said, turning to Jay. “Is it?”

Jay stood up from the chair slowly. He met my gaze again. “We’re good.”

I saw this as a small victory for both of us.

Lola hooked her arm with Jay’s, smiling. “That’s what I like to hear. No drama on my watch!”

Jay raised an eyebrow at her. “Unless you’re the one making it. Right?”

Lola smirked. “Exactly.”

She pulled Jay out of the room, saying that they needed his help to build the fire. She shot me one last look and a quick nod. At least that way I knew that Lola didn’t blame me for what had happened to Xavier.

Did Jay have a point, though? Was there anything I could have done differently to help my brother? It was easy to raise questions and doubts after the fact. But I felt that I had done my best here. I’d done what I was supposed to, and that was to focus on my own responsibilities. Which, above all, lay with Cali and the Redwood pack as a whole.

Even if Xavier had been one of us, he’d lost the protection of the pack when he humiliated Cali and left us all. Adéluce’s trap had been ingenious that way—blocking us all out of Xavier’s life and torturing him.

The thought made my gut twist, and irrational guilt reared its ugly head.

Pushing the feeling down, I realized I needed to keep busy to avoid dwelling on these kinds of thoughts. There were many things to be done before the Samaras came over. I was making a mental list in my head when I ran into Rishika in the hallway.

“Hey,” she said. “Everything okay with Jay?”

“We’re good,” I said.

Laughter came from outside, and Rishika glanced at the window behind me. “The pack seems really happy that Xavier didn’t actually turn his back on us. The party tonight is gonna be great for morale.”

I smiled wryly. “Hope you’re right.”

“If someone had told me a few months ago that we’d be inviting the Samaras over with Xavier as the Alpha, I would’ve called them nuts,” Rishika mused.

I crossed my arms over my chest, scrutinizing her expression. “Now that you know why he left the pack, what do you think about Xavier taking over that position?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I had my doubts at first, because Xavier’s temper is no joke. But he’s actually been a good leader to the Samaras despite all the Adéluce bullshit, so I think that this is what’s best for everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“Xavier being the Alpha of the Samara pack is great for us,” she said. “It means us having a strong partner pack. We know that Xavier will always care about the Redwoods. Unlike the Vanguards and Lucian—”

“Who only cares about himself, yes,” I said with a scoff. “I bet he’s still dreaming about taking over all the packs in the area to form one mega pack.”

“Just so he could crown himself king,” Rishika said dryly. “I bet he’d have a crown and a velvet cape and everything.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure he already has both of those things.”

Rishika grinned just as laughter broke out again outside. We turned to the window, to look at the yard, where Jay and the others were setting up the fire. Jay looked better—less upset, more like himself. I had never expected him to turn on me that way, though I understood that guilt made people do weird things.

There was one person who had never turned on me, though.

“You know,” I said, facing Rishika, “I’ve never really thanked you for stepping up the way you have. It’s not easy for an Alpha to leave his pack when situations arise, but I’ve always felt safe knowing that I’ve left the Redwood pack in your capable hands.”

She shrugged it off. “It’s what any of us would do.”

“I wouldn’t trust that with just anyone,” I said, my voice even. “Each pack member has their strengths, but you stand out. And the Redwoods listen to you and trust you. You’ve pushed through, Rishika, even when times are tough.”

Even after Artemis left for the Fae world and none of us knew how she was.

“Thanks,” Rishika said, smiling. “It’s nice to hear you say that.”

She was right—the pack was relieved that Xavier hadn’t betrayed us. But that didn’t mean that he would be back. My younger brother was gone, and there was only one person who could take over his charge without a hitch.

I was looking right at her.

Was it time for me to make Rishika my official second?

**Episode 4814**

Bear grinned at me. “Why don’t you invite us to your party?”

My stomach plummeted at his question.

*Um, because there are gonna be a bunch of werewolves there who want to let loose and get drunk?*

Okay, I tried to see this from the guys’ perspective. I was going to some party after we’d hung out, and I wasn’t inviting them. They had no idea what was really going on here. They just knew that I was part of their team and their new friend, and I clearly didn’t want to hang out with them.

*And now I feel guilty…*

But I was doing this for their own good.

“It’s a black-tie event,” I blurted.

Schmiddy looked me up and down. “You’re wearing leggings and a sweater.”

“Well, it’s family only, and we don’t judge each other,” I said, digging myself into a deeper hole.

*Why, oh why am I such a bad liar?*

Gael frowned. “A family-only black-tie event?”

Codsworth rolled his eyes. “Guys, she doesn’t want us to go. She doesn’t like hanging out with us—it’s obvious.”

I gasped. “I never said that. Don’t put words in my mouth!”

“No, Codsworth is right,” Bear said with a pout. He morosely gazed away, into the distance, like some sort of boat captain who hadn’t seen shore in a long time. “We shouldn’t pressure her. It wasn’t meant to be.”

*Oh. My. God. The drama these boys are capable of!*

“I mean, we did almost die trying to save her…” Johnny trailed off with a sigh.

Gael, the team captain and generally the most levelheaded of the lot, rolled his eyes. “Seriously? Are you guys for real?”

“But I guess that’s not enough to earn her friendship,” Johnny finished gravely.

My guilt continued to grow, because I was a sucker. “No, you *are* my friends! For real! And I’m so grateful to you for defending me—”

“We didn’t defend you to get invited to a party,” Rodrigo said, eyebrows furrowed. His expression turned mischievous in a second flat. “*But* it *could* be a chance to get to know our coxswain better. It would be fun to meet your friends!”

Jayden—or was it Kayden? I kept mixing up the twins—stared at me with wide eyes. “Speaking of your friends, is Lola gonna be there?”

Oh, boy. The last thing we needed was one of these clueless kids hitting on Lola in front of Jay. As I fought to figure out what to say, Gael patted my shoulder. He said, “Ignore these assholes and get going to your party, Cali. They just love the drama.”

Bear was still staring off into the distance, his expression brooding. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Sorry to have annoyed you with our friendship, I guess.”

I took in the team. If they’d looked like a pack of hounds earlier, now they reminded me of a pack of sad puppies—except for Codsworth, who had the constitution of a judgmental cat, and Gael, who looked up at the sky like a tired mom who prayed for strength.

It was Bear who broke me when he added, “Have a good night, Cali. A good night…” He squeezed his eyes shut, as if the next words pained him to utter. “Without us.”

*Wow.*

“Oh my god, you are impossible,” I said with a huff, pointing at the SUV. “Stop crying and get your asses in the car right now!”

They immediately lit up like a bonfire, breaking into cheers.

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I had no idea how we’d ended up here—with me in the driver’s seat, Gael riding shotgun next to me, and everybody else crammed in the back. The SUV had turned into a clown car, because these boys *were* a bunch of clowns. The entire situation had snowballed, like many things in my life did, just because I had no idea how to lie or to set boundaries.

Why *am I like this?*

“I knew Bear would break you,” Gael told me, putting on his seat belt like the only good boy among a group of madmen. “He should probably be a lawyer. Or an actor.”

Bear was currently standing in the back, his head poking through the sunroof with Rodrigo and Kayden. Waving his arms around, he shouted, “Love you, Lil’ Hart!”

I wanted to both laugh and cry. And then I realized I had to let Greyson know what was happening before I started this damn car. I wasn’t going to call, though—he would ask too many questions, and we were all pressed so tightly together that there was no way the conversation would escape this unhinged crackle of cockatoos. They were talking to me all at once, asking questions and yelling in my ear. Waving them off, I texted Greyson.

*Crew team coming to party. Sorry!!!!!!!*

I hit send, dropped my phone in the cup holder, and told myself that everything would be fine. Greyson would see the text before we arrived at home. He always read my texts right away.

Taking a steadying breath, I pulled out of the parking lot while all the guys cheered. Images of past werewolf celebrations flooded my head. They could get pretty wild, with the main issue being that sometimes people shifted and/or ran around buck naked after shifting. That was not something the crew team could see, obviously. My only hope was that Greyson would see the text, and the crew and I would arrive early enough, before the truly wild and crazy shit started to happen.

In the meantime, Bear started chanting the Kangaroo Rats team song, and soon the whole gang started to sing along. If you considered that I’d almost died at the hands of the most powerful creature we’d ever known only a few hours ago, the whole thing was so freaking ridiculous and outrageous that I could only laugh. And so I did, and then I couldn’t help but sing along.

I took a moment to forget where we were going and allowed myself to enjoy this feeling of comradery between all of us. I realized that, in this car with these singing human boys, I felt truly carefree in a way that I hadn’t felt in a long time. It felt good. We were like our own little werewolf pack.

*But they’re not a werewolf pack, Cali…*

My positive thoughts came to a screeching halt, and I stopped singing along. I realized that I should’ve texted Xavier as well so he could warn the Samaras. And Ava, of course, his Luna to whom he had to tell everything. The bitterness I felt was staggering, but it was nothing new. At least the crew team being there could act like a buffer and force everyone, including Xavier’s finicky Luna who saw me as competition, to be on their best behavior.

“Are we there yet?” Rodrigo asked, breaking through my thoughts. Everybody followed with the same question, repeating it like a bunch of children*.* I wasn’t sure if I wanted to smack them or take a video of them to show Lola. Either way, soon enough, we did arrive at the house. I’d been driving so slowly, but it still felt like we had gotten there in no time.

“Whoa, is this your house?” Johnny asked as I took the turn and passed through the gate. “This looks like it can hold, fucking, I don’t know… Congress.”

“I can’t believe Lola and you live here!” Kayden shouted. “It’s fucking epic!”

“Deadass,” Jayden said. “Wait, is that a lake in the distance?”

Gael gave the house an appreciative look when I pulled into the driveway. “No wonder you didn’t want to take an apartment near the school,” he said. “This is like a palace.”

*Hah*, I thought. *You should see the Vanguards’ house.*

Codsworth narrowed his eyes at me through the rearview mirror as I put the car in park. “Who’s paying for all this?”

My ears burned, but I stayed serious. “You’re not my accountant, Codsworth. Stop asking nosy questions.”

After that admittedly mediocre burn, which, for some reason, everybody found hilarious, the boys and I piled out of the car. I didn’t hear any music or shouting coming from the backyard, which I thought was a good sign that the wild stuff hadn’t started yet and Greyson had warned everybody. I patted myself down and realized I didn’t have my phone on me.

I found it in my cup holder, in the car, and checked to see Greyson’s reply.

He never responded, because I’d never sent the text.

My heart dropped.

*Shit. Shit shit shit!*

I needed to do damage control pronto.

“Okay!” I shouted at the boys, clapping my hands to catch their attention. “You guys stay here! I’m going inside to check with—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Greyson’s cool voice came from behind me.

“Cali?”

I turned to see him sauntering over, a smile on his face. It didn’t reach his eyes. “Hey everyone,” he told the boys, who replied in unison. “You didn’t mention your friends were coming over.” He looked around at them, still smiling. “The more the merrier, of course.”

 In my head, though, Greyson’s mind linking held a distinctly different tone.

*Can you please explain to me what the hell is happening right now? Why are these kids here?*

*I tried to stop them!* I replied, panicking.

Greyson sensed it, pulling my hand in his. While everybody spoke all at once, Greyson pulled me aside.

“You need to send them away,” he whispered. “You know it’s unsafe for them to be here.”

“You don’t understand,” I hissed back. “Things got out of control! They were *sad* I wasn’t inviting them to the party, Greyson. I couldn’t deal with it.”

He looked at me like I was nuts.

I pressed my lips together. “They’re my friends,” I said meekly. “And I—I tried to text you about it, but it was so chaotic in the car and for some reason the text didn’t send!”

Greyson paused, sighing. A deep, long-suffering sigh I knew all too well. “Can you at least keep them here and distract them?” His voice dropped even lower. “I need to warn the others.”

“Of course, sorry, thank you, love you!” I blurted the words in quick succession, and his expression softened.

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean for this to happen,” he mumbled. “I’ll go talk to the pack and—”

Greyson never finished his sentence. A howl echoed, drawing everyone’s attention. The crew team turned toward the yard and gasped in unison.

“Holy shit!” Gael pointed up ahead. I looked and saw Ravi, in wolf form, howling up at the sky. “What the hell is that?!”

**Episode 4815**

**Xavier**

I wanted to fucking smack Blaine for saying that he didn’t want to come to the party. The little shit thought he had a choice in the matter? Fucking ridiculous. Since *I* was going, *everybody* was going—end of discussion. But what was even worse here was his tone, and how he dared meet my gaze like we were equals.

We weren’t fucking equals.

I was his Alpha.

I thought we were over this bullshit, with these kids acting like they could do whatever they wanted, but here we were again. I opened my mouth, ready to tear them a new one, when Ava’s voice echoed from the hallway.

“What the fuck did you just say to your Alpha?” She marched into the kitchen, glaring daggers at Blaine, Knox, and Zipper. They immediately cowered. “How dare you speak to him in such a tone? Have you lost your damn minds?”

The three little piggies looked at Ava like she was the Big Bad Wolf. I didn’t make an attempt to step in when she looked so fired up. It didn’t look like she was anywhere near done, and, honestly, I was kind of enjoying this.

“You three have to stop acting like the pack is some kind of democracy,” she snapped. “You might disagree, have your own opinions, but you can’t just do whatever the hell you want. What our Alpha says is not up for debate.” She pinned Knox with her icy gaze. “Do you understand?”

Her cousin sputtered. “Ava, we didn’t—”

She cut him off. “Xavier is your Alpha, Knox.” Her eyes flickered among the boys. Her voice lowered. That made it ten times more dangerous. “Accept that, or get the *fuck* out of here.”

“Ava,” Knox started again, “we really didn’t mean it to sound like—”

“I don’t give a shit,” she said, interrupting him again. She looked among the three. “Get ready to go. Make sure you look presentable.”

Knox’s shoulders sagged. He headed out of the kitchen, Blaine and Zipper in tow, their tails between their legs. I eyed them before turning to Ava.

She was wearing a robe. Her hair was wet—she looked like she’d just gotten out of the shower. Had she interrupted getting ready just to come down here and yell at these guys? All for me? My wolf stirred at the thought, at the sight of her like this, all flushed and angry on my behalf, even if we’d fought only minutes ago.

Ava always had my back.

“Hey,” I said, taking a step closer. “Thanks for—”

She took a step back, not letting me touch her. Her rejection stung.

“I didn’t do that for you. I did it for the pack.” She eyed me up and down. “And I was worried that you were going to do something worse than lecture them.”

“The thought did cross my mind. I thought we’d moved past this whole insubordination shit,” I said.

Ava swallowed, wrapping her arms around herself. She looked away.

“What?” I asked.

She paused. “I think the whole Adéluce thing might have made them question your role.”

The realization landed hard. My voice lowered. “So because an insanely powerful vampire-witch managed to trap me, I’m no longer Alpha enough for the Samara pack? I have to prove myself all over again?”

Ava huffed, shaking her head. “Don’t see it that way. The majority of the pack is still behind you. And despite this latest flare-up, Knox still believes in you.”

I wasn’t convinced. Either way, I’d have to have a little one-on-one with Ava’s cousin just to see where Knox and the other two stood. I couldn’t let this bullshit spiral out of control. Downing my shot of whiskey, I watched Ava head upstairs again to finish getting ready. I zeroed in on the way her hips swayed, and my wolf growled.

I poured myself another shot when Colton walked into the kitchen.

He was shaved and nicely dressed, good to go and jolly. While earlier I’d been relieved he’d decided to stay a little longer, now I wanted to shove him out of spite. Brother shit. The urge intensified when he said, “Hey, bro,” and grabbed the glass from my hand. He downed the whiskey in one gulp and grinned.

“I needed that,” I told him with a huff.

“You always do.” Colton patted my shoulder in a patronizing way that reminded me of Greyson. Assholes, both of them. “Still trouble in paradise?” he asked, glancing in the direction Ava had vanished.

I sighed. “I’m not sure there won’t ever be trouble. If it’s not with Ava, it’s with the shrimp and his buddies.”

Colton’s teasing expression faded to a frown. “This isn’t a joke, Xavier. You gotta reassert yourself here. Make it clear who is in charge.”

I poured myself another drink. “You mean with Knox and the other two little shits?”

“That too,” Colton said, “but first of all with Ava, dude. She can’t be running circles around you. Show her who’s boss.”

I snorted. It was no secret that Colton didn’t like Ava. I’m sure he would like it if I put her in her place. “Like you do with Maya?”

“That’s different,” Colton said. “Maya is the Alpha.” Lowering his voice conspiratorially, he muttered, “*Never* tell her I said this, but I’ve kind of got a kink now because of it.”

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About an hour later, the Samaras headed to the Redwood house in separate cars. I was driving and had Marissa in the backseat and Ava right next to me in the passenger’s seat. She was looking out the window, not sparing me a glance.

This was bad.

I knew that by going to this party I was walking into a minefield. I hadn’t resolved anything between Ava, Cali, Greyson, and me. If I wasn’t careful here, I would trip up and all hell would break loose. But how the fuck could I resolve the utter madness that was the four of us?

I was stuck. I was stuck between Ava and Cali. Stuck in my own head, too. I had hurt them both, fucked them both over, but they still wanted me. I glanced at Ava. It felt good to know that she had my back always, sure. But it was a little scary, too.

If Ava would never let me go, and if Cali could love me despite everything, was there a limit to what I could do to both of them and get away with it? How much could they forgive? How could they forgive me so easily when the idea of forgiving myself brought a bitter taste to my mouth?

“You cold or something?” I asked Ava. Just to distract myself. “You want me to turn on the heat?”

She barely shot me a glance. “No.”

Her dark hair was pushed back in a ponytail. She had on a pair of black skintight jeans, black boots that came up to her calves, a black leather jacket, and a blood-red sweater with a V low enough to draw attention to her cleavage. The color clashed with her pale skin and pale blue eyes, but it matched the red of her full lips.

Ava was always stunning, but tonight, it felt like she’d been meticulous about it. Like she knew Cali would be there, and she saw this as a competition. It was fucked up, but I couldn’t blame her.

The pressure in my chest grew.

It kept on growing, even if I was supposed to be free now.

I was supposed to be free, but for some reason it didn’t feel like it.

Letting out a breath, I reached for Ava’s hand. I felt a bit pathetic, begging for her attention like a dog. Doing the exact fucking opposite of what Colton had said—*show her who’s boss*. This was never my role in our relationship. When had things switched?

She pulled her hand away from mine.

“Keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road,” she said icily.

I wondered if I should tell her to watch the way she talked to me. To remind her that *I* was the Alpha. Then I wondered if I should’ve never told her the truth about my feelings for Cali. Would that have made a difference? I doubted it. Ava would’ve been able to tell.

“Um, what’s happening over there?” Marissa’s voice dragged me out of my thoughts. We’d just pulled up to the Redwood house, and Marissa had leaned over the seat to look ahead. A naked Ravi was tiptoeing behind some bushes.

“Why is my boyfriend sneaking into the back of the house?” Marissa asked me.

“I have no idea,” I said with a frown.

As we made the turn and came to a stop in front of the house, I saw Cali with the entirety of the crew team. What the *actual* *fuck*?

“What the hell are those humans doing here?” Ava asked. “Has Greyson lost his mind?”

Clenching my jaw, I took off my seat belt. “I’ll go find out.”

I got out of the car just as Greyson stomped over to talk to me. “Xavier, we have a—”

“Problem? Obviously.” My voice dropped. “Why the fuck would you allow humans to come to an inter-pack party? What were you thinking?”

“It wasn’t *my* idea,” Greyson said sharply.

I paused, realizing. “Cali brought them over without asking you.”

Greyson sighed—that annoying, long-suffering sigh of his that made me want to smack him. “It was a misunderstanding, but…yeah.”

“Fucking hell,” I said under my breath, rubbing my face. Shooting the humans a look, I said to my brother, “Those guys need to go. Right now. What are we going to do to get rid of them?”

**Episode 4816**

**Greyson**

“First of all,” I told my brother, “keep your shit together. These guys matter to Cali, so we need to be careful.”

He scoffed. “They’re lucky they haven’t gotten themselves killed yet. You put them in the same room as a drunk Knox or Blaine, and they’d be ripped to—”

“We’re not going to fucking hurt them,” I snapped.

Xavier glared at me. “Accidents happen when werewolves party. The Kangaroos or whatever the fuck they’re called need to get their sorry asses out of here.”

I glanced over at Cali. She was talking with the boys animatedly. Despite her stress over them seeing a shifted Ravi, she’d patched the whole thing up and moved along. She even looked amused now. I wasn’t going to ruin this for her.

“Cali invited them,” I told Xavier. “I can’t uninvite them. It’s too late.”

Xavier’s short fuse seemed to have gotten even shorter. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Greyson? This is supposed to be a party for the Samaras and the Redwoods to let loose, not babysit a bunch of college kids.”

He kept on ranting, and I studied him for a moment. Xavier had been under Adéluce’s spell for months, but he acted like he hadn’t changed one bit. Was the fact that I wanted to punch him for acting like a dick a sign that Adéluce hadn’t broken him? I never thought I’d see a bright side to him throwing one of his usual fits.

“Greyson,” he snapped, flicking me on the shoulder. “Are you even listening to me?”

“I think you’re making this a bigger deal than it is,” I said, keeping my cool. I was upset initially, but I wasn’t going to let Xavier of all people dictate this situation. “Let’s let the guys hang out for a bit, make sure none of us randomly shifts, and then send them on their merry way. Just for Cali’s sake. They’re her friends.”

He sneered. “Do *not* bring Cali into this. I refuse to let my pack coddle a bunch of random, drunk college kids. And if you were a better Alpha, you would have realized that before you let them come here.”

If Xavier hadn’t changed after Adéluce, I hadn’t either. I wasn’t some insecure little bitch who lost his shit when his authority was challenged. I left that kind of bullshit behavior for Xavier.

As if I were talking to a toddler, I said patiently, “Like I’ve already told you, I wasn’t the one who let them come here. It was Cali, and the whole situation was a misunderstanding. The best thing you can do right now is suck it up and calm down.”

His jaw clenched. “Don’t fucking patronize me, Greyson. We might be at your pack house, but if you don’t do something, I will step in and take charge like an Alpha should. The humans are a problem.”

I scrutinized Xavier’s face. His behavior was too much, even for him.

“Honestly, Xavier? I don’t think this is about the humans,” I said. “It seems like right now the only person you truly have a problem with is me.”

Xavier glared at me.

“What the hell is going on?” Colton said, interrupting our stare-off. “You two better not be fighting.”

I turned to see our brother coming over, Cali following. She looked worried, her eyes flick between Xavier and me. I glanced at Xavier. Now that he was done yelling at me, was he going to berate Cali over her mistake?

Xavier used to be mean to Cali because of the Adéluce thing, but that was over now.

He no longer had any excuses, so I wasn’t going to let him hurt her. Ever.

Thankfully, in the end all he said was, “Nothing’s going on.” He shot me one final glare before turning away and marching toward Ava. She’d been watching the entire exchange in silence. I was pretty sure she’d love nothing more right now than to return back to the Samara pack house. The less Xavier had to do with the Redwoods and Cali, the better it was for her.

“Is everything okay?” Cali asked, tugging on my sleeve.

“Xavier’s being a dick,” I said matter-of-factly.

The glint of hurt in Cali’s eyes made me feel bad, but I wasn’t going to take that back. It was true.

“I think it’s best if you and Xavier try to keep some distance,” Colton told me. “Not turn the party into a personal grudge match.”

“I wasn’t the one causing a scene,” I said. And then I purposefully put an arm around Cali, knowing that Xavier could see us. Suited him right for being fucking insufferable.

Colton noticed my move and rolled his eyes, walking away while grumbling something about annoying older brothers. He should try having younger brothers and see how goddamn great *that* was.

“Look! It’s so cool!” someone shouted.

I turned to see the crew team gather around the fire excitedly. They looked almost giddy.

“I’m sorry again for bringing them here,” Cali muttered. “I sort of fell into it…”

“It’s not ideal, but don’t worry,” I said. “I talked to the Redwood—they’re inside getting dressed. As long as no one gets drunk enough to shift, this shouldn’t be a problem.”

She pressed her lips together. “So you’re not mad at me?”

*No*, I wanted to tell her. *Because I’m not Xavier.*

“I’m not mad.” I gave her a kiss on the cheek. She looked up at me, all flushed.

“Do you want to maybe spend some time with them?” she asked with a shy smile. “Get to know them better?”

“They’re your friends, love,” I said. “Of course I do.”

Cali looked so excited that I couldn’t stop smiling. She headed over to the fire, pulling me with her. One of the boys—Johnny, I recalled his name was—was rambling loudly.

“I’ve always loved wolves,” he was saying. “Never thought I would ever see one so up close like that. And it was huge. Kind of like a wolf-bear thing!”

“It was like me if I were a wolf. Fucking *majestic*,” Bear said, while Cali and I took a seat across from them. Everybody cracked up laughing, and Cali was grinning.

I was just happy she was happy.

“Hey, Greyson,” Johnny said. “What other kinds of wildlife do you have around here? I bet you’ve seen actual bears.”

Cali looked up at me nervously.

*What do we say?* she mind linked.

I squeezed her hand reassuringly. Looking at the guys, I said, “There are bears, deer, rabbits, mountain lions, and occasionally moose. So I suggest you stick close to the house and don’t wander off too far.”

Bear laughed. “Why? The moose are gonna bite us in the ass?”

Cali shook her head. “Moose are actually pretty aggressive when they get stressed. Do *not* try to pet one if you see it. I say that from experience.”

I gave her a look. “Really?”

“What?” she said defensively. “They’re cute!”

I had to laugh. Snorting, Codsworth said, “Trying to tame a wild animal? Do you even have any self-preservation instincts, Hart?”

The guy had a point here, but he’d been a douchebag to Cali once before, and I hadn’t forgotten that. I narrowed my eyes at him and waited to see if his comment was more of a jab instead of a joke. But Cali seemed unbothered when she flipped him off, so I took that as a good sign.

“Shit,” Rodrigo said suddenly, “remember my roommate’s friend Dustin? Doesn’t he watch all sorts of nature documentaries about wild animals?”

“Yeah,” Johnny said. “He’s cool, but now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him in a while. He good? Why hasn’t he come to any of our parties?”

Jayden said, “I was talking to my roommate this morning, and he said he hasn’t seen Dustin in a few days either. He texted me that Dustin’s roommate hasn’t seen him either…”

Bear scoffed, “He’s been known to disappear for days on end ever since he signed up for Tinder.”

As the conversation moved from the wild animals of the area to gossip about a mutual acquaintance of the boys, Cali and I stepped away.

“So?” she asked me quietly, glancing at the boys. “What do you think of them?”

“As long as they treat you well, I’m cool with them.” I tucked her hair behind her ear. Glancing over at Xavier, I added, “Though I’m pretty sure Xavier’s still pissed they’re here.”

Cali pressed her lips together. “This was supposed to be a fun inter-pack party, and I ruined everything.”

“No,” I said, “this is Xavier’s issue. He could’ve just accepted the situation and mingled with the humans for a minute to keep up social appearances. Instead he’s off to the side brooding.”

Cali swallowed. “I don’t think this has anything to do with the boys coming over. He’s probably still upset after the whole Adéluce situation and doesn’t know how to deal with it.”

It was no news that Xavier was an emotionally constipated, stubborn dickhead, so I saw where Cali came from. Her words made me feel bad for him. But *still*.

“You’re right,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean he’s allowed to take his agitation out on us. If he needs to figure some shit out, fine. But acting like this when the Samaras and the Redwoods are allies isn’t gonna cut it.”

“Xavier did apologize to the pack, though,” Cali muttered.

I paused, realizing something. “Did he ever apologize to *you*, though? Personally?”

Cali looked away, wrapping her arms around herself. I realized I’d hit a nerve here, and my stomach twisted in a knot. “Sorry, love,” I muttered.

“No.” She sighed. “You’re right.”

“Hey, Lil’ Hart!” one of the crew boys shouted. “Is there any food around here?”

Squeezing my arm, Cali said, “I better go feed the kids. Be back in a moment—I’ll bring you a beer.”

I nodded, watching her go, when I heard heavy footsteps from my right.

Xavier was stomping over, his eyes sharp. He came to a stop in front of me. “Why don’t you just admit it?”

I had no idea what Xavier was talking about. He was being an asshole, but after my talk with Cali, I reminded myself that his behavior had to do with whatever pent-up emotions he had going on in the aftermath of Adéluce’s tormenting him. It had nothing to do with me.

I tried—*try* being the key word here—not to take his shit personally.

“I’m not in the mood for another fight, Xavier,” I said.

“Well, *I* am. Just fucking admit it.” He pointed at me accusingly. “You’re glad I’m not with the Redwoods anymore, aren’t you?”

**Episode 4817**

**Xavier**

Breathing hard, I watched Greyson. I waited for his answer. His calm expression was what fucking pissed me off the most. He stood there, all high and mighty, in complete control, while I felt like I was ready to break out of my skin with anger.

I was free from Adéluce now.

I was supposed to be free, so why the fuck didn’t I feel like it?

“I’m not going to admit anything of the sort,” Greyson said, his voice even. “I think it’s a good thing you have your own pack to take care of, because that’s what you’ve always wanted, and you’ve been good at it. But that’s it.”

“But you never wanted me in the Redwood pack. And right now, you think I’m being a dick. Just say what you really think and stop—”

He cut me off. “It’s clear that you’re going through something right now, Xavier. I’m not gonna feed your self-loathing.”

I was going through something, he’d said. Ha. I was *still* going through something, always causing problems and fucking shit up, while my brother thought *he* was Mr. Perfect Alpha.

I was shaking with the effort to stop myself from hitting him.

“Who the fuck are *you*, with your self-righteous, holier-than-thou bullshit, to tell me how I feel?” I hissed, coming all up in his face.

He didn’t even motherfucking flinch.

“So a witch controlled your life for months on end, and you’re not going through anything right now,” he said flatly. “You’re totally fine, and this is perfectly normal behavior.”

Above all else, the thing about Greyson that set my blood boiling was the fact that he thought he knew everything. I wondered what he would’ve done if Adéluce had trapped him. See if he’d have liked it, to be caged that way like a fucking animal.

*He would’ve dealt with it better than you did*, a tiny voice in my head said. *He’s smarter than you, craftier than you. He’s a better Alpha than you, and you are—*

I was sick of feeling like I had to prove myself all the time.

If it wasn’t for Greyson, then it was for my own pack.

What the hell did I need to do for people to simply fucking accept me?

It was getting harder to breathe.

My voice was a low, barely audible growl. “You’ve always been an arrogant son of a bitch, Greyson, haven’t you? You think you’re better than me, don’t you? You think the Redwood pack’s lucky to have you, and you’re relieved I’m gone.”

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but I wasn’t done. “I could fucking do it, you know,” I said sharply. “I could call for a Lupo Finale and prove to everybody who’s the real Alpha here. I could make the Redwoods join the Samara pack and cast you the fuck out.”

Greyson didn’t even seem surprised. His face was stony.

“If you really want to challenge me over one irrational petty reason or another, go ahead,” he said. “But you might want to think about what that would do to the others. To the Samaras, who just became a pack of their own again. To Ava, who cares about the Samara pack staying united. Not to mention…” He shook his head. “How would Cali feel, Xavier?”

“Stop trying to tell me what to think,” I snarled. “Do you believe that I’m some sort of idiot who doesn’t know all that?”

I had wanted to hit my brother since the beginning of this fight, but I had no idea when I’d raised my fist. Before it could make contact with his face, Greyson grabbed my wrist and twisted it, pulling me close. His calmness seemed to have vanished in a second flat, and all I saw in his face was fury.

His voice was icy when he said, “This isn’t about any Lupo Finale. This is about you going through some shit *yet again*, but my patience isn’t infinite, Xavier. Stop avoiding your responsibilities, figure out what you’re going to do with Ava and Cali, and *get your shit together*.”

“Greyson.”

Rishika’s voice rang out, and I shoved my brother off me. She came to stand between us. Her eyes were sharp. “What are you two doing? You good?”

“It’s nothing,” Greyson said with a condescending shrug. “Xavier’s spiraling and shutting people out. It’s only the trillionth time this year. Very original.”

I growled, and Rishika pushed me on the chest. She glared up at Greyson, then at me. “Are you two for real? You might be Alphas in name, but you’re not acting like it. If you’re not careful, you’re going to start a pack war between the Redwoods and the Samaras over nothing. What the hell is your problem?”

“*He’s* the problem,” I snapped, pointing at my brother.

“Pretty sure it’s Xavier. As always,” Greyson said.

Son of a bitch.

“Stop, both of you,” Rishika said, looking between us again. “I strongly suggest the two of you settle your grievances now, or at least put them on hold. Don’t do this in front of everyone.”

I doubted we could settle our differences. At least not until I settled things with Cali, Ava, and Knox and his friends who thought they had the right to challenge me. I’d never admit it out loud, but Greyson had just read me like a book. It had been so easy for me to go off on him. Fighting with my older brother was the surest way to distract myself from what I really needed to do.

The worst part was that I didn’t feel any better.

“Whatever,” I told Rishika. “I’ve got to talk to my pack anyway. Explain why my brother allowed humans to hang out.”

I walked off before Greyson had a chance to fire back.

Knox and his gang had arrived, and they were huddled to one side. This couldn’t be good. I grabbed a beer and came in on their conversation, ready to do damage control.

“How much longer are the humans going to be here?” Knox asked before I could say anything. Cutting straight to the chase, he added, “It shows a lack of respect on the Redwoods’ part to invite them.”

“They weren’t invited,” I said. “It’s more like they invited themselves.” And Cali was too nice to say no. I wasn’t about to tell that to these morons and let them push the blame on my mate, though.

“It doesn’t matter who invited them,” Blaine said. Of fucking course he agreed with Knox. “They should leave.”

“We should *make* them leave,” Knox added.

I glared at him. “And how do you propose to do that?”

Knox got all indignant, puffing up his chest. “We throw them out. We’re not afraid of humans.”

“You *should* be afraid of humans,” I said sharply, “because if our existence is revealed to them, we’re fucked.”

Knox huffed. “That’s not—”

“You can’t just go around using your wolf to intimidate humans, Knox,” I said sharply. “It’s dangerous. It just shows that you’re not using your brain like a real Alpha should.”

Knox’s face darkened. Blaine and Zipper looked between us, as if waiting for Knox to respond. This wasn’t a goddamn debate, though.

“I’m tired of your bullshit, Knox,” I snapped, grabbing him by the lapel of his jacket.

He yelped as I dragged him away from the fire, away from everyone.

He sputtered, “Xavier, I—”

I gripped his collar with both hands. “You keep undermining my authority. We’ve been down this road before—do you really want to go there again?”

“Don’t you see?” Knox yanked himself away from me. “The Redwoods allowing the humans to stay shows that the Redwoods think the Samaras will just go along with whatever Greyson decides! He and his pack consider the Samaras somehow lesser, submissive.”

I eyed the shrimp, my jaw clenched. My fury rose all over again. “And you see that as my fault? I’m not being Alpha enough for you?”

Knox gulped, looking away. “I can’t deny that’s part of it. I was just starting to trust you, but then I found out that you didn’t become the Samara Alpha because you wanted to.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I spat.

Knox’s voice got louder. “You were coerced by a fucking vampire-witch into this position, Xavier.”

I grabbed him by the neck again, shaking him. I struggled to keep myself from snapping his motherfucking neck. “I’m the Samara Alpha because I want to be,” I hissed. Pointing at his face, I added, “Don’t you ever say that again.”

Knox looked back at me, his eyes blazing with indignation. “You’re here because of the witch and because of Ava. She wanted you, so she convinced you to become Alpha.”

Knox’s words landed so hard, they felt like a punch in my chest.

I was torn between cracking Knox’s skull in half and agreeing with him. Because I *had* been coerced, at least at first. And I hadn’t planned on falling in love with Ava along the way. But what was done was done.

I shoved Knox away. He steadied himself, breathing hard.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I demanded.

Knox’s expression was daring. “Prove it. Prove to me all over again, to everyone, why you should be the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

**Episode 4818**

**Artemis**

“I wonder what you have done that caused the palace guards to arrest you,” my grandmother said in an even, cold tone. Her piercing pale eyes scrutinized every inch of me.

I felt like she could see every little thought in my head and hear the beat of my heart. It was unnerving. I’d fought all kinds of creatures in the past, yet even I had to admit that Hera Wrenthorn was as intimidating as they came.

The Wrenthorns were a fearsome family, at least that’s what I’d always been told. They were at the forefront of the Fae war, exactly like Kadmos’s family, the Mauvaises. A marriage between the two families—my mother, Orla, and Kadmos—*would* have been a huge signifier of unity. Of course, there were people who hadn’t wanted that, hence my father’s alleged death and my subsequent kidnapping.

The first time I’d met Hera Wrenthorn was with Cali the first time she’d been to the Fae world. We hadn’t even known we were sisters yet, but I had felt a strange connection to her… Hera had seemed suspicious of me, but also like she’d recognized me. It had unnerved me then, and it did the same thing now.

“Artemis, isn’t it?” she asked, rising from the settee. “I must admit, I didn’t think I would see you again, and not in this manner. You getting detained and claiming I sent you on a bounty for a young man I’ve only ever seen on ‘wanted’ posters does not paint me in a good light. Do you understand that?”

I was still a little surprised that Hera remembered me at all, in any capacity. Did she have that same inkling like last time, the way I did? Of sensing this person was familiar, a part of yourself that you just didn’t know yet? Did she know who I really was? I couldn’t tell based on her severe expression.

Right now, though, I had a few other things on my mind.

Namely, an annoying rascal I couldn’t seem to get rid of.

“What are you planning to do with him?” I asked, bypassing all of Hera’s implied questions.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “With whom?”

I tried to conceal my alarm. I could tell that Hera was the kind of person who could sniff out people’s weaknesses and exploit them.

“Marius,” I said calmly. “The man I was with when your guards captured me. The one from the posters?”

Hera turned, her luxurious velvet cape swishing behind her. She sat back down on the overly ornate settee and smoothed out her skirts. Her eyes locking with mine, she said, “Are you aware that we are in Light Fae territory, young lady?”

Her tone carried an air of condescension that usually would not sit well with me. But I truly did not have the upper hand right now. I could only stay calm. “Obviously.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Ah. And do you know that the enemy of the Light Fae are the Dark Fae?”

“Of course I know all these things,” I said, trying not to sound annoyed and impatient. “What are you even talking about?”

Hera’s voice was even. “I’m only trying to understand what was going through your head when you brought a Dark Fae into my house.”

A frustrated huff escaped me. “Marius may be a Dark Fae, but he’s not your enemy. He’s not my enemy either—he’s been helping me.”

Hera leaned closer. I thought she’d pull out a magnifying glass to inspect me as if I were a bug. “Helping you do *what*? And since when do I become an excuse for whatever it is you’re doing?”

I had no idea what to say here. I felt like pacing or fidgeting with my hands. Showing how nervous I was wouldn’t go over well with someone like my grandmother, though. I had no idea what she would think or do if she knew that I’d come back to the Fae world in search of my father. Kadmos was a Dark Fae. He used to be their ruler, for gods’ sake.

I looked down at my feet, taking a deep breath.

Hera’s tone had grown impatient. “Artemis,” she said, “I’m waiting for an answer. A truthful answer, at that. I will know it if you’re lying to me, young lady.”

 I did not dare ask how she would know. Was knowing when people were lying one of her gifts? Or was she exaggerating to intimidate me into spilling the beans? I had no idea. Yet I couldn’t just give up and do whatever she wanted.

I had to tell her who I was—who I *really* was.

“It’s strange,” I said, looking around.

Hera frowned. “What is?”

“You haven’t told me to sit down yet or offered me something to eat,” I said. “Isn’t that what grandmothers do?”

Hera’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t play games, Artemis.”

“You also haven’t even asked me how your daughter Orla is,” I said, digging myself into a deeper hole. “And of course then there’s Caliana, your granddaughter who—”

“We can talk about my family later. Your association with them is the reason you’re not with your friend right now,” she said, cutting me off. She gestured at what looked like a golden chair next to her, and I took a seat. Before I could say anything else, she asked, “Are you just trying to distract me from asking questions about your companion?”

I opened my mouth to speak and paused. I wasn’t like this, usually. Why was lying to her so *nerve-wracking*?

“If you are truly interested in your companion’s fate,” Hera went on before I could answer, “you need to explain why you came here, and why you chose him as your travel companion, when he is nothing but a dangerous Dark Fae.”

I pressed my lips together. “I’m Dark Fae, too.”

Hera’s expression sharpened. “I know that, Artemis. I remember when Caliana brought you here.”

I had to just do it. Take the dagger out of the wound. I’d either heal or bleed out.

“I’m Light Fae, too,” I said.

My eyes met hers, and she was silent for a moment.

“Exactly what are you implying, child?” she demanded.

“Exactly what you think I am.”

My heartbeat thrummed in my ears. I couldn’t hear anything else. This was a risk. She could either believe what I was saying—that by being Light and Dark Fae I was her daughter’s first child, the product of the marriage between the Wrenthorns and the Mauvaises—or assume I was lying. Then I’d really lose my head.

“My daughter is alive?” Hera asked.

I was taken aback. “Yes. Cali was able to get the moon buttercup flower to her in time.”

“And you’ve met her? My daughter, Orla Wrenthorn?” There was an urgency in her tone.

“Yes.” I realized I was shaking. “She knew who I was. Immediately.”

“As did I.”

My stomach fell through me. “W-What?”

“Your resemblance to both my daughter and her first husband is something I have thought a lot about ever since I met you.”

I gulped. “You have?”

“Of course,” she said. “Your mother’s marriage and your birth were supposed to bring an end to the war. Instead, they only added fuel to the flames. We’re no closer to reaching peace than we were when you were reported dead…”

“I was kidnapped, actually,” I said. “Surprise.”

The darkness in her expression seemed to give way to sadness. It lasted for the briefest moment before she pinned me with her unwavering stare again.

“I’m no old fool, Artemis,” she said. “But I don’t think you’re here to get to know your grandmother and dig into the past—it is risky enough that we’re together like this.”

I gulped. “I know.”

“Tell me the truth, Artemis. What are you doing here in my house? Who is your companion?”

“I don’t think—”

“You must understand that I cannot let you go without any explanations considering your intentions. Your companion might be a Dark Fae spy. Perhaps he tricked you.”

“I’m not some naïve little girl. He hasn’t *tricked* me.” I scoffed. “He might not be the nicest person ever, but he’s not that bad.”

Hera’s face was severe. “‘Not that bad’? Is that supposed to appease me?”

“I mean—”

“Tell me what you’re doing here, or your companion will be dealt with the way all enemies of the Light Fae are dealt with.”

Hera’s expression said she was not going to back down. I felt like I was in way over my head—like I could escape a million dangerous situations, but not her scrutiny. I doubted I could lie to her successfully. And I couldn’t sentence Marius to death, even if he could be a pain in the ass, just to hide the truth.

“I’m trying to find my father,” I said in the end.

The pause that followed was deafening.

Hera’s eyes had widened in shock. “Kadmos.”

“Yes,” I said firmly.

Hera squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. “Artemis, everyone believes he was killed before you were said to be stillborn. What makes you think he is alive?”

I couldn’t hide anything from her now. I was in too deep.

“I spoke to my uncle, Adair. I met him in the human world.”

Hera’s well-groomed eyebrows shot up so high up her forehead I thought they’d vanish in her hairline. She was genuinely surprised here. It was odd to see someone I’d considered all-knowing react like this.

“Adair,” she said slowly. “I have not heard that name for a while. There had been whispers he was taking over the Mauvais side of things with that awful wife of his,” she said.

Hera picked up a fancy-looking hand fan that probably cost more money than I’d ever had in my life from the table before her. Starting to waft air toward her face, she said, “Adair’s absence has made his family descend into chaos. It’s been *complete* madness on the other side of the border.”

I cringed. “Has it?”

“Indeed.” Conspiratorially, she added, “Let me tell you, Adair’s disappearance is considered the scandal of the century. Those Dark Fae are so shameless, truly. It does help our cause here, though.” Hera’s voice had a weird little twinge to it that went beyond politics. Like she was sharing a piece of gossip.

That’s right—my families were literally at war with each other.

“Regardless,” she said, folding her hand fan sharply. “What did Adair tell you about Kadmos? What proof did he offer to you?”

Her question made my nervousness grow. “I…don’t have any proof,” I admitted. “Just a feeling.”

She gave me a look that I could only characterize as unimpressed. “You traveled all the way here because of a *feeling*?”

Her tone wasn’t helping, so I wasn’t going to indulge it. I scowled, crossing my arms over my chest. “Yes. A feeling. I’ve learned to follow my gut. It’s never led me astray.”

“Hmm,” she said. That was all.

I itched for more.

“What do you think, then?” I asked, pressing. “Do you believe Kadmos is dead?”

Hera hummed. “Well, there have been rumors on both sides. Kadmos was seen here or there. But the story most of us know is that he was killed in battle, leaving my pregnant daughter alone and vulnerable. He was deliberately assassinated.”

“But what do you believe?” I asked.

“Unless I see proof otherwise, Kadmos is alive.”

My heart started pounding at her words. “You really mean that?”

She scoffed. “We are Fae, are we not? We can be quite difficult to kill,” she said. “Besides, if he is alive and never came back for my daughter, then I’d like to be the first to hold him responsible.”

I nodded, gulping. So my grandmother wanted my father alive, but only so she could draw blood. I couldn’t say I didn’t see her perspective. If Kadmos were alive and never came for me or Orla… Why? It was a question I would need an answer to, too.

“Have you heard anything about him lately?” I asked.

“Some of the latest rumors put him, or someone like him, with the Dark Fae Erimentha,” she told me, her voice dropping.

My heart was pounding with hope.

“Erimentha. Never heard that name before…” I trailed off. “I should track her, then. Ask her questions.”

Hera looked at me up and down. “I suppose I cannot talk you out of this fool’s journey, can I?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“Very well.” She pressed her lips together. “In that case, why don’t you spend a few days here before embarking on such a dangerous task?”

Her invitation made me feel nice, actually. Although, unfortunately, I had no time for it.

“Thank you, but I would like to go as soon as possible,” I said.

Hera sighed. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Hera was still intimidating, but I found that the more time I spent with her, the easier it was to talk to her. I was grateful for that.

“I have one last question for you,” I said.

“Go on,” she said.

I stared at her dead in the eyes. “Will you release Marius?”

**Episode 4819**

After a very happy Torin presented to the crew team all the snacks he’d made for tonight’s party, I went to pick up Greyson’s drink. I’d known I could count on Torin to be nice to my new friends.

Xavier was another story.

Grabbing a beer for Greyson, I stole a glance at Xavier. He was having what looked like a very heated conversation with Knox. It was much better for him to take out whatever was eating at him on Knox than on Greyson, so I wasn’t about to intervene there.

*Obviously, the best thing would’ve been for Xavier to not take anything out on anyone and simply talk about his feelings*, I thought. *But will he do that? Of course not.*

“He’s definitely not okay,” I heard Colton say.

I turned to see him picking up a beer, his eyes flickering to Xavier. He must’ve caught me looking. He added, “That was close, before. With Xavier and Greyson.”

I exhaled loudly, shaking my head. “I don’t think Greyson would’ve let it escalate further. He’s not like that.”

He really wasn’t. Xavier on the other hand…

*Will he always bottle up his emotions like this?*

Xavier wasn’t okay. I could feel it. He was supposed to be free now, free of Adéluce, but his energy still felt restless, like something was wrong. I understood that the entire situation with Ava and me and Greyson was messed up and complicated, but I wished he could just talk to me.

“Oh, whatever.” Colton rolled his eyes, twisting off the beer’s cap with ease. “It might’ve been fun to see how a fight would turn out, though. But it would probably not be good for pack morale.”

I gave him a wry look. “Ya think?”

Smirking, he took a sip of his drink. “Honestly, maybe the trip won’t be such a bad thing. The two of them might finally start bonding. Unless of course they all kill each other, which isn’t out of the question.”

I frowned in confusion. “Trip? What trip?”

“Right,” Colton said, eyebrows arched. “Perhaps the word ‘trip’ is too generous a description there. It’s probably gonna be more of a bloodbath.”

My voice came out squeaky. “Okay, *what*?” I came to stand in front of him. “What are you talking about? What trip, and what bloodbath? Hasn’t there been enough blood?”

“That’s why Greyson proposed it,” Colton said. “It’s a way for the Evers boys to bury the hatchet, learn to get along.”

Of course Greyson had suggested that. He was always the one trying to patch things up between him and his brothers. My heart was pounding at the news—at the possibility of the three of them eventually getting along. Or, judging by the way Xavier and Greyson were fighting earlier, killing each other.

*Oh god… This trip could be a huge mistake.*

“Where are you three even going?” I asked.

Colton shrugged. “Eh, no idea. Maybe a camping trip? Or Vegas? I like that better—they have hot running water and fluffy beds in Vegas. And slot machines.” He grinned. Then he tilted his head, scrutinizing my expression. “Hey, you look kind of green. Didn’t Greyson mention any of this?”

“No,” I said, gulping. “And I get the sentiment, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you guys to go anywhere before Xavier…”

*Figures out what the fuck is going to happen with him!*

“Gets his shit together?” Colton asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I wasn’t gonna say that, but yeah,” I agreed.

“Don’t worry about it,” Colton said. “I got the impression that Greyson’s suggestion was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Kind of a reaction to the aftermath of Adéluce’s destruction.”

“It’s a good idea in theory but terrible in practice,” I said quickly, scanning the area for Greyson. “I’m pretty sure you guys shouldn’t go anywhere before Xavier and Greyson get a chance to cool down.”

Colton laughed. “Dude, chill. We’re not going right away. I still have to go home to Maya and the twins tomorrow. I miss them all.”

Colton’s last sentence distracted me from my anxiety. It was great to hear him admit that, out loud, so easily. The last thing I ever thought when I first met Colton was that he’d become a family guy. Then again, I hadn’t believed in werewolves not that long ago, so nothing in life was ever certain.

“Xavier’s bitching aside, everybody else seems like they’re getting along,” Colton went on, looking around. I gazed around the fire. The Redwoods had joined the crew team boys and were chatting loudly, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think it’s gonna be okay.”

Colton nodded. “At least none of the werewolves have ripped anyone’s throat out…” He shot me a smirk. “Yet.”

I huffed, playfully smacking him on the arm. “Not funny.”

He laughed, shaking his head before he joined the others by the fire. I walked past the group, holding Greyson’s beer, and heard Zainab and Sage gushing enthusiastically about going to the regatta to cheer on the Kangarats. Violet and Charlie were laughing with Bear and the twins, and the entire scene made me smile.

*All is turning out fine*, I thought. *No need to worry or stress or freak out over—*

I bumped into someone and nearly spilled the beer. No, not just someone. Xavier. My heart somersaulted inside my chest at the sight of him.

“I already have a drink,” he told me.

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. He stood so close to me that the urge to touch him hit me hard. My fingers itched to reach out, smooth his furrowed brow, but his stance told me his walls were still up.

*How much longer, Xavier? Is this how it’s going to be?*

Before I could excuse myself and tell him that I was taking the beer to Greyson, Xavier took a step closer. My breath caught.

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

My eyes darted toward Ava immediately. She was with Marissa, huddled up and whispering. Then I spotted Greyson. He was talking to Jay and Lola, a soft smile on his mouth. He looked calm, confident in his own skin.

Xavier’s energy was the exact opposite.

His anger from earlier seemed to have vanished, but I knew better than to ignore the fact that his reaction to the crew team being here and to Greyson in general was extreme. Xavier was supposed to be free of Adéluce, but he still wasn’t okay.

He just wasn’t, and the thought made my chest ache.

“It won’t take long,” he added. His voice was smooth, but I could trace the undercurrent of a plea there. It broke my heart. “I just need to talk to you without an audience.”

“Okay.” I glanced at Greyson again. He wasn’t looking. I told Xavier, “Let’s go.”

He led me to the side yard, where things were quieter. He leaned against a tree and downed his drink, dropping the bottle to the ground. He took the bottle from my hands—the beer I never brought Greyson—and gently placed it on the ground as well.

When he looked up at me again, he seemed haunted.

A lump formed in my throat. For a brief moment, I wanted to throw all my pain out the window. All I wanted was to put my arms around him. To let him know again that despite everything, I still loved him… But I didn’t dare move.

Xavier spoke first.

“I just wanted to apologize,” he said.

“You already did. The pack was happy that—”

“This isn’t about the Redwoods. This is about us,” he interrupted. “And I’m not going to apologize for what I had to do. Adéluce had the ashes, and she made it very clear that she would let them kill you if I didn’t break up with you—if I didn’t hurt you and, in turn, hurt myself. I would do it all again if it meant you staying alive, Cali.”

My eyes burned at the sight of him like this. He felt so raw, like he’d just cracked open, only for me. And he wasn’t done.

“What I need to tell you, though, is how sorry I am that I needed to hurt you in order to save you,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I put you through all that… And I’m sorry for the horrible things I had to say to keep you away from me. To keep you safe. You need to believe me when I say I didn’t mean any of it.”

My cheeks felt wet. I didn’t know when I’d started crying, but it was happening, and I didn’t feel like wiping my eyes. I didn’t dare blink when Xavier was in front of me, like this, vulnerable in a way so rare it made my heart melt. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to let all the hurt I felt be in the past.

But it just wasn’t that simple.

“I know it was painful for you, too,” I whispered as he neared me. “You never meant for any of this to happen, Xavier. I know it’s hard not to feel guilty over it. I *do* still love you, but—”

He reached for me, cupping my face lightly to wipe my tears. My heart was racing at the feel of his touch, his closeness. *This* was the Xavier I’d missed. The one who didn’t blow up over things that didn’t matter. The one who cared.

The one who looked at me like he loved me.

“Cali, I—” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. He didn’t finish his sentence.

Instead, he pulled me in for a kiss.

**Episode 4820**

**Xavier**

The sounds of the party faded away. All I could hear was the sound of my heart pounding. All I could feel was Cali’s soft mouth against my own, her silky hair as I slid my hand through it. My other palm glided down her jaw. She opened up for me with a gasp, kissing me back. The taste of her was dizzying.

The anger I’d felt eating me alive vanished the moment her lips met mine. This was how I had always wanted it to be. Just the two of us, with Cali in my arms, clinging to me like nothing else mattered. I’d missed her closeness so fucking much, and my entire body was goddamn vibrating with the need to move closer. I wanted to feel her bare skin against mine, lick her all over, drown myself in her scent. When she kissed me like this, the outside world didn’t matter.

We were in our own little cocoon, and I was safe here. With Cali.

She loved me.

Even if I didn’t deserve her after all I’d done.

I never wanted to let her go.

But then the wind shifted, and her scent was tainted. My nostrils flared when I caught the smell of burning wood and alcohol. I didn’t want this to ever end, but Cali went rigid in my arms.

She pressed her hands against my chest, pushing back.

My heart was beating so fast I thought my fucking chest was going to break.

When she looked up at me, I held my breath.

“No, Xavier,” she whispered. “Don’t do this.”

“I didn’t—”

“No,” she said quietly, taking a step back. “This isn’t fair. This isn’t right…”

Shakily, I said, “You need to know that the only thing that kept me going while Adéluce fucked up my life was the idea of returning to you. The thing that eats at me right now is that I feel like I no longer deserve your love.”

Cali sighed, shaking her head. “I still love you, Xavier. I’ll always love you.”

“Then what is this about?” I asked, hating the way my voice cracked. “Why are you pulling away?”

She took a step back, running her hands through her hair. She looked frustrated. “We can’t just dive into this headfirst before you figure out what it is that you really want.”

She didn’t say Ava’s name, but I could hear it.

“This is about Ava,” I said slowly.

“And Greyson. I can’t be with you like this—without discussing things with him first. He’s my mate too. And you need to talk to Ava and realize where you stand.” Cali sighed, looking up at me. Her eyes were glistening. “I love you, Xavier, but I—you know I love Greyson, too. I can’t continue letting what I feel for you hurt him.”

The *due destini* really was a goddamn curse.

Her words felt like a dagger in my chest, but I had already known. Of course I did. And I knew that nothing could go back to the way it was. I’d told her as much time and time again, and that seemed to be the only thing that was for certain.

She stood there, as if expecting me to suddenly bring up a solution to this mess. But once more, I had no idea what to tell her. The pressure I’d been feeling all day returned tenfold, and the answers never came. Maybe the only thing she and I could do was stay apart for a while longer. Until I could manage to sort things out with Ava, with my own feelings, even with my fucking brother.

I didn’t say any of that to Cali right now, though.

I didn’t want to see her cry again. Not tonight.

She didn’t move away when I reached for her hand, pressing the palm of it against my cheek. She stared up at me, her dark gaze making me shiver.

“There’s one thing I never want you to forget,” I whispered. “I love you. Despite everything that’s happened. *Because* of everything that’s happened. You’re my mate, and I never for one second stopped loving you, Caliana Hart. I’ll do whatever it takes to deserve you again.”

Cali’s breath caught.

For a moment, I thought that this was it—she was going to forget all about Greyson. She was going to kiss me, and everything would magically be perfect between us. What a stupid, naïve lie to tell myself.

Right now, nothing was perfect.

And things could only become worse when a familiar scent tickled my nostrils. I heard leaves crunching and looked over Cali’s shoulder. Ava was glaring, watching us. Her eyes glowed in the dark. Her posture reminded me of a missile ready to launch.

Fuck.

I stepped away from Cali.

“Xavier,” Cali said, “what’s going—” She followed my gaze and saw Ava. Shaking her head, she muttered, “I should bring Greyson his beer.” She bent to pick up the bottle from the ground. Before she could step away, I couldn’t help myself.

I reached for her hand once more.

“I meant everything I said to you tonight,” I whispered.

Cali didn’t meet my gaze, but she nodded.

It physically hurt to see her walk away from me. Though, a moment later, when I looked at Ava, the hurt and anger on her face hurt like a son of a bitch as well. Cali was ready to ignore her, but Ava wasn’t done here. She blocked Cali’s way, shoulder-bumping her.

The beer dropped and shattered on a rock.

“*Oops*,” Ava said, sneering at Cali. I held my breath, ready to intervene, but nothing happened.

Cali looked back at Ava, her expression blank. “It was warm anyway, so I was going to get a new one.”

With that, she walked away. The scent of Ava’s bitter anger seeped into the air as she marched toward me, her eyes narrowed in slits.

“Was pushing her really necessary?” I asked tersely.

“She’s fucking lucky it was only beer that was spilled,” Ava spat. Shoving me on the shoulder, she hissed, “What the *fuck*, Xavier?”

“I don’t—”

“You missed her, you still love her, *fine*. But you had to kiss here? At the damn party where anyone could see?” Ava seethed. “You said tonight wasn’t going to be dramatic, but guess what, Xavier? *You* are the fucking drama!”

My wolf whined at the sight of Ava like this, so upset. I knew that she was right—that I shouldn’t have kissed Cali. I was being reckless. I was fucked up, and I had no idea what the hell I was doing. But how could I explain to Ava what that kiss had meant to me without hurting her even more?

Pressure continued to smother me from every angle.

I was trapped.

Freedom, my ass.

“You need to work this shit out, Xavier,” Ava snapped. “You have to stop using me as target practice. Or *else*.”

With that final threat, Ava turned and stormed off.

 I wanted to bang my head against a wall. Kissing Cali had made this shit a million times worse. I felt like clawing at my face just to feel something other than frustration and anger. I couldn’t keep going like this, but…

I had no idea what to do.

I headed back toward the fire, looking around for Ava. Had anyone seen her storming off? Even worse, had anyone seen me kissing Cali? Maybe that would’ve been better. Maybe all I needed right now to work out all my anger was for Knox and his buddies to ask me the wrong kind of questions. I almost hoped they would give me shit again. They had already dared ask me to prove how good a leader I was.

I could prove that I was a true Alpha by beating all three of them to a pulp.

Useless punks.

I walked around the party, ignoring the laughter and cheerful conversations that came from the crew team and the Redwoods. The Redwoods were getting along with the humans, and I even saw a couple of Samaras hanging out with them. They were having fun, and I was miserable.

I needed to find Ava.

I hated hurting her.

*Ava, come on*, I mind linked. *Where are you? We need to talk.*

She didn’t respond. She either couldn’t hear me, or she was ignoring me. I had no idea what to say to her, but finding her was the first step.

“Josephine,” I called. “Have you seen—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I felt someone’s hard grip on my arm. The scent told me it was Marissa. She spun me around, glaring. “You really did it this time, Xavier.”

The last thing I needed right now was a lecture. “Just tell me where Ava is.”

“How should I know?” Marissa scoffed. “She headed into the woods, shifted, and ran off.”

I looked away at the woods and scented the air. She was still nearby. And then, I heard her voice in my head.

*When you’re ready to have a serious conversation, Xavier*, Ava mind linked, *you know where to find me.*

**Episode 4821**

**Greyson**

It was past midnight, and the party was winding down. Cali’s human friends had just left, toddling their way into a couple of Ubers while singing *Hakuna Matata* at the top of their lungs. The fact that Xavier had considered these oversized toddlers a problem big enough for him to go on a fucking bitch tirade earlier was beyond me.

“Good party, Greyson,” Donovan said, patting my shoulder. Perrie and a few others from the Samara pack were with him, and they all said goodbye to me and the rest of the Redwoods before heading off home. Either they hadn’t heard my stupid fight with Xavier earlier, or they’d chosen to ignore it as bullshit.

Because it was bullshit.

I couldn’t believe we’d even brought up a Lupo Finale—for *what*? Because I let the humans stay so I was useless? Not so fucking useless when I helped save his sorry ass from Adéluce now, was I?

I took a deep breath to settle down, scanning the woods.

Xavier was nowhere to be seen.

I knew that he wasn’t okay. I knew that I should’ve been more empathetic toward him after all that Adéluce had done. But it was hard to keep a level head when he said shit like that. He didn’t have the excuse of Adéluce anymore. His disrespect and disregard were all his own now, and he hurled them at me like fucking iron blades.

I still wanted things between my brother and me to get better. But how? How much longer till he said something especially shitty, and then *I* was the one to call that fucking Lupo Finale just so he’d stop making the threat?

What would happen if one day, *I* was the one who snapped?

A sudden breeze picked up, and Cali’s scent invaded my nose. I turned to see her come from the woods, heading toward the house. When our eyes locked, my stomach dropped.

She was upset.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when she came to the front porch.

“Xavier talked to me,” she said quietly.

Her words fell on my head like an anvil. Xavier had been furious while he’d spoken to me. The idea that he’d taken that out on Cali as well had me on edge immediately.

My voice was cold. “What did he say? Was he still angry about your friends coming over?”

I swear, if my hothead brother treated the woman I loved like shit *yet again*, without being under a spell and only because he needed fifteen million years of therapy, I was going to motherfucking *skin him*—

“No,” she whispered. “He just apologized to me personally about… everything.”

I paused.

Well, then. Good for Xavier. He would live to see another day with his skin intact.

“That’s good,” I said, clearing my throat.

She bit her lip. “And he told me a few things, so I’ve been thinking about… the terms of the curse Adéluce put him under. The ones that had to do with me in particular.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? Is there more to it than what he’s already told us?”

Cali sighed, wrapping her arms around herself. “Xavier said that he knew Adéluce had Seluna’s ashes. Him accepting the deal was the only way she wouldn’t let them kill me.”

The realization made a sudden wave of shock and guilt wash over me. Of course.

*Of course.*

I had known that Adéluce had used Cali’s life as a weapon against Xavier. It had been obvious, but the extent of the threat had only just dawned on me. It all made sense now. How I had not put all the pieces together? Why hadn’t I figured it out sooner?

Xavier, with all his senseless explosions and his shitty behavior tonight, had done everything for Cali. He’d saved Cali once more. He was the reason she’d been in danger, but *he* was also the reason she was alive. Not me. I had been so mad at him all night, but now it felt like the only person I should’ve been furious at this entire time was myself.

Fucking hell.

Cali’s voice was soft. “Greyson?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t figure it out sooner,” I said, sounding bemused.

“Greyson, I hadn’t realized it either,” Cali said, taking my hand. “You shouldn’t be hard on yourself.”

 I stared at her beautiful face and thought of all the pain she’d been through with that goddamn mark. And still, I had not understood the extent of Adéluce’s plan.

Xavier had saved her, and I had failed her.

“I should’ve known,” I said. There was a bitter taste in my mouth. “I—”

“Greyson, no. You were there for me. You were there when I needed you the most.”

Her words gave me pause. While Xavier had been Cali’s savior, I’d been her support system. Both of us were always circling around Cali because of the *due destini*, each in his respective role.

That thought didn’t ease my guilt.

“I’m sorry,” I said hoarsely. “For everything you had to go through.”

She pressed her lips together. “I know…” She looked down at the ground, her grip on my hand tightening. She was keeping something from me. I could just feel it.

I gulped. “Is there anything else?”

She glanced at me. “Xavier and I… Something happened between us.”

“I shouldn’t have asked,” I said gruffly. “I’ve told you before, love, I don’t need or want the details.”

Cali looked up at me, taking a step closer. “I know, I…” She took a deep breath. “I wanted you to know that I told him he needs to clear things up with everyone. I told him that this can’t keep happening, because it isn’t fair to you.”

For a beat, I was shocked. Then I realized what this meant. Cali had stuck up for me.

“I don’t want to hurt you anymore,” she went on in a whisper. “I hate it.”

I pulled her into my arms, kissing her forehead. When I felt her breathe in my scent, my wolf rejoiced. “Despite everything that’s happened, I still trust you, Cali,” I muttered. “You know that, right?”

She nodded against my collarbone.

“I understand how hard this is. I know you’re in a difficult position with the *due destini*…” And that was exactly why setting boundaries with Xavier held so much weight considering the circumstances. Cali had been swept away by her feelings for him repeatedly—with the dressing room incident being the most fucked-up example—but not tonight.

This time, she had thought of me. Of *my* feelings.

“I just want to be with you,” I whispered against her temple. She gazed up at me. Her eyes were dark, shiny. Gorgeous. I cupped her cheek, and she leaned into the touch. I asked, “Do you want to be with me?”

Her cheeks were rosy. Her exhale was sharp against my palm. “Yes,” she murmured. “More than anything.”

I gently held her by her wrist, feeling her pulse drum. I led her inside, leaving the dying party behind us. We passed by the kitchen, and I thanked Torin and Rishika for already organizing cleanup. They said goodnight, and Cali’s voice was soft when she said it back. I could feel her pulse pick up with every step we took toward my room.

As soon as the door closed behind us, I faced her. She was already staring, her lips parting when she glanced at mine.

Tonight, I’d been chosen despite not being there for her as much as I should’ve. Even though I had not been her savior—not like Xavier. Even if I had been on the sidelines like a less-than spectator who hadn’t understood enough to help.

“I love you so much,” I said gruffly, pulling her closer.

My every instinct screamed to claim her, as if I was suddenly terrified that she’d vanish into thin air.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she didn’t have the time. Pushing her up against the door, I kissed her, devouring the gasp she’d let out. I kissed her like I’d been dying to do it all night, like I hadn’t had her in ages. Like I felt in my gut and in my heart that we could always be like this, as long as she loved me. Not as much as I loved her—I didn’t think that was possible—but love me enough to choose me sometimes.

She arched up to me while I took off her jacket, as I slid my hands up her sweater and touched her soft skin. Her stomach was trembling, her hips arching toward me while her hands swept over my arms, down my chest.

She choked out my name when my lips left hers just to reach her neck, the soft spot where it met her shoulder. I thought I’d kiss and lick her there, make it nice. Because I was supposed to be the nice one now, after all. The good one, the reliable one who tried his best and didn’t fuck up, didn’t make mistakes, didn’t fail her.

Even though I had.

The kiss turned into a bite, gentle yet sharp enough for her to keen.

It was a sound that made something in me go off like a firework. The thought of leaving love bites all over her body set me aflame. I held back the instinct, tied it up on a leash before it took over.

“Too much? Should I stop?” I rasped, facing her. Her pupils were blown wide, lips swollen and parted as she trembled against me. She stared at me, her breathing getting harsher, hard enough that it looked like she couldn’t speak.

I waited for her reply, but she said nothing.

Her answer was to push me toward the bed and straddle my lap.

**Episode 4822**

My lips and neck and every inch of me felt raw and tingling after the way Greyson had pushed me up against the door and kissed me. I could feel him holding back now, but somehow that made me want him even more.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, shifting across his lap.

He let out a sharp exhale at the contact. “Cali…”

He had seemed regretful and guilty, earlier. I knew he blamed himself for things he couldn’t have controlled, and I couldn’t let feelings like that linger between us. He had to know the truth.

Against his mouth, I said, “You’re my rock, Greyson. You always give me what I need at the right moment. Never doubt that.” I stared deep into his eyes, gliding my one hand down his chest, over his pounding heart. “Okay?”

He nodded once. Then again when I kissed the corner of his mouth, down his jaw, his neck. I pulled his shirt back to reveal the spot where his shoulder started. His skin was smooth, hot, stretched tightly over firm muscle. His skin had always seemed invincible, just like him, but I couldn’t help myself. Even if I knew that he’d heal in a moment or two, I didn’t hold back.

Right there, where his shoulder met his neck, same spot where he’d bitten me too, I latched on and sucked hard. His entire body seized, and he let out a sound that reminded me of a growl. I wanted to pat myself on the back. Who could’ve imagined a few months ago that I would’ve gotten so bold?

*Not me!*

Being with Greyson made me feel bold. Powerful. Because with him, I was always safe.

“*Don’t stop*,” I whispered in his ear.

He flipped us over on the bed and kissed me like he’d die without me, and I gave back as good as I got. He had me naked and under him in no time, licking his way down my body and between my legs.

What felt like hours but had to be only minutes later, the muscles of my legs were dancing, trembling. My pelvis twitched upward, toward his mouth, as I whimpered and gripped the sheets tight. He smiled up at me like some debauched, unhinged god. I saw the gleaming traces of how much I loved what he’d been doing to me all over his lips, his chin and fingers. He dipped his head back down between my thighs for…the third time? I’d lost count.

I didn’t tell him to stop.

I gripped his hair so tight it had to hurt. “It’s okay, love, pull as hard as you want,” he said. “You’re so good for me, so fucking gorgeous.” He looked proud, so pleased I thought I’d cry, and maybe I did after coming apart so many times. I didn’t feel sated, though—I wanted him so badly it ached. When I told him so, he muttered, “Please keep those pretty thighs spread for me, okay?”

Well, since he’d asked so *nicely*.

One powerful arm perched over the headboard, he hovered over me and stroked himself. I gasped and arched toward him, grabbing at his shoulders when he brushed up against me, letting only the tip inside. He whispered, “I want to see everything… Can I?”

I nodded, because that sounded like a great idea, genius, good for him. Good for me, too, because I got to watch how dazed he looked when he came, spilling where he’d had his mouth on me for what felt like hours. His breathing was hard, shaking. There was an intense, sharp edge to his expression when his eyes flickered up to my face, and I felt rather than heard the word when he whispered it.

*Mine.*

He was still hard, Alpha werewolf through and through, and I reached for him with greedy hands. I kissed his lips while locking my arms around his neck, my legs around his torso. He glided in fully this time, and I shuddered and whimpered at the so-right feeling of him.

“I’m right here, love. That’s it, there you go,” he muttered, his thrusts smooth and unhurried. “God, you’re perfect, fucking amazing…”

I believed every word he said.

“I love you, Greyson,” I rasped.

I said the words over and over, and I did not stop.

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Morning light streamed through the curtains. I was on my hands and knees on the carpet, looking for my phone. It must’ve fallen somewhere during Greyson’s and my, *uh*, enthusiastic activities. When I spotted it, I quietly said, “Aha!”

It hadn’t been quiet enough. Greyson let out a soft yawn. “Cali?”

I popped up from under the bed and saw him. His hair was all rumpled, his eyes heavy-lidded. He was just *so* handsome.

Why was I leaving again?

“It’s still early, go back to sleep,” I whispered as he rolled over and checked the clock.

“Come back to bed,” he grumbled, pulling me to sit down next to him.

I squeezed his hand, sighing. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stay.”

He frowned, probably confused by the dramatic flair in my voice. “Why?”

“I have to go to crew practice,” I said. “And it’s my first day of classes. I barely even remember what I signed up for. Everything’s been a blur.”

He raised an eyebrow, glancing down at the death grip I had on him. “Doesn’t feel like you want to go, though…”

Acting dramatic had started as a joke, but was I really joking here? “Don’t make this more difficult than it already is, Greyson.”

He grinned and yanked me into his arms, on top of him. “I think I could convince you to stay.”

I laughed and made a move to let go, but he flipped us onto the bed. He kissed me, made it deep and thorough. My entire body went hot, still sensitized after last night. I kissed him back, open-mouthed and eager. When his hips brushed against mine in a tell-all move that told me *exactly* what a good morning this was for him, I knew I was one minute away from getting in trouble.

*I must stay strong!*

“Greyson,” I said, breaking off the kiss. “I *really* need to go to practice.”

“I’ll miss you,” he muttered, giving me one last kiss before letting go and rolling over. I lay there for a beat, staring at him. My eyes moved from his full lips to his neck, down his abs and even lower.

*Why am I leaving again?*

I could just hear the self-satisfied smile in his voice. “Didn’t you say something about crew practice, love?”

“Shit, right!” I jumped up, and he laughed. Blushing, I grabbed my shoes to put them on. “I’ll see you after my classes?”

Nodding, he stood up as well. I did *not* look at his bare ass, because I really did need to go. But then I asked, “Wait, why are you getting up?”

“Things have been hectic, so I need to make up for neglecting my Alpha duties lately,” he said, slipping on his jeans. “I’ll go on border patrol before my morning coffee.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I kissed him on the cheek, loving how domestic we were—talking about our plans like an Alpha and his sort-of Luna. No worries, no Xavier freak-outs, nothing hurting us.

I ignored the flinch in my stomach at the thought of Xavier.

“Let me walk you outside,” Greyson said with a soft smile.

He gave me one last lingering kiss before I got into the car. I grinned the entire drive to practice.

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The team and I were out on the water, so I was supposed to be focusing. Unfortunately, being around the boys reminded me of the party the night before. The image of Ava’s angry face flashed through my head, and I winced. I hadn’t meant for my talk with Xavier to go that way, or for her to catch us and clearly get furious.

I hoped this wasn’t going to affect pack relations.

*The sooner Xavier figures out what he wants to do next, whatever that is, the better it—*

“Oy, Hart!” Codsworth shouted, startling me. “Are you going to call the strokes or not?”

“Right, um, sorry!” I sputtered. “Stroke! I mean, ready all, row!”

I shook off all thoughts of Xavier and refocused.

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The rest of the boys were putting the boat and equipment away when Codsworth came up to me. “You good?”

“Yeah, why?”

He raised an eyebrow. “’Cause you look like your brain is in a different universe than your body this morning.”

Everyone was a critic these days. But Codsworth was a critic every day, so was I surprised here? Nope.

“I guess I didn’t get enough sleep last night,” I said. Which was the truth, because Greyson had been, *uh*, very attentive.

My cheeks flushed at the memory.

“It’s ’cause of last night’s epic party!” Schmiddy said, strolling over with Bear by his side.

“And the snacks? Holy shit, so good!” Bear grinned wide, and the two of them did a little funny arm-wave dance move before Bear raised his hand for me to high-five.

Laughing, I gave him one. Johnny and Patel had gathered around as well. “Thanks for everything,” Patel said for what felt like the third time today. “It was really nice of you to let us come.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I think it was less about me *letting* you and more about you *begging* to come with the stubbornness of a toddler who only wants to eat ice cream for dinner.”

Everybody laughed. Johnny said, “Holy shit, she just burned our asses to the ground!”

Gael scoffed, “Okay, but she’s right. Bear, especially, is a menace to society.”

Bear gasped, pretend-offended, and then there was more laughter all around. I snorted, shaking my head. “I’m glad you guys came to the party and had a nice time. We should do it again.”

I meant that, actually. I would only have to make sure that Greyson and the pack knew before I invited the boys over next time. The last thing we needed right now was the team noticing anything “weird” about the Redwoods.

*We’re just a bunch of good friends living together. Nothing magical about it!*

 The guys kept rambling about the party as we headed back to the gym. Codsworth sidled up to me and stared.

I sighed. “What is it this time?”

“About the party…” He looked around as if to make sure nobody was paying attention to us. His voice lowered. “I wanted to talk to you about something that happened last night…”

My stomach dropped, paranoia immediately washing over me.

*Shit… Did he see something supernatural?!*

**Episode 4823**

**Greyson**

I followed Cali’s car in wolf form until she reached the highway. I couldn’t risk being seen by any humans, so I had to turn around and head back to the Redwood estate.

Since I wasn’t going to be spending my morning with Cali under me, or on top of me—I wasn’t picky—I saw no point in staying in bed. Life was hard, but I would persevere and catch up with all my Alpha duties.

I felt grateful for the night she and I had spent together. It had been unexpected, like a gift I didn’t feel like I deserved. The fact that I hadn’t been able to really figure out why Cali was so sick in the first place was still nagging at me, clawing at the edges of my mind. The guilt and shame I felt hadn’t gone away. I was certain that it would linger for a while. I would have to make sure it didn’t impact my performance when it came to leading the Redwoods.

*Especially* after the shitshow that was my quarrel with my brother the night before.

See, I didn’t fucking *want* to fight with Xavier. I tried to get along with him, time and time again, but he just kept keeping secrets from me and kept trying to fucking bring me down and stomp all over me. No doubt because he had his own issues, but *still*. He was a loose cannon, his feelings and thoughts running amok, and what did he do?

He took it out on me without telling me anything that was real.

*Just be honest with me*, I wanted to tell him. I wanted to grab him and say, *Stop trying to fight me and be honest with me.*

I was sure a conversation like that would totally go over swimmingly.

My wolf let out a low growl, and I shook my head. I didn’t want to think about Xavier anymore, and I had reached Redwood territory again, so it would be best to start patrolling for real. I decided I would circle around the house itself and then go through the rest of the area. Perhaps later I could run by my mother and Big Mac’s home to check on them. Even if they weren’t living with us anymore, they were under my protection. I wanted to see them anyway.

Perhaps they would invite me for breakfast or for lunch later or something, and the three of us could sit together and eat and chat. I didn’t think we’d ever done that—just hang out, only the three of us, like a family. I had never had that, not once in my life, so it would be cool to see how it was. Try it out. Maybe do it once a week. Like on Sundays. Families ate lunch together on Sundays. I’d seen that in sitcoms.

It wouldn’t be that hard to receive a standard weekly dinner or lunch invitation, I realized. If I dropped by around lunchtime, there was no way my mother wouldn’t tell me to eat with them. I could just imagine it— Big Mac would roll her eyes about it but tell me to stay, too, and then she’d ask me how everybody was doing. She would call Cali annoying but would offer a throwaway comment about Leo the cat liking her, and then my mom would say that animals knew the right people to trust.

Not that I had my entire visit planned out in my head already… but maybe I did.

I would have to ponder it further when I was done patrolling.

I had just come around the side of the house when I saw Rishika and Ravi stripping down. They had to be going out on patrol. I recalled my idea to make Rishika my official new second now that Xavier seemed settled in the Samara Alpha role. I needed to discuss this with her.

Shifting back to human, I said, “Morning. How are you two doing?”

Ravi snorted. “Still recovering after last night. Next time humans end up at a party, a little warning in advance would help.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “Thankfully I patched things up with the kids and convinced them you were just a normal wolf.”

“It’s all good,” Ravi said. “The humans were funny, actually. Kind of like I’d imagine Cali’s friends to be.”

The three of us chatted for a beat about last night. After I confirmed that most of the Samaras weren’t pissed off about the humans, I wrapped up the conversation and told Ravi, “Hey, could you give me a moment with Rishika? I wanted to ask her something.”

Ravi agreed. I told him to patrol the east side of the property, because I’d be checking out the west. He nodded, told Rishika he’d see her in a few, shifted, and ran off. Rishika crossed her arms over her chest, eyeing me.

“You’re not still worried about last night, are you?” she asked.

“I was, but not as much anymore,” I said.

She shook her head. “I know the party didn’t go the way we wanted, but I still think it was good for inter-pack relations. And it still doesn’t change the fact that having Xavier in the Samara pack as Alpha is good for us.”

“It is what it is right now, so we’ll see,” I said. “There’s something else I want to talk to you about, though.”

“What’s up?”

 “I think you’d be a great second for the Redwood pack,” I said, cutting straight to the chase. “It would be a lot of responsibility, but honestly, you’re doing so much of it already. You’re reliable and sharp, and the pack listens to you.”

Rishika’s first reaction was to grin, and I took that as a good sign. Her smile faded slightly just a second later, though. “Thanks for saying that,” she started.

I paused, scrutinizing her expression. “But?”

She pressed her lips together, looking conflicted. “I want to say yes, but with Artemis gone, I’m worried my focus is too split to do a good job.”

“I get what you mean,” I said. “Though, FYI, you’ve already been amazing in the role.”

She nodded, smiling again. “Thank you, Greyson. That means a lot coming from you.”

I tried to lighten the mood. “All I’m saying is—I don’t know how your pining-for-Artemis schedule goes on the daily, but it doesn’t seem to have overwhelmed you so far.”

“It’s usually whenever the mood strikes, with no schedule,” she said wryly.

“Makes sense,” I replied. She rolled her eyes, laughing a little and pushing me on the arm.

I sobered up. “All jokes aside, I get what you mean. I’ll give you time to think about it and figure things out. It’s up to you. Okay?”

“I appreciate that,” she said, nodding.

After Rishika headed off to catch up with Ravi, I stood on the back porch for a beat, processing. I felt good about my conversation with Rishika. My gut told me that she was going to accept the position. Or at least I hoped she would, because with the night before going the way it had, I needed something to work out in my favor without any problems.

I shifted back to my wolf and headed west, in the opposite direction that Rishika and Ravi and vanished to. I kept my run steady, making sure to take in all the scents and sounds, always cautious in case I encountered anything out of the ordinary. When I reached the border we shared with the Vanguard pack, I sensed that something was definitely not right.

What the hell did Lucian need all these trucks for? They were clearly heading toward the Vanguard palace. I slowed down and approached, realizing they were party rental trucks. This made more sense—Lucian was having a party. Though when *wasn’t* he having a party?

The real question, though, was how come he hadn’t invited the Redwoods yet?

Not that I *wanted* to be invited, but Elle had been a Redwood up until a few days ago, and I would have thought that counted for something. Frowning, I ventured closer, when I caught sight of a man pulling what looked like decorations out of one of the vans. My jaw dropped. Was that…a cardboard cutout of Lucian and Elle’s faces in a heart?

What fresh hell was this?

Shifting back to human, I immediately marched up to a Vanguard wolf I’d seen running around doing Lucian’s bidding many times before. He was carrying a giant potted tree across the lawn.

“Hey!” I called. “What’s going on here?”

The man’s eyes widened, like he’d just spotted me. He paused dragging the tree for a beat to say, “Greetings, Alpha Greyson! We are rushing to get ready for the ceremony tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What ceremony?”

“What else, of course?” With a huff, the Vanguard started lugging the giant tree again. “The Luna ceremony between our Alpha and Elle!”

**Episode 4824**

My mind was racing. I’d thought that Greyson prattling off fun facts about the animals native to the area had crushed any doubts about the *totally normal* nature of the giant wolf (Ravi) the boys had seen the night before. Could Codsworth have noticed anything else? Was I panicking for no reason?

*But of course there’s a reason, Cali!*

Humans suspecting the existence of the supernatural was a huge liability. It put everyone in danger. I did not, under any circumstances, want to have a repeat of the LIPS situation for us. Not that I thought Codsworth or the team were as dangerous as Dig Wigbert, but things like this could snowball. One second Codsworth thinks he saw Ravi shift, the next he tells a friend who tells a friend who eventually tells a cop or something, and now the FBI is banging on our door.

*Okay, maybe that escalated quickly… but still.*

The point was that we did not need anyone believing in the existence of werewolves or other supernatural creatures. Dick Wigbert might not remember what happened after Artemis compelled him to forget, but he probably still believed in werewolves. He was obsessive enough that I could see him set up some sort of alert line so people could call in tips or something.

God, where was Artemis when you needed her to do that mind wipe shit on someone?

“Cali?” Codsworth said, eyeing my face. “Did you hear what I said?”

*Of course I did! And I can just imagine you calling Dick Wigbert’s hypothetical supernatural hotline. If my sister weren’t in the Fae world right now, your memories would be toast.*

I realized that I might have been spiraling, but that did not stop me from wishing that Artemis were here. She’d just stare into Codsworth eyes, use her manipulation magic, and make Codsworth forget everything. Though I still did not know what it was that Codsworth knew, so maybe I should start from there.

“Sorry, got distracted for a moment there,” I said, clearing my throat. “What did you want to talk about?”

Codsoworth looked around conspiratorially once more.

*Oh god, he did see something!*

He opened his mouth to speak when something vibrated in my pocket like a small bomb about to go off. I let out a sound that resembled a pterodactyl’s screech before I realized that it was my goddamn *phone*. I was being freaking *ridiculous*.

Judging by Codsworth’s expression, he seemed to think I was ridiculous, too. Which was rude, because I was allowed to be mean to myself, but he was not. Even if he suddenly knew all the Redwood secrets.

“Something is seriously wrong with you, Hart,” he said flatly.

“Oh, shut up,” I said with a huff, reaching for my phone.

“You’re so weird,” he said with an eye roll. “Just answer the phone.”

“That’s what I’m doing!”

“Then why is it still vibrating?”

Glaring at him, I finally grabbed the phone and saw it was Lola. Of course.

“Um, where are you?” I heard Lola’s annoyed voice.

“I’m very athletic and very important, Lola, so I’m at crew practice. Why are you asking?”

“Well, you’re going to be late for class.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Our class, remember? The one we’re taking together because we just love the history of dance?”

I frowned. “Since when do we care about dancing?”

“Since I started caring about it. Hurry, I saved you a seat. The lecture starts in like five minutes!”

Lola hung up, and I looked at the clock and gasped. I turned to Codsworth and reasoned with myself. *Cali, he doesn’t know anything about werewolves*,I thought*. He wouldn’t be so chill if he did!*

Taking a deep breath, I told Codsworth, “I’m going to be late for class, so let’s talk later, yeah?”

He looked deeply unimpressed. “Fine.”

“Just—” I waved a hand in his face. “Whatever you have to say to me, keep it to yourself, so we can discuss it together before you tell anyone else. You shouldn’t tell anyone else anything. *Ever*.”

Codsworth gave me a look that reminded me of an annoyed cat. “Right. Because that totally makes sense.”

“Of course it does. Okay, I’ll come find you later!” I said, running off toward class.

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Breathing heavily from having to run across campus, I slid into the seat next to Lola just before the classroom door banged open and the teacher walked in. He was a short and stout man who resembled a teapot. I didn’t even know his name.

I was *so* good at this whole college student thing.

“I can’t believe you made it,” Lola whispered, looking impressed. She nudged her water bottle toward me. “Here, my little wilting petunia, drink this before you die.”

I downed some water and took deep breaths until my racing heart calmed. The professor rambled in the background, introducing himself, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Codsworth. I’d told myself that I was exaggerating, but the nagging feeling in my stomach wouldn’t go away. What if Codsworth had seen something?

*What if he knows?*

Lola nudged me again. She whispered, “What’s going on with your face right now? Did something happen?”

I looked around to make sure nobody was listening to us. Nope—they were paying attention to the teacher. As they should. Could not relate.

I leaned closer to Lola. “I think one of my teammates might have seen Ravi shifting,” I whispered. “And if that happened, it’s completely my fault.”

Lola frowned. “But, like, are you sure they saw something?”

“No, but—”

“Cali, please wait for something to be a problem before your anxiety makes it a problem,” she said with an eye roll.

I shook my head. “The point still stands—I never should have risked it. I never should have let the team come with me. I should have thought of a way to get out of it.”

“Cali, these guys are supposed to be your new friends,” Lola said in a low voice. “You want to be nice to them, not lie badly to them till they no longer want to hang out with you.”

“My lies aren’t bad, per se—”

“They’re bad enough that they would’ve realized it if you lied,” Lola whispered. “And if you wanted to be honest, what were you supposed to say? Sorry you can’t come to the party—there’s werewolves everywhere?”

I gulped. “But what if Codsworth saw—”

Lola waved me off. “If he’d seen something, he would’ve already told you. I’m sure everything is fine.”

I took a deep breath, wishing I had Lola’s level of confidence. “Okay. Maybe I’m exaggerating.”

“You totally are. Besides,” Lola added, “from what I saw, they were too busy checking me out to notice Ravi doing anything.”

“Kayden—or Jayden, I mix the twins up—does seem to have a vested interest in you,” I said with a snort. “But Jay was right there and he wears an eye patch that makes him look like a pirate. Pretty sure nobody dared to stare at you for too long last night.”

Lola huffed. “Well, if I’d worn my little red dress like I’d wanted to, the boys would have invited Jay to a duel. He would have killed them all in my honor, and that’s kind of hot, so—”

“If the two ladies in the back would like to join the lecture, we would be much obliged,” a loud, nasally voice said, cutting Lola off.

I looked ahead to see Professor Teapot glaring at Lola and me.

“Sorry!” I said quickly, opening up my notebook.

*Why did I sign up for History of Dance again?*

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A few hours later, I attended my second class of the day, Algebra 101. I tried to focus, but I had no idea what was happening, so I got distracted easily. Even if Lola had made me feel like there was probably no reason to worry about Codsworth, I had many other things to worry about, thanks very much.

First, I wondered what Greyson was doing. I hoped he had no issues with the pack after the crew team crashed the party the night before. I also hoped he had a nice breakfast. Second, I wondered what Xavier was doing. I bet he was brooding or fucking Ava. Both of those things made me want to cry—one from misery, the other from fury.

*Do* not *think about Xavier, Cali! Bad idea!*

Unfortunately for me, bad ideas were my strong suit. When I had one, it stuck. And now Xavier was stuck in my head, and my lips felt tingly at the memory of our kiss at the party. It had felt so right, so overwhelmingly perfect. But I shouldn’t even be thinking of that after spending an amazing night with Greyson.

Greyson, who had never wavered or made me feel horrible about myself.

Greyson, who had always been my rock.

Rationally, I knew I couldn’t blame Xavier for hurting me to protect me from Adéluce’s schemes. I believed him when he said he loved me. That everything he had done was in order to keep me safe. But things had changed irrevocably, and no matter how much I understood Xavier’s truth, something else lurked behind my love for him. Something ugly that didn’t seem to go away.

Fear.

I was scared, because I had no idea what his next move would be when it came to Ava, him, and me. I had no idea how I could ever deal with sharing him. The one thing I was certain of was that I loved Xavier so deeply that he had the power to break me into pieces. I had seen it happen in real time when he’d left me. And even if Adéluce was gone now and she wasn’t forcing him to do anything, Xavier was *still* hurting me.

He was hurting me by being with Ava.

While Ava was his Luna, and they were together…

How could I ever go back to trusting Xavier like I used to?

**Episode 4825**

**Xavier**

Taking a deep breath, I gently knocked on Ava’s door the next morning.

I’d let her have her space last night, so I hoped we could finally talk now. To say what, I wasn’t sure. It seemed like I had better apologize, though, because kissing Cali where Ava or anyone from the pack could’ve seen us had been a major asshole move. It felt like I kept fucking up and having to apologize, but I still had no idea what would happen next.

Could I swear to Ava that I wouldn’t lose control and kiss Cali again?

No. Just the sight of Cali set me on fire.

My apologies were stupid Band-Aids over wounds that could not heal, and I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. But since my wolf was whining and urging me to scratch at Ava’s door like a besotted dog, I had no other choice.

After she didn’t answer, I opened the door to check if she was in the bathroom. The room was empty. Her bed was made. Shit, where was she? Her scent was fresh. I walked out the room, heading downstairs as I contemplated mind linking her. She couldn’t be far, maybe—

“Okay, now that you’re all here…”

Her voice came from the kitchen. I breathed deeply, relieved that she was home and safe. I walked over to see her talking to a group of Samaras. They all looked like they were ready to go out. When the group saw me, everyone fell silent.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

Ava shot me a glance. Flatly, she said, “We’re going to go train.”

I stared at her. “Without your Alpha?”

Ava crossed her arms. She was angry, still, but that didn’t mean she should’ve arranged a training session without me. This bullshit was starting to bother me. Should I have gone after her the night before? How much would that have helped considering how angry she was? My stomach turned in knots, frustration starting to climb inside me.

Yeah, I knew I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, what with the whole keeping two mates around and all that. But didn’t I deserve a break after all the shit I’d been through?

“I’m never too busy for my pack,” I said, trying to keep my cool. “I’ll join you. Could use a good workout.”

“Fine,” Ava said, looking away from me like I didn’t even matter.

A sudden urge hit me. I wanted to grab Ava by the nape, bend her over this very table, and fuck her in front of everyone, just so she remembered who the hell she was mouthing off to. *I* was her Alpha. She’d moved hell and earth to steer me to this position, and now she was going to undermine me because of her jealousy?

She should have some goddamn respect.

I told myself to stay calm.

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

Coldly, Ava said, “We want to do drills, to figure out how to best defend our territory from anyone who tries to attack us again.”

“Sounds good. Let’s do it.” I looked around the pack, nodding toward the exit. “Get going.”

The moment the last person was out of the room, I grabbed Ava by the arm before she could file out with the others.

She yanked herself away. “What do you want?”

I grabbed her arm again. “You don’t do training sessions without letting me know. Got it?”

“*Fine*,” she snapped, glaring.

“As for what happened last night, you told me to come find you when I wanted to talk, so here I am.”

She shoved me harder this time, releasing herself before she crossed her arms over her chest. “No. I don’t want to talk to you right now. We’ve got shit to do.”

“But—”

“This”—she gestured between us—“can’t always be on your schedule, Xavier. I have a life, too, you know.”

I wondered if Ava realized that she was playing with fire here. Not to brag, but I’d been told by people—Greyson, namely—that I was the most hotheaded asshole they’d ever had to deal with. This “being respectful toward Ava’s feelings” thing was getting so old, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to distract myself from my frustration.

“I get what you mean,” I said. And I did, but what about how *I* was feeling? What about how confused I was, how lost I felt after everything that Adéluce had done to me? I couldn’t just forget about Cali—Ava knew that. Where was her fucking sympathy?

“I get it,” I repeated, “and I’m sorry. I really am, but you know this is hard for me, Ava. We need to talk.”

“But not right now.” Ava huffed. “I just can’t do this right now!”

She stomped away. Before I could follow, Marissa blocked my way.

“Just give her some time,” Marissa said seriously.

“I didn’t ask for your advice,” I snapped. “Get out of my face.”

Marissa flinched. She stepped back, hackles raised. “Wow, okay.” She raised her hands in surrender. “Whatever.”

She walked off, and I groaned. Great. Now I had to feel guilty about yelling at Marissa, too. Sighing, I rubbed a hand over my face. Could things ever get back to normal? Then again, what the fuck was *normal* under these circumstances? I probably wouldn’t be able to recognize it if it looked at me in the face. I didn’t need Adéluce to fuck up my life anymore, if the last twenty-four hours had been any indication. I could make my own bad choices.

I really couldn’t catch a fucking break.

The group had moved ahead of me, and I had to jog to catch up. Bad sign, since the Alpha was supposed to be up front. I moved fast, though, and I made sure to address the group before Ava could.

“We’ll split up into two groups and play capture the flag,” I said, gesturing ahead. “The cliff by the river is one side, and the front of the pack house is the other.”

The pack looked confused, exchanging looks I didn’t like. Knox spoke up first. Of fucking course he did.

“So you want us to play a kid’s game?” he asked, eyebrows arched.

“No,” I said, staring at him. “I want to simulate a situation where we’d have to defend something precious to us like our pack house.”

Murmurs of understandingbroke out among everybody, and Knox shut up. Ava hadn’t spoken a word, and I took that as a good sign. Whatever was going on in our relationship, Ava wouldn’t go against me if she agreed that I was doing what was best for the pack. The Samaras were important to her. Maybe as much as being with me was.

“I’ll lead the defense team,” I said, “and our base will be the house.”

“I’ll lead the attack team,” Ava said in that same cold voice.

I frowned, eyes flickering up to meet hers. She stared back, as if daring me to say no. I didn’t think that taking our feud out here, on the field, with everybody watching would look good. Then again, who would be better to lead the opposing team to mine? Ava was cunning, and she could rise up to every challenge. She was a worthy opponent to have. I’d learned that the hard way over the years.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s a good idea.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed, like she was wondering what game I was playing. When, in reality, she was the one playing games. Had she suggested leading the opposing team just to get a rise out of me? If she had, it hadn’t worked, and now she wasn’t happy.

Tough luck. Try harder next time.

Ava nodded. She opened her mouth to speak, but I didn’t let her.

“We’ll split up evenly,” I said, looking around. “Me, Donovan, Josephine, Blaine, Geraint, and Zipper.” I turned to Ava. “Against you, Marissa, Knox, Perrie, Fausto, and Simon.”

Ava should have been grateful that I’d let her BFF Marissa be on her team, just saying. I could’ve split them up out of spite. But I didn’t want to be on the receiving end of a pissed-off Marissa either.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Ava’s eyes flickered to Marissa.  “Fine.” She eyed me up and down, her expression sharpening. “What do we get if we win?”

I could hear the real question here.

*“What do I get if I win? What are you going to give me?”*

This moment between us felt better than her ignoring me, so my wolf perked up. This was a challenge, and nothing got me going like a challenge. Ava’s blazing gaze said she was still angry, yeah, but she wanted me. She would always want me, no matter how many times I fucked up. There was a messy comfort to that.

Stepping forward into her space, I kept my gaze fixed into hers. “You tell me, Ava. What do you want?”

**Episode 4826**

How could I ever go back to trusting Xavier again?

The thing was that I *did* want to trust him, though. I couldn’t imagine a future without him in my life. But things had changed so irrevocably that Xavier telling me he never stopped loving me couldn’t fix our bond. Adéluce had done that to us.

We were broken, and Ava’s presence in his life was a constant reminder of it. I knew he wasn’t telling me things when it came to how he’d fallen back in love with her. I could just feel it. Not sharing information was still lying—save for the fact that he couldn’t tell us about Adéluce—and Xavier was the king of being cryptic. He couldn’t deal with his feelings, and now he was stuck in a situation where he was being asked to communicate with both me and Ava. *And* his brother.

*Good times…*

My head was throbbing. It felt heavy, so I lowered it to the desk, resting on my arms. I gave myself a moment to just… be. To exist somewhere where it didn’t matter that Xavier loved Ava and me at the same time. Where I didn’t have to agonize over losing Greyson or Xavier thanks to the *due destini* curse, or worry about losing my mind if I didn’t choose between them.

*This is a fucking nightmare.*

Someone touched my shoulder, and I jumped, yelping. It was the second time today that I’d felt attacked for literally no real reason. All this stress was not good for my blood pressure.

“Sorry,” the TA said, eyebrows arched over her glasses. “Are you okay?”

I felt the absurd urge to start laughing.

*Well, then. Maybe I’m* already *losing my mind.*

“Class is over, and everyone’s gone,” the TA went on, gesturing around the empty room. “Did you need something?”

I gulped, feeling like an absolute fool. Which I was. “Sorry, I—” I cleared my throat. “I was just…”

*Having a mental breakdown?*

“Um, thinking about the future.”

*Same difference.*

“Right,” the TA said slowly. She told me something about office hours, I pretended to jot it all down, and then off she went. I wondered what good office hours would do me if I hadn’t heard a word of the lecture. I would have to get the notes from someone else and magically get better at algebra.

This whole day could go to hell, honestly.

The only thing that could make it better was a cup of coffee, so I gathered my stuff and made a beeline for the campus café.

When I walked inside, I saw that a few guys from the crew team were at the café. Codsworth, Gael, Kayden, Schmiddy, and Bear immediately spotted me and waved me over. They were like a pack of overenthusiastic puppies that fed off of socializing. I would’ve been immensely flattered by their attention under other circumstances, but right now, I just wanted to go lie down somewhere and sleep.

Then again, perhaps socializing with them was exactly the distraction I needed.

“Lil’ Hart!” Bear grinned up at me when I got to their table, coffee in hand. “Wait, why do you look so sad?”

Having an open book of a face was a curse. *Another* one.

“Do I look sad?” I asked with fake casualness, squishing myself between Bear and Gael in the booth. “I’m totally fine,” I went on, lying.

“Something’s wrong,” Codsworth said darkly. He pinned me with his stare. I suddenly remembered the whole thing about him wanting to talk to me this morning and me getting paranoid that he’d caught sight of Ravi shifting.

*As if I needed ONE MORE THING to stress about.*

I decided to ignore and evade the problem until it came to bite me in the ass or it magically went away. That tactic had worked for me in the past. Besides, realistically, if Codsworth *had* really seen something, he would’ve told me right away. Right?

“Did something happen during class?” Bear asked.

“Yeah, the lectures were boring,” I replied, which wasn’t a lie. “I wasn’t paying attention, honestly.”

Schmiddy laughed. “Same!”

He lifted a hand in a high five. I half-heartedly met his gesture, because there was nothing sadder than an unreciprocated high five. It was second only to the weird love-square situation I’d gotten myself into with two brothers and a disgustingly attractive, psychopathic brunette.

*Did Ava have to be so hot, though? Ugh…*

“Cali, are you even listening?” Bear’s hand waved in front of my face.

“You still seem out of it, like you were this morning,” Codsworth said. “I know something’s bothering you. Just spit it out!”

“Hey, don’t yell at her,” Bear told Codsworth with a huff.

Cosworth rolled his eyes, and Scmiddy patted my hand. “Codsworth yells when he cares.”

Gael turned to me, his face serious. “Is there anything we can help with, Cali?”

I winced. How did I explain the Ava/Xavier/Adéluce situation to these guys without sounding completely insane? But the truth was that I did need advice here. Lola’s advice could only get me so far when half her suggestions ended with Ava’s gruesome murder.

*We can always throw her to the sharks!* Lola would say.

*Where are we going to find sharks, Lola?* I would ask.

*I know a guy*, Lola would reply cryptically.

I loved her, but no.

“You’re all guys, right?” I asked the boys.

Laughing, Kayden said, “Last we checked.”

“I mean, can I get your advice as guys?” I asked. “About… something personal?”

Codsworth’s eyes narrowed. “Guy trouble?”

Since using Ava as shark bait wasn’t an option, I decided to be very careful with my wording and go for it.

“So, you know I’m dating—”

“Greyson,” Gael said. “He was a good host even though we crashed his party.”

“Dude, he’s so hot,” Bear said, grinning. “Nice to talk to, too.”

“Bear has a bro-crush,” Kayden said with a snicker.

“I thought you and Greyson were casual, though?” Schmiddy asked. “Like, weren’t you also dating Xavier?”

“Also very hot,” Bear observed, “but like with a murdery-bad-boy vibe.”

“I’m not casual with Greyson. We’re together-together,” I rushed to explain. “Xavier is…” I paused, trying to find the right word. “My ex.”

“Ahhhhh,” everybody said in unison.

Taking a deep breath, I barreled on. “Xavier broke up with me. He wasn’t honest about it with me at the time, but I just found out it was because of… some kind of family emergency. And now he’s back, and he’s apologized, and he wants to be in my life again. But in the meantime, he’s been talking to his *other* ex again, and they’re kind of… working together now. So, they’re spending a lot of time together. I just don’t know if I can trust him.”

Kayden blinked. “Shit, that’s deep.”

Schmiddy frowned. “Wait, he broke up with you because of a family thing?”

“I broke up with a guy once because my cat didn’t like him,” Gael offered.

Bear laughed. “Get out—that’s not true!”

Everybody broke into laughter. Apart from Codsworth, who waved us off. “Yeah, yeah, let’s focus on Hart now. You’re wondering if you can trust Xavier again, right?”

I nodded stiffly.

Codsworth scowled. “It’s shitty that he wasn’t honest with you. Why didn’t he just tell you what was going on with his family?”

“And why do you want to go back to talking to him if he broke up with you and is now talking with his ex?” Schmiddy asked.

“The ex thing is a red flag,” Bear said seriously.

“Deadass,” Gael agreed. “Maybe you’re having doubts about talking to him exactly because you know deep down that you might get hurt again.”

“Oh, yes!” Bear pointed at Gael. “That’s, like, self-care or something.”

“What about Greyson?” Codsworth asked me, eyes narrowed. “Where does he fit in here?”

I had no idea how to answer that without spilling my guts, but Kayden saved me.

“Hang on a second,” he said, raising his hands. “Let’s cool it with all the Xavier slander. My boy doesn’t deserve this!”

Schmiddy scoffed. “Your boy lied to Hart and broke up with her, and now he’s hanging out with his ex.”

“If he broke up with her because he had to, not because he wanted to, there’s no reason not to trust him,” Kayden said. “He’s apologized, for fuck’s sake!”

From one second to the next, everybody started arguing about what I should do, and the conversation quickly spiraled out of control. The only one who wasn’t talking was Codsworth.

He leaned across the table to speak in my ear. “Feels like you need a distraction.”

I groaned. “Yes, please.”

“I wanted to talk to you about something this morning,” he said in a low voice. “Remember?”

My stomach dropped.

*It’s fine, Cali! Don’t panic. He did* not *see anything.*

“Yeah?” I asked.

Codsworth’s grim expression turned into one of shocking glee. His voice dropped to a whisper. “That wolf we saw at your party… I’m pretty sure it wasn’t just a wolf. It was a shapeshifter.”

**Episode 4827**

**Greyson**

I had to force myself not to gape. Lucian and Elle were doing a Luna ceremony? Already? I was not fucking ready for that.

I mean, *she* couldn’t be ready for that. Elle. She’d only been in Lucian’s palace for—what? A few days? What did Lucian say to her to convince her to do this so quickly? And why hadn’t she reached out to let me know? Elle trusted me. She respected me. We were friends.

At least that was what I used to think.

This whole thing was goddamn weird, and I needed to investigate. Even if Elle had left to go live with Lucian, my impression had been that she was still deciding on what she wanted to do in terms of the mate bond. If she became the Vanguard Luna, she’d be done with the Redwood pack once and for all, and it felt way too rushed.

Elle had turned human to become a member of *my* pack, not Lucian’s. The sire bond between Elle and me might’ve been cut, but I still considered her a Redwood.

I didn’t like this.

I cared about Elle. She and I had history. Her father had trusted me to keep her safe, and I was going to do that, come hell or high water. I needed to make sure that Lucian making her his Luna was the right call, and it had nothing to do with his usual impulsivity. For the love of every god that was out there. After all, not too long ago, Lucian had wanted to make a *demon* his Luna.

Besides, was the Vanguard pack even ready for a new Luna? Did they support it? Could I trust Lucian’s minions to treat Elle right and offer her the respect she deserved? How had she been doing these past few days without the Redwoods? Was she going to stop speaking to us and never look back because of *Lucian*?

My wolf growled inside my chest.

Elle had been a Redwood first, dammit.

“Where’s Lucian?” I asked the guard. “I need to talk to him.”

The man paused pushing the potted tree and blinked at me. “Um. I am not sure if I’m allowed to disclose his whereabouts.”

This dude was clearly out of his depth and pretty low-ranking, so I was not about to take out my frustration and anger on him. Don’t maim the messenger and all that.

“No problem,” I said, matter-of-fact. “I’ll go find Lucian myself.” I started walking toward the palace entrance while the guard sputtered behind me.

“Alpha Greyson! Wait!”

I ignored him, walking past another five guards who were trying to push potted trees or potted bushes or golden furniture around. They all told me to wait, but I said, “Waiting is not my strong suit,” and kept moving.

I was going to get to the bottom of this Luna bullshit. End of story.

Once I got to the foyer, three butlers rushed up to me.

“Mr. Evers!” one of them said, dabbing his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. “We did not expect you today!”

“Where’s Lucian? It would be great if you could point me in the right direction.”

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I am not allowed to disclose such information without prior notice. How did you—”

I heard commotion coming from somewhere near the banquet hall where Lucian usually held his events. Patting the butler on the shoulder, I said, “Good talk. I got it.”

I took off in that direction, leaving the befuddled butlers behind. I’d barely walked a few feet down the hall when I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Someone grabbed me by the arm. Instinctively, I whirled around and twisted their wrist, pushing them off me.

“Easy!” Armin huffed, waving his wrist to shake off the lingering pain. “This is not the battlefield!”

“Don’t come at me from behind, Armin,” I said. “Accidents happen.” My voice was calm but cold. I wondered if Lucian’s second could hear the fury in it.

He could.

“What are you doing here?” Armin asked. He looked disheveled and tired, holding a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other.

“I didn’t receive one of Lucian’s absurdly ornate invitations, so I’m here to find out why,” I said.

Armin blinked rapidly. “An invitation?”

“There must’ve been a mistake,” I went on. “Officially making a Redwood pack member the Vanguard Luna surely calls for a multi-pack celebration. Doesn’t it?”

Armin frowned, looking down at his clipboard. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

*I’m talking about Lucian being a fucking asshole who thinks he can do whatever the hell he wants*, I thought. I didn’t say that, though. I just glared at Armin. “As much as I enjoy wasting my time with small talk, I’m not here to play games. Not today.”

That was enough for him to say, “Right. Follow me.”

He led me to one of the palace’s fifteen million fancy sitting rooms, opening the door for me to enter first. He’d picked one where Lucian’s face was in every portrait, so basically my very own personal nightmare. The moment I stepped foot inside this hellhole, Armin said, “Please wait. You can find complimentary clothes in the armoire. Someone will be here to explain things to you shortly.”

I eyed him coolly. “I don’t like waiting. If Lucian, Elle, and Aysel are not here in the next five minutes…” I gestured at the wall art. “I will destroy Lucian’s precious self-portraits just for fun. And then I’ll come find *you*, Armin, and we are going to have a problem. Understood?”

Armin grimaced. “I promise I’ll be right back.”

The moment the door was closed, I pulled on some pants and a shirt from the armoire and then immediately started pacing. There was a hole in the ceiling, reminding me that half the house was still being rebuilt after the Bitterfang war. Why the *hell* did Lucian think that having a Luna ceremony right now was a good idea?

I checked the clock on the wall.

Two minutes to go.

Okay, this was ridiculous—I was going to go find them myself.

I marched toward the door and reached for the handle when it turned.

“Good morning, Greyson,” Lucian said with fake pleasantness. “What a surprise it is to see you.” Sweeping past me, he took a seat in the largest armchair with a flourish. “I heard you almost murdered Armin earlier. Never expected such uncivilized behavior from a man of your stature.”

“Lucian, good morning.” I gestured at the self-portraits. “Is it me, or has your hairline receded since you had these painted?”

The princeling choked, and then Elle walked in. She looked okay—healthy, normal. Thank fuck. She beamed at me, and something in my chest eased.

“Greyson!” She immediately went to hug me. I wrapped my arms around her tight, breathing in her familiar scent. My wolf settled down. She was okay. Breaking the hug, she looked up at me, still smiling. “I’ve missed you!”

She still gave a shit about me, then. We were still friends. I’d gotten all worked up for no reason. Well, not *no reason*—Lucian was still here, lurking like a fucking barracuda.

“Tell me how the pack is,” Elle went on. “I’ve missed everyone! Sage and I have been texting, and she mentioned something about you mind linking with a bat?”

I wasn’t going to touch any of that right now.

“Everyone’s good. How are you doing, though?” I asked, keeping a smile on my face. “I was on my morning patrol and saw the guards setting up for a party. I was surprised you hadn’t told me anything.”

“Oh, I was just about to call you today,” she said, nodding vividly.

“Seems like you’ve been busy,” I said, watching as she walked over to lean against Lucian’s chair.

“I’m keeping busy. This house is so big I keep finding new things every day,” she said. “It’s like a castle full of secrets!”

Lucian laughed, running his hand over Elle’s. So, we were doing that now, then? PDA?

Disgusting.

“It’s a castle full of problems that need to be fixed after the war,” Aysel’s voice said. I turned to see her breeze past me before she dramatically plopped on another armchair. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she looked annoyed.

“Feels like I’ve missed a lot,” I said, taking a seat opposite Lucian and Elle. Staring at Elle, I made sure to keep my voice neutral. “You said you’d call me about the party. Were you going to tell me about the sudden Luna ceremony, too?”

Before Elle could answer, Lucian said, “There’s nothing sudden about it, Greyson. You’d know that if you weren’t so caught up in your own problems.” He sniffed derisively.

“Elle has only been here for a few days. These kinds of decisions take more time than that normally,” I said, forcing my tone to stay even. I looked at Elle exclusively. “Am I wrong, Elle? What aren’t you telling me here?”

She smiled. “Well, there is some news I’ve wanted to share with you…” She held up her left hand. On her ring finger, there was an ornate stone-studded silver band that I’d never seen before. “Lucian and I are married!”

**Episode 4828**

**Xavier**

“You tell me, Ava. What do you want?” I asked.

The question went beyond the training game we were about to play. It was genuine, because I couldn’t fucking tell what Ava truly wanted after our fight the night before. She demanded I talk to her, then she didn’t want to speak to me, and it seemed like she was nowhere near done sending me mixed signals.

We had to talk about my kiss with Cali, what it meant for Ava and me. Though, at this point, it felt like neither of us were willing to do it. My stomach twisted at the thought. I knew I deserved this bullshit after allowing things to get so far, but it didn’t mean I had to fucking like it. What I would *really* like was twenty minutes with Ava all alone, out of earshot of the pack.

I was certain I could fuck all this anger out of her.

“Well…” Ava looked me up and down. She knew exactly what I was thinking, but she didn’t take the bait. Raising an eyebrow, she said, “Losers have to do all the chores for the rest of the week.”

A collective groan echoed from Zipper and Blaine, along with a few others.

“That’s bullshit,” Knox said. “The pack house gets so dirty!”

I turned to stare at him. “Which is why the winning team will be free from cleaning duty for a week. It’s a fair prize.”

The change in phrasing seemed to appease Knox, along with everybody else. Ava’s challenging stare remained unwavering. “Sounds good.”

We all got into position with our respective teams.

“We’re going to spread out and form a defensive circle around the house,” I told my team. “I’ll be running ahead to call out coordinating directions as I survey the situation. In the meantime, what you have to do is keep your formations and make sure the enemies don’t move past you and break the circle of defense.”

Everybody, even Blaine, listened and agreed. I told the team their base positions, we shifted, and I ran ahead to assess the area. I hadn’t even gotten very far when I spotted movement ahead, behind a large bush. There were no birds chirping or squirrels doing their thing, so that meant a large predator was in the area. The scent told me it was Knox and Perrie.

Ava had already sent in scouts, but they were not careful. They hadn’t even spotted me yet. They didn’t notice me circle them, coming up behind them as they ducked for cover behind the bush. This was all pretty fucking bad, actually. If I were an enemy, we would’ve had a problem. I guess this was why we did shit like this, wasn’t it?

With a snarl, I leaped forward and shoved Knox into the bush before pinning Perrie to the ground. She let out a surprised yelp while Knox’s wolf yipped. The bush had thorns, and some of them had gotten in his ass. Good.

*You have to be aware of your surroundings*, I mind linked to Perrie, growling.

*I was!* she fired back, though she was clearly still startled. She was so overwhelmed she hadn’t even tried to push me off. On the one hand, that was good because she acknowledged my dominance. On the other, she needed more training pronto. I did need to remember she was young, only a teenager, and Lilac’s girlfriend. But by the time I was their age, I already had my sights set on Alpha.

*Not enough*, I snapped, looking between them. *Go back to your base position and start over*.

She and Knox slinked away, and I shook my head.

These kids had so much to learn.

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I found my base position and stayed there for a few minutes. It was high enough that visibility was good, but I’d learned to trust my nose and ears first of all in situations like these. Soon enough, traces of Ava’s scent started to waft toward me. She was nearby. It could be a trap for me to leave my post, so I mind linked Donovan to keep an eye out for any sort of ambush. Ava liked to be sneaky.

A moment later, I headed off to find her. At this point, with frustration and the need for things to be good between us eating at me, I didn’t think I could resist following her. I was moving stealthily through the forest, but she was elusive, same as last night. I came to pause in front of a stream. This tactic screamed “Ava.”

She had lured me out here, where the water was loud enough to camouflage any sounds, where her scent could be covered if she’d passed through the water, where visibility was shit. I looked around, half-expecting her to pounce. I wished she would, actually. Then I’d shift back to human and kiss her, and maybe that would make things better. At least for a little bit.

I hated this.

I hated it when she was mad at me.

I heard something cracking and instantly turned to the left, only—

To be hit with a pebble on the back of the head.

I shifted back to human. “Seriously?” I scoffed, spinning around. “Is this what we’re doing now?”

Silence.

I heard a whooshing noise and whirled around to see the rock flying directly at me. Ducking to evade it, I mind linked, *Very funny, Ava!*

*I think so*, her smug voice replied.

“Will you come out?” I demanded.

I saw her step out from behind a boulder located on the opposite side of the stream. Her wolf was wet. When she shifted back to human, her body was wet, too, glistening. She was so fucking hot it made me clench my jaw. She was furious, and I wanted to drown myself in this stream and get all this over with.

“This is serious, Ava,” I said gruffly.

“I *am* taking it seriously,” she said, glaring. “But it seems like you aren’t.”

“Are we talking about the training or our relationship right now?” I demanded.

She threw her hands up in the air. “What the hell do you think?”

I groaned, taking a step forward. She took one back. I didn’t want her to just run off, so I stayed put. “I’m not doing this to you on purpose, Ava—I’m just dealing with the aftermath of Adéluce’s bullshit. You know I want to be here with you. I told you that my feelings for you are real. For fuck’s sake, I’m chasing you around to try and talk to you, and you are—”

“I said, *I don’t want to talk about it*,” Ava snapped.

Before I could utter another damn word, she shifted back to wolf and ran off. With a growl, I shifted as well and took off after her. I needed her to listen. To understand that I was not picking Cali over her.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I was sure that I couldn’t give up on my relationship with Ava. It had gotten me through some of the worst times in my life as I’d battled Adéluce all alone. She needed to realize how much she meant to me. She’d been my anchor in so many ways, and I realized I had to tell her that before her anger got even worse. Loving Cali didn’t mean that I didn’t love Ava—why the fucking fuck was it so hard for her to see that?

My wolf let out a snarl of frustration. Thinking about all that while I ran after Ava was giving me a headache. It got so bad so fast that there was a light ringing in my ears, and my head started throbbing.

Shit. I needed to focus here.

*Xavier!* Donovan suddenly mind linked*. It was an ambush! Where are you?*

I paused, breathing hard. I couldn’t keep following Ava around—I needed to go back to the others.

*Who did it?* I mind linked back.

Blaine’s voice echoed in my head. *It’s—we—*

Why the fuck did the mind linking get all stuttered and broken suddenly? I could only pick up bits and pieces of what Blaine was saying.

*Knox and Marissa—the long way—gone—not—Marissa!*

On top of being broken up, Blaine’s mind linking voice sounded like he was far away. But that couldn’t be right. I was close enough to the house.

*Blaine, take your team to the right and move in*, I mind linked. *Donovan, gather your team and attack from the right!*

Donovan replied, *The right? Wait, who is going from the right?*

The static returned, Donovan’s voice sounding farther and farther away. I shook my head. The ringing got worse. What the hell was this?

*Blaine right, Donovan left*, I mind linked. *That’s it!*

Nobody replied. The static was replaced by emptiness.

*Hello?*

Again, nobody replied.

*What the hell is happening?* I demanded. *Is anyone—*

*Xavier!* came Blaine’s sudden response. *Come quick, there was an accident!*

**Episode 4829**

**Artemis**

The guards gave me nods of acknowledgment as I made my way down to the dungeon. One thing about Grandma Hera, she was efficient. She hadn’t been thrilled to let me go see Marius, but in the end she had cooperated.

“The Dark Fae that was brought in with me,” I said, “where is he?”

The guard who stood in front of the chamber with the rows of cells looked me up and down. Then he said, “Sixth one to the left.”

My steps echoed in the eerie quiet of the space before I came to stand before Marius’s cell. He gasped, scrambling up when he saw me. “Ari!” He gripped the bars, his eyes wide. “Are you here to let me out?”

Marius looked tired but still attractive in an *I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but my cheekbones could cut glass* kind of way. Which annoyed me on a base level. If I were a better person, I would’ve put him out of his misery. But he could still claw my eyes out if given the opportunity, so I could never simply trust him.

“Let you out, hmm…” I pretended to consider it. “That depends.”

He groaned. “On what? What is it this time?”

I scoffed. “Don’t give me attitude. I’m the only one who doesn’t want to leave you down here to rot.”

Marius offered a fake smile. “That’s so gracious of you. I’m at your service until these guards tear out my heart and eat it.”

I rolled my eyes, crossing my arms over my chest. “Oh my gods, you are so dramatic. They didn’t even do anything to you.”

I didn’t even know where to begin with this man, so I decided to cut straight to the chase.  “Have you ever heard the name Erimentha?”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Just answer the questions and stop being such a pain in the ass.”

“So you don’t want me to be myself, then? Is that what the world has come to? Telling people to change the very essence of who they are or else stay and rot in a dingy dungeon?”

“Okay, you’re delirious. I’m leaving—”

“Wait!”

I paused my exiting march, facing him. “Answer the questions.”

He sighed, deflated. “I think Erimentha is a Dark Fae. That’s all I know. Why do you want to know about her?”

I eyed his face. Was he keeping something from me? It didn’t feel like it. Hopefully. He’d at least confirmed what I already knew about Erimentha.

“That tracks,” I said with a nod. “If I let you out, you have to behave. I’m vouching for you.”

He nodded eagerly. “Yes, I’ll be so good!”

With a sigh, I let him out and led him toward the chamber exit. His declaration about being “good” did not include him shutting up, of course. Brushing dirt from his clothes, he prattled on about the dust in his cell, the disgusting food, the frogs in the swamp outside that were too loud, the fact that the guards called him “pretty boy,” which was an objectifying comment he did not appreciate, and many other things that I did not register.

I tuned him out—I had to, otherwise I would stab him in the eye.

When we got out of the dungeon, he blocked my way. “Ari!”

I took a deep breath.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“No.”

“Well, now you are, so is it possible to get a bath and maybe something to eat that’s not moldy and gross?”

“No time, we’re leaving,” I said flatly.

His eyes widened. “Leaving? Why? Not that I’m complaining, I haven’t had the best stay here.”

“Really? I had no idea you were so human.”

“Never say that to me again,” he said.

“Then don’t complain about every little thing the way they do.”

He snorted. “Right, I forgot you’re worldly now after hanging out in another realm. Are you ever going to tell me more about that, actually?”

“Like I said, no. Besides, there’s no time, we’re leaving. We’re going to Dark Fae territory.”

Marius gaped. “What?”

I eyed him, scowling. “I thought you’d be happy to go home.”

Marius gulped, shaking his head. Chuckling awkwardly, he said, “Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re not telling me something.”

He scoffed. “Who? Me? I’m only wondering why you want to go to the Dark Fae territory. It’s not a good place to vacation.”

My jaw clenched. “This is not a vacation. We both have our separate missions, and you know it.”

He huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay, fine. But where is this plan coming from all of a sudden?”

“I have to find Erimentha. She might know where Kadmos is,” I said.

Marius’s eyes widened. To my shock, he did not speak for a long moment. I marched toward the castle exit. “Okay, wait!” He blocked my way, his hands raised. “Let’s take a beat here. You made a promise to me.”

I glared. “Yes, and you made me one, too. You said you’d help me find Kadmos, and apparently, he’s in Dark Fae territory. Who better to guide me there than a Dark Fae like you?” I pointed at his chest.

He gripped my wrist and tugged me closer, offering his most charming smile.

Oh, he was trouble all right.

“Come on, what’s the rush?” he asked, tilting his head to the side. “We don’t need to find him right now, do we? What about our deal?” He placed my hand on his chest, my entire palm, right over his pounding heart. Through the sweat and dust, he still smelled like lemon grass. Annoyingly.

“Marius—”

“Why don’t we finish finding my bounty first, and then after that’s all tidied up, I’ll be happy to show you around the Dark Fae territory,” he said, taking my other hand to place it on his chest as well. “It’ll be like old times. You and me, together for as long as you can tolerate me. I’ll annoy you, you’ll yell at me, we’ll laugh, it’s perfect.”

I looked down at my hands on his sternum, pressing my lips together. “Your heart is racing…”

He smirked. “I guess I like the idea of spending time with you.”

Flushing, I pushed him away. “Cut the bullshit. What aren’t you telling me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Will you quit being so suspicious? I’m just saying, we’re already on the trail of my bounty, why stop now?”

I shook my head. “I'm a good bounty hunter, Marius. I can help you find your target any time. I want to find Kadmos now.”

“But—”

“End of discussion.” I made a move to evade him and keep walking. He blocked my way again.

This time, all his charm was gone. His expression had turned serious, almost desperate. “Ari,” he said in a lower voice, “I’m not joking around. We need to find this bounty.”

I paused, taking in his expression.

“You’re scared of going back to Dark Fae territory,” I said, realizing. “That’s what you’re hiding from me.”

“What?!” Marius let out a fake laugh. “No, of course not. I’m scared of nothing.”

“And now you’re getting defensive,” I said dryly.

He huffed, shaking his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Everything’s fine!”

I took a step closer to him. “Marius, you need to be honest with me. Why are you scared to go back? Why do you need to find this bounty so bad?”

He pressed his lips together, scrutinizing my face. He was so close again, and I thought of the kiss we’d shared, and how it shouldn’t have happened. The back of my neck heated up at the memory, but I didn’t move away. If he could attempt using whatever was going on between us to try and charm me, I could do my own version of that.

“Tell me the truth,” I said, my voice dropping. “I’m right here to listen.”

His rigid shoulders slumped, and he looked down at the ground dejectedly. “Fine,” he muttered. “It’s not just a bounty…”

“What is it?” I asked.

His words were a confession. “It’s my punishment. I messed up, and the Dark Fae court sentenced me to this task. I have to find and deliver this bounty, or it’s my own head that’ll be on the line.”

My stomach clenched. This was… a problem.

“And you can’t go back to the Dark Fae land until you get the bounty,” I said. “And the bounty is somewhere in Light Fae territory, that’s why we headed this way to begin with.”

He nodded, still not meeting my gaze. I wanted to smack him, but he looked too torn up for me to attack right now. Unfortunately.

“You should have told me, Marius.” My voice was firm. Strict. “You realize that, right?”

He gulped, nodding.

“Usually there’s a deadline for this kind of stuff…” I trailed off.

He winced, eyeing his feet. I bit the inside of my cheek. “When’s your damn deadline?”

Marius’s dark gaze finally met mine. In a whisper of a voice, he said, “In ten days. If I don’t bring back the bounty by then, I’m dead.”

**Episode 4830**

**Greyson**

“Married?” I was so shocked I almost jumped out of my seat. “*What?* When?”

“A few days ago,” Lucian said, preening. “We would have invited you, but you seemed to be out of town.”

What the actual fucking—

“They’re not *really* married,” Aysel said with an eye roll.

Lucian glowered at his sister. “We’re emotionally committed to each other, sister. Till death do us part, which might as well be forever, since legends never die!”

Elle chuckled, squeezing his hand in hers. She looked… enamored. When the fuck did she get so smitten with him? Had removing the sire bond between Elle and me made everything snowball between her and Lucian? Even Cali and I hadn’t moved this fast, ignoring, of course, the whole *due destini* of it all…

Taking a deep breath, I turned to the one person who seemed reasonable enough right now. For once, that was Aysel.

“What is happening?” I asked her.

She rolled her eyes again. “They did some handfasting ceremony in the garden. They’re as good as engaged. Ring and all, but that’s as far as it goes. For now.”

I let out a sigh of relief. That was good. An engagement was less of a commitment than an actual marriage. It meant that it would be easier for Elle to get out if she wanted to. *If* being the operative word here, because she didn’t seem inclined at the moment. I eyed her face as she shot Lucian a look of adoration.

When the fuck had *this* happened?

“I wanted to call you and let you know, Greyson,” Elle said after turning to me. “I thought I would text Sage about it, but I decided it would be better if I let you know in person.”

I swallowed. “You didn’t invite me to the handfasting, though…”

She shook her head. “Oh, we were going to! But it ended up being a small thing with me and my mate.” She sent Lucian a soft smile. “It was very romantic.”

I did not like any of this, but I tried to school my expression.

“An engagement, that’s… great,” I said tightly. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks for your support,” Lucian told me, wrinkling his nose. “Not that we need it, since you are no longer Elle’s sire. We would have loved to have you join us in our engagement, but we can’t put off our own lives for you. You’re always so busy, Greyson.” He looked up at Elle, bringing her hand to his mouth to kiss. “And our love waits for no one.”

Elle blushed. I had to stop myself from wincing.

Aysel sighed once more, eyeing me. “See what I’ve had to put up with? It’s corny nonsense twenty-four seven.”

I nodded, for once agreeing with Aysel. Which said a lot, because I’d wanted to kill her just a few months ago.

“I’m having a nice time,” Elle said with a shrug, and Lucian chuckled, all pleased as a peacock. I took a small amount of comfort in the fact that Elle did seem to want to be around Lucian. Despite him being him.

But still.

“Okay,” I said, looking between them. “Let’s back up for a moment here. You are not married, but you are engaged. And now you’ve decided to do the Luna ceremony?”

Lucian raised his eyebrows at me. “Obviously. We’re mates, and I’m an Alpha. A Luna ceremony is inevitable.”

I looked up at Elle. She looked so *young* to me, suddenly. I knew the Luna mark could be excruciating. Was she ready for that kind of pain?

“But…” I paused, trying to refocus here. “You’re doing the ceremony tonight?”

Elle flinched. She turned to Lucian, looking surprised. “Lucian? What is he saying?”

Lucian scoffed. “*Tonight*?! Where did you hear that?”

I felt both relieved and so fucking confused. “From one of your pack members?”

Lucian huffed. “That is preposterous! No, that’s not what tonight is about at all.” He squeezed Elle’s hand, looking up at her with fluttering eyelashes. “My sweet forest rose, I would never spring something like that on you. Besides, a Luna ceremony would require at least fifteen shopping trips to the most expensive boutiques around the country, so you could choose your dress and jewelry, my darling.”

Elle’s cheeks were tinged bright pink, and Lucian kissed the top of her hand. Again.

“Oh,” Elle told Lucian, her voice a little breathy. “Okay, then. That’s nice.”

Lucian smiled. “Our timeline is whatever you want it to be, my sweet. Never worry.”

Lucian appeared to be giving Elle the space to make her own decisions. That was a good thing, right? But then why did I feel so fucking weird about this entire situation?

“I need a drink,” Aysel mumbled, standing up. She went to the minibar and poured two snifters of whiskey. She downed her own and handed the other to me.

“You look like you need it,” she said.

I gratefully accepted the drink and thanked her. Taking a huge gulp, I turned to Elle again. “There’s no Luna ceremony tonight,” I repeated, as if to make sure I wasn’t fucking hallucinating. “But you’re still having some sort of soiree, right? Otherwise, what are all those preparations for?”

Elle glanced at Lucian. “Preparations?”

“There are literally heart-shaped pictures of you and Lucian’s face everywhere, Elle,” I said flatly.

“We are simply celebrating our love, Greyson,” Lucian said. “You were off doing things with your brothers, and we’re doing our own thing here. Elle is part of my pack now, as you may have realized.”

“I’m having a great time here,” Elle told me with a bright smile.

Her words made my stomach twitch, but I forced myself to pause and re-assess the situation. From the way Elle and Lucian were interacting, it was obvious that she wanted to be here. Lucian wasn’t forcing her into anything. It looked more like a partnership, and Elle seemed to have complete agency over the situation.

Lucian may be annoying and problematic and a huge pain in the ass for us, but to Elle… he was her mate. And with the sire bond gone, it looked like whatever had been growing between them had taken a life of its own.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Congratulations to you both.”

Lucian smiled. “Thank you. I’m actually glad you are here, Greyson.”

I downed my scotch, raising an eyebrow. “Really?”

“I have always considered you a friend, Greyson, despite everything,” Lucian said seriously.

No comment.

“I believe we now need to speak about a more permanent alliance between our packs,” he went on.

I nodded, because it was something I’d considered as well. “I agree. Not one that’s reliant on a war, but a true partnership of the regional packs.”

My words seemed to perk Lucian up. “And we’d have Alpha meetings again? And spend time together, exchange opinions and life experiences?”

*Kill me, but sure. Anything for the harmony of the area.*

“I guess,” I said tightly.

Lucian grinned. “Why, that’s excellent! Isn’t it excellent, my forest rose?”

Elle smiled back at him. “It is.”

“Lovely, then,” Lucian said excitedly. “We have a lot to discuss, Greyson. I might have had a minor hand in the alliance getting screwed up, but I’m looking forward to making amends.”

I let out a loud snort. “A *minor* hand, huh?” That was probably the closest I would ever get to Lucian outright acknowledging his fuckup.

He ignored my tone and barreled through. “Whenever we have the Luna ceremony, and wedding one day, of course you are invited. And the rest of the Redwood pack. It’s going to be the event of the season!”

Elle gave me a fond look. “I’ll be so happy to have you there, Greyson. The Redwoods are important to me.”

Her words were sweet and all, but something still nagged at me. “About the Luna ceremony, are you sure you’re both ready for it? Do you know what it entails, Elle?”

Lucian’s face hardened in an instant. “That’s our decision. Nobody else’s, Greyson.”

Elle nodded. “And when the time comes, I’ll ask all the questions I need answers to.”

I looked between Lucian and Elle. Ultimately Lucian was right. I couldn’t step in here and cause a ruckus if I had no suspicions that Elle was being mistreated. She seemed happy, even. That was the one thing her father had wanted—for Elle to be content. It was why he’d let her become a human in the first place.

As much as I cared for Elle and felt connected to her after all the things we had been through, if she wanted to become Lucian’s Luna… I would have to accept it.

Thank god it wasn’t today, though. I was *not* ready for that.

“I understand,” I said.

“Wonderful! I’m glad that you do.” Lucian brightened up again at that. “Actually, I had another brilliant idea!”

Aysel sighed in the background. “Oh, boy.”

“What is it?” Elle asked.

Lucian’s beaming smile was blinding. “Why don’t we invite everyone over and announce our engagement tonight?”

**Episode 4831**

**Xavier**

I rushed to join Blaine and the others and found a crowd of pack members standing over Marissa’s prone human form. Everyone had shifted back to human, including me.

*Oh no. What’s happened now? Did someone attack Marissa?*

I took a quick look around, keeping an eye out for anyone who might’ve harmed Marissa and could potentially be gearing up for another attack. But I didn’t smell anything but Samara pack members and the coppery scent of blood.

I pushed through the crowd to get a better look at the large gash on Marissa’s side. Blood was pooling on the ground beneath her, and her teeth were bared in pain.

I dropped to my knees beside her. “Marissa, are you okay? What happened?”

Ava was kneeling on Marissa’s other side, and she swiped a lock of hair out of her face.

“I don’t really know,” Marissa said with a groan. “One minute I was running, and the next I was on the ground, bleeding. It all happened so fast.”

I spotted a jagged stump sticking out of the ground a few feet away, a section of it coated in Marissa’s blood. I winced at the thought of how painful it must’ve been for Marissa to have landed on *that* from the height of the outcropping above us. I caught Ava’s attention and nodded toward the stump, and she nodded.

“Can you move?” Ava asked.

Marissa shook her head. “Not yet. But soon. I can feel it healing, but it’s nasty. I don’t know how that happened… I know these woods so well. How did I fall like that?”

“We got shitty directions,” Blaine said, glancing at me. “That’s how it happened.”

“We’ll discuss that in a second,” I said, my voice tight. “Right now, we need to focus on getting Marissa back to the pack house.”

I carefully lifted Marissa from the ground and cradled her in my arms, then rushed back to the house as smoothly as I could, trying not to jostle Marissa’s wound.

I burst through the front door and laid Marissa out on the couch. My chest and arms were covered in her blood, and it was already staining the couch. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a trail of it leading from the door.

“You’re bleeding a lot. We need to stop it somehow,” Ava said, clearly panicked.

“Should we call someone? Maybe Torin?” I asked, feeling helpless. “Maybe he can come and heal you—”

Marissa waved us away. “No, don’t go to all that trouble. It hurts like hell, but like I said, I’m already healing. I’ll be good as new in no time. Just give me some time to rest—and stop fussing over me.”

Still, Blaine rounded on me, his eyes flashing. “This is *your* fault. You pulled this exercise out of your ass without thinking—”

“Come on, Blaine,” Josephine interrupted. “How could it possibly be Xavier’s fault? It was an accident! Now’s not the time to point fingers.”

Blaine shook his head. “No, Xavier gave us bad instructions! That’s why this happened! What, does being an Alpha mean you don’t have to take responsibility when you screw up?”

I did feel guilty, mainly because Blaine wasn’t entirely wrong. I should’ve put up boundaries and made sure that the terrain was safe for everyone—and, at the very least, I should’ve known the terrain well enough that there were no surprises. My carelessness had led to Marissa getting hurt, there was no getting around that. But I wasn’t about to let Blaine call me on it right here in front of everyone.

I spoke through gritted teeth. “Yes, Blaine, I misspoke at first. But I did tell you to go right and Marissa to go left.”

“No, you didn’t,” Blaine shot back. “That’s a lie!”

I scowled at him. “I wouldn’t lie about something like that—those are definitely the directions I gave you.”

“No, they definitely are *not*,” Blaine spat. “I was waiting for the command! I would’ve heard it!”

*What? That’s not possible. I distinctly remember mind linking the directions to them. Did they not hear me?*

Then it hit me. Marissa and Blaine had never actually replied to me. And I’d barely been able to hear either of them right before the accident. There’d been a kind of static—like bad cell phone reception. Almost as if they were out of range. But that couldn’t have been the case, since we’d all stayed within Samara territory. We hadn’t been all that far away from each other—it should’ve been easy for us to mind link.

*But Blaine doesn’t look like he’s lying or trying to pass the blame. From the looks of it, he really didn’t hear my directions—and that means that Marissa probably didn’t hear them either.*

I sighed. “I should’ve been more on top of things as Alpha.”

I wasn’t like Greyson. I wasn’t above admitting when I was wrong. And besides, I was just stating a fact. But I didn’t feel the need to say anything else. Not to Blaine, at least. I needed to figure all of this out for myself, first. Something had gone wrong, and I needed to work out what.

I turned away from everyone, stepping out of the room. But as I walked into the den, Ava marched in after me and slammed the door shut behind her.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded.

I shook my head. I was starting to get a headache, and I could tell that it was going to be a bad one.

“I can’t talk right now, Ava,” I said wearily. “Give me a minute to think.”

“Are you serious?” she demanded. “You literally chased me down to talk, but now that it’s about the pack, you don’t have time?”

“Ava, you choose not to talk whenever you want, and now it’s my turn,” I said. “I just need to be alone right now.” I pinched the bridge of my nose as the pounding in my head intensified.

Ava huffed, but didn’t back down. “The Samara pack is meant to be our top priority. I believed you when you said you were all in on being Samara Alpha—but if you were telling the truth, then what was all that just now?”

“I *am* all in!” I shot back. “I told you that already! How many times do you need to hear it? Becoming Alpha of the Samara pack wasn’t something Adéluce forced me into, and you need to understand that, and understand it fast. I’m the Alpha of this pack, and I’m doing everything I can to make it strong again. And this”—I gestured between the two of us—“isn’t helping anything.”

I stepped closer to her. Almost instantly, I heard a strange ringing sound followed by an intense shot of pain from temple to temple.

I stumbled, and Ava’s expression quickly shifted from angry to concerned. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I—I don’t know,” I replied, sagging against the wall. “Maybe I’m just tired or something. I need space to think.”

Ava frowned as she stared at me. “You’re not looking too good. Are you sure you’re just tired?”

She started to reach out to press a hand against my forehead, but the closer she got, the worse the headache became. I ducked out of her reach, scared of what might happen if she actually made contact.

*This isn’t normal. It isn’t fatigue, either. What’s going on with me?*

And then a rush of horrible thoughts entered my brain.

*What if this is a curse? One final curse from Adéluce, so she can torture me ever after she’s dead? I wouldn’t put something like that past her. In fact, it would be kind of surprising if she* didn’t *do something like that.*

I fumbled for something to hold onto as the world began to tilt and shift before my eyes. The ringing in my ears was getting so bad that it washed away the sound of Ava’s worried voice.

I pressed my hands against my ears as the ringing seemed to morph into another sound altogether.

*What is that? Is that…* laughter*? Is Adéluce alive? Did I really kill her, or was that all just a hallucination? Oh shit… Is it happening again?*

“No, no, no,” I burst out. “You’re dead! You’re not here—I killed you!”

I slammed into the wall and slid down to the floor, my legs shaking.

Hands reached out to grab me and I pushed them away, half shifting to defend myself.

Finally, Ava grabbed my face and shouted, “Xavier Evers, listen to me! You’re here with me, Ava. You’re okay. Adéluce isn’t here. She’s dead and gone. I promise you that.”

I finally focused on Ava, using her voice to push away the ringing.

“Good, good,” Ava said softly. “Now just breathe—in and out.”

I kept my eyes locked with hers and did as she instructed, swallowing hard and taking long, deep breaths. Slowly but surely, I started to focus again.

Ava looked worried. “Has this happened before, X?”

I shook my head. “Kind of, I guess. Not quite this bad, but out in the woods earlier, something happened. It got in the way of my mind link with Marissa and the others.”

Ava’s concerned look deepened. “Xavier, something might be really wrong with you.”

**Episode 4832**

I was making my way across campus, and the sun was just starting to set behind the buildings. I was feeling pretty anxious after what Codsworth had said to me earlier—that he didn’t think the wolf he’d seen at the party was just any old wolf.

Codsworth asking me undesirable questions was the absolute last thing I needed right now. We’d just defeated Adéluce, and I was eager to enjoy some unprecedented peace before we fell right into another catastrophe. I wasn’t in the mood for another LIPS level issue right now.

*Could Codsworth really suspect that the wolf he saw was a werewolf? No, he didn’t say that, exactly. He used the word “shapeshifter.” That’s concerning in and of itself, but I have no idea what that term means to him. He didn’t use the term “werewolf,” so at least there’s that. I just need to figure out how much he knows. Until then, I’ll have to try not to panic.*

I looked down at my phone, where Codsworth had texted me instructions about where to find the club meeting—he’d said he’d explain everything there after I’d used the excuse of needing to go to class. I’d pushed for him to tell me everything right then and there, but he’d been adamant about waiting until this meeting, whatever it was. That was why I’d lingered on campus for so long rather than just going home, even though going home was exactly what I wanted to do after such a long, tiring day.

As I walked through campus, trying to use Codsworth’s directions to figure out which building the meeting was in, my phone rang. Greyson’s name flashed across the screen, and I quickly accepted the call.

“Hey, what’s up?”

I couldn’t help but notice how tense I was feeling, just because Greyson was calling. I was happy to hear from him, of course, but these days, I never knew what news he might be delivering. Our lives were anything but dull, and that meant that things could go off the rails at any time.

“Where are you?” Greyson asked. “You’re usually home by now.”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” I said. “I meant to text you—I’m going to a club meeting I was invited to.”

*And I’m hoping that I’m not about to learn that a human knows a bit too much about who and what we really are*,I thought to myself.

“Oh, okay. Sure,” Greyson said. “Makes sense, college activities and all. Sounds like fun. Go ahead, I won’t keep you.”

“Wait, why?” I asked quickly, before he could hang up. “Is something wrong? Why’d you call?”

I suddenly got a few flashes of Codsworth calling the authorities or LIPS and reporting the strange wolf he’d spotted at the party. If he did that, it would be only a matter of time before they descended back on the Redwood pack house. Then we’d be back to square one, all because I’d failed to stop my rowing friends from coming to a stupid party.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. I had to stop escalating things so dramatically in my mind. Greyson wouldn’t have sounded so calm and normal if he’d been calling about anything like that, anyway. There was probably nothing to worry about. But somehow, my self-pep talk didn’t do much to calm my nerves.

“Well, I’ve got some news,” Greyson said. “Thought you might want to hear it.”

My heart skipped a beat. “News? What kind of news?”

*Oh no. Is Adéluce back? Is Xavier in trouble? Is one of the Redwoods missing? Hurt? Sick?*

My head was spinning with possibilities. I knew I was being a little irrational—but on the other hand, it wasn’t like any of those things were outside the realms of possibility.

Greyson laughed, and I was encouraged by the fact that he at least sounded… Well, he sounded *not* like the world was about to go up in flames.

“Don’t worry, Cali. It’s good news,” he said. “I guess. I suppose that depends on who you are.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Well, it doesn’t sound like the news is all that good, then. What is it? Is everyone okay?”

I braced myself, waiting for Greyson’s answer and embarrassed that I was already thinking about worst-case scenarios.

Greyson sighed. “Elle and Lucian are engaged, and they’re throwing a party tonight to celebrate. I told them we’d come. All of us.”

“Oh! Oh my god!” I said, feeling a wave of excitement and then… confusion. “That’s… interesting news. Exciting! But interesting…”

It was also extremely surprising. Elle had only moved back to the palace a short time ago.

“Yeah, you’re telling me.”

“Well, uh, I guess I’ll meet you there after this. I’ll just be a little late.”

“Sounds good,” Greyson said. “And don’t rush. Be safe—and enjoy your meeting, love.”

“I will, thanks,” I said. “And I’ll be safe.”

We hung up, and I leaned into the relief I felt at the fact that the news, while shocking, wasn’t nearly as bad as I’d imagined.

As for the party, I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I’d made last night—being late and also bringing a squad of humans along for the ride. No way. *No* humans this time. Plus, bringing humans to one of Lucian’s parties would be its own unique kind of hot mess. If I did that, I’d practically be begging to expose the supernatural world. Lucian was a lot of things, but subtle wasn’t one of them.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel like I was rushing through everything in my life right now. I was overwhelmed by all the college stuff, crew practice, not to mention the upcoming regatta… And then there was everything with the pack. I wanted to be there for everyone, but I was starting to feel like I was stretching myself thin.

I shook my head. This was all stuff I needed to get a handle on—and that was doable. Hopefully.

I sighed and checked the time.

*Shit! I have to get to that meeting. If Codsworth is planning to explain himself there, I can’t miss it.*

As I searched the campus for the building he’d described, I wondered if I should’ve warned Greyson about Codsworth. The possibility of a human being onto us was something a pack Alpha needed to know about… But I also didn’t want to worry Greyson until it was absolutely necessary. This was my mess—if there really was a mess to deal with—and I would handle it on my own. At least until I was certain that I needed Greyson’s intervention. I was praying that it wouldn’t come to that.

*I just need to relax and stop blowing things out of proportion. I’m sure that whatever Codsworth wants to show or tell me is probably nothing. It’s not like it’s going to be an Adéluce level threat. And if I dealt with her, I can deal with anything.*

And if Codsworth *did* end up being onto something, all I had to do was convince him that he was wrong, and that he hadn’t seen what he thought he’d seen. I’d done that before, and I could do it again. I had, of course, once wiped Phil’s memory… But that had happened so infrequently that it didn’t seem reliable to try. The last thing I needed to add to things was failed Fae magic that would only make me look insane and make Codsworth suspicious of me.

“Dammit, where’s this meeting?” I grumbled. I wished I’d been smart enough to keep the humans from coming to the party in the first place.

Finally, after getting turned around a few times, I pushed into a dim room in the back of the science building. It was filled with taxidermized animals, and shallow frames hung from the walls, displaying dozens of strange insects. I shivered.

*What kind of meeting* is *this, exactly?*

“It’s kinda creepy, right?” someone said from behind me, her words colored with a slight southern accent.

I turned to see a pretty girl smiling at me. She looked about my age and was nursing a cup of punch that she’d plucked from the impressively stocked refreshments table behind her. She was blonde and sweet-looking, sporting a very Americana look, and was about a head shorter than I was.

I laughed. “Definitely not what I was expecting.”

Not that I’d devoted much time to wondering what to expect at the meeting. Mostly, I’d just been obsessing over the possible bomb Codsworth was about to drop on me.

“Honestly, I almost turned around and walked out when I first saw the place,” the girl said. “It’s not the most inviting setting I’ve ever been asked to come to.”

I nodded and held out a hand. “Not by a long shot. I’m Cali, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The girl took my hand, smiling sweetly. “And I’m Chessa. Nice to meet you, too.”

I was about to say something else when the door swung open and Codsworth came strutting in.

“Cali!” he said. “Glad you could make it. Oh, and hi, Chessa. Cali, Chessa is a new member. She joined during the summer semester.”

I nodded slowly, still confused about what this club actually was.

*I’m sure I’ll find out soon… I’m just hoping it isn’t Bug Club or something. I wouldn’t be into that at all.*

“Come, sit!” Codsworth said, motioning to a couple of chairs that had been set up in a circle. Three other students filtered in and sat down, too. They seemed a lot less confused than I was.

I leaned over to whisper in Codsworth’s ear. “You invited me here to explain what you were talking about, right? What’s going on?”

Codsworth grinned. “Just hold on—that’s what this is all about. All will be revealed,” he said. Then he turned to address the small group. “Hello all, and welcome to tonight’s meeting of the CCU Cryptozoology Club!”

**Episode 4833**

I was completely taken aback.

*Did he really just say* cryptozoology*? As in, the study of supernatural creatures? Oh god, is this really a thing? A club meeting full of people who are about to discuss everything humans* can’t *know?*

My hope that this whole thing would turn out to be nothing was rapidly fading. If Codsworth had invited me here, it had to be because he thought there was something strange about the wolf he’d seen at our party. Something cryptozoological. My pulse quickened as I wondered if it was possible that he’d seen more than I’d even realized, and if that were true…

The other three students and Chessa clapped excitedly. I met Chessa’s eyes, and she just smiled and shrugged.

“Thank you all for coming—and what a great turnout!” Codsworth said.

I looked around. *Are there usually* fewer *people than this?*

I supposed the paltry attendance was a good thing. Fewer people meant less damage control for me to do later. Though I was still holding out hope that I wouldn’t actually have to do any damage control at all.

“For any newcomers,” Codsworth began, throwing me a pointed look, “this club is all about opening your mind. It’s rare to find a group of like-minded individuals who are devoted to not only discussing the supernatural, but to gathering proof, too. So let’s make sure to take advantage of today’s meeting and leave more educated about the ways of the supernatural than we were before.”

“Hear, hear!” the others shouted.

I sank down lower in my seat.

Codsworth smiled and nodded like a politician addressing his supporters. “I’m in charge and running the meeting tonight because some of our other members are out on a ghost hunt right now. Let’s wish them luck! Now, let’s start our meeting and discuss, as per usual, our daily activities as they relate to our adventures in cryptozoology!”

There was another round of polite clapping.

“Daily activities? What are those, exactly?” I asked, afraid of what Codsworth was going to say next.

*Please don’t let it be an opportunity for him to tell everyone what he saw at the party. If he does that… God, what will I even do? Slap him? Tackle him to the ground? Point at him and call him a liar? That would only make these people more suspicious.*

Sitting by and watching Codsworth tell a group of eager-to-believe humans that he’d seen a werewolf at my party would be the icing on the top of this already random day.

“Great question, Cali,” Codsworth said. “Our daily activities are our theories about the origins of different rumored paranormal creatures. Here, we relay and record any sightings and personal experiences with the supernatural. It’s how we strengthen our understanding of supernatural lifeforms and cook up ways to prove their existence to the rest of the world.”

“Oh,” I said forlornly.

I’d never seen Codsworth so excited. He certainly seemed to be passionate about this stuff.

“Now, who would like to go first?” Codsworth asked. “Remember, keep an open mind.” He threw me another look. If only he knew that my mind was already wide open.

*On the one hand, this is kind of cool. I used to like hearing the occasional ghost story. They always freaked me out, but I could tell myself they weren’t real and make myself feel better. Now, I know a bit too much about ghosts, and the supernatural world in general—ghost stories are a lot less thrilling than they used to be. And right now, it’s downright stressful to know that there are people out there hungry to believe that people like Greyson and Lola and* me *exist.*

A boy raised his hand and stood up. “I’ll go!” he said excitedly. “I’ve got a good one.”

Everyone clapped again.

“Awesome, Nathan. You have the floor. What’s your story?” Codsworth asked.

“So, the other night I was in my dorm studying for an exam when I looked out the window and saw…” There was a dramatic pause that Nathan used to look everyone in the eye, really milking the moment. Finally, he said, “Mothman!”

Everyone gasped.

Chessa let out a low giggle that she quickly turned into a cough. But when she caught me looking at her, she flashed me a conspiratorial smile and shook her head.

*What is a Mothman? Is it, like, a less impressive paranormal creature or something? No one seems impressed.*

“Nathan, this is like, the *fifth* time you’ve seen Mothman. Are you sure this time?” Codsworth asked with an exasperated eye roll. “Mothman isn’t even from Oregon. It’s based in West Virginia. Everyone knows that. And I don’t think Mothman is the type to make cross-country trips.”

There was a titter of laughter that quickly spread around the circle before one of the other members shushed everyone.

Nathan frowned. “Well, I *was* kind of out of it. And I’d taken like five caffeine pills right beforehand…”

“So maybe you just saw that Richard Gere movie one too many times,” Codsworth said. “Happens to the best of us. Sometimes movies can seem so real,” he said in a slightly mocking tone.

“Shut up, Cods. Why are you such an asshole all the time?” Nathan shot back. “None of the side effects on the pill bottle had anything to do with seeing Mothman! And why would I lie?”

Codsworth sighed as the others groaned and started complaining.

“It’s not for you to decide whether he saw Mothman or not,” someone shouted.  “Everyone’s experiences are valid, Codsworth.”

“Yeah, except experiences that come from being hopped up on caffeine,” someone else threw out.

“And who’s to say that there aren’t *multiple* Mothmans, anyway?” Nathan added.

I was just glad that they were focusing on something other than werewolves. And the Mothman couldn’t possibly be a real thing… Could it? But either way, I was happy that I was here, and could try to steer the conversation away from werewolves.

I cleared my throat. “So, this Mothman—”

“Okay, back on track,” Codsworth interrupted. “Cali and I have a story to tell!”

Dread pooled in the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t believe this was actually happening. Codsworth was about to tell everyone that he’d seen a shapeshifter at my party. And with this group, it wouldn’t take them long to say the actual term—*werewolf*. Then we’d really be in deep trouble.

*He can’t share that story with a bunch of cryptozoologists! Any other group would write us off as completely bananas, but if anyone’s going to buy a story about werewolves, it’s this group. I can’t let it go down that way. I have to get ahead of this. Greyson’s safety—the whole pack’s safety—depends on it.*

“Oh yeah, we did have a great race the other day!” I interjected, my voice cracking. “We can absolutely tell you guys all about that! It was riveting. Lots of water and oars plowing through the waves. Lots of shouting. Everything you’d ever want in a story!”

Codsworth gave me a strange look, then tugged on my arm to get me to stand up with him.

“As you might have guessed, Cali’s on the crew team with me,” he said. “But we definitely aren’t going to talk about racing.” He turned to look at me. “This group doesn’t give a shit about crew, but they *do* care about something else…” His eyes went wide. “Possible cryptid sightings!”

I stood there frozen. It almost felt like I was watching a car careen out of control and there was nothing I could do to stop it. What was I going to tell Greyson when I got home? That my brilliant idea to bring a gaggle of humans to a werewolf party had blown up in my face, and now the world was going to know that werewolves existed?

“The crew team went to a party with Cali the other night,” Codsworth began.

I resisted the urge to put my head in my hands.

*This is it. It’s really happening, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it, short of blasting everyone in here with magic—and that would create an even bigger issue. Shoot! He’s really about to tell these conspiracy theorists that he saw a werewolf!*

“The party was in the woods,” Codsworth continued, “and it was a full moon—”

“Was it?” I interrupted.

“I thought the full moon wasn’t until next week,” Nathan said. “Maybe *you’re* the one making stuff up.”

Irritated, Codsworth snapped, “Be quiet! I want to finish this story!”

I was starting to panic. What was I going to do? If Codsworth actually told everyone what he thought he’d seen, all these cryptozoology kids were going to clamor for a field trip to the Redwood pack house—and I just couldn’t let that happen.

Codsworth cleared his throat loudly before continuing. “So, we’re in the woods, right? And I see this massive—”

Before I could do anything to stop Codsworth, Chessa let out a little scream and jumped up, dumping her punch all over him.

**Episode 4834**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t believe I’d let Ava force me to go see Big Mac. I’d tried to convince her that I was fine, that I was just stressed, but Ava wasn’t having it, and had insisted that we leave immediately to go see the witch—who I knew wouldn’t be happy to see us.

But, deep down, I was a bit relieved that we’d come here. I was still fairly panicked about the possibility that I’d been cursed by Adéluce again.

*Maybe Ava’s right and it’s for the best that I get checked out. Just to rule that out. There’s no point waiting around for things to get worse when Big Mac should be able to tell me exactly what’s going on.*

When we arrived at Big Mac’s, Mrs. Smith answered the door. She covered her surprise with a pleasant smile.

“Xavier, Ava, great to see you!” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Hi, Mrs. Smith. We think something’s wrong with Xavier,” Ava said. “Like, magically wrong.”

“I already solved his witch problem! Go away!” Big Mac shouted from somewhere inside. “It’s probably just gas.”

Mrs. Smith laughed kindly. “Don’t mind her, she’s just kidding. Come on in.”

She stepped aside to let us in, and a wall of Big Mac’s grumbles hit us as soon as we crossed the threshold.

Big Mac glared at us from the couch as Mrs. Smith shuffled around the kitchen, pulling down a few mugs and sitting them on the counter. “You two want tea?” she asked. “Water?”

“Tea would be nice,” Ava said.

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

Mrs. Smith put the kettle on. “So, are you two going to the engagement party?”

“Engagement party?” I asked. “What engagement party?”

My mind was already racing through the possibilities. Jay and Lola would’ve told me if they were engaged. I figured I was back in their good graces now… Well, Jay’s, at least. Lola was still keeping me at arm’s length. Marissa and Ravi were still too new to get married. Who else could it be?

*Oh god, it’s not Greyson and Cali, is it?*

I immediately shoved that thought out of my mind. I’d just seen them, after all. And even if Greyson chose to keep that kind of news from me, Cali never would.

“Oh, you didn’t get an invite?” Mrs. Smith asked. “Apparently, Lucian and Elle have gotten engaged. There’s a party at the palace. Greyson told me about it. I thought it was a little shocking and a little fast, but werewolves do move quickly when it comes to that kind of thing.”

Ava turned her attention to me. “Do you think that’s something we should attend? Just to represent the pack?”

I scowled at her. “Hell no. I don’t want to go to some flouncy Vanguard party. I’m already dealing with headaches—just being in Lucian’s presence is sure to bring on another one.”

Mrs. Smith laughed. “Oh, Lucian isn’t *that* bad. And I’m sure the Samara pack got an invitation. It doesn’t seem like Lucian not to invite the Alpha and Luna of a neighboring pack. You know he’s big on custom and tradition.”

At the words “Alpha” and “Luna,” I felt the flare of my low-grade headache returning.

“I don’t really care either way,” I said. “Best wishes to Lucian and Elle, but I don’t need to be there in person to bask in the glow of their bad decision.”

I was annoyed, and my burgeoning headache wasn’t helping matters. I knew I sounded like a grump, but I was sick of feeling like shit.

“I know it’s bad timing, but maybe we should go,” Ava pressed. “We need to keep our alliances strong, for the sake of the pack.”

I heaved a loud sigh. Unfortunately, Ava wasn’t wrong.

“Fine, we’ll go,” I said. “But only for a little while. Just to make an appearance. I’m not in a party mood. Are you?”

“I’m not,” Ava admitted. “But if we’ve been invited, the pack is kind of obligated to go. It would be bad form not to.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t give a shit about bad form, especially when it came to Lucian, but I kept that to myself. I didn’t want to argue in front of Big Mac and Mrs. Smith… Though it wasn’t like they hadn’t seen Ava and me at odds before.

Once we’d settled on the couch and Ava had her tea, Big Mac crossed her arms and said, “Now, spill. What new trouble have you gotten yourself into, now? Did you manage to offend *another* vampire-witch hybrid?”

Big Mac chuckled at her own joke, and I was surprised to see Mrs. Smith struggling to hide a smile.

*I suppose she wouldn’t be with Big Mac if she didn’t think she was funny—even if her joke was at my expense.*

“I don’t know. It could be nothing,” I said, deciding to ignore Big Mac’s dig. Enduring her sharp personality was pretty much the price of doing business with her.

Ava scowled. “It didn’t look like nothing, trust me. And I’m not letting you hide things anymore, X. We’re solving this right away, not letting it fester.”

I sighed. “My mind linking was all wonky this afternoon. It was full of static, and the connection sounded like it was broken or something. And now I’m getting these crazy headaches. Bad ones. I have one right now, even.”

Big Mac nodded and walked over to touch my forehead. I didn’t feel any sparks of magic or anything, so I wondered what she was doing.

“You’re a little warm,” Big Mac said after a while. “Probably a cold or something. Take a few Tylenol and you’ll be fine.” She returned to her spot in a comfortable looking armchair and gave us a dismissive wave. “Thanks for stopping by. Don’t let the doorknob hit you in the ass on the way out!”

“Wait,” Ava said. “You didn’t even *do* anything!” She grabbed my hand, as if in solidarity. “Xavier needs your help.”

I groaned as the pain in my head suddenly increased. My temples were throbbing with stabbing pain. I winced and pulled away from Ava, and a flash of hurt crossed her face.

Big Mac leaned forward in her seat and narrowed her eyes at me. Then she got up and walked back to my side.

“Do that again,” she said. “I want to see something.”

“Do what?” I asked, wincing from the pain in my head. It wasn’t getting any better.

“Not you, her,” Big Mac said. “Ava, touch him again.”

Ava looked confused, but she took my hand again.

Almost immediately, the ringing in my head started back up, and I groaned as the pain began to build. I felt like I was moments from passing out.

Big Mac nodded. “Hmm. Interesting. Very interesting.”

She walked over to a chest of drawers and pulled out a few crystals of different sizes and shapes. She arranged them in a square around me, then she rested her hands on my temples and closed her eyes.

There was a weird humming sound, and then the ringing started again. I tried to pull away, but Big Mac wouldn’t let go.

*Damn. She’s stronger than I remember.*

The ringing got louder and louder until I finally shouted, “Stop it!”

Big Mac released me and stepped back. “That’s very interesting indeed.”

“What is it?” Ava asked. “What’s interesting? Is he okay? Is it Adéluce?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Nope, not Adéluce. There seems to be a conflict within Xavier. It’s pulling him in two different directions.”

*Tell me something I don’t know*,I thought to myself. *I* always *feel like I’m about to be torn in two—Cali and Ava, the Samaras and the Redwoods…*

“But why would that give me headaches and affect my ability to mind link?” I asked.

“The headaches are probably just an enhanced stress reaction,” Big Mac said. “As for the shoddy mind linking, think about it—your mind linking abilities are tied directly to your Alpha role, and to your wolf. But your wolf seems to be disoriented right now—almost like it’s fighting against itself.”

Big Mac glared over at Ava for a few beats before she pinned me to the spot with a pointed stare.

 “Can you think of anything, anything at all, that might be pulling you in two directions?” she asked. “Anything that might be directly affecting your heart?”

I glanced at the witch. “Okay, okay! I got it the first time.”

I looked over at Ava. I’d been torn between Ava and Cali for a long time now, so it was strange that I’d started experiencing these symptoms out of the blue… But Big Mac’s theory still tracked. I was literally straddling the line between two different women, two different packs—between the life I used to have and the life I was living now.

Then I had a horrible realization.

“Is this some kind of Alpha *due destini* thing?” I demanded. “Is someone going to die if I don’t figure this shit out?”

**Episode 4835**

**Xavier**

Big Mac plied me with an appraising look, cocking her head to the side. She hesitated for a few beats, obviously thinking her answer through. I tried not to groan in frustration. I didn’t want to push her and make her mad enough that she refused to tell me anything, but I was anxious to find out what this whole thing meant.

Finally, Big Mac leaned forward. “Maybe.”

“What does that even *mean*?” I exploded. “You can’t just say ‘maybe,’ all flippantly like that. This is a life-or-death situation!”

Beside me, Ava tensed.

“I meant what I said,” Big Mac retorted. “*Maybe*. You know the definition of that word, right? It means I’m not sure. I mean, I’m not saying the words ‘*due destini*’ because I don’t think whatever’s going on with you is the same as what’s going on with Cali. But I’m also not entirely sure what it is. It’s probably got more to do with the stress you’re putting on your wolf than anything else.”

“That’s not very helpful,” I grumbled. “Maybe the people I love will die if I don’t get my shit together, or maybe they won’t!” I shrugged, trying to mimic the matter-of-fact tone of Big Mac’s reply. As usual, she was unmoved.

I thought back to the time when my wolf had made a lot of choices for me—and how hard it had been to fight him. I didn’t want to go back to that. If my wolf was confused, then I needed to get him un-confused quickly, before he started making my life into more of a mess than he already had.

Then something else occurred to me.

“When I was in the demon world, I had to exchange a sliver of the essence of my humanity to make it back to the mortal world,” I said. “Do you think this might have anything to do with that?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Nope. Don’t think so. This is something else altogether. Demons have a lot of powers, but they can’t mess with a werewolf’s inner beast—at least as far as I know.”

“Okay… So what do we do?” Ava asked. “Is there a spell or something that’ll fix this? Some kind of potion he can drink?”

“No,” Big Mac said. “I wish there *was* some kind of easy way out, but all I can recommend is that Xavier do the hard work of figuring out the division within him, or it’s not going to stop. This isn’t a magical issue. The way I see it, it seems like more of a psychological problem. And that means that the only person who can fix it is Xavier.”

My head still pounding, I looked up at Big Mac with pleading eyes. “Really? You don’t have anything at all? The only way to stop this grinding feeling in my head is to make some kind of big breakthrough or have some mentally healing moment?”

I dropped my head into my hands, barely holding back from shouting in frustration. Apparently, I’d beaten Adéluce only to be forced to contend with even more bullshit.

“Don’t worry, Xavier. You’ll figure it out,” Ava said, stroking my back—which caused the pain in my head to skyrocket.

I looked up at Ava, resisting the urge to shrug off her touch. I felt like shit right now, and her closeness wasn’t helping, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings any more than I already had.

Frowning, Big Mac got up and rummaged around in a desk behind us before she returned with a small vial. She handed it to me.

“I have a small amount of an herbal elixir that might help stem the pain. But that’s *all* I have, and getting more would be a huge pain in the ass, so this is all I can give you. And *no*, I’m not going to risk my life finding the ingredients to make more, so don’t ask.” She smiled pleasantly. “Use it judiciously, and you’re welcome.”

“Thanks?” I said, holding up the vial. “How do I use it?”

“Just put a few drops under your tongue.”

I pulled out the stopper and turned to look up at Ava. She shrugged and gestured for me to try it.

I opened my mouth and hovered the dropper under my tongue, letting the liquid fall. The effect was almost immediate, and the pain dissipated.

*I think it’s working*,I mind linked to Ava. Then I grinned. “Thanks, Big Mac. No pain at all.” Testing it out, I reached out to grab Ava’s hand. “Wow. Still no pain.”

Big Mac moved back to her recliner, eyeing our clasped hands. “Like I said. And don’t forget, I don’t have any more of that, so you’ll need to work through whatever it is that’s making you feel this way. That’s the only permanent solution to your pain.”

I nodded. “I know. I’ll deal with it.”

*Though I don’t have the slightest fucking clue how. What am I supposed to do? Why can’t I just wallow in indecision without becoming physically ill, like everyone else on the planet? Talk about bad luck…*

Ava had my hand in a death grip, like she could tell what I was thinking.

“The door’s that way,” Big Mac said suddenly. “Please don’t come back with more problems soon.”

Ava rounded on Big Mac, bristling, but I yanked her toward the door.

*Don’t say a word. You should be used to her by now*, I mind linked.

“Thanks, Big Mac, bye, Mrs. Smith,” I called as we left.

Ava and I shifted and bolted back toward the Samara pack house, both of us lost in our own thoughts for the first half of the short journey.

*It’s good that Big Mac at least had a short-term solution for you*,Ava said as we bounded into the yard. *But do you have any ideas about what you’re going to do to stop it for good? I don’t want to see you in pain every time you’re near the Samaras… Or me.*

I decided to be honest with her. Ava always got the truth out of me, one way or another, so there was really no point in trying to keep my indecision from her.

*I have no idea what to do yet, but trust that I’m going to figure this out. I won’t let this impact my role as Samara Alpha. I need you to know that.*

*And I’m here for you, X, and I’ll do whatever you need me to do, too.* Ava hesitated for a moment before adding, *I don’t think we should tell the pack.*

I was relieved to hear her say that.

*Agreed*, I said. *I’m glad we’re both on the same page.*

*We are. And I hope that you know that even while we’re dealing with our relationship… stuff… I told you once before that I won’t turn my back on you as Alpha, and I meant it.*

*Thanks, Ava*, I said. *And thanks for making me go see Big Mac. I appreciate that. I don’t think I would’ve done it without you pushing me. And I appreciate you, too. I hope you know that.*

*I love you, Xavier*,she said. *Even when we’re fighting. I don’t want to see you hurting. It breaks my heart to see you in pain.*

*Same*, I replied.

We shifted back to human before climbing the stairs to the porch.

“What’s that?” Ava asked, pointing to an envelope sticking out of the door.

I already knew exactly what it was, and I groaned as I pulled it out. The envelope was heavy, and held shut with a wax seal.

Ava shook her head and rolled her eyes. “That guy is so extra.”

I sighed. “Right? I’m struggling to think of anyone more extra than him, werewolf or otherwise.”

I ripped open the envelope and pulled out the garish invite to Lucian and Elle’s engagement party.

“How’d they even get this printed so fast?” Ava asked, staring down at the glittering invitation with wonder.

I laughed. “No one knows the answer to that but the princeling and his minions—but I’m pretty sure he has a last-minute invite guy on the payroll.”

Ava sighed. “I guess I should go get ready,” she said, walking into the house. “Now that we have to go to this stupid thing, I might as well use it as an excuse to get all dolled up.”

I looked up at her. “And I can’t wait to see it. I’ll be up in a few minutes. I just want to check in on Marissa.”

Ava was clearly happy about the compliment—and my concern for her friend. She even seemed slightly surprised that I had plans to check on Marissa, which showed that I still had a lot to prove to her when it came to my dedication to the pack. Marissa and I weren’t always on the same page, and our relationship had gotten off to a rocky start, but she was a Samara, and that meant I was directly responsible for her well-being.

Ava went upstairs and I moved toward the living room, only to be cornered by a furious Knox.

“I can tell you’re hiding something!” the shrimp shouted. “What is it?”

**Episode 4836**

“I am so, so sorry!” Chessa squealed, her cheeks red with embarrassment. “It’s just that I thought I saw a spider on you, Kurt! It looked like the biting kind.”

“What?” I asked, looking around. “Who the hell is Kurt?”

*Oh god.* Codsworth *is Kurt. I didn’t even realize that was his name—the crew goes by last names all the time!*

“*I’m* Kurt, Cali. And it’s fine, Chessa. Accidents happen,” Codsworth said stiffly. He gestured to another member of the club. “Larry, why don’t you tell your story next? I’m going to go clean up. I’ll regale you all with my story when I return.”

I felt so grateful for the spill that I could’ve kissed Chessa. She’d effectively cut Codsworth’s little exposé short—and just in the nick of time. The very last thing we needed was more humans snooping around. This group seemed harmless enough, but better safe than sorry.

Codsworth leapt out of his seat and hurried off to the bathroom.

“Cali, would you mind helping me clean this up?” Chessa asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Chessa and I left to fetch some paper towels from the bathroom.

“Guess we’re on cleanup duty,” I said.

“If you want, I can do it myself,” Chessa said. “I’m the one who spilled.”

“No, I’ll help,” I said. “Besides, I’ve spilled a *lot* of stuff. I’m kind of an expert at the cleanup part.”

We headed back into the room with the paper towels and started to clean up. Larry had finished his story—which must’ve been a short one—and the meeting was already starting to break up.

“I need to get back home and check on my guinea pig, anyway,” Nathan said. “My roommate just sent me a pretty distressing text, and it sounds like Munchkin needs me. There’s no rest for a guinea pig dad.”

Nathan hurried out, leaving only Larry, who started gathering his things and shot us a friendly smile. “Good luck with that. Good thing it’s not carpet, eh? See you next time?”

“Sure,” I replied, wondering if there would be a next time—and hoping that Chessa would be there with another cup of punch, ready to dump it in Codsworth’s lap to save him from a spider. I laughed at the thought, thankful all over again for her impeccable timing. I wondered if I would’ve thought to do that if I’d had a cup of punch in my hand.

“So… What did you think of the meeting?” Chessa asked, once we were alone.

I hesitated, trying to figure out how to put it nicely. “It was… interesting?”

“It was ridiculous,” Chessa said bluntly. “I could hardly keep a straight face. The Mothman? Give me a break!”

I laughed. “Yeah, okay, it was kind of strange.”

“I didn’t really think that it would be anything,” Chessa said, “but I had to check it out. I like to explore new things, and this was definitely something new.”

“New for me, too,” I replied. “Sorry if this sounds weird—I mean, I don’t know you at all—but you don’t strike me as someone who believes in this kind of stuff.”

“What, you mean stuff like Mothman and Bigfoot?” Chessa asked innocently.

I grinned. “Yeah.”

“Or do you mean werewolves and vampires and Fae?”

I froze. There was something in Chessa’s tone that gave me pause. It almost sounded like she wasn’t joking anymore.

I looked up from the mess of soaked paper towels in my hand to see that Chessa was still watching me.

“Is there a difference?” I asked slowly. “I mean, they’re all made up, right? Straight out of books and movies.”

Chessa narrowed her eyes ever so slightly. “Do you really believe that?” She lifted a knowing brow. “Like, really?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

*Wait a minute, does this girl really know about Fae and werewolves? Or is she just talking about the versions from books and movies? And if she does believe the truth, then how? Why?*

I lowered my voice. “What makes you think they’re any different?”

Chessa just shrugged and went back to wiping up the spill. “Just things I’ve seen. And heard. They’ve made me a believer.”

I tittered an uneasy laugh. “I don’t know. I never really bought into any of that stuff myself.”

*Here’s hoping I’ve miraculously turned into a convincing liar…*

“Any specific reason why you think they’re real?” I asked. “I mean, no one has actually seen that kind of stuff. Otherwise, it would be all over the news.”

Chessa looked thoughtful. “Well, I think there’s a reason why lots of people have never seen them before. And there’s a reason why they stay hidden and in secret. And that secret isn’t really something amateurs like this group would know how to handle. You know?”

I was acutely aware of how serious Chessa was being right now, and it was making me uneasy.

*Damn, this girl is majorly intense. I think I read her wrong before.*

“Sure…” I said slowly.

“I was skeptical when I first joined—I wasn’t sure if this was a legit club or not,” Chessa said.

“And… Are they?” I asked.

“Some are, some aren’t.”

I nodded as I continued to clean.

I stood up to throw away the paper towels, just as Chessa said, “You didn’t want Kurt to tell that story, did you?”

I turned back to look at Chessa as realization dawned. “Oh my god. You spilled that punch on purpose? There wasn’t a spider?”

Chessa smiled and shrugged. “Seemed like you were freaking out. I was trying to help. You seem like a nice person. I know people can get really excited about their stories, especially in a group like this, but if you’re not ready to share, then you’re not ready.” She stood up and patted me on the arm. “What I’ve learned is that it all comes in time. Sometimes you have to process things first, you know?”

“Um, yeah, totally,” I said lamely. “Thanks so much. I really do appreciate your, um, your help with that. I’m just not ready. That’s all.”

Chessa smiled. “Believe me—soon, you’ll accept what’s really out there. You’ll open your mind. And then you’ll see.”

I nodded, trying to ignore how ominous that sounded.

“In the meantime,” Chessa continued, her tone noticeably lighter, “maybe I’ll see you around campus.”

She gave me a jaunty little salute and left.

Codsworth came back into the room, looking pretty annoyed at the giant punch stain on the crotch of his pants. He looked around.

“What happened? Where is everyone?” he asked. “I know I took a while, but why’d they all leave?”

“Oh, they all had some stuff come up and the meeting ended, I guess. Sorry.”

Codsworth sighed. “It’s fine. I was just so excited about sharing our discovery with everyone.”

“About that,” I said. “I feel bad saying this, but that wolf you—*we—*saw… It was just a wolf. Nothing special about it, as far as I could see.”

Codsworth made a face. “No way. It was huge! I’ve seen wolves before—like in books and on TV and stuff—but never the size of that one. There was something strange about it.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t that huge. It looked normal to me. Er… Not that I see a lot of wolves. In person, I mean. I’ve seen them on TV, like you have. And pictures…” I trailed off awkwardly.

“No, that thing was the size of a bear! Huge!” Codsworth said, holding his arms out wide to communicate just how big it had been.

I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t.”

I felt really bad for gaslighting him, but what else could I do? Admit that it had been one of my friends howling in celebration because we could finally relax after having slaughtered a vampire-witch?

“I’m sorry, Codsworth,” I said. “I know you were excited about what you thought you saw, but I just don’t think it was anything out of the ordinary.”

Codsworth sighed and dropped down into one of the chairs. “You probably think this whole club is a joke.”

I smiled. “No, I think it’s cool that you have something you love so much. And honestly, I don’t mind hearing the stories. I like them—even that one about the Mothman.”

Codsworth rolled his eyes and held up a hand. “Please, don’t patronize me. That was a load of caffeine-induced bullshit.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But I just don’t think any of that stuff is real. That’s all. There are probably all kinds of explanations for everything you guys think you’ve seen. Not to mention all the times my eyes have played tricks on me, making me think I saw things that I really didn’t see. It’s normal.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I get it,” Codsworth said, waving me off.

I could tell that I’d gotten him down, and until this moment, I’d actually felt like I was starting to make a connection with him.

“But if it’s okay,” I said, “I’d like to come to another meeting.”

Codsworth brightened. “Really? You would?”

“Definitely,” I said firmly.

And when I really thought about it, I realized I didn’t actually have a choice. I had to keep coming to meetings—if only to make sure he didn’t expose the pack.

**Episode 4837**

**Artemis**

“And what exactly do you mean by that?” I asked Marius. “And why didn’t you tell me any of that from the beginning?” I grimaced before I asked my next question. “And what does this mean for me? Am I in danger, too? Do I have to worry about people coming for me in the process of coming for you? All while I’m trying to deal with my own search?”

This was just the type of thing that had made me hesitant to get mixed up with Marius again. He was mysterious—and full of lies. You never quite knew what you were getting into when you got tangled up with him, and now he’d potentially dragged me into a line of fire that I would’ve easily avoided if I’d kept working alone.

“You know what?” I hissed. “You’re really becoming a huge pain in my ass, and I’m over it!”

“Ari, calm down,” Marius said as he shrank away from me.

“Don’t you *dare* tell me to calm down!” I burst out. “I can’t believe you’d do this. I thought you’d changed. I thought—”

“You’re not in danger, Artemis,” Marius interrupted. “This won’t hurt you—or even *affect* you—at all. I just…” He hesitated and looked away from me.

“What?” I pressed. “What could you possibly have to say, here? How can you possibly make up for dragging me into a mess that has nothing to do with me? Say it! Say something that’ll make this better. I dare you!”

“What I’m trying to say is that I know you’re an incredibly skilled bounty hunter,” he said. “Seeing you in that alley, it was the first time I’d felt hopeful in a long time. If anyone can help me, it’s you. There’s no one else I’d rather have at my side.” He sighed and started ringing his hands. “I need you, Artemis.”

I ignored the feeling his words gave me, still steaming over the fact that he hadn’t been honest with me. It was just like him to hold back the truth when it benefitted him. I was angry about his deception—that was for sure—but I also wasn’t at all surprised by it.

“Artemis, I’m sorry,” he said. “I never meant to lie to you. I just wanted you on my side. That’s all. And I know I’m not going to survive this—and if I do, it’ll only be because of your help. You were right. I should’ve told you everything from the beginning. I’m an asshole, I know.”

Marius paused and seemed to steel himself, squaring his shoulders and looking at me dead-on.

“I understand if this is too much for you and you want out,” he said. “I’ll tell you what I know about Kadmos, either way.”

I just stood there, staring back at him with no idea what to say. Honestly, I’d never seen this side of Marius before. He’d always kept himself hidden behind layer after layer of deception—it was almost impossible to get any truths out of him. And even then, you never knew if it was the actual truth or just *his* version of the truth, which always happened to be eerily similar to an outright lie. This was as honest as I’d ever seen him. It was a new side of him—and one that I wasn’t entirely prepared for.

*Lie or not, I can’t just let him walk into something he won’t walk out of. He’s annoying and conniving and dishonest, but that doesn’t mean I want to see him dead.*

I glared at him. “*Fine*. I’ll help you with your bounty.”

Marius let out a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you so much. You won’t regret—”

I jabbed a finger into his chest, sending him reeling back a few steps. “And it’s not because of any of that stuff you said—it’s only because I honor my agreements. I’m not like you. I have a code.”

Marius raised his hands, nodding quickly. “I get it. Thank you, Artemis. That’s all I can ask of you, and I’m just happy that you agreed, whatever your reasons. You’re too good to me.”

“Don’t I know it,” I grumbled. “But if you lie to me again, it won’t be pretty. And remember—I *mean* what I say.”

“I hear you loud and clear,” he said quickly. “I’m on the straight and narrow from here on out—at least as far as you’re concerned… So, do you want that information about Kadmos now? Because—”

“No, I want to get out of here first,” I interrupted.

*I’m just not certain that my grandmother is someone I can trust. I need to put as much distance between us as possible before I dig into whatever information Marius has on Kadmos.*

I grabbed at Marius’s hand and pulled him along behind me, heading up the stairs and toward the exit. We walked fast, ignoring the guards posted in the halls—though I could feel their angry stares as we passed. We needed to get the hell out of here before one of them snapped and stopped us from leaving.

The exit had just come into view when I caught a glimpse of my grandmother through one of the open doors. But I didn’t stop and she didn’t ask me to, even though she’d seen me, just as I’d seen her.

Hera gave me a quick nod, and I let out a breath. I was glad not to have to talk to her with Marius listening in.

We finally made it to the huge entry doors, then pushed through them and out into the cool air. Wasting no time, we raced back into the cover of the woods.

“Damn, it feels great to be out of that place,” Marius breathed. “I thought that might be the end for me.”

“And it very nearly was,” I snapped.

We were quiet for a while as we threaded our way through the thick trees. Being back in the woods reminded me of what I’d been doing when we got caught. I shuddered at the memory.

*I can’t believe we were making out in the woods like a couple of teenagers. Not only should I have kept my mouth to myself—especially when it comes to Marius—but we were distracted enough that we didn’t hear a bunch of Hera’s guards sneaking up on us.*

Admittedly, though, getting swept into my grandmother’s palace had ended up being a blessing in disguise. If we hadn’t gotten caught, I had to wonder if Marius ever would’ve come clean. Now, I had him right where I wanted him, and I also knew to be a bit more vigilant about traveling with him, since he had a bunch of Dark Fae on his tail.

Honestly, it was no surprise that I’d fallen for Marius’s charms. He had a way of pulling you into his emotional whirlwind. One minute, you were minding your own business, and the next, you were already sucked into whatever he was doing.

And I hadn’t exactly *hated* the kissing. Marius was a good kisser. Always had been. But I had to keep my guard up. I had to be careful.

Marius interrupted my thoughts. “Can I ask you a question?”

I shrugged.

“How did you manage to get out of the Wrenthorn estate without ending up in the dungeon yourself? Looked to me like you had free run of the place. How? Not that I’m one to talk about secrets, but… You can tell me, you know. Did you use your magic to get out?”

“No, I didn’t need to,” I snapped before I could think to lie.

Marius reared back. “Okay, okay, I get it. I’m sure in part because of your morals and code, right? We all have ’em.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “What do you mean, ‘we’? Since when do you have morals or a code?”

“I’m hurt that you’d even say that,” Marius said, though he didn’t look all that hurt. “Come on, Ari—you don’t have to hide the truth from me. We had a breakthrough back there, didn’t we? We can be honest with each other, now. Tell me. How did you get out?”

“Marius,” I said, hoping he heard the warning in my voice.

“What?” he asked. “I’m just curious. And can you blame me? They took me right into the dungeons, no questions asked. Boom bam bang clank! But you? They took you somewhere else. Where did they take you? Who did you meet? Who did you talk to? Better yet, how did you convince them to let me go? We both just waltzed right out of there! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Marius—”

“And you didn’t use your magic—sorry, you didn’t *need* to. All high and mighty. So, what happened? How did you get us both out of there if you didn’t use your magic?”

Marius finally stopped talking, and something odd flashed across his face before he looked at me with a sort of dawning understanding.

“Wait a minute,” he said slowly. “I know how you did it. You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

**Episode 4838**

**Xavier**

I stared at Knox, who was absolutely seething.

“Who the hell do you think you are, questioning your Alpha like this?” I demanded, through gritted teeth.

Knox sniffed. “Alpha? Where? You haven’t been acting like much of an Alpha, lately.”

My hackles went up, and I squared my shoulders and stepped right into Knox’s space. I easily towered over him, and Knox had to crane his neck to look me in the eye.

With a cold calm, I said, “Knox, I’ve given you a lot of leeway lately. I’ve let you act out. I’ve let you work through your feelings—but this has to stop.”

Knox started to push back, but I planted a heavy hand against his chest, holding him still. It was clearly a power move, and it worked. Knox deflated.

“I need you to be a strong member of this pack, Knox,” I said. “I can’t have you questioning me time and time again. It’s getting old, and it’s majorly disrespectful. Get this through your head: *I am your Alpha*. You will treat me with the respect that position entails, and I will do what I’ve always done—tell you exactly what you need to know, nothing more, nothing less. And you’d better remember that the next time you feel the urge to question any of my decisions.”

Knox strained against my hold, and I moved my hand from his chest to his shoulder and tightened my grip.

“You were making so much progress, Knox, and I was glad to see it,” I said. “I don’t want to see you backslide into your old ways.” I leaned forward so that we were nearly nose-to-nose. In a quiet voice, I added, “Because that would be a problem, Knox. And you don’t want any more problems with me, do you?”

Without waiting for an answer, I removed my hand from Knox’s shoulder and then shoved past him with a body-rattling shoulder check.

Knox stayed quiet as I popped my head into the living room. Marissa was sleeping soundly on the couch, and I was glad to see that she looked a lot better than she had earlier.

Passing by Knox again—he still hadn’t said a word—I went upstairs to join Ava in our bedroom. I opened the door just in time to see her pulling on her dress. Her movements stuttered when I walked inside.

“I’ll be done in a second, then you can have the room all to yourself,” she said.

I leaned against the doorjamb, blocking the exit. “I don’t want you to go. We need to talk about everything we weren’t talking about before Big Mac’s.”

Ava arched an eyebrow at me and uttered a falsely calm, “Oh?”

“We can’t mingle with the rest of the pack or attend this party tonight without the two of us being on the same page,” I said calmly. “That means we need to talk—whether we really want to or not.”

“For the pack?” Ava asked, her voice flat.

“Yeah. For the pack,” I said. But we both knew that I meant more than that.

Ava let out a gush of breath and slid her earrings—gleaming gold hoops—into her ears before turning to face me. “Fine. Let’s talk.”

I took a deep breath, knowing that I had to choose my words carefully. No matter how I felt about Cali—and my feelings for her were stronger than ever—I didn’t want to hurt Ava. In fact, that was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I never meant for any of this to happen,” I blurted out. “Not like this. And I don’t want us to keep getting so twisted up in our feelings for each other. I want to make it very clear that if I didn’t have feelings for you—if I didn’t care deeply for you—I wouldn’t be here.”

Ava tilted her chin up and met my eyes. “No. You’d never do anything you didn’t want to do, would you?”

I smirked. “I could say the same thing about you.”

Ava rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh. “I hate fighting with you. It’s literally the worst.”

My smile deepened. “I don’t know. I think you kind of love it.”

I crossed the space between us, and Ava twisted around, offering me the zipper at her back. But rather than zip her up, I pushed down the shoulders of her dress so that it slipped off her body and pooled at her feet.

Ava looked at me over her shoulder, both eyebrows arched. “I thought you were going to zip me up?”

I pressed a kiss to her neck. “Why would I want to do that?”

Ava turned around in my arms and kissed me, her warm tongue instantly darting into my mouth and swirling deep. My hands trailed from her shoulders to her back and down to her waist, and I gripped her hard as she hissed into my mouth.

Losing all awareness of everything but Ava and the amazing sensation of her body melded to mine, I backed her against the wall and held her there, tangling my fingers into her long, thick hair and tugging gently as I battled her tongue for dominance—and won.

“Mmm, feels like you’re trying to eat me alive,” Ava moaned out when I pulled my lips from hers and bent down to drag them across her breasts.

“I would if I could,” I murmured.

I reached down and tunneled my hands beneath the soft, silky fabric of her panties, letting out a pleased sigh when my fingers met the slick warmth of her sex. Bringing my mouth back up to cover hers again, I plunged two fingers deep inside her and dragged my thumb along her clit, pulling a whimper from her lips.

I turned her around, then shoved her panties down her thighs and left them there. Then—using my knees since my hands were busy caressing her center and diving deep into the velvety heat between her thighs—I nudged her legs apart.

“Xavier, I want you now,” Ava gasped out.

Wordlessly, I took my cock in my hand and, after slowly pulling my fingers out of her fluttering canal, I plunged inside her, not stopping until my hips met the soft swell of her ass.

Ava moaned and slammed a hand against the door, arching her back and pulling me in deeper.

“You ready?” I growled, holding still, knowing that I wasn’t going to be gentle—and that Ava wouldn’t want me to be.

“I’m ready,” she said, her voice a husky growl. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

I took both of her wrists in my hand and pinned them to the door, and then I retreated from her depths before slamming all the way back in, making the door rattle on its hinges.

“Yes, Xavier. *Harder*,” Ava breathed.

I obliged, pumping in and out, transfixed by the way her perfect ass vibrated with every retreat and advance, loving the sounds that erupted from her soft lips.

I pulled her away from the door so that her back was right up against me and snaked a hand between her legs, playing with her clit while my lips searched for, and found, hers. I kissed her deeply, holding back my own groans as I increased my speed. Our bodies moved together, her breasts were soft and heavy in my hands… And then she grabbed my hair, pulling as hard as she could.

“You coming?” I asked, already knowing the answer. I could feel her pulsing around my cock, urging me toward my own orgasm.

I pressed her against the door again as her cries tore through the room. “Xavier, fuck—don’t stop.”

“God, *fuck*,” I growled, wrapping my arms around her waist as I came, my knees going so weak that I had to stumble over to the bed, where we collapsed together and rode out the last jolts of our release.

“Shit, I needed that,” I panted out, pressing another trail of kisses along the back of her neck.

Ava smiled as she pulled away, tousling her hair so that it cascaded perfectly over her shoulders before she got up from the bed and stepped back into her dress.

“Really, no shower?” I asked with a laugh.

“I want everyone to know exactly what we did.” She turned around and looked at me over her shoulder. “Okay, now you really do need to zip this thing up, or we’re going to miss the party.”

I hefted myself out of bed and laughed as I pulled her zipper all the way up. “You know I wouldn’t mind missing it—but I know we have to go,” I added quickly, before Ava could protest.

I went to our closet and grabbed a suit for myself, quickly putting it on. When I came back out, Ava was holding Big Mac’s glass vial in her hand.

“I wonder if you should take another dose of this before we go…”

I reached for it. “That might be a good idea. I only took a tiny dose earlier.”

Vial in hand, I held the stopper over my open mouth and squeezed out a few drops.

“Whoa, how many did you just take?” Ava asked. “Big Mac said that you only needed a few.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Okay…” she said, looking dubious. But then she shrugged. “So… I was thinking. Can we lay out some ground rules for tonight?”

“Ground rules? What kind of ground rules?” I asked.

“Without rules in place, how do I know you won’t take off with Cali the second we get to the party?” she asked, almost defiantly.

I sighed. “Ava, I’m not going to do that.”

“Good,” she said briskly. “So that means you won’t mind making a promise to me. No secret meetings with Cali. Agreed?”

**Episode 4839**

I was still feeling pretty stressed out about the whole Codsworth thing, despite my best efforts to put it out of my mind. I cursed under my breath when I realized that I was speeding down the road, completely distracted. I slowed down, took a deep breath, and turned off the sound system.

*Silence. Yes. That’s exactly what I need right now.*

I needed a moment to think about everything that was going on. I hated lying to Codsworth—I hated lying to anyone about anything—but I didn’t like the idea that he might eventually tell the story of what he’d seen at the pack house. It brought back too many uncomfortable memories of the trouble Dick Wigbert and LIPS had caused, and I didn’t want any humans knowing anything about our pack.

*I have to do what I have to do. I can’t risk of putting so many people I care about in danger. I’ll just keep going to the Cryptozoology Club meetings for now and find ways to distract them. That way, I can stay on top of what they know, and maybe even push them off track if I have to. It’s better for them if they never find out the truth, anyway.*

Plus, I didn’t actually mind the idea of going to the meetings. The club members seemed cool, and the stories would probably be entertaining, if nothing else. Hanging out with people who were still in the dark about just how strange the world really was actually made me feel kind of nostalgic—it brought me back to a simpler time, when I was just like them.

*Clueless.*

I laughed to myself as I glanced at my phone, doing a quick check to see how far I was from the Vanguard palace. I’d barely slid my phone back into my bag before my mind inevitably drifted back to thoughts of the club.

*It’ll be good to know what humans think they’re finding in the area. I could be like a spy for the Redwood pack—sabotage any predictable sightings before humans can spread the word, or contain the rumors after the sightings happen. I should really be thanking Codsworth for alerting me to this group. Not that I can* *thank him without blowing our cover. Ugh, this is all such a delicate balance!*

Before long, I drove through the palace gates, which had been flung open and strung with decorations for tonight’s festivities. I drove along the winding path to the palace, which had been decorated with floral portraits of Lucian and Elle. They were in different poses and positions, and there were so many of them that I was super weirded out. I’d never seen anything like it.

*What the hell is even going on here? And how did they get flowers arranged to the point where they literally look like them? Is there magic at play here, or does Lucian just have access to the best florists in the world?*

I figured it was the latter. With the type of money Lucian had, and his willingness to throw it around—especially when it came to his lavish parties—he could easily afford the best of everything.

But the flower portraits were so strange and over-the-top that I wanted to laugh. It was so beyond anything Greyson and I would ever do—or even want.

I pulled up in front of the busy valet station and handed the valet my keys, just as I spotted Greyson climbing out of a car up ahead.

I called out to him, feeling overwhelmed by how handsome he looked. He was decked out in a chocolate-colored linen blazer and a white shirt, as well as crisply pressed tan slacks and a white leather belt that matched his loafers. Every single strand of his thick, dirty blond hair was in place, and his chiseled jaw had been shaved smooth.

Suddenly, I felt out of place—and why wouldn’t I? Greyson looked like he’d stepped out of the pages of an upscale fashion magazine, and I was dressed in jeans and a ratty old sweater that I’d picked up from my closet floor this morning and pulled on without even checking my reflection afterwards.

*Shoot. Why didn’t I stop at the house and change? I should’ve expected that any party at Lucian’s would be a black-tie event. He never misses a chance to be flashy and fancy.*

Greyson approached and pulled me into a hug, the subtle smell of his musky cologne filling my nose. I had to keep from swooning as he pulled away to plant a kiss on my lips.

“Hey, love. How was your club meeting?” he asked.

*I love him so much. He looks at me like I’m the only woman in the world. I bet he hasn’t even noticed how underdressed I am.*

“The meeting was interesting. Very interesting, actually.” I was about to say more when I heard Lola call my name.

She was climbing out of the back of the car as Jay emerged from the passenger side.

“Cali! Perfect timing!” Lola shouted, rushing toward me with a garment bag in her hands.

My eyes widened as I took in the bag. “Please say that’s for me!”

Lola smiled and held it out. “It’s for you.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I chanted, nearly jumping with excitement as I took the bag. There was no way I would’ve had a good time tonight if I’d been forced to stand next to Greyson looking as good as he did while I was dressed like I’d spent the afternoon cleaning out the attic.

Garment bag in hand, I rushed into the palace to change.

“And hello to you, too,” Aysel called as I blew past her. She was greeting guests in the expansive foyer, and looking absolutely stunning, as always. I spared Lola another minute of silent thanks for ensuring that that I wasn’t going to have to stand beside Aysel and the other beautifully dressed women at this party in my current getup.

*Ava would* love *to see me looking like this—I’m sure she’s going to look like a million bucks.*

“Hi, Aysel. Nice to see you,” I called distractedly, already scanning for a place where I could change.

“Nice to see you, too,” she said, “though you’re not quite dressed for the occasion. But you’re into that whole effortlessly casual, ‘I don’t care about fashion’ look, right?”

“Not tonight,” I said, holding up the garment bag. “Is there somewhere I can change?”

“Thank goodness,” Aysel said, genuine relief coloring her words. “Go halfway down the hall and you’ll see the powder room. Door should be open. You can’t miss it. Let me know if you need any… help.”

I found the powder room and dashed inside, then I quickly pulled on the cocktail dress that Lola had brought for me. It was simple and black, but also heads and shoulders above what I’d had on before. I took a deep breath as I admired myself in the mirror, feeling as ready as I could be for yet another Vanguard party.

With an attendant’s guidance, I went out to meet everyone in the remodeled courtyard. It looked a lot better than it had last time I’d last seen it, though there were still a few pieces of scaffolding at the far end—that, too, had been draped in decorations. Luckily, they weren’t as creepy as the floral portraits that had greeted me on the way in.

It was strange being out here—and a stark reminder of the war we’d just fought—but I was happy to see that Lucian’s efforts to rebuild were going well. Especially since this was the place Elle would be calling home for the foreseeable future.

“Cali! I’m so glad you’re here,” Elle said when she spotted me.

“I’m so glad to be here!”

After a tight hug, I pulled back to examine Elle’s face. I couldn’t help searching for traces of sadness or uncertainty in her expression, but I didn’t find any.

“How are you feeling?” I asked tentatively.

“Nervous, but excited!” Elle said.

“Good—that’s normal,” I said. “I’m so happy for you, Elle. Congratuatlions. I can’t believe you’re engaged!”

“I know!” she said. “And I’m so glad you’re here. I wanted to ask you something. I know it’s premature and that we’re not actually planning a wedding or anything yet, but will you be my maid of honor? I learned what it was from Aysel… You’ve always been those things to me, Cali. You have no idea how much I appreciate it. Please say yes.”

I was shocked, but I was already nodding. “Yes, of course!”

We hugged again. Damn, it was nice to have something good to look forward to for a change.

“Whoa, I didn’t know they were invited,” Lola said, sidling up to us with a drink in hand.

I turned to see Ava and Xavier walking in, hand in hand.

“Of course they were,” I said absently to Lola as I watched Xavier’s gaze sweep around the courtyard before it came to rest on me.

Suddenly, all I could think about was our last kiss. A strong feeling overtook me, almost out of nowhere. The feelings enveloped me just like they had at the mall… And before I knew what was happening, I found myself standing right in front of Xavier.

**Episode 4840**

**Greyson**

I was talking to Jay—and happy that things had calmed down with him since last night—when Lucian came over and patted me on the back. I was surprised by my lack of desire to pull away from the contact. Maybe Lucian and I had really turned a corner. He still wasn’t my favorite person, but my skin wasn’t crawling at the sight of him… Well, at least not as much as usual.

“Such a good turnout tonight, wouldn’t you say?” the princeling said, pausing for a moment to take it all in with a satisfied look on his face. “I should probably go check in with the bar to make sure that we’re sufficiently stocked. You know how wolves like to drink! Oh, your brother just arrived with his ragtag Samaras. It really is a party!”

I decided to let Lucian’s little insult slide, since this was his night and all. And I was glad to hear that Xavier had shown up, even though the party last night had been rough. I was hoping that we could start fresh today and just forget about our most recent conflict, but I wasn’t holding my breath. Fights between me and my brothers just seemed to have a way of dragging on.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me—and please, enjoy yourselves,” Lucian said before rushing off to attend to his other guests.

“He seems calmer since he got together with Elle,” Jay remarked as we watched him go. “And a lot more normal.”

“Don’t worry, Jay,” I said dryly. “The night is still young.”

I moved out to the courtyard and instantly spotted Cali, Xavier, Ava, standing with a group of Redwoods, Blue Bloods, and Vanguards.

Cali caught my eye and smiled. I walked over to join her, wrapping an arm around her waist and kissing the top of her head.

*I’m going to have to push down my frustrations about last night*,I thought to myself. *This party is a chance to bury the hatchet and just have a good time with my brother. I don’t want to fight with him tonight—especially in front of everyone. If we keep it up, people are going to stop inviting us places.*

But even though I genuinely wanted to keep things civil with my brother, I knew it would be a tall order. Xavier and I always seemed to rub each other the wrong way no matter what, and typically, our fights didn’t end until something new and more pressing cropped up between us and sparked a new conflict.

Still, I swallowed all that down and offered Xavier my hand. “Glad to see you here.”

To my surprise, Xavier gripped my hand in a firm handshake.

“Everyone actually seems to be getting along,” he noted. “It’s a beautiful night for an engagement party, anyway.”

There was an unsettling calm to Xavier that I couldn’t quite read, but I knew I didn’t like it. I didn’t want to fight with him, but I wasn’t interested in interacting with this weird, zen version of him, either. Maybe he was pushing himself to the limits to keep his cool. I didn’t know.

I saw Ava shoot a few strange looks at Xavier that I was sure I wasn’t supposed to notice, and Cali was almost vibrating with tension. Something had obviously happened before I’d come to join them.

*You okay?* I mind linked to Cali.

*I’m fine*,she said, painting a grin onto her face.

*Wow, that’s maybe the fakest smile I’ve ever seen on her face*,I thought to myself. I was tempted to ask Cali why she was behaving this way, but quickly decided against it. Maybe I was imagining things.

“Can I grab anyone a drink?” Cali asked.

Ava snorted. “What, did you suddenly become the hostess of the party when we weren’t looking? I’ll get my own, thanks.”

And then Ava walked away, and I was surprised when she pulled Xavier along behind her without encountering any resistance.

*That was strange. Xavier didn’t even look at Cali. Didn’t even seem to notice that she was standing right in front of him.*

I frowned after my brother for a moment, then looked down at Cali and saw that she was watching him go too, a hurt look on her face.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “He’s probably just trying to keep the peace between us.”

It was a bad excuse, but it was the only plausible explanation I could come up with.

“But he *was* acting weird, right?” Cali asked.

I nodded slowly, not sure if I cared all that much, but knowing that Cali certainly did. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Cali shook her head like she was clearing her mind, then she turned to look at me. “Anyway, this is Elle’s night. We’re not going to ruin it with any *due destini* drama, right? Let’s just have a nice time, mingle, and celebrate. How about it?”

“That sounds like a wonderful plan,” I said, relieved that she was willing to let Xavier’s weirdness pass—or at least it looked like she was willing.

Cali leaned close. “I don’t know if I told you, but you look very handsome tonight.”

I grinned and pulled her close. “Oh, is that so? And no, you haven’t told me yet, and I never get tired of hearing it.”

“Well good, because I have no problem telling you how hot you look over and over again until you get sick of the sound of my voice,” Cali said.

“That’ll never happen.” I dipped down to kiss her. I knew that she was putting on a brave face, and I appreciated it. But when I pulled back, I said, “I hope you know that I’ll always be there for you. Even if you want to complain about Xavier, I can take it.”

*I don’t love hearing her complain about my brother, but if that’s what she needs from me—a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen—I’ll do it. I love her too much to let her keep any of that bottled up inside.*

Cali sighed and nodded. “I do know that, and thank you, Greyson. But I don’t want to do that right now. Not here. I want to have fun tonight, and I want you to have fun, too.”

Lola came bounding up and grabbed Cali’s arm.

“Cali, you *have* to come see this buffet. It’s insane! These parties are always kind of off the hook, but this buffet is out of this world!” she shouted. She was almost quaking with excitement.

I laughed as Lola started dragging Cali toward the buffet table. Even from where I was standing, I could see what looked like a chocolate fountain and a champagne tower surrounded by mounds of food.

*But why two fountains on the same table? Isn’t one of those enough? Next, he’ll bring out an ice sculpture—wait, is that an ice sculpture next to the chocolate fountain?*

Cali met my eyes as she replied to Lola, resisting her friend’s pull just a bit. “I should probably stay with Greyson—”

“No, no,” I interrupted. “You go on ahead. I’ll find you later.”

I watched them go skipping off and turned to scan the room, looking for Xavier. I didn’t like how strange our interaction had been any more than Cali did. And the last time I’d ignored Xavier’s weirdness, we’d ended up in a knock-down drag-out fight with a powerful vampire-witch.

I finally spotted Xavier on the other end of the courtyard, his hand still firmly clasped in Ava’s. He was chatting with some of the Blue Bloods, and I made a beeline for him.

“Xavier, hey!” I said, trying to be as polite as I could. I turned to Mace and the others. “Can I pull my brother away for a moment?”

I watched a silent exchange between Ava and Xavier, then Xavier shrugged and moved away with me.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“What I *don’t* want is a repeat of yesterday,” I said. “But I do want to talk to you. What you did just now isn’t okay. You didn’t even acknowledge Cali. You can’t treat her that way, especially after what you put her through before. It’s not fair. You keep saying you’re sorry for what you did, but you’re sure not acting like it.”

I took a deep breath, waiting for my brother to do what he always did—tell me to mind my own business or make some scathing remark that sent us spiraling into a heated argument—but, to my surprise, Xavier just gave me a mild look and nodded.

“That’s fair,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes, looking right into my brother’s face.

*What the fuck is going on with him? Usually, he would’ve thrown a punch or two by now. But… Now that I really think about it, Xavier does look a little out of it. His pupils are dilated, his expression is… Wait one damn minute!*

“Xavier, what the hell?” I burst out. “What… Are you… Are you *high*?”

**Episode 4841**

**Greyson**

I stared at my brother, waiting for an answer. For a beat, he looked like a deer caught in headlights. Motherfucking *Bambi*, to be exact, young and sad. Right now, he wasn’t just Xavier, this never-ending problem I had to deal with. He was my little brother, and he *had* tried his best to protect Cali when Adéluce threatened her life, while I’d been on the sidelines.

Fuck it all.

“I’m not high, don’t be ridiculous.” He scoffed, grabbing my arm to push past me. But it was too late now, the damage was done—the damage being that I did give a damn about him.

I blocked his way.

“I get that you hate me—”

Another scoff.

“—and I’m not fucking thrilled about you either after the fight we had last night—”

He rolled his eyes so hard that I was surprised his eyeballs didn’t jump out of his gigantic, stubborn head.

“—but you can’t blame me for worrying after all the shit you went through with Adéluce. It feels like you’re constantly five seconds away from spiraling, Xavier.”

He narrowed his eyes at me and… pouted. He was *pouting*. He was not in his right mind, was he?

“It’s not like you’re helping,” he grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. “You were a dick to me during the party yesterday. You said some nasty things.”

I could not believe my ears.

“But you’re *always* a dick to me,” I snapped. “For fuck’s sake, you mentioned calling a Lupo Finale over nothing, and I can’t constantly excuse all the shit you do, Xavier. I have feelings too, you know.”

Well, fuck. Now we were talking about our *feelings*? How did we get here?

Was *I* the one who was high?

“I didn’t mean that,” he said, pouting harder. “Or maybe I kind of did because I was mad. But you know what? It isn’t fair.”

“What isn’t fair?”

“Everything,” he said in a low, ominous voice that reminded me of a brooding vampire in a teen movie.

“Please tell me you *are* high right now instead of possessed or having an actual mental breakdown,” I told him in a flat tone.

He huffed. “Fine, I did take something. But I needed it, trust me.”

Okay. This was progress.

“Why did you need it?” I asked. “You throwing a bitch fit is nothing out of the ordinary, so what’s really going on here?”

“First of all, eat shit—”

Perhaps I deserved that.

“Second,” he went on, “since you’re being a pain in my ass, I’ll tell you what’s going on. I saw Big Mac.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I’m having some headaches and my ears ring and some other shit. She says that being double-mated is messing with my wolf abilities. I’m so torn that sometimes even being close to Ava hurts.”

I snapped my mouth shut before it dropped open in shock. “And Big Mac…”

“She gave me some drops to calm me down,” he said with a sigh. “She says part of it is just mental, and I need to figure out how to get past it, but until I do the drops will help.”

I… had no idea how to respond to any of that.

This was definitely *not* what I’d expected. In a display of tact and consideration that was deeply unlike him, Xavier had not said Cali’s name or linked this confession to the reason why he’d been weird with Cali earlier, but it all made sense now. He’d also just shared the truth with me without screaming at the top of his lungs.

Was this progress, or did Xavier simply need to get high more often?

“Anyway, whatever,” he said, looking down at his feet. “I told you that you didn’t need to know.”

There was a bitterness in his expression that made me feel all jumbled up. On the one hand, I didn’t want him anywhere near my mate. On the other, he had almost died a million times because of Adéluce while protecting Cali. And clearly, he wasn’t enjoying being mated to both Cali and Ava right now. He was in bad enough pain that Big Mac had needed to give him drugs.

Fuck.

“I’m glad you told me.” I cleared my throat. “I’m… sorry about this.”

I huffed the moment the words were out of my mouth. What the fuck was I supposed to say? Part of me regretted even starting this conversation. Things were easier when I was furious at Xavier.

When I started to feel bad for him, when I saw him as my brother instead of another Alpha who tried to claim my mate, I felt like shit over what he had gone through. Over what he was *still* going through.

“If you need anything…” I didn’t finish my sentence. If he needed anything—*what*? Ask for my advice on how to get my mate back?

I took a deep, much-needed breath.

“If you end up being in danger in some way,” I clarified, “if things get worse, let me know. I need to know. You’re my brother, no matter what. Okay?”

Xavier paused. He was still looking at the ground. Then, he shrugged. “Yeah, sure. Thanks… I guess.” With that, he walked away, making a beeline for the bar.

This was bad.

Here Xavier was, getting high, probably going to get drunk, obviously unable to deal with the aftermath of everything that Adéluce had done. Meanwhile, I hadn’t been able to read the situation correctly and got into a fight with him the night before. I tried to remember the last time he and I had been civil with one another, and that was before Adéluce had struck. I wondered how long it would take for Xavier to go back to that version of himself. It had to happen. It needed to.

But what if… it didn’t?

What if Xavier never got better?

Werewolves dealt with tragedy as if it were part of life, but sometimes, things could go too far. Back in my day as a fighter, I’d seen supernaturals go through some shit that was so traumatic, they were never the same afterward. Could this be happening to my brother, too?

My chest ached at the thought.

When I turned to look at the bar, Xavier wasn’t there. He wasn’t going to want to keep talking to me right now, but I had to make sure he was around other people instead of brooding somewhere, drinking while being high. Taking in a shaky breath, I moved forward when a familiar figure bumped into me.

“Someone’s in a hurry,” Mace said, raising an eyebrow.

I paused, scanning the area. “Yeah, I was just trying to find my brother.”

“I saw him talking to Marissa on the other side of the room,” Mace said.

As long as he wasn’t alone, this would do.

“You’re worried about him,” Mace said. His words were a statement, and he didn’t wait for me to confirm or deny. “From what I hear, the Blue Bloods missed quite a battle with that vampire-witch…”

I gave him a wry look. “Believe me, you didn’t want to meet her.”

He nodded. “Not gonna lie, I feel lucky that my pack has never had to directly deal with her. I’m glad you’re all okay.”

“Thanks, Mace,” I said.

He gave me a lingering look. “Just so you know, if you’d asked, we’d have been there for you.”

“In Adéluce’s case, that would’ve only meant more people to endanger. But I’m grateful to you for saying that.” I rested my hand on his shoulder, squeezing. “Which actually reminds me…”

“What’s up?”

“I was talking to Lucian earlier about forming a more permanent kind of alliance.”

Mace lifted a brow. “Go on.”

I was ready to elaborate when Lucian—wearing a purple suit and tie—barreled toward us like a giant sentient eggplant.

“Mace! Lovely to see you and the Blue Bloods.” He whirled toward me. “Greyson, my dear comrade!”

Why, though? Like, in general, *why*?

“I’m delighted to have found you,” Lucian went on, planting his palm on my shoulder. “I was hoping you’d say a few words about my engagement to Elle. As her past Alpha, you should officially give your blessing.”

Lucian’s last sentence made my stomach twist. Because I *was* Elle’s past Alpha. Just a little blip in the grand scheme of her life, before she became part of the Vanguard pack with Lucian by her side.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” I said tightly. “This is Elle’s and your business.”

A gasp caught my attention. I turned to see Elle standing there, her hands at her mouth. She looked ethereal tonight, with her fancy dress and her hair cascading in waves and whatever glittery stuff she had on her eyes. She looked aghast when she said, “But, Greyson! You must!”

Mace shook his head at me, like, *Don’t do it.*

Of course, Elle noticed and frowned. “Your blessing is very important to me, Greyson.” I could swear her eyes grew twice their size as she looked up at me. “*Please?*”

Fucking hell.

“Fine,” I told Elle, the word coming out with difficulty.

Mace sighed, and Lucian clapped his hands together. “Excellent! You may address the guests after I do, Greyson. I’m a tough number to follow, but I trust you to exceed our expectations.”

“I’ll do my best,” I deadpanned, reaching for Elle. “I just need a second with Elle beforehand.”

Elle wrapped her arm around mine, following me. My stomach was trying to strangle itself by now, which was great. This whole thing just felt… off.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked the moment we were out of Lucian’s sight.

I didn’t beat around the bush.

“Before I give you my blessing,” I said, “I want to make sure this is what you really want, Elle. Is Lucian truly your choice?”

**Episode 4842**

“Did you see where Greyson went?” I asked Rishika, looking around.

“He’s probably dodging Lucian,” she replied. “I think the princeling is low-key obsessed with him.”

I snorted. “All the mutual murder attempts notwithstanding, they’re the kind of frenemies that would be great teen rom-com material.”

Rishika chuckled at my comment, but it didn’t reach her gaze. Eyeing her, I asked, “How are you doing tonight?”

Rishika paused, the smile fading from her face. “The same. I guess I’m always worried about Artemis taking so long in the Fae world.”

*I know*, I wanted to tell Rishika. *I hate it. What is she doing over there? When will she be back? I miss her so much.*

The only bright side I could think of when it came to Artemis being away was the fact that she hadn’t been here during our fights with Adéluce. I was still so relieved that nobody had died during those altercations.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” I said. I was trying to convince both Rishika and myself. “She’s tough. She’ll be back in no time.”

Rishika gave me an assessing look. “You’re worried sick, aren’t you?”

I laughed. Awkwardly. “Who? Me?”

Rishika raised an eyebrow.

I sighed. “Okay, fine, I am. But I do think she’s tough.”

Rishika nodded at that, pressing her lips together. I squeezed her shoulder reassuringly when the music suddenly stopped playing. Lucian’s voice rang out, loud and clear, accompanied by the clinking sound of a fork touching glass. “My wonderful friends, allow me a moment of your time!”

He stood on the stage/mini-podium situation he always set up for his parties, forever prepared for one of his impromptu speeches. From his triumphant expression, I could tell that this one was going to be a doozy.

“Thank you to everyone who came to my humble abode tonight to celebrate my official engagement to Elle! Why, there she is!” He gestured among the cheering and clapping crowd that parted for Elle to pass. She came to stand next to Lucian, beaming up at him as if he hung the moon.

Yikes.

*Cali, no, Lucian is Elle’s mate*, I reminded myself. *Now that her sire bond with Greyson isn’t a thing, their mate bond had the opportunity to… grow? Thrive?*

And thriving it was, with Lucian waxing poetic about his love match with Elle during his speech. Some highlights included:

1) “I was a cold, lonely man, lingering in the shadows of winter, till she came along like the first cherry blossom in spring and warmed my forlorn heart.”

2) “My Elle is the sun of my solar system, the center of my universe. It is a deep, complicated space, for I am a deep, complicated man, as you all know. Smart, delightfully pleasant, and utterly gorgeous, I have never met a woman more fit to be my mate than Elle.”

3) “I would slay dragons for my forest rose. I would climb the highest mountain and swim in the most dangerous waters. Her love feels like the greatest gift known to man and supernatural being alike. Our union will be legendary, for we are what legends are made of, a prince and his queen, who…”

The crowd was eating it all up, both amused and enthusiastic. But then of course, there were the ones who were getting sleepy, myself and Rishika included. She checked her watch, yawning. I whispered, “How much longer do you think this is going to go?”

“And now!” Lucian exclaimed, flailing a hand toward his left. “Elle’s previous Alpha will say a few words to bless this union!”

The crowd started clapping again, and I gaped when Greyson walked on stage. He looked so unlike himself—stiff, awkward, a little like he was about to announce who was next in line for the guillotine. He shot Elle a look, and she grinned wide, waving at him.

When the crowd settled down, Greyson leaned closer to the microphone. Clearing his throat, he said, “Elle chose to accept Lucian’s hand.” Pause. “So they are now engaged.” Pause. “To be married.” Pause. “Congratulations and good luck.”

Another pause.

And then Greyson stepped off the stage, accompanied by the sound of crickets.

Lucian looked shocked and offended by how brief Greyson’s speech was, but he quickly recovered and raised his glass. “To my future bride!”

The crowd started cheering again. I had to shake my head when I saw Greyson sighing like a tired dad. Rishika smirked. “He seems *thrilled*.”

“At least Elle is happy,” I said.

Grinning, Elle wrapped a garland of roses—of the forest kind, I would assume—around Greyson’s neck. Rishika said she’d go check on him just as Lola walked up to me.

Grinning, she said, “Wow. Greyson really missed his calling in public speaking.”

I laughed, ready to answer, when suddenly I had the distinct feeling of being watched. My eyes flickered to the left, across the room. Xavier was there.

*Stay cool, Cali. Just. Stay. Cool.*

It was hard to keep a level head, though, when Xavier’s eyes were pinned on me. He downed his drink, tongue slipping out to lick his bottom lip. And he just kept on staring.

My heartbeat went from one to a million in a second flat. I looked away.

*Shit. Shit shit shit!*

“That was subtle,” Lola said, glancing between Xavier and me. “*Not*.”

I scoffed quietly, shaking my head.

“How are things between the two of you?” she asked.

“He’s still acting kind of hot and cold,” I muttered. “He hasn’t talked to me all evening.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “He needs to grow a spine and get his shit together. This is getting old.”

“Lola, he’s been through a lot. He can’t just magically get over everything.”

She pressed her lips together. “What about you? You’ve been through a lot too.”

“I feel like… like he’s trying to fix things with me,” I muttered. “But he doesn’t know how. It’s like he’s keeping his distance for my benefit or something.”

Or just kissing and confusing me…

Lola frowned. “But do *you* want to talk to him?”

“Yes,” I blurted. “I mean, no. I mean—”

“I’m sensing there’s a bit of a dilemma here.” Lola squinted at me. “On a scale from one to ten, how confused are you?”

I wasn’t just confused.

*I’m fucking terrified he’ll hurt me again, one way or another.*

He’d been brave, though. When Xavier had protected me from Adéluce, he had been brave. Perhaps I could be a little less fearful for his sake.

“I want to be able to fully forgive him for the hurt he caused and move forward,” I said. “I guess… the only way I can do that is by talking to him.”

“This is your chance, then,” Lola said, gesturing ahead. “He’s alone now, go talk to him!”

Xavier was wandering away from the party and down a side hallway. My heart was still racing.

*Here goes nothing*, I thought.

I weaved through the crowd and entered the hallway just in time to see Xavier slip into one of the side rooms. Pulse still racing, I pushed the door open.

He whirled around, his eyes widening when he took me in.

I closed the door behind me.

His shoulders went rigid.

“Cali?” He took a step back, away from me. “What are you doing here?”

*I don’t know*, I thought. *I don’t fucking know what I’m doing—I just know I hate this!*

We used to be so in love. We used to be happy for a while there. That feeling having just crumbled down to this sense of constant unease and pain made my heart ache.

“Can we talk?” I asked quietly.

Xavier looked behind my shoulder, at the door, like he was ready to bolt. He seemed intimidated almost, unlike the prideful, self-assured Alpha I had grown to know. Who even was he right now?

“You want to leave this room, don’t you?” I whispered. The hurt in my voice was obvious. “You’ve been avoiding me tonight, so—”

“No,” he cut me off, his jaw clenching. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“What’s happening, Xavier?” I asked.

He looked wound up tight, ready to burst, so devastatingly handsome and raw in this moment that it hurt to gaze at him. He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing while his gaze flickered down to my body. His lips parted, breath coming out sharp. He took another step away from me.

“What do you want to talk about?” he asked in a gruff voice.

“I just need to figure out where we stand with each other. And if we can… be in each other’s lives again,” I said. “We’re still mates and our packs are allies. We need to figure this out.”

As for Xavier, he winced. As if the very thought of that pained him. He didn’t say… *anything.*

It felt like a slap in the face.

“Okay, I see,” I whispered. “I guess we can’t even talk. Great.”

Unshed tears burned in my eyes. Turning my back on him, I headed to the door when I felt his hand grip my arm. His touch set every inch of my body alight.

“I—it’s complicated,” he said, bringing himself in front of me. He was breathing hard. His palm lingered on my arm, burning up the skin there like a brand. But when I reached to touch his wrist, he flinched away.

*Wait…*

“What’s going on?” I asked, alarmed. “Are you hurt?”

He shook his head, but he couldn’t fool me.

*Oh, god. This can’t be happening again. Not when we just got him back!*

We killed Adéluce, but…

A horrible idea took root in my mind and I couldn’t stop myself as I asked, “Xavier, are you still cursed?”

**Episode 4843**

My thoughts were going a mile a minute.

*What if Xavier’s under another spell? What if he can’t tell me again? What if Adéluce* *isn’t dead? What if—*

“No,” he said. “I’m not cursed. That’s not it.”

He still looked like he was in pain, though. His pupils were blown wide, beads of sweat gathering at his forehead. Fear grabbed me by the throat, and my voice broke when I spoke. “What if Adéluce was able to put another spell on you before she died?” I asked. “Or Big Mac didn’t severe the connection between you and Adéluce?”

Xavier squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath. “It’s not that. I’m here and I’m fine, so just drop it.”

His words were sharp. I blinked, surprised at the response. “Fine,” I said. “Then what is it? You’re either avoiding the answer or avoiding me.”

It was no secret that he didn’t know how to be around me anymore. This moment was case and point. One moment it looked like he was going to hug me, wrap me tightly in his embrace. This had to be Ava’s fault, at least in part. Didn’t it?

“There *is* something going on, but it’s not a curse,” he admitted. “I’m getting headaches and shit like that. It’s something internal that I need to deal with. My wolf is torn between the Samaras and Redwoods…and between my two mates.”

*“I’m torn, because I love both you and Ava,”* was what he didn’t say.

But I heard the words loud and clear.

Xavier had gone through hell, and now he was struggling to pick up the pieces. I saw that in his drawn features, in how exhausted and lost he looked. I knew he was struggling about his feelings for me and Ava. He loved us both—that was the cold, hard truth. And even though things were so strained between me and Xavier, I still loved him. How could I not? He was one of my mates. The *due destini* would never let him go.

And I didn’t want to.

None of this was easy. I knew that…I was obviously in a similar position, stuck between Xavier and Greyson, so I should’ve been full of understanding.

“I understand why this is painful to you,” I whispered, avoiding his gaze. “I guess… I’ll leave you alone.”

He didn’t stop me when I walked out of the room.

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Everybody was dancing and laughing in the main hall, while I was trying not to cry. I’d suspected that Xavier couldn’t make an easy choice between Ava and me, but seeing that suspicion turn into certainty left me sick to my stomach.

I didn’t want to lose Xavier, but I didn’t want to lose Greyson either. I didn’t know how to navigate any of this anymore, especially with Ava in the mix. But I had to try to stop putting everything on myself… Something had to give. Xavier needed to figure some of this out too. How he wanted to interact with me and proceed… or not.

The thought made me feel hopeless. Terrified all over again.

“Cali!” Elle’s voice interrupted my wallowing. I snapped back to the present when she came over, wrapping me in a hug. “I’m so glad you’re here tonight.” She broke the embrace only to smooth down my dress and hair with meticulous care. “Look at you—you’ll be the most beautiful maid of honor anyone’s ever seen. Or at least that I’ve seen because I’ve never actually seen one.”

Elle was radiant, so content in this moment that I decided to shove all my personal Xavier angst aside for tonight.

“I’m happy you’re happy,” I told her, smiling.

She wrapped her arm with mine, giving me a sly grin. “You know what would make me even happier?”

“What?” I asked.

Before I knew it, Elle and I were on the dance floor. The mini orchestra Lucian had perched on the second floor played a string cover of some fast pop song I couldn’t pinpoint. Elle took my hands and twirled me around till I was laughing. Soon enough, Jade and Zainab joined us, and all four of us danced together. Among them, I felt like I belonged, exhilarated to shake off the stiffness inside me.

“Thank you, Elle,” I said in her ear.

She didn’t ask why I’d thanked her. She just beamed and gave me another hug.

The *second* the music switched to something slower, Lucian popped out of nowhere.

Because of course he did.

“May I steal my forest rose, Caliana?” he asked me with a bow.

Elle blushed as she looked up at him, so that was enough for me.

“Dance with me, love?” Greyson’s voice was smooth, near my ear. I faced him, our eyes locking. His gaze was soft, and the urge to bury myself in his embrace hit hard.

“Of course,” I breathed.

We started to slow dance, but in no time, I didn’t give a damn about the dancing part. I only wanted to hug him tight and sway in place, and he gave that to me. He kissed the top of my head, rubbing my back, and I thought, *Greyson is never going to let me go.*

“Feels like your mind is somewhere else,” he muttered. “Is something going on?”

I didn’t want him to worry.

“I talked to Xavier. He says he’s conflicted between, uh, his two mates,” I said. “It’s hurting him.”

Greyson paused. Then, he nodded. “He and I had the same conversation. It’s good that he opened up to us instead of acting all cryptic while we worried ourselves sick.”

Greyson’s tone was matter-of-fact, no jealousy or bitterness to it. We’d come a long way. Though Greyson had always been calm and assessing like this. Steady. The kind of person who made you feel secure just by standing by your side.

The kind of man who did not hurt you.

*I feel lost*, I thought. *I feel so lost.*

While everybody else continued dancing around us, he paused and looked deep into my eyes. The slow orchestral music melted into the background when he spoke in a low, gruff voice. “I’ll do whatever you need, love. Whatever you want, always. You know that, right?”

His hand was warm on my cheek, and the level of certainty and comfort this moment brought me shattered how hurt I had felt only a few moments ago, in that room, with Xavier. If his struggles to deal with his feelings had left me hopeless, Greyson made me hopeful.

Greyson had always given me hope.

I had always been his number one choice, and all I needed right now was to get as close to him as possible. I moved to my tippy-toes, kissing him once, feather-light. His lips parted in surprise, a gust of air escaping.

I was so lucky to have Greyson in my life. The love I felt for him was strong, and I hated that the *due destini* constantly brought doubt. I didn’t want Xavier to come between us—not again.

I sighed, leaning into him and breathing in his scent. My hand absentmindedly dragged down his chest. “I want to go home,” I said. As I looked up, I saw his eyes were stormy. “Could that be arranged?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he muttered with a broken chuckle.

I gave him another kiss, slipping my tongue into his mouth. He didn’t laugh this time. His grip on my waist tightened. The needy edge to his touch scorched through me. I loved it. I loved *him*, because with him, I was never afraid.

With him, I felt free.

“Take me home,” I whispered in his ear.

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It felt like I was leaving a dark cloud behind as Greyson drove us back to the pack house. He reached for my hand over the console, weaving our hands together. I squeezed his hand and he lifted them up so he could kiss mine. Desire jolted through me.

Then, the next thing I knew, I couldn’t keep my hands off him. I felt powerful, a little like I was on the outside looking in, witnessing this self-assured version of myself mouthing at his neck as he drove. He swerved slightly to the right a bit when my hand moved up his thigh, cursing under his breath.

“Almost home, love,” he said. I hummed against his skin.

When we pulled into the pack house, he parked haphazardly—half on the lawn, half on the driveway. Pulling me over the console, he gave me a hard kiss that made me melt from the inside out.

“Upstairs,” I whimpered, starting to unbutton his shirt. “Take me to your room.”

“Our room,” he said.

“Yes,” I gasped out.

We scrambled across the front porch and got inside the house, kicking off our shoes in the hallway. Seconds later, I was pushing the shirt off his torso, pushing the door to his room open, pushing him to sit on the bed. When I straddled his lap, he hissed, arching up to the pressure while I ground down on him, gasping at the friction.

He grabbed my hips and dragged me even closer while my mouth crashed against his again. How right this felt would never get old—the heat of his skin, his scent, the taste of him under my tongue. Everywhere I touched, he felt hard, trembling, ready to break just for me. He wanted me. Greyson always wanted me. No doubts, no second thoughts, no pain.

No pain.

Just care and safety.

“Tell me,” he rasped, cupping my cheek. “What do you need? I’m right here for you, always.”

His words made something in me crack open and spill, overflowing. The feeling started from my chest and spread down low, between my thighs. How much I wanted him had already taken a life of its own, a needy pulse that echoed through my body.

“You, Greyson,” I whispered against his lips, unbuckling his belt. “All I need right now is you.”

**Episode 4844**

**Ava**

When I saw Cali go after Xavier earlier, it had taken all my self-control not to grab her by the hair and pull her the fuck away from him.

This whole thing was so infuriating it ended up being exhausting, actually. I was constantly in fight mode. Always expecting Cali to do something to steal Xavier from me. Always expecting Xavier to run off somewhere with her.

I wanted to be the mate that Xavier would choose, but the never-ending conflict of it all was draining the life out of me. Being with Xavier was everything I’d ever wanted since I’d come back from the dead. So much so, that at times, it felt like it took over my entire being. But pain was tightly laced with that desire, to the point where I started to wonder how much longer I would be able to take this back and forth with Xavier.

He loved me, but he loved Cali, too.

He needed me, but he needed Cali, too.

He was the only one for me, but I wasn’t the only one for him.

I couldn’t keep living like this. Something had to give.

“Greetings, Samara Luna,” Lucian said in that nasally voice of his. His gaze held nothing leery or sexual, though, which used to be a rarity a few months back. His relationship with Elle, and the obvious fact that he was obsessed with her, had made him moderately less annoying.

But then he asked, “Are you looking for your Alpha?” and he was back to being a thorn in my side.

“The party’s winding down, so I thought it’s time for us to leave,” I said tightly.

“But of course! Thank you so much for gracing us with your glorious presence,” Lucian went on, but I was on autopilot, nodding and smiling when I had to. First to him, then to Elle, who seemed much less enthusiastic to be in my presence. It wasn’t like I was thrilled about Cali’s friends either, so I didn’t take it personally.

Eyeing me up and down, Elle interrupted Lucian. She said, “Xavier left a moment ago, Ava. He’s waiting for you outside. Thanks and goodbye now.”

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Xavier and I were alone in the car. I could hear his rapid-fire pulse. It joined my own in a little fucked-up concert that I was pretty sure wasn’t going to end anytime soon.

He and I were stuck in this predicament, and I was trying to figure out how to broach the Cali thing yet again, without sounding like I was whining. Or attacking him. Even though I wanted to attack him and claw his fucking face off for wanting another woman who wasn’t me.

I told myself to be reasonable, though. At least try to have an adult, calm conversation about this. It wasn’t like Xavier could help any of this after the shit Adéluce had put him through. But for his sake—so I wouldn’t murder Cali—and mine—so I wouldn’t explode into a million pieces—we needed to figure out a way to have a real relationship that was going to last.

In the end, I just couldn’t keep quiet any longer.

“I saw Cali following you into a room. You spent a long time alone together.”

His grip on the wheel tightened. His Adam’s apple bobbed, but for the longest beat, he didn’t speak. I knew I’d said I would be calm about this, but my voice came out impatient and sharp. “Well? Do you have anything to say?”

Xavier sighed, looking dejected. “I’m sorry.”

His words immediately deflated my growing anger.

“You are?” I asked carefully.

Xavier nodded, his eyes pinned on the road as he drove. “Cali followed me into that room, but I didn’t leave immediately. I stayed back and talked with her. I was trying to figure out how to explain it to you, but I didn’t.” He shot me a glance. His voice dropped. “But that’s what happened—she came after me.”

I was almost shocked at how Xavier took responsibility for a mistake without any fuss. He was being so rational about it, when reason was the last thing he usually saw when it came to Cali. Those drops that Big Mac had given him had certainly taken effect.

“Are you going to say something?” he asked, his voice dropping further.

I gulped. “I need a moment to think…”

When we got to the house, Xavier parked in the driveway. We climbed out, and I came around to his side. He watched me warily, looking exhausted. For a second, I felt bad for him. He really was trying here, despite everything. He was as frustrating as he could be amazing, and my wolf whined for him.

I just loved him so damn much.

“I’m glad you’re acknowledging what happened,” I said. The next words came out with difficulty. “And… I forgive you. I want us to be honest with each other.”

He let out a slow exhale, pure relief. I hated seeing him like this, so dejected, so I took a step closer, resting my palm on his chest. “I love you, Xavier.”

His eyes were dark when they met mine. Gripping my wrist lightly, he pulled me closer. I thought he’d give me a kiss and say the words back. Instead, he gave me a hug. It was a good hug, though. Warm and firm. He needed the comfort of it, and I found myself unable to pull away. It was fucked up, but he had a way of making my anger toward him melt. The power he had over me was borderline aggravating, but he managed to control my aggravation, too.

I guessed that was what having a mate felt like. Unfortunately.

“I’ll go upstairs to change and wash up,” he said when we got in the house. It felt like he needed some space, so I headed to the kitchen. The knot in my stomach got tighter when I saw Marissa. She gave me a look that said she knew exactly what was going on in my head.

“I’m making tea,” she told me, gesturing at the boiling water. “Want some?”

I nodded, leaning against the counter. The second I made a move to play with the edges of my hair, she scoffed, “Okay, spill. What happened this time?”

I exhaled deeply. “I just… have a lot on my mind.”

Marissa raised an eyebrow. “’Cause of Xavier and Cali.”

My snort was bitter. “Am I that transparent?”

“Yeah,” Marissa said flatly. “Pretty sure that as long as this love triangle keeps going, it’s all you’re gonna think about.”

I rubbed my temples, sighing. “Sounds fun.”

Marissa did not seem to appreciate my sarcasm. “You know I think Xavier needs to drop Cali and get this over with, but he *is* in a tough spot. The fact that he hasn’t left you for Cali after defeating Adéluce is huge, actually. It’s proof that he really cares and wants to be with you. That has to count for something, right?”

“It does. But he hasn’t officially chosen me, and that’s hurting him,” I said, wincing.

Marissa looked confused. “Because of all the brooding overtime he does?”

“No, it’s literally hurting him,” I said. “He’s getting headaches and stuff like that. Big Mac had to give him some drops or whatever to calm him down.”

Marissa’s eyes widened. “So… he’s literally willing to hurt himself because he can’t let go of Cali?”

I felt like digging my nails into my skin at the sound of her words. “If you put it that way—”

“There’s no other way to put it,” Marissa said, moving closer to me. She took my hands in hers, squeezing. “As your friend, I’m worried for you. I don’t want him to hurt you. Maybe you need to take a step back from him.”

I frowned. “Xavier is my mate. If I took a step back, my wolf…” I shivered at the thought. “I don’t know what she’d do.”

Marissa pressed her lips together. “Just… think about it.”

I gulped, nodding. “Rain check on the tea. I need to talk to Xavier.”

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Xavier was fresh out of the shower, wearing only a towel. Droplets of water trailed down his chest, and I couldn’t help but look. I couldn’t help but want to touch him, put my hands and mouth all over him, pin him under me with a kiss. It felt natural to stay with him in our bed, in our room, in our home—the home of the Samaras. Because he was the Samara Alpha.

He was always supposed to be mine, first.

“Can we talk?” I asked in a low voice.

He nodded, sitting on the bed.

“Xavier, look at me.”

Tentatively, he did. The sight of him like this, almost vulnerable, when I was used to him raging, made my heart throb. I shook my head to clear it, fighting for composure.

“I think you need to do something to figure out why you’re so internally conflicted. This might not be a *due destini* thing, but you’re still hurting. I don’t think you’ll be able to make a choice between me and Cali until you figure out exactly why it’s so hard for you to do so.”

I’d said the words in one breath. Xavier stared at me now, his gaze intense.

“What do you suggest I do?” he asked.

I hadn’t thought that far. But from the past few days, I was certain that whatever was going on with him simply couldn’t go on. It affected me. It affected the pack, above all.

“I know you love being Alpha, but maybe you need a break,” I said. “Why don’t you take some time off?”

**Episode 4845**

**Greyson**

“You, Greyson,” she whispered. “All I need right now is you.”

I felt the truth of her words in her gasping breaths, in the way her fingers trembled as she unbuckled my belt. When I traced the insides of her thighs, the molten feel of her made me groan. She was so devastating in her want that I wouldn’t dare tell her to slow down right now.

I could only spur her forward—push her dress up around her waist, tear her underwear off, lift her hips. She grabbed my shoulder for leverage and used her other hand to guide me in. She worked herself on my cock, and I watched, enraptured, shaking after her every shiver and moan.

“There you go,” I whispered when her hips were flush with mine. “There’s my gorgeous girl…”

She whimpered against my mouth, writhing on my lap, but I grasped her hips tight. I kept her in place, feeding on her anticipation. I was so ravenous for it, I felt dizzy, drunk. I sounded drunk when I said, “Do you have any idea how amazing you feel? How much I adore you?”

Her nails dug into my shoulders. Her chest heaving, she murmured, “Tell me.”

“Sometimes this is all I can think about…” Staring into her eyes, I cradled her face with one hand while the other traveled downward. “How wet and hot you get when you’re in my bed. How no one’s ever felt as good as you. How much I crave you. How I’d do anything, *anything* to make you happy…”

“Greyson,” she said my name in a gasp, arching into my touch. I slid my hand from her chest down to her stomach, past her dress, right where our bodies met. My thumb dipped to the apex of her thighs, and at the first brush and press of my finger to her clit, she keened.

Her hips bucked, and she slammed down on me, forcing an animal sound out of me, followed by, “*Fuck*, say my name again.”

She did. She kissed me hard and rode me harder, grinding down on me. She chased her high, didn’t stop, took what she needed and what I so badly wanted to give her. My hands were up her skirt, gripping her hips, urging her on. My mouth was on hers, on her collarbone, her neck. Every inch of her exposed skin was so hot it felt like she could catch fire any second now. Like she was burning me down from the inside out, and I would die a happy man.

This would be the best way to go.

Her orgasm came fast—a wild, reckless thing. A spasm that turned her body into a vise all around me, owning me. The feel of her pushed me over the edge, and it was like a crash, my spine bending under the force of it.

Panting, I lay back onto the mattress. I pulled her on top of me, and she nestled close, trembling so hard I thought she would crack into pieces. Or maybe that was me. Maybe I was the one who felt like the only thing grounding me to earth right now was how much I loved her.

I felt the truth of her words when she uttered, “I love you, Greyson. Always.”

Her eyes fluttered closed as I whispered, “Always.”

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Cali was already out of bed when I woke up the next morning. I grinned to myself when I heard her chattering with the others downstairs. I found her in the kitchen, fresh-faced and beautiful. She was making coffee and tea for the awake half of the pack house while Torin cooked breakfast.

“We should do this more often, Torin,” she told him. “We work so well together.”

“You could say that I’m…” Torin winked, gesturing at the yellow liquid sizzling in the frying pan. “Your butter half!”

Cali laughed, and Torin was pleased. Had he just discovered the power of human puns? Good luck to us all.

In the meantime, Sage and Zainab were having the time of their lives eating Torin’s pancakes. Lola and Jay were cuddling on the sofa, with Jay running his fingers through Lola’s hair. It was a rare quiet morning, and I hoped for many more of these in the future.

“Greyson!” Rishika waved me over.

I said good morning to everybody and gave Cali a hug and a kiss. Her touch lingered, and I grinned.

“Here you go.” She smiled, offering me a cup of coffee. “How did you sleep?”

“Amazing.” I smirked. “And you?”

Her cheeks suddenly turned bright pink. “Um—”

“Oh, we *heard* how well you slept, bestie!” Lola called from the sofa.

 Cali gasped. “*Lola!*”

While that was going on and I was busy trying not to laugh, I turned to Rishika. “What’s up with you?”

“I was just wondering if there was a way for Cali and me to contact Artemis in the Fae world,” Rishika said. “Torin said it’s hard, though.”

Torin shook his head, flipping a pancake. “If there is a way, I’m not aware of it. It’s not like cell phones can get a signal between worlds.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Rishika said with a sigh. I patted her on the back before turning to Cali. She seemed worried now, her blush fading.

“I’m sure Artemis is fine,” I said, trying to reassure them both. “She’s tough.”

“That’s what I said.” Cali nodded. “I hope she contacts us sooner than later, though…”

The Artemis conversation seemed to have put a dent in both my mate’s and Rishika’s good moods, so I changed the subject.

“Do you have class today, love?” I asked.

“Yeah, after crew practice. The boys are actually—” Cali’s eyes widened, as if a light bulb had turned on in her head. “Oh shit, I forgot to tell you something!”

Rishika frowned. “What is it?”

Cali blurted, “I was late for the party last night because of this cryptozoology club Codsworth runs. He’s certain that the wolf the guys saw when they were here the other day is a werewolf!”

I didn’t like this. If the humans hadn’t been at the party at all, then this probably wouldn’t have happened. It was a problem. Humans discovering us was annoying, but at least it was something I had handled before.

“How much does he know?” I asked.

“Not much, really—the club is all about conspiracy theories and nerds hoping to spot Bigfoot.”

Rishika barked out a laugh. “Wow. And he’s your friend, you say?”

“Wasn’t Codsworth the grumpy one?” I asked.

Cali shrugged. “Turns out, he just has the personality of a grumpy cat.”

“Charming,” Lola said wryly in the background. Meanwhile, Jay had been petting her hair like *she* was a cat.

“And they’re all like that in this club?” I asked. “I mean, just a bunch of kids who are into conspiracy theories?”

Cali shook her head. “I’m not sure. They haven’t given me any indication that they’re not.”

I nodded. “It’s humans who don’t know any better not to stick their nose into things that are a problem.”

Rishika nodded. “Yeah, they could stumble onto something dangerous and die. Or take a video and expose us all.”

“Why don’t we give them a scare?” Jay called out.

Lola snorted, slapping his arm. “When did you become such a bad boy, babe?”

“Maybe we could give them a tonic to wipe their memories,” Torin said, dumping a pitcher of maple syrup over the second plate of pancakes Sage and Zainab were about to devour.

“Remember when Artemis did that to Dick Wigbert?” Sage asked Rishika.

“But she’s not here,” Rishika said, frowning while everybody started to talk at the same time.

Lola said, “All jokes aside, Jay is right. We *could* put on some masks and mythical creature costumes and scare them, and then play it off like we had been trying to scare them with a huge fake wolf during the night of the party too!”

Sage said, “Omg, that’s genius. I’ll be Bigfoot.”

Zainab scoffed, “No, I’ll be Bigfoot! You can be the Mothman.”

Sage said, “First of all, I called dibs on Bigfoot, and second, the Mothman’s not even real!”

Torin said, “The Mothman *is* real, actually. His name is Claudius, and he likes peppermint tea.”

Lola gasped. “Maybe we could get the *real* Mothman here to scare Codsworth, then!”

“No way,” Cali declared. “That’s way too risky!”

This conversation was getting out of hand.

“Okay, everyone,” I said, “that’s enough.”

They kept on going, though, and I opened my mouth to shout, when Rishika let out a loud whistle.

“Hey!” she yelled. “Your Alpha is talking!”

Everybody stopped. I gave her a grateful nod. Turning to the pack, I said, “Nobody’s scaring anyone. Cali will keep an eye on Codsworth and his conspiracy theory club—”

“I will!” Cali agreed immediately.

“—and the rest of us will get back to our routine,” I finished.

“Already on it,” Rishika said. “I’m going to lead a fight practice today to keep everyone spry. I gotta tire them out anyway before they start getting chaotic.” She shot a pointed look at Lola.

Lola threw her hands up in the air, huffing. “My god, you cannot even suggest hanging out with the Mothman these days without someone judging you!”

“Sounds great,” I told Rishika. “That’s exactly what I’d do.”

After Lola, Jay, and the rest of them headed off to prepare for the drills, Cali looked up at me and sighed, saying she had to get ready for crew and class. I got a hug and a kiss from her before she left, along with her voice in my head when she mind linked, *I’ll miss you.*

I could get used to mornings like this.

“Thanks for organizing everything today,” I said to Rishika before she headed outside. “I didn’t even have to ask.”

“I guess I was just doing what I think you’d do,” Rishika said with a shrug.

I eyed her carefully. I didn’t want to pressure her, but checking in wouldn’t hurt. “I think this is proof that you’d be the perfect second. Have you given that any more thought?”

Rishika paused, hesitating for a beat. “I did, actually…” Then she nodded, full of determination. “You’re right, Greyson. I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

**Episode 4846**

**Xavier**

It was a morning like any other. I was awake. I felt shitty. I looked outside, through the window. I could practically hear Greyson’s voice in my head, saying, *“Good fucking god, are you brooding again? Do you* ever *take any time off?”*

Fuck him.

Ava had mentioned me taking time off the night before, though. But, like, to do what? Wander around and think? I already thought. A lot. Then again, people would come and ask me a million things all the time and constantly interrupt the process. If it was even a process, anyway.

Ava’s rich, honeyed scent tickled my nose before I turned to face her. She’d just walked into the kitchen. She wore a pair of leggings and a T-shirt. All very simple, but she still looked so hot that I itched to touch her. The sudden stabbing in my head said that I should stay the fuck away.

I needed to fix this pronto.

“Did you think about what I said last night?” she asked.

“I guess…” I sighed. “Maybe I do need a day off.”

She nodded. “I’m glad you see that. An Alpha who’s all conflicted on the inside isn’t good for the pack.”

I hated how right she was, but I didn’t say so. The hint of hope in her face made me feel a little better.

“What do you need me to do in your absence?” she asked.

“We have to run drills around the territory to make sure our defenses are solid,” I said. “Are you up for that?”

“Of course. Marissa and I are on it. We’ll be fine for a day without our Alpha, don’t worry.”

I would never admit it out loud, but I was worried they’d be a little *too* fine without me.

“Here you go,” Ava said, interrupting my thoughts. She held out a backpack to me.

“What’s that?” I asked, taking it gingerly. I sniffed it, my eyes narrowed.

She snorted. “It’s not a bomb, Xavier. I packed you a couple of sandwiches for lunch, snacks, and water.”

I looked up at her, startled. That felt so—*domestic*. Which wasn’t a label that I would have applied to Ava, ever. But she was trying here, I could see that. When I was at my lowest, she persevered and did sweet shit like this that made me feel all mushy on the inside. Before I could stop myself, I hugged her. She held onto me tight, breathing against my neck. Her closeness made my mouth water and gave me a low-grade headache at the same time.

Pleasure and pain, all together.

“Thank you,” I said in her ear. “For… the backpack. And for helping me out.”

She faced me, resting her hands on my chest. Her eyes flickered to my lips, and I wanted to kiss her, badly. But then Cali’s hurt face from the night before flashed through my head, and a bout of dizziness hit me. I stepped away from Ava.

It felt like I wasn’t in control of my own body all over again. I fucking hated it.

“I’ll be home by dinner,” I said gruffly.

“Take your time. Promise you’ll take this seriously, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

I couldn’t *not* take it seriously, I realized. I couldn’t be alone with Cali without thinking about Ava, and I couldn’t kiss Ava without feeling guilty about Cali. I hadn’t even stayed in the same bed as Ava the night before, because I didn’t trust myself. Cali’s heartbroken expression had played on a loop in my head, and I’d had to take those drops again just to be able to sleep.

“I’m going to fix this,” I told Ava.

And that was a promise.

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Once I got outside, I wondered if I should shift and run as a wolf, or hike a bit as a human. I decided that since my mate bond was wolf-connected, being a wolf might help me figure out what I really wanted. After shifting, I picked up the backpack that Ava had given me in my mouth, by the straps. I was careful with it.

It mattered to me.

I tried to ignore the weight of it after I started running, though. I needed to clear my head. The breeze was cold as ever but subtle today, and it felt good to run like this, for no reason. Then again, there was a reason here. I was supposed to think about what was making my wolf so conflicted, and clearing my head should have the opposite effect.

My wolf slowed down, pausing by a stream.

The issue here was—

Everything.

I loved Cali, but I also loved Ava. Being with Ava meant being Alpha of the Samara pack. And I loved being Alpha. The role was meant for me, even if I’d always imagined being the Redwood Alpha, not the Samara Alpha. I couldn’t lie to myself and say that that dream wasn’t still present in the back of my mind.

But to become the Redwood Alpha, I would have to challenge Greyson. And as much as my brother still annoyed the shit out of me, we were brothers. It would be so much easier if I could flat out despise Greyson like I did when we’d first met, but that wasn’t the case anymore. We had been through a lot since his return. He’d been there for me, and I’d been there for him.

It wasn’t like I wished for him to be miserable and go die alone in a ditch. I didn’t mind if he found happiness—just with someone who wasn’t Cali. But Cali was the only one who seemed to make Greyson happy, and he was straight up fucking besotted with her. But what did that mean for me? Did I have to be the bigger person here and stay with Ava and the Samaras?

The very idea of letting Cali go sent a pain so sharp through my head that my wolf whined in agony. My vision grew spotty, the water of the stream before me sparkling all of a sudden. I huffed. This was just way too fucking much, and this “day off” bullshit wasn’t working.

It was only making me feel worse. More conflicted, more confused, more alone.

I was about to turn around when I spotted someone through the trees across the other side of the stream. It looked like a man in his forties, with long brown hair, tied up in a bun on top of his head. He was shirtless with baggy pants on.

The last thing I fucking needed was to be seen by a human right now.

I was about to slink away when the guy said, “Hello, Xavier.”

I recognized the voice immediately. It was Vander. They waved me over. “You may follow me if you feel like it.”

I didn’t know what I felt like, so… whatever. I jumped over the stream, then shifted and followed them through the trees. Vander had led me to a cliff side and now sat cross-legged on the ground.

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

“I like to sit in nature and commune with it,” Vander said.

I paused. “Okay, uh… I won’t disturb you, then.”

“No, sit. I like company.”

With a shrug, I settled beside Vander.

“Do you know how to meditate?” Vander asked.

“Nah.”

“It’s easy. You simply sit in one place comfortably, focus your gaze on one spot in the horizon or close your eyes, and listen to your body.”

“Listen… to my body,” I repeated incredulously.

Vander smirked. “Yes. You can start with observing your breaths.”

“Or I could just die and finally be at peace.” I scoffed.

Vander raised an eyebrow.

“Fine. I’ll try.”

I did try. It went over as well as you’d expect it.

Vander looked thoughtful.

“You’ve always been a very *complicated* person, Xavier,” Vander said, using air quotes.

I frowned. “Why the air quotes?”

Vander ignored the question. “I can feel that you are even more troubled than usual at the moment. What’s got you so tense?”

*Here goes nothing*, I thought. And then I spoke.

“I’m torn between two mates and two packs. I assume you already know everything that’s happened with Adéluce?”

Vander nodded. “Indeed. I know everything all the time. How will you solve your predicament?”

“I don’t know,” I said bitterly. “That’s the problem.”

“Perhaps you are only looking at the big picture here, when you need to figure out each small step first.”

I squinted at Vander. “What does that mean?”

“Well, how can you decide where your relationship with Cali should go when there’s a gaping wound between the two of you? You hurt her, and it’s only logical for her to be afraid of getting hurt again. The breach of trust between the two of you is giant. Shouldn’t you resolve that first?”

I realized that Vander was right, and a small weight lifted off my shoulders. With this smaller step to work on, things didn’t feel so big and overwhelming anymore.

“Thank you, Vander.”

Vander smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Hey, maybe we can talk more? Like a regular thing?” I asked.

Vander raised an eyebrow. “Or you could find a real therapist.”

“What?” I almost laughed. “Who? Me? *Therapy?*”

Vander shrugged. “I didn’t use Socratic questioning, or what Freud would define as psychoanalysis, but still, the conversation we just had did include me briefly guiding you and offering you advice. Sounds like a version of what humans do in therapy. Don’t you agree?”

If I ignored the weird part in the beginning about those dead dudes, Vander had made a good point here.

Should *I go to therapy?*

**Episode 4847**

“So, Lil’ Hart,” Bear said, nudging me. “How are your relationship woes going?”

The team and I had gathered at the cafeteria before practice. They seemed to be in the mood for chaos, which was nothing new. I had made the mistake of (semi) telling them about my Xavier issues, so now they were following up.

*What am I supposed to say, though? That my ex is taking drugs because being around me makes his head hurt?*

Ha. Good times.

“Guys, let’s not put Cali on the spot,” Gael said, like any good team captain should.

Everybody booed him, and Johnny threw half a cookie in his face. It bounced off Gael’s cheek and landed on the table. Instead of getting mad, Gael picked up the cookie and ate it in one bite. This was true anarchy, and I barked out a laugh.

“Nothing about this is funny, Cali,” Codsworth deadpanned. “I want an update, too. Where did we leave off last time?”

“Hart said Xavier’s working with his ex,” Kayden replied, “but I didn’t get that part. Like where does the ex fit in? Does he like her?”

I shot a look around the table. Numerous pairs of eager eyes were fixed on me. Anyone who said that boys weren’t into gossip was deeply deluded. Entertaining them was a lot of pressure, but I would persevere and deliver the drama here.

“Xavier’s ex is a… special case.” I paused. Then I said the first thing that came to mind. “She was in a ‘coma’ for a few years, and she miraculously came back last year.”

Gasps all around. I wanted to pat myself on the back.

“Holy fucking shit, dude!” Jayden said. “For real?”

“How did she get into the coma?” Patel asked.

I opened my mouth and closed it. How did I say in a concealed way that Xavier had killed Ava after she’d killed his mother? Yikes.

“Well. It involved… an accident. And Xavier was part of it.”

More gasps. They were *riveted*.

“No way,” Bear said. “Like, a car accident? Was Xavier driving? Did he get out of it unscathed?”

“He did, and she fell into the coma, so he’s always felt responsible!” Schmiddy said, pointing at Bear. Turning to me, he said, “That’s it, right?”

I cleared my throat. “I mean, you guys are practically writing the story yourselves.”

“Wait, hang on,” Codswroth said, narrowing his eyes on me. “So he’s been asking you to let him back into your life, right?”

I nodded.

“But are he and his ex are back in a relationship now? Or are they just working together? Because you haven’t answered that.”

I sighed. “They’re back together.”

More gasps, accompanied by groans, and Bear very loudly saying, “I told you fuckers that the ex thing is a red flag!”

“That’s some bullshit,” Codsworth said with a scowl. “He’s asking you to hang out again, but he’s with his ex. Is he into her? Or does he feel like he owes it to her to stay in a relationship with her?”

“I think that’s it,” Johnny said. “Because he was driving during the car accident, and it was his fault that she fell into a coma!”

“This shit’s getting good,” Rodrigo mumbled in the background, chewing on his straw.

I blinked between all of them. “I mean. Sort of. I guess.”

By the way, there was a tiny chance that my embellishments were getting a little too complicated, and that would soon come back to bite me in the ass.

“I think things should be simpler than that, though,” Bear said with a scowl. “If he likes Cali, he should dump his ex.”

“Yeah, but what about Greyson?” Gael asked.

Aaaaand now I was the one getting the headache.

“No, it’s true,” Codsworth said. “Greyson’s always been nice to us.”

“Um, *us*?” I asked.

Codsworth waved me off. “Us, you—same difference. Greyson’s been good, whereas Xavier… He’s not fully pursuing you because of his ex who came back from the dead.”

That was a surprisingly accurate sentence.

“Red flag!” Bear slammed his fist on the table, making everybody other than Codsworth jump.

“Thank you, guys, for having my back, but it’s more complicated than that,” I said.

Codsworth gave me a look. “How much *more* complicated?”

I opened my mouth and closed it like a fish. Thankfully, Gael’s phone went off at just the right time. Checking it out, he said, “Kay, playtime’s over. We gotta get going to practice before Coach has our heads.”

“Regatta’s this weekend, Lil’ Hart!” Bear said, grinning. “You ready?”

I forced a smile. “Sure.”

*Oh, god, I forgot all about the regatta!*

If I didn’t want to disappoint these guys, I needed to practice *a lot* more.

\*\*\*

Practice was ordinary. Thankfully not disastrous. Usually I’d go home right after, but I had to stay late for another cryptozoology meeting with Greyson’s blessing. I was eating an early dinner in the cafeteria when Chessa walked in, flipping bouncy blonde hair over her shoulder. When our eyes met, I waved her over.

“Cali, hey!” She looked around. “Where’s the pack of puppies that usually follows you around?”

I snorted. “Crew’s over for the day, so I’m not sure. I’ll probably see Codsworth later, though.”

“You’re going to the cryptozoology meeting, then?” she asked, taking a seat across from me.

“Yeah, you?”

She nodded. “Are you going to let Codsworth tell that story about the wolf he saw in your backyard?”

I shook my head, looking around to make sure nobody was listening to us. “I think there’s no reason for him to say anything. He needs to understand that he didn’t actually see anything extraordinary. He has to stay out of it.”

Chessa nodded. “I get it. I’ve seen what happens when clueless people find out about the supernatural world.”

*What about you?* I wanted to ask. *What’s your story? How do you know about supernaturals?*

I wondered if I should bite the bullet and try to figure out more about Chessa. She took my silence as nervousness, because then she said, “Come on, don’t worry. I’ll help you to keep things with Codsworth chill during the meeting.”

“Thanks,” I said just as my phone beeped.

I checked to see a text from Lola.

*I’m done with class!! Are you still at the cafeteria???*

I sent back a quick reply. Looking up at Chessa, I smiled. “Lola—that’s my best friend—is on her way. I’m excited for you two to meet, actually. She also knows about this stuff.”

Chessa looked intrigued. “Really? Can’t wait to meet her.”

I was about to figure out how much I should share when Chessa checked her phone. “Oh, crap!”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I actually can’t stay,” she said apologetically, standing up. “I forgot I have a meeting with my professor—I really need to get going. I’ll see you at the club, okay?”

I watched her walk her away quickly, feeling a little disappointed that she couldn’t stay to meet Lola. My best friend arrived only two minutes later. I expected her to be her usual hyper self, but she seemed confused.

“What’s up?” I asked while Lola sniffed the air around my table.

“I thought I smelled something… weird?”

I frowned. “Weird?”

She nodded, taking a seat. “It’s so faint that I can’t put my finger on what it is.”

“Maybe it’s the mediocre meatloaf,” I said in a dry tone, stabbing at the rubbery food on my plate. “Torin would ask to speak to the chef if he were here.”

Lola’s confused expression melted away. She laughed, shaking her head. “Yeah, probably. Anyway, when’s your cryptozoology club meeting?”

“In like half an hour,” I said. My voice dropped. “Don’t worry—I’ve made it my mission to get them off the trail of the pack.”

Lola pressed her lips together, a glint in her eye. “Without scaring the shit out of them?”

I pointed at her with my fork. “Lola, no! No scaring them!”

“Eh, whatever. Stuff like this happens every once in a while, but it never goes anywhere.”

“Hope so,” I mumbled. “The pack needs some time off from dealing with emergencies. I’ll make sure to keep going to these meetings and monitor the situation.”

“It’ll be fine.” Lola shrugged. “What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

\*\*\*

Lola went home, and I headed to the club meeting. The sun had just set, and the campus was uncharacteristically calm as I walked across the lawn.

*Hmmm, I don’t like how quiet this is…*

The silence was accompanied by this eerie feeling of being watched. After all the stuff I’d had to deal with during the past few months, I had clearly become paranoid.

*Get a grip, Cali*, I scolded myself. *You’re fine.*

When I got to the club meeting, everybody was there but Chessa.

“Cali, there you are,” Codsworth said. “Come sit next to me.”

I took a seat next to Codsworth around the circle. Everybody was talking to one another, but I wasn’t listening. Where was Chessa? I had counted on her help after our talk, and now I was getting jittery.

“Okay, now Chessa’s the only one who’s missing,” Codsworth said, going through a list of names. “Anyone know where she’s at?”

“She said something about meeting with a professor,” I said. “Maybe she got caught—”

“Wait, I’m here!” Chessa hurried into the room.

 “You are late,” Codsworth told her sternly. “*Again*.”

“Agree to disagree!” She waved a hand at Codsworth, squeezing herself to sit down between him and me. I hid a grin when Codsworth shot her a long-suffering look.

“Moving along after that interruption,” Codsworth said, clearing his throat. “I wanted to start the meeting by bringing up something I found in the woods about an hour away from campus.”

Everybody looked riveted. I was alarmed.

*He’s really going to talk about this? Again?*

“Oh, oh!” Chessa raised her hand. “Before he goes on with that, I have a story!”

She had to be playing misdirect here, and for that I was grateful. Codsworth, on the other hand, looked annoyed. “I’m not done talking, Chessa.”

I gulped. “But—”

“I’m *still* not done talking, Cali,” Codsworth scoffed before looking around the group. Casually, he added, “Anyway, long story short, I found shapeshifting wolves in the woods. Who wants to go on a hunt to find them?”

**Episode 4848**

**Artemis**

“You’re one of the Wrenthorns, aren’t you?” Marius asked.

“No, who ever said I was?” I demanded, maybe a bit too quickly. “I’m an orphan. You know that.”

“An orphan who has always wanted to know about her family.”

“So? What does that have to do anything?”

Marius stared at me, narrowing his eyes. “you’re lying.”

“Don’t you think there’s probably a reason for that?” I snapped.

Marius blinked at me. Then he started laughing—with a hint of an edge to it that should’ve been more annoying than attractive. “I can’t believe you are part of one of the most powerful Light Fae families and I never knew! Who *are you*? Who *am I*? I thought you trusted me more than that!”

“I never knew,” I snapped again. “Besides, as if knowing would’ve have changed how you treated me!”

He paused, thinking that over. “Maybe.”

I glared at him. “That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

He huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Fine. You have a point.”

“If you’re done with the theatrics, let’s get back to the task at hand now,” I said. “You have to catch this bounty because you were dumb enough to get on the wrong side of the Dark Fae court. Did I miss something?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not dumb. Some mistakes were made. But everyone makes mistakes—”

“I am going to punch you in the mouth if you don’t shut up right now.”

He smirked. “And then kiss it better?”

I ignored his question.

“What we need to do right now,” I said between gritted teeth, “is catch this guy really fast so you can go back home without getting decapitated.”

Marius lifted a brow. “So you’re really going to help me here?”

“Yes.”

He grinned. “Because I’m adorable, and you secretly like me?”

“Because I need you to guide me through the Dark Fae land,” I said dryly. “It’s been too long since I’ve been there.”

Marius winked. “Oh, just admit it. You’d miss me if I got executed.”

I rolled my eyes and started walking. He, of course, followed me with the determination of the most annoying duckling alive. “This is getting old, Ari. Just saying.”

I shot him a look. He was baiting me.

“Aren’t you going to ask me *what’s* getting old?” he asked innocently.

“What?” I barked, falling into his malevolent trap.

“You, not admitting that you like me.” He elbowed me. “Come on, you even kissed me before.”

I swatted him away. “What?! When?”

He chuckled. “Right before your Light Fae family caught us! It was searing, I must say.”

I wasn’t going to admit that that kiss had been a distraction. Instead, I said, “You’re delusional. I barely tolerate you.”

Marius came in front of me, walking backward as I moved forward. “Then prove it. Kiss me again.”

I scoffed. “What will that prove?”

He shrugged. “I’ll be able to tell if you like it. And if you do…” His lips pursed in a mischievous smile. “Then you like *me*.”

“That’s stupid,” I said, huffing. “You’re just trying to get me to kiss you.”

He shrugged, twirling to the side to walk beside me, close enough that the backs of our hands brushed. A shiver ran through me, and I pulled mine away.

He noticed. And grinned. “It’s okay if you’re scared.”

My hands turned into fists. “I know what you’re doing, Marius.”

He laughed. Evilly. “What am I doing exactly, Ari?”

I shook my head, scoffing. Marius was playing one of his usual little games here. Nothing meant anything to him, but kissing him had been a big deal to me. I felt like I had betrayed Rishika. She and I were on a break, but it had been a while, and deep down I worried that she no longer thought about me. Did she even miss me at all?

The possibility that she had moved on… It hurt.

Could *she* be out there kissing someone else?

Meanwhile, Marius had decided to turn this into a concert of madness, speaking to me in a song-like tone.

“Ariiiiiii!” He waved a hand in my face. “Ari, Ari, Ari, where did you go? Hello? AriAriAriAriAriiiiiii—”

“Oh my gods, shut up!” I shouted, smacking him on the shoulder. “What is your problem?” I gave him a shove, suddenly irrationally angry, because those damn kisses were at least halfway his fault. Marius, with his fox-like expression, his lopsided smile, his horrible never-ending dramatics was… a lot.

He was a lot to deal with.

He was too much to ignore.

“You’re the one with the problem, Ari. Why are you so mad at me?” Suddenly, I wanted his nonsense singing back. Because the tone he’d just used was dangerous, low and gruff.

He knew what he was doing. And the fact that I *did* want to kiss him—despite still having feelings for Rishika, despite knowing that I wasn’t special and he did this with every woman he stumbled upon——*enraged* me.

I was so furious that I could taste it. At him and at myself, too.

“You *are* afraid, aren’t you?” he muttered, leaning closer. “You’re terrified you’re going to kiss me again, and you’re going to love it like all the other times. And what would that mean?” I did not breathe when his nose brushed my cheek. His entire body radiated heat. He smelled like the earth, sweat, and that damn lemongrass. I wanted him enough to want to hurt him, actually.

It would be nice to see him bleed.

I didn’t recognize my voice when I spoke. “Okay. I’ll kiss you. But it won’t mean anything. I’ll just do it because I pity you.”

He laughed. “Pity?”

“Of course. You’ve been begging for a kiss like a pathetic dog. It’s sad, really.”

His gaze sharpened, but I didn’t give a damn. He’d asked for this, so I leaned in and gave him a peck. I hated the way my lips tingled afterward.

“There,” I said. “Happy now?”

“No.” He pulled my arms around his neck, wrapped his own around my waist, and dragged me flush against him. He felt hard all over, and my breath caught. “If I’m going to beg, Artemis,” he whispered, “you better be generous. Like this.”

He kissed me, then. It was not a peck.

I forced myself to remain unmoving, unmoved, but it didn’t work. His kiss had the kind of scorching pressure to it that made me gasp. Once my lips parted, it was game over. His tongue slipped inside, his grip on my waist tightened, his other hand came up to grab my jaw. He licked into my mouth, no hesitation or pre-empt. Like he was there to seize, and I’d better hold on because he needed this so badly he wouldn’t let go.

I was supposed to love someone else, though, and I was supposed to not trust him.

I wasn’t supposed to want him, so I wanted to break him, break this kiss. I did it with a slap, but his response was to laugh. He grabbed my hand and bit the heel of my palm. He laughed again when I hissed in pain, and when I bit his lip hard and drew blood, he stumbled back in surprise. In delight. He fell on the ground, pulling me with him, on top of him.

We were both panting.

“Do that again,” he challenged. Another challenge, another little trap. Because when my teeth scraped his mouth once more, he grabbed me by the hair and kissed me again. He flipped us over, and now he was on top. He was pressure and heat all over me, and I kissed him back like I couldn’t get enough.

This was bad.

This was so bad, because he made all these sounds that felt desperate, and I greedily swallowed them down. He kissed me like he’d been thinking about it for days, months, years, and now he was gorging himself on it, terrified someone would take it away. He grabbed my thigh, hitching it over his hip. The friction between our bodies had me trembling, arching up to him, unable to control it.

He had me where he wanted me.

He broke the kiss only to rasp, “You love this, Ari. Admit it.”

I was breathing so hard I couldn’t tell him to go to hell. I didn’t have the time to do it when a roar echoed through the woods and the ground under us shuddered.

The ground under us was made of… scales and hay?

*What?*

We broke apart, and I jumped to my feet. “It’s an egg,” I choked out, my eyes wide when I saw the thing. “It’s a giant egg!”

Marius gaped. “We rolled into a—”

“Weeper nest! Shit, we have to go!”

Another roar, more like a screech, and then the ground under us shook again. I grabbed Marius’s hand, pulling him up before we broke into a sprint. “It’s gonna catch up to us sooner than later,” I said, panting. “It hates climbing—we should get up a tree!”

A moment later, Marius was climbing a black myrtle tree with the grace of a big cat, pulling me up with him. The smell from the flowers all around us was overwhelming.

“It won’t be able to pick up our scent in here,” he whispered, pulling me close.

We held our breaths when the beast’s giant lizard-like form appeared below. It growled and snarled, sharp teeth showing. Its heavy footsteps made the tree shake. This type of creature loved to eat your liver and spleen first. It kept you alive to continue with the rest, devouring you from the inside out.

I shuddered.

Finally, when it couldn’t find us, the weeper growled one last time, and turned around.

“That”—I gulped—“was close.”

Marius’s face was blank. He nodded, smoothing my hair away from my face. “You’re okay,” he said. There was a weird hint of *something* in his voice. In his dark gaze. Looking away, he cleared his throat and pointed ahead, at a cluster of smoking rooftops. “We should go check out that village. There might be clues about my bounty.”

He helped me climb down the tree and led me out of the forest in silence. There was no mention of what we’d been doing before rolling into that nest. None of Marius’s constant talking and teasing.

He didn’t let my hand go.

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The village was a ghost town. Too quiet, too empty, black curtains over the windows.

“There’s still smoke coming out of the chimneys,” I said in a low voice. “And it’s early. There should have been people out and about.”

“Hello?” Marius shouted into the distance. “Anyone home?”

“Stop!” I hissed. “You have to be careful.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s just a tiny little village in the middle of—”

A war cry cut Marius off. A second later, a bunch of weapon-yielding Fae jumped out from rooftops and behind houses.

The largest one among them raised his sword toward us and snarled, “Stop right there!”

**Episode 4849**

As soon as Codsworth stopped speaking, I was screaming inside my head.

*What?! No! This isn’t how things were supposed to go!*

Apart from Chessa, who shot me a wide-eyed look, the other cryptozoology members were super excited. They started talking all at once, shouting and overflowing with enthusiasm, while Codsworth sat there and admired his handiwork.

“Okay, so when will we go?” Nathan yelled over the group, claiming the crown of Loudest of Them All.

“You *can’t*!” I burst. I’d tossed my hat in the ring at the last minute but effectively won the shouting match, loud enough that everyone turned to look at me.

Codsworth’s hint of a smirk vanished. He scowled at me. “Why the hell not?”

“I mean, we can’t go, because—there’s, uh…” I sputtered, grasping at straws here. And then it hit me. “We can’t go. We have the regatta!”

Everyone turned to Codsworth. His narrowed eyes widened before he cursed under his breath. “Cali’s right. We can’t. Practice is gonna be brutal, and I don’t have the time to prepare for a hunt this week.”

But seriously, who did Codsworth think he was? Did he *want* to get killed? What if the next thing he tried to hunt wasn’t a Redwood wolf but a murderous vampire or something? Honestly, the same went for the rest of these deluded coeds. Why were they huffing in disappointment? I was trying to keep them alive!

“What do we do now?” Nathan asked Codsworth.

He nodded seriously. “We’ll reconvene next week to plan out the hunt.”

*Oh, god…*

At least I’d bought us some time.

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“Are you okay?” Chessa asked as we headed outside. “You seem upset. I know you didn’t want Codsworth to say anything about what he saw…”

I sighed. “Yeah, I am upset. I live in those woods… I just want to protect the wolves.”

Chessa eyed me, pausing her stride.

My pulse picked up. I stared back at her, not sure how much to reveal. She shook her head. “You know, they’re endangered and all in certain places. I’m from Minnesota, and the wolf population is important to the, um, ecosystem… and stuff.”

“I understand,” Chessa said.

I swallowed, scrutinizing her expression. “They’re just precious”—*and real people*—“and I don’t want them to be in any kind of danger.”

“Don’t worry, Cali,” she said. “I’ll help you any way I can.”

*Aww, that’s so sweet! She’s so sweet!*

“Thanks, Chessa. You’re a live saver,” I said. Then, “You know what? You should come to the regatta.”

She smiled. “Oh, cool! When is that?”

“This weekend,” I said.

Her smile fell. “I’m supposed to have a family thing, so I’m not sure if I can make it.”

“You could always come to the after party,” I said. “The guys say it’s really fun, a bonfire in the woods.”

“That sounds amazing!” Chessa grinned. “I’ll keep you posted, okay?”

She and I said our goodbyes when I got to the parking lot. I watched her as she headed toward the dorms, thinking that I needed to update Greyson about her as well. I definitely had to tell him about what happened at the meeting today ASAP.

When I reached my car and pulled out my keys, though, a familiar voice called my name.

“Hey! Cali!”

I turned around to see Codsworth walking over, his signature frown on his face.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You left the meeting so quickly we didn’t have time to chat,” he said, still frowning.

“About what? Are you out here looking for radioactive raccoons or something?”

He gave me a flat look. “Hilarious. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

I stared at him, alarmed. “Please don’t tell me you believe in magical raccoons, Codsworth.”

“No.” He scoffed. “I wanted to talk about how you deal with all things supernatural. You look kind of… bored during the meetings.”

My voice rose an octave. “Me? Bored?”

“Yeah, you look bored or say sarcastic shit,” he said with a pout. “I appreciate both those things usually—”

“Those are your default vibes, after all,” I said.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “But I thought you’d be more excited about the planned hunt. This is huge, and I guess… I mean, we’re friends, so I wanted to share it with you. None of the guys from crew are into this stuff, and they tease me about it. I guess I hoped you’d be different.”

I blinked at him. Could—could Codsworth be endearing?

Didn’t see that one coming.

“Codsworth,” I said slowly. “You hate me, remember?”

“Seriously, shut up.”

I laughed, shaking my head. But then I sobered up, because this was breaking my heart a little. “I am excited about the hunt,” I lied. “Because you are excited about the hunt. Because we are friends, like you said.”

 “Cool!” His enthusiasm was back full-force. “’Cause I was thinking that maybe we could get, like, night-vision goggles, and we *have* to bring go-pros to get video. It’s like when people see Bigfoot and never get video evidence. We can’t be newbs like that, right?”

Every word that came out of his mouth made me feel guilty. This was snowballing, and none of it would’ve happened if I hadn’t invited the boys to that damn party.

“Buying all those gadgets sounds expensive,” I said. “Maybe instead of hunting supernatural things we could just… talk about them?”

“No way! What’s cooler than witnessing this stuff in person?”

I huffed. “I don’t know, not getting maimed?”

He laughed, but I shook my head. “Dude, I’m serious—”

He smirked. “Did you just call me ‘dude’? Are you one of the guys now?”

“*Codsworth*,” I said firmly. “If these creatures are real, they’re dangerous. Have you seen—well, basically every scary creature movie ever? People get eaten!”

He snorted. “You’re funny, you know that?”

“I really don’t understand why you want to do this hunt,” I said. “Where did this whole supernatural obsession come from? Watching *Scooby-Doo* as a kid?”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t try to psychoanalyze me, Hart. I can’t be put in a box.”

*Yeah*, I thought, *but you* will *be put in a coffin if you go out there and hunt something other than the Redwood pack!*

Codsworth said he’d see me at practice, looking happy (for his standards) about it, before he walked off.

I needed to talk to Greyson.

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On the ride home, I stewed and spiraled.

*This is all my fault! I invited the guys to the party, they saw Ravi, and now look what happened. Oh, my god, I’m supposed to become the Redwood Luna, and this is NOT Luna behavior!*

Greyson wouldn’t be mad about this, because he was Greyson, and he always fixed things. But this had the potential to stress him out, and that was a million times worse. I didn’t want to cause him problems—I wanted to solve problems with him. I wanted to prove to him that I could be the pack’s true Luna, not a liability.

*Shit. Shit shit shit!*

I was on autopilot while I drove, spacing out during the entire ride, wallowing. I didn’t even realize I got back home until I saw the lights of the house in front of me. Taking a deep breath, I parked, grabbed my things, and headed inside.

 “Cali, hey!” Torin called from the living room. “I made strawberry cheesecake,” he said proudly.

“And we’re eating it. Wanna join us?” Rishika asked.

Ravi grinned. “It’s so good.”

I was not worthy of the cheesecake after the mess I’d made, but I did not tell them that to avoid bursting into tears. I said I needed to talk to Greyson first.

“He’s upstairs,” Rishika said. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I lied, feeling even worse about it.

I found Greyson in his room, lying on his bed, reading a book. He wore nothing but a pair of grey sweat pants. Utterly pornographic, all of it.

“Hey, love,” he said, smiling softly. He looked so sexy and domestic I wanted to throw myself into his arms like a Victorian debutante that was about to swoon. He noticed my face and frowned, closing his book. “What’s wrong?”

Shaking my head, I went over to the bed and curled into his side, feeling overwhelmed. He wrapped me into a hug in his warm, strong arms, which I *did not* deserve after the mess I’d made.

“It’ll be okay,” he muttered, kissing the side of my head.

My voice cracked. “You don’t know that. You don’t even know why I’m upset.”

His touch was gentle on my cheek. “I figure you’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

*Nooo, he’s so sweet!*

I could bear it no more. Looking up at him, I blurted, “It’s Codsworth. He wants to go on a wolf hunt.”

Greyson paused. Then, he scowled. “Seriously? He thinks it’s a good idea to go out there looking for supernatural creatures?”

I pointed at him. “That’s what I said! Like, does he want to die?”

Greyson looked thoughtful, scratching his cheek. Sitting up, I grabbed both his hands in mine. “I’m so, so sorry, Greyson. This is all my fault. I never should’v suggested the party—”

“Love, stop,” he said, “Shit like this happens sometimes. I’ll figure it out.”

His soothing words and presence made me feel better. But still. “What are you going to do?”

“Well…” Greyson raised an eyebrow. “If they’re looking for a wolf, let’s give them exactly what they want.”

**Episode 4850**

**Xavier**

When I returned home, I found Ava in the kitchen. The whole room smelled like bleach.

I frowned. “Have you been . . . cleaning?”

She fidgeted. “Well. Yeah. I wanted to keep busy, so—yeah.”

This was weird.

“Have you eaten dinner?” she asked, gesturing at the stove awkwardly. “Donovan made this bean casserole thing. It’s surprisingly good, actually, so—”

She was rambling, now. This kind of behavior was so unlike her that it freaked me the fuck out.

“Ava,” I cut her off firmly. “We need to talk.”

She gulped. “Yeah. I figured.”

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I poured myself some whiskey when we got to my study.

“Can I have one, too?” Ava asked.

I gave her a glass. She downed the whole thing in three seconds flat. I scowled. What was she so nervous about? She was fine when I’d left earlier. Like, as fine as she could be considering the circumstances.

“Okay, I’m ready.” She looked like she was bracing herself. “You went on your walk, you marinated over things, and now you want to talk. So just tell me. I can take it.”

I stared at her. “What the hell do you think I’m going to say?”

Her icy blue eyes pinned me in place. “You’re… not breaking up with me?”

I felt her words like a punch in the gut. My voice cracked. “That’s what you’ve been thinking this whole time?”

She pressed her lips together. The throbbing in my head returned. I ignored it, marching toward her. Taking both her hands in mine, I said, “Ava, for fuck’s sake. I’m not breaking up with you. I meant it when I said I love you. Do you think I’d ever lie about something like that?”

Her lips parted, and her eyes turned shiny. She looked like she was about to cry. I wanted to tell her that everything would be okay. That I felt like shit over the stress I caused her. But when I opened my mouth to speak, a warning pang of pain surged across my brain.

Fuck.

“So…” Ava gripped my hands tighter. “Are you going to tell Cali you’re not getting back with her, then?”

The hope in her face was staggering. I felt even worse.

“I’m not doing that either.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed to slits. She yanked herself away from me. “So what? We’re exactly where we were before?”

“That’s not true,” I rushed to say. “I did realize something.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What?”

“I—” I rubbed my forehead. This was going really bad, and it was only going to get worse. But keeping the truth from her was out of the question. “I did some really fucked-up stuff to Cali after Adéluce cursed me, Ava. The kind of shit that Cali can’t just forget. I need to make amends and make sure that things between her and me are balanced again.”

Ava went rigid. She looked like she was three seconds away from exploding and tearing this room to pieces. When she spoke, though, her voice was low. “So that’s the only reason you’re still with me? I’m the consolation prize until you can make up with Cali?”

I would’ve preferred it if she’d screamed at me.

“Ava—” I reached for her, and she winced.

“Do not fucking touch me!” she spat. She made a move to leave, but I blocked her way.

“Ava, that is not what this is! Don’t you see? Whatever choice I ultimately make, it can’t be influenced by whatever fight I’m having with Cali or you—”

She scoffed. “You think this makes me feel better?!”

“No, but it’s the truth! Didn’t you say I should be honest?”

She huffed, making a move to leave again. I grabbed her arm, ignoring the pain in my head. Pulling her close, I said, “I need to even the playing field and start with a clean slate to figure out what the fuck I’m going to do. I can’t choose between Cali and you until I restore some kind of balance across the board, and that’s exactly because you’re *not* my last resort, and you’re not a fucking consolation prize. I love you, Ava. Do you understand?”

She was breathing harshly. She hadn’t tried to pull away this time. The blazing anger in her expression had slightly dimmed, though. Thank *god*.

“I do,” she admitted. “But for the record, I fucking hate this.”

My throat hurt when I swallowed. “I promise I’ll always be honest with you about my feelings.”

“I guess that’s all I can ask for…” Looking up at me, Ava rested her hand on my chest. My heart ached where she touched. My wolf whined, and I wanted to kiss her. On the lips, on her neck—mark her and keep her close. I needed to, but something in me kicked in warning.

I settled for a kiss on the cheek that made my lips burn. I took a step back from her.

“I’m going to the Redwood house,” I said.

I needed to talk to Cali.

\*\*\*

My hands were shaking when I got to the Redwoods’ front porch. This used to be my home, but now I was just a fucking guest. I despised the thought. I despised how nervous I was about speaking with my mate. Cali’s and my last conversation had been during Lucian’s party, and she’d seemed so hurt that I dreaded what I would see in her face today.

This was such a mess.

“Xavier,” Rishika said after answering the door. Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to see Cali,” I said. No point in stalling.

Just then, I looked up to see her and Greyson coming down the stairs.

“Why?” Cali asked carefully. Her grip on the rail was white-knuckled. She looked confused and wary.

This was already going badly.

I looked between her and Greyson and swallowed thickly. A flash of pain invaded my brain, and I wondered how much worse this would’ve been without Big Mac’s drops. At least anger was no longer my first reaction at the sight of my mate standing so close to my brother. I felt… exhausted. Like I had no choice here but to be honest and level with everybody.

“Please,” I said, looking between Cali and Greyson. “This is important.”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. Cali stared at me, wide-eyed. Nobody spoke for a moment. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d used the word *please* in my brother’s vicinity. Cali glanced at him. Then she turned to me.

“Okay,” she breathed.

Cali led me to one of the studies. As I walked behind her, I felt Greyson’s watchful gaze burn holes in my back.

Once Cali and I were alone, I didn’t even know where to start. She looked as nervous as I was, and it fucking killed me. I wanted her to be happy, dammit. Happy, safe, okay. Not—*this*. She didn’t deserve all this pain.

“Is…” She cleared her throat. “Is this about your internal conflict, uh, situation? Between Ava and me?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I had a conversation with Vander today.”

Cali blinked at me in surprise. “You did?”

“Vander told me that one roadblock to knowing what I truly want is figuring out where you and I stand. They said there’s been a huge breach of trust.”

Cali looked away, wrapping her arms around herself. “Wonder why,” she said coldly. “Couldn’t be your hot and cold attitude, could it? All I’ve been trying to do is connect with you, Xavier. You can’t suddenly put all of this on me.”

I didn’t say anything.

She continued, “I mean, I knew you were in trouble with Adéluce, and we got you free. That’s when things ended between us.” She was still looking away, still wrapped up in herself. She took a step away from me.

I took one forward, ignoring the dull ache in my forehead.

“Cali. Look at me.”

Slowly, she looked up. The vulnerability I saw in her gaze made me want to drop to my fucking knees for her.

“I know that you’re still hurt by the things I did to you. Even though it was Adéluce who made me break up with you, I was the one who made you feel that way.”

Cali stared at me for a beat. “It’s hard to be around you.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I waited.

She inhaled sharply and went on.

“I wanted to save you—I spent months obsessing over what was going on with you while you kept on treating me like shit.” She wrapped her arms around herself tighter. Her eyes were dark, depthless when they met mine. “You had no choice but to do it, I know that now, but the end result remains the same. You hurt me, and I don’t want to be hurt again. I can’t forget the sound of your voice, how cruel you were when you said those horrible things. And now you’re with Ava and the Samaras, and every time I see you with her, it’s like—”

“What?”

She shook her head, the corners of her eyes glistening. “You’re no longer mine. That’s already hurting me. I’m terrified that, in the end… you could break me beyond repair.”

A deep sense of self-loathing twisted inside me like a snake. It slithered up my neck, wrapping around my windpipe and squeezing.

“I wish I could go back and stop it all from happening,” I whispered.

Cali looked away.

At the sight of her like this, I no longer had control of my limbs. Walking up to her, I pulled her into a crushing hug. The moment our bodies made contact, she let out a little sob that cracked my fucking heart open.

I ignored the building headache, the sudden ringing in my ears that felt like a drum. It was all worth it. Giving Cali this bit of comfort as she leaned against my chest was worth all the pain in the world. I deserved to be torn apart into pieces for all I’d done to her.

I didn’t deserve *her*.

I loved her as much as I hated myself for hurting her.

The two conflicting feelings became one with the drumming in my head, and suddenly my entire universe narrowed down to this girl in front of me. My mate.

The one who healed me when she’d brought my wolf back.

The one I had hurt so badly she was terrified I could break her.

Losing all control, I leaned down and kissed her.

**Episode 4851**

The kiss surprised me at first, but then I leaned into it. I didn’t even think about it—kissing him was almost second nature. I’d done it so many times, after all.

It felt thrillingly familiar, like remembering the contours of my own body. His mouth coaxed mine open, tasting me, urging me to keep responding to him. Our bodies pressed together. The feeling of Xavier against me was warm and comforting. He completely filled my senses, overloading me as he slid a hand into my hair. I gasped as he bit at my bottom lip, his other arm snaking around my waist. Just as he started to lift me up and I braced myself on his chest, did my senses return.

What was I *doing*?

Immediately, I pulled away.

My feet went back on the ground. He was still holding me close, trying to keep me from ending the kiss. We couldn’t—this wasn’t right.

“Xavier, no,” I murmured, taking a step back.

That was all it took, and he immediately let his hands fall away from my waist. He shook his head, and I could see real shock over what had just happened in his eyes.

“Cali, I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what—I didn’t mean to do that. It just…happened.”

“I know,” I said, stepping even farther away from him. When I was at a safer distance, I turned back to look at him. “I got carried away, too, Xavier… but that’s not right. I think we both know it. There’s still too much baggage between us.”

“I know,” he said softly.

“You can’t just go around kissing me randomly, and you’ve done it twice now. It’s confusing, Xavier. It’s only making things worse between us and our other mates,” I said. I felt like I was going to start crying at any moment and that was just making me angry. “We can’t. Not when you’re still the Samara Alpha, and when you have a Luna and a mate in that pack.”

He pushed a hand through his dark hair.

“Yeah,” he said sharply, sounding frustrated, “I get that, Cali. I know, okay? That’s the whole fucking point of this.”

I frowned at this. “The whole point of what? What are you talking about?”

He met my eyes. “I need to make things right between us. That will let me figure out what to do about this damn internal conflict—choosing between you and Ava.”

I stared at him. “So… You’re not even sorry? You’re just here to work your shit out?”

His eyes widened, and in an instant he realized he’d made a mistake.

“Of course I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I hate that I hurt you, Cali. You know that. I don’t know how many more ways I can—”

“Stop,” I said, putting my hand up. “Just stop. I don’t want to hear it. I can’t believe you came here saying that you wanted to apologize, when you really just wanted to ease your conscience.”

“Cali—”

“I think you should leave,” I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

He looked stricken, but he didn’t argue. He pressed a hand to his eyes and turned, walking out of the room.

My heart was beating hard, and I knew I didn’t want to see him again, so I didn’t move until I heard the front door click shut.

Taking a shaking breath, I walked back into the hallway. Glancing into the living room, I saw Lola lounging on the couch, the TV remote in her hand. She was staring at the screen, flipping through channels. She must’ve sensed I was there, because she glanced at me and instantly sat up straight.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked.

“*Ugh*,” I moaned.

She patted the couch. “Care to elaborate?”

“Not really.” I heaved a gusty sigh. “Xavier was just here.”

“Yeah, I heard,” she said. “What did he want to talk to you about?”

“Do you want to know what he *said* he wanted to talk to me about, or do you want to know what he *actually* wanted to talk to me about?” I asked, cradling my face in my hands.

“What does that mean?”

“He *said* he wanted to apologize for everything—”

“I should think so,” Lola interjected heatedly.

“But what he *really* wanted to do was ease his conscience.”

“What do you mean?”

“Vander told him that he won’t be able to decide between Ava and me until he resolves his ‘internal conflict,’ so he came here to do that,” I said bitterly. “Not to apologize, but to try to solve his own problems.”

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “What an idiot. That guy needs to figure out his own shit *before* he comes over here and involves you. After everything he did to you, he thinks he can drag you into this? It’s not your job to fix him or help him along on his fucking journey.”

“I know, I know,” I said, a heavy feeling settling over me. “I know you’re right, but now I’m worried that I might’ve hurt his feelings when I told him to leave. Maybe I should’ve talked to him more. Tried to figure out why he’s so all over the place.”

“I don’t know,” Lola said doubtfully.

I considered the conversation I’d just had.

“I just don’t feel safe being vulnerable with him again, you know?” I said. “Not after all the pain he’s caused me. It just feels like too much of a risk.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Lola said, nodding. Then she sighed. “But, for your sake, I do hope you can figure out a way to be friendly with him. The Redwood and the Samara packs aren’t going to stop interacting anytime soon.”

“I know,” I said ruefully.

I looked up when Jay and Ravi walked into the room. Jay grinned when he saw us.

“Oh, Cali, good,” he said. “You’re just the coxswain we’re looking for.”

“That’s the term, right?” Ravi asked, suddenly looking nervous. “We did look it up online.”

“Yeah, that’s the right word,” I said with a laugh. I glanced between him and Jay. “What are you two up to?”

“We’ve set up the dining room to help you practice,” Jay said, his eye shining with excitement.

“*What?*”

“Come see,” Jay said, beckoning me forward.

Getting to my feet, I followed them into the dining room and was shocked to see that the whole room had been cleared. Everything was gone except for the chairs, which had been set up in two rows. Lilac, Violet, Rishika, and other members of the pack were sitting in the chairs. They were all holding a mop, broom, or stick as makeshift oars, and they were grinning at me.

“Ta-da!” Ravi yelled, throwing out his arms.

“What is this?” I asked, laughing as I looked around.

“Well, we promised to help you practice for your regatta, so we’re helping you practice,” Jay explained. “You need to catch up fast if you’re going to help your team win.”

I looked around at everyone’s faces, and the careful way the chairs had been arranged.

“That’s really, really nice of you all. Thank you,” I said, truly touched. “Okay, let’s do this!”

Sage cheered, and Violet waved her mop in the air.

I took my seat at the rear of the “boat” and pointed to the empty chairs where Lola, Jay, and Ravi sat. They picked up their “oars”—two brooms and a ski pole, respectively—and I concentrated, trying to remember all the instructions my coach had given me.

I started slowly, calling out instructions to my rowers, and at first, it was a mess. Violet and Lilac were rowing in opposite directions, so their “oars” kept smacking together, and they were getting progressively more irritated with each other. Also, Jay accidentally smacked Ravi in the shin, making Ravi swear colorfully.

“Okay, okay! Stop. We need to reset,” I said, waving my arms.

I had a feeling it would probably be easier for me to just practice on my own, but I couldn’t bring myself to say as much to the pack. I was so grateful to them all for being willing to do something so sweet for me.

And—as I kept shouting instructions—I realized that this was what it could be like to be a Luna. Organizing my pack, giving them instructions, and helping them work as a team. So this really was great practice—not just for crew, but for being the real Redwood Luna one day.

Despite the bumpy start, we kept at it, and were just getting into a groove when Greyson appeared in the doorway of the dining room. He clearly hadn’t been in on Ravi and Jay’s plan, and he looked around, his brow lifted in surprise as he watched his pack rowing through imaginary water with a motley assortment of improvised oars.

“Um, great work, everyone! Go grab some water,” I said, jumping to my feet and walking over to Greyson. He looked so severe; it was freaking me out. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

**Episode 4852**

**Xavier**

As I headed back to the Samara pack house, I couldn’t stop thinking about my conversation with Cali. I’d really blown it. And the worst part about the whole thing was that she was absolutely right. I *had* gone over to apologize to her with ulterior motives. I had kissed her out of the blue too many times. But how could I not? I felt so drawn to her, so in love with her… But it didn’t matter. I’d hurt her, and I knew that, and I still couldn’t fucking stop.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to make things right with Cali—of course I did—but I’d gone to talk to her because I was desperate to fix my problems. My *personal* problems. That was fucked up, and not at all fair to Cali.

That kind of behavior was turning into a very bad habit.

“Fuck,” I muttered, shoving a hand through my hair, feeling furious with myself. I’d really screwed things up this time. I hadn’t even shifted for the journey back. I was walking in my human form. It was taking a lot longer, but I needed the time alone to think.

As I approached the house, I paused and looked around.

“Vander!” I called into the trees. My voice was met with silence. “Vander? Are you there?”

I needed to talk to them. Maybe talking things out with the nature spirit would help me figure out some things. Like what the hell had gone wrong, for starters. It had helped the last time. Kinda.

But there was still no answer.

“*Vander!*”

No answer. Nothing but the quiet sounds of the woods.

Shit. This was so fucking frustrating. I wished I could just figure this out—that there was some kind of key I could use to unlock these problems and make everything go back to normal. That way, I’d be able to just go back to living my life.

This was all down to fucking Adéluce. All my frustration, my anger, my confusion—it was all her fault. She’d started this. She’d been the catalyst that had kick off the chain reaction. It was because of her that I’d left Cali and the Redwood pack, and after that, everything had gone to hell—

No. I stopped myself. I couldn’t think like that—it wasn’t true. Good things had happened for me recently, too, despite Adéluce’s best efforts to utterly destroy me. The most recent chapter of my life had been hard as hell, but the results hadn’t all been shit. After I’d been forced to leave the Redwoods, I’d gone to the Samaras. They were my pack now, my family now. And I had Ava, too. She was a part of my life in a way I never would’ve thought possible. I truly loved her. The way I felt about her was different to the love I felt for Cali, but it was still very real.

I knew Vander wasn’t around—I could sense I was alone in the woods—but I looked around one more time, anyway. Then I headed toward the pack house.

Still feeling conflicted, I pushed the front door open and walked inside. Ava was in the living room, and she looked up at me.

“Hey. What happened?” Then, before I could answer, she wrinkled her nose. “I can smell her on you.”

My stomach twisted. I knew what she meant. I’d had the same experience myself, when Cali would come to me smelling of Greyson, and I knew just how shitty it felt.

“Listen,” I said. “I just went over to talk, and then—”

She held up her hand. “Stop, please, Xavier. I really don’t want to know when you kiss Cali, or hook up with her or whatever.” She shook her head, looking pale. “It hurts too much.”

“Ava—”

“And I know you’re dealing with stuff. I know I can’t demand that you stay away from Cali,” she added, looking pained. “But I don’t have to hear about it. So just don’t tell me about it, okay? I don’t want explanations, or justifications. I just don’t want to hear about it at all. It… It just hurts too much.”

I got what she was saying, and I nodded. “Okay.”

I rubbed my head. I could feel a low-grade headache forming, right behind my eyes. Past experience told me it would start there, then wrap around my head like a band, steadily getting tighter and tighter.

Ava frowned as she watched me massage my temples. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I answered automatically.

She didn’t look convinced. “Maybe you should take some of that medicine.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to over-medicate,” I said. “It’s just a headache. It’s not even that bad. I can power through.”

Ava got to her feet, looking miserable. “Fine, Xavier. Do whatever you want. But I refuse to be the one who causes you pain.”

She walked past me and headed outside, letting the door slam shut behind her.

I wanted to go after her, wanted to insist that we talk this through, but I could see that I’d hurt her. Which was great. Now I’d hurt both Ava *and* Cali.

The headache was already getting worse, and I took a deep breath, trying to keep it from growing any stronger. I needed to do something to change my thought process—and to decompress. A run usually did that for me, but my head ached even harder at the thought of it, so I headed upstairs.

In our room, I shut the door and stripped off my clothes, then headed for the bathroom. I turned the shower on and waited until the bathroom was filled with steam before I stepped in.

The water was searing, but that was exactly what I wanted. I stood under the spray, letting the water wash over me, closing my eyes against the heat, trying to wash away all the stress and pain of my most recent conversations with Cali and Ava.

I hated that I was doing this. And that I kept doing it. I was hurting the two women I loved most in the world. It was the very last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn’t seem to stop.

I needed to figure this shit out—and soon.

But how? How the hell was I supposed to wade through this mess?

It was clear that I needed to talk to someone. My mind was constantly racing, and my thoughts were spinning, but I just couldn’t seem to come up with any answers. I knew I couldn’t talk to Cali. She’d made it very clear that she was mad at me.

Ava would be willing to talk, but that would only hurt her even more.

Greyson wasn’t an option, either. He had too much skin in the game. If I asked him what he thought I should do, he’d just tell me to choose Ava. That would leave Cali to him, free and clear.

And Vander probably wasn’t going to show up any time soon. They always worked to their own timetable, anyway.

I rubbed the water out of my eyes and turned off the faucet. Stepping out, I grabbed for a towel and scrubbed it through my hair, then wrapped it around my waist. As I walked back into the bedroom, I wracked my brain, trying to think of who I could talk to.

Maybe Colton?

He had some strong feelings about Ava that I didn’t share, but I grabbed my phone anyway. At least it would be someone to talk to.

But when I called, he didn’t pick up. The call went to voicemail, but I ended it before the beep. I dropped my phone back onto the bed, frustration clawing its way up my chest. And as my frustration grew, so did my headache.

The one thing that I did know was that I couldn’t go on like this. Something had to give.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, stepping over to the bedside table. I pulled the drawer open and grabbed the medicine Big Mac had given me. I hated that I was already dependent on it. I hated depending on anything. I needed to get this shit fixed—fast.

I looked out the window. The day was overcast, and the tree line stood out sharply against the gray sky. As I zoned out, my thoughts wandered, and I suddenly remembered the paratherapist I’d met a while back. Carlson something.

I marched over to my desk and dug around in the drawers, leafing through papers, looking for where I’d scribbled down the guy’s contact information.

“Carlson Greene,” I said triumphantly, snatching up the paper. Maybe the guy could help me.

Or maybe not.

I sighed. “Can’t make things worse, right?” I muttered to myself.

Picking up my phone, I dialed the number.

“Dr. Greene’s office,” a woman said cheerily. “How can I help you?”

“I need to make an appointment.”

**Episode 4853**

**Greyson**

Concern washed over Cali’s face. “No, nothing’s wrong,” I said. “I actually just wanted to talk to you. Give you an update on the Elle-Lucian situation.”

“Oh, okay,” Cali said, looking relieved. “What’s on your mind?”

“This whole thing—it’s taking a lot out of me,” I said. “I don’t want to go over there tomorrow, but I said I would. It’s just a mess.”

Cali reached and took my hand. “Why don’t we go upstairs and talk about it? Get away from everyone for a second.”

I cupped her face and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “That sounds amazing.”

She squeezed my hand. “Let’s go then. It’s been a long day, for all of us.”

“You can say that again.”

Hand in hand, we walked up to my bedroom. We all but collapsed onto the bed. She snuggled up to me and I closed my eyes for a moment, taking in the feel of her body next to mine. I sighed, running a hand down her back and Cali let out a low hum.

“I needed this,” she said, tilting her head up to look at me.

“Needed what, love?”

“This,” she said, tracing circles on my chest with her nails. “A moment alone with you to clear my head.”

I pushed her hair out of her face. “Me too,” I said. “You can always tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I know.” She smiled. “But right now this is about you. Tomorrow will be okay—annoying, probably—but okay. I know it. You just need to relax tonight.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not sure about that.”

Cali shifted, pushing herself halfway on top of me. “I can be very,” she kissed my neck, “convincing.”

A deep desire rolled through me like a storm. “When you put it that way…”

Wasting no time, I pulled off her clothes as she kissed her way along my jaw, then down my neck. She nibbled on my shoulder, biting hard when I slid my hand into her panties. Then I slipped two fingers into her, making her sigh with pleasure. She was wet and hot, and she moaned as I swirled my fingers around in lazy circles.

“Is this what you had in mind, love?”

Her hands trembled as she fumbled with my pants, tugging them down over my hips.

“You read my mind, Greyson,” she murmured, a small smile playing across her lips.

Naked now, she lay beneath me on the bed, and my cock ached for her. She was so fucking beautiful, I could barely breathe. She looked up at me, her eyes half-lidded.

I bent and kissed her, then pushed her legs apart.

She gasped as I drove my cock into her. She arched against me, moaning with pleasure, then wrapped her legs around my waist, drawing me in even deeper. My breathing labored as I pumped into her.

“Oh god, you feel so good,” she moaned, her head lolling against the pillow.

I chuckled as I braced my arms on either side of her head. I could feel heat building deep within me, but I was waiting for her to come. I pushed in hard, adjusting my angle so I’d hit her most sensitive spot, and it worked. An instant later, she cried out, digging her fingernails into my shoulders.

“Oh god, oh Greyson.” She was shaking now, her eyes closed as her climax closed in.

Burning hot pleasure rolled through me. “Fuck, Cali.” I braced myself as she clenched around me, her tightness making my pleasure spike.

She purred beneath me, trying to pull me close as I wound down. Spent—I let her pull me down onto the bed. I pulled her close, and she snuggled against my chest.

I *definitely* felt more relaxed.

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There was no part of me that wanted to go visit Elle at the palace. But I’d promised her that I would stop by, so when I woke up the next morning, it was with a sense of vaguely martyred resignation.

But I wasn’t in a huge hurry to leave, so when I got downstairs and saw Rishika in the kitchen, I walked in to talk to her.

“Morning,” she said.

“Morning. What’s going on today? Need any help running drills?”

She shook her head. “I’m actually not running any drills today.”

“No?”

“There’s really no need,” she said with a shrug. “No imminent threat. Without one, the pack should be able to rest and just have some fun.”

I was surprised but took a moment to absorb what she’d just said. I was just so used to always having *something* unpleasant looming on the horizon, to feeling a constant pressure to train both myself and the pack to face whatever was coming next. Since I’d been back with the Redwoods—since I’d become Alpha—that state of existence had always been necessary. There’d always been someone or something out there who wanted to hurt us. So this lull felt… strange. I kind of had no idea what to do next.

It wasn’t that I *wanted* another pack war—of course I didn’t. But the constant threats had given me a sense of duty and purpose. A direction for me to lead the pack. And without that, I had to admit that I felt a little lost.

I cleared my throat. “That sounds good,” I told Rishika. “Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Will do, boss.”

I looked around. There was really nothing more for me to do at the house. Even Cali had already headed off to school, which meant I couldn’t use her as an excuse to procrastinate. I officially had no choice but to get ready and go see Elle.

So, without any legitimate reason to avoid it, I headed upstairs to shower and get dressed, and then I drove over to the palace.

I’d just climbed out of my car when the double doors opened and Elle burst out.

“Greyson!” she called, waving happily.

“Hey,” I said, smiling at her as I walked over to meet her. “How are you?”

“Thank you for coming!” she said, throwing her arms around me. “Come in, come in.”

She led me inside and down the hall. There was scaffolding everywhere and the sound of construction in the air, but Elle didn’t even seem to notice. She looked comfortable, and like she really knew her way around.

“How’s the reconstruction going?” I asked. “Looks busy.”

“Everything’s going great!” Elle said enthusiastically. “Better than we could’ve hoped.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“We’ve actually discovered some hidden tunnels and doors that even Lucian didn’t know about!” she said. “It’s been so much fun.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure if I thought finding creepy hidden tunnels under the palace sounded like *fun*. But Elle seemed really excited, so I kept my opinions to myself. She was happy, and that was all that really mattered to me.

“Greyson Evers, hello!”

I looked up to see Lucian descending the grand staircase in what could only have been described as a maroon smoking jacket. The fact that the grand staircase was half-destroyed and covered in plastic sheeting didn’t seem to bother Lucian, and it was obvious that he was back to his old self. To my surprise, I was grateful to see it.

The sad, depressed Lucian I’d seen when the palace had practically been destroyed had been a disturbing sight. So—as annoying and pompous as Lucian was—I was glad to see him again.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said grandly. “Won’t you come sit?” He gestured toward an open door off the main entrance hall.

I let him lead me into a sitting room, where a tea tray had been set out. I looked at the setup, which had been arranged for three, then at Lucian.

“What’s this all about?” I asked him. “Why did you two ask me to come here?”

Lucian sat down in a velvet chair. “To talk about the wedding, of course!”

“The wedding?” I repeated.

He nodded. “We have to follow traditions, Greyson,” he said, smiling at me. “Sit!”

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously.

“Oh, Greyson, I have so much to think about. I already have so much planned. I can’t wait to show you,” Lucian said, all in a rush. Then he scurried over to a small table by the window and picked up a leather-bound binder. He carried it back to me and dropped it into my lap.

“What’s this?” I asked, trying not to groan at the pain of the binder landing on my balls.

She flipped through the pages. “*Everything!* This section is napkins—I’ve got at least a hundred options. And then I’ve got flowers and decorations. And for catering—”

“The flowers are really nice,” Elle supplied.

“Hang on,” I said, holding up a hand to stop both of them. “Why are you showing me all of this?”

Lucian’s eyes widened, then he looked hurt. “So you know what to get for the wedding, Greyson.”

I stared at him. “What do you mean, what *I’m* going to get for the wedding?”

“Tradition, Evers. Tradition!” Lucian said, smiling at me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked him blankly.

“It’s traditional for the bride’s family to coordinate and pay for the wedding,” he said. “Elle’s father is a wolf, Greyson, it’s not like they have thumbs or access to the internet for a save the date card.”

I stared at him, shocked. “Hang on, let me get this straight. Are you saying that *I* have to plan—and pay for—*your* wedding?”

**Episode 4854**

Sweat had been pouring down my face for hours, but I barely cared. Crew practice had gone great, and as the crew team headed toward their bags for water and towels, I couldn’t help but think it was due to the practice I’d done with the pack.

“You did great out there!” Kayden called.

“Kickass!” Schmiddy added, patting my back as he passed me.

Codsworth grinned as he walked over and held his hand up for a high five. “You were awesome out there, Hart.”

“Thanks,” I said, shaking out my hand after his stinging slap. “It felt good.”

“I could tell,” he said, wiping sweat from his face with a towel. “We’re definitely going to win this weekend.”

“Yeah, I think we will,” I said.

His grin grew wider. “And then, as a reward, we’ll have a hunt,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

I sighed. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

Codsworth’s smile faded. “What? You’re not still worried about it, are you? There’s no reason to be! I've got all the supplies!”

“The *supplies*?” I asked doubtfully.

“Sure—everything we need. Night vision goggles, nets, tranquilizer guns—”

“*Tranquilizer guns?* Why the hell do you have those?” I demanded. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to know how Codsworth had actually gotten them. “What are you planning on doing with them?”

I was definitely starting to freak out. This was getting out of hand. Greyson had promised that he had a plan, but I didn’t think he’d accounted for the possibility that the “hunters” would be packing tranquilizer guns. That seemed a bit extreme—and expensive—for a college club event.

Codsworth shrugged, looking unfazed by my reaction. “Don’t look so scared. They’re for our own safety, but we’ll do whatever we need to with them. We just don’t want to miss out on our chance to get real proof that shapeshifters if we see one, right?”

*Shit*.

I shook my head. “Listen, man, the wolves in that forest are protected. By federal law. They’re, like, endangered and stuff. You can just troop in there with guns. You’ll get yourself arrested.”

Codsworth rolled his eyes. “We’re not going to hurt the wolves.”

“Then what are you going to do?” I asked.

“We just need to see if they’re—you know—real or not.”

I’d just opened my mouth to object to the whole premise of this conversation when the rest of the team crowded around us.

“Hey, Cali, who are you inviting to the regatta?” Gael asked, taking a big gulp of water.

I looked at him in surprise. “Oh, I have to invite people?”

Kayden laughed. “You don’t *have* to, but we figured you’d want to. It’s your first big competition. You should invite people to cheer you on!”

“What about your two guys?” Schmiddy asked, tearing off a bite of protein bar. He winked as he chewed and Codsworth shook his head.

“Lay off her,” he muttered.

I gave him a grateful smile, glad someone was willing to stop the guys from gossiping about my love triangle, which I knew they were endlessly fascinated by. It seemed like Codsworth and I were sort of becoming friends at the very least, his urge to expose all of my friends as supernatural aside…

“Let’s head back to the gym!” Codsworth called, waving to the team.

As everyone grabbed their stuff and started walking, Codsworth fell into step beside me.

“So, what *is* going on with you?” he asked. He gave me a sideways glance. “And your guys?”

I rolled my eyes. I should’ve expected this. Codsworth was nosy—all the guys were.

“I don’t actually know,” I admitted, hoping that this could distract him from our previous conversation. “My ex came to talk to me yesterday. He said he was trying to smooth things over, but I’m not sure if I believe him.”

“What do you mean?” he asked curiously.

“I just have reason to doubt his intentions.”

Codsworth frowned. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Things are just so awkward with him.” I thought for a moment. “I really care about him, but I wish things between us could just be easy again, like before.”

Codsworth considered this. “Maybe you should extend an olive branch.”

“A what?”

“Come on, seriously?” He laughed. “Invite him to the regatta.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “Really? Do you think that’s smart?”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters, I was going to invite Greyson,” I told him.

Codsworth shrugged his broad shoulders, which were still damp with sweat. “Yeah, and? Is there a reason why they can’t both come? They know about each other, right?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. *They’re brothers.*

“And it’s just a race. Casual public setting.”

“That’s true, I guess.” I looked up at him. “Thanks. I might do that.”

He smiled and, when we reached the gym, he walked into the men’s locker room.

I stopped outside the women’s locker room and leaned against the wall. I thought about it for a moment, then—deciding to take Codsworth’s advice—pulled out my phone.

I dialed Xavier’s number and tried not to freak out as it rang.

He answered after the first ring. “Hello?”

“Hey.” My heart was racing. “Um, I was just calling to ask what you’re doing this weekend.”

“This weekend?” he asked, sounding confused. “I’m not—I don’t have any plans this weekend. Why? Is something going on with the Redwoods?”

“No, no. The pack’s fine. Um…”

I realized abruptly that I hadn’t given any thought to how the hell I was going to invite him. And at the same time, I was also wondering why I was making this so awkward. This was Xavier. This shouldn’t be hard.

But it was.

Finally, I just blurted it out. “I was wondering if you wanted to come to the regatta I’m competing in with my crew team. It’s this weekend.”

“Oh,” Xavier said, clearly surprised. “Sure. Yeah. I’ll come.”

I smiled to myself. That hadn’t been so hard.

“Can I bring Ava?” he asked.

My heart sank like a stone, but I fought to keep my voice steady. “Oh, yeah. Of course. She’s obviously invited, too.”

“Great,” he said. “We’ll be there. See you then.”

He ended the call, and I looked down at the blank screen.

I shouldn’t be disappointed. I *knew* I shouldn’t be disappointed. Of course Xavier could bring Ava with him. She was his Luna, wasn’t she? He couldn’t just ditch her because I’d invited him to a regatta.

Besides, this would be good practice for trying to be friends. Lola was right about that—it was an important step for us to take, for the sake of both packs.

But I couldn’t deny that I was bummed that things had changed so much between Xavier and me. Things between us got more and more complicated by the second, it seemed.

I looked down when my phone rang. I saw Chessa’s name on the screen and remembered that I’d given her my number at the last cryptozoology meeting.

“Hi, Chessa,” I said.

“Hi, Cali. I was wondering if you’re going to be around tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah. I was thinking we should hang out after dinner,” she said.

“Oh, no, I can’t. I’m sorry, but I’m not going to be around,” I said. “I’m done with classes, and I just finished crew practice. I’m about to head home for the day.”

“Oh,” Chessa said. I could hear the disappointment in her voice.

“But hey, are you still coming to the regatta?” I asked.

“Um, maybe,” she said, sounding uncertain.

“You should,” I said encouragingly. “I’d love to see you, and we can hang out there.”

I felt bad about not sticking around campus to hang out, but my conversation with Codsworth was echoing in my head. I wanted to go home and talk to Greyson about the new information I’d learned about his wolf hunt.

“Yeah, I’ll see,” Chessa said. “Talk to you later.”

“Okay,” I said, ending the call. After that, I headed into the locker room, took a quick shower, and hurried to my car.

I made it home in record time and, when I walked into the house, I found Torin in the living room, watching TV.

“Hey,” I said, dropping my backpack by the door. “Do you know where Greyson is?”

Torin grinned at me, nearly laughing. “Yeah. He’s in the study.”

I stared at him, confused, wondering what was so funny about Greyson being in the study.

Figuring there was only one way to find out, I headed over and pushed the door open. Greyson looked up from the desk, where he was surrounded by stacks of what I realized in an instant were thick wedding magazines. Open in front of him was a fat binder, stuffed full of pages. His light hair was standing on end, and his grey eyes looked haunted.

I took everything in, from the magazines to his frazzled state. “What’s all this? What are they making you do?”

**Episode 4855**

**Artemis**

I slowly lifted my arms into the air. But even as I made the universal gesture of surrender, dozens of weapons were lifted and aimed right at Marius and me.

“We mean you no harm!” Marius shouted.

“Shut up!” the leader called out, taking out a sword.

“Please,” I said, taking a small step forward. I kept my eyes on the weapon, trying to make no sudden movements so he’d swing. “We’re just passing through.”

The leader of the small group narrowed his eyes at me. He was obviously suspicious, but he didn’t snap out a retort. He looked me over, seemingly confused by me. That kind of thing happened a lot, what with my being half Light Fae and half Dark Fae. They couldn’t decide which one I was, but usually decided based on what scenario worked better in their head.

“Tell him who your family is,” Marius quipped from the corner of his mouth. “Better yet, use your magic. That should get them off my back.”

“*Shut up!*” I whisper-shouted back. Then I looked back at the Light Fae leader, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. “I give you my word that we truly don’t mean any harm here.”

Giving my word wasn’t *quite* a Fae promise, but it definitely meant something—that kind of thing wasn’t just thrown around lightly.

The leader relaxed slightly and stepped toward me, lowering his weapon. “And where are you headed? We have nothing of value here, and there’s nothing but wild land beyond our village.”

I frowned. “I don’t exactly know,” I admitted. “We weren’t actually heading this way. We were chased here by a beast, so we weren’t exactly following a map.”

“The Mimas Monster?” someone called from the back of the group.

“I guess so,” I said.

“Good gods! And you’re still *alive*? How did you escape?”

I looked around at the awed faces. It was clear that the Mimas Monster was truly feared in this village, and that our escape sounded nothing less than miraculous to these people, even though it had actually been *significantly* less than miraculous.

“Well, I’m used to fighting, so that helps,” I said. “I’m a warrior.”

“And the Dark Fae?” someone called.

I glanced at Marius. “Him? He just got lucky. The monster almost got a big chunk of his ass while he was climbing up a tree.”

“Hey! No, I didn’t just *get* *lucky*! I’m a warrior too.” Marius said indignantly, but there were already giggles coming from the group.

The leader considered me for a moment, then he nodded. He raised his hand and waved, and his group lowered their weapons. “Very well. We will trust that you mean us no harm and pray that you don’t betray your word. You two can pass through. But be aware that we can fight, and we will defend our homes. Make no mistake.”

“Of course,” I said, nodding respectfully. “Is there anywhere nearby where we might find a hot meal? We’ve been traveling for a long time.”

The leader tipped his chin. “There’s a pub down the street a ways. They’ll have something for you.”

“Thank you,” I said earnestly.

He eyed me for a moment, then took a step toward us. “Come on. I’ll take you there myself.”

Marius shot me a questioning glance, but I just shrugged. It didn’t seem like we had a lot of options, so I followed the guy down the lane.

The pub turned out to be a quaint little building with a thatched roof. There was smoke rising from the brick chimney, curling into the blue sky.

The leader pushed the wooden door open and called into the dimness, “Clara, it’s okay. I’ve got them with me, but they’re not a threat!”

A volley of voices shouted replies, and I realized that the pub was full of Fae. When I stepped inside and looked around, I realized that they’d just been crouching down under their tables, hiding. They didn’t even seem surprised or put out as they clambered back into their chairs, and it made me wonder why they were so used to this. How often was this place attacked by actual enemies?

The Fae who’d led us to the pub turned to look at us. “My name is Phebus.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “You all seem pretty wary of strangers around here. You run into a lot of trouble?”

He nodded as he led the way to a small table. “You could say that. This village is close to the border between the Light and the Dark territories—you must understand what that means.”

I nodded. “I do.”

“We get a variety of people here—from both sides, and generally with ill intentions.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I said. “And I respect that you need to protect your homes, and your village.”

“Sit,” Phebus said, gesturing toward the chairs.

We sat, and a moment later, a young boy brought over three mugs of ale. I took a grateful drink and saw Marius do the same, chugging half his mug in one gulp.

“So where are you heading? Or, where *were* you heading, before the Minus started chasing you?” Phebus asked.

I glanced at Marius and found him watching me, a mustache of ale foam on his lips and a worried look in his eyes. I knew he was wondering the same thing I was—if it was smart to tell this guy anything.

I cleared my throat. “We’re looking for someone.”

Phebus lifted a brow. “Well, if it’s a someone you’re searching for, you should talk to Clara.”

“And why is that?” I wondered, honestly curious.

“She’s got a gift,” he said. “A talent for finding people.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

Phebus nodded toward the bar, where a pretty young woman was pouring mugs of ale. “Right there.”

“Thanks,” I said, drinking the last of my ale. “You’ve been very helpful. We appreciate it.”

Phebus gave me a long look. “You can best thank me by leaving my village as soon as you’ve eaten.”

“We will,” I promised. Then I looked at Marius. “Let’s go.”

We walked over to the bar and waited until Clara noticed us.

“If you want food, you can order from the maid,” she said, barely looking up as she wiped off the bar with a damp cloth.

“It’s actually you we wanted to talk to,” I said.

“Oh yeah? And why is that?” she asked.

“Phebus told us about your talent,” I said.

Clara finally looked up. Her eyes were such a pale blue, they looked almost white. “You’re looking to find someone?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“My help will cost you,” she said flatly.

“That’s okay. We have money,” I said. I pulled out my purse and plopped it down on the counter, making the coins clink together.

Clara eyed the bag, then nodded. “Okay. Who are you looking for?”

Marius held out the braided leather bracelet. “Would this help?”

“What is it?” Clara asked.

“It belonged to the person we’re looking for,” Marius said. “Can you use it to find him?”

She nodded. “It’s perfect.”

She reached out and took the bracelet, then wrapped her hands around it and closed her eyes, humming low in her throat. When she opened her eyes again, I gasped. They were a pure, snow white.

“I see them!” she gasped out. “They’re walking. No—they’re running. They’re scared.”

“Do you see where they are?” Marius asked, leaning toward her.

Clara frowned. “It’s hard to see where they are. There are no landmarks. Maybe they’re in the woods? No, no, that’s not right. They’re breaking free of the forest.”

“Where?” Marius asked again, more urgently now.

“They’re running toward a fortress…” Clara’s eyes stared, like she was seeing “them” right in front of her. “It’s on the border of the Light and Dark Fae territories.”

She gasped again and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they’d returned to her normal, light blue color. She’d started out pale, but now she looked grey, and like she needed to sit down. Had it worked? And… was that all?

She held out the bracelet to Marius. “That’s all I see.”

Seriously?

Marius took the bracelet. “Thanks.”

Clara flipped her hand over, holding it out. “My payment.”

Ha. The woman didn’t mess around. I had to respect that at least. I pulled a few coins out of the pouch and dropped them into her hand.

“Thank you very much,” she said, slipping the gold coins into the pocket of her skirt. “Nice doing business with you. Tell your friends.”

*We won’t be doing that.*

“You got it,” I muttered as she swept away. When she was gone, I turned to Marius. “If what she said was true, then you’ll have to go to that fortress.”

Marius didn’t look thrilled by the prospect. “Yeah, I gathered as much.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” I asked.

He frowned. “Look, we can go—but if I don’t succeed… I’ll lose my pretty head.”

**Episode 4856**

I’d installed myself behind Greyson’s desk with the wedding magazines and the massive planning binder. I’d officially taken over Elle and Lucian’s wedding budget planning duties. The binder that Lucian had given him had exuberant prices… amounts I’d never even considered for basic things like napkins or candles.

I looked up when Greyson walked back into the study. He was carrying two mugs of tea, and he put them down on the desk.

“You okay? Make any headway while I was getting these?” he asked, casting an apprehensive look at the binder and all the sticky tabs I’d started placing.

“I’m trying to sort everything out into categories,” I told him. “But this is kind of a lot.”

“I know it is. Thank you for your help,” he said with a grateful smile. Then he leaned across the desk and kissed my cheek. “Have I told you lately how much I adore you, love?”

That made me laugh. Then he growled, leaning in again and pressing a kiss to my lips this time. It was quick, but hot enough to leave me a little breathless when he pulled back.

He winked and sat down. “Where should I jump in?”

I pointed to a stack of papers I’d taken out of the binder. “That’s all the centerpieces that were in there,” I said. “Do you know how much a centerpiece is supposed to cost?”

He shook his head.

“Crap, I was hoping you would. I don’t know either.” I frowned. “Maybe we should call your mom?”

“I’ll take a look first. It can’t be that complicated,” he said, picking up the stack and starting to sift through it. “Wait, this one alone costs ten thousand dollars?!”

“What?!” I gasped, grabbing the paper. “Let’s put that in the *no* pile.”

“The absolutely-the-fuck-not pile,” he grumbled.

“What exactly was Lucian’s argument for getting you—us—to pay for this again?”

Greyson sighed. “Apparently because Elle’s father is a wolf with no opposable thumbs, and I’m Elle’s former Alpha, it falls to me.”

“That…okay,” I said, shaking my head. “But he’s pretty particular, why doesn’t he just do this?”

“A great question.”

WE both sighed and went back to the pages. Greyson stuck to the centerpieces, and I continued to sort things out. There were dozens of pages for food, flowers (somehow different than centerpieces), music, drinks, and so much more. It all fit Lucian’s style that I’d seen at the Vanguard parties to a T.

*Is there anything for Elle in here? Or is it all Lucian’s wedding fantasy…*

I mean, the idea itself was pretty perfect for a werewolf wedding. Forest-y and bohemian glamor. Kind of *A* *Midsummer Night’s Dream*-esque. And knowing Elle, she’d like it, too.

But as I went through page after page—finally finding some dress ideas for Elle, too—I couldn’t stop taking note of things I’d love for my *own* wedding—dresses and flower arrangements, table settings, and flower arches. I glanced up at Greyson, who scoffed and put another centerpiece idea into the *absolutely-the-fuck-not* pile.

Looking back down, I started taking out all the dress options and grouping them together. I paused on a particularly pretty one, my fingers tracing down the lace of the neckline that draped down the sides like wisteria. For a moment, I could just picture myself walking down the aisle in that dress, surrounded by my friends and my family. My parents and Artemis were right at the front. I saw myself reaching the altar, where my future husband was waiting for me.

But as I tried to focus on the man in my fantasy, I realized that he didn’t have a face.

I frowned to myself, then shook my head.

No. This was dangerous. I couldn’t let myself think too deeply about this. Not when my heart was still so torn. I looked down at the magazines again. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all.

Agreeing to be Elle’s maid of honor was one thing, but volunteering to help plan and pay for the wedding seemed like it had the potential to lead me down a very complicated path.

Just as I was starting to spiral, my phone rang and I reached for it, grateful for the distraction.

“Lola? What’s up?” I asked, seeing her name on the screen.

“Hey,” she said. “I hate to do this to you, but could you pick me up after my night class?”

“Now?” I asked, confused. I glanced out the window and saw that it was nearly dark out. Time had flown while I’d been engrossed in the wedding magazines.

“No, not yet,” Lola said. “I’m just walking in. Jay was going to, but he can’t anymore. He said he’d take the patrol shift from Zainab so she and Sage could go out on a date.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet.”

“I know, my man’s a regular romantic,” she said. “But you’ll come? I wore a cute outfit today, don’t really want to ruin it.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll come,” I said. “I can leave right now, no problem.”

“Thanks,” she said. “See you soon.”

I ended the call and started stacking the magazines neatly. Maybe I just needed a little distance. I’d come back to this later.

“Don’t tell me you’re leaving me alone with all this,” Greyson said. “I might cry.”

I laughed. “I’ll be back soon.”

“You better be,” he said.

I grinned. “Don’t miss me too much.”

“Impossible.”

I leaned down to kiss him

Grabbing my keys from the rack by the door, I jumped into my car and headed toward campus, making the trip quickly. As I parked in the lot and climbed out, I realized that the sun was sinking quickly. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should go grab some dinner while I waited for Lola’s class to finish.

“Cali!”

I looked over when I heard my name and saw Chessa walking toward me, waving.

“Oh, hey,” I called, smiling. I jogged toward her.

“I thought you said you were busy tonight,” she said.

“Change of plans,” I said with a shrug. “I should’ve called to tell you. Sorry.”

Chessa smiled. “No worries. Are you free now?”

I glanced at my watch. I had some time before Lola was done with her class. “Sure. You want to get some coffee?”

“Okay,” Chessa said. “I think the café is still open.”

We walked across campus to the café, which *was* still open, and also quiet. We ordered and carried our drinks to a small table near a window. As soon as we sat down, Chessa dove right in.

“So, have you made any progress getting Codsworth to call off the hunt?”

I sighed, remembering the conversation we’d had earlier. “Not really.”

“I can help if you want,” she offered, taking a sip of her tea. “Maybe we can sabotage their equipment or something.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I’d rather just stop them from going in the first place.”

“Maybe we should just break their legs,” Chessa said, laughing. Then, when she saw my eyes go wide, she added, “Oh! Sorry! That was just a joke!”

I smiled when she laughed again.

“So, what made you a believer?” she asked.

I thought quickly and carefully before I answered. “I had an encounter with—” I stopped myself. I didn’t want to tell Chessa the full truth, even if she was just a supernatural fanatic. “I, uh, saw a ghost. Plain as could be. My best friend saw it, too. We think, anyway.”

Chessa nodded. “Poltergeist? They can be trouble.”

Tony had been. “Uh, yeah. Totally. Something like that.” I cleared my throat. “What about you? What made you a believer?”

“It was a really, really long time ago,” she said, wrapping her hands around her mug. “I was separated from my family, and I had a… a run-in.”

“A run-in with what?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It’s really not something I like talking about, to be honest.”

“Sure, that’s fine,” I said, letting it go. I didn’t want to push. I looked down when my phone buzzed and saw that it was Lola.

*Done. Are you around?*

“Oh, my friend is out of class,” I said. “I should go.”

Chessa smiled. “Good timing. I have to go meet someone too.”

I must’ve looked confused, because she laughed.

“When you weren’t free, I made other plans,” she said.

“Oh, right,” I said, getting to my feet. “That makes sense. Well, you’re still invited to the regatta this weekend.”

“Okay, thanks,” Chessa said. “I’ll let you know. It was great seeing you.”

“You too.”

We walked out of the café and parted ways, then I walked back across campus to meet Lola. It was late, and there weren’t many students around. As I stood in the courtyard, waiting for Lola, I realized I was completely alone.

This realization sent a shiver through me, followed immediately by a strange prickling sensation on the back of my neck—letting me know that maybe I wasn’t as alone as I thought.

I quickly looked around, but I couldn’t see anyone.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling.

Restless, I started toward one of the campus call boxes, figuring it would be better to be near it, just in case I needed to call security for any reason. But as I walked, the creepy feeling along my spine got more and more intense. My heart started to race, and I was practically running when someone suddenly grabbed my arm.

I screamed and whirled around, gathering my magic to strike—

And then I realized I’d spun around to face Lola, who was staring at me, clearly shocked.

“Lola! What are you *doing*?” I demanded.

“What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing?”

“Don’t creep up on me like that,” I said, breathing hard.

“Sorry, Cali. I didn’t realize you were so jumpy. Are you creeped out because of the news?”

“What news?” I asked, confused. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

Lola’s eyes were wide. “Another student disappeared from campus last night.”

**Episode 4857**

**Xavier**

If I could’ve kicked my own ass, I would have. Why the *hell* had I asked Cali if I could bring Ava to the regatta?

Dropping down to sit on the bed, I replayed the conversation in my head, cringing the whole time. I could still hear the hurt in her voice after I’d asked her about Ava, even though she’d been trying to mask it. She’d reached out to me, even though things were weird as hell between us, and I’d somehow managed to make everything worse.

I was annoyed with myself, but, if I was being honest, I knew why I’d done it. I was trying to do the right thing. I was *desperately* trying to do the right thing, though half the time, I wasn’t sure what that was. But right now, as things stood, Ava was my Luna. Which meant I had to think about her and her feelings.

*Right?*

But I also couldn’t help wanting to make things right with Cali. And to be close to her again. It was a need so deep that it felt like it was etched on my bones. I’d find a way. I knew I would.

I clutched my phone tightly as self-recrimination seethed through me. I just kept thinking about the pain I’d heard in Cali’s voice. I’d hurt her in so many ways, and yet she’d still reached out and invited me to her first regatta. And then I’d gone and fucked it up by asking to bring Ava. And now—to top everything off—I was going to have to ask Ava if she wanted to come to Cali’s race.

I didn’t even know if this was something she’d want to do.

*Fuck*. I rubbed my eyes. I just couldn’t help but feel like I was messing everything up. I really needed to talk to someone about this—about everything—but the appointment I’d made with Carlson Greene wasn’t for another week. I didn’t know if I was going to last that long. I felt like my head was about to explode.

I shook my head with a sigh. Maybe I just needed to get my mind off all this stuff.

I walked out of my room and headed downstairs, in search of something to do. Something I needed to take care of, as Alpha. *Anything* to change the currently useless direction of my thoughts.

I found Marissa in the kitchen, making herself a sandwich.

“Hey,” I said. “How did the drills go the other day, when I was gone?”

“Fine,” she said with a shrug. “There were a few wolves who need more help than others, but I think everyone’s coming along nicely.”

“Good, good,” I said, still feeling restless. “Anything else I should know?”

She gave me a curious look. “You want a *report*?” she asked, looking wary.

I didn’t have time for this. “Yeah, I’m your Alpha. Do you *have* something to report?”

Marissa shrugged. “I hear things.”

“What kind of things?”

“I have good connections,” she said. “They let me know if there are any threats or concerns in the area that we should know about.”

I perked up when she said this. *This* was the kind of distraction I needed. “Tell me what you’ve heard.”

She pulled herself onto a stool at the counter and took a bite of her sandwich. “Well, there’s a nomadic werewolf pack down in Northern California that people are taking notice of.”

“Are they planning to come up here?” I asked.

“There’s no knowing for sure if they are—they don’t seem to have any set migration patterns or anything—but we should probably be on alert, just in case they do.”

“Yeah, agreed. I’ll let the other packs in the area know, too,” I said, feeling oddly proud of the fact that I’d be the one to give the others advance notice. This was especially good for me, being the newest Alpha of all the area packs. “Anything else?”

Marissa picked up a potato chip. “There seems to be heightened vampire activity in Menlo.”

“The next town over?”

She nodded. “That’s what I hear.”

I frowned. “Any vampires we know?”

“It doesn’t seem to be. And it’s just a few minor attacks at the moment. Nothing too worrying. Yet.”

“Yeah, yet,” I said, considering this. “Okay, well, that’s something we should keep an eye on too. I don’t want vampires encroaching on our territory and causing trouble. We don’t need to deal with that shit.”

“You got that right,” Marissa muttered.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, one more thing,” she said. “I heard someone saying they thought they met a Fae in a bar nearby.”

“What?”

“Apparently he didn’t seem threatening,” she said with a shrug. “I just thought it was worth mentioning.”

I frowned to myself, remembering that Artemis had gone back to the Fae world. “And you’re sure it was a guy? Not a woman?”

“No, I heard it was a guy. For sure,” Marissa said. “And no, it wasn’t Torin. Probably just someone passing through, as they do.”

I nodded, taking this in and considering potential next steps. I was a little disappointed that I wasn’t going to be able to tell Cali that her sister was back—I knew she was desperate to see her. But maybe that was for the best. I really didn’t need to be seeking Cali out at the moment.

“Hey, Xavier. There you are.”

I looked over to see Ava walking into the kitchen. “Hey.” I looked back at Marissa. “Thanks for the information. Let me know if you hear anything else, yeah?”

She nodded, and I walked over to Ava.

“Hey, can we talk for a minute?” I asked.

Ava frowned at me. “How’s your head feeling?”

“My head?”

“Any pain?”

“What? No, no. I’m fine,” I assured her. “I just want to talk to you.”

She still looked apprehensive and not completely convinced, but she nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

She tipped her head, and I followed her into the living room, which was devoid of any other pack members.

“What’s up?” she asked.

I shoved a hand through my hair, feeling suddenly nervous.

“Cali called me,” I began, ignoring Ava’s flinch. “She invited me to a regatta she’s competing in this weekend, and I asked if you could come along. She said that would be fine. So, what do you say?”

Ava’s eyes flashed angrily. “Why would you do that?”

“Do what?” I asked blankly.

“I don’t want to go to some stupid boat race, Xavier,” she snapped. “Why would you think I would?”

“It’s to keep up good relations with the Redwoods,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Is that really the reason why you agreed to go?”

“What does that mean?”

“Is this just an excuse to go see Cali. because you want to get close to her again?” Ava demanded.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my own frustration in check.

“I do want to make things right with Cali,” I said evenly. “You know that. I’ve *told* you that, Ava. And she called me. She invited me. She offered me this olive branch. I think it’ll be good for all of us to figure out how to be around each other without the constant tension. Don’t you agree?”

I could see the fight happening behind Ava’s eyes. She was torn between what she wanted—to never see Cali again ever—and her duty to the pack. She knew I was right, and that we lived next to the Redwoods, and that it would serve both packs well if we at least had a *civil* inter-pack relationship.

“Fine,” she eventually said, her voice as thin as a thread. “But I’m only doing this for the good of the pack.”

“I know,” I said. “But I think it’s the right thing.”

“Fine,” she repeated tightly. “Now can we please stop talking about Cali all the fucking time? What’s going on with this personal issue, anyway? Did your walkabout even help?”

“Yeah, actually, it did,” I said. “I started to do some work on it, and I think I’ve made a decent start.”

Ava’s expression softened slightly. “Really? What are you doing? Is it helping?”

“I haven’t technically started yet, but I made an appointment,” I told her.

“An appointment?” she asked, looking confused. “For what? You’re seeing a doctor?”

“A therapist,” I admitted, my heart racing. “It’s an appointment for therapy.”

“Oh!” Ava’s eyes went wide. “Okay. *Wow*.”

“What?” I asked. “What wow? Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“No,” she said, without hesitation. “No, not at all. I think it’s great.”

“You do?” I asked hesitantly.

She nodded. “It can’t hurt, can it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It could be a colossal waste of time.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” She paused, chewing on her bottom lip. “Maybe I should go with you.”

I stared at her. “What? Go with me where? To *therapy?*”

“Yeah, like couples therapy,” she said. “What do you think?”

**Episode 4858**

“I can’t believe you haven’t heard about it,” Lola was saying as we drove back toward the house. “No one mentioned the fact that a girl disappeared from campus last night?”

I shook my head. “I feel like I’d remember that.”

“Well, you had morning classes,” Lola reasoned. “Probably not as many people knew about it that early.”

“What have you heard?” I asked.

“Well, there’s not a lot to know, obviously, but everyone in my class tonight was talking about it. People are really freaked out.”

“Obviously. *I’m* freaked out, and I’m just hearing about it for the first time. Do you know who it was?”

“No, I don’t know her name,” Lola admitted. “But I know she’s in the same year as us.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Well, what I heard is that she was studying late at the library last night. She was with a couple of friends, but then they took off, and she stuck around. Apparently, she wasn’t finished studying, and she told them to go ahead. So she was the last student left in the library before it closed. Her friends swear they saw her when they left at midnight, and she was fine.”

“Okay?” I pressed. “But?”

“But when the security guard did his rounds at twelve thirty, she’d disappeared. All he found was her backpack and books. She’d left everything behind, but she was just gone. Totally disappeared without a trace. Her roommate called it in early this morning when she realized she never came home. Apparently that’s really unusual for her.”

I shivered, a chill creeping up my spine. “God, that is so weird. I really hope she’s okay.”

“I don’t know,” Lola said darkly. “People in my class tonight were saying that there have been some strange disappearances in the next town over—Menlo. Maybe this is part of that. Like a pattern.”

“A pattern of what?” I asked with a frown. “A serial kidnapper or something?”

“Or a serial killer,” Lola said, lowering her voice dramatically. “Dun dun dun!”

I rolled my eyes. “Overdramatic much, Lola?” I shook my head. “To be honest, a normal human serial killer doesn’t seem all that terrifying to me. Not after everything else we’ve faced.”

Lola nodded. “I know what you mean. I’d take a human psycho over Adéluce any day.”

We were quiet for a moment as we drove down the dark road.

“I do hope she’s okay, though,” I said after a moment.

“Yeah, I hope so too. Maybe she got disoriented or something. Took too many pills and wandered off. Or—better yet—maybe she met up with someone and they’ve just been hooking up. For twenty-four hours.”

I laughed, glad to smile, and to dispel some of the creepiness in the car.

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The next morning, I woke up when my alarm went off at five a.m. Crew practice was calling, and I sat up, ready to answer. I had practice every day this week because of the regatta.

I shook my head as I grabbed my practice bag and headed down the stairs in the early morning darkness. I couldn’t believe the race was tomorrow.

I was nervous as I drove to campus, but once we got out on the water, practice went well again. The team was in good spirits, and I was feeling so fond of the guys that I stuck around afterward to hang out in the weight room.

Gael was sitting on a weight bench, looking more serious than I’d ever seen him. This was probably just how they all got, right before a competition.

“We have to be really aware of the Fringeheads tomorrow,” he said, looking grave.

“Why?” I asked.

He looked over at me. “Weren’t you listening last time?! They’re our arch-rivals, Cali, and they’ve won this race for the last three years.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, that sucks,” I said.

“Yeah, especially because we always have a side-bet with them, and this year it’s a whopper,” he said darkly.

“Wait, what’s the bet?” I asked. They hadn’t talked about that part.

Schmiddy, who was sitting on top of a balance ball, looked suddenly nervous. “Um, maybe you shouldn’t be a part of it, Cali.”

I frowned. I didn’t like being left out of anything to do with the team.

“What is it?” I asked again. “I’m part of the team, aren’t I?”

Codsworth shook his head. “Yeah, but I don’t think this is something you’d like.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” I said, folding my arms across my chest. “I’m a team member, aren’t I? I’m in!”

Gael sighed. “Fine. The bet is that the losing team has to jump into the river.”

“Oh.” I’d honestly thought it would be way worse. “That’s not so bad—”

“Completely naked,” Schmiddy added with a grin.

My eyes went wide. *Shit*. What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

Codsworth cleared his throat. “Guys, we’re not going to hold Cali to it.”

“No,” I said stubbornly, shaking my head. “I’m in.”

Codsworth gave me an incredulous look. “You sure?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding emphatically. “I’m in. For sure. If all of you do it, then I’ll do it, too.”

Schmiddy cheered, the team smiled, and we got back to talking strategy.

When Codsworth stood up and started toward the locker room, I got to my feet too.

“Hey,” I said, catching up to him. “I appreciate that you’re trying to protect me, but you don’t need to. I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions.”

Codsworth grinned at me. “Yeah, Cali. I’m beginning to see that you’ve got a bit more backbone than I initially gave you credit for.”

I smiled back at him as an understanding passed between us. I hadn’t been at all sure about this whole crew thing at the beginning, when Lola had lied my way onto the team, but now I was really happy about the new friends I was making.

“Breakfast in ten minutes!” Codsworth yelled back at the team. “Let’s meet out front.”

The guys nodded, and everyone filtered into the locker room to grab showers and their bags.

It was barely eight in the morning when we headed into the campus café for breakfast, and we were some of the first people there. We pushed a few tables together and ordered huge breakfasts. All the guys were starving.

I ordered coffee, a bagel sandwich with eggs and bacon, and a bowl of fruit.

“Is that all?” Schmiddy yelled down at me, from behind a tower of pancakes.

Laughing, I shook my head and dug into my breakfast.

When we were done, I pulled out my bag and opened it, and—as I reached for my wallet—a wedding magazine fell onto the floor.

Gael looked over and gasped when he spotted the cover. “Cali! Do you have *news*?”

I laughed as I picked up the magazine. “Nope. My friend is getting married—I’m just helping her with the planning.”

The team looked disappointed that there wasn’t more to the story. That made me laugh, too—these guys loved gossip.

“So, Cali,” Kayden started, leaning over as he chewed on a slice of toast. “Did you end up inviting anyone to the regatta?”

I glanced over at Codsworth, who was sitting across from me. I remembered his advice on the subject and smiled. “Yeah, I did.”

“Who?” Kayden pressed.

“I invited some friends, and my ex,” I said, knowing the guys would be interested in that particular detail.

“*Oh!*” Kayden’s eyes went wide. “Do you think he’s going to come?”

“Um, I guess we’ll find out,” I said.

“If he does, that’s a pretty good sign, right?” Kayden asked.

“I’m not really sure what it’ll be,” I admitted.

On one hand, if Xavier showed up, maybe it would mean he’d want to work things out between us… Maybe he’d actually want to talk instead of going back and forth kissing, apologizing, kissing again and confusing the shit out of me. Anything would be better than the hot mess we had going now…

My stomach twisted with anxiety. I could only hope they weren’t going to make things awkward at the regatta, knowing what they did. They just needed to say absolutely nothing… Joining this team had basically given me a massive group of brothers.

I took a swallow of my coffee, trying to calm my nerves.

*There’s no point in freaking out about it now*, I told myself firmly

“Hey,” Codsworth said, looking over at me. “What are you up to now?”

“What?” I asked. “Now?”

He nodded. “Yeah, a bunch of the guys are heading over to the game center to hang out. There’s an epic ping-pong game in the works. Want to come?”

I happened to be *great* at ping-pong, and I was just about to say yes when my phone started ringing. I looked down and saw Elle’s name on the screen.

“Hold that thought,” I said, looking up at Codsworth. Then I accepted the call. “Elle? What’s up?”

“*Cali!* Thank god! There’s an emergency! I need you right now!”

**Episode 4859**

“Cali! Where are you going?” Codsworth asked as I jumped up from the table.

“I gotta go! Raincheck on the ping-pong game!” I yelled, throwing my bag over my shoulder as I dashed out of the café.

I sprinted across campus and jumped in my car, then headed straight for the Vanguard palace and hastily parked in the wide, circular driveway, my stomach churning with worry when I thought of how Elle had sounded on the phone. It’d sound like she’d been almost in tears, which was highly unusual. What had happened? What was the emergency?

I burst into the house, running past a surprised Aysel, who was just coming down the stairs.

“Caliana, whatever are you doing here?” she demanded.

I screeched to a stop and looked at her. “Where’s Elle?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Elle called me. Is she okay? What’s happened?”

Aysel pursed her lips. “I’m not exactly sure.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means that the foolish girl locked herself in her room and she won’t let me in. I’m not sure what’s wrong,” she said.

I groaned and headed up to Elle’s room, Aysel in tow, then knocked gently on the door. “Elle?”

“Go away!”

“Elle, it’s me. Cali.”

That did the trick. There was a shuffling sound, and a moment later, the click of the door being unlocked.

I shot a glance at Aysel’s annoyed face, then slipped into the room and closed the door behind me.

Elle had already thrown herself onto her bed, absurd amounts of white taffeta surrounded her like a snow pile. She hiccupped, grabbing for a pillow to hold against her.

“Elle?” I said gently, walking toward her. “What’s going on?”

“I ruined it!” she said angrily.

“What?” I asked, completely baffled. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“The wedding is already cursed!” Elle sat up. Her cheeks were red like her hair, and there were angry tears glistening in her eyes “This is Lucian’s family’s dress. A family heirloom,” she added hurriedly, gesturing at the piles of white fabric draped around her body. “I was trying it on, and it has so many layers, and I started to get confused. I must have done something wrong, because I ripped it and now it’s *ruined*!”

I nodded, looking at the dress, trying to suss out the damage. That certainly explained why she wasn’t letting Aysel in. She was embarrassed—and probably reasonably concerned about Aysel’s reaction to a ripped sartorial heirloom.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, I’m sure we can fix it—”

“*How?* Cali, it’s so delicate, and there have to be a bajillion layers, and I don’t even know how to get the thing on!” she said. “And Aysel’s going to find out that this happened! She let me wear it, Cali. How am I going to tell her it’s ruined?”

Looking at the dress, I understood the vague terror in Elle’s voice. The fabric seemed endless. If it was ripped somewhere, it was going to take forever to find and likely longer to fix… I was at a loss.

I stood. “Let me help you get out of it first. Then we can take a look at what’s going on, okay?”

Elle dabbed at her eyes and nodded, though she still looked miserable. She slid off the bed and got to her feet. I turned her around and found the buttons on the back, carefully working them open. When they were open, I eased the dress down over her hips, careful not to rip it more. Elle grabbed a blue silk robe and threw it on.

“Okay, where’s the tear?” I asked, looking at the dress. There was so much dress it really maybe was impossible to find.

Elle fumbled through the taffeta for a moment.

“There,” she said, pointing.

I looked at the rip. “It’s really not that bad,” I said, after a moment. “It’s really mostly the lining part of it, whatever that’s called. We can find a seamstress and see if we can’t get it all fixed up before the wedding. Or a witch. I’m sure I could beg Big Mac to fix it. No one even has to know about it.”

“Really?” Elle asked, her face brightening with sudden hope. “It’s okay?”

I nodded. “Really. I’m sure it’ll be good as new in time for the wedding.”

Elle let out a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you. I was so worried. Lucian is taking all this wedding stuff so seriously. And he was so excited for me to wear this family wedding dress. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

I slipped my arm around Elle’s shoulders. “You won’t. Really.”

She sighed. “I hope not.”

“How is the planning going?” I asked. “From your perspective.”

“What do you mean?”

“Is Lucian giving you a say in what the wedding will be like?”

Maybe I was being too paranoid, but I’d seen the binder. It had so much of Lucian in it, I just wanted to make sure Elle was in there, too. I doubted Elle had over fifty centerpiece option ideas.

Elle nodded. “Yes, I’ve been helping,” she said. “But I’ve never been to a human wedding before, so I’ve been telling Lucian to do what he thinks is best.”

“That explains a lot…”

“I know, the binder is a lot…”

“But do you like what he’s doing so far?”

“I do. I asked for it to have a lot of forest themes. It’s the one true place I really feel at home,” she explained. “It’ll make the day feel special… if I don’t ruin everything first.”

“You haven’t ruined anything,” I said. “I’m sure all Lucian wants is to marry you, Elle. He’ll be happy no matter what you wear or what hors d’oeuvre there are.”

Elle smiled up at me. “Thank you, Cali. You always know what to say to make me feel better.”

Her sad, worried smile broke my heart a little. I hated to see Elle so nervous, and I wanted to do everything I could to get her mind off the stressful dress situation.

“Hey, I’ve been getting some ideas based on some of the stuff in the binder,” I said. “Do you want to talk about some of the things? See if you like them?”

This did the trick, and she perked up at my words. “Oh! Yes, I do!”

I grinned and threw my bag down on the bed. I pulled out the magazine the crew team had seen earlier and started flipping through it.

“I was thinking maybe something like for your flowers,” I said, pointing at a dreamy bouquet with trailing ivy. “Or maybe something like this, with eucalyptus. That would smell really nice, and you could keep it for a long time. And for dresses…” I started to flip through the pages again.

“Oh! What about this?” Elle asked, pointing at a page I’d passed.

She’d stopped on an advertisement for lingerie. It was wedding lingerie and it was white, but there was nothing particularly virginal about it.

My eyes widened, cheeks heating. “Oh, um… That’s up to you.”

She looked up at me guilelessly. “But do you think Lucian would like it? Would he like me in it?”

I frowned, trying *really* hard not to think of what Lucian would like in that particular department.

“I guess so,” I managed. “I mean, you would know, Elle. You know him a lot better than I do.”

This made her smile. “Yes, I do.”

“Good!” I said quickly, not needing her to elaborate more than that. “Just go with your gut. If you think he’d, um, like you to wear some of this, then go for it. Whatever will make you happy. That’s all you can do, right?”

Elle smiled. “I like doing this with you, Cali.”

“Wedding planning?”

She shook her head. “Girl talk.”

I smiled back. “Yeah, it’s nice. We haven’t really had a chance to hang out in what feels like a long time.”

Elle threw her arms around me, squeezing hard. “Thank you so much for coming, Cali. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course!” I hugged her back. When we were done, I asked, “So you’re happy here with Lucian?”

“I am,” she said confidently. “The wedding planning might be a bit stressful, but it’s good. I’m still trying to understand why we need something so… large, but I know it will make my mate happy.”

“I think so,” I said. “If there’s anything Lucian likes, it’s a party.”

She nodded. “And like you said, I want to see him happy. His happiness makes me so happy in a way I didn’t even know was possible.”

I understood what she meant. I felt that way about Greyson—seeing him happy felt like the best high I could ever get. His smile, his laugh… If I could create a world where he didn’t have to worry about anything, I would. He was my mate, it was what he deserved.

A lump formed in my throat. I used to feel that way about Xavier, too.

I cleared my throat. “I’m glad you feel that way, Elle.”

She hugged me again. “You’re the best.”

“Well, I better get going. Just tell Aysel what happened, and she’ll help you get a seamstress. If she’s upset, just let me know and I’ll talk to Big Mac.”

With that, Elle started walking me out the door. Luckily, Aysel wasn’t still out there. I would miss that conversation. Suddenly, a loud bell clanged somewhere in the palace, ringing loud enough that I jumped, my heart suddenly racing.

“What the hell was that?” I demanded, looking around the hallway, on edge.

“Oh.” Elle laughed. “That’s the new doorbell. Lucian just had it installed. Lucian says it sounds very regal, and that it’s just right for the palace. What do you think of it?”

“Oh yeah, super regal,” I said, my ears still ringing. I couldn’t imagine living with the stress of that thing going off every time someone came to visit.

“I should go see who it is,” Elle said, hurrying down the hallway toward the door. She waved off an attendant standing there. “I’ll get it!”

Elle opened the massive front door. “Oh, hi! I wasn’t expecting you.”

I moved to stand next to her, curious to see who it was, and found myself face-to-face with Xavier.

**Episode 4860**

My stomach clenched.

“Hi,” I said, my voice an embarrassing squeak. I suddenly wasn’t sure what to do with my hands, so I clasped them awkwardly behind my back.

*Did he somehow know I was here?*

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. “Wedding stuff.”

His gaze sharpened at that, and he looked at me quickly, then at Elle. Moments later, his expression cleared. “Oh. *Elle’s* wedding?”

“Of course. Who else’s wedding would it be?” I asked without thinking.

Then realization dawned—he’d thought I was talking about *my* wedding. To Greyson.

My face flushed. How could he think that of me? That I was capable of planning on marrying Greyson without letting him know? Were things really *that* awkward and strained between us that he thought I was capable of being so deceitful?

It made me pissed off that he would think that of me, but I didn’t say any of that out loud.

Xavier cleared his throat. “I came over to see Lucian. I need to talk to him—Alpha to Alpha.”

“Why?” I asked before I thought better of it. “What’s going on?”

Xavier sighed, crossing his arms. “That’s on a need-to-know basis.”

*Well then.*

“He’s in his study down the hall. Just that way,” Elle said, pointing. “You can’t miss it. There are huge brass lion heads on the door.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, and they met mine. We both smiled at Lucian’s pompous absurdity and had a moment of unspoken connection, like nothing had changed between us. Then Xavier’s smile faded, like he was coming back down to earth.

“I’m going to get this over with then.” He stepped past us into the entrance hall. Then he turned back to me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I looked at him, confused. “Tomorrow? Why would you see me tomorrow?”

“The regatta?”

“Oh! Right,” I said, going hot all over again. “Wait, that means you’re coming?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Great.”

“Great,” he repeated. Then, without anything more to say—and clearly unsure how to act around me—he turned and walked away, toward the study with the brass lion heads on the door.

I watched him go, and when I turned back to Elle, she was eyeing me, her expression shocked.

“*Wow*,” she said, with feeling.

“What?” I asked, self-conscious.

“Are you two okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine,” I said.

She frowned. “Are you sure? That was uncomfortable. Even *I* picked up on it, and I don’t always notice that kind of thing.”

I groaned. She was right about that. If *Elle* was picking up on the awkward tension between Xavier and me, then it had to be bad. She really wasn’t great at picking up vibes between humans.

“We’re… figuring it out,” I said vaguely.

“Yeah?” Elle didn’t look convinced. “Well, I hope you figure it out soon.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “You two were always so in sync before. And now it’s all…” She shivered. “*Weird*. Really weird. You don’t feel it?”

Of course I felt it. Sometimes, it was *all* I felt. But I was tired of talking about it—especially to Elle. I needed to change the subject.

“Do you want to do any more wedding planning today?” I asked.

She rolled with the subject change. “No, that’s okay. I want to have the binder with me when I make my decisions, and that’s at your house,” she said. “Besides, I think Lucian shouldn’t have given it to you. I don’t want you and Greyson to be burdened by this. I’ll ask someone to pick it up.”

“Okay,” I said. “If you’re sure. I’m happy to help.”

Elle smiled. “I’m sure. And I’m sure I’ll still need your help, binder or not.”

I laughed. “Okay, well, please call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Promise.”

I slung my bag over my shoulder and headed out. Deep in thought, I wandered down the driveway. I passed Xavier’s car and ran my hand lightly over the sleek paint, my thoughts going back to the drives we used to take together. I remembered how happy I’d been to sit next to him, to be so close to him, to talk to him and hold his hand. Everything was so different now.

Now, when I saw him, all I felt was anxious and awkward. And I hated it.

Frustration flooded me, and I almost slammed my fist down onto the hood of Xavier’s car, but I stopped myself just in time. This wasn’t the car’s fault. I didn’t know *whose* fault it was, really.

I headed to my own car and climbed in, then drove home, feeling all knotted up with anger and sadness and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness.

The feeling left me empty, and even though I’d just had breakfast with the team, when I walked into the pack house, I headed for the kitchen, thinking that maybe I could convince Torin to make me his version of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha. It wasn’t exactly the same—Torin foamed his milk with a steamer—but it was still really good, and I definitely needed something warm and comforting. The sugar and caffeine wouldn’t hurt, either.

But when I walked into the kitchen, it was empty.

I glanced into the hallway, but there was no one there either, so I put the kettle on the stove to boil with a sigh, figuring that tea was going to have to be good enough.

That was probably better for me, anyway. As good as a temporary sugar high would’ve felt, I probably didn’t need the crash.

I leaned against the counter, staring at the kettle, completely disregarding my mother’s constant reminders that a watched pot never boiled.

It was strange. For the first time in a long time, there were no big threats in my life. There was nothing terrifying looming over us, threatening the pack at every turn. And yet everything seemed more uncertain than ever.

I’d really believed that once we’d broken Xavier’s curse and gotten rid of Seluna and Adéluce for good, things would settle down. I’d thought I’d be able to stop living with the kind of constant anxiety that kept me up at night.

But that hadn’t happened. I still worried. All the time. About everyone—the pack, my friends, Xavier, everyone around me. I was worried about Xavier, and how he was obviously in pain because he couldn’t choose his loyalties. I was worried about Greyson having to stay in limbo because I couldn’t bring myself to make a choice. I even felt bad for Ava. It couldn’t possibly be fun to feel so uncertain about your mate.

Thoughts were spinning in my head like a hamster wheel, moving faster and faster until I rested my head down on the counter and groaned.

“Cali?”

I looked up to see Greyson standing in the kitchen doorway . He was looking at me with a worried expression. My groaning must’ve drawn his attention.

“Hey,” I said, trying to smile—and failing miserably. “Good news, Elle’s going to make Lucian take the binder back.”

“That is good news,” he said. Then he frowned. “Are you okay, though? I’d think you’d be happier about it.”

I shook my head. “No, I am happy about it. I just feel like crap.”

He walked into the kitchen and moved to stand behind me. He put his hands on my shoulders and rubbed, massaging away the tension. “Can I help? Is it school? Friends? The cryptozoology club?”

I groaned again. I’d actually forgotten about that particular drama. “No. I mean, yeah, now that you mention it—but no. I’m just… I’m worried about taking care of everyone.”

Greyson squeezed my shoulders. “You should just focus on taking care of yourself right now, love.”

I sighed. “I know, and I want to, but I feel like there are so many balls that I’m trying to keep in the air.”

“Like what?” Greyson asked.

“I want to be there for Elle, and I want to do a good job for the crew team at the regatta,” I said. “And that’s just for starters.”

“How was Elle?” Greyson asked. “Good, I’m assuming, if she wants to take back the binder?”

“Yeah, she’s good,” I said, rubbing my head, where a headache was starting. “Actually, I ran into Xavier on my way out of there.”

“You did?” Greyson asked, surprised. “What did he want?”

“I don’t know, actually,” I admitted. “He wanted to talk to Lucian.”

Greyson snorted. “Maybe he’s trying to rope Xavier into helping pay for the honeymoon.”

That made me laugh. “I honestly wouldn’t be surprised. It would probably cost more than the wedding.”  
 “Yeah he’d rent a whole island or something.”

“No, he’d probably buy it,” I joked.

We both laughed. It felt good—I loved that he could completely turn around my mood in a matter of seconds. I reached for his hand, squeezing it. He squeezed back.

But then he gave me a curious look, a question in his grey eyes. “Where would you want to go for our honeymoon?”

**Episode 4861**

Greyson’s question was echoing through my head, creating waves of anxiety that coursed through me.

When he asked me questions like that, not only did they make me wonder if Greyson often found himself wanting more than I could give, but they made me wonder if I’d ever be able to answer those kinds of question honestly without feeling crushing guilt.

*And then there are all the follow-up questions, like where would* *I want to go for my honeymoon? And if we go on a honeymoon, we’d be married! Could I marry Greyson? Could I really make that choice? And what would that mean for Xavier and me?*

Well, that last one was obvious. If I made that choice, it would mean that things between me and Xavier would finally have to be over for good. There was no way that Xavier would stick around if I married—if I *chose*—Greyson.

I was thrown. It wasn’t like I’d never imagined marrying Greyson—or Xavier—before. I’d fantasized about it more times than I could count. But I’d never even mention the idea of marrying either one of them out loud. I wouldn’t want to risk hurting them… And I still had no idea who’d be waiting for me at the altar if that day ever came.

*And what if I make the wrong choice? And what if something happened to me or the person I didn’t choose because of some weird* due destini *loophole?*

I rested my hand on Greyson’s arm. “You know I can’t answer that question, Greyson.”

I wanted to say more, but I didn’t know if there was anything I could add that would soften the blow. He never really pressured me about this kind of thing, but it had to be difficult to know that not only could I not give him an answer right now, but I seriously doubted that I’d ever be able to.

Greyson smiled softly, but there was something sad about it.

“I know,” he said. “I wasn’t asking you to choose or anything. I was just being…” He trailed off and looked away, absently biting his lip.

“Hopeful,” I supplied. “I get it. I know it’s complicated.”

I so wanted to say something to make him feel better. But I had a feeling that nothing short of the answer he wanted to hear would make him feel good.

Greyson shook his head like he was dashing away the conversation. “Doesn’t matter anyway. So, is there anything I can do to help you while you’re doing all this for Elle? Thanks again for taking over the wedding planning. You’re a lifesaver.”

*He’s eager to change the subject, and honestly, I am, too. This is a conversation that normal couples have to have—that they* need *to have. But we’re not a normal couple, and conversations about our future are off limits, as far as I’m concerned.*

“Actually, now there are two things I have to plan,” I said, feeling a little brighter now that we were talking about something I actually *could* make decisions about. “Elle asked me to be her maid of honor, and that means that I have to plan the bachelorette party as well. Where do you even *throw* a werewolf bachelor party? In the forest? A banquet hall? A club? Wait, don’t tell me—the pack house.”

Greyson laughed. “I think I can help you out on that front. I suppose they aren’t all that different to human bachelorette parties in that there’s no specific rules for how to put one together—they just have to be fun. But you have plenty of time to worry about all that, right?”

I nodded. “Right. If she and Lucian just had the engagement party, the wedding is probably kind of far off. And Elle *only* just asked you—and now me—to plan the wedding. She can’t expect us to get everything in order at such short notice.”

Greyson raised his brow. “Although, knowing Lucian, he could easily send out a ridiculously fancy invitation for tomorrow.”

I gasped. “He wouldn’t!”

*What if Lucian thinks that just because he can pull a lavish party out of thin air at the drop of a hat, I should be able to do that, too? But Elle wouldn’t let him put that kind of pressure on me, would she?*

Greyson burst out laughing again and held up his hands. “No, I’m only teasing. I don’t think he’ll go that far. You looked totally horror-struck for a second, there.”

Greyson’s expression turned thoughtful. “I mean, I *hope* Lucian wouldn’t do that.”

I groaned and dropped my head back down on the table. It had been a no-brainer to take over wedding planning duty from Greyson, since he would’ve drowned without my help. But that didn’t mean I was fully prepared to take it on, either.

A few moments later, Greyson’s hands landed on my shoulders, and he started giving me a light massage.

“You know what I think?” he asked, his voice as soothing as his hands.

“What?”

“I think you need a distraction,” he replied. “Let’s table all the wedding talk for a while. How are you feeling about the regatta tomorrow?”

I lifted my head and leaned into Greyson’s touch, moaning slightly. This was all I really needed—to feel close to Greyson.

“I’m nervous, but excited,” I finally told him. “I appreciated what the pack’s been doing to help me feel ready. I hope it goes well.” I hesitated, wondering if I should say what was on the tip of my tongue. “Xavier’s going to be there,” I blurted out. “With Ava.”

Greyson briefly stopped massaging my shoulders, but then he got right back to it.

*I have to figure out how to be better at not hurting him with this. He’s been so supportive and patient with me, even with the Xavier stuff, but I know it can’t be easy, hearing about it all the time. It can’t be easy for him to have to constantly pretend that none of it bothers him for my sake, either.*

I thought about how badly it had hurt when Xavier had asked to bring Ava along to the regatta. I didn’t want to make Greyson feel that way. I’d gotten used to how easy it had always been to be with Greyson while Xavier had been…

Struck by a sudden surge of guilt, I couldn’t even finish the thought. I felt like a jerk for thinking about how easy things had been with Greyson and me before, when Xavier had been actively pushing me away.

*If Xavier had kept that all up for a year or more, what would’ve happened then? Would marrying Greyson have become an easy option to choose?*

I put a hand over Greyson’s, stilling it. I squeezed it gently, hoping that he could feel my affection through the contact.

“We should go to bed,” I said. “It’s been a long day.”

Greyson leaned down and planted a kiss on top of my head. “You must’ve been reading my mind.”

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It was early Saturday morning, and I was sitting at the front of the boat, facing my team of rowers. I could see the sky overhead and the river stretching out around us, but the rowers were blurry.

*That’s so weird. Why can’t I see who’s on the boat with me? Is there something in my eyes?*

My heart started beating wildly. This was so strange, and no matter how many times I blinked my eyes to clear them, I couldn’t make the figures out. I was trying my best to yell directions at my team, but nothing was coming out of my mouth.

I looked around, and the entire river was suddenly empty—except for me. There was no one on the riverbank watching or anything.

*Wait, is this the race, or is it practice? What’s going on here?*

“Where should we go? Forward or backward?” someone asked.

*I don’t even understand that question… Shouldn’t we always go forward?*

“Hurry up and get to me!” That was Greyson’s voice.

*What’s he doing at the end of the route?*

I started yelling for the boat to move forward, but then I heard Xavier’s voice coming from the opposite end of the route, yelling for me to come toward him.

“Cali! I’m over here! Come this way!”

I twisted around and squinted hard, but I still couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t see either of my mates, but their voices were loud and clear. I tried to call out for them, but I still couldn’t find my voice.

“Which way?” someone asked frantically. “We’re falling behind!”

*I don’t know which way to go! I can’t decide!*

A loud sound suddenly filled the air. I opened my eyes and realized I was in bed, my phone buzzing like crazy on the nightstand.

I pulled in a deep breath and let it out.

*Okay, good. That was just a dream. A nightmare. And a confusing one at that.*

I grabbed my phone and answered it, still groggy. “Hello?”

Gael’s voice thundered over the line. “LIL’ HART, WHERE ARE YOU?”

**Episode 4862**

**Greyson**

I felt Cali go from sleepy to alert in seconds flat as she burst out of the bed and started racing around the room.

I lifted myself up onto my elbows and watched her struggle into her clothes. She was beyond frantic.

“I’m late!” she shouted, almost falling over as she pulled on her pants. “I have to get to the school! I can’t believe I overslept!”

“You want me to drive you?” I asked, already moving to get out of bed.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going to rush over now—I’ll see you there. The race starts at 8:30. Don’t be late like me.”

And then, before I could get another word out, she was out the door. Moments later, I heard her feet pounding down the stairs. A few seconds after that, the front door slammed shut behind her.

I sighed and flopped back down into bed. Immediately, my thoughts went to my conversation with Cali the night before. I was still kicking myself for saying that stupid thing about the wedding. It had just slipped out. I’d had no intention of actually asking her to choose, but in my future, I only saw one reality, and that included Cali.

*I was only thinking out loud, but now that Xavier’s back to normal, I’ll need to be more careful. I know that Cali won’t do anything to risk hurting either of us. I guess I’ll just have to wait and see how things turn out… Even if I have to wait forever.*

Sighing, I dragged my hands down my face. I’d have done anything for a single uncomplicated week. When we were busy fighting entities and other werewolves and everything in between, it was hard to remember that regular life came with its share of challenges, too.

*Like struggling to keep from hoping for something that may never happen. I may never get to marry Cali, and I make my peace with that.*

I picked up my phone and checked the time. If we were going to be on time for Cali’s regatta, I was going to have to start getting people together.

I got out of bed, took a quick shower, and got dressed before heading downstairs. Torin was already in the kitchen, stirring something on the stove.

I nodded at the pot while pouring myself a cup of coffee. “What are you up to, Torin?”

“Making cocoa to bring to Cali’s meet. It’s pretty chilly outside, and I looked up what actually happens at a regatta. We’re going to be sitting on the riverbank and watching the boats, so we’ll need something to keep us warm.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said, walking over to inspect the bubbling, sweet smelling concoction. I had to resist the urge to dip a spoon in for a taste test. Not that it needed testing. I was sure it was delicious.

“Thanks,” Torin said. “And I’ve also pulled a bag together with picnic blankets and gloves and extra sweaters, just in case. I just want us to be prepared. I can’t imagine it’s fun, having to watch an outdoor sporting event while you feel like you’re going to freeze to death.”

I was glad that Torin had thought about all this stuff, because I certainly hadn’t considered any of it. “Thanks, Torin. I’m glad you’re so on top of things.”

“I try to be,” Torin said distractedly as he rushed over to stir the cocoa again. “But mostly, I just love an excuse to bundle up and drink cocoa.”

I looked down at my phone again, checking the time. If we didn’t get our asses in gear soon, we’d be late. I didn’t want Cali to look for us and not see us on the riverbank, cheering her on.

“Lola! Jay!” I shouted. “We’re going to have to leave soon if we’re going to make it on time!”

Lola stepped into the kitchen a few minutes later, rubbing her eyes.

“Is this thing *really* happening at the crack of dawn like this?” She yawned. “It’s way too early for a regatta, don’t you think? Why can’t they row in the middle of the afternoon? Is there some kind of rule against keeping reasonable hours? It seems unfair to us, their devoted public.”

I laughed and passed her an empty mug so she could pour herself some coffee.

“Hell if I know,” I said. “Maybe they do it so early because that’s when the rowers are at their freshest?”

Lola scowled as she gulped her coffee. “*They* might be at their best, but what about me?”

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After rounding everyone up, we sped over to TK School’s Campus and drove down the sloping, winding roads to the riverbank, where people were starting to gather.

After we parked, Lola, Jay, and Torin walked down to the river while I lingered by the car, taking in the scene. Despite the early hour, there were already plenty of people sitting scattered up and down the route. I could even see a few people in the distance sitting on temporary bleachers that had been erected near the finish line.

*This is an impressive turnout. Who knew that crew was such a draw? I hope Cali’s not too nervous. She’s going to do great.*

I spotted the two teams getting their gear together and starting to move toward the river. I smiled when I saw Cali on the dock. My smile widened into a grin when I noticed the determined look on her beautiful face, her hair whipping around her face in the soft wind.

I’d never been to a crew race before, but I knew that look on Cali’s face. The other team had better be ready to lose.

“I see a good spot near the middle,” Torin said as I strode over to join them, pointing to a patch of grass about halfway down the bank. “Looks like the perfect spot to get a good view of the entire race.” Torin gave me a look. “I’m sure you don’t want to take your eyes off Cali for a second, if you can help it.”

“You’re right,” I said, smiling to myself. “I’m excited to see what she’s been practicing all these weeks.”

*I’m so proud of Cali. It’s amazing that she’s doing this. She’s so adventurous. Fearless. She doesn’t know the first thing about crew—at least she didn’t, when she first started—and now here she is, about to race in her first crew meet. I know she’s going to do so well.*

Torin led the way to the spot he’d picked out, where he made quick work of spreading out a few blankets and unpacking all the snacks and supplies he’d brought along.

“Can you handle this one?” Torin asked, throwing me a thick flannel blanket. He pointed to a spot beside one of the other blankets he’d already put out. “Spread it out there. Then we’ll be covered. They’re insulated, so the chill of the ground won’t seep through.”

“You really thought of everything,” Jay said.

“Not everything. It would’ve been nice to bring a few heaters along or something, but I thought that might be overkill,” Torin said.

“Maybe just a little,” Lola said.

I spread the blanket out while Torin set up a little table and started stocking it with the thermoses of hot chocolate and a few mugs. Torin might not have brought heaters, but it seemed like he’d brought everything else. I could see that Lola was relaxing about the idea of being up so early now that Torin had made our little picnic spot so inviting.

“Now if *this* is what it’s like to be a spectator at a regatta, I could get used to it,” Lola said as she sat down and leaned up against Jay, both of them making themselves comfortable.

“It’s the way the Redwoods do it, for sure,” Torin replied. “The cocoa is self-serve, so help yourselves.”

Torin pulled out a thermos that he’d filled for himself and settled onto a cushy pillow, watching the teams, where they were starting to gather around their boats.

I sighed as I sat down beside him, my eyes still on Cali.

“Cocoa for you,” Lola said, handing me a mug.

“Thanks,” I said. “And everyone, be sure to thank Torin. If all this had been left up to me, we’d be sitting on the frozen ground right now, totally deprived of cocoa.”

“Thanks, Torin!”

Torin ducked his head and smiled. “It was nothing. Just make sure to sip the cocoa slowly. I brought plenty for the four of us, but we should try to make it last throughout the entire regatta.”

I nodded at Torin and raised my mug at him in salute before taking a huge sip of cocoa. It tasted as good as it smelled, and I almost melted when Torin dropped a huge marshmallow into my mug.

“Almost forgot the best part,” he said, going around and anointing everyone else’s cocoa with marshmallows.

Jay sighed. “Is this heaven?”

Lola winced. “Almost—in heaven, this thing would be happening later in the day.”

We all chuckled and settled in to watch, but then Xavier cleared his throat and spoke.

“Is this spot taken?”

**Episode 4863**

**Xavier**

I eyed Greyson, Lola, Torin, and Jay. Torin and Jay were the only ones smiling at me, but I decided to take that as a win. There’d been a time when none of them would’ve shown me anything that could’ve been perceived as inviting, so maybe we were finally making some progress.

I gestured again at the empty space next to the four Redwoods. “So…?”

Greyson gave me a tight nod.

No one else raised any objections, so even though it wasn’t the warmest reception I’d ever gotten, I decided to stick around.

Ava tensed briefly, then squeezed my hand.

*This is kind of awkward*,she mind linked.

*That’s a bit of an understatement, don’t you think?*

Ava and I locked eyes and shared a flicker of a smile. It felt good to have Ava here with me. Even though I’d felt bad about telling Cali that I wouldn’t be coming alone, now I was happy that I had Ava’s moral support. And it wasn’t like Cali was up here on the blankets with us, so that meant Ava was the perfect ally.

I spread out the blanket that Ava had brought, then eyed the thermos in Torin’s hands.

*Damn. I should have brought snacks, too. Don’t really know how long this regatta thing is going to last, but hopefully not long enough for Ava to get hungry or thirsty.*

“Glad to see you, man,” Jay said. Then he sighed. “Glad that things are finally getting back to normal.”

*Normal? I wouldn’t exactly call any of this normal. Normal was when I was with Cali, and still part of the Redwood pack. There’s nothing normal about having two mates and being in love with them both. I don’t know how Cali has managed to deal with her version of this situation for so long.*

I didn’t even consider saying any of that out loud, quickly shaking the thought off. I was on shaky but decent ground with the Redwoods, so it was best for me to pretend that things *weren’t* still as weird as they obviously were.

“It seems like it’s time for a classic Jay and Xavier team-up,” Jay continued. “It’s been a long time coming.”

Greyson snorted, and I grinned.

“I’d like that,” I said. “Just like old times.”

“Do I even want to know what that means?” Ava grumbled.

“You’re better off not knowing,” Lola told her.

*I could get used to this. It’s almost… easy. There doesn’t have to be any tension, especially when Greyson and I can now sit here as equals, both of us Alphas of our own packs.*

Out of the blue, Greyson turned to me and asked, “Why were you at the Vanguards’ yesterday? What did you have to talk to Lucian about?”

I held in a snort of laughter.

*Classic Greyson. Of course he has to bring the tension when we’re all finally managing some version of cordial interaction. And what business is it of his? Sometimes I wonder if he forgets that he’s not my Alpha anymore. I don’t have to answer to him.*

“What does it matter?” I asked.

“Well, Lucian mentioned wanting to rejoin the alliance,” Greyson pressed. “Anything to do with that?”

I could tell that he was trying to keep things cordial, and I supposed I could meet him halfway.

“No. It was just some stupid thing—he asked about using the Samara land to house his wedding staff when the time comes.” I rolled my eyes for emphasis.

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me. “Really? He’s trying to turn your property into a base camp for them?” He chuckled and shook his head. “How much is that shit going to cost?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said dryly. “I turned him down. Besides, if I’d agreed to that, it wouldn’t have taken long for Lucian to ask for something else—and his requests probably just would’ve gotten crazier.”

Greyson took that in and nodded. “He’s definitely going crazy with this wedding thing.”

“You’re telling me,” I said. “But what else did we expect? It’s Lucian.”

“True. Well, if he ever brings up the alliance, let me know,” Greyson said.

I simply nodded, suddenly not feeling in any kind of mood to talk pack business. Especially with Greyson.

“I’m going to go talk to Jay,” I said.

I hesitated for a second, half expecting Greyson to try and stop me by asking yet another question about something I had no interest in discussing. I almost sighed in relief when he left me alone.

*Glad that interaction’s finished. Things are good between me and Greyson right now, but our relationship is constantly teetering on the edge of going down the drain. No point in pushing it.*

“I’m really glad to see you here today,” Jay said as I sat down next to him. “I have to admit, I’ve missed hanging out.”

“Same here,” I agreed. “We should find a time to really bro down, just you and me.”

I really meant that. I was thrilled that all the Adéluce shit was over with, for multiple reasons—but I’d only just realized that now, I could finally get my *friend* back. There was nothing to complicate things there—all we had to do was fall back into an easy, natural friendship.

“Xavier,” Torin called.

I looked at him askance, a little surprised by how anxious and nervous he sounded.

Clearly picking up on his tone, Greyson asked, “Torin, are you okay?”

Torin shook his head. “I just didn’t realize that Xavier and Ava were going to be here!”

“Um… Okay. And?” I said, confused.

*Is he mad that I showed up? He smiled at me before… Why would he do that if he didn’t really want me to be here?*

I hadn’t really thought about Torin specifically when I’d come over to the Redwood group, but maybe I should have.

“I just didn’t know that you and Ava were going to be here—I didn’t make enough hot chocolate to share with everyone. I’ve already warned everyone to pace themselves as it is.”

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence.

I was kind of strangely touched by Torin’s anxiety—and a little disappointed, if I was being honest. The hot chocolate looked delicious.

Torin’s cooking was something I really missed about living with the Redwoods. Everyone at the Samara pack house kind of chipped in for meals, cobbling together this or that. Ava was a decent cook, but she didn’t always feel like doing it, and I couldn’t blame her for that. There was no one in the Samara pack that had the kind of devotion to and passion for cooking that Torin had, and I definitely felt the difference.

The silence hung in the air for another few seconds before Lola erupted into a loud laugh.

“I can’t believe you’re worried about that, Torin. I thought it was actually going to be something terrible,” she said, still giggling.

“Sorry. I just… I feel bad about it,” Torin said, but then he was laughing, too. “It’s just… It’s really good, and that made me feel kind of guilty.”

“Thanks for rubbing it in,” Ava quipped.

Soon, everyone was laughing, including me. It was funny—and really ridiculous.

*Okay, so this whole thing might not be so bad. None of us seem to be taking ourselves too seriously—for once. If this is what it could be like moving forward, maybe it won’t be so strange to be around the Redwoods.*

The Redwood pack wasn’t *my* pack anymore, but that didn’t mean that I couldn’t be close with its members. That we couldn’t come to an event like this and hang out and have fun and just be normal.

The laughter finally died down, and we all settled in to watch the teams making their preparations. I zeroed in on Cali, who was surrounded by her team members. Seeing her gave me a pang in the pit of my stomach. She looked so cute and in her element.

*I bet she and Greyson spent the night together. He watched her get up and get ready to come to this meet. Probably gave her some words of encouragement… And who knows what else. It hurts that I’m missing out on spending that kind of quality time with her.*

I felt myself starting to get depressed, so I pushed those thoughts away. I was getting good at that—compartmentalizing my feelings about the state of things between Cali and me. I had to keep doing that if I was ever going to be normal around her, my brother, and the rest of the Redwood.

*And that’s what I want. To be normal and friendly with them.*

“How are you doing?” Greyson asked me quietly.

That was a loaded question if ever I’d heard one.

Deciding to ignore the deeper meaning, I said, “Fine.”

*And I’m glad that I took a few drops of Big Mac’s medicine this morning. I need it for this. There’s no pain to think through with Ava being so close and me still being so torn. I can just relax and be here in the moment.*

Ava’s mind link reached me.

*Are you going to tell Greyson about the whole couples therapy thing?*

*No*,I replied. *It’s none of his business.*

Ava hit me with an appraising look. *Are you going to tell Cali?*

**Episode 4864**

I was nervous and trying my best to push it down. I didn’t want to get so anxious that I made a mistake and ruined things for the team… But I was having a hard time calming down. This was a freaking boat race. I was going to have to be on a boat, shouting out commands… on a river.

*Some nerves are probably good, though, right? Even elite athletes get nervous… Don’t they?*

I was standing on the dock, suited up and surrounded by my team and our coach. It was cold, and I was doing my best to focus on everything but that. It was probably going to be even colder out on the water, and I needed to prepare myself.

“Everyone, put your hands in the middle of the circle!” Gael shouted, his eyes wide with excitement. “Now, Kangaroo Rats on three! One, two, three!”

We all yelled out, “Kangaroo Rats!”

“One more time!” Gael shouted, throwing his hand back into the middle and waiting for everyone else to follow suit.

We quickly piled our hands on top of his. “Kangaroo Rats! Kangaroo Rats! Kangaroo Rats!”

I laughed, getting into the excitement and anticipation. Even though I was nervous—which made sense since this was my first crew meet ever—it was hard to *not* be just as excited as the rest of my team.

I heard the other team doing their own cheer, and I liked to think that we had a lot more heart and energy than they did. I hoped that would serve us well when it came time to blow past them in the water.

One by one, we started climbing into the boat, starting at the back. I waited patiently, rubbing my hands together and trying not to let my nerves get the best of me. I stared into my teammates’ faces as they all settled into the boat, wondering if any of them were as anxious as I was.

*They all look pretty calm, but maybe they’re just good at hiding it. Hopefully no one can tell that I’m about to shiver out of my thermal underwear. The cold definitely isn’t helping my nerves any.*

I was the last one in. I settled into my seat, facing Gael. I glanced back toward the riverbank and spotted Greyson with Torin, Lola, and Jay. I was surprised to see Xavier sitting with them. So he did actually come…

*And they seem… Okay. Like nothing’s wrong. Like this is the most natural thing in the world. That’s progress, right? Hopefully Lola isn’t giving Xavier too much of a hard time…*

I spotted Ava sitting next to Xavier. Even from this distance, I could tell how uncomfortable she was. Not surprising. She’d never really integrated with the Redwood pack, and it had to be strange for her to be sitting with a group of them when she knew how a lot of them really felt about her—especially Lola.

All of a sudden, my dream came back to me in a flash. I saw myself rowing frantically between Greyson and Xavier, trying to decide which way to go, my heart pounding away as I struggled to make the decision.

Codsworth’s loud voice brought me back to the present.

“Are you ready?” He was standing on the dock and pointing at me. “The race is about to start! It’s go time, Lil’ Hart!”

“I’m ready,” I croaked out. My stomach twisted in on itself, and my nerves returned in full force.

*Am I really about to do this? Coxswain a crew competition? How the hell did I get myself into this?*

I felt a fresh surge of annoyance at Lola. She was sitting comfortably up on the riverbank watching and relaxing with everyone while I was perched on a boat freezing my ass off and under a whole lot of pressure. That just didn’t seem fair.

But a bigger part of me was excited about what was about to happen. It was always scary going into the unknown, and this was definitely the unknown, but this time, I knew there was a good chance that I was about to have a lot of fun.

*And why shouldn’t I be able to do a good job as coxswain? I’ve faced bigger challenges than yelling a bunch of instructions at people. I’m confident that I can do a good job.* *I just have to make sure to keep my nerves from getting the best of me.*

“We’ve got this,” Gael said with a wink. “Just make sure that you’re loud and clear with your instructions—just like we practiced. And remember to keep us updated about where the other boat is. We can’t let those damn Fringeheads win! Your job is to keep the fire lit under our asses so that we push ourselves to victory!”

I nodded. “I can do that,” I croaked, my mouth dry. I cleared my throat and nodded at Gael before turning my attention to the rest of the team. “I’ve got this. We’ve all got this! Are the Kangaroo Rats ready to kick some Fringehead ass?” I shouted.

“Ready!” the team shouted. Their voices were loud, their expressions animated—a far cry from my nightmare, where I hadn’t been able to see any of their faces. I was already doing way better than I had in my nightmare… And Xavier and Greyson were safe on the riverbank and didn’t look like they had any plans to come down and yell orders at me, which was a good sign.

A man stepped onto the dock, holding a small starter’s pistol. He had a megaphone in his other hand, and his expression was serious as he looked between the two boats. He slowly brought the megaphone up to his mouth.

“I’m going to count down from three, and once I pull the trigger, the crews will start rowing! The first team to make it to the other end gets the win! Good luck!”

A hush had settled over the entire area. The only sound was the lapping of the water against the boats. I felt the Kangarats’ collective energy crackling in the air, and I braced myself as the man started his countdown.

“Three, two, one!”

And then the crack of the gun echoed through the air.

“Move!” I yelled at my team. “Let’s go!”

The boat took off, slicing through the water at a speed I wasn’t prepared for. I jerked off balance before righting myself and gripping the sides, white knuckling it as we sped away.

*This is way more chaotic than I imagined! Who knew that people could row this fast? Is this safe? It must be safe, right? The college wouldn’t sponsor it, otherwise.*

I eyed the Fringehead boat, easily keeping pace with ours. The other coxswain was shouting at the top of his lungs, and I decided to scream just as loudly to drown him out. I didn’t want him getting into our heads.

“Come on! Push! Row!” I screamed. “Push the limits! The only thing you need to think about is the finish line!”

We were already rowing pretty hard, but even though we were going ridiculously fast and I could see the effort on everyone’s faces, I knew we could do better—we were going to *have* to do better if we wanted to win this thing. I’d seen how hard the boys had worked at practice, and now was the time for them to give it their all.

“Row harder! Push harder! Push faster!” I screamed. “That’s it! Row! Row! Row!”

*At this rate, I’m not going to have a voice tomorrow, but if we win, it’ll all be worth it.*

“We can do this, team! Leave those Fringeheads in the dust! Show them what the Kangarats are made of!”

I nearly jumped with glee when I realized we were starting to pull ahead, the nose of our boat slowly overtaking the Fringeheads’ and gaining speed. Our slight edge was growing by the second.

*Oh my god! We might actually win this! Yes!*

“That’s right!” I cheered, clapping hard. “Keep it up! We’re doing it! We’re beating them! We can win this! Just keep doing what you’re doing! Keep up the good work!”

I could barely feel the chill in the air anymore, my adrenaline was pumping so hard. I really felt like we were on our way to victory—we just needed to stay focused and push ourselves to the brink and stay ahead of the Fringeheads.

Only inches away from me, Gael leaned forward, gripping the oars tightly. He pushed back in tandem with the rest of the team, and the boat surged forward even faster. I tightened my grip on the sides, trying to hold myself steady as our speed increased.

“We’re doing it!” I cheered. “Now just—”

My words were cut short when the boat slammed to a bone-rattling halt. I screamed as the impact jolted us all out of our seats and sent us flying into the freezing water.

**Episode 4865**

**Greyson**

My cheers for Cali were cut short and I watched, horrified, as the Kangarats’ boat slammed into something in the water and lurched violently.

*What did it hit? What was that? Something in the water—a boulder or a rock or something? Did they get tangled in roots? Run aground?*

Whatever the cause, the impact had thrown everyone into the water, almost in slow motion.

*Shit! What are the odds of something like that happening?* *I thought crew was a safe, calm sport!*  

Before I knew it, I was on my feet and rushing toward the water, scanning the dark span of water for any sign of Cali. There were a lot of thrashing bodies in the water, but none of them were Cali. My stomach dropped.

*Please be okay, Cali. Just hold on, I’m coming. I’ll get you out of there.*

People were yelling and screaming and rushing toward the bank and spilling out onto the dock, but I ignored them all. I was laser focused on the water as I searched frantically for any sign of Cali.

I increased my speed, pushing through the mass of people in my way. There were yells of protest and a couple of people pushed back, but I barely registered any of it. The only thing I cared about was getting to Cali. She needed me.

I was nearly at the river when I realized that someone was running right next to me. Xavier.

“I’ve got this, I don’t need your help!” I shouted at him, resisting the urge to shove him away. “She’s *my* mate!”

*God, I hate how I sound right now, but I can’t help it. Why is he always inserting himself into everything that has to do with Cali? He’s a Samara now. He has his own damn Luna to worry about.*

“Did you hear me? I said I got this!” I hissed. “Fall back!”

Xavier ignored me, and a moment later we were both diving into the water and swimming like crazy out to the spot where we’d seen Cali go in.

I pushed forward, trying to ignore the painful cold. Werewolves ran hot, so it was extremely unlikely that I’d freeze in water this cold, but that didn’t mean that this was a pleasant way to spend the morning. My fingers and toes were already aching, and my muscles cramped and spasmed as I pushed them to their limits in the frigid water. I could only imagine how Cali was feeling.

*If only I could shift! This would be so much easier in wolf form… But I can’t risk it. There are too many people around.*

I’d lost track of Xavier, but that didn’t matter. I’d meant it when I’d said I didn’t need him. I could handle this myself, and I was going to be the one to save Cali. I just had to find her.

*It’s kind of strange that I don’t see her anywhere. She’s a decent swimmer… And if she’s been under the water this whole time…*

I didn’t complete that thought, not wanting to consider all the horrible ways this could end.

I dove below the surface and tore through the water, swimming as fast and for as long as I could before I finally had to come up for a big gulp of air. I wasn’t too far away from the boat now. It had flipped over on impact, and it was still upside down and bobbing along on the water.

I could see a few of Cali’s other teammates thrashing their way to shore, but I still didn’t see Cali. My heart rate quickened as I wondered if she was trapped under the boat,  calling out for help, scared and alone and trying to keep her head above water…

*I have to stop thinking the worst. I’m going to save her, and everything will be okay.*

I dove back under the surface, blinking against the cold, murky darkness. I couldn’t see much farther than a few inches in front of me, which meant Cali probably couldn’t see a thing.

*Cali must be freaking out! This is the worst kind of water to fall into. If I’d known that something like this could happen, I would’ve tried to convince Cali to play a safer sport.*

I fumbled around desperately, trying to search for anything recognizable in the darkness, hoping that wherever Cali was, she was close enough for me to get to her and pull her back to shore.

I reached out to Cali via mind link.

*Cali! Are you okay? I’m here! Tell me where you are, and I’ll be there in no time! Cali! Cali! Answer me!*

But there was no answer. Only the bubbling sound of the water and the darkness. I was really starting to panic.

I kept moving until I couldn’t hold my breath any longer, and then I was shooting back up to the surface. This time, when I looked toward the dock, I spotted Cali.

Someone was pulling her up out of the water and onto the dock. A bunch of people were rushing forward to check on her and the rest of her teammates. I was surprised—but so relieved—to see that she was okay. We must’ve passed each other while I was swimming out to the upturned boat.

I mind linked with her again. *Cali. You’re okay! Thank goodness!*

Cali whipped around and looked out across the water until she spotted me. *Greyson, what are you doing all the way out there?*

Before I could even answer, Cali reached out to me again.

*And is that Xavier I see next to you? You both dove in?*

Treading water, I twisted my head to the side and caught my brother’s eye—and saw my own sheepish expression reflected right back at me. I shared a moment of wordless commiseration with my brother.

*We really could’ve waited a second before jumping into the water. It’s not like she didn’t have an entire team of athletes with her*, I thought to myself. *It’s not like she can’t swim.*

It was like I couldn’t think straight whenever Cali was facing even the smallest hint of danger. I’d seen the boat tip, and the rest was a blur. One second I’d been on the bank, and the next I’d been swimming through the water and trying to get to her as fast as I could.

I turned and struck out toward the dock, excited to be out of the cold water and to have Cali in my arms. But I was already beating myself up.

*Why the fuck am I so reactive when it comes to Cali? I want to keep her safe, always… But most of the time, she’s good to take care of herself, and this time, she had her entire team there to make sure she got out of the water okay. I look like an idiot. I shouldn’t have acted without thinking!*

By the time I pulled myself up onto the dock, Torin, Lola, and Jay had rushed down to Cali. Ava had her arms crossed over her chest and was standing a few feet away from everyone else, looking awkward.

*I wonder what Xavier’s going to say to Ava to explain why he left her in the dust to go save Cali. Ava doesn’t look happy. But then, does she ever?*

“We should’ve gone over the safety plan,” one of Cali’s teammates was saying. “But things could’ve gone way worse… Wouldn’t you agree?”

Cali simply looked at the teammate and slowly shook her head.

“Anytime you end up in the water during a meet—that’s the worst-case scenario,” another teammate chimed in. “Last season, we didn’t tip over once.”

Ignoring all of that, I rushed to Cali’s side. “Love, are you okay? I saw you go over, and—”

Cali put a hand on my arm. “I’m fine, Greyson. More embarrassed than anything. I’m the coxswain. I’m supposed to know what to do if the boat tips over. Instead, I just thrashed around like a panicked puppy in the water while Gael and the others pulled me to shore.” She shook her head.

“Glad to be of service,” Gael said, shivering as he took a theatrical bow.

“Are you sure you’re good?” Xavier asked, all but shoving himself between me and Cali. “Do you need anything? Should I run and get one of the blankets? We should probably get you out of those wet clothes.”

A wave of irritation swept through me, leaving behind a searing anger that took me by surprise.

Was this how it was always going to be? Having to compete with Xavier for Cali’s attention, even though Xavier had a whole other life now? This new life wasn’t fully Xavier’s choice—Adéluce had pushed him into it—but it was still his new reality. And it wasn’t like he’d made any moves to officially come back into the Redwood fold, or to break up with Ava… So why was he still inserting himself between me and Cali?

*Meanwhile, his Luna is standing forgotten on the sidelines. I’m so tired of this! He needs to mind his own business for once and leave me and Cali be.*

Before I could stop myself, I snapped, “I already told you that I’ve got this, Xavier. She doesn’t need you.”

**Episode 4866**

I tensed at Greyson’s sharp tone. It had taken me—and everyone else—by surprise. Everyone was waiting for the other shoe to drop, myself included. It was kind of embarrassing that Greyson had taken that tone with Xavier in front of all my teammates—though most of them were too busy drying off and trying to warm up to pay much attention.

I looked at Xavier and waited for him to explode. His jaw was tight and I could see the wheels turning in his head, like he was trying to figure out how best to respond to his brother.

It was like we’d gone back in time to a year ago, when the brothers hadn’t been able to stand each other and had constantly been at each other’s throats, always seconds from getting into a knock-down, drag-out fight. I didn’t want to go back to that, and I had to believe that neither Xavier nor Greyson wanted that, either—though Greyson clearly wasn’t above pushing things in that direction.

“I’m okay, Greyson,” I said. “Really.” I glanced at Xavier, but couldn’t quite read his expression. He took a step back when I reached for Greyson’s hand. “I’m soaking wet, but fine.”

And I was. I was actually surprised at how uneventful our little plunge had ended up being. I’d nearly fainted from panic when we were all thrown out of the boat, but luckily, my terror had been short lived, and the Kangarats had mobilized moments after we all hit the water.

“The water was cold, but I was barely in it,” I said. “Even though I didn’t know about it, my teammates have a system for when stuff like this happens, and it worked well to get us all out of harm’s way. We got back to the dock so quickly that there’s really nothing to worry about.”

Greyson was chafing my arms, trying to warm me up. He was also looking deep into my eyes, as if trying to confirm that I was really okay. After a few minutes of that, he finally took a deep breath, and I saw him starting to calm himself down.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” he said, hugging me against his warm body. I leaned into his touch, feeding off his warmth and closeness.

Greyson pulled away a little and turned to look at Xavier. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I was just… reacting to all the adrenaline.”

I was surprised to hear Greyson apologize, but I was also thankful for it.

Xavier said nothing, just moved off to stand near Ava. I ignored the twinge of pain I felt, seeing how quickly he’d sought out Ava’s support—but how could I blame him? I was in Greyson’s arms right now.

*And I’m a little surprised that Ava didn’t get between us, before… That’s not like her at all. She always manages to throw herself in the middle, especially if I’m involved.*

I studied Ava’s face and immediately saw the tension there. It almost looked like she was holding something back.

Before I could consider what that might be, the man with the megaphone came walking over. “You all have twenty minutes to reset the boats and get dried off before we start the next race. Let’s keep everyone in the boat, this time,” he said, before moving off.

A few of the Fringeheads snickered.

“Yeah, they can’t even stay in the boat,” one of them called, sneering. “If they can’t do that, how the hell are they supposed to win?”

“Let’s hope they put on a repeat performance and go for another swim. It’ll be the easiest race we’ve ever won,” another Fringehead added. “They’re an embarrassment to the sport.”

“Take that back!” Bear barked. Patel rushed to hold him back, pulling him away from the Fringeheads.

The man with the megaphone stepped between Bear and the Fringeheads. “Break it up, or I’ll disqualify all of you!” He thrust a finger at the Fringeheads. “Get back to your side, and get ready for the next race!”

“You’re lucky!” Bear shouted. “He just saved your asses!”

The man gave him a look. “Enough out of you, or I’ll sit you out for the next round. You all need to get to preparing your boat—twenty minutes!” he repeated, before moving off.

Coach Ludwig pulled us toward the spot where all our equipment had been set up and started angrily passing out towels.

“I can’t believe they didn’t check the river for obstacles beforehand! This is unacceptable!” He turned and glared out at the river. “They should really be restarting all the races from scratch! This is unfair!”

The team started grumbling, and Gael sighed.

“It’s my fault. I should’ve—”

“It’s not your fault, Gael,” I said quickly, not liking the energy I saw coming over the team. If we were going to win this, we couldn’t go into the next race with our heads hanging. I was going to have to step up. “Gael, it’s not like you can take the blame for not testing the river for obstacles, so don’t beat yourself up about it.”

*And how can I blame them for not teaching me their safety protocols when I’m* supposed *to be an experienced coxswain? I just need to get everyone back on track so we can win this next race.*

“Everyone, let’s hold our heads high for this next race! Sure, we might’ve hit something and then hit the water, too, but this is a new race—a new opportunity for us to prove ourselves. Nothing’s changed—we’re going to beat the Fringeheads, just like we were about to do last time, before the river showed us that it had other plans!”

“Guess you’re right,” Patel said, though he still didn’t sound all that excited.

“Sure she’s right!” Bear shouted. “Falling into the water wasn’t ideal, and it sucks that it happened, but it was a fluke and we need to treat it that way. None of us could’ve changed what happened, so let’s move on.”

“Yeah!” Codsworth shouted. “We’re going to smoke the Fringeheads next round!”

The team started cheering, and even Coach Ludwig was finally beginning to look a little cheerier.

“Cali’s right! There’s nothing we can do about what happened before, so let’s move forward and do what we came here to do—beat the Fringeheads!” Coach shouted.

Everyone cheered.

Codsworth stepped up and started handing out dry uniforms.

“Where’d you get these?” I asked.

“I’m always prepared,” he said, throwing me a fresh shirt and shorts.

By the time we made it back out to the starting dock, the entire team’s mood had visibly lifted.

“Bring it in!” I shouted, thrusting my hand out into the middle of the circle we were forming. “On three, Kangaroo Rats! One, two, three!”

“Kangaroo Rats!”

“For the win!” Gael shouted.

“For the win!” we all repeated.

“Kangarats for the win!” I yelled.

“For the win! For the win! For the win!” the team chanted, slapping each other’s backs.

For the second time that morning, we all piled into the boat, the team filling the back first before Gael finally took his place in the seat directly in front of mine. I took a deep breath and climbed onto the boat, settling in and already gripping the sides to hold myself steady.

Gael and I locked eyes.

“We can do this,” I said, giving him a wide smile. “We’re going to beat the Fringeheads.”

The team cheered again.

The man with the megaphone was back on the dock. “It’s time for the next race. Let’s stay safe out there, and may the best team win! On the count of three. One, two, three!”

He blasted the starter’s pistol and we were off, shooting through the water just as quickly as before.

“We’ve got this!” I shouted. “Row! Row! Row! That’s it! Keep it smooth and stay in sync with the person in front of you! Let’s do this!”

Remembering Gael’s advice from the first round, I kept my eyes on the Fringehead boat, tracking their progress. They were right next to us, and keeping pace.

The Fringehead coxswain caught my eye and then screamed at his team, “They look like they’re about to go over again, team! Let’s make sure we row clear of them so we don’t get splashed!”

The team laughed and cheered as their boat pulled out a little ahead of ours.

“Come on, team!” I shouted. “They can’t win! Losers never win!” I screamed, making sure the Fringehead coxswain heard me loud and clear.

With a burst of speed, we edged out the Fringeheads’ lead, and once again, we were nose to nose.

This time, I also made sure to keep a close eye on our balance, and I was happy to see that everyone was staying in line—but then I noticed Bear tilting to the right.

“Bear! Bring it over a little to the left!” I shouted.

Bear nodded without looking at me and quickly corrected his form. The boat leveled out and I heaved a sigh of relief.

“Good job, Bear! Look at us, we’re about to blow right past them!” I shouted as we started to pull ahead, gaining a small lead. “Yes!” I screamed. “That’s it! Row! Row! Row! They can’t keep up!”

The team cheered, and I pumped my fist in the air as the Fringehead boat began to drop back, inch by inch.

I didn’t dare turn around, but I could feel it. We were almost at the finish line. Only a few feet to go…

**Episode 4867**

The dock slid into view on my right, just as the man with the megaphone yelled, “We have a winner! The Central Cascades University Kangaroo Rats have it! Congratulations!”

I only heard a snippet of the Fringeheads’ frustrated snarls before our entire boat erupted into cheers, drowning them out.

Gael leapt up and pulled me into a bear hug, and I was laughing and whooping along with everyone else, even as the boat rocked from side to side from our excitement—which did make me kind of nervous.

I spotted Coach Ludwig watching us proudly from the dock. He was standing right beside the Fringeheads coach, who looked like he was seconds away from spitting fire.

“Unfair! They should’ve been disqualified in the first round!” he shouted at the man with the bullhorn, who was doing his best to calm him down.

I didn’t care how mad the Fringeheads and their coach were—they couldn’t take away our victory. We’d beaten them fair and square, which in my opinion was even more impressive *because* we’d takenthat demoralizing plunge.

*We really did it!* I *really did it! I can’t believe it! I got through my first race—and we won it! Maybe I* am *good at coxswaining!*

I climbed out of the boat and scrambled onto the dock, where Codsworth and Coach Ludwig were waiting.

“Good job out there, Lil’ Hart,” Coach Ludwig said gruffly, smacking me on the back. “I knew I was right to press you into joining the team.”

Coach didn’t stick around for me to reply, already moving on to say something to Gael.

Codsworth was actually smiling at me—and it was a real smile, not dripping with sarcasm or anything. I was shocked by how far we’d come since his sharp comments when we’d first met.

“Good job, Cali,” he said. “I didn’t know you had it in you, but I’m glad that you’ve turned out to be such an asset to the team.”

I was quiet for a beat, and Codsworth arched an eyebrow at me.

“So… Do you have anything to say?” he asked. “Or are you just going to stare me to death?”

I shrugged, grinning. “No, just waiting for the part where you say something insulting to cover up the fact that you actually care.”

Codsworth laughed. “So glad you finally figured out who I really am.”

We were interrupted when Greyson and the others showed up. Jay high-fived me, and Torin gave me a quick hug, sliding a festive thermos into my hand.

“Hot chocolate,” Torin announced. “For the winner—and it’s chock full of marshmallows!”

“Thanks, Torin,” I said, taking a huge swig of the hot, sweet liquid. I hummed with happiness as it blazed a warm trail down my throat.

Lola bounded up to me. “I knew you were going to kick major ass!” she yelled. “I knew you could do it, even if you’ve never even—”

I quickly slapped a hand over her mouth. The rest of the team didn’t need to know just how little experience I really had. I didn’t want to ruin this amazing moment by accidentally revealing to them that I’d not only stolen a scholarship from someone else more qualified, but also had never ridden a crew boat in my life until a few weeks ago.

*And after today’s victory, there’s no reason for them ever to think that I don’t know what I’m doing! I’ll just have to keep proving myself.*

Lola’s eyes went wide as she realized what she’d almost let slip. She pulled away and finished, “Even though you’d never consider joining another crew team again?”

I glared at Lola when she ended her sentence in a question. I only hoped that no one was paying her much attention, since nothing about that sentence had made even a lick of sense.

“Proud of you, Cali,” Greyson said, coming over and pulling me close. He lifted me into his arms and spun me around before putting me back down gently. “That was surprisingly exciting to watch. Who knew that a boat race could be so suspenseful? And that’s even without the little dip your team took.”

I winced. “Yeah, that was a lot. But yes, it was all very exciting. And I’m bushed—that thing took a lot out of me. But I’m super energized at the same time! I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

“Glad to hear that,” Greyson said, his eyes shining.

“Good to see you again,” Codsworth interrupted, holding out a hand to Greyson. “Remember me? I’m Codsworth. I came to your party the other day—had such a good time.”

Greyson shook his hand, though I sensed the slightest bit of hesitation on his part.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Did anyone come for you?” I asked, trying to change the subject. “Roommate? Parents?”

“Ha! That’s a good one, Cali. As if my parents would be caught dead in the same room.” Codsworth laughed, sounding genuinely amused.

“Er, sorry I brought it up…”

“Nah, it’s fine. I wanted to ask you, though, if you had the chance to mention our idea about searching Greyson’s property for… something?” Codsworth said, quickly changing the subject. “I can’t say it out loud, but Cali knows exactly what I’m talking about.” He gave Greyson a conspiratorial look and leaned in really close. *The shapeshifting werewolves*, he mouthed.

I was impressed by how calm Greyson remained as he shot me a quick look.

*I guess this is where we’ll finally handle this problem once and for all*,he mind linked.

He leaned forward to speak to Codsworth in a hushed tone. “Yes, Cali told me everything. Why don’t you and the rest of the team come over to my place to celebrate the win? And then you can go looking for… whatever it is that you think you saw,” he said with a wink.

“Hell yes!” Codsworth exclaimed, with more enthusiasm that I’d ever seen him project. He immediately turned around to address the rest of the team. “Party at Cali’s! Gotta celebrate our win the right way!”

“Way to go, Cali!” Gael shouted, and the entire team started cheering my name.

“My pleasure, guys,” I said, before pulling Greyson away from the others. “Are you sure about this?”

Greyson shrugged. “Yeah, I’m sure. This is the best way to do it. If we tell him he can’t look around or try to keep him away from the pack house, he’ll only get more curious. He might even go as far as to sneak onto the property—which would be a problem, and it could end with him getting hurt. Having him over on our terms will allow us to control what he sees while also nipping his curiosity in the bud.”

I smiled and was about to tell Greyson how much I appreciated the way he was humoring my teammate, but then Xavier yanked him away.

“What was that about? Have you lost your mind?” he hissed. “I’ve always known that you don’t know how to use your head, but this is ridiculous.”

Ava was standing nearby, glaring at both me and Greyson. “Exactly. What are you two bozos thinking? Or maybe that’s the problem. You weren’t thinking at all. Typical. It’s a wonder that you and Greyson haven’t already managed to blow our cover, as careless as you both are.”

I bit back an icy reply, knowing that this wasn’t the time or the place for Ava and me to get into one of our arguments. Besides, I was still trying to ride the positive wave of my win. I wasn’t about to let Ava bring me down—or Xavier, for that matter.

“What are you on about, now?” Greyson shot back.

“What do you mean, ‘what are we on about?’ We’re *on about* protecting not only our pack, but our kind. But obviously, that’s not your concern,” Xavier replied, making sure to keep his voice low so that no one overheard.

“What? Are you mad that we’re planning to celebrate Cali’s victory?” Greyson asked. “I would’ve thought you’d be ecstatic about celebrating your ex’s win.”

*That was a low blow. Greyson’s angry, and I get that, but he shouldn’t throw that in our faces.*

Xavier stiffened and narrowed his eyes at Greyson.

“Watch yourself, brother,” he snapped. “We heard what you said to that guy. It’s obvious that he saw too much the last time you guys let these humans stick their noses where they shouldn’t, and now he wants to come investigate further? And you’re going to just let him onto Redwood land to do that?” Xavier let out a bitter laugh. “Unbelievable.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “So fucking stupid.”

“Very stupid!” Xavier added.

*Great, now they’re even talking the same way and finishing each other’s sentences, just about. Seems like Xavier and Ava are getting closer by the day.*

Greyson tore his arm out of Xavier’s grip.

“Relax,” he ground out. “We have it under control. There’s no reason for you two to be blowing it out of proportion like this.”

“You don’t get to tell me that when our *continued existence* is at stake because you can’t put your foot down and draw boundaries!” Xavier snapped.

I couldn’t help but feel irritated by the way Xavier was coming at Greyson. And even though he hadn’t directly addressed me in his little tirade, I was just as responsible for bringing the team back to the Redwood house as Greyson was.

I pushed my way in front of Greyson so that I was standing between him and Xavier, and then I returned Ava’s glare.

“We’re handling this,” I said, looking between her and Xavier. “It doesn’t concern you, anyway. This is a Redwood issue.”

**Episode 4868**

**Xavier**

I took a step backward, as if Cali’s words had physically pushed me away. I was reeling—she might as well have punched me right in the gut. That was the kind of thing I would’ve expected Greyson to say—the blunt reminder that the Redwoods weren’t my business anymore.

But to hear it come out of Cali’s mouth…

My mouth was literally hanging open in shock. I sputtered for a second, unsure of how to reply. As much as we’d been separated, as much as Adéluce had forced me to push Cali away, this was the furthest I’d ever felt from her. It was probably long overdue, but the reality of Cali and me being in different packs finally crashed down on me like a rush of cold water.

*This is it. We’re on different sides of the field now, and Cali just made sure to remind me of it. That comment rolled off her tongue like she’s been thinking it for a while. Well, I heard her loud and clear. I’m not a Redwood, and she wants to make sure I know it.*

It was even more of a letdown after the relatively decent morning I’d just spent with the rest of the Redwood group. It had almost felt like old times. Almost. But Cali’s declaration had only confirmed just how different things were, now.

I felt Ava slip her hand into mine, and I was grateful for it. Ava always had my back, and it would serve me well to remember that. No matter how much we fought or disagreed, even in the face of the painful physical symptoms I experienced just being near her these days, she was still someone I could count on. Ava’s loyalty was unmatched.

Ava finally broke the silence. When she started speaking, it was as the Samara Luna, and I could hear the power and authority in her voice. Not for the first time, I congratulated myself for deciding to make Ava my Luna.

“As we all know, Samara territory borders Redwood territory. You get that, right, Cali? And that means that the games you play with your beloved Redwood pack won’t just impact you. Xavier and I have a right to know what’s going on, and even more of a right to tell you when you’re being idiots.”

Cali opened her mouth to speak, but Ava talked over her, drowning her out until Cali snapped her mouth closed.

“And that means, if you’re going to have a human running around the woods unchecked, they could easily end up near our home. And if they can end up near our home, that means I have to warn my people to be on high alert—because of a decision *you* selfishly made without involving us.”

There had been a time when I might’ve told Ava to pull back, to stop going at Cali so hard, but that time had passed. Cali had brought this on by telling us the matter was none of our business—when in reality, it totally was. I nodded my agreement, still too shocked to even say a word.

I also did my best to keep from meeting Cali’s eyes. I didn’t know how it would feel to look her in the eye after what she’d just pulled.

*She didn’t even stop for a second to give me the same consideration when it came down to her decision to protect Greyson over me. I guess I deserve it, don’t I? For what I did, and all the confusing shit I’ve done since… What does that say about the state of our relationship?*

“Ava, you’re not wrong, but you’re making a big deal out of nothing,” Greyson said. “It’s really not as dangerous as you think. We’ve got the situation handled. We’re telling you that you don’t need to worry about it because you don’t. We have it under control. Trust me on that. Or don’t. Really, it makes no difference to me.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Oh please, Greyson. Don’t act like you’re above messing up. Give me a break.”

Greyson started to reply, but my hackles were up, and I cut him off. “Nor are you in the position to decide what the Samara pack should or shouldn’t worry about. Ava and I will figure that out for ourselves. We don’t take our cues from you.”

Cali still sounded furious as she cut in. “If you have so little faith in the Redwood leadership, maybe you should just come to the party later and see it all work out for yourselves. Then maybe you’ll realize that you’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“That sounds great. We’ll be there,” Ava bit out in a tight voice. Then she took my hand and pulled me toward the car.

For the first time ever, I wasn’t excited about the prospect of seeing Cali later. I was hurt, confused, and unsure of where we stood. Had something happened during the regatta to make her angry with me? Was she lashing out because I’d brought Ava along? But how did that make sense? She’d spent the entire morning hanging all over Greyson every chance she got.

The ride back to the Samara house was quiet, the air heavy with the weight of our unexpected blowout with the Redwoods. I could tell that Ava was seething, and I was angry, too.

*Thank god Ava was there with me. Without her, it would’ve ended up with me going up against Greyson and Cali on my own, and I have no idea how I would’ve handled that. I probably would’ve said something I didn’t mean and made things worse… Though how much worse could things really get?*

First Greyson had snapped at me for trying to check on Cali after she fell into the river. Then I’d held my tongue when Cali had taken his side. And then, after that, she’d lashed out at me directly. What had gotten into her?

*Maybe I shouldn’t care. It’s like Greyson said—for all intents and purposes, Cali is my ex. Maybe I’m too invested. And maybe if I weren’t, I wouldn’t be dealing with all the headaches and pain over my inability to choose between her and Ava.*

I took a sidelong glance at Ava’s beautiful profile, then lifted my hand off the steering wheel and reached for her hand. I smoothed my thumb along the back of it, grateful that Big Mac’s medicine was doing its job and dulling the pain of being close to her. I pulled her hand to my lips and kissed it, inhaling her scent and feeling instantly calmer.

“What was that for?” Ava asked.

“I’m just glad you were with me at the regatta,” I said. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d been there alone.”

*To think that Cali acted all hurt over my inviting Ava when she hung me out to dry back there. Without Ava, I would’ve been on my own while she and Greyson ganged up on me. I’m glad I didn’t let the way Cali felt stop me from doing the right thing and bringing Ava along.*

Ava said nothing, and we fell into a more comfortable silence for the rest of the drive back to the house.

Not long afterward, I pulled into the driveway but made no moves to get out of the car. It was still early enough that the house and the land around it were quiet. I wanted to just sit for a moment and take in the quiet before heading into the house and starting my day in earnest. And it was kind of nice to steal a moment alone with Ava.

Ava took my hand and smoothed the back of it along her cheek. Her eyes were on mine, and my heart warmed at the adoration I saw there.

“You know that I’ll always be there for you,” she said. “Especially now. It’s clear that we need to maintain a united front so that we, as Samaras, present a strong connection to the outside.”

*It’s hard to think of Cali being a part of the “outside” now. But didn’t she make that perfectly clear with her little comment? What else was she trying to say, if she wasn’t trying to tell me that I’m no longer on the “inside” with the Redwoods? She made that declaration, not me.*

But that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

Not wanting to dwell on the disconnected feeling Cali’s harsh words had brought out in me, I leaned toward Ava and kissed her.

She pulled away almost immediately, looking worried. “Isn’t this hurting you? Being so close to me? I want to kiss you, but the last thing I want is for you to be in pain.”

I just shook my head. “I knew I’d be seeing both you and Cali today, so I used some of Big Mac’s medicine.” I leaned in and kissed her again, deeply this time, before pulling away and adding, “And we should probably take full advantage of it while it’s still working…”

**Episode 4869**

Anger burned in the pit of my stomach as I watched Ava and Xavier pull away. I was angry at the way Ava had spoken up for Xavier so easily. Angry that he’d let her. And angry that our argument had ruined my good mood after the race.

*I can’t believe I just got in a fight with Xavier over* pack issues, *of all things. Why couldn’t he have just calmed down and trusted Greyson and me to handle this? He was a part of the Redwood pack before. He knows that Greyson is a good, capable Alpha who wouldn’t just let conspiracy theorist humans run wild in our woods. Why was he making such a big deal about it?*

“You okay?” Greyson asked. “You look like you’re a million miles away.”

“I’m okay… I guess. I just don’t like what happened just now. Having to go up against Xavier and Ava like that. I don’t like feeling as though we’re on opposite sides. Xavier should know by now that he can trust us to do the right thing.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about the expression on Xavier’s face after I’d told him that he shouldn’t be sticking his nose into Redwood business. He’d looked completely hurt and floored, but I didn’t regret saying it. He was the one acting like Greyson and I would ever do anything to put the packs in danger. We had just as much to lose as he did if Codsworth found or saw anything he shouldn’t.

Greyson frowned. “I actually do think that Xavier trusts us. This isn’t about trust.”

“Then what’s it about, then?” I pressed. “If he really trusted us, wouldn’t he be okay with the plan? Wouldn’t he have stopped Ava from coming at us like that?”

It had taken everything in me not to lunge at her when she’d been making all her snide comments—and then she’d had the nerve to say that we were *idiots!* And Xavier hadn’t corrected her, so what did *that* mean? Did he really think we were idiots, or was he just mad about what I’d said? Either way, I was supremely annoyed.

“Xavier isn’t on the opposite side,” Greyson said. “Not at all. But we do have different priorities now. For you and me, it’s about protecting the Redwood pack by any means necessary. That’s what we should be focusing on, and Xavier knows it. But it’s like you said—the Redwood pack isn’t any of his business, and we’re certainly not Xavier’s number one priority anymore. He has to worry about his own pack. So… with that in mind, I guess I understand where Xavier was coming from.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying that,” I said. “I thought you’d be more upset about them calling us to task like that.”

“What would getting mad achieve?” he asked. “Ava’s delivery was off—as usual—and I know you hate to hear it, but she did make some good points. We share the woods with the Samara pack, and the things we do *can* directly affect them, even if we don’t intend it. I’m not saying that we’re going to do what she says, but issues like this one, we have to hear them out at least.”

I sighed. “Well, we did that. Neither one of them hesitated to say their piece—and then some.”

Greyson sighed and draped an arm across my shoulders. I leaned into him, feeling suddenly defeated when I should’ve been feeling the joy of our victory.

If I’d known that things were going to turn out this way, I never would’ve invited Xavier to the regatta in the first place. There’d been enough drama on the boat—I hadn’t expected to step right into more once the race ended.

“I just really hate this,” I said lamely. “This isn’t how I pictured today going—and especially the moments after my win. I thought we’d all celebrate. Hell, I thought Ava might even congratulate me!”

*That was wishful thinking. Ava didn’t even act like she saw a thing that happened today out there on the water… Though that might be a good thing. I can just picture her making some snide comment about me falling into the water. If she’d done that, I really might’ve lost it.*

Greyson hugged me tight. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to see you hurting, Cali. Just try to think about all of this as… As growing pains for both our packs.”

I shook my head. “You’re right. This is just something new that we have to learn to navigate—we have to figure out what it really means to be in different packs, now. I guess I thought that after Adéluce was taken care of and Xavier was finally free of her, things might go right back to normal. I was wrong.”

Greyson pulled me into a proper hug, his warmth cutting through the chill. We’d dried off and put on dry clothes, but I was still chilled to the bone and couldn’t wait to get indoors.

“Well, don’t worry about it too much. It’s not like we have to figure everything out today,” Greyson said. “I think we should go grab some breakfast and get back on track—celebrate your first big win with our friends.”

I smiled up at him, knowing that he was trying to distract me. I was grateful for it. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Hey! Lola, Torin, Jay, come here!” Greyson called out, waving our friends over.

They’d been talking and laughing with my team, and I was happy to see my old friends getting along with my new ones—even though we had to be careful around them. I would die if any of my teammates ended up overhearing or learning something they shouldn’t, thereby proving Ava and Xavier right. I was going to have to make absolutely sure that didn’t happen.

“Please tell me you’re thinking breakfast!” Torin said, before Greyson could get a single word out. “Because I’ve been researching restaurants in the area ever since Lola and Cali started school again, and there is a *great* breakfast place nearby. Famous flapjacks, fluffy eggs, delicious, fresh-squeezed orange juice.” Torin clapped his hands and bounced up and down with glee. “One of the reviews I read called the place heaven on earth!”

Lola laughed. “Torin, never change.”

Torin gave her a serious look. “I don’t plan on it.”

The restaurant was close enough to walk to, but there was a line hanging out the door by the time we got there.

“Torin wasn’t kidding, this place must be really good,” Jay said, peering through the plate glass and whistling at the sight of the packed house inside.

“Is everyone okay with waiting?” I asked.

“It’s early as hell and we’re out and about—might as well make the best of it,” Lola said brightly.

“Agreed,” Greyson and Jay said in unison.

“I was hoping you’d say that!” Torin said, before rushing off to put our names in with the hostess.

There was a couple standing nearby, and I watched them out of the corner of my eye, thinking that I recognized one of them from campus, though I couldn’t be sure.

Lola elbowed me, and I snapped to attention.

“What?” I asked.

Lola nodded toward the couple. “Did you hear what they just said?”

“No…” I moved a fraction of an inch closer to them and tuned in to what they were saying. Seconds later, I gasped and turned my attention back to Lola. “They’re talking about another disappearance!” I whispered.

“The guy across the hall was really freaked out,” the guy was saying to the girl. “Had campus security over and everything.”

The girl shuddered theatrically and shook her head. “That’s so awful. What do you think is going on? Murder?”

The guy shrugged. “Hell if I know. Just make sure you’re not walking around alone on campus, especially at night.”

Moments later, their names were called and the hostess ushered them inside.

Greyson frowned as he tore his gaze away from the couple to look at us. “He’s right. You two need to stick together while you’re on campus—at least until they figure out what the hell is going on. You can never be too careful.”

“Agreed,” I said. “I don’t even want to think about what might’ve happened to all the people who’ve disappeared.”

“Right. We know exactly what’s lurking out there in the darkness,” Lola said, her expression tense. “We have to watch each other’s backs.”

A minute later, someone called Torin’s name, and we made our way inside to a table near the back of the restaurant.

“It smells so good in here,” Lola said excitedly. “I can’t wait to eat!”

“I’m starved,” Jay said. “Though I have to say, Torin, your hot chocolate was rich enough to take the edge off my hunger at the meet.”

“Glad to hear it,” Torin said as we settled into our booth.

Once the server appeared, introduced himself, dropped off the menus, and left, Jay leaned forward across the table.

“So,” he said. “Now that we all have a little privacy, what’s the plan to get this weird cryptozoology guy off our backs?”

**Episode 4870**

**Xavier**

I pulled Ava over the center console and onto my lap, and she plastered her lips to mine, rolling her hips and grinding against me. She accidentally backed into the horn, and we both dissolved into laughter.

“Careful. We don’t want to wake everyone up,” I said before covering her mouth with mine again and exploring her with my tongue.

There was nowhere else I wanted to be. Ava smelled amazing, she was burning hot, and her sweet-smelling hair was acting like a curtain around us. I was lost in her, and I could tell by the way she was running her hands all over my body that she was lost in me, too.

I reached down and pressed the button on the side of my seat. A mechanical buzz filled the car as the seat rolled back, giving me room to stretch my legs. I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around Ava, pulling my lips away from hers and nibbling on her ear lobe, inhaling huge breaths of her scent.

“Looks like someone’s hot and bothered already,” Ava said, her hand landing on my lengthening erection.

With deft movements, she popped my fly open and pulled my shaft out of my pants.

“Can’t wait to feel you inside me,” she said, stroking my cock while I slowly reclined in my seat, watching her.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and reared back a little so that she could work herself out of her shirt.

“You’re so fucking hot,” I said, reaching up to weigh her heavy breasts in my hands. I pushed them together and leaned forward hungrily to cover them with my mouth and tongue, suckling her, burying my face in the soft valley of her cleavage, all the while rotating my hips as she kept smoothing her soft, warm hands up and down my rigid cock.

Ava ripped my shirt open, sending buttons flying every which way—a few even hit the glass.

“Oops,” she said as she ran her hands down my chest, her long nails raking across my skin and causing me to suck in a hissing breath.

The pleasure and pain of making love to Ava was exactly what I needed. The morning had sucked—there was no getting around that—but at least now, I had the perfect distraction to push all those bad thoughts far out of my mind.

Hungry to bury myself in Ava’s velvety warmth. I helped her out of her jeans, both of us laughing as we bumped our elbows and knees against each other and the confines of the car as we worked hard to get her out of her pants.

“Keep these on,” I growled, pulling at her panties.

I leaned back in the seat again, admiring the delicate red fabric of her silky panties. I reached down between us to feel the soaked fabric, playing a finger slowly along the stiffening bud of her clit while Ava bucked against my hand, the back of her head pressed against the windshield.

“Yes, Xavier. *Yes*,” she hissed, licking her flushed lips.

I pulled the crotch of her panties to the side and touched her slick folds before plunging a single finger deep inside her. She shuddered and fell forward, her body shuddering against mine as I picked up the pace, pumping my finger in and out of her before adding a second and swirling them both in deep.

“Ready?” I asked, grabbing her waist with my free hand and lifting her up.

“I’m—”

A deep moan cut her words short as I pulled my fingers free and maneuvered inside, pulling her slowly down until her hips were flush against mine and my cock was buried to the hilt.

My hands still on her waist, Ava started circling her hips, rising up onto her knees and laughing as she curved her neck to keep from bashing her head on the ceiling before she slammed back down, causing the car to rock.

“Yes, just like that,” I groaned, sitting back and lacing my fingers behind my head as she rose and fell on my shaft, pulling me in deep before lifting up and nearly letting me spring free of her tight, fluttering canal.

Ava reached down and looped her fingers around the base of my shaft, giving it three languid pumps before she slid back down.

I slapped a hand against the ceiling and groaned, closing my eyes as intense pleasure washed over me.

Showing off her flexibility, Ava lifted one foot up to rest on the center console and then gripped my shoulders, riding me hard until I flew up in my seat, my climax catching me by surprise and wrenching a guttural moan from the depths of my throat.

I fell back against the seat as Ava rode me fast, and, only a few moments later, she sighed with pleasure as her own orgasm hit.

“I’m coming,” she breathed, her body trembling as she pivoted her hips against me, pulling me in as deeply as she could.

She jerked backward and hit the horn again, but at least the windows were fogged now and would block anyone’s view if they happened to look out the window to see what the hell was going on.

Then Ava went limp and collapsed on top of me, her breasts dragging against my chest with every shuddering inhale.

“That was amazing,” she said.

I lifted her chin and gave her a lazy kiss, trailing my hands up and down her sweaty back.

“As always,” I said around a smile.

Ava slowly dismounted and plopped back down into the passenger seat, quickly getting to work putting her clothes back on.

Only my fly was unzipped, and I quickly stuffed myself back into my jeans and zipped them up, but the crotch was soaked and I needed to find a way to hide that—along with my now button-less shirt. I reached around blindly in the back seat until I found the sweatshirt I’d brought along and quickly pulled it on.

Ava looked at me and smiled. “I’ve missed this. If this is what happens after we hang out with the Redwoods, I’ll stop getting mad about it.”

I frowned. “This wasn’t about them—”

“I don’t mean it like that,” Ava interrupted, fixing her hair in the rearview mirror. “I just mean that I’m happy. That’s all.”

I softened and stroked her back. “I really appreciate how careful you’ve been, lately. Maybe you coming to the therapy session with me isn’t such a terrible idea.”

“Oh yeah?” was Ava’s breathy response as she got out of the car.

I followed suit. “Yeah,” I said. “It could be good.”

Ava climbed the stairs to the porch, looking at me over her shoulder as she poked the key into the lock and pushed into the house. “I hate to bring it up again, but what are you planning to do about the whole Redwood situation?”

I pondered Ava’s question for a moment. “I’m going to deal with it like the problem it could end up becoming.”

I moved to the bottom of the stairs.

“Marissa, could you come down here?” I called.

The house was already starting to come to life, and the kitchen and living room were buzzing with activity. I was still riding high on the pleasure that Ava and I had shared in the car, and I was happy to be home—and finally ready to deal with everything head-on.

“Hey, what’s up?” Marissa asked as she came bounding down the stairs.

“Something happened at Cali’s boat thing,” Ava said.

Marissa rolled her eyes. “Of course it did. What, did she fall off the boat?”

Ava broke into a peal of laughter, but I stopped her before she could tell Marissa exactly how right she was.

“This isn’t about the regatta itself, but what we learned there,” I said. “The Redwoods are planning to have a bunch of humans over again for a party at their pack house.”

“One of them saw something last time he was at their place, and this morning, Greyson pretty much gave him his blessing to come to their woods and poke around,” Ava explained.

“He thinks it’s the right thing to do, even though it’s dumb as hell,” I added.

“That’s so stupid!” Marissa said angrily. “Why would he put us all in danger like that?”

“Because it’s Greyson,” I said dryly.

“Okay,” Marissa said. “So what do you need?”

“I need you and Ava to work together to create a patrol list with the rest of the pack,” I said. “We’re going to protect the Samara boundaries, no matter what the hell happens on Redwood land. Ava and I are attending the party so we can keep an eye on things up close. We’ll keep you updated from there.”

Marissa nodded. “Got it. Ava, you want to go over that list right now?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you upstairs in a minute,” Ava said. Once Marissa was gone, Ava turned to look at me. “I just want to tell you how proud I am. Proud that the Redwoods aren’t influencing your ability to do what you have to do to protect the Samaras. I honestly wondered if I’d ever see the day when you put us first—but this is just more proof that you will. I get it now.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Get what?”

“I get *you*,” she said. “You’re really in this as Samara Alpha. It’s real. You doing whatever it takes to protect our pack against any threat. Us versus them. And you’re with *us*.”

**Episode 4871**

Silence set in as the group looked at Greyson expectantly, waiting for him to fill them in on the actual plan to stop Codsworth from finding out about the supernatural world. But he just looked back at them, his expression unreadable.

“We’re going to give this Codsworth guy what he wants,” Greyson said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lola asked. It was almost the exact same thing Xavier had said when Greyson had told him about the plan, only she sounded more confused than irritated. I appreciated that small gesture of faith—that she was innately willing to give Greyson the benefit of the doubt, something Xavier clearly failed to do.

Part of me wondered if Xavier would *ever* be capable of giving Greyson the benefit of the doubt. Even after all this time, it seemed like a pipe dream.

“We’re going to have Ravi shift and lead Codsworth into the woods,” Greyson said.

“And then what?” Jay asked.

“That’s it,” I said. “We’re just going to let him see a huge wolf in the woods. Codsworth won’t see anyone shifting, and he won’t get any evidence that there’s anything in these woods other than a massive wolf.”

They eyed Greyson and me with matching skeptical expressions—though I didn’t know why. I thought it was a solid plan. It was simple and easy to execute. Nothing dramatic would happen, which meant Codsworth would have nothing to get excited about. No proof. No eyewitness account of shifting. Nothing but a big-ass wolf in the woods, which was somewhat unusual, but nowhere near as earth-shattering as seeing a real-life werewolf.

“I’ll be in charge of making sure he doesn’t have his phone on him,” I added. “So even though there’ll be nothing exciting for him to see, he still won’t be able to take any pictures.”

“So…” Jay said slowly, “the big plan is to show this guy a wolf?”

I sighed. *Well, when he puts it that way…*

“Okay, maybe it sounds a little ridiculous,” I conceded, “but it’s our best option. Codsworth is convinced that there’s some big story out here in the woods—if we act all cagey and suspicious, it’s only going to make him more determined to find proof. We want him to give up? We *show* him there’s nothing out here. I agree with Greyson. I mean, what would Codsworth possibly report to the cryptozoology club after that? Nothing. All he’ll be able to say is that a big animal exists in the regular world. Not exactly breaking news. It should nip everything in the bud.”

“I mean, it’s ridiculous, but what the hell. Let’s pull one over on the human, I guess.” Jay snorted, and, after a beat, everyone joined in.

I smiled, then laughed as I met Greyson’s eyes. This whole situation was, admittedly, pretty ridiculous—not unlike the other funny situations we’d found ourselves in. Still, it was nice that everyone saw this whole thing for what it was—a minor threat with a simple solution. And compared to the other threats we’d faced lately—Adéluce, the pack war—I’d take a hundred more overzealous would-be cryptozoologists.

“Any other not-so-fantastical creatures we want to bring in on this tour?” Lola joked. “Cali, you could put on some plastic fairy wings!”

“And steal the spotlight from Ravi?” I asked, grinning. “I would never.”

It was a huge relief that Jay and Lola had agreed to this plan so quickly—that they’d put their trust in Greyson. Our awful interaction with Xavier earlier had left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Greyson had a point, of course. Xavier *did* have his own pack to think about, which meant his priorities had changed. He wasn’t a member of the Redwood pack anymore—a fact which still pained me—and not only that, he was responsible for the safety and well-being of the entire Samara pack. With that in mind, I guess I understood why he couldn’t just blindly trust Greyson’s assertion that this wasn’t a threat to the pack. He probably felt he wouldn’t be doing right by his pack if he didn’t do his own assessment of the situation.

It was understandable, yes, but that didn’t make it any less frustrating. It was just one more thing we had to work through in the aftermath of Adéluce’s curse. Times like this—when I saw the ripple effect of what she’d done to us, how she’d changed things so irrevocably that there was no going back, for any of us—made me wonder if she’d actually managed to win, after all.

Hadn’t this always been her goal? To push Xavier away from the Redwood pack? To make him hurt? To cause conflict in his life and make him suffer, like she felt he’d made her suffer? She’d certainly accomplished all these goals while he’d been under her control, and even now that she was gone, her shadow lived on in this new reality we were all being forced to come to terms with.

*How are we ever going to fix this?*

Torin set down his fork with a loud *clink*, pulling me from my thoughts. He pushed back from the table and stood. “I’m going to head back to the pack house a little early, so I can start setting up for the party.”

I opened my mouth to ask if he needed help with anything, but then Greyson’s phone rang, cutting me off.

“Hey, Rishika,” Greyson said, taking the call. “What’s up?”

The call was short, and when he hung up, he turned to Torin.

“I’ll head back with you,” he said.

I glanced at Lola. “Can we hang back for a bit?”

“Sure.” She turned to Jay, and it looked like they had a mind link conversation.

After a few seconds, Jay kissed her cheek and turned to Greyson and Torin. “I’ll head back with the guys.”

Greyson’s voice slipped into my mind. *Is everything okay? Do you need me to stay?*

I smiled. *Everything’s fine. I just wanted to talk to Lola about some of this Xavier stuff.*

*I understand.* He kissed my cheek and then he, Torin, and Jay all headed out.

I smiled as I watched them go. Greyson had made it clear that, while he was sympathetic to my situation, he really didn’t want to hear about my feelings for Xavier. That was extremely fair, and I appreciated that he was being honest about his boundaries. I also appreciated the fact that he had no issues with my discussing Xavier with Lola—he understood that even though he didn’t want to talk to me about the issue, that didn’t mean I’d be pushing it all under the rug.

*He really is an amazing mate.*

“All right.” Lola leaned back in her chair, eyeing me. “It’s just you and me. Spill.”

I filled her in on our heated discussion with Xavier and Ava about the Codsworth issue. How Xavier had reacted when I’d told him that it was Redwood business, and therefore none of his. And how Ava had jumped down my throat defending Xavier’s insistence on getting involved.

“So now they’re going to be there tonight, too,” I said. “We told them they didn’t need to worry about it, but clearly they don’t believe us.”

Lola nodded. “Are you really surprised? I mean, if the tables were turned, don’t you think Greyson would want to make sure the Redwood pack stayed safe?”

“I guess,” I said reluctantly. “I mean, it does make sense, logically. I guess it just wasn’t something I’d really thought about. That Xavier has his own pack to think about now…” I shook my head. “And that race today. What a rush.”

Lola blinked. “That’s quite the subject change. What does the race have to do with anything?”

I shrugged. “It just… It felt good, being in that position on the boat, you know? I was the leader, guiding my team. It was kind of like when I was pretending to be Greyson’s Luna. I felt strong, capable. I like doing it, and I think I’m good at it, but…”

Lola’s brows rose, and she gestured for me to continue. “But?”

“I just never really thought about what it means, that Xavier isn’t a part of the pack—but today, that reality really smacked me in the face when I saw him put the Samaras first. It was like second nature to him. They were his first priority.”

“And by ‘the Samaras,’ you mean Ava.”

I frowned and looked down at my empty glass. “I guess that’s part of it, but—”

My phone rang, cutting me off. I glanced down at it and was surprised to see Aysel’s name flashing on the display.

*What does she want? Is this about the wedding planning? Is it about the dress? Is she pissed off?*

“Hi, Aysel,” I said, taking the call. “I’m—

“Caliana.” Lucian’s voice slid smoothly over the line. “I’ve heard about tonight’s Redwood event. What time should the Vanguards arrive?”

**Episode 4872**

**Artemis**

Once again, Marius and I were approaching the warzone. We’d gotten a bit sidetracked when we’d been taken to the Wrenthorn estate and had been forced to double back to get on the right path—which, of course, was right on the edge of the warzone.

I couldn’t wait to finally be done with this awful, dangerous place. The war had been raging since before I was born, and I’d grown up under the shadow of all that hatred and violence. Not that my life would’ve been cozy during peacetime—but the war had become such an intrinsic part of Fae culture that I couldn’t really imagine what the Fae world would be like without it.

“Do you know where we need to go from here?” I asked Marius.

He nodded. “Clara must’ve seen my target at the fortress. She described it perfectly. That has to be the place.” Then he frowned and cursed under his breath. “Not that it makes my job any easier. It doesn’t make sense—I have no idea what the man could possibly be thinking, running to a fortress, of all places.”

“What’s so surprising about it?” I asked.

“It’s surprising because it’s the last place in the world he should want to visit, considering how many Dark Fae want him dead and would love nothing more than an excuse to make it happen,” he said darkly.

“Didn’t you basically just describe yourself?” I asked. I couldn’t help myself. “You’re also wanted by the Dark Fae court, right? Heading to that fortress puts you at risk too.”

He frowned but looked away. Naturally, he didn’t engage with what I’d said at all. He just kept talking like I hadn’t said anything—or like he hadn’t heard me, even though I knew damn well that he had. “Going to that fortress would put that man right in the crosshairs of the very people he’s been running from all this time.”

His avoidance needled at me, even though it was nothing new. It had always been like this between the two of us. There were always acres-worth of secrets between us, and any information we did share was only disclosed out of necessity. Even then, we’d probably left too much unspoken. That was the thing about our particular brand of self-preservation: there was safety in never letting anyone truly know you, but it also made it sort of impossible to trust anyone.

And maybe it was evidence of how much I’d changed—how much Cali and Rishika and being part of a family had changed me, but I couldn’t just let that go. I couldn’t keep living with the knowledge that I needed to be ready for Marius to throw me to the wolves. Now that I’d gotten a break from living that way, I didn’t want to go back to it. God, it was exhausting to even think about it.

Marius and I… Well, maybe we weren’t friends. But we weren’t enemies, either. We weren’t *nothing* to each other. And, more importantly, we were in this together now—and I refused to keep flying blind.

“How exactly did you end up getting into so much trouble?” I pressed. “Why is your head on the line here?”

Marius shook his head. “I don’t want to get into that. It’s not something I like revisiting.”

“I’m sorry it’s a sensitive subject, but that’s not a good enough reason to leave me in the dark. Remember, I’m about to walk into this fortress with you, which means I’ll be in danger too. I deserve to know what I’m heading into, don’t you think?”

“If you’re intent upon trapping me into saying something, then no,” Marius said curtly. “I think you should trust me instead of worrying about what comes next.”

“Trust you?” I laughed. “What have you ever done to earn my trust?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he muttered.

My teeth ground together. He wasn’t exactly wrong, but, just like him, I wasn’t about to be guilted into giving up more information than I was comfortable giving. Gods, it was amazing that we’d made it this far without killing each other.

We were nearing the Dark Faeborder, and I could already make out a few scattered guards.

I tried again, keeping my voice low. “I’m just saying. It would put us—both of us—in a stronger position if I had all the information.”

“If you’re that worried about being safe, then why don’t you just use your suggestive magic?” he asked, a bite to his tone that made my eyes narrow. “With power like that, you could get whatever you want, whenever you want. We wouldn’t need to worry about anything at all. You could just tell the people to let us pass, and we’d be on our way.”

I stopped short. “Do you really think I’m capable of doing something like that?”

“Not at all. You’ve certainly proven yourself powerful enough—” He stopped suddenly, apparently only just having realized that I wasn’t still walking beside him. “What’s the matter?”

“You don’t get it,” I snarled. “I’m not asking if you think I *can* do it. I’m asking if you think I’m the kind of person who would take away someone else’s agency with so little care!”

“Artemis—”

“You know what? It doesn’t matter what you think of me, because I know I *won’t* use my magic like that. I would never do that—and certainly not as flippantly as you seem to think I could.”

He put his hands up. “Hey, I didn’t mean—”

“What? You didn’t mean that I’m a monster? Or did it just not occur to you how awful it would be to lose your autonomy? How would you feel if I used my magic on you?”

He frowned. “But you wouldn’t do that. You just said—”

“Come on, Marius!” I snapped. “I know your imagination is better than that. Just think about it—if I truly cared so little about using my power, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to use it on you. I could’ve avoided this never-ending headache and simply forced you to give me the information I need about Kadmos. You’re right—I’d be much safer under those circumstances, and just think of how much time would have been saved. No more hoofing it across the Fae world, helping you do your dirty work.” My eyes narrowed. “I could’ve gotten what I wanted, and then I could’ve forced you to turn yourself in to the Dark Fae. That way, you and your messy history with them would’ve already ceased to be my problem.”

Marius had gone pale. “You… you wouldn’t do that.”

His voice shook; the poor guy was trembling like a leaf. He didn’t sound convinced, and that pissed me off even more. Maybe Marius and I weren’t friends, but we’d known each other a long time now. The fact that he seemed to think me capable of doing something so cruel and heinous made my stomach twist. Did he not know me at all? Or was he so hung up on my powers of persuasion that he’d forgotten who I really was?

“You’re right,” I said. “I wouldn’t do that to you. And that’s why I’m not going to do it to other people now. It might make us a little safer, but it’s not worth the cost. I won’t steal anyone’s agency for anything less than a life or death situation. Understood?”

“I understand,” he said quickly. “And… I’m sorry. I didn’t… I didn’t know. I won’t bring it up again. We’ll figure out another way to get past the guards.”

We looked out toward the town again. It was a small place, right on the edge of the warzone. It had to be a horrible place to live, honestly. There were countless towns just like it scattered across the Fae world. All of them kept a small squadron of soldiers, allegedly to protect the townsfolk from the war, but more often it was to catch deserters and to prevent their opponent’s allies from crossing over to help. We were going to have to be careful in a place like this.

Regardless, a few soldiers weren’t likely to be an insurmountable obstacle. Marius might’ve been a lot of things, but I could count on him in a fight. And I was no slouch, but I would prefer to stay under the radar, especially where the Dark Fae court’s soldiers were concerned.

“It’s getting dark,” I said, nodding toward the last rays of dying sunlight on the horizon. “We should be able to slip into town pretty easily, and from there, we can buy some clothes to help us blend in with the locals. And then we’ll continue on to the fortress to find this bounty of yours. Sounds good?”

He nodded. “Let’s get going, then.”

We’d just started walking toward the edge of town when a loud voice bellowed, “Halt!”

**Episode 4873**

I was so shocked by Lucian’s question that I yanked the phone away from my ear and looked down at the screen. Sure enough, it was Aysel’s contact information. Lucian, for whatever reason, had never bothered to get himself his own phone, so he’d clearly taken Aysel’s to call me. That part wasn’t what was melting my brain. It was the other part. The part where, somehow, he’d not only found out about the party tonight, but he’d invited himself and his pack along.

*Why on earth is he assuming that the Vanguards will be attending my college party? Who even told him it was happening?*

Lola looked at me, wide-eyed. Clearly, my bewilderment was written all over my face.

“What’s going on?” she whispered.

I frowned and brought the phone back up to my ear. “Um… Hi, Lucian. I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about.”

“Well, it’s quite simple, Caliana,” Lucian said with an irritating amount of patience. “If there’s going to be an event tonight, and the Samara pack is sending representatives, it only stands to reason that the Vanguards should be in attendance as well. Unless there’s a reason why we were not invited directly?”

His tone was light, but there was no missing the dangerous undercurrent. This was a test, and I couldn’t fail it. For all the energy Lucian spent on acting ridiculous, it was impossible to forget that he could be one hell of an adversary when it suited him. We were on decent terms with him at the moment—in no small part thanks to his mate bond with Elle—but the last thing I wanted to do was give him a reason to feel jilted.

But, by the same token, he absolutely could *not* attend this party. It was bad enough that the Samaras had inserted themselves into the situation. Greyson had come up with a perfectly simple plan to undermine Codsworth’s determination to find a werewolf, but the more people who got involved, the less likely it was that it would *remain* a simple plan. Xavier and Ava could behave themselves around humans, but Lucian and his pack were all wild cards.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” I said carefully.

I considered explaining the whole thing to Lucian, to help him understand that we definitely weren’t snubbing him and his pack, but again, I didn’t want him to feel like he had to get involved. In this case, more information wasn’t necessarily better. This was Lucian we were talking about, after all. He wasn’t exactly known for being reasonable.

“How so?” he asked in that same dangerous tone.

“Well, for starters, it isn’t that kind of party. It’s not a pack get-together. It actually doesn’t have anything to do with werewolves at all,” I lied. “It’s just a college party.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and I held my breath, waiting for his response. Would he believe me? Would he insist on coming anyway? How would I be able to get him to drop this whole thing if he decided he needed to be involved?

“What do you mean by ‘college party’?” he asked. “I wasn’t aware that parties were a collegiate requirement. Or is it the other way around? Must one have graduated prior to attending? Because if so, I can assure you my pack is, on average, the most well-educated pack in the Northwest. In fact, I myself have been educated in the best…”

I rolled my eyes and pulled the phone away from my face so I could let out a slow, quiet groan. Lucian continued to wax poetic about his personal education, apparently none the wiser.

Lola watched me, looking like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

“Not going so well, huh?” she whispered.

I just shook my head, then put the phone back to my ear. Lucian was still at it.

“… actually, and I do hope you won’t mind my saying this, I’m rather shocked to hear that the entirety of the Redwood pack, as well as the Samara representatives, have attended college. That’s an incredibly high matriculation rate for a pack, you see. Have you checked all of their credentials personally?”

*Oh my god. This is going off the rails.*

*Which, considering the fact that this is Lucian I’m talking to, isn’t actually all that surprising.*

“Lucian, I’m sorry, I don’t think I made myself clear. College isn’t a requirement to attend the party. It’s just that this party, the one tonight, is to celebrate a big win my *human* college crew team had—”

“Oh,” he interrupted. “In that case, forgive me, Caliana, but I’ll be unable to attend. I’m afraid your human extracurriculars hold no interest for me.”

*Why is he apologizing and acting like he’ll be missed? I already told him he wasn’t invited, didn’t I?*

I shook my head. It didn’t matter. The important thing was that Lucian and his pack would be staying away from the party tonight. If he wanted to act like it was my loss, then that was fine.

“I understand—”

“You see,” he interrupted again, “when Torin called to ask about borrowing something for a party tonight, I made an assumption. But never mind. The Vanguards will not be in attendance tonight.”

He hung up before I could get another word in.

I stared at my phone for a minute before shaking my head. “How Elle puts up with him, I will never, *ever* understand.”

Lola snorted. “I could tell how annoying that phone call was, and I wasn’t even a part of it.”

I laughed. “You’re not wrong. But we dodged a bullet. For some reason, Lucian thought we were throwing a wolf party tonight, but now that he knows it’s a human party, I don’t think we’ll have to worry about him crashing it. He seems to think such things are beneath him.”

“Lucian? Thinking something’s beneath him?” Lola’s eyes went wide with mock scandal. “I never would’ve guessed!”

“We’d better head back to the pack house to help set up for the party,” I said. “If Torin’s calling Lucian to borrow things, he could probably use a couple extra sets of hands.”

We left the restaurant and headed back to the pack house. When we got out of the car, we found Torin on the lawn, getting things set up. My jaw dropped when I saw who was with him. Next to the Fae man were two humans I knew very well: Nathan and Codsworth. They’d already arrived, and they were helping Torin set up an outdoor table.

*Why are they here so* early*?* We weren’t expecting to have to act like a house full of normal people until tonight! And why hadn’t Torin warned me? What if Nathan and Codsworth had already seen too much? All it would take was someone to return from patrol, and they’d witness a full shift. Or what if they overheard the pack members talking about shifting?

Our communal living situation was weird by most human standards—we weren’t, like, a frat house or anything, but for someone who was prepared to be suspicious, coming here while we were unprepared had to be like hitting the jackpot. I racked my brain for a solution to get the guys away from here. There were too many loose ends I hadn’t tied up. Too many things that could easily out the existence of werewolves to the rest of the world. We just weren’t ready yet.

Nathan knelt on the ground, pulling at the table legs to lock them into place while Torin held the tabletop steady on one end with Codsworth on the other.

Lola stopped next to me. “Is that who I think it is?”

I nodded. “Yep. I hope you’re ready to act normal, because it’s already showtime.”

She snorted. “*I* am. Let’s see if the rest of the pack feels the same way.”

I grimaced at the thought. Still, it wasn’t like we had any other options. The humans were here, and we had the existence of an entire supernatural species to protect.

“Should I try to get them to leave? Maybe offer to take them out for ice cream or something?” I whispered to Lola, desperate to get some semblance of control over the situation.

“Ice cream?” Lola scoffed. “What are they, a couple of ten-year-olds on a custody weekend?”

I scowled. “There’s no age limit on enjoying ice cream—and you know that’s not the point.”

“Cali,” Codsworth called. “Are you just here to supervise, or are you going to help?”

I forced a smile onto my face and rushed over. “Sorry, I’m just surprised! I didn’t expect to see you guys here already!”

He shrugged. “We thought we’d come by to help out. It didn’t seem right to let you do all the work by yourself.” Then, sidling up to me, he lowered his voice. “Plus, I thought it’d be a great opportunity to look around. And you won’t *believe* what I found.”

**Episode 4874**

**Xavier**

I wanted to be angry at Ava for what she’d said. To tell her she was wrong—that, when it came to the Redwood pack, it wasn’t us versus them. Maybe there were some people in the world for whom that mindset was true, but the Redwoods weren’t like that. This was my family Ava was talking about, after all. And even after everything Adéluce had done, even after I’d become the Alpha of the Samara pack, the Redwoods were still my family. Cali, especially.

Except even as I clung to that belief, in the back of my mind, I couldn’t help acknowledging that Ava wasn’t wrong. If nothing else, that fiasco of a confrontation over Cali’s stupid crew teammate had proven that.

Greyson hadn’t even been willing to talk his plan through. He’d just expected me to trust that it would be handled correctly and butt out because it was “a Redwood issue.”

*Ugh.* The memory of those words coming out of Cali’s mouth made my stomach twist. As if it wasn’t bad enough to be perpetually at odds with my brother, *Cali* of all people had drawn a line in the sand and made it crystal fucking clear that I was on the opposite side of it. How the hell had that happened? *When* had that happened? Was it another consequence of Adéluce’s curse?

*Shit. Ava’s right.*

Maybe I wasn’t happy about it, but if the Redwood and Samara interests didn’t align, I’d have to go up against Cali and Greyson. It was my duty as Alpha. No matter what I felt for Cali. I didn’t mind clashing with Greyson so much—god knew I was used to it by now—but I couldn’t say the same about Cali.

Sure, things had gotten ugly while I’d been stuck under Adéluce’s curse, and I’d always known it wouldn’t be easy to repair what I’d broken, but I’d never considered the possibility that I’d have to go toe-to-toe with Cali over pack business *after* I’d finally gotten rid of that bitch.

And yet here I was, asserting my will on behalf of the Samara pack—which was exactly what it meant to be a pack Alpha. I had to make tough calls, even if things got awkward as a result.

Once upon a time, I’d dreamed of being Redwood Alpha, and I’d been ready to give up everything to make that happen, but… that had been then. Now, I had a different pack of wolves counting on me to lead them, to protect their interests. Even if becoming the Samara Alpha had never been part of my plan, I wasn’t going to abandon them. This was just one more thing I needed to work through—figuring out how to balance my feelings for Cali with my commitment to my pack.

And I *would* figure it out. One way or another.

I turned to look at Ava, who was still standing next to me, probably watching and waiting for me to come to terms with the truth of what she’d just said. She’d certainly spent her fair share of time doing that, lately. Something like guilt gnawed at my insides. There was another thing I needed to figure out. Because if one thing was certain, it was that Ava deserved a hell of a lot better than being stuck in limbo, waiting for me to sort out my shit.

She cupped my cheek. “I can feel you thinking too hard. You’ve practically got smoke coming out of your ears.”

I snorted and lightly pushed her hand away. “I’ve just decided something.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’m going to call that therapist’s office and have you added to my appointment.”

Her brows shot up, and she grinned. Then, just as quickly, her smile faltered. “Are you sure? If you do that, won’t you have to take more of Big Mac’s potion to be close to me?”

I just shook my head. “Don’t worry about that. It’ll be fine.”

Worst-case scenario, I could muscle my way through the pain. And therapy would hopefully be a way to sort out all my issues, a way to make the pain go away. Involving Ava would only help. Even if it hurt to have her there, it’d be worth it if her presence helped me make some progress cutting through this seemingly never-ending mess.

I got up and pulled on a pair of pants before grabbing my phone.

Ava stood and padded to the bathroom. “I’m gonna take a shower. I’ll leave you to it.”

As she disappeared behind the closed door, I dialed Dr. Greene’s office. The secretary answered on the second ring.

“Hi,” I said. “This is Xavier Evers. I have an upcoming appointment with Dr. Greene, and I’d like to add someone to the appointment if possible. My, um… My girlfriend.”

“Okay,” the secretary said. “Can I get her name?”

“Ava Reed.”

“Perfect. Should I update your file to include couple’s therapy then? I don’t want to assume…”

“Um, no. I mean, yeah. Yes, you should update the file,” I said haltingly.

I didn’t know why confirming that felt like such a big deal, but somehow, it made the decision feel more real. Which was silly, because I was literally calling this place up because the decision had already been made.

“Oh, good,” the secretary said.

“Good?” I asked, surprised. “What do you mean?”

*Does this lady know something I don’t?*

“You just sound a little nervous,” she said, “but you shouldn’t be. It’s always best to be honest with your partner, and Dr. Greene can help you with that.”

“Oh,” I said dumbly. “Okay. Thanks.”

“We’ll see you soon, Xavier,” she said. “Let us know if there’s anything else we can do for you.”

I ended the call and stared down at my phone, sorting through the feelings that had rushed to the surface of my mind. Above all, I felt good about having Ava at the appointment with me. That felt like the right way to handle this. She was my Luna, after all, *and* my mate. Just about every decision I made would affect her. She deserved to be in that meeting with me. Plus, she was the one who’d suggested couples therapy in the first place.

*This could be good for us. A way to help sort things out the right way instead of continuing to muddle through.*

Maybe I could bring Cali to the appointment, too. Would that be strange? Or… crossing some sort of boundary? I mean, Ava probably wouldn’t love it, but Cali was a part of this too. And if this therapist was as good as he claimed to be, maybe he’d be able to help me put this mate bond stuff to rest, once and for all.

The thought was so tempting… I liked the idea of having a professional step in to help me work through this, even though the mental picture it created was sort of like something out of a bad sitcom, with me sitting in the middle of a sofa and Cali and Ava sitting on either side of me while the therapist played referee.

*Oh yes, that* definitely *wouldn’t end catastrophically.*

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I’d made the appointment; Ava was coming with me. I’d have to figure out the rest of it later. First, I needed to let the pack know about the Redwood party tonight. Attending some college rager at the Redwood pack house was pretty much the last way I wanted to spend the evening, but if that party posed a threat to the supernatural community, I sure as shit wasn’t going to sit at home when I could be protecting my pack. Ava was right about that, too—anything that threatened our neighbors was too close for comfort.

I headed downstairs and was surprised to find the entire pack in the living room.

*I guess that makes giving the announcement easier—everyone’s already in one place.*

And then I realized just how small the pack was. So small all ten of the pack members could fit comfortably in the living room. I thought of all the empty bedrooms upstairs. How the house was at only half occupancy. Compared to the Vanguard pack’s numbers, we were barely more than a blip.

How would we ever survive if we were faced with another pack war? Or a threat that was centered on the Samaras in particular? We could be wiped out in one attack—and it wouldn’t even have to be a big battle.

*Shit. I really need to work on bolstering our numbers, if only to give us a fighting chance if anything ever goes down.*

My instinct thus far had been to chip away at the Redwood pack’s numbers. They were our neighbors, people I already knew and could vouch for. But standing here now, looking out at the fledgling pack I’d chosen to lead, I realized I couldn’t just pull people from my old pack.

I needed to build a new one.

**Episode 4875**

*How can our plan be falling apart already?*

Codsworth gripped my wrist tightly as he pulled me around the side of the house, presumably to show me whatever horrifying piece of evidence he’d stumbled onto. Because, despite all my best attempts to gaslight him, he was still hellbent and determined to find proof that werewolves existed.

He chattered on excitedly as we rounded the corner of the house. Fortunately, he was so stoked about whatever it was that he’d found that he failed to notice what had to be the sheer horror written all over my face. The poker face I’d managed to maintain during this whole cryptozoology side quest had crumbled. I knew, in the back of my mind, that I had to get control of this situation. I had to play my part and do everything in my power to make sure that whatever it was he’d found, I played it off as something totally normal.

And that was all well and good, but I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around this new reality—around the fact that despite all of our planning, this whole endeavor was already going tits up.

*I should’ve grabbed him and forced him to go out for ice cream*. *No matter what Lola has to say about it. Hell, I probably never should’ve given them my address in the first place. Then they wouldn’t be able to just show up here unannounced and start snooping around.*

I knew Codsworth didn’t mean any harm, and Nathan probably genuinely just wanted to help because he was a nice guy like that… Except what they’d done was exactly the kind of thing that got humans killed. The more they stuck their noses where they didn’t belong, the harder it was going to be to conceal the supernatural world. And once that secret was out? Well, in my experience, things got very, *very* dangerous for any humans who knew the truth.

It wasn’t a secret that any supernaturals were willing to dish out willingly—not to some random humans, at least.

I couldn’t let anything bad happen to my teammates—or Nathan, who was just kind of an unfortunate bystander believer—but I also couldn’t let them discover the truth. Codsworth would no doubt be thrilled to share his discovery with the world.

*And then he’ll find out that my “boyfriends” are wolves and that I’m not even fully human and Lola’s a hybrid, and we’ll have to go into hiding and I’ll lose my place on the crew team and Lola and I will have to drop out of school and my life as a human will officially be over, once and for all, and—*

*FOCUS, CALI. One thing at a time! You can fucking figure this out!*

“You’re not gonna believe what I found,” Codsworth was saying. “And it was right there, out in the open where anyone could stumble across it. I’m surprised you haven’t seen it yet.”

I laughed nervously. “Maybe I have.”

“Nah. You would’ve told me.”

The complete certainty in his voice made my stomach churn. He had so much faith in me, and I didn’t deserve a single bit of it. “R-Right. Well, I can’t wait to see it.”

But really, what had he found? And, more importantly, how was I going to explain it? What if it was something Big Mac had left behind? Something magical? What if he’d found photographic evidence just lying around?

Codsworth came to a sudden stop and turned around. He released my wrist and pointed at the ground. “See? Look at that!”

I stared down at the grass and dirt. “Um… What are you talking about?”

He rolled his eyes and pulled me down to the ground so we were both on our hands and knees, our faces maybe six or seven inches from the ground. Then he pointed again. “Look. *That* is a giant paw print.”

My heart seized. It sure was. Still, I looked up at him, screwing up my face in fake confusion. “So… What does that mean?”

“Are you seriously not seeing this?” He stabbed his finger at the ground. “Look at the print next to it—that’s a *human* footprint!”

My heart tripped over itself, then full-on face planted. *This is—*

“This is evidence!” Codsworth burst out. “Werewolves are real.”

The laughter slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it. Hopefully he thought it was just nervous laughter from the situation, not relief catching up with me. A paw print. All of this hullabaloo was over a paw print next to a human footprint. Somehow that meant that werewolves were real? I’d had more solid evidence when I’d first met Xavier of werewolves existing than this.

Sure, the prints weren’t ideal, but I could work with it. Of all the “evidence” Codsworth could’ve stumbled onto, a paw print was probably the least damning. People lived in this area, and of course wolves had the potential to run rampant. This was the freaking *woods*.

I cleared my throat. “I, um, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I’m not sure this means anything.”

He looked at me with a mix of incredulity and betrayal. “What are you talking about? Of course it means something! Don’t you get it? We have a record of the transformation, right there on the ground! There’s a wolf paw print right next to a human footprint! What are the odds?”

Something like guilt slipped into my gut. He was adamant about his discovery—and he was right. And I just had to keep gaslighting him until he gave up.

I shrugged. “I mean, sure, I can see how you might jump to that conclusion, but…”

His brows knit together. “But?”

“People walk around out here barefoot all the time,” I said apologetically. “I think I would have heard about it if someone in my house had ended up right next to one of the big wolves that live in the woods. Like, that’d be all we’d talk about around here for months.”

He just frowned at me, but didn’t say anything else. I pressed on. I wasn’t sure if he believed me, and I *had* to make sure he believed me.

“Listen, I want to believe that werewolves are real too,” I said, “but all these prints are telling me is that there are people who live here, and that there are also wolves nearby. But we already knew that. The wolves probably come close to the house at night looking for food scraps.

Rather than looking defeated, Codsworth was starting to look pissed off.

“Maybe you’ll find something tonight?” I added with a small smile. “Something more substantial?”

*But, you know, not substantial enough to matter.*

He sighed, apparently satisfied. “I hope so.”

“Let’s go help Torin with the setup,” I suggested.

I led him back to the front of the house, where Nathan and Torin were still hard at work.

“I’m going to go ask Greyson if he’s seen any wolves around,” I said—another lie. “I’ll report back.”

He nodded distractedly, his gaze on the tree line. I really, really hoped that I’d managed to get him to play into the plan.

I headed into the house and went up to my room to get ready. After showering and getting dressed, I came downstairs to find Rishika, Ravi, and Greyson in the living room, discussing the plan.

“Where’s Codsworth?” I asked as I joined them.

Greyson nodded toward the front door. “Torin’s keeping both the humans occupied outside, thankfully.”

“What would we ever do without him?” I said.

Rishika looked around at the group. “Before we get started, are we all still one hundred percent on board with this plan?”

Greyson nodded, and Jay and I followed suit.

“I know it sounds, well, Jay was right to call it ‘ridiculous,’” Greyson said. “It *is* ridiculous. But I really do think it’s our best option.”

“I think so too,” I said.

“Me too,” Ravi said. Then he winked. “I’m happy to play my part.”

Rishika nodded. “Good. I just wanted to make sure before we committed ourselves to this.”

“I’m ready,” Ravi said. “Let’s go underwhelm some humans.”

“You’ll need to head into the woods before Codsworth sees you,” I told him. “That way, nobody will notice that you’re missing from the party. We don’t want to give him *any* fuel for his theories.”

“Can they still be called theories if he’s actually right?” Jay asked.

Ravi grinned. “No problem. I’ll head out back now and see you all in a few hours.”

Just as he turned to leave, there was a knock on the front door.

Greyson raised a brow and turned his gaze on me. A grin tugged at his lips. “I think your guests have arrived. Let’s get this show on the road.”

I laughed and headed to the door to greet my teammates. Except when I opened the door, I was completely unprepared for what was waiting for me on the other side. It wasn’t *just* my team. It was my team and what looked like my entire university class.

**Episode 4876**

**Greyson**

I stared in horror at the sea of college students darkening my doorstep.

*What fresh hell is this? And why are there so* many *of them?*

The crew team had what? Ten, twelve members? There was no earthly reason for Cali’s entire school to be at my front door right now.

I glanced at Cali, who looked just as shocked as I felt. Her expression was a pretty good indicator, but I mind linked to her anyway. *So… Do you know what’s going on?*

*I really don’t. I only invited the crew team. I don’t even recognize most of these people. Greyson, I’m so, so—*

One of Cali’s teammates pushed through the front door and slapped my shoulder. “Thanks for hosting. This is gonna be fun!”

And just like that, the seal on the pack house’s threshold was broken, and people began to flood inside.

Cali’s eyes were almost comically wide. “Bear, what’s going on? How did so many people find out about the party?”

“Oh, I invited some other folks,” one of the guys said. “I hope you don’t mind. The whole school is so excited that we kicked some Fringehead ass today—they all wanted to help celebrate!” He lowered his voice and shot Cali and me an apologetic look. “It felt like bad form to leave them out, you know?”

“It’s totally fine,” Cali lied. I recognized that tone in her voice—the fake happiness. I could see the grimace she was desperately trying to keep off her face, lurking just beneath her stressed smile.

“So, you got any drinks?” Bear asked.

“Um, yeah,” Cali said. “In the kitchen.”

“Then what’re we waiting for? First things first, we drink to your amazing coxswaining!”

Bear headed down the hallway, pulling Cali with him. All she could do was shrug at me apologetically as she disappeared into the throng.

I had half a mind to put my foot down—or up that Bear kid’s ass for inviting half the damn university to my house—but I didn’t want to make a scene or make things difficult for Cali moving forward. She finally seemed to have settled into the team, and into university life. I didn’t want to make her a pariah for ruining her team’s victory lap. Plus, there was a very specific purpose for all of this: we needed to persuade Cali’s teammate to forget all about looking for werewolves. If we made that work, then this headache of an evening would be worth it.

Right?

Someone shouldered past me, spilling what felt like half of his can of beer onto me.

“Sorry, man,” the kid said, before continuing on his merry fucking way.

I let out a groan.

“Upstairs is off limits!” I bellowed. “And if anyone breaks anything, their ass is getting kicked out of this house immediately!”

Nobody gave any indication that they’d heard me, and I sighed. Already, the regrets were rushing in. *Why* had I let all these college students come over, again? I hadn’t wanted to host the party in the first place. But no, this was a necessary evil.

*Still, these college kids had better not mess up my pack house. The pack is already messy enough by itself without the help of a bunch of drunk humans.*

I twisted around to look over my shoulder for Cali. She was nowhere in sight—probably doing shots with Bear or something.

*Great. Guess it’s time to mingle, then.*

I headed outside and walked down the front porch steps to find the yard seemingly no less full of people, despite everyone who’d flooded into the house.

*Jesus, maybe Bear really did invite the whole damn school.*

I scanned the crowd for Codsworth—the reason why we were putting on this farce.

“Tonight’s the night,” I overheard him say as I approached him. I bit back a grin.

*Oh, tonight’s definitely the night. Just not how you’re envisioning it.*

He had a small group of people clustered around him.

*That must be the cryptozoology club*. *At least one thing is working out for us in all this chaos.*

Maybe, with a little luck, we could get through this night without any other hiccups in our plan, and Codsworth and everyone else who’d come out here to hunt werewolves would be none the wiser.

What was it about humans that made them so determined to seek out particularly painful deaths? If I were a human who believed in cryptids or other supernatural beasts that went bump in the night, I sure as shit wouldn’t have made a hobby of going out and trying to irritate them.

Codsworth and the rest of his club would never know it, but he was damn lucky Cali had crossed his path—and that she was connected to the Redwood pack. I tried to avoid causing human bloodshed as much as I could, but the fact that Cali had been advocating for them and keeping me informed of their plans so the pack wasn’t caught off-guard had probably saved their lives. And if they’d decided to go hunting for werewolves on any other pack’s land? Well, those curious humans probably wouldn’t have come out of that alive.

The chaotic sea of people spread out in every direction—inside the house and out—and someone was cranking pop music. Already, I could feel the beginnings of a headache pounding in my skull.

Thankfully, the pack house was remote enough that we wouldn’t have to worry about a visit from the cops for a noise complaint. One less thing to stress over.

I stopped at one of the coolers Torin had scattered around the yard and pulled out a beer. As I took a long pull from the can, someone stepped up next to me.

“Quite the party you’ve got going on here,” said a familiar, feminine voice.

I turned to see Xavier and Ava standing next to me, surveying the huge group of humans. They wore matching expressions of shock and mild disgust.

*Talk about a power couple*, I thought, snickering to myself. *Now they even look alike.*

I kept my thoughts to myself. I knew Xavier wouldn’t appreciate the comment, coming from me. And, since my brother dearest seemed no closer to making a goddamn choice between the two women he’d found himself mated to, Ava probably didn’t want to hear my snark, either.

“Why the hell are there so many people here?” Xavier demanded. “I thought this was just going to be a small party with Cali’s crew team.”

I shrugged. “I thought the same thing. But apparently, word gets around at her school, and now it’s a rager. We’ll have to adapt. This shouldn’t have any impact on our plan.”

My brother just hummed in response. Ava didn’t say anything. Their expressions told me they were displeased about this turn of events—though it wasn’t like I was all that fucking pleased about it either. Still, there was no denying the awkwardness that had settled between us. Probably because of our little incident, earlier.

And, looking around at the sea of humans out here in werewolf territory, I could understand their frustration. And I could see just how bad it looked that I hadn’t wanted to involve them in this ruse we were planning for Codsworth and his club. But, of course, I’d had no way of knowing several hundred people were going to show up uninvited.

I meant what I’d said to Cali—I really did understand that Xavier had to think about the Samaras, now. That they had to be his priority, and that the Redwoods shouldn’t make the cut anymore beyond the bounds of basic decency. His loyalties had changed, and if my brother was half the Alpha I assumed he wanted to be, then I knew he’d do his duty.

I cleared my throat. “I understand why you two felt like you had to come tonight, and I respect that. You have a responsibility to keep your pack safe, and to advocate for their best interests.” My gaze locked with Xavier’s. “I just hope that doesn’t mean you don’t trust me to make the right call.”

“Right call for who?” Ava muttered.

Before anyone could say anything else, Cali sidled up to us.

“Hey. I’ve been looking all over for you,” she told me. Then she gave Ava and Xavier a polite, if chilly, smile. “Hi. Welcome.”

The tension in the air doubled. This was going to take some time to iron out, wasn’t it? I might’ve made my peace with Xavier’s new loyalties, and I’d always understood that his new role would potentially come with some uncomfortable conversations and decisions, but Cali clearly wasn’t there yet. Hopefully, once enough time passed, she’d come to an understanding of her own.

Suddenly, Cali let out a gasp, and all the blood drained from her face. “Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no… He actually *came*.”

I turned around to see what she was looking at and froze, my mouth twisting into a grimace. This night had just gotten way more complicated.

I turned back to my mate. “Cali, what the *fuck* is Lucian doing here?”

**Episode 4877**

Greyson was staring at me expectantly, but I didn’t have the first clue what to say to him. All I could do was watch in helpless horror as Lucian and Elle walked up to the pack house, several Vanguard wolves trailing behind them.

What *was* Lucian even doing here? I’d thought we’d sorted out this unfortunate misunderstanding when we’d talked on the phone earlier. He’d *hung up on me* the second he’d realized the party was for humans.

And how the hell was I supposed to explain this to Greyson? *Sorry, I thought Lucian didn’t give a fuck about human affairs? It’s actually Torin’s fault for asking the Vanguards for help with the party? Sorry this “simple” solution to the problem my crew team created just keeps getting worse and worse?*

Clearly, something had changed Lucian’s mind. I just wished I knew what it was. The guy was so mercurial, it could’ve been literally anything from finding out the truth about the cryptozoology club to simply having decided he was interested in attending a “collegiate party” after all.

But now he was here, which meant he was probably going to find out about the whole Codsworth thing whether we liked it or not.

I finally composed an explanation as I turned back to Greyson. “So, Torin called the Vanguards to ask to borrow some things for the party, and somehow it came up that the Samaras were sending people, so Lucian got his wires crossed and decided he wanted to come too.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed.

“I made it clear to him that he shouldn’t come,” I added quickly. “I told him it was just a party for human college students, and he seemed to lose all interest after that. It didn’t ever occur to me that he’d come anyway.”

“He clearly missed the message,” Greyson said dryly.

Lucian spotted us in the crowd, and he and Elle changed course to come join us. Once they made it over to us, I didn’t beat around the bush.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you said you weren’t coming.”

Lucian gave me a dry look. “That’s true. I wasn’t planning to attend, but then I thought about it and realized I couldn’t let an opportunity to bond with my fellow Alphas pass me by. Plus, when I mentioned the party to my beautiful fiancée, she seemed excited by the prospect of attending a human party.” He smiled adoringly at Elle. “Who was I to deny her such a unique experience?”

“I hope it’s okay,” Elle said, her dazzling smile blazing full-force. “I just wanted to spend some time with my old pack, and my maid of honor.”

On the outside, I kept my own smile intact, but inwardly, I groaned. *I can’t ask them to leave now! It would hurt Elle’s feelings!*

“It’s fine,” Greyson said, though I could tell from his tone that nothing about this was *fine* to him. He seemed to realize how transparent he was, because he cleared his throat and tried for a more genuine-looking smile as he looked at Elle. “I’m glad you’re here. And Lucian too, of course,” he added, and the smile he gave Lucian came out a lot frostier.

“You see? I was right to indulge my forest rose,” Lucian said smugly.

“But did you really need to bring so many Vanguard wolves with you?” Greyson asked. “Especially since you knew this was going to be a human party?”

“I’m sorry about that,” Lucian said.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. He didn’t mean a single thing he’d just said, and he wasn’t even trying to hide it.

*But that’s Lucian for you. When he shows you who he is, believe him, because he’s too narcissistic to try to hide any part of his true nature.*

“Why *did* you bring so many?” I asked. “Are they interested in experiencing a human college student party too?”

“Perhaps. The wolves in my service live with all the privileges and luxuries afforded to a pack such as mine.” Lucian puffed out his chest a bit. “But… Uh, what’s the word? But ‘slumming it’ with humans would be a new experience for many of them.”

I glowered at him, and Elle lightly slapped his arm.

“Come on, Lucian, you’re being rude—and you’re not being honest,” Elle said.

Greyson and I exchanged a quick look. Thank god for Elle. She didn’t play the types of games that were second nature to her mate.

Sometimes, I wondered what it would be like if we didn’t have to play nice with Lucian. I didn’t think he was a bad person, at heart, but we knew for sure if we could trust him. He was impulsive, vain, and had an unnerving habit of looking out for himself first and foremost.

He was our ally now, and probably would be for the foreseeable future—probably in no small part because Elle was his mate—but that could change at any second, and if it did, we’d have the entire considerable force of the Vanguard pack to deal with.

*That* was why we played nice with him. Because he was a bigger pain in the ass as an enemy than as an ally. But that didn’t mean I wanted him anywhere near the cryptozoology club tonight. It would be just like Lucian to mess up our plans—or, worse, to stumble upon these budding werewolf enthusiasts and decide he couldn’t risk allowing them to live.

Lucian sighed, but his expression was fond as he glanced at Elle. “Forgive me. When I heard that the Samara pack would be represented at this party, I assumed that… Well, I assumed that, as small as the pack is, they’d all be attending. I thought I should bring a modest contingent of my own pack to balance out the guest list.”

There was no missing the way Xavier tensed at Lucian’s words.

*What a dickish thing to say. Is this some weird Alpha pack-size pissing contest?* The Samara pack was small because they’d been through hell over the last few years, and most of them hadn’t survived it. They didn’t have the privilege of constant strong leadership like the Redwoods did, or the seemingly endless resources of the Vanguard pack. And maybe I was mad at Xavier right now, but that didn’t mean I wanted to listen to other people insult him.

*Plus, Ava and Xavier are standing* right there*. I should say something to Lucian. He’s clearly in a mood tonight, and he needs to be put in his place.*

I opened my mouth to speak, but Ava was already pulling Xavier away into the crowd, their fingers twined together.

My stomach dropped as I watched them go. *I hate this. I wish we could go back to the way things were before.*

“Cali!” Lola rushed over to our little group. “You need to come entertain your teammates. They’re here to celebrate with you, and they keep asking me why you keep disappearing. I think they’re starting to suspect something.”

Greyson scoffed. “Suspect what? That there are other people she wants to talk to? We’ve been acting perfectly normal. In fact, we’ve been damn hospitable, welcoming the entire student population of the university tonight. If they wanted more face time with Cali, they probably shouldn’t have invited every young adult this side of I-5!”

“It’s okay!” I said quickly. Greyson was clearly frustrated by tonight’s turn of events, and I didn’t blame him. But until we got Codsworth and the cryptozoology club off our backs, we were just going to have to deal with the rager. Plus, the last thing we wanted was for Lucian to overhear our plan.

“I’ll deal with my team,” I said, looking from Lola to Greyson. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Lola and I left Greyson with Elle and Lucian, then made our way through the crowd. I was surprised to see some familiar faces from my class, or people I saw on my regular stomping grounds around campus. I passed Chessa, too, who was standing with Codsworth and Nathan by one of the coolers.

“Hey!” I said to the three of them. “This is my friend Lola.”

“Hey,” Chessa said. She looked badass in thigh-high boots, a mini skirt, and a lacy top. Definitely not what I would’ve expected someone to wear to hunt the supernatural…

“Having fun?” I asked.

“Can’t wait to explore soon, yeah?” Codsworth said, nudging Nathan in the arm.

“Totally,” I said quickly. “Sorry, we have to go check on something.”

I grabbed Lola by the arm and steered us in the opposite direction.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Lola said. “Stall?”

We stopped, both at a loss. I didn’t know what was going to deter Codworth from his search. It seemed like nothing would, not even a college rager. I shook my head, aimlessly looking around the party. Then I did a double take and let out a huge laugh.

Gael, Shmiddy, and Rodrigo were dancing on top of one of Torin’s outdoor tables, singing off-key to the music blaring over the speakers.

“Lil’ Hart!” Gael called. “Come join us!”

He reached for me, and I only lightly resisted being pulled up onto the table. I grabbed Lola’s hand on the way, and she was pulled up after me. I knew Codsworth wouldn’t do the search without me, and dancing was as good a stalling technique as any…

“I didn’t know you liked *Coyote Ugly*!” she called to me over the music.

It was ridiculous, being up here and singing and dancing, but it was more fun than it had looked from the ground. There was something heady about being up here, hearing the party go on around us.

Suddenly, Lola went stock-still.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I smell a vampire.”

**Episode 4878**

I rounded on Lola. “I beg your *what*?”

“I said, I smell a—”

“Not here!” I clapped my hand over her mouth, then jumped off the table and pulled her down to the ground alongside me. Behind us, my teammates erupted into jeers.

“Lil’ Hart!” Gael shouted. “Come back! You haven’t finished your dance!”

I ignored them and pulled Lola through the crowd until we reached the edge of the yard where, hopefully, there was a smaller chance that we’d be overheard. It was lucky we’d just been so close to the speakers before, and it was unlikely that anyone had overheard what Lola had just said.

“Did you just say there’s a vampire at this party? *Right now?*” I asked, my gaze darting around the party. For every person here who I knew, there had to be ten who I didn’t. “This party full of *humans?*”

Lola raised a brow. “Can I speak now?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you can.”

“Then yes.” She nodded. “I definitely smelled one. Faintly, but it was there.”

“Ugh! No! No, no, no, no, no.” I groaned.

Could just *one part* of this night go right? First all these people had shown up, and then Lucian and the Vanguards had crashed the party, and now this? A *vampire*?

To a vampire, a college rager like this was basically an all-you-can-eat buffet. Plus, how were we supposed to keep humans from finding out about the supernatural world if a vampire was roaming around the party—which also happened to have werewolves in attendance? Werewolves who wouldn’t hesitate to shift if that was what it took to defend themselves.

This was a nightmare of epic proportions. When Greyson and I had engineered this get-together, the success of the plan had been built on two assumptions: one, that the humans would have no idea at any time that they were on werewolf territory; and two, that the werewolves in attendance would all have a vested interest in ensuring that the first thing happened.

And now, the whole thing was about to come crashing down on top of us.

“We have to find that vampire as soon as possible,” I said. “We can’t let anything happen to anyone—especially not the humans.”

I mind linked with Greyson. *Hey. How are you?*

His voice slipped into my mind, sounding tense. *It’s a bad idea to kill Lucian, right?*

*Probably.* I tried to keep my tone light, to *not* show the panic that was threatening to consume me. *So, um… I have some news. You’re probably not gonna like it.*

He groaned. *Your friend didn’t stumble onto someone while they were shifting, did he?*

*No. At least, not as far as I know.* I couldn’t quite figure out if that would’ve been better or worse than what was *actually* happening. *Lola said she smelled a vampire. Here. At the party.*

*Fuck. This party is the worst.*

*Agreed*,I said. *So what are we gonna do? A big party like this is going to be like shooting fish in a barrel for a vampire.*

*I know*,he said grimly. *I’ll regroup with Xavier and Lucian, get some of their wolves to move through the party and see if they can pick up the vampire’s scent. Can you have Lola do the same on your end? If she’s picked up the scent once, she’s more likely to recognize it a second time.*

*Yeah, we can do that.*

I grabbed Lola’s arm and started leading her toward the thickest part of the crowd. “Come on.”

“So what’s the plan here?” she asked.

“We’re gonna sniff out this vamp. Well, *you* are.”

“Eau de rotting bloodsucker. My favorite.” She sighed. Then her eyes widened. “Don’t tell Mikah I said that.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

We moved through the crowd, and I watched Lola’s face as she breathed in the scents of the people around her. It felt a little bit like watching paint dry, and even with all my self-control, I still had to stop her every few minutes to ask if she smelled anything.

“What about now?” I asked, the sixth time we stopped.

She shook her head again. “Like I said last time, I’ve lost the scent. There are just too many people here. Everything’s mixing together. I can barely smell *you*, and you’re right next to me.”

I resisted the urge to ask her what, exactly, I smelled like. *I showered before the party! I should smell amazing…*

*Not now, Cali. There’s a vampire on the loose at the very well-attended human party YOU are hosting. FOCUS.*

“Let’s keep looking,” I said. I wasn’t going to rest until I knew for certain that there was no vampire here, and that everyone was safe.

Greyson’s voice slipped into my mind. He’d checked in a handful of times since we’d started our search. *We still haven’t found anything on our end. I’ve checked everyone in the house, and Lucian and Xavier handled the backyard. Not a single whiff of vampire.*

He sounded frustrated, and my stomach curdled with guilt. We were only having this stupid party because of me, and my connection to Codsworth and his club. In a roundabout way, this was my problem to fix. My problem that kept giving my mate one headache after another. First it was coming up with a way to get Codsworth to lose interest in wolves, then it was hosting a couple hundred of my closest friends. Now, Greyson was teaming up with our two closest allies—neither of whom we were on particularly friendly terms with—to find a vampire in the middle of a sea of unsuspecting humans.

Our so-called simple plan had really gone off the rails.

*How did it go when you told Xavier and Lucian about the vampire?* I asked. I almost dreaded to hear the answer, but I was a part of this too. I couldn’t just leave all the hard stuff for Greyson to deal with on his own.

*My brother had some pretty strong opinions about it, but it’s fine. I’ll fill you in on everything later. Have you two found anything?*

*Not yet.*

*And Lola’s sure she smelled a vampire?*

*It seems that way.*

He sighed. *Well, it’s not ideal, but at least that means the vampire is probably gone. If they were still around, we would’ve found them by now. There’s a lot of people crammed in together here, but with how many people we’ve got searching, we should’ve found them by now. A vampire doesn’t smell anything like a human or a werewolf.*

*So… everyone’s safe?* I asked.

*I guess so. I hate not having a clearer answer for you. I don’t love the idea of a rogue vampire running around, but I don’t think the humans here are in danger right now. We can regroup later. try to find out who it was, but otherwise let’s just all be on the alert rather than cause a big panic by trying to evacuate everyone at once.*

*That makes sense*,I said. *Plus, we can still salvage our plan for Codsworth.*

*That’s good. I’d hate to have to do this all over again.*

I laughed. *You’re not having even a* little *bit of a good time?*

*You left me alone with Lucian.* Lucian*, Cali. What kind of time do you think I’m having?*

I laughed again, and Lola shot me a look. *Fair enough.*

“So, what’s going on with lover boy?” Lola asked. “I’m guessing you have good news?”

“Sort of?” I filled her in on what Greyson had said. “We need to stay alert, just in case, but I think the immediate danger has passed.”

We started heading back to my teammates, but I stopped when I saw a strange expression on Lola’s face.

“What is it?” I asked. “You don’t smell the vampire again, do you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t smell it right now. It’s just… There was something familiar about that scent. Not like it was the scent of someone I know, but it…. It sort of reminds me of something. I just can’t figure out what.” She grimaced, then shook her head. “I’ll tell Greyson about it when we regroup, but right now. I just can’t quite figure it out.”

“Whoever it was, I’m sure we’ll be able to find them.

A sudden hand on my arm made me jump, and I turned to see Codsworth and Nathan standing right behind me. *How long have they been standing there? What did they hear?*

Both guys were holding a duffle bag in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

“It’s time,” Codsworth said. “We’re heading into the woods to go find the wolf. You want to join?”

My heart plummeted, and I clenched my fists, then hid them behind my back. I couldn’t show them how uncomfortable I was.

*I should’ve known he’d expect me to go with him. But that’s fine! It doesn’t change the plan all that much.*

“Of course I’ll come,” I said. “And so will Lola!”

My friend frowned. “Hold on, guys. I just need to talk to Cali for a second.”

She pulled me away and nodded toward the woods.

“But what if there *is* a vampire?” she demanded.

**Episode 4879**

**Artemis**

I tensed as Marius and I exchanged a look. Slowly, we both turned to face the guard standing behind us.

“So much for it being easy to sneak in,” Marius muttered.

I shot him a glare.

“Hey!” the guard barked. “No talking.”

He held his saber out toward us, but even in the dim light, I could see his hand shaking. He looked young. Too young.

*Is this the toll the war has taken? Are Fae barely out of childhood the only ones left to patrol towns on the front lines?*

I didn’t know what I felt more strongly—quiet horror, or pity for this young Fae who’d found himself in opposition to Fae like Marius. Fae like me.

“We mean no harm,” I began, stepping forward. “You—”

“Stop!” he said. “Don’t move! Nobody move! You both need to be brought in for questioning.”

Marius and I exchanged another look. Well, that just wouldn’t do. We obviously couldn’t tell the truth about what we were doing here, or where we were headed, or who we were.

“Questioning about what?” Marius asked, with fairly impressive feigned weariness. “We’re just two travelers making our way into town. Speaking of which, where’s the closest inn?”

“It’s about half a mile—” The boy stopped himself short. “Enough! I’m asking the questions here! If you’re really travelers, then what are you doing skulking about in the woods? And where are you headed, anyway?”

I watched the young guard for a moment as Marius kept peddling his “weary traveler” story, and generally pushed the guard’s buttons by asking inane questions of his own. It reminded me a bit of a video Torin had made me watch back in the human world, in which two men asked each other a bunch of questions about a game called baseball. He’d loved it and had cackled his way through the video before making me watch it twice more.

I… didn’t really get it, but watching Marius work on this guard, I had new appreciation for it.

*Torin would probably love seeing this play out, too.*

I shook myself. I needed to focus. This guard was just a kid, sure, but he still had the power to make our lives difficult if we didn’t play our cards right.

“That’s enough!” the guard snapped. “State your names and business, or I’ll be forced to arrest you!”

A sly grin tugged at my lips as I met Marius’s eyes. We could work with an inexperienced guard who didn’t seem to know who—or what—we were. In fact, this kid was possibly the least threatening roadblock we’d run into thus far.

I gave Marius the tiniest nod toward an alleyway on the edge of town. He glanced toward it, and a feral smile twisted his lips. In tandem, we bolted toward the town.

The guard stood there in stunned silence for a beat, and then…

“Hey! Come back here! I’m not done questioning you!”

I heard his footsteps some distance behind us as he chased after us. Unfortunately for him, Marius and I were faster. Much faster. We flew down the alley and I pulled random boxes and crates into the path behind us to hamper the guard’s progress.

As we turned the corner into an open market, a second set of footsteps joined the guard’s. The market was reasonably busy for the time of day, and lanterns had been lit all around the market square. Marius and I immediately slowed to a walk to try to blend in, and I breathed in through my nose to try to slow my breathing after our impromptu sprint.

The market was well lit enough that the guard might’ve been able to recognize us, but the road out of town had been dark, illuminated only by the last rays of sunset. Hopefully, with a little luck and some disguise work, we’d be able to lose our tail and continue on with our journey the way we’d planned.

I pretended to survey the market’s wares, keeping an eye on Marius, who was doing the same thing several feet away. He was a pain in the ass, but there was no denying the fact that he knew what he was doing.

I casually pulled a dark coat off one of the stall tables as I walked by, and, up ahead, Marius did the same. By the time we reached the other side of the marketplace, we’d collected a small pile of clothes.

“Hey! You two!” The guard’s voice rang through the square. “Stop!”

He’d found us again. Maybe I’d underestimated him. He was certainly more dogged than I’d given him credit for.

We burst into a sprint again, our stolen clothes tucked under our arms. We reached a T-intersection at the end of the market lane. I began to turn left, and Marius grabbed my arm and yanked me back just in time for me to spot a guard stepping out into the lane at the opposite end. Fortunately, he was looking the other way and didn’t notice Marius pulling me out of sight.

“Thanks,” I panted. Without his help, I would’ve run straight into a trap.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said.

We ducked down another lane and started pulling on the eclectic collection of coats and hats we’d pilfered.

“Ready?” I asked. “We play it like old times.”

He nodded. “I remember.”

I leaned into him, throwing my arm around his shoulder as he slipped his arm around my waist, and together, under the cover of far too many coats, we stumbled down the lane, looking for all intents and purposes like a couple of drunks out for a stroll.

Air gusted over my skin as a guard ran past us. Farther down the lane we’d just come from, guards’ voices called out for us.

*We lost them. For now.*

Marius squeezed my waist. “Works every time.”

“Mm. Let’s get out of sight until they move on.”

We crossed the market and ducked into a nearby abandoned-looking building to wait out the guards. Chasing a couple of vagabonds who hadn’t actually presented a threat to the town was below their pay grade. Soon enough, they’d get bored and return to their posts. And then Marius and I could keep moving.

I leaned against a dusty wall and slid down to the floor, chuckling under my breath.

“What’s so funny?” Marius asked.

“This.” I laughed, gesturing around us. “I knew we’d outsmart them eventually, but still. I’d forgotten what a rush it is to live on the run.”

“One of the perks of sticking with me,” he said, his dark tone belying the smile on his face. “But you’re not wrong—that was more fun than I’d expected to encounter on my way back to Dark Fae territory. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. You always did know how to keep things lively.” He sank down onto the floor next to me.

“We can probably wait the guards out here for a little while. Once we know the coast is clear, we can try to find a carriage to take us to the fortress.”

He nodded, then looked me up and down, his sinful lips curving up rakishly. Despite myself, I felt my face heating under the intensity of his gaze.

“What are you looking at?” I asked.

“That hat,” he said, after a moment. “You look ridiculous.”

I ignored the relief that zipped through me, though it wasn’t quite enough to douse the warmth in my cheeks. Still, I rolled my eyes and glared at him. “You’re wearing the exact same hat, you know, and you’re *not* pulling it off.” I reached for it. “I think only one of us can make this look work.”

He caught my wrist, his gaze intense again. His grip was strong and firm, but not too tight. His calloused fingers were rough against the delicate skin on the inside of my wrist, and his grip loosened the longer he stared at me.

My heart tripped over itself, and it was all I could do to stare back at him. My mouth went dry, my face got even hotter, and I honestly didn’t know who leaned forward first. but suddenly we were kissing, our mouths hungry. My fingers wound through his hair, and he grabbed my waist and hauled me into his lap.

Greedily, his hands found their way to my hips, then my thighs, locking me against him. Heat pulsed through me, and all rational thoughts left my mind. I knew I wanted to feel Marius as close to me as possible, needed to feel him. Without thinking, I started rolling my hips against his, bracing my hands on his strong shoulders. He groaned, capturing my mouth with his once more.

We kissed for hours or days or maybe just a heady string of seconds. For the first time, there were no monsters lying in wait, no guards to interrupt us. It was just Marius and me and this thing that had simmered between us for far too long.

I broke away from his lips with a gasp, panting faster than I had after our sprint through town.

His gaze was heated and dark as he stared up at me. “Should we stop playing games, Ari?”

**Episode 4880**

I took a careful and exaggerated step forward, lighting up the path in front of me with my phone’s flashlight.

“Um, here, doggie?” I called.

The forest was pitch-black around us, and as unforgiving as it had ever been. And while it wasn’t my first time being in the woods around the pack house after dark, I didn’t love being out here. Especially knowing that Lola had picked up the scent of a vampire.

“It’s not a lost house pet,” Codsworth said.

I shrugged. “Wolf, dog—same thing, right?”

“*Were*wolf,” he corrected. “Not the same thing at all.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

Codsworth was quiet for a beat before he cleared his throat. “And anyway, we need to be quiet. We don’t want to spook it.”

*Quiet, huh?* I snorted softly. If Ravi weren’t already lying in wait, the group’s stomping footsteps would’ve scared off every living thing within a five-mile radius.

*Also, where’s the logic in that? We’re trying to find a fearsome mythological beast, but if we’re not quiet enough, we’ll scare it off?* If anything, wouldn’t it make more sense *not* to take a wild and potentially dangerous animal by surprise?

I kept these thoughts to myself, of course. Codsworth had made it very clear that logic and his belief in the supernatural didn’t always see eye to eye. As it was, he’d never know just how lucky he was to have me to mediate his introduction to the supernatural world. I’d witnessed far too many situations where humans who got involved in supernatural affairs didn’t live to tell the tale.

If tonight went as planned, Codsworth might not get the amazing story he was hoping for, but he’d get to walk away, and he’d be all the safer for finally letting his werewolf obsession go.

A branch snapped under someone’s foot and Lola let out a loud yelp.

“What was that?” she cried.

I rolled my eyes, glad that my flashlight was pointed out at the forest and nobody would be able to see the expression on my face. Lola was really going overboard with her “scared girl from a horror movie” bit. Never mind how strange it was to see Lola of all people pretending to be afraid of walking through the woods. I’d seen her eviscerate vampires, revenants, and any number of things that went bump in the night, but when Codsworth and Nathan had invited us to join them on their “hunt,” she’d whispered to me that the best way to keep them ignorant would be to act like a couple of scared human girls. I just hoped they were buying what Lola was selling—high drama and all—because I definitely wasn’t.

Playing a scared girl didn’t feel right to me—for a hundred different reasons—so I went with skeptical instead, which felt right, since it was the attitude I’d taken toward Codsworth’s determination to find a werewolf since the beginning.

Fortunately, the two guys were none-the-wiser and our hunt was turning out to be nothing more than a boring walk through the woods, punctuated by Lola’s gasps and Codsworth telling me where to shine my flashlight. I’d take the boring ruse over having to protect Codsworth and Nathan from a rogue vampire, but it still wasn’t how I wanted to spend my evening.

*Hopefully we come up on Ravi soon. I don’t know how much longer I can stand to keep this going.*

“Cali, wait.” Codsworth stopped short and ducked down. My light was shining up ahead, so I could just make out his hand, touching the bark of a root. “Shine your light down here.”

I did. “What is it?”

He grinned and held up a jagged piece of broken root. “This is a sign. We’re on the right track.”

I frowned, genuinely confused now. “The right track to where?”

“To a werewolf, of course. It’s well documented that the North American werewolf loves tree roots. They consider them a delicacy.”

Lola let out a huge bark of laughter that she barely managed to turn into a cough.

“Oh,” she wheezed. “Sorry! I think a bug flew into my mouth. First werewolves and then giant bugs? These woods can’t give a girl a break, can they?”

If Codsworth hadn’t been looking right at me, I would’ve rolled my eyes.

*Great cover, Lola. Very smooth.*

Not that I could blame her for laughing. If I let myself picture literally any of the werewolves I’d met going out into the woods to forage for roots, I’d probably lose control too. Regardless, I was desperate to set Codsworth straight. The mansplaining tone to his voice nagged at me, dared me to prove him wrong, and part of me was very willing to rise to that challenge.

*You couldn’t be more wrong. The North American werewolf loves a good barbecue—ribs and steaks and burgers and whatever alcohol they can find to go with it. You’ll never see them eating tree roots. I don’t even think that’s something a true wolf wanted either. Where did you get your info, anyway? Wikipedia?*

But I obviously couldn’t say *any* of that, so instead I made a polite, appreciative noise and pretended to gasp. “Wait, did you guys hear that?” I twisted my head to the south and cocked my head. “I think something might actually be out there.”

“Of course there’s something out there,” Codsworth said, immediately jumping to his feet. “What is it? What did you hear?”

I took a cue from Lola’s school of acting and bit my lip nervously. “You *didn’t* hear it? I…” I gulped. “I swore I heard some kind of growling coming from over there.”

I pointed toward the area where I knew Ravi was waiting for us.

Codsworth took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and took off without waiting for the rest of the group. “Let’s go!”

I had to hand it to Codsworth—the guy knew what he wanted and didn’t hesitate to go after it. He booked it toward Ravi so quickly that Lola and I had to jog to keep up with him. I knew we had some time before we made it to the clearing where Ravi was waiting for us, so I hurried up to jog beside Codsworth.

“What’ve you got in the duffle bags anyway? You’re not going to try to take something home, are you?” I joked.

He didn’t answer right away. As he carefully navigated a large fallen branch, he said, “It’s just some safety precautions. You can’t be too careful with monstrous cryptids about.”

*Oh god. What does* that *mean?*

Thus far, Codsworth’s information on werewolves and cryptids in general was about as far from accurate as conceivably possible, but there was always a chance that he might actually have something on him that could hurt Ravi, or another wolf. Like, say, something coated in silver.

Before I could formulate a careful follow-up question, Codsworth and Nathan let out identical gasps. Lola and I exchanged a meaningful look.

*Is it this?*

We covered the last of the distance to the clearing, and there he was, just where he’d promised to be. I’d known what to expect, but I could admit that stumbling onto Ravi standing in the light of the moon in a gorgeous clearing in the middle of the woods was a sight to behold.

“That”—Nathan’s voice cracked—“is the biggest wolf I have ever seen in my life.”

“*Cali!*” Codsworth hissed. “Hurry! Take a picture.”

I frowned, my brows knitting together. “But it’s just a really big wolf. That’s the one I was telling you about earlier. I’ve seen it before. It’s always running around the property. But it’s never hurt anyone. It’s just a regular wolf.” Ravi huffed, and I fought back a smile as I added, “I mean, it’s a very big and *impressive* wolf. But still. It’s not a monster.”

Codsworth’s eyes narrowed. “You really think it’s just a wolf?”

I nodded. “I know it is. I mean, look.” I gestured up at the sky. “The moon’s not even full. And werewolves need a full moon to transform or whatever, right? So that *has* to be a wolf.”

“Oh, he’s just a cute little doggie!” Lola singsonged. “You’re not a mean old cryptid, are you?”

Ravi just blinked back at her, and I wished I could mind link with him and hear what he thought about being called a “cute little doggie.”

It was a smart move on Lola’s part, though, making Ravi seem silly—because that finally seemed to be the thing that got through to Codsworth.

He sighed, his face falling. “I guess you’re right. I should’ve taken your word for it.”

I let out a breath. Finally, this farce was going to end. Werewolves would stay hidden, and Codsworth would be all the safer for it.

Suddenly, a second huge wolf stepped into the clearing. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and my jaw dropped. “Who the hell is *that*?”