**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 38**

**Episodes 4881–5000**

**Episode 4881**

I froze. My heart was pounding as we all stared ahead at the second wolf that had just appeared in the clearing. It was dark, but not so dark that I couldn’t see that this wolf was a stranger to me. Every alarm in my brain was screaming *DANGER!*

Codsworth was messing with the tranquilizer gun, and he staggered back a few steps, stumbling into Nathan.

“Watch it!” Nathan hissed, but too late—they both fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Codsworth lost his grip, and the tranquilizer gun slid a few feet away.

While they were distracted, trying to scramble back to their feet, I took a good, hard look at that second wolf, trying to figure out who the hell it was. I had known at a glance that it was a werewolf—it was way too big to be a natural wolf. But even with a second look I knew it wasn’t one that I recognized.

So, who the hell was it, and what was it doing here?

Fear washed over me, wrapping me in its grip. Did this mean there were *Rogues* running on the Redwood territory?

*Shit*.

I seriously doubted Greyson had taken that into account when we planned this ruse for the crew team. And why would he? There was no reason to anticipate *this*. No one had seen Rogues around this area for what felt like ages.

*Greyson? Can you hear me? Greyson?!* I reached out to him through the mind link. *Greyson?!* I wanted to tell him about this unexpected threat, but I didn’t hear anything back, so I couldn’t be sure if he had heard me.

I grabbed Lola’s arm. She could run a hell of a lot faster than I could, so I knew there was only one thing to do.

“Lola, go.”

She looked over, her eyes wide with shock. “What?”

“Go. *Run*. Go get Greyson while I stay here. I’ll deal with the crew guys,” I said urgently, keeping my voice low.

Lola—for once—didn’t argue. She nodded and turned, taking off at top speed.

Ravi, still in his wolf form, had turned to the other wolf. He was clearly just as weirded out by this wolf’s sudden appearance as I was, and he had started to growl. My stomach twisted, worried that this was going to turn into some kind of werewolf fight. That was the *last* thing Codsworth needed to witness.

And while I knew Ravi was strong and capable and a natural fighter, I literally knew nothing about this other wolf. This could be anyone, capable of anything. There was so much risk.

When Codsworth and Nathan finally regained their feet, I grabbed at their arms.

“We need to get out of here,” I snapped. “Now.” I wished like hell that Artemis was with me. Apart from being good in a crisis, this was just the moment for her. She could have used her manipulation magic on these guys, making them forget everything they had just seen. Or were *about* to see, I corrected myself anxiously.

I cast another glance at the wolves, who had now started to pace around each other. If things got dangerous—if a werewolf fight were to break out—I knew I couldn’t let Codsworth and Nathan get hurt. I knew I would have to protect them, but I had to wonder if I could risk using my magic in front of them to do it.

My mind was spinning, trying to figure out how the hell I was going to get us all out of this when I heard a thunderous growl that knocked those thoughts out of my head in an instant. I spun around just in time to see Greyson’s massive grey wolf sprint out of the trees and leap in front of us.

Nathan screamed, the blood draining from his face so fast I could have sworn he was going to pass out.

“I—I think I’m going to be sick,” he stammered. Then he staggered and—no surprise—fainted at my feet.

Codsworth, on the other hand, hadn’t moved. He was frozen, staring wide-eyed at Greyson’s grey wolf. “That… wolf… biggest I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, great, but we really need to get out of here,” I said, tightening my grip on his arm. “You have to help me get Nathan.”

But Codsworth didn’t move a muscle. He was still staring at the wolves, completely immobilized by shock and fear.

Nathan groaned and rolled over just as Lola reemerged from the trees, panting. She stopped and looked around, taking in the wolves first, then Codsworth and me with Nathan on the ground at our feet. I was sure we made quite a picture.

“What happened to him?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Forget about that,” I groaned. “Will you just help me with him?”

Lola stepped forward and we each grabbed Nathan under an arm. We pulled him to his feet, and when I looked up, I saw that the unknown wolf had turned and was running away, racing into the woods.

*What should we do?* I asked Greyson.

*You should do nothing*, he said quickly. *You should get everyone back to the party.*

*What about the wolf?*

*Exactly*, he said. *We don’t know who this wolf is or why they’re here.*

*Okay*, I said, agreeing without argument. *But please, please be careful, Greyson. Like you said, we have no idea who this wolf is or what they’re capable of.*

*I will.*

Ravi broke into a run and took off after the strange wolf, disappearing into the darkness of the tress. This movement spurred me into action, and I grabbed Codsworth’s arm.

“Let’s go,” I said urgently.

Codsworth took a breath and seemed to recover his senses. He looked over at me. “No way.”

“*What?*” I asked, staring at him.

“I’m not going anywhere. I came here to get proof that werewolves are real. Why would I walk away when I’m looking right at all the proof I need.”

“Codsworth, you *can’t* be serious,” I said. “Come on. You’re being reckless. These aren’t werewolves, man. You’re talking crazy. These are just wild wolves and it’s crazy dangerous for us to be out here like this. They could attack us at any moment.”

“That’s why I brought these.” Codsworth rummaged around in his pack again and produced what looked like a butter knife.

It was not what I was expecting, and I squinted at it, trying to see it clearly in the dim light of the clearing. “What the hell is that?”

“I borrowed it from my grandmother. It’s pure silver!”

Fear shot through me like an arrow. I looked quickly over at Lola, who looked as freaked out as I felt.

It was incredible—Codsworth had gotten almost every single thing about werewolves wrong. Everything he thought he knew was based on antiquated myths and bedtime stories parents would tell their children to scare them into obedience. But then he pulled out the one myth that happened to be true—silver really *was* lethal to werewolves. After all those misses, he had somehow gotten that one right. And though his grandmother’s flatware didn’t look dangerous, it certainly was. If it really was silver, even that butter knife could kill Greyson.

Codsworth must have believed the same thing, because he stepped toward Greyson’s massive grey figure, the butter knife clutched in his hand—though I noticed that hand was shaking.

“Silver’s not going to do anything,” I said desperately. “It’s not a werewolf, Codsworth! It’s just a wolf, and that butter knife is just going to piss it off. And what if you miss?” I stared at him as he kept moving forward, feeling terror coursing through me. Did he really want to murder a werewolf?

Lola—who was also watching Codsworth—shot a glance at me, then rolled her eyes. “Screw this.” She stepped forward and reached out, neatly snatching the knife from Codsworth.

He spun around to look at her, startled. “What the hell. Why’d you do that?”

Lola looked down at the knife in her hands and snorted a laugh. “You might want to have a talk with your grandmother, kid. This knife isn’t silver—it’s stainless.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, not even bothering to hide it. At least that was one less thing to worry about.

*Get them out of here!* Greyson mind linked to me. *Now!*

He turned, about to take off after Ravi, when Codsworth jerked away from my grasp and stepped toward him.

“Not so fast, wolf man!”

A scream escaped my lips when I saw that Codsworth had shouldered his tranquilizer gun and was aiming it right at Greyson. When I saw that, my brain went on autopilot. I had seen firsthand what tranquilizers could do to werewolves—thanks to LIPS—so I didn’t hesitate before I summoned my magic. I raised my hands and held them before me, aiming a blast of magic directly at Codsworth.

**Episode 4882**

**Greyson**

I saw Cali’s magic hit Codsworth like a blast of sunlight at the same time I heard the tranquilizer gun fire. In that moment, I had an instant to wonder if Cali using her magic was a good idea. Though, I supposed it was better than letting me get hit with a tranquilizer dart. What Cali was going to tell her friends to explain her magic was a mystery to me—she was going to have to come up with some solution for that.

But that wasn’t my problem—not now anyway. The situation behind me handled, I turned and took off into the woods after Ravi, tracking the scent of the unknown wolf who had just appeared on our lands.

My mind raced as I ran, trying to make some sense of what had just happened, and this sudden appearance of a strange werewolf.

*Fuck.* The plan with Cali’s crew friends had been so simple and so straightforward. It *should* have worked perfectly. And it would have. Of all times for a Rogue werewolf to show up on Redwood land.

Ravi’s scent was easier to pick up, so I followed that. A quarter mile later I caught the scent of the other wolf, and I picked up my pace as I chased them both. The reality was that I had no idea why this wolf had entered my pack’s territory, but I was sure as hell going to find out. I had spent a lot of time and a lot of effort defending my pack from the likes of Malakai and a feral vampire-witch set on bloody revenge. And I had won, too, so I wasn’t about to let some random werewolf stroll onto our land and threaten us.

It was just one wolf, so there was a limit to the damage they could do alone, but the Redwood pack treated our land like a backyard. We often ran alone as wolves, and a Rogue hiding on our land could attack at any point. Beyond that, the pack understood what it meant for us to stay clear of human interference. We couldn’t have someone on our lands who might expose us to the attention of humans.

I leapt across a log that had fallen across the rough path and landed smoothly on the other side. The ground was still mostly frozen, and I increased my speed even more, anxious to catch up to Ravi. Even as I did this, I was keenly aware of the possibility of a vampire making an appearance tonight.

I let out an angry growl as I ran. This night was turning out to be a perfect storm.

Rounding a stand of trees, I practically slammed right into Ravi, who was stopped on the path just ahead of me.

I slammed on the breaks and swerved, barely missing him, then spun around to look at Ravi. *Where is she?* I demanded, looking quickly around.

That’s when I noticed that Ravi was looking around too. His furry brows were drawn down, as confused-looking as it was possible for a wolf face to seem. *I don’t know*, he said slowly. *She just… disappeared.*

I stared at him as an eerie sense of déjà vu washed over me. *That’s not possible.*

*She was here, and then she was just gone*, Ravi said again.

*Werewolves don’t just disappear, Ravi*, I told him. *Unless magic is involved*. I looked around again, wondering if that’s what we were dealing with. Then, I suddenly began to wonder if the visitor had been a werewolf at all. Or… something else entirely.

Ravi circled around, his nose to the ground as he moved, trying to pick up the scent of the wolf and figure out where she had gone.

I looked for tracks in places where the ground had started to soften. There was nothing where Ravi was standing, so I backtracked the way we had come until I found the pawprints of the other wolf. I looked for more in the trees but didn’t see any. The tracks did seem as though they had just stopped.

*I don’t understand how I lost her!* Ravi said, sounding frustrated as he made his way toward me. *I was so close to her, too. She was fast, but I never lost sight of her. I was gaining on her when suddenly—poof. She was just gone. Vanished.*

I ground my teeth, feeling frustrated as hell. I hated this. It was bad enough to have a random werewolf show up on our land to surprise us, but then to have it disappear right in front of our eyes? That wasn’t great. I was the Redwood Alpha. I had a responsibility to keep my pack safe from outside threats. And I knew perfectly well how it was going to look if I went back to the packhouse without any explanation of who this wolf was and where it had come from. Or worse—where it had gone.

*Greyson?* Ravi stepped in front of me. *What do you want me to do?*

What *did* I want Ravi to do? I wanted him to find that fucking werewolf, but I had seen those tracks just stop, and I couldn’t expect Ravi to pull a wolf out of thin air. I knew this wasn’t his fault, and I was determined not to take it out on him.

*We should head back*, I said gruffly.

*Just leave?* Ravi said, casting a look over his shoulder.

*There’s nothing more we can do out here. We’ll bring Rishika in on this.* That would be natural enough, now that she had accepted the offer to be my second.

*Yeah, okay*, Ravi agreed. He looked back the way we had come. *But what are we going to do about the humans?*

*I’m going to get rid of them*, I said without hesitation.

Ravi hesitated, and it occurred to me how threatening that had sounded.

*I’m pulling the plug on the party. I’m going to send everyone home*, I clarified.

*Oh, got it. Right. Smart*, Ravi said, sounding relieved.

*This is too serious*, I said, shooting another look into the trees. I knew the wolf wouldn’t be there, but I couldn’t stop myself from looking for her. *We can’t afford to compromise our safety to indulge Codsworth’s foolish little werewolf fantasy.*

*For real*, Ravi agreed. He looked around as well, like he couldn’t help it either, then turned to me.

*Let’s go*, I said.

We ran back the way we came, going more quickly this time since we weren’t tracking a stranger through the trees. We avoided the partiers, who were making a lot of noise as they tromped through the trees, and Ravi and I headed back toward the pack house. We stopped on the back porch and shifted to our human forms before we walked quietly into the kitchen through the back door.

I headed straight into the laundry room and was just throwing on a pair of joggers and a T-shirt when I heard the front door fly open.

I walked into the hallway just in time to see Xavier stomping into the entryway with Lucian at his heels. Shit. From the look on his face, I knew Xavier had heard about the werewolf.

He narrowed his eyes when he saw me. “Oh, there you are. Great plan, Greyson.”

I gave my brother a long look and pulled my shirt over my head. “After the night I’ve just had, I’m really not interested in your snarky comments, Xavier. That werewolf could have been a Rogue—we don’t know.”

“Just so you know, this has the *very* real potential of ruining my wedding,” Lucian complained. “I hope you know the kind of consequences that could have—”

“We have bigger problems than your catering plans, Lucian,” I snapped. “We don’t know anything about this wolf. We don’t know if she was here by chance or if she’s come intentionally.”

Xavier looked thoughtful. “I’ve heard something about a nomadic werewolf pack pushing up from Northern California. Maybe this could be one of them.”

I glared at my brother. “You *heard*? Couldn’t you have mentioned that piece of information a little sooner?”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know. Didn’t seem like that big of a deal. And I’m telling you now.”

My instinct was to shoot back a smart reply, but I bit my tongue. I couldn’t tell if Xavier was being honest with me about not thinking it was a big deal, or if he was just trying to piss me off. But either way, I didn’t want to escalate things between us—not now, when there was a looming threat still at large. We needed to cooperate, and that was easier to do when we weren’t at each other’s throats.

Anyway, the first thing I needed to do was shut down Cali’s party. I had just started toward the living room when Lucian stepped in front of me.

“Perhaps now is a good time to welcome me and the rest of the Vanguard pack back into the werewolf alliance?”

**Episode 4883**

I was dragging Codsworth, and Lola had been put in charge of a very delirious and loopy Nathan. We were pulling them both through the trees back in the direction of the pack house, but moving slowly.

“I can’t believe you shot me with a tranquilizer dart, *Codddddddsworth,*” Nathan slurred, looking sleepily peevish. “I thought we were friends. Friends for *liiiife*.”

Lola shot me a look, but I just shrugged.

“Not *coooooool*, man,” Nathan went on, slowly wagging his finger at his friend. “Friends don’t shoot other friends with tranquilizer darts. That’s like… rule number one. Everyone knows that.”

“I’m sorry, Nathan,” Codsworth said again. “I didn’t mean to. I swear. I still don’t know what happened. I was aiming right for that werewolf. I *know* I was. I swear something hit me just as I was firing.”

Lola snorted a laugh. She kept chuckling at the confusion of the guys, no matter how many dirty looks I shot her.

I knew I’d taken a big risk when I’d shot a blast of my magic at Codsworth, but what choice did I have? Codsworth’s confusion and curiosity after the fact wasn’t ideal, but I *had* stopped him from shooting Greyson. It was too bad about Nathan—who’d taken the dart in the ass and was now stumbling over a patch of even ground, kept from falling only by Lola’s iron grip—but what was I *supposed* to do?

When we stepped into the pack house clearing, Codsworth looked up, surprised. “What are we doing back here? And what’s going on? Why’s everyone leaving?” he asked, pointing to the house as people streamed out the front door to their cars.

Even from a distance, I could see Sage and Zainab at the door, waving and smiling in a very firm and final way, clearly indicating the party was over.

“Thanks for coming,” Sage said, turning someone around as they attempted to walk back into the house. “Your ride’s right *this* way,” she added, giving the guy a gentle shove toward the steps.

I knew the answer to Codsworth’s question—Greyson must have pulled the plug on the party. He would have to, so we could deal with this Rogue wolf situation. I looked around, wondering if he was back, and if he had found the werewolf. I had some questions that needed answers.

I searched the crowd for a sign of him—or Ravi—but I didn’t see either of them. Though it was hard to see anyone with so many people leaving all at once.

Next to me, Nathan moaned. When I looked over at him, I saw that he was starting to look pale.

“Lola, can you get Torin?” I asked. Maybe Torin could help Nathan recover from the tranquilizer, though I wasn’t sure how.

“Ugh. Fine. Some party this turned out to be,” Lola muttered, but she leaned Nathan on me and headed inside.

I sagged under his weight. Nathan was tall and thin but a lot heavier than he looked.

“What happened to Nathan?” Gael asked, walking down the steps toward Codsworth.

“Um…”

“He looks bad.”

“Is he going to be sick?”

“Dude! Nathan! How much have you had to drink?”

The rest of the team was heading toward us and as Codsworth tried to field their questions, Nathan leaned into me.

“I saw.”

I looked quickly over at him. “What?”

He nodded sleepily. “I saw what you did.”

I nearly dropped the guy to the ground. Shit. He had seen me summon my magic and shoot a blast of it at Codsworth. Shit. How could I have let that happen?! I knew it had been careless, but Codsworth had been pointing a tranquilizer gun at Greyson! I’d had to do *something*!

I thought fast, trying to figure out a way to lie myself out of the situation. The problem was that Nathan was a member of the cryptozoology club, so he was more likely to believe that I had magical powers than most other humans would be. I wasn’t sure what to do or what to say, so I dragged him a few steps away from the others, scrambling to find some credible explanation.

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously, trying to find out exactly what he had seen. “You saw me do what?”

Nathan’s eyes rolled back in his head and for a moment I was sure he had passed out, but then he looked at me again, his gaze fixed on me. “You were *so* brave, Cali!”

“Thank you?” I said warily, still not sure what the hell he was talking about.

“You stepped up when it mattered the *mossssst*. I know Codsworth will never admit it,” he said, waving sloppily in Codsworth’s direction, “but we were all scared to death when those giant wolves showed up. But *you*! You were so brave! You were so sure of yourself!”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

He grinned at me, his eyes unfocused. “You’re the best, Caliana Hart!” he said, throwing his arms around me to hug me.

It was kind of like being hugged by a drunk bear, but I was so relieved I almost started to laugh.

Nathan pulled back to look at me and wiped some drool from the corner of his mouth. “You really proved yourself today, Cali.”  
 “Cool. Thanks, Nathan.”  
 He nodded. “I just wish Chessa had been there to see it. Man, she would have been so impressed to see you back there, just staring down those wolves like it was no big deal.”

“Oh, that’s not really what happened,” I said, trying to play down the moment in the woods. “I was scared too. But thanks, Nathan. It really means a lot…”

I trailed off as Nathan’s eyes rolled back in his head again. But this time he didn’t recover. His mouth was moving but there were no words coming out. He seemed completely out of it now.

I glanced over toward Codsworth, wondering if he had seen anything, or if he was feeling any new suspicions about me. I watched him as he spoke with the team, demonstrating with the gun and acting out scenes I didn’t quite remember. It was clear he was playing up his own bravery in front of the wolves. It wasn’t exactly what had happened, but I wasn’t going to correct him. I was glad for his lies—as long as they deflected from the actual truth.

Lola appeared on the porch and walked down the steps, trailed by Torin.

“Torin, thank god. What can you do for my friend here?” I said, heaving Nathan toward him.

Torin took a look at Nathan and shook his head. “Tranquilizer? Not much. I think the best I can do for your friend is smelling salts,” he admitted. “There’s not a ton I can do in these situations.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, happily handing Nathan over to Torin. “Whatever you can do for him will be greatly appreciated. Even if it’s just making him comfortable.”

Relieved of my Nathan-shaped burden, I turned and found myself wrapped in Gael’s strong arms.

“That was an *awesome* party,” he said.

“I’m glad you had a good time,” I said, leaning back to look up into his face. He was tipsy and grinning down at me.

“But what are you going to do about…” He nodded back toward the pack house.

“About what?” I asked. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He laughed. “You’re so *greedy*, Cali!”

“Greedy?” I repeated. “What are you talking about, Gael?”

He snorted. “You know, most people would kill for just *one* hot guy, but you have two smoke shows.”

“Which one is your fave?” Bear asked, crowding into the conversation.

My face flushed with embarrassment. “I don’t…” I shook my head. I didn’t want to think about any of that right now. These guys were nice, but they had no idea how complicated my life was, so I just shrugged. “I’m torn.”

Gael leaned closer. “Between you and me, Greyson gets my vote.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

He nodded. “There’s something really sexy about his eyes. They don’t just look at you—they *grip* you.”

Bear threw his arm around Gael’s shoulders. “Okay, maybe it’s time to get going. Patel has the car over there,” he said, pointing.

Relieved, I waved goodbye as Bear led Gael toward the waiting car. Then I turned to Torin, who had helped Nathan to the ground and was crouching next to him. When I looked, I saw that Nathan was opening his eyes, slowly recovering with the help of Torin’s smelling salts.

Okay, that was *one* crisis avoided. I turned and looked around. Now I had to find Greyson and find out what the hell had happened with that strange wolf. Who was she and where had she come from?

But as I started toward the house, Ava appeared, blocking my way.

“Ava, what are you—”

Without waiting for me to finish my sentence, she grabbed me roughly by the arm and pulled. “Come with me.”

**Episode 4884**

**Xavier**

I snorted with laughter at Lucian’s request. I wasn’t the least bit surprised Lucian was using this moment to aid himself and his pack. Leave it to him to turn a moment of worry for everyone into something all about him. For Lucian, *everything* was about him.

“I don’t ask this for myself,” he said, shooting me a dirty look for the laugh. “This is really about what’s best for *all* the packs in the area.”

“Really?” Greyson asked warily.

“Of course. You have to admit that the alliance likely would have failed in the fight against the Bitterfangs if it wasn’t for the invaluable help of myself and the Vanguard—”

“I’m not going to argue with you about the Vanguard pack’s role in that fight,” Greyson interrupted, looking peevish. “This isn’t the time for that. This isn’t the moment to relive the past, I have to deal with the situation at hand.”

“Well, you shouldn’t take too long to come to a decision about the alliance,” Lucian warned, “or the Vanguards might just find another pack to build an alliance with.” He ignored me when I laughed again. “But I’m sure you will make the right choice, Greyson Evers. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go find my beloved forest rose.”

“Such an ass,” I muttered to myself as I watched Lucian walk away. Then I turned to Greyson. “What are you going to do about that?”

Greyson nodded. “I don’t know. Let him back in I guess.”

“Really? Just like that?”

He shrugged. “No reason not to bring them back in.”

“I think you’re being too rash,” I told him. “What about Mace? And Porter? And me? The other Alphas in the alliance? You’re not the only one, you know. Shouldn’t we all have a say in this?”

“I suppose so, but I don’t think *you’re* in a position to make a call like that,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means that you should work your own shit out and let me figure out the pack stuff—”

“Why the fuck are you treating me like this?” I demanded, taking a step toward him. “Like a sub-Alpha”

Greyson didn’t flinch. “I’m only repeating what you told me—you need time to work on some stuff. I’m giving you that time. Whatever you need. But in the meantime, the world doesn’t stop, Xavier. Shit happens, things have to get done, decisions have to be made. If you had been on the ball, you would have mentioned that nomadic pack before now, not just when a stranger shows up in our backyard.”

“I was planning to,” I spat.

“But you didn’t,” Greyson retorted. “You were distracted. And understandably so. You’ve got a lot of shit going on. I’m just trying to give you the space you asked for to work on it.” He gave me a long look. “Go home, Xavier. Work out your issues and then we can talk. I’ll handle things. Just like I always do.”

And with that he turned and walked away, leaving me standing alone in the hall. I heard him walk into the living room.

“Everyone out!” he bellowed. “Party’s over. You don’t have to go home, but you do have to get the hell out of my house!”

I pushed a hand through my hair, thinking hard. I wondered if Greyson was right—though if he was, it would still piss me off. It wasn’t like I couldn’t juggle more than one thing at a time, but all this shit with Cali and Ava was messing with me, making it hard to focus on other things. Maybe it was even clouding my judgment. But still, I was the Alpha of the Samara pack. I couldn’t *not* be involved in the decisions that would affect my pack.

I knew that Greyson, and Cali—and the rest of the Redwoods—had some trust issues with me, but that sucked, too. Couldn’t they see that I wasn’t lying or covering anything up anymore? And it wasn’t like I had ever done that shit because I’d *wanted* to. I’d done it because Adéluce had *forced* me too. I was the same Xavier they had always known—loyal and uncompromised.

But they wouldn’t see it.

It didn’t help things that Greyson was basically negating any progress I made. It had always been this way, but it was even worse now. Greyson had only ever seen in me exactly what he *expected* to see. Nothing more.

I balled my hands into fists as frustration washed over me. It shouldn’t be like this. It didn’t have to be, did it?

Maybe there was something I could do. Something to prove myself.

Part of me hated that I was even thinking about that. Why should I have to prove myself to anyone? I had done plenty to prove my contributions to the pack were worthwhile. Hadn’t I saved the pack? Hadn’t I kept Cali alive? And I’d had to torture myself to do it.

At least Ava believed in me. She didn’t fully understand what I had gone through, but that didn’t matter. She had faith in me. She always had. She was loyal to a fault, and I knew she would always be in my corner.

Not that Cali wasn’t loyal, but she had been hurt—understandably—by what I’d said and done under Adéluce’s power.

I realized that my finger was pressing against my lips. I hadn’t noticed, but I’d been thinking of how I had kissed her, and how she had pushed me away. That had broken my heart. Then she’d walked away before I could even talk to her.

My chest ached when I thought about that. I hated this feeling, and it wasn’t even something I could explain to anyone else. Though if I mentioned it, I’m sure Ava would push me to talk to the therapist about it.

Fuck that.

As much as it pained me to admit it, Greyson was right. There were more pressing matters at hand.

I glared at him as he pushed partygoers out the door. He thought he could handle things on his own. The implication that I was being irresponsible by trying to take care of all this other shit in my life really stung, and I hated that he had thrown that in my face.

I was pissed at myself for not mentioning the nomadic pack to Greyson or any of the other Alphas. I had meant to, but just hadn’t gotten around to it. I hadn’t seen the urgency in it.

But that was before a strange werewolf appeared out of nowhere, then disappeared. Now that there was a threat, was it possible for me to use my information to my advantage? Something I could do to earn back a little of the trust that had been stolen away from me by the fucking vampire-witch’s influence on my life?

My jaw set, I headed out the door. If Greyson wanted to play alliance dictator, that was fine with me. I would let him deal with Lucian and all his bullshit. As for me, I was going to go out and do what needed to be done.

I hurried down the steps and looked around for my pack but stopped in my tracks when I spied Ava a little ways away, talking to Cali.

Fucking hell. What was it *now*?

I had just taken a step toward them to see what was going on, when Marissa stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Just let it be.”

“Uh, I don’t know if that’s a smart choice,” I said.

“I know you’re having trust issues, Xavier, and maybe a way to fix that is to start trusting people around you.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Ava will always have your back. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know that,” I said. She was right, of course. I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I want the whole pack to head back to the pack house. We need to move out.”

Marissa shot a glance over her shoulder at where Ava and Cali were standing, speaking quietly. “Is it so they can’t talk?”

“It’s because I’m the Samara Alpha. *Your* Alpha,” I snapped. I was getting pretty fucking sick of being second-guessed all the time. “I want the pack back at the pack house. Now. And I want a full pack meeting first thing tomorrow that everyone needs to be rested and ready for. You got me?”

Marissa raised her eyebrows, apparently shocked by my reaction. “Okay, I got you. But that was a little harsh.”

I could feel the tension in my jaw rising up the back of my neck. “I guess I’m not in the best mood, but I mean what I say. Get the pack home and tell everyone about the meeting. Tell them to get a good night’s sleep because first thing tomorrow morning, we’re going after that nomadic pack.”

**Episode 4885**

*Ugggghhh.*

I didn’t want to make a big scene as everyone was leaving the party, but talking to Ava *really* wasn’t something I was in the mood for after the night I’d had. Not that I was *ever* in the mood to talk to Ava.

But right now I really wanted to find Greyson. So much had happened tonight that I needed to talk to him about, and none of it involved Ava.

“What do you want?” I asked shortly.

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a steely look. Those were the only kinds of looks she ever gave me. “I want what I’ve always wanted—to do what’s best for Xavier.”

This hit me right in the gut. She was right—that *was* what Ava always wanted. Even with all her other flaws, she was always looking out for Xavier.

But Ava wasn’t finished. “And right now, the best thing for him is for you to leave him alone.”

My mind flipped back to the last time Xavier had kissed me, when I’d rejected him, even though it had hurt like hell to pull away from him. And I thought about how Xavier had seemed stricken. But not by the rejection—it was as though just *being* with me had rattled him. Like he was cursed or something.

I thought over what Ava just said and nodded. There was no point in bringing up the kiss, so I didn’t mention that. “Well, you don’t need to worry. I’ve made it clear that I’m not going to interfere with Xavier. *He’s* the one who hurt me.”

Her blue eyes were chilly. “Yeah, and you won’t ever let him forget it, will you?”

I bristled. “You know, *I’m* not the only one seeking out interactions with him. He’s coming to me, too. Instead of talking to me, maybe your time would be better spent talking to *him*.”

I spun on my heel to storm away, but Ava grabbed my arm again.

“You know you’re killing him, right?”

I stared at her in shock. “What are you talking about? What am *I* doing to hurt Xavier?”

Ava leaned in. “Every time he sees you, it hurts him. Physically hurts him.”

I sucked in a breath as my mind spun. I thought back to the suspicions I’d been having. Did Ava know something she wasn’t telling me?

“Is Xavier okay? Is he under some kind of curse again?”

She released my arm with a hollow laugh. “The only curse is that he’s mated to you,” she said bitterly. “Maybe there’s nothing he can do to change that, but if you care about him at all—if you have any actual feelings for him—listen to what I’m telling you. Stay away from him.”

I wanted to stomp my feet in exasperation. I was *trying* to stay away from him. It was Xavier that was making that hard. And—more importantly—I didn’t like ultimatums from Ava. “How about this—why don’t *you* stay away from *me*? And what if it’s not me hurting him, Ava. What if it’s you?”

Her face darkened dangerously, but I was done with the conversation. I pushed past her, ramming my shoulder into hers as I headed toward the house. Screw Ava.

But as I walked up the porch stairs, I began to have some doubts. She’d said I was hurting Xavier. I hated to believe anything she said to me, but Xavier hadn’t looked well. Could any of what Ava had said to me actually be true?

I had seen Xavier in pain, but when I’d asked, he’d told me that it involved his two mates. Which meant that I was right, too. That it was possible that being around Ava was hurting him just as much as being around me. And they lived together. Which meant that Xavier might be in constant pain.

The thought of Xavier weighed down with constant pain made my steps heavy with sadness. I slowed so much I came to a stop at the top of the steps and leaned against the post for a moment. To call what Xavier and I had been going through a *rough patch* would be a *massive* understatement. It was like we didn’t know how to talk to each other anymore. We were trying, but it was like we were speaking different languages. But as upset as I was with him, I would never wish something so terrible on him. I hated to think of him feeling pain of any kind, especially because of something I did.

But I’d meant what I’d said to Ava. I know she thought she was looking out for Xavier, but I figured she needed to take a good look in the mirror before she put all the blame for whatever was going on with him on me. I didn’t know what was happening with Xavier, and it wasn’t like Ava had given me any useful information to go on, but I did know that—whatever it was—it wasn’t *just* my fault.

I leaned my head against the post of the porch, feeling all the stress and worry of the night knit its way into my shoulders. My neck ached, and I put a hand to it, trying to massage out a knot at the base of it.

What about my own pain? Seeing Xavier with Ava had never ceased to be a complete shock to me, and it hurt me deeply, every time. But that was part of the *due destini*. And the only one who could fix that problem was me.

I was going to have to choose—Xavier or Greyson.

I figured whatever Xavier was going through must be similar to that. Which meant that only *he* could fix that.

“Hey!”

I looked up, pulling myself from my thoughts, and looked around.

Beau, one of the crew members, was waving drunkenly at me. “Great party, Lil’ Hart! Have another one soon, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, not meaning a word of it. Then I turned and headed into the house. I saw Greyson as soon as I walked in and immediately felt my tension ease. Just seeing him made me feel better, and I smiled as I watched him. He was in the living room, having effectively pushed the party out the door, and had everyone in the pack in cleanup mode.

Sage had abandoned her place at the door and was walking around with a trash bag, collecting cups and plates. She looked disgusted as she pulled a slice of pizza out from between the cushions of the couch.

“Greyson,” I said, walking over to where he was wiping a spatter of beer off a window. “Hey, what happened?”

“Hey, love, there you are.”

“What happened in the woods?” I asked impatiently. “Did you find the wolf?”

He shook his head. “No, we didn’t.”

I stared at him in surprise. “You didn’t?”

“Ravi was tracking her. I caught her scent, too, but by the time I caught up to her, she was gone.”

“Gone *where*?” I asked, confused.

“Just… gone,” he said. “We tried to find the trail again, but her scent petered out and her tracks stopped.”

“But… how can that be?” I asked, a strange fear gripping me.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “Ravi and I were careful, but she was just gone. I can’t explain it.”

I twisted my fingers together. The way Greyson spoke about this wolf made me uneasy. “I feel like we’ve been through something like this before.”

He smiled. “I know, it’s weird, but just because I can’t explain it doesn’t mean that I’m not going to do something about it. I’m determined to figure out who this wolf was and why the hell she was trespassing on Redwood territory.”

“Do you think she could be connected to the vampire scent Lola picked up earlier?” I wondered.

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t know. It is a weird coincidence. I’m not sure, but I’m not going to rule anything out.”

“Right,” I said. I was glad Greyson was determined to do something about this, but I was still nervous.

Greyson glanced around, then leaned toward me. “By the way, I never got a chance to thank you for making Codsworth miss with that tranquilizer gun. That would have been a real pain in the ass.”

I snorted a laugh, thinking of poor Nathan. “I know it was risky, but I had to do something. I wasn’t going to let anyone shoot at my mate. And I should be thanking you, anyway,” I said, shaking my head. “Maybe things didn’t go as planned, but I’m pretty sure Codsworth and the other guys might think twice before coming back to the woods to hunt werewolves. I think we managed to scare them straight.”

Greyson chuckled and leaned forward to press a kiss to my lips. “I’d say we make a pretty good team.”

I wrapped my arms around him and leaned in, pulling my body against his. But even as I hugged him, I started to wonder—what if Codsworth *didn’t* drop the werewolf hunting kick?

Then what?

**Episode 4886**

**Artemis**

*Should we stop playing games, Ari?*

Marius’s words echoed in my head, making my racing heart beat even faster. When I looked at him, I saw him staring back at me with hunger in his eyes. I felt his nearness to me—we were barely a breath apart—but my thoughts flew away from him, and back to Rishika. I *knew* I shouldn’t be doing this, but… why not? There was a big part of me wondering what was holding me back.

When we had spoken about our relationship before I left, Rishika had told me that we were going to need to be realistic. She had pointed out that we were going to be apart for who knew how long, and that she didn’t want anything holding me back from my quest to find Kadmos. Especially not her.

I hadn’t wanted to agree to a breakup, but I had wanted to consider it from Rishika’s perspective. I was the one leaving, after all. I was going off to the Fae world, while Rishika was getting left behind. And I didn’t want her to be stuck in limbo after I left, feeling heartbroken.

I looked at Marius again and his kiss-swollen lips. *This* couldn’t have been what Rishika wanted either. She wouldn’t have wanted me to find the one other person I’d ever had serious feelings for.

Marius leaned back in, kissing me again. He kissed his way down my neck, pulling me even closer. Our bodies were pressed tightly against each other as I straddled him. I could feel his arousal through his pants pressing against my stomach.

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?” he murmured, his lips against my neck.

I tensed. I felt suddenly completely exposed, as though all my layers of clothes had disappeared. I felt vulnerable, which I absolutely hated feeling, and—to make it worse—Marius could apparently read me like a freaking book.

“It’s okay,” he went on. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Ari,” he said softly.

But I could see the look in his eyes, and I didn’t think he meant that. I was pretty good at reading Marius, too.

I gritted my teeth. I was so frustrated—not with Marius, but with myself. I didn’t know what to do, and I *hated* that feeling. I wasn’t used to being so indecisive. I never had been before. I couldn’t be. A bounty hunter’s life depended on being able to make thousands of split-second decisions, sometimes based on nothing more than a gut feeling about what to do.

And yet here I was—tangled up with Marius in the dusty dark.

He pressed harder against me, wrapping an arm tightly around my waist. I gasped, but he held up a hand, telling me to be quiet, his eyes darting quickly to the door. When my heart had stopped pounding in my ears, I could hear why—a group of townspeople were passing close by. We could hear them talking and laughing, and we both held our breath until their voices faded into the distance.

Marius met my eyes again, this time with a smile. “We better be quiet,” he whispered.

Slowly, he released his hold on my waist and his hands found my hips again. They were strong on me and the feeling of the pressure of his fingers digging into my skin was making it hard for me to follow directions. My heartbeat was in my throat, and it felt like my legs were going to give out, even though I was sitting.

He seemed to notice this, and his smile grew. He brushed his hands upward, trailing them softly along my skin, making me shiver with the sensation. “So what do you want to do?” he asked, his voice husky and hoarse.

This was a tricky question. I knew what my body wanted. And there was a time—not too long ago—when that was all the information I needed. I would have gone with that. But that was before I had met Rishika. Had things really changed that much for me?

And the part of my brain that was still rational knew that even if I *did* manage to ignore the physical urge to be with Marius, there was still the emotional connection we shared. It wasn’t just that I wanted Marius—I *needed* him. Needed him in a way that shocked me. I needed the connection that we had—the shared history. I could feel it coming from him, too. It had been eating at both of us since we’d met up again. Maybe the best thing to do would just be to get it over with. Just screw Marius and get these old feelings out of the way, once and for all.

I hadn’t answered him, and I hadn’t moved—I’d been too lost in thought—and Marius’s smile turned suddenly wistful.

“Ah. I see. Well, maybe I read things wrong,” he said, his grip on me loosening.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I spoke. “You didn’t.”

His brows furrowed ever so slightly. “Ari? I—”

I didn’t let him finish before I leaned in and kissed him, hoping that would shut him up. Hoping he would stop asking me questions I couldn’t answer.

And it worked. He tightened his grip on me and in one motion, he lifted me up. He stood and pushed me back, hard, slamming me against the wall. As my toes searched for the floor, his hands slipped under my clothes and against my skin, leaving me panting as they moved down my back, hungrily.

I grabbed at him, trying to assert my own dominance. I didn’t want Marius to think he was navigating the ship on his own. My hands found their way underneath his shirt. I explored the feel of his muscled chest, but as quickly as I’d felt his hot skin, Marius nudged my hands away. He kissed and licked and bit another patch of my skin. He was moving fast, and I barely registered when he grabbed both my wrists in one hand and held them up above my head.

“*Hey*,” I said, pushing against his hold. I’d been enjoying what I’d been doing.

“Be good for once in your life, Ari,” he said as he moved his kisses down my neck.

“Oh gods,” I moaned.

With his free hand he pushed my shirt up, his kisses finding my chest and working and their way down to my breasts.

He flicked his tongue across one hardened nipple, then the other. I pushed against his hold on me, needing to sink my hands into his hair. My back arched as his teeth grazed my sensitive skin, biting, and making my knees buckle. He gave each breast ample attention before he trailed his mouth down my stomach.

“*Fuck*,” I panted, dropping my head back against the wall, sweat covering me. This was different than how sex had ever been between us. Not that sex with him had ever been bad; it had just been, well, to the point. But this… *this* was something else. This was him taking his time.

He finally released my hands as he knelt in front of me, moving his hands to grip onto my leggings. I could feel the heat of him between my legs, and I moaned.

He looked up at me with a smile. “Everything okay, Ari? You want to stop?”  
 I did *not* want him to stop, but also… “How did you learn *that*?” I asked him, referring to everything he’d just done.

He chuckled. “Practice,” he said with a casual shrug.

I felt a strange pang of jealousy—which was absurd. I was *jealous*? I had no right to be of course. I didn’t *own* Marius. I hadn’t seen him in years. But I also didn’t need to be reminded that he’d been with others.

Marius must have seen some of this on my face because his smile turned into a teasing grin. “Are you *jealous*, Ari?”

Heat flushed my face. I hated that he read me so easily—easily enough to call me out like that. But I fought down my embarrassment and shook my head. “You were just telling me to keep it down.” I raised my eyebrows suggestively. “So maybe it’s your turn to be quiet.”

He grinned wider and nodded, then slowly pulled off my leggings. When he saw my underwear—a blue pair from the human world—he sucked in a breath. “Doesn’t leave much to the imagination.”

“Gods, Marius, don’t you ever just—”

But then he dragged his tongue right down the center of the fabric, and I stopped talking. I don’t even think I was capable of it. I could feel the heat from his mouth through the cotton, and I sucked in a breath.

“I’m not teasing,” he said, hooking his fingers into the underwear. “I like them. But not enough to keep them on.”

He pulled them down, then reached between my legs. I couldn’t stop the moan that escaped as he slid a finger along my sex. He smiled, feeling how aroused I was. Then he hooked one of my legs onto his shoulder, opened me wide, and slipped his tongue into me.

I closed my eyes, and fireworks exploded as I fought to grab onto something to hold myself up. Searing heat flooded through me as he thoroughly tasted me. He drove his tongue into me, again and again, before swirling and sucking on my clit. I whimpered, desperately trying not to scream, when Marius slid two fingers into me, curling them.

Then, distantly, I heard the sound of people speaking outside the door again.

“Marius…” I’d meant it to be a warning, but instead I moaned his name. “Someone… *coming*!”

But all Marius seemed to hear was *coming*, and he gripped my thigh harder, easing a third finger into me, and kept his tongue’s pace as I began to shake. I was close to climaxing, and though there was an alarm going off in my head, he was pushing me over the edge.

I dug my hands into his hair, gripping hard. “Oh gods, yes. *Yes.* Fuck.”

I came hard. Squeezing my eyes shut, I saw spots as waves of pleasure drowned me. He didn’t stop teasing me, drawing as much out of my orgasm as possible. And just then, the door of the abandoned building burst open, and a group of people crowded into the doorway, staring directly at us.

**Episode 4887**

When the last of the party debris was picked up and the trash had been taken out, Greyson locked the doors, and we headed upstairs. Inside his room, he shut the door and stepped into the bathroom to get ready for bed. It was late and I was tired, so I pulled out some pajamas from a drawer, but instead of putting them on, I just held them while I paced. I was feeling anxious and couldn’t stop thinking about Codsworth.

“What do you think we should do about Codsworth?” I asked.

Greyson stuck his head out of the bathroom. “What do you mean?” he asked, mumbling around the toothbrush in his mouth.

“Like if he won’t drop the werewolf thing,” I explained.

“Ah.” He finished brushing his teeth and came out of the bathroom. He stepped in front of me, putting his hands on my shoulders. “If he won’t, then we’ll do what we always do. We’ll deal with it.”

I nodded. I liked that he had said *we’ll deal with it*. I liked that he had included me in that thought, but I was still worried.

“Werewolves have always lived under the threat of being discovered, you know,” he said as he pulled off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper. “This kind of curiosity isn’t exactly a new development for us.”

“I know, but…” I trailed off.

“I know you’re worried, but really don’t think Codsworth is as big a threat as you’re making him out to be,” he said.

“You don’t think so?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nah. He’s just a young kid with ideas about seeing werewolves in the woods. At the end of the day, who’s going to believe him?”

I could see he had a point. I knew better, but that was a story that would sound crazy to most everyone else he said it to. So why couldn’t I just accept that? Greyson was right—werewolves had been around for a long time, and they had always managed to stay hidden. And while I knew Greyson and the rest of the pack had a lot of resources and options when it came to protecting their existence, I knew I didn’t have to worry about anything happening to Codsworth or any of the rest of the team. I trusted that Greyson would never resort to violence unless it was absolutely necessary.

The best evidence of that was Dick Wigbert, who was still alive and walking around.

“How do you think the party went?” Greyson asked, pulling down the comforter on the bed. “In all the commotion, all I really wanted to do was celebrate the regatta victory.”

I laughed and pulled on a pair of soft shorts. “It was okay. A bit of a shit show, but I think everyone had a good time anyway. Even Lucian,” I added, making Greyson roll his eyes.

“That guy. Did he have to plan his wedding so close to my mom’s?”

I pulled on an oversized T-shirt. “I think you already know the answer to that one.”

“I guess I do,” he said with a sigh.

“But don’t worry about it,” I assured him. “I’m going to take care of it. And I already got Lola to agree to help me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure if getting Lola onboard is a positive selling point, love, but I’m going to trust you.”

“Oh? Like I trust you?” I asked teasingly.

He shook his head, looking suddenly tired. “Yeah, well, at least somebody does.”

I frowned at the sudden turn in his mood. “Where did that come from?”

He climbed into bed. “Nowhere. Forget I said anything.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. “That didn’t come from nowhere, and neither did this,” I said, pressing my finger between his brows, where a worried crease had formed. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, the crease deepening.

I looked at him for a moment, then remembered seeing Xavier leaving the house just before I walked in. “Did Xavier say something to you?”

Greyson heaved a gusty sigh as he leaned back on the pillows. “Oh, you know how it is with my brother.”

“How is it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “We’re just on rocky ground again. It’s always something. Now it’s this thing with that wolf from the woods. He just refuses to trust that I can take care of the pack without his interference.”

I thought back to my run-in with Ava and how she had tried to blame me for Xavier’s problems. I looked at the worried look on Greyson’s face and wondered if Xavier was doing the same thing to him.

“Hey, come here,” Greyson said, grabbing my arm and tugging me gently toward him. “Let’s get that worried look off your face. I don’t want to talk about my brother right now.”

“Maybe we *should* talk,” I said nervously. “I mean, if not now, when?”

“I don’t know,” he said, rubbing a hand across his eyes. “Maybe you’re right. All I know is that I’m tired, Cali. I’m tired of carrying Xavier and all his troubles around on my back. Can we just not go there? Not right now?”

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Greyson had a point, and I needed to back off. I’d meant what I’d told Ava—whatever problems Xavier was dealing with, only Xavier could solve them. And no amount of talking or worrying or Greyson and me twisting ourselves into knots would fix them.

Greyson had let go of me and was looking out the window at the night, the crease between his eyes again.

I crawled up the bed and slid between the sheets, settling next to him. “Hey,” I said softly.

He looked over at me. “Hey.”

“No matter what’s going on with Xavier, you know that I love you, right?”

He smiled a weary smile. “I know.”

“And I’m not just saying this to make you feel better. I really do mean it.” And I did. Even if Xavier suddenly decided to leave Ava and the Samaras and came back, demanding to reenter my life, it wouldn’t change how deeply I felt about Greyson. Looking at him now, in the quiet of our bedroom, I knew nothing could change how I felt about him.

He leaned down to kiss me. “I know you love me, Cali, but I never get tired of hearing it.”

I smiled up at him. “I think you’ve had a tough day. Maybe what you need is a back massage. How about it?”

“You don’t have to—”

“I *want* to,” I insisted. “Turn over onto your stomach,” I instructed, giving his shoulder a push.

He hesitated, then reluctantly turned onto his stomach, his head to the side.

I straddled him at his hips, glad he had ditched his shirt before he’d gotten into bed.

“You really don’t have to, love,” he said again.

“I’m not just doing it for you, you know,” I told him.

“Oh no?” he asked.

“No way. I’ve been dying to get my hands on you all day,” I told him, cracking my knuckles.

That made him chuckle, which turned into a long sigh as I pressed my hands onto his lower back. He was all muscle, but I could feel how tense everything was, so I pressed harder, kneading my fists into the knot of muscles just above his ass.

“And I wasn’t the only one,” I added.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, his voice turning sleepy.

“Oh, someone on the crew team just happens to think you’re pretty smoking hot,” I told him, making my way up his spine.

“Hmm,” he hummed. “I don’t really care what other people think about me. The only thing that’s important to me is what you think.”

I looked down at the man beneath me. His skin was golden, and it practically glowed as I ran my hands over it. His back looked like something from Da Vinci’s sketchbook, and he was wondering what *I* thought about him? He was a freaking *god*.

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe that this amazing man was my mate. Sometimes I wanted to pinch myself. I was so lucky to have found him.

“So,” he said, his speech starting to slur as I made my way up to his shoulders.

“So what?” I asked, pressing on a knot at the base of his neck.

He groaned for a moment, then recovered himself. “So what do you think? About me?”

I smiled to myself, then leaned down so my lips were close to his ear. “I think you look good in clothes, Greyson,” I whispered, feeling daring, “but even better without them.”

In an instant, all my hard work was undone. Greyson’s body went rigid, and he turned his head, his eyes flashing at me in a way that sent a wave of heat southward. “Then help yourself, love, and take them off.”

**Episode 4888**

**Greyson**

Cali’s eyes grew wide, but she slid off me and slipped her fingers into the waist of my joggers. I watched as she slid them down and tossed them to the side. Her expression was a mix of the determination I’d seen on her face a million times before, mingled with a familiar, thrilling hunger in her eyes.

I was growing impatient, but when I reached out to pull down my boxers, she stopped my hand.

“No,” she said quietly, “Let me enjoy every minute of this.”

The low, husky tone of her voice sent heat flooding through me, and I watched as she pulled my boxer briefs off, leaving me naked on the bed.

I felt strangely off-kilter—I was often naked while Cali was still clothed, but this was different. This was us stripping each other bare. She raked her eyes down my body, taking me in like she was starving, and I was a banquet spread just for her.

I grinned up at her. “Okay, now that you’ve had your eyeful, it’s *my* turn.”

Her eyes met mine, and when she caught my meaning, her cheeks flushed. I marveled as I watched her blush, astonished that I could still elicit that kind of an innocent response from her—and it only made me want her more.

Reaching for her, I brushed my fingers lightly down her arm and smiled when she shivered under my touch. I grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and pulled it slowly off, enjoying the process of revealing her skin inch by inch.

When it was off, I gazed at her, running my fingers gently across the undersides of her breasts. She moaned and when her nipples hardened, my mouth started to water. But I was committed to being patient. I slipped off her soft shorts, then hooked my fingers into the waist of her panties.

Cali’s face was completely flushed now, and her eyes were flashing, watching my every move. I smirked at her. There was no use playing coy—I was naked, so she could easily see how aroused I was. I grabbed her by the hips and pulled her under me, laying her back on the bed. I leaned down and kissed her. She moaned into my mouth when I traced my cock along the thin fabric of her panties.

“Greyson, oh my god,” she panted, pulling away to speak. “Do you want me to beg?”

“You’re not undressed yet,” I reminded her, brushing my fingers across the lace of her panties.

She let out a frustrated breath and reached to pull them off, but I pushed her hand away, just like she had done to me.

“No, no, you’re going to let me have my fun, aren’t you?”

She sucked in a breath as she looked up at me. “Are you teasing me?”

“So what if I am?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, you know, two can play at that game.”

“What did you have in mi—” I stopped talking when her hand wrapped around my cock. Her grip was strong and sure, and when she began to stroke me, my mind went blank. Fuck, I would never be over when she was assertive like this.

She smiled when she saw the look on my face and reached up to kiss me, opening her mouth as my tongue plunged in.

“You little vixen,” I growled, speaking against her lips.

But she just laughed and stroked harder. “You tease me, I tease you back.”

I could feel pressure building inside of me as her hand worked my cock. She varied the pressure and the speed, and when she started going faster, sparks exploded at the edges of my vision. Lust was threatening to take over, but I was determined to make her come. I pushed her hand away, and without even bothering to take them off, I eased her panties to the side.

She moaned. “Please, Greyson,” she said. “Fuck, I need you. Please.”

Hearing her beg nearly drove me over the edge, but I focused as slowly pushed inside her. She gasped in pleasure, and she hitched her legs around my hips. I circled my hips as I pumped inside of her, then I reached down to massage her clit, and I could feel her starting to shake.

“Good,” I groaned. “Come for me. I want to see you.”

“Greyson—*fuck*.”

She tightened around me, her nails digging into my back. I fucking loved it. I didn’t let up my rhythm; I wanted to watch her come undone beneath me. And she did. I was right behind her, my whole body tightening as my climax overtook me. I pumped into her as it crested, then retreated, leaving us both hot and sweaty and breathless.

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The next morning, I woke up early. I hadn’t meant to, I just opened my eyes and felt wide awake. Next to me, Cali was still asleep, and I looked at her for a long moment, taking in the way the cool morning light played over her peaceful features.

When I leaned in and kissed her forehead, she moaned softly, and I considered staying in bed. It was tempting—especially when I thought back to our night together.

But I slid out of bed. I wanted to get a workout in, and I needed to focus. The nonsense with Codsworth aside, there was still the question of the unknown wolf in the woods, and the possibility of an encroaching vampire. Two very real threats—just another day with the Redwood pack.

I pulled on my joggers and a T-shirt and headed downstairs. The house was quiet in the early morning, but I caught sight of Torin in the kitchen, making breakfast, and when I made it down to the weight room in the basement, I was surprised to find Rishika already there.

She was doing squats with a shocking amount of weight, and when I walked in, she glared over at me.

“Morning,” I said warily, noting her attitude. “Everything go okay last night?”

She took out an earbud. “What’d you say?”

“Last night? Did everything go okay?” I repeated.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. She set up her weights again and stepped beneath them. “Sage and Lilac patrolled and didn’t report seeing anything unusual.”

She did a quick rep of five squats, then re-racked the bar with a loud clang.

I looked at her carefully. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she said with a shrug. “Why?”

I watched as she moved to the free weights and picked up a twenty-pound set. She apparently found it wanting and tossed it angrily back onto the rack, then picked up the twenty-five pound.

Yeah, I didn’t buy that there was nothing wrong. Something was off.

“I’m just wondering why you’re treating the weights like they’ve insulted your honor. It’s barely five in the morning. What could have gone wrong so early?”  
 Rishika looked over at me, then sighed. “I couldn’t sleep.”

I thought about that for a minute. I couldn’t imagine that it was the patrol that had kept her up. She’d just said Lilac and Sage hadn’t reported anything unusual. Which meant it could only be one thing—

“Artemis?” I asked.

She didn’t answer right away, but she didn’t have to. I could see the answer in her eyes.

“I just thought it would be easier,” she said quietly, looking down, like she was admitting something shameful. “I mean, it was my idea for us to take a break, after all.”

I nodded. I could only imagine what Rishika must have been going through. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to take a break from Cali. I think it would kill me.

“I’m sorry, Greyson,” Rishika said, looking up at me. “I want to make it clear to you that whatever I’m going through in my personal life isn’t going to affect my pack duties—”

“Rishika, stop. I don’t care about that,” I said, putting my hand up. “Your personal life matters to me. You’re part of this pack. You’re my friend. I just want to make sure that you’re okay. What are you doing to get through this? And what can we do to—”

I stopped talking and looked around in confusion. There was a strange kissing sound, and I had no idea where it was coming from.

“What the hell was that?”

Rishika looked confused. “Hear what? I didn’t hear anything.”

“There it is again!” I said, spinning around, wondering where the strange, wet, smooching sound was coming from. And then I saw Rishika’s phone on the ground. I reached for it, and from behind me Rishika lunged. We both grabbed for it at the same time, making the phone flip faceup, and I saw a message:

*From: Phoebe*

*When are we finally going to stop flirting online and meet in person???*

I glanced up at Rishika, one eyebrow raised, and saw that her face had gone bright pink.

“That’s not what it—she’s just a friend—it’s probably a mistake. I don’t know where she…” Rishika stammered, fumbling for her phone and jamming it into her pocket.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said. “Artemis is gone. You broke up, and you’re trying to move on. I get it. You don’t have to explain anything to me.” I paused. “I do just have one question.”

“What?” she asked cautiously.

“Are you going to tell Cali?”

**Episode 4889**

**Xavier**

The sun was just coming up as I sprinted through the woods along the border of the Samara land. I was on my regular patrol, but after what happened on the Redwood land with the strange werewolf showing up out of nowhere, and then disappearing, I was looking out for anything that seemed out of the ordinary. I’d yet to see anything unusual, however, and although I was keeping my eyes open, my thoughts had started to wander.

I knew where Ava was coming from with her suggestion that I take a break, but I also knew I couldn’t do it. It just wasn’t in me. The idea of backing off just wasn’t part of my makeup. Maybe it was the Alpha blood in my veins. It was fine for a day, but if last night was any indication, I needed to stay on my toes. This was *not* the time to get complacent.

And I was going to make a game plan today. First and foremost, I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself. This whole situation with Cali and Ava—not to mention the conflict between the Redwoods and the Samaras—had been tearing me apart for weeks. I couldn’t think straight. It was like there wasn’t enough room in my brain for anything else. But it was just too much, and I needed to focus. I was a Samara now. I needed to get the fuck over whatever was bothering me and stop letting it eat me up all the time.

The sun was almost up, and I dropped my head and ran harder. I pushed myself as I rounded a stand of trees and started back toward the Samara pack house. I could feel the cold winter air burning my lungs, but it felt good to run so hard. This was how I did my best thinking. I found it easiest to sort out my most complicated problems when I was moving. It helped me to clear my head and see my worries and problems at their most basic level, so I could solve them.

And it was working. I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to focus on my pack and my role as Alpha. I wasn’t sure of what the end of the plan was going to look like, but I knew what the first step was, and that was something.

As I drew closer to the house, I saw two figures step onto the porch, and when I got close enough, I saw that it was Donovan and Fausto coming outside.

I shifted to my human form and walked up the steps, wiping sweat from my forehead. “You two ready for your patrol?”

“Of course.” Donovan said. “How’s it look out there?”

“Good. Coast is clear. No sign of any other wolves,” I told him. “But we can’t assume it’s going to stay that way. I want you two to double back over the territory on the east and the south end. Those are the easiest entry points from the outside.

“You got it,” Fausto said with a nod. “Whatever you say, Alpha.”

I didn’t smile, but I felt some pride in hearing those words from him. I was their Alpha, and they respected me. *That* was what I wanted to focus on. *That* was what I wanted to be—no more of that sad-sack Xavier bullshit.

I walked the wraparound porch to the front of the house and found Marissa on a mat. She was sitting with her legs crossed like a pretzel, doing what I could only assume was some kind of yoga meditation. Her eyes were closed, so I was surprised when she spoke as I passed by.

“Ava’s been looking for you.”

I nodded. I figured she might be. She had asked me about therapy the night before, and I hadn’t answered. In fact, I’d kind of blown her off. But it was hard to blow off Ava when she asked a question, and I knew she wasn’t going to drop it.

I sighed as I headed into the house, figuring I might as well find her and give her a straight answer. I glanced through the rooms and finally found her in the kitchen where she was—mercifully—alone.

“Hey,” she said, looking up as I walked in. “Do you want some coffee? I was just about to make some—”

“I’m going to cancel the therapy appointment,” I said, cutting her off.

Her eyes narrowed. “What? Why? You told me you’d made the appointment for the both of us.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I did. And now I’m going to cancel it.”

“Why?” she asked again.

“What do you mean?”

She turned to look directly at me, abandoning the bag of coffee beans on the counter. “I mean, what the hell changed between yesterday and today?”

“I don’t know. I had time to think, that’s all,” I said with a shrug.

“Yeah? And what have you been thinking about?”

I sighed. This was going about as well as I had expected it would go. “I was thinking that I could handle my own problems. And that the pack needs me. There’s been a threat to the Redwoods—an unknown wolf on their land. We could be next. If something’s coming our way, we have to be prepared.”

Ava gave me a long, cool look. “I wonder if you’re talking about preparations for the pack, or preparations for yourself.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

She raised an eyebrow. “A preoccupied Alpha is worse than having no Alpha at all.”

I felt my hackles rise. “Ava, I don’t need you fucking micromanaging my life. What I need is to earn back the pack’s trust and to show them that I’m capable of leading them, not having you looking over my shoulder all the damn time.”

“That’s not what I’m—”

But I didn’t wait for her to finish. “I don’t want to hear it. I canceled the appointment. That’s the end of the discussion. It was my shit, and my decision. Don’t you get that? *I’m* the Alpha. This is my call. And it’s my…” I searched for the word. “… *situation*.”

“I know that, X, but it affects me, too. It’s hurting you—”

“And I’ll deal with it,” I said shortly. “I’ll be fine.”

Ava stared at me, and I saw the hurt flashing in her blue eyes. Guilt struck me like a slap across the face. I knew she was trying to look out for me, and that her intentions were good, even if it did feel like she was keeping too close a watch.

“Listen,” I said, softening my tone, “I know that you love me, Ava, but part of loving someone is trusting them, right?”

“Yeah, fine,” she said, pain still lacing her voice, “but that trust goes both ways.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“You think you know everything, Xavier, but you need to learn to trust me when I tell you that you need help. I see more than you think I do.”

I took a step toward her and felt a dull pain growing in the back of my head. I reached up and massaged the base of my skull, digging my fingers in, trying to relieve the pressure. “Do you know where Big Mac’s medicine is?”

Anger and fear forked across her face. “Do you ever think about what this is doing to *me*, Xavier? What it feels like to know that you need to rely on witchcraft to even be physically close to me? That you flinch when you take a step toward me?” She shook her head. “I love you, but I hate every time I see you reaching for that bottle.”

I dropped my hand from my head, doing my best to ignore the ache. I knew I had been relying on Big Mac’s potion to get me through the worst of the pain, and the fact was that I hadn’t thought about how that must feel for Ava. I hated that she thought I needed it just to be with her. I would hate it, too, if she had to rely on some drug just to tolerate being with me. That fucking sucked, and it made me sick to think about. I had to prove that Ava was wrong about me and my dependence on Big Mac’s potion.

It was early, and the pack house was still quiet. The only people I had seen were Donovan and Fausto, who I suspected had only been up because they’d been scheduled to patrol, and Marissa, who was occupied outside. That meant we had the house to ourselves for the moment.

“Listen to me,” I said, taking a step toward her. “I said I could handle all this fucked-up emotional shit, and I meant it.”

She rolled her eyes, though they looked liquid, like she might be about to cry. My stomach twisted miserably at the sight of that.

I took another step toward her. “I meant what I said. I don’t need the potion.”

“Xavier—” she started, shaking her head.

I grabbed her around the waist, pulling her close. “And I’ll prove it to you.”

**Episode 4890**

**Ava**

Xavier pulled me close, but I shook my head and put my hands on his chest to push him away. “You don’t have to do this, Xavier.”

“Do what?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

“You don’t have to suffer to prove something to me,” I said. “This is stupid. You don’t have to prove anything to me—”

But my words were cut off when he pressed his lips to mine. The instant he kissed me, my words stalled, and every thought—along with every worry, every insecurity, every fear—faded away. He slid his hands around the back of my head, threading his fingers into my hair and holding tight, and I melted into him. I pressed my body to his, feeling the tension in my body release. *This* was what I wanted. This was all I had *ever* wanted—just the two of us, with nothing in the way. Nothing between us, nothing holding us back.

When I had first come back from the spirit world, there had been this huge distance between us. I was back in the mortal realm, but I was as far from Xavier as I had ever been. As much as I longed for him, I didn’t know how to be near him, and he could barely stand to look at me. It had been excruciating, and even now I didn’t like to think of that time.

It had taken time and every bit of determination in me, but I had done it. I had clawed my way back to Xavier until there was only Cali standing in our way. And now it was just the two of us. Now the only thing standing in our way was Xavier himself. I had been waiting *so* long for him to come back to me—for him to fully come back to me. And now he was so close. Almost within my grasp. If only he would admit to himself that he needed help. And not the kind of help that he found in Big Mac’s magic bottles.

When Xavier broke from the kiss to come up for air, his eyes locked with mine, and I could see into their dark blue depths.

“Look at me, Ava,” he commanded. “I’m *not* in pain. I’m not on the shit Big Mac gave me. I’m going to be okay. *We’re* going to be okay.”

God, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe him *so* badly. Having him back was everything I had ever wanted. I fought my way back from death to get him back, and now here he was, standing in front of me, holding me tight.

I studied his face, my eyes ranging over his high cheekbones and his sharp jaw. I looked deeply into his eyes, searching for signs that he was in pain, but he met my seeking gaze with the kind of Alpha confidence that only he could possess. It was challenging and dangerous and hot as hell.

“Don’t you doubt me,” he growled, tightening his grip on me. “You hear me? Don’t ever doubt me again.”

And before I could respond to him, he kissed me again, so hard that he stole my breath away. His kiss was bruising, and I responded, wrapping my arms around him, clinging to him, and to the hope that the man I’d loved for almost all my life was back—to stay.

Without breaking the kiss again, he let go of my hair and grabbed onto my waist, lifting me effortlessly onto the kitchen counter.

My whole body felt like it had been set on fire. It was early, and the house was quiet, but it *was* the pack house, and I knew anyone could walk in on us at any moment. But maybe there was a part of me that didn’t mind that. Maybe there was even a part of me that hoped someone would. That way the pack could see that even though Xavier and I sometimes argued—that we had our quarrels and disagreements—at the end of the day, we had each other, and we were committed to that.

Xavier was rough as he jerked me forward and dug his fingers into my flesh. But I liked when he took control, and I broke the kiss and threw my head back, arching my back and wrapping my legs around him.

He made a low growling sound in the back of his throat and slipped his hands beneath my shirt, roughly grabbing my breasts in his hands. He thumbed over my nipples—none too gently—until they went hard, making me pant with want.

I was rocking against him now, bucking my hips. I could feel myself growling hot and slick, dying for him to touch me. Having just come in from a run, I wasn’t in any doubt about his level of arousal, but just as I was about to reach for him, he grabbed me again and yanked me off the counter, flipped me around, and pulled my shorts off.

Before I’d even had a moment to gasp, he bent me over.

“You want this? Huh?”

“Y-Yes,” I moaned, holding onto the counter tightly.

He entered me from behind, his cock sliding hard and fast into me.

"You’re so wet,” he said, running a hand up my back and grabbing onto my hair.

“*Fuck*!” I breathed, closing my eyes as fireworks exploded inside my brain.

“That’s the idea,” he growled.

I was panting with pleasure and braced myself against the counter as he pumped into me.

“Oh fuck, *yes*!” I rose up on tiptoes and drove myself back, wanting more of him—*all* of him—inside of me. “*Xavier*.”

He was shaking, too. I could feel him quaking, and when I tightened around him, it pushed him over the edge.

“*Fuck*,” he breathed, his fingers digging into me.

I pushed back, letting him spend himself before winding down. I was breathing fast and hard, and my knees felt weak, but when he finally stepped away from me, I was flying high.

I smiled as I turned to him, glad to see the smug, satisfied expression on his face.

“I’m going to take a quick shower before the meeting,” he said.

I nodded. “Yeah. Maybe I’ll join you.”

Pulling on my shorts, we headed upstairs and hopped into a steaming hot shower. Xavier soaped up and rinsed off, then stepped out and toweled off. He had called a meeting and he didn’t want to be late, so he headed downstairs first, leaving me to get dressed.

Alone in our room, I smiled at myself in the mirror. Apart from being pretty fucking great sex, Xavier taking me in the kitchen like that showed me that he *was* the man that I wanted—the man that I had always known he was capable of being. A man who took charge and got what he wanted, when he wanted it.

I pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, then hurried down the stairs and into the living room. Xavier was already there, and so was the rest of the pack.

He looked at me as I walked in and nodded. “Now that we’re all here, the meeting will come to order.”

I took my place at the front of the room by his side. I stood there not only as his mate—not even just as his Luna—but as the woman he loved, and the woman he chose to be with. That meant everything to me, and my heart felt as though it was swelling in my chest at the thought.

But there was another thought in my head, this one more troublesome, and try as I might, I could not dismiss it. I just couldn’t forget the pattern of things between Xavier and me. Things with the two of us seemed to go in cycles, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this was going to be another one of our false peaks. The kind where I *thought* everything was going great, and then—just when I least expected it—the bottom would suddenly fall out.

Things had a way of going like that for us, and it seemed like every time Xavier and I got to the place where I felt like we finally should be, something came along and blew everything up.

I took a deep breath, trying to push those thoughts away, and vowing to myself that no matter what happened, I wasn’t going to let it destroy me. This morning had been incredible, and it had let me see what was possible for us.

And as for the therapy, I wasn’t going to press him. He was right, this was his situation and his call. If he was still having issues going forward, I could encourage him to go in a more discreet way. Let him think that reaching out for therapy was *his* idea. There were a lot of things I was good at, and one of those things was pulling strings in a subtle way.

“Okay,” Xavier said, turning to the pack, “we all heard about the strange wolf that showed up on Redwood land last night. I think it could have come from a nomadic wolf pack that has reached the area. I’m planning to lead a group out to hunt down the pack.”

This statement set off a chorus of murmurs from the pack, and they looked warily up at him.

Xavier looked back, his gaze moving slowly around the room. “I’m not going to order anyone to join me, so I want to know—who’s coming with me?”

**Episode 4891**

Once again, I was busy trying to show Lola how to make a cup of coffee that didn’t taste like dirt, but for whatever reason, Lola just couldn’t seem to get it. It was like she had some kind of mental block against making a decent pot of coffee.

“It’s uncanny, this cup of coffee tastes worse than any you’ve made before,” I said, wincing and spitting Lola’s latest attempt at drinkable coffee in the sink. “It’s like a mix of soil and ash with a little hint of rancid nuts thrown in.”

“Maybe that’s the way it’s *supposed* to taste and everyone else is wrong,” Lola said with a smirk. She sipped from her own mug. “I don’t think it’s that bad. In fact, I kind of like it.” She took another generous gulp from her mug.

Jay poked his head in. “Hey, you two. Greyson’s called a pack meeting.”

I felt pride in knowing that my mate could call a pack to order with only a command. It was funny to think that my mate was the one in charge, the head of the pack. It gave me a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Things were pretty calm right now, though. No big issues hounding the pack as far as I knew, so I was curious to find out what this was all about.

Everyone filed into the living room where Greyson stood waiting. I smiled at him, thinking about last night and how wonderful it had felt to be alone with him and really spend some quality time together.

Greyson smiled back at me before his expression turned serious—the subtle change in him that indicated he was ready to get down to business.

“I called everyone together today so that we can organize a search party to look into the wolf that showed up during the party last night.” He motioned to Lola. “Lola also thinks she might have caught a whiff of a vampire nearby, too, and hopefully if that’s the case, the search party might be able to get to the bottom of it.

“At this point, I’m still concerned that Ravi and I were unable to keep on the wolf’s trail. We lost it—as in its scent vanished while we were tracking it. Something about that doesn’t sit well with me. That’s why the search party is necessary. I want to find out what’s going on before it has the potential to become a problem for us.”

*It was strange to see that random wolf out there in our woods—and it nearly caused us to expose ourselves to my classmates. Hopefully it’s nothing, but with our track record…*

“Do you think that this strange wolf might have anything to do with the missing people around Bend?” Charlie asked. “Just seems like too much of a coincidence.”

I nodded at Charlie before turning to regard Greyson. “I admit I’ve been wondering about that, too.”

Greyson took a moment to consider it but then shook his head. “I can’t say I’m ready to make that assumption just yet. Right now, all we know is that someone—or something—was in our woods that shouldn’t have been.”

“But those disappearances have been all over the news,” Violet added. “Even some students at Cali’s school have gone missing.”

That got the pack’s attention, and everyone began muttering amongst themselves, exchanging worried expressions.

I looked at Lola. “You think we should be worried?”

“Maybe less worried and more cautious,” Lola said with a shrug.

I thought back to the couple we’d overheard at breakfast, talking about the disappearances on campus. I liked having campus as an escape from the day-to-day goings-on in the pack house, and I felt safe there. I hoped that wasn’t about to change.

Greyson lifted his hands and slowly brought them down to calm everyone.

“I want everyone to chill, okay? I’m not ruling anything out, but I want to be smart about this. The wolf trespassed on our land—finding out who and why is the priority right now. Let’s not jump to any conclusions beyond that at this point.”

The pack answered with words of agreement and seemed to calm down a bit, but I was still a little uncertain, and I guessed others were, too. We’d all been through so much that it was hard to think that this wasn’t just another sign of worse things to come, but I was trying to stay positive.

“So, in closing, Rishika will handle forming up the search party. I think we’ll keep it small for now,” Greyson said.

As the meeting ended, Lola leaned in close. “I think we should push to be part of that search party.”

“Agreed. If someone is threatening the pack, I want to be part of helping to protect our pack mates,” I replied.

“Me too—and besides, they should want me to come along. I’m the one who smelled the vampire in the first place,” Lola said.

I saw Rishika and Greyson off to the side discussing strategy. Rishika caught my eye and headed over, her expression unreadable.

“Hey, Rishika,” I said as she approached, feeling guilty, somehow, about how things had been left between her and Artemis. I knew I had nothing to do with any of it—it had been completely Artemis’s choice to leave, but that didn’t mean I didn’t feel bad about the position that had put Rishika in.

“Hey, can we talk?” Rishika asked.

“Oh yeah, sure!” I passed Lola an excited glance.

*Maybe she wants to ask me to be part of the search party! If so, that would be awesome—and it would mean that Rishika really sees what an asset I am to the pack!*

But when Rishika took my arm and pulled me into one of the studies, I wasn’t so sure that she had the search party on her mind.

“You all right?” I asked once I noticed how uneasy Rishika looked all of a sudden. It was very unlike Rishika, who always had a confident, self-assured air about her that I’d always wished I had.

“Yes…” Rishika began.

She didn’t say anything more, and when the awkward silence stretched between us, I quickly said, “I’d love to be part of the search party!”

Rishika looked a little confused. “Oh… um, that’s not why I pulled you aside. It’s about Artemis, actually.”

My stomach dropped, and I was instantly in panic mode, wondering if I’d somehow missed a message from Artemis and Rishika was coming to share the news. Apparently, my guilty feeling about what was going on between her and Artemis hadn’t been entirely off base.

“Oh, it is? Is something wrong? Have you heard from her?” I asked.

Rishika looked crestfallen. “No… I haven’t heard from her. I wanted to send Artemis a message in the Fae world, but Torin told me that doing that is next to impossible.”

Now I was really starting to worry. “What? Why? Is something wrong?”

Rishika shook her head. “It’s nothing like that. I just… I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Just say whatever it is,” I pressed. “How bad can it be?”

Rishika let out a gust of breath and nodded. “Do you… I wanted to know… if you thought that… maybe… Would Artemis be mad if I went out on a date?”

I was both relieved and confused.

“You’re dating? I had no idea. Artemis hasn’t even been gone that long—”

“I haven’t gone on a real date yet,” Rishika interrupted. “But I’ve been thinking about it.”

I nodded at Rishika, unsure of what to say. Of all the things Rishika could have pulled me aside to talk about, I certainly hadn’t expected this. “I don’t know. I just… I guess I’ve always taken you and Artemis as a constant in my life.”

“I did, too, but then Artemis left,” Rishika said. Then she took a deep breath, shook her head, and started backpedaling. “You know what? I get it that you’re angry at me. Of course you would be. You’re Artemis’s sister, and your allegiance is to her.”

“No, Rishika—it’s not that. I’m just… disappointed, I guess? Honestly, I’m not sure what I feel.”

Rishika sighed. “I just thought it would be easier—that I would be able to busy myself with pack stuff. But being with Artemis made me realize that I need someone in my life.”

“But you do have someone: Artemis. She’ll be back—” But then I stopped myself. I had no idea when or if Artemis would be back, and as much as I loved my sister, I could see how upset Rishika was. Artemis up and leaving had put her in a weird place.

*There’s no way Artemis would want to put Rishika in an awkward position. She had something she needed to do in the Fae world, but that didn’t mean she wants Rishika to just sit around waiting for however long that’ll take.*

“I’m sure you know as well as I do that you’ll have a hard time filling Artemis’s shoes—”

Rishika held up a hand to cut me off. “I’m not trying to replace Artemis. I know I could never do that. She’s very special to me, and she always will be. I’m just trying to get through this the best way I can. I’m sure you can’t relate, but that’s my reality.”

“I get it, and I understand. I truly do,” I said quickly. “You should do whatever you need to do, Rishika. And whatever you’re looking for, I really hope you find it.”

“Thanks, Cali.”

There was an awkward lull before I said, “So tell me about the search party. Where to first?”

**Episode 4892**

**Artemis**

I shoved Marius away, sending him sprawling backward onto the floor as the group of people watched us from the doorway, some of them snickering amongst themselves while others just stared hard, expressionless.

*Fuck. What are the odds? I should have known that having sex with Marius would somehow, some way, come back to bite me in the ass, and now here we are*.

I calmly pulled myself together, pulling up my leggings and yanking my shirt down over my breasts, struggling to regain my breath and composure. I couldn’t remember the last time—if ever—that I’d been literally caught with my pants down, but I guessed there was a first time for everything.

“Who the hell are you?” a man growled, staring right at me. He was on the bigger side, and I instinctively took a step back as he took a deliberate step toward us.

I returned his glare, feigning nonchalance while reaching for my dagger. “Who the hell are *you*?”

*Is this really happening right now? Am I going to have to maybe kill a guy only moments after regrettable sex? This day just can’t get any worse, can it?*

The man’s eyes darted down to where my hand hovered near the dagger, but he didn’t react. He’d clearly seen a dagger or two in his lifetime.

Marius got to his feet, took one look at the group, and quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry about this, we’re newly engaged and got a little carried away. You know how it is… And I mean, look at her. Come on, am I right?”

I kicked Marius and shot him an angry glance.

The man stepped forward, still glaring. “I don’t give a damn whether you’re engaged or just married, you’re trespassing!”

“And you have no idea how sorry I am about that,” Marius replied. He grabbed my hand. “We were just leaving. Forget you even saw us.”

Marius pulled me toward the door, but the man stepped up to block our path, shaking his head and leveling an accusatory finger at us.

“I don’t believe you,” he spat. “I don’t know what you were looking for, but you made a big mistake coming here. In fact, I think you’re a couple of spies!”

I rolled my eyes. “Is that what you think spies do? Have sex in the place their spying on? Don’t you think that would be a little… distracting for any spy worth their salt? Not to mention how important it is for spies to stay concealed, and I’m sure can all agree that we weren’t concealing ourselves—”

“Listen, we don’t want any trouble. It’s all just a misunderstanding.” Marius yanked my hand, pulling me past the glaring man and the others. “We just got a little carried away, and we’re absolutely and completely embarrassed. We’re just going to get the hell out of here while we still have a shred of dignity left.”

“I still have my dignity, speak for yourself,” I hissed under my breath.

Marius held my hand tight as we headed toward the door—which was still blocked by the mass of silent, staring people who didn’t make any move to let us pass as we approached.

“Sorry, pardon me,” Marius muttered as we barreled through them. “Oops, didn’t mean to stomp on your foot there. My bad. Excuse us.”

We finally broke through, and I let out a sigh of relief when I realized that they weren’t going to follow us. We were back outside and away from prying eyes. We picked up our speed and raced out into the cover of the woods.

“That was close,” Marius said. “Next time we do that, we should find a more private place—”

“There won’t be a next time!” I snapped. “I was crazy to let that happen! And look where it got us, being ogled by a bunch of hostile strangers.”

I dug my heels in once we were a safe distance away and yanked my hand out of Marius’s hold. “What was that all about, anyway?” I hissed. “Why were you so apologetic to that guy?”

“Shhhh!” Marius threw a cautious glance over his shoulder in the direction we’d just come from. “Have you really been gone that long that you didn’t recognize the Crimson Gang? You do remember them, right? They sometimes worked with the Kollector… and sometimes against him.”

I was surprised. “Really? I remember them all right, but I don’t remember them working this near the border. Weird.”

“Well, they do, and we better get moving. Why didn’t you warn me they were coming?” Marius snapped. “If I’d known I would have, ahem, put the brakes on a little earlier.”

“I did warn you! I told you someone was coming.”

“I thought you were talking about yourself!” Marius quipped.

I smacked him, but that only caused his leering smile to widen.

“You’re the worst,” I ground out, taking the lead and hurrying off.

We fell into a not entirely uncomfortable silence as we continued on our way. Marius kept throwing glances over his shoulder, but I was less concerned with the Crimson Gang than I was with what had happened moments before.

*I can’t believe I just did that. I had sex with Marius! I’ve betrayed Rishika. What does it mean that I gave in to my desires so easily? And to Marius, of all people? Is it because I remember what happened between us before I left for the human world? Or is it because I miss Rishika and the closeness we shared?*

Marius came to a stop near the town square. “Great, I think we’re finally out of danger.”

“Fine,” I replied tersely. “Now we can finally go find your bounty.” I moved to push past him, but Marius blocked my path.

“Wait a minute, aren’t we going to even talk about what just happened?”

I pushed him back. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

That wasn’t exactly true—there was plenty going on in my head and a lot of insults that I would have liked to hurl at Marius, but I was still too tangled up in how complicated I’d just made things. And talking it through with Marius wasn’t going to help in the least. I knew that.

Marius shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. “Whoa, you’re in major denial. You can’t keep ignoring what’s happening between us. Don’t you see that it’s not going to just go away because you want it to?”

I whirled on him, resisting the urge to pop him one.

“*You’re* the one in denial. There’s nothing between us. And there never will be. What happened back there was just a fluke! A symptom of the stress we’re under—we’re not thinking straight. Under normal circumstances and with me in my right mind and not fighting tooth and nail to find Kadmos, none of that would have happened!”

Marius looked skeptical. “So… are you trying to convince me? Or yourself?”

I smacked him again. “Don’t push it!”

I turned away and stalked off without him, not looking back to see if he was following. My putting some distance between us was for his own good, since I was seconds from either stabbing him with my dagger out of pure, blind anger or breaking down in tears.

*Knowing Marius, he’d be way more put out by the tears.*

I heard Marius’s footsteps start up behind me.

*At least he’s sensible enough to shut up right now.*

As we distanced ourselves from the square, I heard a horse-drawn carriage approaching.

“Ahh, this could be fortune shining down on us,” Marius said, coming to a stop and eyeing the carriage. “We should try and hitch a ride. We still have a long way to go before we reach the fortress. On foot it will take us an eternity to get there.”

I stopped, too, to watch the carriage approach.

“No. I think it’s best if we stick to ourselves. We don’t want to risk running into the wrong people.”

But Marius wasn’t listening, he was jumping around like a maniac, already waving down the carriage.

I was about to yell at him and tell him to stop and how stupid he was for drawing attention to us, but I couldn’t really blame him for trying to catch a ride. If my life were on the line like his was, I’d want to get to that bounty as soon as I could. And walking like this left us exposed. Maybe the carriage was the very thing we needed. The faster we got to the fortress, the closer I would be to doing what I needed to do to find Kadmos and getting away from Marius for good.

As the carriage slowed and steered toward us, a familiar voice said, “Well, if it isn’t the two love birds.”

It was the Crimson Gang leader—I’d know that voice anywhere. And I doubted I would forget it any time soon after the embarrassment of him catching us in the act. “Fancy seeing you two here… and *with* your clothes on.”

I took a step back. “Now look what you’ve done!” I yelled at Marius as the carriage pulled to a stop in front of us.

The Crimson Gang leader grinned at us from the carriage, and then gestured, his voice threatening, “Get in!”

**Episode 4893**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t sure what to expect, and I was starting to feel uncertain about who would volunteer to join me in hunting down the nomadic pack.

I glanced anxiously at Ava, wondering if I’d just screwed up.

What if the pack wasn’t ready to take a risk like that with me in the lead? Maybe they were still a little skeptical about me. I’d only just wrenched back control of my life from Adéluce. What if they were still reeling from that?

*Maybe I should have just picked who I wanted? What if no one trusts me enough yet to throw themselves into a dangerous mission like this? What if no one wants to join me? That would be so embarrassing… How would I ever be able to save face after a failure like that?*

But my concerns were shoved aside as the entire pack volunteered. Everywhere I looked, I saw eager faces and nodding heads. Even Blaine, Knox, and Zipper were on board. Usually, one or all of them would have been falling all over themselves to pick apart any plan I came up with.

*You shouldn’t ever doubt yourself*,Ava mind linked, obviously having sensed my uncertainty. *You’re built for this, and you know what you’re doing. The pack can sense that.*

I knew that Ava was right, but with how things had been going lately, I had reason to be skeptical. This move to go after the nomadic pack without consulting any other pack—forging our own path—was an important statement, a way to show Ava and everyone else that I was a good Alpha and that I deserved to lead them.

Not only that, carrying out a mission like this—successfully—would be one more step toward reestablishing the trust between me and the rest of the pack. I wanted to push past the newness of my leadership and reach a more comfortable place where no one ever second-guessed me. Where having me at the head of the pack felt natural for everyone.

“As a warning, this nomadic pack might be friend or foe. We have no way of knowing exactly what we’re going up against here,” I said. “We need to stay vigilant, keep our heads on straight, and be ready for anything.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected in response, but my warning only seemed to encourage the others.

“Friend, foe, or anything in between, we’ll handle it,” Marissa said, setting off a chorus of cheers.

“Well said,” I called back. “I’m so proud of you all, proud to be a Samara, proud to be your Alpha. I want you all to know that I’m going to work even harder in the coming days, weeks, and months to get our pack where it needs to be, where it deserves to be. I’m here. And if any of you has something you want to talk about, I’m ready to listen and advise.”

“Hear, hear!” Ava cheered along with the pack as she nuzzled under my arm to wrap me into a hug.

*Whoa. This is… amazing. I don’t feel any pain, no light-headedness. I feel normal again with Ava so close. Screw Carlson Greene. I can fix this myself. Maybe whatever was going on inside me before is finally calming down, leveling out.*

Knox broke away from the rest and approached.

“Just wondering where we’re heading. There’s a lot of ground between here and California. This nomadic pack could be anywhere.”

On instinct, I wanted to smack Knox for questioning me. But that was the old Xavier. New Xavier had to be open to these kinds of questions—especially since it was a valid one. I didn’t want the pack to think I was taking them on some kind of wild goose chase or that I hadn’t thought this entire thing through.

“I’ve already thought about that,” I said, turning to Marissa. “Check with your contacts to see where the nomads were last spotted. I want to make sure we’re not just chasing our tails out there.”

“On it,” Marissa said.

Then I turned to address the rest of the group. “I can’t say how long we’re going to be on their trail, but I can’t imagine this will take any more than a couple of days. I suggest everyone pack a small bag. I want to hit the road in an hour.”

The pack moved off to prepare, but Ava lingered.

“I like this side of you,” she said. “Strong, confident, calm. You didn’t even smack Knox for asking a question. That’s progress. I’m impressed.”

“And you should never doubt me,” I said with a wink. “Even when I’m doubting myself.”

“Hmmm,” Ava replied with a smile. “Noted.”

*I’m glad that I’m able to prove to her that I’m getting a handle on things again. I don’t know what this will mean for me and Ava or even Cali, but I’m really starting to feel more like myself.*

Maybe that turmoil I’d felt before was all part of the process. Perhaps I’d needed to feel bad for a few days, only to snap out of it and finally find my footing. Hopefully I wouldn’t need therapy, the medicine, or anything again. It would be great to get over this all on my own.

I thought back to the heated session in the kitchen with Ava not too long ago. Things had felt so good, so right, so real. At that moment, just like in the car with Ava, I hadn’t thought about Cali at all. But that didn’t mean I was over her.

Far from it.

The thought of Cali and being without her still nagged at me, bothering me more than I could accept. I supposed I should just be happy that the pain wasn’t there anymore. I’d been under a dark cloud for sure, but right now I felt driven to win everyone’s trust back—Cali’s included.

*But for now, I should focus on getting that trust back from my own pack. Here at home is the easiest place to start. The Samaras deserve all my effort and attention. Hopefully everything else will work itself out.*

“Checked in with my contact,” Marissa announced as she came back into the room. “They think the nomadic pack crossed into Oregon a few days ago.”

I wasn’t sure if I was happy with that news or not. If the pack had remained in California, I wouldn’t have had to concern myself with them. But if they’d already crossed over, it was possible that the lone wolf that had crashed the Redwood party might have been one of them. Could have even been a scout sent to report back to his pack—which meant they could be a threat.

“What will we do if it turns out to be just a Rogue or something? Nothing to do with the nomadic pack? There are a lot of unknowns here, which means we could easily be barking up the wrong tree,” Ava said.

“I’ve thought about that,” I said. “If that’s the case, then maybe we can gain a few Samara recruits. I’ve been on my own before. Sometimes you’re looking to join up with another pack for stability even if you don’t realize it. If that’s the case with this lone wolf or anyone else we run into, it could be a good opportunity to recruit.”

Ava nodded slowly, giving me an appraising look. “I like the way you’re thinking. Building our numbers should be a priority after ensuring that our woods are safe.”

Ava squeezed my arm, and I leaned into the contact, noticing once again that I wasn’t reacting negatively to her presence anymore, and that felt damn good.

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A short while later, I joined the rest of the pack where they’d gathered out on the front lawn. I could hear and feel the anticipation in the air, the excitement of banding together to solve a problem. There was almost no better way for the pack to bond than to go on a hunt together.

Before we headed off, I pulled Ava to the side.

“Just wanted to prove that I don’t need this anymore to be close to you.” I held up the bottle of Big Mac’s potion. “I haven’t taken a drop since right before Cali’s crew meet the other day. And to further prove that I’m back to normal, I’m going to leave it behind.”

Ava arched an eyebrow at me, looking skeptical. “Okay… but what if something goes wrong during the hunt? What if me being near you suddenly causes the pain while you’re in the middle of a fight or something? Is that worth the risk just to prove a point?”

I shrugged. “Don’t worry about that. I can handle it. In fact, I’m already handling it. Leaving it behind will only further prove my case that I’ve got everything under control like an Alpha should.”

I dropped the potion into a drawer.

Ava immediately put her hand on my arm before I could go join the others. “Xavier, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

**Episode 4894**

**Greyson**

“Still want to keep the search party small?” Rishika asked as she looked down at her notebook.

“Yes, I think smaller is better. We’ll be more agile that way,” I responded. “As far as we know, there’s only one wolf. If we manage to track it down again, it’ll be better to have a small group to deal with things.”

Cali was standing right beside me as Rishika continued hashing out the details for the search party. I knew that Cali was itching to join—had asked Rishika about it a few minutes ago—but I had mixed feelings about it.

It wasn’t like Cali couldn’t defend herself if it came down to it—I knew she could. She’d proven herself time and time again.

*And if she does end up coming along, it’s not like I won’t be right by her side, just in case.*

But I still didn’t like the idea of potentially putting her in danger. We had no idea who this lone wolf was, or what her intentions were. And then there was the matter of the potential vampire lurking in the woods, as well. Vampires savored Fae blood, which meant the vampire might set their sights on Cali if she got close to them.

*But on the other hand, Cali was right by our side during the fight against Adéluce—a vampire-witch. Even without meeting the lone wolf again, I can safely assume that Adéluce was a lot more dangerous than this wolf could ever be. Doesn’t quite make any sense to keep her from this when she was right in the thick of things then.*

A commotion in the hallway broke through my thoughts. A few moments later, Charlie, Violet, Lilac, and Lola came running in.

“We have something to show you before you leave,” Lilac announced.

“Whatever it is, it can wait. We’re still in the middle of planning the search party,” I replied. “I want to get out there as quickly as we can. We’ve already got a cold trail as it is, and the longer we wait, the harder it’ll be.”

“And that’s exactly why you need to see what we have,” Lola pressed. “I promise it’ll be worth your while.”

Cali was convinced and already racing over to see what they were talking about.

I sighed and gave Rishika a look. “Guess we should see what all the fuss is about.”

“Suppose so,” Rishika said.

I had to admit I was a little intrigued by whatever had the others so excited. And this little interruption also gave me a bit more time to figure out what to do about Cali wanting to join us on the search party.

I followed everyone up to Lola’s room and stopped in surprise in the doorway as the others gathered around some kind of wall map posted on Lola’s wall, complete with multicolored push pins and strings connecting them.

“What the hell is this?” I said.

*This looks like they’re trying to solve a murder or something.*

“I’ve been tracking all those missing people, and I’ve discovered a pattern of sorts,” Lola replied. “I think I’ve got something here.”

I tried hard not to roll my eyes.

*Just another of Lola’s Scooby-Doo adventures. I should have known.*

Charlie stepped up to the map, pointing at each of the push pins. “Each of these represents a different missing person’s last known location.”

“And none of them are in any of the pack territories,” Lola added excitedly.

“And, so, what is that supposed to mean?” I pressed, trying to hide my impatience. “Last night’s wolf was definitely roaming around Redwood territory so I’m not sure how this is related.”

“But I think that might have been in error. Maybe the wolf heard the party and wandered onto our land while hunting,” Lola explained.

I shook my head. “Still not sold on this whole idea that the lone wolf and the disappearances are somehow linked, though I appreciate the thought and work you all put behind it.”

I made for the door, but then Cali piped up, her eyes glued to the map.

“I wonder what I would do if I were a wolf on the prowl for victims,” she said.

Everyone turned to look at me.

“What would you do? Where would you go?” Cali asked me.

Sighing, I stepped up to study the map.

“Once again, I just want to remind everyone that we do not know if there’s even any connection between the disappearances and the wolf we saw. Or even with the mysterious vampire that Lola thinks—”

“I KNOW,” Lola interrupted.

“That Lola *knows* she smelled,” I finished wearily. “Anyway, I’ll keep an open mind about it. Like I said, I appreciate all this,” I waved a hand at the map, “work you’ve done. But missing persons is something the police handle. Unless we have proof that there’s something supernatural involved, we should probably stay out of it.”

“Yes, but isn’t that selfish? We present as human to almost everyone, so doesn’t that mean that supernatural or not, it’s our problem?” Violet pressed.

“Right, and if we were to get to the bottom of this, it would ensure that whatever’s going on *doesn’t* somehow end up affecting us,” Lola said.

Rishika cleared her throat and stepped in front of the map. “Just want to remind everyone that Greyson’s your Alpha, and if he wants to drop it, we drop it.”

*Rishika’s right… but I don’t want to play that card. I like that Lola and the others have been thinking about this. It shows a lot of initiative, but Rishika’s right to keep them from getting too wrapped up in this sensational thing that’s driving the news cycle right now. We have more important things to think about.*

“Thanks for this, Lola,” I said pointedly before turning to the others. “But right now, I think we need to focus our time and energy on tracking the wolf and finding out why it trespassed. If there is a connection between that and the missing people, then we’ll figure out what to do at that point.”

“Fine,” Lola grumbled.

“Good, glad we’re on the same page,” I responded, ignoring her eye roll.

“And if we find a vampire?” Lola posited. “What then?”

“And if we find a vampire, we’ll handle it like we always do. It isn’t like this would be our first rodeo with vampires, not to mention the fact that we live with one.” I gave Lola a pointed look. “I think we can handle it.”

I turned to Rishika. “Have you got the list of who’s joining the search party?”

Rishika was about to announce it when Cali interrupted.

“I want to come with you.”

“And I want you to come, too,” I replied.

Cali looked stunned. “Wait a minute… Did you really just say that? You’re letting me come along?”

I smiled. “Of course. I want you there by my side. We work great as a team, don’t we?”

Privately, I mind linked, *We proved that last night, didn’t we? How good and perfect and in sync we are?*

Cali blushed, flustered. “Y-Yes, we’re the best team. I think we do great together.”

Lola chuckled. “Wow, Cali, never thought I’d see the day that Greyson encouraged you to go out on a potentially dangerous mission. That’s progress,” she added.

A few minutes later, the search party—Cali, Rishika, Charlie, Ravi, Sage, and I—were moving through the woods. We’d all shifted, and Cali was perched on my back. We were making our way toward the last place Ravi and I had been able to detect the wolf’s scent.

I wasn’t exactly sure how I expected to find what we couldn’t, at least for the moment, detect, but we had to try. We had no other leads beyond what we’d discovered the night before, so that was what we were going to have to go on.

If the wolf really was traveling on its own—or even if it was with others—there was a good chance it had a camp nearby. Our challenge would be lucking out enough to end up traveling in the right direction, since we really didn’t have much to go on.

Charlie trotted a little ahead of the rest of us, and I hoped that his superior hunting and tracking skills were coming into play. He lifted his nose to the air and slowed down. For a split second, I wondered if he’d caught a whiff of something, but then he took off again and we all followed close behind.

I glanced back at Cali, and she smiled at me. She was confident and secure on my back, and I had a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach knowing that she was with me. I’d been a little skeptical about her coming along, but the more I thought about it, the more I was able to see how much of an ally Cali was. She was strong, passionate, and with her by our side we had her magic at our disposal.

*I’m glad you’re with us*, I mind linked.

*Glad to be here*,Cali replied.

Suddenly, Charlie’s voice reached us through mind link.

*Everyone, I’ve found something.*

**Episode 4895**

I noticed that everyone was rushing ahead to catch up with Charlie, but I had no idea why. I tightened my hold on Greyson and asked, “What’s going on?”

*Charlie found something*,Greyson mind linked. *He hasn’t said exactly what, yet.*

My heart kicked into high gear as we raced ahead. I wasn’t prepared for what we found.

Charlie was crouched down by something on the ground—something bloody. Really bloody.

I couldn’t immediately make out what it was, and I reluctantly slid off Greyson’s back to get a closer look.

*Wait!* Greyson warned, but I kept going.

I wasn’t about to let my squeamishness get the best of me. Not in front of the others and definitely not in front of Greyson. He’d had enough faith in me to invite me along, and while I suspected that in part it was just so he could keep an eye on me, I wanted to step up and show him that I could handle this no matter how grim or disgusting it was.

*Greyson’s finally starting to respect my role in these kinds of outings, and I don’t want to give him any reason to doubt me and have second thoughts this time. Besides, it’s not like I haven’t seen my share of grisly things while living with this pack. Whatever it is, I can handle it.*

But what *was* it? I still couldn’t figure out what we were looking at. And despite my internal pep talk, I was still afraid of really seeing what was lying there. It had all the wolves in an uproar, which meant it was definitely something bad.

They were all sniffing the air, the ground, searching for clues. Another reminder that while I might be mated to a werewolf, I wasn’t one. At least not yet. I assumed they were talking amongst each other—they looked like it, at least. I wished I could hear what they were saying. I felt kind of disconnected from everyone else, to tell the truth.

But just because I couldn’t sense things like they could didn’t mean I couldn’t help. I edged closer to the bloody mass and forced myself to get close enough to examine it. Instinctively, I held my breath. Anything that bloody couldn’t possibly smell good.

I took a delicate push at the item with my foot. It was soft, moved easily. Thankfully, it wasn’t a dead body or even part of one. It looked like a fragment of a CCU track jacket—the kind athletes wore. When I pulled my foot back, I noticed that the toe of my shoe was smeared with blood, and it made me want to wretch.

I wondered what kind of wound or injury would cause that much bleeding. It didn’t seem like the type of thing anyone—human, supernatural, or animal—would survive.

*It’s definitely human blood. I can smell it*, Greyson mind linked. *Not that that gives us much to go on.*

*But how the hell did it get here?* I replied. *Did you and Ravi search over here last night? Could you have missed it?*

*We did search here. And there’s no way we would have missed this. Even if we didn’t stumble over it, the smell is so strong that we would have found it in no time.*

*So that means that someone just put it here. Left it behind.*

*Must have. And there’s no sign of struggle and no blood other than what’s on the jacket. It had to be left for us to discover.*

I looked around, wondering who the hell would do something like that—and why.

*And look, there are slash marks across the torn sleeve—the kind a werewolf would make*,I remarked.

*Yes, but don’t jump to conclusions, we don’t have any idea who or what did that*,Greyson countered.

*Can you smell anything or anyone else?*

In response, Greyson lifted his nose and sniffed, but then shook his head.

*No. There’s nothing but the blood. No other lingering scents. I don’t like this at all. It seems like someone is setting us up, but for what, I don’t know. I’m even more confused now than when we got out here.*

*What about what you said earlier—that we can’t assume the missing people are victims of a supernatural. But do you think this could be proof? Has this changed your mind?*

*No, still not convinced. There are a lot of messed up people in the world, and anyone could have done this. Maybe even tried to make it look like a super killing to throw the authorities off their trail. All this tells me is that someone’s lurking around out here who shouldn’t be. No more, no less.*

I nodded slowly, taking that in. I wasn’t thrilled that we had to be the ones to come across this clue, but what if Codsworth and the others from the cryptozoology club had found this? What would they have done? And better yet, who would they have rushed to tell?

I couldn’t help but think back to Xavier and Ava’s anger about us allowing the humans to come for a party. I hated to think that they were right. We’d taken quite the risk, and we’d almost exposed ourselves.

*We’re lucky that this thing just got here—otherwise our party guests could have stumbled across it and blown everything wide open*, I remarked, picturing the fear and confusion that the humans would have felt at seeing something like this—especially since it was a CCU jacket.

*There’s no way in hell that we would’ve been able to convince them to keep this to themselves if they’d gotten a look at this. We would have been screwed.*

I thought about going back to campus and trying to function normally with Codsworth and everyone on the crew team if one of them had stumbled across something on our property that indicated a murder—or at the very least an extremely brutal attack.

*No point in worrying about that now. They didn’t find it, we did, and now we have to figure it out and stop whatever’s going on in our woods from affecting the pack or anyone else, for that matter*, Greyson replied.

He turned toward Rishika, and I knew I was going to have to wait a bit to learn what she was telling him. When she was finished, she moved to join the others who were spread out, apparently trying to pick up any trace of a trail in all directions.

*What did Rishika say?* I pressed when Greyson didn’t immediately fill me in.

*She said that assuming it’s* not *a super behind this, whoever did this knows enough to imitate the way a werewolf would kill someone. They thought this through.*

*That makes sense*, I replied. *But who would do that? And humans don’t generally even believe that werewolves exist, which makes all this even more confusing. How would they even know what a werewolf victim looks like?*

I thought about Tony, and how the police first believed that he was murdered and then decided, thanks to Xavier’s help, that he was, in fact, the victim of an animal attack. That had happened so long ago, but it was still fresh in my mind. The police had held all the evidence in their hands and still refused to consider that it could be anything but an animal.

While the wolves gathered to speak amongst themselves about what to do, I kept my eyes on the bloody mess in front of me. I couldn’t help but wonder if whoever had left this bloodied thing for us to find had made their way near the pack house at any point. If they’d been spying on us, stalking us, planning something sinister.

I couldn’t help but shiver at the thought.

*Maybe we should have Mikah look into it*,I thought to myself. *He’s a great detective and he’s a super, but I can’t just call him and expect him to drop everything he’s doing to come here. And right now, all we have to go on is a bloody jacket fragment. Maybe it would be useful to involve him when we know more.*

Greyson’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

*We’re going to keep searching. Whoever did this had to have left a trace of some kind.*

But as everyone prepared to move on and I was getting myself situated on Greyson’s back, I thought about who would know enough about supernaturals to make it look like a super was behind it. And more than that, it had to be someone who believed supers existed.

Then I was hit by a disturbing thought—a thought I hoped wasn’t true. The cryptozoology club members had studied this stuff extensively. Sure, some of their ideas were completely wacky and off base… But was there a chance that one of them was behind this? That they’d studied super attacks and set this scene?

Could Codsworth be so desperate to prove that werewolves exist that he would plant this here? Could he be a… killer?!

**Episode 4896**

**Xavier**

With Ava by my side, I led the pack through the woods. I was reveling in the sound of all our feet thundering on the ground as we ran. It felt like we were all one entity, one wolf, cutting our way through the woods toward our goal.

The farther we went, the more confident I felt. I’d made the decision to track down the nomadic pack, and now we were doing it. No turning back.

Ava had finally stopped questioning my decision to leave Big Mac’s potion behind. As if to prove a point, she’d been right by my side since we left, and I’d never felt better. No headache, no wooziness, no nothing. I had no idea why I was suddenly able to stand her closeness without any pain, but I wasn’t about to ask any questions. I was confident that this was just one of those times where things had fixed themselves.

With the whole “mate turmoil causing a painful physical reaction” thing behind me, I could concentrate on the matter at hand. I truly felt like I was in my element now—a werewolf leading his pack, plowing through the woods with my mate and Luna by my side. We were unstoppable. I didn’t have to answer to anyone, and I would protect my pack to the death.

*And they’ll protect me, too. I can feel it. This was the right thing to do—and the pack is going to be all the better for it.*

As for my turn as Alpha, it didn’t get much better than this. I was happy—truly happy. Adéluce had gone above and beyond to try and ruin my life and had almost succeeded. It was the ultimate fuck-you that through her manipulations, I’d ended up with the one thing I’d wanted more than anything—a pack of my own.

*I have to look at the bright side of things. I might have lost what I had with Cali in the meantime, but that’ll work itself out, too. I’m sure of it. But right now, it’s time to focus on* my *pack and what we need to do to protect ourselves.*

*How are you doing?* Ava mind linked.

I knew why she was asking. Even though she’d stopped needling me about leaving the potion behind, she was still concerned that I might end up regretting my decision. I appreciated her concern and even understood it.

*Stop worrying. I feel great*,I replied. *Even if we don’t happen upon the nomadic pack, being out here in the woods with everyone working as a unit is exactly what the Samaras need. Maybe I should organize things like this more often. Bonding exercises or something*,I replied. *The types of things that make us remember what it really means to be a werewolf pack.*

*You’re right, everyone is so excited, and so far, I haven’t noticed anyone complaining,* Ava replied. *It’s a miracle.*

*You mean Knox and company?*

*Yes… but don’t come down on him too hard. My cousin’s been trying really hard to fall in line. I can’t remember the last time I heard him talking shit about you to the other pack members… And part of that might be because the pack won’t allow it. Another good sign.*

Ava was right. Even I had noticed Knox complaining less in general. And it felt good to hear Ava say that the pack was on my side now and wouldn’t have allowed it even if he tried. Maybe I’d made more progress with them than I’d even realized.

*I’m glad to hear that, but I won’t promise anything. As long as he stays off my back and doesn’t cause any trouble for me, I’m happy to stay off his case. But the moment that changes, I might have something to say.*

*Fair enough*, Ava replied just as I heard someone running to catch up to us.

*Speak of the devil. It’s Knox. Wonder if he’s here to criticize already*, I thought to myself.

Ava remained at my side as Knox fell into step on my other side.

*Hey, Xavier. Just thought I’d come and remind you that I’m from California, and I know the routes between here and there pretty well. So, I was thinking. If we veer off the path we’re on now, we can cover more distance and probably put ourselves directly on the route the nomadic pack might have taken*, Knox mind linked.

I slowed to a stop. *Which direction?* I asked him.

*We’d need to take a slight turn to the west and then continue south*,Knox explained.

I stopped to consider that.

*But wouldn’t that put us in closer contact with any humans that might be wandering around out here? I seem to recall a hiking path in that direction.*

*It will put us closer to more human activity, there’s no question about that. But if we’re careful and keep clear of the path and the main roads, we’ll easily avoid all the people and save a lot more time.*

I looked back at the others who were watching our exchange. They were probably trying to see how I was going to respond to Knox’s advice. Was I going to take it or tell the shrimp to get back behind me and Ava where he belonged?

Not long ago, I would have taken latter choice and told Knox to fuck off and to never question my methods or decisions. But I needed to hold onto that trust I was trying so hard to build with the pack—and that included the trusting relationship I was building with Knox.

I was going to have to choose my battles wisely from here on out. Especially since what Knox was suggesting didn’t sound too off base and might even be the right move.

Sure, I could assert my Alpha status or give off “my way or the highway” vibes, but what would that do other than stir up resentment? I was going to do better than Greyson and listen to my pack when they had suggestions instead of thinking I had all the answers.

I took a sidelong glance at Ava and saw her watching me with a sparkle in her eye, almost teasing me silently about what I was going to do in the face of her cousin’s unsolicited advice. I was looking forward to the possibility of surprising her.

I looked out to the west, the direction that Knox was suggesting we take. I knew I had to make a decision. I also knew that no matter which direction we went, there was always the risk of human encounters. But at least we were in wolf form, and that meant that most humans would steer clear.

And the faster we found the nomadic pack, the less risk of being exposed. If there was a way to track down the nomads quicker, it made sense to do it. Especially keeping in mind that we had no solid trail to follow. We only had Marissa’s contact’s tip about the nomads being in Oregon, which was barely any intel at all. So, all things considered, maybe taking Knox’s guidance was the right move.

*So, which way, Alpha?* Ava asked.

I turned my attention to her, sensing the challenge in her tone. She trusted me already—Ava always had—but I knew she was eager to see me make an effort with Knox. He was part of the pack, whether I liked it or not. I couldn’t treat him like a pariah forever.

I turned to address the entire pack, feeling confident in my decision.

*Knox thinks we should veer off our current path and follow one he knows leads straight from California to our lands. He thinks it might put us in the path of the nomads quicker. But there is an increased risk in taking that route since it might bring us closer to a hiker’s path and the main roads.*

I waited, watching the wolves before me exchange uncertain glances. They were right to be skeptical. Not just because it was Knox who’d made the suggestion, but because coming across humans could open up dangerous floodgates.

*I’ve decided to listen to him*, I continued. *We’re going to take the path he suggested. But I want to make one thing clear. Even though it’s Knox’s suggestion, whether it succeeds or fails rests squarely on my shoulders. This is my decision, and I will bear full responsibility for the consequences.*

I glanced at Ava, wanting to know what she thought of my declaration.

*Hmm. Agreeing with my cousin? What’s the deal? And better yet, what’s your angle?* she questioned.

*No angle, no deal. Just trying to build some trust. Weren’t you just saying that Knox is trying to be a better pack member? I’m giving him an opportunity to demonstrate that.*

I gestured to Knox. *Lead the way.*

Knox started to head off to the west when I caught a whiff of Cali’s scent. Before I could react, Ava’s mind link was already in my head.

*Cali? What the hell is she doing here?*

**Episode 4897**

I was almost flung right off Greyson’s back as the entire pack skidded to a stop. I was about to ask what was going on when I spotted Xavier’s wolf staring right at me, with Ava’s wolf right by his side.

My breath caught in my throat.

*Did you know he was going to be out here?* I mind linked to Greyson.

As was par for the course these days whenever I encountered Xavier, I was immediately thrown off-kilter by the very sight of him. I suddenly didn’t know how to act. My heart was pounding in my chest, my mouth was dry, and I was at a loss for words.

It kind of felt like how I used to feel when I first met him—all flustered and swooning all over the place. But now it was because we were in this strange, awkward place with each other, and I hadn’t the slightest idea where we really stood.

Ava was a huge part of that anxiety for me, of course. I couldn’t act natural with Xavier when she was around staring daggers at me. She was like a wild animal, waiting for me to make the wrong move so she could attack.

*I had no idea he’d be here*, Greyson replied. *You should climb off.*

Reluctantly, I got off Greyson’s back. I was worried that things were about to go south very quickly. I didn’t know why they would, but Xavier and Greyson rarely needed a reason to disagree over something. They were staring each other down like they were both ready to pounce with the slightest provocation.

*Is that why Greyson wanted me to get off his back? So that he can fight if he has to? If it is, I can’t let it happen. I won’t. They’ve come too far to get back to a place where they want to tear each other apart on sight. Right now isn’t the time for them to come to blows, especially in front of our packs.*

Greyson shifted to human form and all the others followed suit. Ava was the last to shift and immediately made a dramatic move to put her arm around Xavier, staking her claim while leaning into him, naked.

Ava’s nakedness was another thing I could never get used to, no matter how many times I’d seen her and every other wolf in my life naked. There was something about the way she wore her nakedness, brandishing it, posing, almost. She looked like a living, breathing, centerfold, and it drove me crazy.

Greyson and Xavier both started talking at the same time. “What are you doing here?”

I pulled my eyes away from Ava and tried to keep my focus on Xavier and not let my eyes drop below his shoulders. I knew what would happen if I did, and I wasn’t prepared to feel even a shred of desire for him with Ava doing her damndest to make it clear who he belonged to. Even though she would have no clue what I was thinking, I still didn’t want to give her the satisfaction.

“We’re looking for any sign of the lone wolf or the vampire,” I explained. “Have you or your pack seen anything?”

Xavier glanced at me. “Haven’t seen anything of note yet, but that doesn’t mean we won’t. We’re heading toward California, trying to intercept the nomadic pack.” He shifted his gaze to Greyson. “I truly hope that pleases my older brother.”

I saw Greyson’s jaw clench just before he responded. “I didn’t ask you to go.”

“And I didn’t ask for your permission. The nomadic pack could be friend or foe, and I have a responsibility to my pack to find out. I know you find it hard to believe, but it has nothing to do with you.”

I glanced around and could see that everyone was keyed into this moment, watching it all play out. The tension between the brothers was thick enough to cut with a knife. It wasn’t going to help anything if they weren’t able to put their differences aside and settle things amicably.

*What’s going on between you two?* I mind linked to Greyson. *You both seem so on edge. I don’t get it.*

*I think Xavier’s still pissed off that I implied he wasn’t up to something like this and needed rest. You know how prideful he is. I’m sure he won’t let me live that comment down for a long, long time.*

I mulled that over, remembering how Xavier had explained that he had a few things to work out. And maybe he still did. I took a step toward him, hoping to intercede and get both Xavier and Greyson to understand that they were on the same side. But as I did, I noticed Xavier’s brow furrow and he made a motion to step back.

I paused, unsure of what was going on. I reached out to him via mind link.

*Is it hurting you? Being near me?*

Xavier smiled. *No. I’m fine. No need to worry about me.*

But the smile was off. Forced, even. I wanted to question him further, but Ava was watching the two of us like a hawk. There was no doubt in my mind that she knew I was mind linking with him—and that she was going to blow her top about it in seconds flat if we didn’t stop.

*I don’t care what she thinks about me talking to Xavier—he’s still my mate after all. But I don’t want to make a scene. Not in front of everyone. Now’s not the time, anyway. There are more important things going on than Ava being a possessive banshee over Xavier like usual. I’m not going to stoop to her level.*

The only thing I cared about right now was smoothing things over between the two Alphas and making them put down their weapons. So, I stayed where I was, deciding that it wasn’t worth straining things any further.

Besides, Xavier was the one who’d taken a step back even though he’d said I wasn’t hurting him, although I couldn’t imagine why.

“Maybe both our packs should work together on this. Aren’t we still part of the alliance? It would make sense to join forces and do what we can to figure this out,” I suggested. “We could cover more ground, share ideas, that sort of thing.”

Xavier shook his head. “This isn’t an issue that requires the alliance. The Samaras are searching for nomadic werewolves. If we find them and discover that they have anything to do with the lone wolf or with the vampire, I’ll make sure to let Greyson know. But in the meantime, I’m leading my pack and doing things my way.”

At his words, I saw the almost imperceptible shift in Ava’s posture. She was proud.

My stomach dropped in response to Xavier’s wooden tone. He hadn’t said anything *wrong*,but he was also being so… distant. Dismissive. I didn’t like how things were between us now, but I supposed it was our new reality, and I was going to have to get used to it. At least for now.

“Fine, whatever,” Greyson threw into the ultra-awkward silence that followed. He turned his back on Xavier and the Samaras to address the pack. “Come on. Let’s go. We’re wasting time.”

“Wait,” I said. “There’s something Xavier should know.” Almost without thinking, I took another step toward Xavier. It was just a natural movement, a way to connect with him—a habit I hadn’t yet broken.

Xavier backed away, and I could feel Ava’s angry stare boring into me. If looks could kill, I would literally be bleeding out on the ground right now.

*Ava can stare and posture all she wants, but I’ll say what I have to say. She doesn’t rule me, and she doesn’t rule Xavier. No one does. She should realize that by now.*

I did my best to ignore Ava. What I had to tell him was way more important than our petty beef. Maybe once I said what I had to say, she would realize that and cool her jets.

“We found a bloody piece of jacket in the woods. We don’t know where it came from, whose blood it was, anything—except that Greyson says it’s human blood. Be careful. There’s definitely someone—or something—out here. Stay vigilant.”

Xavier nodded and rubbed his head, shooting Greyson an icy glance.

“Thanks, Cali, for telling me something that my brother obviously didn’t think was important enough to share.” Xavier gestured to Knox. “Let’s go. I want to cover as much ground as we can before sundown.”

I reached a hand toward Xavier. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

But before I could even get near him, Ava stepped between us.

“He was fine. In fact, he was amazing. And then we ran into you,” she said sharply. “Tell me, Cali, have you ever considered the possibility that maybe it’s not *me* causing him pain, but *you*?”

**Episode 4898**

It was taking everything in me not to blast Ava and shut her up once and for all.

*Does she really want to go up against me? It’s like she doesn’t even realize that I have magical powers and what I’m capable of. Guess she’s just that fearless. Or that stupid.*

“Chill out, Ava!” I shouted. “All I was doing was showing that I care about Xavier. He looked like he was in pain, and I only wanted to make sure he was okay. Why is that such a fucking problem for you? Would you rather I let him suffer?”

“What I would *rather* is you worry about your own problems for once and stay out of everyone else’s,” Ava hissed. She crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes before adding under her breath, “If you’re even capable of that.”

Xavier grabbed Ava’s arm and pulled her back, avoiding my gaze. “Come on, Ava. We should go.”

I stood back, fuming as the Samara pack shifted back to wolf form. Ava waited until the very last minute to shift, her eyes boring into mine. And when she finally did shift, she bared her teeth at me before turning and running off.

I was startled by Greyson’s hand on my arm.

“Cali, are you okay?”

I snapped my attention to him. “Sorry about that. I shouldn’t have fallen for Ava’s crap.”

“I don’t think that was about Ava,” Greyson said.

I sighed. “I just hate to see Xavier like that. I saw it—we all saw it. He even told you he needed some time to work things out.”

Greyson seemed to be thinking that over. “Do you think Ava pushed Xavier to go on this quest?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to imagine anyone pushing Xavier to do anything, but who knows? I’m just sorry I brought it up like that in front of everyone… and in front of you.”

Greyson pulled me into a hug. “I don’t care about anyone else, but maybe you’re the one who needs some time?”

I was struck by that. “I know I hurt you with that whole scene. But trust me, I don’t need time. I need to just let Xavier deal with his own stuff. I’m going to try really hard to do that from here on out.”

*But can I really do that? Can I truly distance myself completely from Xavier? Especially when I see him in pain?*

“Get on,” Greyson said to me, then he shifted.

My mind a million miles away, I slid onto Greyson’s back and held on tight.

*I will not let Xavier and Ava and my own mixed-up feelings hurt Greyson again. It’s not right. If Xavier wants to make poor decisions, that’s on him. It’s not my problem anymore.*

I’d hoped that Xavier and I would be able to find a place where we could at least get along. But clearly, I was wrong to hope for something so far out of reach.

Then again, if it weren’t for Ava, that fight probably wouldn’t have happened. Actually, I was sure it wouldn’t have. Xavier and I would have been able to have a civilized conversation, and I wouldn’t be feeling so riled up and frustrated right now.

*I wish I could apologize to Greyson in a more meaningful way, but clearly, he doesn’t want to talk about it.*

I leaned forward and clasped my arms tightly around Greyson’s neck as we shot off deeper into the woods.

Along the way, we slowed after mistaking a cluster of mushrooms for an article of clothing. After closer investigation and realizing our mistake, we then spotted a set of unusually large human footprints that we initially mistook for wolf prints.

We ended up following the prints until we stumbled across what looked like a crime scene. All around us were signs of a struggle and disarray.

“Hang on, look here,” Charlie said after shifting to human form so that he could better examine the scene. He was pointing to an overturned keg. “Looks like this is nothing more than the aftermath of a raging keg party.”

We took off again, leaving our mistake behind.

*We need to be a bit more discerning*,Greyson said as we threaded our way through the woods. *Finding that bloody jacket remnant has us all on edge, and now we think everything we see is a sign.*

But obviously unable to take our own advice, we slowed down once again when we saw something suspicious. We proceeded to spend no less than an hour examining a set of bones that Rishika eventually pegged as belonging to a long dead deer.

And then there were the bloodstains we found about a mile away from that… And those turned out to be nothing more than a pile of squashed berries that some ravenous animal had left behind.

After that final false alarm, Greyson shifted back and leaned against a tree, looking defeated.

“I think we’ve done all we can today,” he announced. “Time to pull the plug and head back home.”

I was disappointed. It wasn’t that I’d been looking forward to finding proof of the carnage the torn-up, bloodied jacket had suggested, but I’d certainly hoped to find *some* clue. Anything that would alert us to what was going on in our woods. It stung that we’d done nothing but follow a bunch of false leads and waste a ton of time.

*And it doesn’t help that I still have a bad taste in my mouth after that argument with Ava. Where does she get off, anyway, speaking for Xavier? If he was so bothered about me asking after his health, he would have said so himself.*

But it wasn’t lost on me that he hadn’t admonished Ava for how she’d treated me. At least not in that moment. I liked to think that maybe, once they were far away, he’d told her that she’d overreacted and shouldn’t have treated me like that. But I wasn’t convinced. They seemed to be more in sync than ever these days. A united front against everyone. Including me.

*I really wish we’d found something—anything at all*,I mind linked to Greyson as we booked it back toward the pack house. *I feel like we’ve been barking up the wrong tree the entire day. I don’t know what we expected to find out here, but I never expected that we’d find* nothing *at all after stumbling across that jacket.*

*But the track jacket sleeve* is *something*,Greyson said. *Even if it has nothing to do with the lone wolf, it was left out here for a reason. We just have to find out what that reason is.*

*Either way, I’m going to question Codsworth tomorrow*,I said. *See what I can gather from him. Maybe he has absolutely nothing to do with it. And even if he doesn’t, I want to make sure that he has no plans to return to Redwood land unannounced.*

*That’s a great idea*, Greyson responded. *I don’t think that lone wolf showing up did us any favors as far as stifling his curiosity. If anything, it piqued it.*

*Maybe*, I responded, trying to think back to how Codsworth had seemed after the encounter. *But I think he believed me when I tried to convince him that the wolves weren’t werewolves at all, but your average, run-of-the-mill grey wolves. But who knows?*

*Right. You don’t know him well enough yet to be able to decide what he really thought of all that*, Greyson said.

*You have a point, there.*

When we got back to the pack house, I was surprised Lola didn’t run out to greet us. She’d seemed bummed not to be included in the search party, so I assumed she’d be champing at the bit to find out what happened.

As everyone dispersed to go clean up, I stopped by Lola’s room. She looked up from her computer as I entered.

“How’d it go? Did you all find anything?”

“It was… interesting,” I replied. I was about to say more when I noticed what was on Lola’s screen. It was a grid of all the missing people. “Wait, what’s this all about?”

“Oh, this? I’m just looking for a common denominator. As far as I can tell, all the missing people have blond hair or brown eyes. But other than that, the only thing they have in common is that they’re all relatively young and live around here.”

I leaned close to Lola’s screen. I felt terrible looking at all their faces and wondering what could have happened to them, and why. I wished we’d found out something more that would have helped us figure out what was going on.

“With you on the case, I’m sure we’ll figure out what’s happening sooner rather than later,” I said.

I was just turning to go when something caught my eye. I pointed to one of the smiling faces on the screen. “Wait! He’s wearing the same CCU jacket as the track jacket sleeve we found!”

**Episode 4899**

**Xavier**

It was funny how something that had brought me so much joy before—running through the woods with my pack on a mission to secure our safety—couldn’t cut through the slow burn of anger I was feeling.

I was angry at myself, angry with Cali, Greyson, Ava—basically the entire world. Just when it had started to feel like everything was going my way, we had to run into the Redwood pack.

*I should have handled that better. I wonder what the rest of the Samaras must think of me. Especially after what Ava said to Cali. And it’s only a matter of time before Ava starts grilling me.*

I decided to strike first.

*Can I ask you a question, Ava?*

Ava looked at me out of the corner of her eye and nodded as we both vaulted over a fallen tree.

*Go ahead.*

*Do you still feel threatened by Cali even after me telling you that there’s nothing to worry about?*

*I don’t think “threatened” is the right word. “Annoyed” is more like it. Anyway, I’d hoped you were right—that there really wasn’t anything to worry about. But then I saw that you were in pain when Cali got close to you. And before you deny it, I know what I saw.*

*But what you don’t get is that it wasn’t because of Cali. It was because of everything I’m going through with the both of you… and Greyson, too. It’s like I’m torn between two worlds, and whenever I manage to forget for even a second how complicated things are, I’m reminded of it. I just wasn’t prepared to run into Greyson and my old pack.*

*I’m surprised that* you’re *surprised we ran into the Redwoods. It seems like we can’t get away from them. You should be used to it by now*,Ava said, clearly close to getting as irritated with it all as I was.

*I wonder how you would even prepare for something like that*,she continued. *Either being around me and Cali hurts, or it doesn’t. You told me you felt better and that you didn’t need the potion to be near me. Is that still true?*

*I do feel better! I told you that. Why are you doubting me again? Believe me, the pain was bad enough that I wouldn’t risk leaving without taking the potion if I really thought it was going to be a problem.*

*I’m doubting you because I know what you look like when you’re in pain!* Ava snapped. *Am I so wrong for not wanting you to suffer? Ugh, now I’m sounding like Cali.*

*Keep this up and you* will *give me a migraine*,I growled. *And leave Cali out of this.*

*Whatever, X. I know what I saw. Cali’s not my favorite person, but she saw it, too!*

I was getting more frustrated by the second.

*Ava, how many times do I have to tell you before you get it through your head? I was fine then, I’m fine now, and I’m not hurting! We’re together, mere inches apart, and I’m not hurting. I’m fucking pain-free! And even if I weren’t, I left the drops back at home, so there’s nothing I could do about it anyway.*

*You know what—* Ava started before stopping herself. *Forget it. Let’s just drop it.*

*Yes, let’s. I’m over this. Let’s just focus on tracking down the nomad pack.*

I was so tired of talking about this same thing over and over that I was actually relieved at the sound of Knox’s voice.

*The path’s about to start going south again, running parallel to the coast. But this is also the stretch where we’re more likely to run into humans. We should be careful.*

As if on cue, Josephine rushed over, panting hard. She fell into step with me, sprinting right at my left flank. *There’s a group of humans up ahead!*

*Everyone stop!* I commanded. I gestured to Ava. *Ava and I will go ahead and check it out. Everyone else stay put and try to blend into the woods as best you can. We shouldn’t be gone long.*

Ava and I shifted and pulled on our clothes from our packs. I led Ava in the direction that Josephine had indicated.

“Let’s go see what this is all about,” I said.

Even though we’d expected that we might run into humans on this path, it was still kind of strange for humans to be out here. It wasn’t a particularly popular tourist spot, and it was the dead of winter.

We walked until we spotted a small group of humans fanned out ahead of us. Every once in a while, one of the humans called out, “Eddie!”

Ava glanced at me, her brow furrowed. “Think they lost their dog or something?”

I shook my head. “No idea.”

Cautiously, I approached one of them. “Hey, what’s going on?” I asked. “Is everything okay here?”

One of the women jumped in surprise when she saw me but quickly recovered.

“Wow, you scared me half to death. Didn’t think we’d stumble across anyone else out here in the middle of nowhere. We’re looking for someone. A missing person—Eddie Wilson. He told his friends that he was going to hike out this way and never returned. Have you seen anything—or anyone?”

Ava’s expression folded into concern. “Sorry to hear that, but no, you’re the only people we’ve come across since entering the woods. It must be awful for you all to lose track of him like that. If we come across anything that might help, we’ll be sure to alert the authorities.”

“Thank you,” the woman said. “We really appreciate it. It’s cold out, and I’ve heard there are wolves in these parts. I’m just hoping that Eddie didn’t get himself into some sort of trouble.”

One of the men gave us a quick description of Eddie, and then we wished them luck and headed back toward the others.

“I wonder if he might be connected to all those missing people I’ve been hearing about in the news,” Ava said.

“Don’t know, but I guess we can’t rule it out,” I replied.

I thought back to the jacket part that Cali mentioned finding. Was it possible that the jacket belonged to Eddie? That something had happened to him out here in these woods like his friends suspected?

*It wouldn’t be the first time a human ran across something nasty out here in these woods, and it wouldn’t be the last. It’s a shame if he’s hurt, but I can’t concern myself with human problems. We have enough to worry about. Humans take too many risks. Venturing out into places that they don’t understand.*

“I suppose there’s a chance that the lone wolf we’re seeking could be targeting humans,” I surmised. “But I don’t see why a lone wolf would do that. It would be reckless. Draw a lot of attention that none of us need.”

“Sure, but we don’t know anything about this wolf. Maybe they don’t care about taking risks like that. I’ve met werewolves like that before. Full of blood lust with a weird vendetta against humans.”

“Shit. Well, if that’s the case, maybe we should report it to the council… or handle things ourselves.”

*Like I did with Tony.*

Ava and I finally rejoined the others who revealed themselves from their hiding places once they were sure it was us.

“We found a group of people out searching for a missing friend,” Ava explained. “Someone named Eddie Wilson.”

“Yes, but luckily they don’t seem suspicious of anything and didn’t mention seeing any wolves—which humans would certainly mention if they came across other humans. Donovan, shift back and scout ahead a bit and see if you spot any more humans. We can’t be too careful.”

Donovan shifted. “On it,” he said before rushing off.

“Okay, Knox. Let’s get going,” I said.

We shifted back and fell into step behind Knox as we continued on the path he’d plotted out for us.

*First you let Josephine do some scouting, and now Donovan*, Ava remarked.

*Yes, I know. Just want to make sure that everybody feels like they’re part of something. Included. And it’s not like I’m just doing it for nothing. I need every one of their skills. Why do everything myself when I have a bunch of capable wolves around me?*

*Good point*, Ava said. *And good idea. Giving everyone tasks like that makes them feel even more invested in the Samara pack. See, you* are *good at this.*

A bit of the frustration and anger I was feeling about everything cooled. I did feel capable and like I was making a difference in the state of our pack, despite our little hiccup with the Redwoods. It was another Alpha tactic that would serve us all well in the end, I hoped.

We hadn’t gotten very far when Donovan came running back to join us. He was breathing hard, and he looked thoroughly freaked out.

I groaned internally.

*Let me guess. More humans? Another search party?*

Donovan shook his head. “No, way worse than that. Bitterfangs.”

**Episode 4900**

**Greyson**

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop replaying what had just happened with Xavier over and over again in my mind. It was like I could feel my anger and frustration with him as if he were still standing right in front of me.

I wished that I could have just kept my cool, but I was so damn tired of seeing Xavier affect Cali like that. And it wasn’t like Cali did anything wrong—I would be stupid to think that Cali would ever act like Xavier was just some guy she knew—but that didn’t mean I wanted to see this sort of thing play out in front of me repeatedly.

*It’s getting old. It’s no one person’s fault, I guess—well, Xavier’s if it’s anyone’s—but it’s getting so, so, old.*

What irked me most of all was that Xavier just kept pushing and pulling, almost like he was toying with Cali’s emotions. And I wasn’t blind. I could see how physically distressed Xavier had been when Cali approached. That was why she’d been so concerned—because Xavier had looked like he was barely keeping it together.

*And that, of course, prompted Ava to go after Cali like a rabid dog. It’s a cycle that just won’t stop. Cali sees Xavier and gets all torn up about it, Xavier stands there like a bump on a log, and Ava flies into a rage. Rinse and repeat.*

If only Xavier realized what he was doing by doing nothing to fix this. By pretending he was all better so that he could show his pack what—that he was ready to be their Alpha? That everything was perfect? What a joke. He needed to face what was going on if any of us were ever going to be free of this circus.

If it didn’t all affect Cali so damn much, I might be able to brush it off as pathetic. As Xavier’s problem, but that wasn’t the case. It was poisoning us all.

I wondered if I should continue pushing for that Evers brothers camping trip. Maybe if Colton was a part of all this, Xavier would be a bit more amenable to listening and taking some advice.

*Because he sure won’t listen to me on his own. At this rate he’d rather rip out his eardrums than hear me out about anything. And he’s always been closer to Colton, anyway. That’s fine by me. If Colton’s the one that can talk some sense into him, I’m good with it. Just as long as things change.*

I knew that I should talk to Cali about what happened, but earlier, I just hadn’t been sure that I could deal with it in a calm manner. Now that I’d had a chance to think about it all and calm down, I was in a better headspace.

I headed out of the room to find Cali and ended up running right smack into her in the hallway.

“Sorry,” Cali said quickly. “I was just coming to get you. You won’t believe what Lola helped me discover!”

“What?” I replied. Cali’s eyes were dancing with excitement.

“The missing people! They’re all connected!” She pulled me into my room and shoved Lola’s laptop into my face. She pointed a finger at a picture of a smiling track athlete. “Look, he’s one of the missing people! I think he’s the one we found in the woods!”

“Okay, okay, slow it down, Cali,” I said. “We found a jacket sleeve. Not a body.”

“Yes, but look at the picture! It’s the same kind of jacket! And he’s missing, see?! This can’t just be a coincidence.”

I leaned in to get a better look at the coat. “You’re right. It does look like the same jacket.” I read the name aloud. “Eddie Wilson. Hmm. That is pretty compelling.”

I glanced out the window, suddenly feeling an overwhelming sadness for Eddie and his family and friends and what they must be going through. But I was more concerned that whatever was happening was going on right in the middle of my territory. That didn’t bode well at all.

“This is bad, Cali. Really bad. If that was really his jacket out there, that means this whole missing person thing is going to bring a hell storm of fanfare right to our doorstep. The last thing we need is an investigation, questions, and the press. I’m surprised that no one has stopped by the pack house to question us already.”

Cali nodded, fear marring her beautiful features.

“Do you think we should report what we found?” She casted a forlorn glance at the screen. “If I were his family, I’d want to know if someone found a clue. Something that might tell me what happened. We don’t know much yet, but it’s safe to guess that he’s either badly injured or dead. His loved ones deserve to know that.”

I sucked in a breath, my sadness and frustration over the situation deepening. “Not to sound cold-hearted, but I don’t think we should do anything quite yet.”

Cali gasped, her eyes wide.

“Really? But what about Eddie? The people who care about him and are probably worrying themselves sick over him. If we can help solve his disappearance, we should do what we can. We can’t be like that… We can’t let things like this happen to people just because we’re afraid of getting found out. That doesn’t sit right with me.”

I winced, knowing that Cali was right but also knowing that there was no way I could just go take the torn piece of Eddie’s jacket to the authorities and hope for the best.

“Don’t worry, Cali. I do plan to do something about it. But first, we need to do some digging. If we take this to the police and tell them where we found it, they’ll be crawling all over this place within hours. Might even start to suspect us or one of the other nearby packs of having something to do with it.”

Cali frowned but nodded. “I guess you’re right.”

“I know it’s hard to swallow, but I know I’m right. If Eddie’s disappearance is the work of some Rogue or other supernatural, we can’t just go to the police. We have to alert the council first, as useless as they are. And we also have to let the other packs know. We have werewolf protocol to follow above all else. Having a supernatural out there killing people is not only bad for their victims, but also bad for werewolves.”

My words still sounded selfish to my own ears, especially considering all we suspected about what had happened to one of the missing persons. But I was stuck between a rock and hard place.

I could read the turmoil on Cali’s face, and I hoped that my reasoning was enough for her.

Cali sighed. “I understand. And I guess we still don’t even know for sure that the bloody jacket belongs to Eddie Wilson. I mean… it’s possible that Codsworth planted it knowing that Eddie was missing.”

I raised a brow at that. “Um… really? You think that?”

“I know it sounds crazy when I say it out loud, but when it comes to supernaturals and the people who love them, like Codsworth, nothing is too far out there.”

“Maybe, but Codsworth is just a college kid, not some criminal mastermind. Seems farfetched that he would go to lengths like that on the off chance that someone would find a shredded jacket in the woods.”

Cali frowned. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But I’ve learned not to rule anything out.”

“Right now, we need to keep calm and not immediately dream up any explanations for this. Not until we have more evidence. All we have right now is a bloody sleeve that may, or may not, belong to a missing student.”

“True. And it’s not like we came across anything else of note out in the woods. We definitely need more time to explore and figure out what’s going on.”

“Exactly. But on the plus side, if there’s a chance that a supernatural is involved in all this, perhaps I can chat with Big Mac about it. She might be able to use her magic to help set us on the right path.”

Cali brightened, and it made me happy to see she wasn’t too down about having to play our cards close to the vest for now.

Cali and I were a lot alike. We were only happy when we were actively solving one of our problems. She was doing her best to play it down, but I knew she was extremely uncomfortable with not taking the jacket sleeve to the police. At least if I worked an angle with Big Mac—an angle that might bear fruit—it would put her mind at ease.

“Consulting Big Mac is a great idea, Greyson. And in the meantime, I’ll feel Codsworth out at morning practice,” Cali said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean I’ll go to campus tomorrow and see if Codsworth knows anything about Eddie. I’ll be able to read him face-to-face, see what kind of reaction he gives.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” I replied. “What I mean is that you’re not going anywhere tomorrow.”

**Episode 4901**

I looked up at Greyson, baffled.

“What are you talking about? Why can’t I go anywhere tomorrow?” I wracked my brain, trying to remember if we had something going on that I’d forgotten about. “Is there a Redwood event happening?”

“This has nothing to do with the pack, Cali.”

“Then what—”

“It has *everything* to do with Eddie Wilson and a potential murder in our territory,” he added pointedly.

“Okay, well, if there was a murder on Redwood land, wouldn’t it be *safer* for me to be on campus? You know, away from the murderer?”

He sighed. “I’m sorry, love, I’m not trying to be controlling—”

“That’s not what it looks like to me,” I said shortly.

He shoved a hand through his light hair. “Let’s think about this. Most of the missing people—including Eddie Wilson—are students at CCU, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said reluctantly. “But even if there’s some kind of connection, that doesn’t mean I can just avoid the campus forever. I’m a student, Greyson, and I’m going to have to go to class at some point. I can’t fail out of college just because you’re a little worried.”

“Cali—”

“And people go missing all the time, right?” I continued, not letting him put me off. “Does that mean I’m supposed to drop everything and let myself be confined to the pack house until you decide that it’s safe for me to set foot outside?”

“I can see that you’re frustrated—”

“Canyou?” I asked tersely. Then I shook my head. “Because you’re treating me like a child, Greyson. Why can’t you see that I’m more than capable of protecting myself?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry, Cali, but I just feel like it would make sense for you to stay away from campus for a few days.”

“What are you going to be able to do to fix the situation in a few days?” I demanded.

“It would give me some time to do some investigating,” he said stubbornly. “I’d be able to talk to Big Mac and check in with the council, see if they’ve heard any reports.”

I shook my head. “No, sorry, but I can’t do that. I have to go. I have an obligation to my team. Besides, you’re not the only one who’s decided to do some investigating.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“How am I supposed to find out if Codsworth had anything to do with that bloody sleeve if I don’t go talk to him?”

Greyson’s gaze turned stormy. “Cali, I really don’t think—”

I put my hand up to stop him. “I get that you want to protect me, Greyson, but I’m not going to budge on this. Besides, the threat you’re worried about is just speculation, at this point. It’s not like we’re in a pack war or fighting demons or whatever.”

“But we could easily be fighting something else,” he retorted. “Like a Rogue werewolf or a *vampire*, for god’s sake.”

“But we don’t know that for sure,” I reminded him.

He breathed out slowly, like he was working hard to stay calm. “We couldn’t confirm what Lola thought she scented at the party, but it still makes me nervous that there could be a vampire in the area, using our territory as its hunting grounds.” He gave me a long look. “I do know that I can’t make you stay, love. I just hope that you will.”

He looked so worried, and I felt my irritation fading as I looked up at him. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close, hugging him tightly.

“I’ll be careful, I promise. I’ll keep my eyes open. And it’s not like I’ll be alone. The campus is really busy. I’ll be surrounded by students and staff all the time.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, finally relenting. “Go. But please, promise me that you’ll stay in touch with me throughout the day. I want to hear from you on the hour.”

“Okay,” I said, pleased that I’d successfully argued my case. I stepped back and looked up at him again. “So, when do you plan on talking to the council and Big Mac about the bloody sleeve?”

He thought for a moment. “I should probably go to Big Mac first. Maybe she has some idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He shrugged. “If it turns out there’s no connection to the supernatural world, then there’s no reason to take the matter to the council.”

“It probably would be better if you didn’t have to talk to them at all,” I said.

“That’s true,” Greyson said, frowning worriedly. “Bringing in Cesaries and his cronies would probably only make things worse. Even if it is the right thing to do.”

“I could come with you when you go investigate,” I offered, worried about the concerned look on his face.

“You don’t have to, love,” Greyson said, giving me a grateful smile.

“No, I want to,” I said firmly. “I’d like to talk to Big Mac about this.” Then I grinned. “And maybe I can convince Mrs. Smith to make some *real* white chocolate mocha. I mean, don’t tell Torin I said this, but his just isn’t the same.”

Greyson chuckled. “I’m sure my mom wouldn’t have a problem with that. Let’s go.”

He threw on some clothes, and we headed downstairs. Soon, we were in his car, speeding down the road toward Big Mac’s house.

We were quiet for a while. It was nice—the pack house was always so busy, so it was kind of unusual to be able to just sit in silence and listen to music.

After a while, Greyson turned the radio down and glanced at me. “Have you had any more thoughts about Elle and Lucian’s wedding?”

“No, not really,” I admitted. “I haven’t had a chance to do any more research, but I will. I promise, I’m going to do everything I can to make this whole thing more reasonable for you.”

He looked back out at the road with an irritated huff. “Yeah, well, what we consider reasonable and what Lucian considers reasonable are almost certainly two very different things. Probably hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of different.”

I laughed. Greyson looked annoyed, but I was relieved to see that he didn’t seem as deeply stressed as he’d been the last time we’d talked about the wedding.

When we got to Big Mac’s house, she opened the door as we were climbing out of the car, and I could immediately tell that she was none too pleased to see us. I hadn’t expected a warm welcome—this *was* Big Mac, after all—but she flat-out glared at us as we walked toward the house.

“What is it this time?” she demanded.

“Well, we’ve made a kind of grisly discovery,” Greyson said. He told her about the crime scene and the bloody sleeve. “We’re mainly worried about this because we spotted an unknown wolf a few days ago—it might’ve been a Rogue. And Lola thought she scented a vampire as well, so we’ve got a couple of big potential threats on our land.”

“*Potential?*” Big Mac demanded.

“Well, it is possible it’s all just a coincidence—”

“None of us believe in coincidences, Greyson,” Big Mac said sharply. “Where’s the evidence?”

“The evidence? You mean the bloody sleeve?” I shook my head. “We didn’t bring it. We left it in the woods. Would you be willing to come back with us and check it out for yourself?”

Big Mac groaned just as Mrs. Smith appeared in the doorway behind her, a concerned look on her face.

“Is everything okay, MacKenzie? Greyson?”

“No,” Big Mac snapped. “Everything is *not* okay. These two have shown up to force me to come to the woods to look at some discarded clothing they think is important, for some reason.”

Mrs. Smith put a calming hand on Big Mac’s arm, and I saw the immediate effect that had on the witch. It was clear that their problems had been resolved, and I could see how much they cared about each other.

“Alright, let’s go,” Big Mac snapped, stepping toward us. “We’re not driving,” she added, when Greyson took a step toward his car.

She beckoned us closer, and once we’d described the location in the woods, she waved her hand. One nauseating moment later, she’d blipped us into the woods on Redwood land.

“Lead the way,” she said sourly.

Greyson and I led the way toward the place where we’d found the bloody sleeve, and Big Mac followed.

I scanned the ground, searching. Then I glanced at Greyson, who was doing the same thing.

“Shouldn’t it be here?” I asked. “This is where it was, right?”

“Yeah,” Greyson said, frowning.

I looked around again. I was hardly an expert at recognizing different parts of the dense woods that circled our land, but I was sure this was the spot. I saw a tree that had fallen across a dried stream, and a cluster of dense holly bushes that I was sure I recognized.

“I know this is the spot,” I said.

Big Mac scowled at me. “So, where is it?”

I looked up at Greyson, a knot forming in my stomach. “It’s gone.”

**Episode 4902**

**Xavier**

*Over there*, Donovan said, nodding toward the east.

I turned, leading the rest of the pack in the direction he’d indicated. Even though I’d asked Donovan to lead us to the spot where he’d seen the supposed Bitterfang wolf, I just couldn’t believe any members of that pack would’ve come here. I honestly doubted any Bitterfangs would *want* to come within a hundred miles of Samara territory—or really any of the allied pack territories.

The Bitterfangs had suffered a crushing defeat. They’d lost their Alpha, and they’d earned every bit of punishment we’d doled out—they had to know that trespassing on our land again wouldn’t possibly end well. So if Donovan was right and they really were here, then what was their game?

*Hey*, Ava said, speeding up to run alongside me.

*Hey.*

*Do you think there’s a connection between the Rogue wolf the Redwoods saw and this sudden Bitterfang reappearance?*

This exact question had been eating at me, so it didn’t surprise me to learn that Ava had thought of it as well.

*I don’t know*, I admitted. *I’ve been wondering about that too. The wolf could’ve been a Rogue or a Bitterfang for all we know, but I trust Donovan.*

Ava nodded. *Yeah, me too.*

I did trust Donovan, but I didn’t like to make assumptions, and I didn’t like going into situations blind. I needed to know the truth. Had the Bitterfangs somehow managed to regroup and reorganize? Was Honora out there somewhere, looking for a chance to avenge her mate’s death?

There were a lot of questions, and no answers.

*You need to be on the lookout*, Donovan told me. *The Bitterfangs aren’t far from here.*

I nodded, but I didn’t need the reminder. The wind picked up, and I could detect the scent of other wolves. Ultimately, their identity didn’t really matter. Whoever they were, they were moving fast enough to constitute a threat.

Ava pulled up short. *Up ahead*.

I glanced at her, admiring—as I always did—my mate’s keen senses. Then I signaled for the pack to stop. I turned my attention to the woods ahead, in the direction Ava had indicated, and concentrated. The scents on the air were getting stronger, and now that we’d stopped running, I could hear movement from within the trees as well.

Then, from the shadows of the woods, figures began to appear. I did a quick count. There were three of them. Maybe four. Hardly a serious threat to my pack, which was waiting for orders right behind me.

*Donovan, Knox, Josephine—flank right. Go wide, but close in if there’s trouble*, I said quickly.

The three wolves immediately obeyed.

*Everyone else, forward*.

No one hesitated. They were ready to fight, if it came to that.

We approached the small group, who stopped short when they saw us. One of the wolves shifted back to human and put up his hands, looking around quickly.

“Hey, listen, we don’t want any trouble,” he said, sounding nervous.

The others fell in behind him, also shifting back to human.

Now that they were closer, I could see that all four of them looked… bad. Gaunt and tired. Weak.

But still, they were strangers, and I snarled a warning before shifting back to human, too. Ava, however, stayed shifted and kept my snarl going. The rest of the pack did the same.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

The small group looked at each other, looking a little lost. No one spoke.

“Who’s in charge?” I asked.

Again, no one answered.

“Someone had better start talking,” I snarled, growing impatient.

Finally, one of the men—a slight guy with sandy hair—cleared his throat. “We’re, uh… just passing through.”

I looked at them closely, trying to figure out if I recognized any of them. “Are you with the Bitterfang pack?”

The four wolves looked at each other again, suddenly seeming even more panicked than before.

“We *were*,” one of them said, looking down. “But the Bitterfang pack died along with Malakai.”

Ava shifted and moved to stand next to me. “What have you been doing over the last few days?”

“We’ve just been out,” the sandy-haired guy said, shrugging.

“Out doing what?” Ava demanded.

“Roaming, mostly,” he said. “Looking for somewhere we can settle down for a bit.”

Ava looked at me. *We need to find out if they have anything to do with that bloody sleeve.*

I nodded and looked back at the guys. “Doing anything else?”

A guy with dark hair shook his head. “Nah.”

“A human might’ve been killed on Redwood land,” I said. “You guys know anything about that?”

But before they could answer, Josephine, Knox, and Donovan moved in from the east. The four Bitterfangs eyed them nervously. They’d been getting edgier and edgier as we questioned them, and now, faced with three angry-looking Samaras, they looked about ready to shit bricks.

“We don’t know anything about anyone getting killed!” the sandy-haired guy insisted.

“We haven’t been that far north,” the dark-haired guy added. “And we’re not looking for trouble. We haven’t caused any problems for humans.”

I thought about this, then about the four thin guys standing in front of me, all with dark circles under their eyes. I had to wonder if they even had the strength to pose a threat. “You guys got any proof?”

“Proof?” one of them asked.

“Yeah. How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

“Do you have any witnesses?” Ava asked, crossing her arms.

“We ran into another small group that was crossing into Oregon from California,” the dark-haired guy said.

This piqued my interest. Maybe they were talking about that nomadic pack I’d heard about. “Did that group belong to a bigger pack?”

“Don’t know,” another guy said. “They called themselves Loneclaws. They said they didn’t have a territory. They just… roamed, you know? Moved around a lot.”

I looked at Ava. “That has to be them.”

“You know them?” the sandy-haired guy asked.

“Can you show me where this nomadic pack is?” I asked, ignoring his question.

The guy nodded. “Yeah, we can, but we last saw them at least ten hours’ travel from here. And they might’ve moved on by now.”

“Okay,” I said. I knew there was a chance we’d miss them completely, but I was willing to take that chance. Maybe, if we caught up with the nomadic pack, I’d be able to poach a few of its members and get them to join the Samara’s ranks. I wasn’t looking for a horde of people, but with a few more members here and there, the Samara pack would be just as big and powerful as the Redwood and Blue Blood packs. Not only would that bring the Samaras the respect we deserved, but—from a purely selfish standpoint—it would prove that I was a good Alpha. If my pack could grow, that was an undeniable sign of good leadership.

I looked at the former Bitterfangs, who were starting to shiver a little in the winter wind. “I want you to lead me to the nomadic pack.”

The dark-haired guy looked anxious. “And what happens to us once we do?”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax. Nothing’s going to happen to you. I don’t have a hidden agenda, here, and I’m not planning on harming you—not as long as you don’t do anything to deserve it,” I added in a warning tone. “I’ve been wanting to meet with this nomadic pack, and you happen to know where they are. That’s all. Once we meet up with them, that’s it. You four can be on your merry way—as long as you stay the hell away from Samara territory. Clear?”

The guys exchanged looks, then nodded.

“Okay,” the sandy-haired guy said. “That’s clear.”

“Terrific,” I said wryly. “Now let’s go.”

I shifted back to my wolf form, and everyone else did the same. As we started back on our path, Ava caught up with me.

*Okay, is it just me, or do those Bitterfang wolves look completely pathetic?* she asked.

*It’s not just you*,I assured her. *I guess that’s what happens when your pack falls apart.*

*I guess so*, Ava said. She was quiet for a moment, then she looked over at me. *You know, the Bitterfangs are—or rather were, I guess—outstanding fighters.*

I snorted a laugh. *You don’t have to remind me. I fought them, too, remember?*

*Yeah. They could be an asset to us*, she said.

I looked over at her, surprised. *What are you saying?*

She kept her eyes on the path ahead. *I’m just wondering if you’d consider inviting them to join the pack.*

**Episode 4903**

**Greyson**

Cali’s face was a mask of confusion, but I wasn’t confused in the slightest. I knew for sure that we were in the right place. I could read it in the shapes of the trees and the tracks on the ground. And I could smell it, too. I could still pick up on the scent of Redwood wolves, so I didn’t doubt that this was the place.

Big Mac looked irritated. “So? What’s going on? Is this the place or not?”

“It is,” I told her.

“So what’s the problem?” she demanded.

I gestured around. “The problem is that the evidence has disappeared.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Now, if only one of you was claiming to have seen this evidence, I’d be inclined to think you were mistaken.”

“But we weren’t alone—” Cali started, but Big Mac put up her hand.

“But as it was both of you and one of you is an Alpha werewolf, I can’t disregard your account,” she said. “Though I wish like hell I could.”

Cali shook her head, looking baffled. “I don’t know what to make of this. Could someone else have found the sleeve? Maybe taken it? Or do you think the police were called and came while we were gone?”

I shook my head. “Neither of those options seem likely. This area’s too remote for someone to have just stumbled across it. What would anyone be doing out here?” I asked, looking into the dense, dark trees that surrounded us. We were standing at the top of a ridge, and though there was technically a trail leading up here, it was nearly invisible unless you already knew where to look.

“I know,” Cali conceded. “But how else can we explain this? It’s just… gone. That can’t be a good thing.”

“I know,” I muttered, looking around again.

“Are you picking up any other scents?” she asked.

So far, the only scents I’d picked up were the ones I’d been expecting—those of the Redwood wolves. But I focused my attention on the ground. Moments later, I frowned. “I can still smell blood, but there’s a human scent, too.”

“The victim’s scent?” Cali asked.

“Maybe,” I said hesitantly. “I can’t be totally sure. There’s a lot of scents here.”

Big Mac gave an irritated huff and pushed past me. “Okay, let me take a look.”

She stepped forward and crouched down low, examining the ground closely.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t use my senses like you can, if that’s what you’re asking. But I *can* use magic.”

“You can use it to figure out what happened?” Cali asked.

She nodded. “I want to collect some samples from the area and take them back to my house. I can do a more thorough magical investigation there.”

“I can help,” Cali said, taking a step forward, but Big Mac waved her away.

“Shoo!” she hissed. “Get back! Don’t contaminate the ground, girl!”

“Sorry,” Cali muttered, taking a quick step backward.

We stood back and watched as Big Mac collected dirt and leaves, putting everything into a small cloth bag she’d pulled from her coat pocket.

Cali took a step closer to me, leaning her body against mine.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said quietly. “Otherwise I think I might’ve assumed I’d lost my mind.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking down at her.

She shook her head. “I just don’t get it. We all saw that bloody sleeve, right? We all saw it. So I know it can’t have been an illusion or anything.”

“No, it wasn’t an illusion,” I assured her. “It was real.”

“It was real,” Cali repeated, though she didn’t sound completely convinced.

I nodded. “As real as the ground we’re standing on, love.”

“So what the hell happened to it?” she asked, frustrated.

“Hell if I know,” I said with a sigh. I eyed Big Mac. “Let’s just hope Big Mac’s magic can help us figure out what happened.”

Finally, the witch straightened. “Okay, I’ve got what I need.”

“You’re done?” Cali asked.

She nodded shortly. “That’s what I said, isn’t it? So let’s go.”

When Cali and I were standing beside her, she waved her hand and blipped us all back to her house.

When we arrived, I shook off the disorientation I always felt right after being blipped. Big Mac headed straight into the house without a word to either Cali or me, which didn’t surprise me, but when she stomped through the front door, my mom leaned out of it.

“Greyson! Cali! Come inside!” she said, waving us in. “I made some mocha.”

Cali shot me a grin. “Oh, really?” she said, feigning surprise.

I laughed, and we walked inside.

As we stepped into the kitchen, Cali inhaled deeply, breathing in the sweet smell of chocolate and coffee.

“I swear, I miss your while chocolate mocha almost as much as I miss having you and Big Mac in the pack house,” she said, accepting a steaming cup from my mom. “Have you and Big Mac talked about moving back in?”

My mom nodded, handing me a cup, too. “We’ve discussed it, but right now, we’re mainly focusing on the wedding. We haven’t really had a chance to think much further than that. Why don’t you two sit down? I’m just going to pop in and see if MacKenzie needs anything from me.”

Cali pulled herself into a stool, and I leaned against the counter. I took a sip of mocha and watched as Cali enjoyed her own, taking tiny sips to make it last longer.

“Have you reconsidered going back to campus tomorrow?” I asked her after a moment.

Cali frowned at me over the rim of her cup. “Reconsidered? No. Why would I?”

I stared at her. “Really? Do I seriously have to point out the obvious, Cali?”

“I guess you do.”

“There’s been what looks like a murder, and then when we went back to the scene of the crime, all the evidence was gone, which means it’s been covered up. That’s pretty suspicious, don’t you think?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, it *is* suspicious—and it makes going back to campus all the more necessary. If I can find anything to link what happened out there with the other disappearances, it would go a long way toward figuring out who’s responsible and solving this.”

“That’s not our job,” I said firmly. “It certainly isn’t yours.”

She gave me a stern look. “You already agreed to drop this,” she reminded me. “I don’t want to argue about it anymore—especially not in front of your mom and Big Mac.”

“They’re not even here—”

My mom popped her head into the kitchen. “Greyson, Cali, can you come with me? MacKenzie wants to see you both.”

“Did she find anything?” I asked. Maybe if Big Mac could figure out what was going on, Cali would drop her investigation idea.

“No clue,” my mom said. “I only know that MacKenzie asked for you. Come.”

When we walked into Big Mac’s study, we found the witch hunched over a table, where she had spread out the evidence she’d gathered. Along with the rocks and dirt were crystals and little vials of liquid. She was looking at the pile closely, muttering under her breath.

That was classic Big Mac—always muttering something. I wondered if that was a witch thing, or a Big Mac thing. I was about to ask, but then Cali spoke.

“Did you find anything?” she asked, taking a step toward the table.

Big Mac glared at Cali. “I wouldn’t have called for you if I hadn’t.”

I took Cali’s hand and led her back, giving Big Mac some space. Cali tended to get a little overzealous, and it always seemed to rub the witch the wrong way.

“Can you tell us what you found?” I asked.

“You go first,” Big Mac shot back.

“What?” I asked, confused.

She looked up. “Tell me again—what exactly did you find out there?”

I nodded and started, describing in detail what the blood had looked like on the ground, how the dirt had been disturbed, and the bloody sleeve we’d found.

Big Mac listened closely, and when I was done, she shook her head.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked warily.

“From what you’re describing, whoever ripped off this kid’s arm has to be a werewolf. Now, I’m basing that only on what you’ve told me, but the slash marks, the volume of blood, the fact that it happened in werewolf territory, and the unidentified wolf everyone saw at the party… It all spells out werewolf.”

I narrowed my eyes, detecting a certain amount of skepticism in her voice. “*But?*”

Big Mac stood up. “*But*, I can’t be a hundred percent sure about that. And my magic is suggesting a different explanation.”

“What?” Cali asked.

Big Mac looked grim. “My magic is telling me that this was the work of a vampire.”

**Episode 4904**

**Artemis**

My ass was killing me. We’d been bouncing around in this carriage for so long, I was nearly delirious—and in my delirium, I was dreaming of cars. How had I never realized how much I loved modern suspension systems until this point?

Marius bounced on the seat next to me as the carriage went over a giant rut in the road.

“*I told you so*,” I hissed, glaring at him for good measure, just in case he forgot that this was entirely his fault.

“Okay, okay,” he muttered.

I shot a glance at the Crimson Gang guard in the corner and leaned toward Marius, keeping my voice low. “*I* wanted to go to the fortress on my own. Which—for the record—is how most bounty hunters operate, as you well know. And it would’ve been the best option for us, for very obvious reasons. But oh no, you just *had* to flag down a ride, didn’t you,” I spat, burning with fury. “And now look where we are—riding with the Crimson Gang and their leader, who looks like he’d rather kill us than look at us. Also, he smells like stale cheese.”

“Are you done?” Marius hissed. “It’s not like I knew it was going to be like this when I hailed the ride, Ari. And while I know you like a nice stroll, the fortress is still a considerable distance away. This might not be ideal—”

“*Ideal?*” I whisper-shouted.

“—but at least we have a ride,” Marius finished.

I rolled my eyes. “That logic is so freaking twisted, Marius. How do you even know we’re going to the fortress?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh my gods, *why* are you being so naïve? Who’s to say this guy is going to take us where we want to go? This carriage isn’t a freaking Uber!”

He stared at me. “What the hell are you talking about? What’s an Uber? Did you just make that word up?”

“Forget it,” I muttered darkly.

“Whoa!” Marius said, bracing himself as we jostled over a rough patch of road.

I hadn’t had a chance to steady myself, and I bounced up into the air, landing hard in Marius’s lap.

He looked surprised for a moment, then he grinned at me. “See, traveling by carriage isn’t so bad.”

My face heated as I looked up at him, his lips inches from my own. I thought of the kiss—and the *other* things—we’d shared recently, and embarrassment welled up inside me.

“No,” I said, smacking his chest. “It’s worse than bad.” I climbed off of him and sat back down in my own seat. “Stop screwing around. We should be trying to figure out what the Crimson Gang wants with us. Whatever it is, it can’t be good.”

Marius nodded thoughtfully. “I could feel the leader out,” he whispered.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I muttered doubtfully.

“Why not? I have good instincts for this kind of thing.”

“Yeah?” I said warily. “Well, so far, I haven’t been all that impressed with those instincts.”

Marius stood, instantly drawing the attention of a member of the Crimson Gang. He had been riding in the back with us, sitting in the far corner of the carriage, his hat pulled over his eyes. Our conversation had been risky, but he’d seemed asleep. Except when Marius stood, he looked up.

Instantly he drew his knife and glared. “Sit down.”

Marius put up his hands, raising his voice, “I just want to talk to your leader.”

From the front of the carriage, the leader turned. “What do you want, Marius?”

I frowned, wondering how the hell this guy knew Marius by name. I was pretty sure neither of us had said it. And if he knew Marius, did that mean he knew *me*, too? That could be problematic.

“I was just wondering how far we were planning on going,” Marius asked, affecting a light, friendly tone.

I was—as always—in awe of his chameleon-like ability to shapeshift when the moment called for it.

“Are we going to go as far as Rosegate?” he pressed.

The gang leader laughed. “Where we’re going and where you’ll end up are two very different places.”

I tensed. *That* didn’t sound good.

“I know you’re a bounty hunter, Marius, and I assume your companion here”—he shot me a look—“is either a hunter as well, or a bounty to be claimed.”

“Her?” Marius asked, feigning shock. “No, she’s just a friend.”

The guy looked past Marius to leer at me. “You two seemed to be a lot more than friends. But, regardless, what you are makes you both enemies of the Crimson Gang. It’s no secret that my men and I are wanted for… various crimes. So maybe we can use you to negotiate a pardon.”

None of that sounded good, and I slowly reached for my dagger—I wasn’t about to get carted off to be used as a bargaining chip. I glanced around the carriage’s interior. We were outnumbered and didn’t have much to fight with. Our options were limited, but I wasn’t going to let myself get locked up—or worse. I’d come to the Fae world to find my father, and nothing was going to stop me from doing just that.

Apparently finished with the conversation, the leader turned to look at the road again and leaned over to speak to the man beside him.

Marius shot me a glance. “I think we’re in trouble,” he whispered.

I stared at him. “You *think*?” I shook my head and showed him my dagger, trying to be discreet. “We’re going to have to make a run for it.”

Marius shook his head. “No. We can do better than that.”

“What does *that* mean?” I hissed.

He looked me squarely in the eyes. “Do you trust me?”

“Absolutely not,” I said without hesitation.

He grinned. “Well, you’re going to have to. Give me the dagger.”

I hesitated. “It’s my only weapon.”

“I know what I’m doing,” he insisted, his mouth barely moving as he spoke. “And since I was the one who got us into this mess, I should be the one to get us out.”

I definitely didn’t want to hand him my weapon, but if he had a plan, that was better than what I had, so I reluctantly slipped him the dagger. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to charge the leader, and when I do, I want you to climb over him and get on one of the horses. I’ll do the rest.”

I stared at him. “Have you lost your *mind*?” I whisper-shouted at him. “How is that a plan?”  
 “Just do it,” he whispered. “On three.”

We didn’t have a lot of other options, so I wanted to believe this could work… But how could it?

“You two, shut up,” growled the guard in the corner.

“One,” Marius said, his voice so low that only I could hear it. “Two. THREE!”

He jumped up and charged the leader, slamming into him. The shock caught the guy off guard, and—taking advantage of that half-second—I scrambled over him, kicking the leader’s companion for good measure as I leapt onto the back of the horse nearest me. I situated myself on the animal’s back, then twisted around and saw that Marius was fighting with the leader, who’d dropped the horses’ reins.

I frowned, wondering why Marius hadn’t used the dagger. What was he waiting for? Had he gone soft on me?

The leader had a hold on Marius, but as I watched, Marius wrestled free, lunged for my horse, and pulled free of the leader’s grip. An instant later he produced the dagger and slashed at the horses’ tack, separating them from the carriage.

Without the horses, the carriage rolled to a stop behind us.

“*Do something!*” the leader screamed, glaring at his cronies with furious, bulging eyes.

Marius laughed as he cut our horse free from the rest. Then he wrapped his arms around me. “Go!”

Conscious of his body pressed against mine, I did my best to concentrate. I leaned forward and dug my heels into the horse’s flanks, making her break into a gallop. We were moving a lot faster than before, but it was also hard to ride at a gallop without bouncing into Marius.

“*Wa-hoo!*” Marius yelled as we ran. “That was incredible! Did you see how I did that?”

“That was… not bad,” I admitted. “Though it’s still your fault that we needed to escape at all.”

“Oh, Ari,” he said with a laugh, slipping his arms around me and giving me a squeeze.

We rode for a long time. Marius didn’t seem that concerned, but I had him keep an eye on the road behind us to make sure we weren’t being followed. And when I felt like we’d gotten far enough away, I slowed the horse to a trot, then a walk. We both needed the rest. My whole body was aching now, not just my ass.

“How much farther do we have to go?” I asked.

“Not far,” Marius said. He pointed. “It’s just over there.”

I looked in the direction he was pointing, and there, looming in the distance, was the fortress.

**Episode 4905**

When I woke up the next morning, I felt like hell. I hadn’t slept well at all. I’d spent the entire night waking up from dreams about vampires attacking me, or attacking the crew team, or attacking the pack.

I was grateful that Greyson had been sleeping by my side. It had been comforting to have him there when I’d woken up from my nightmares, terrified in the dark. The feeling of his arms around me had grounded me again and made it possible to get back to sleep.

Though not everything was perfect between us. The night before, after Big Mac had explained that she’d been able to detect vampire residue in the evidence she’d gathered—“vampire residue” being a concept I was still trying to wrap my mind around—Greyson had tried again to try to talk me out of going back to campus. But I’d stood firm and told him I was going, end of story. I’d informed him that I wasn’t the least bit worried about vampires attacking me in the middle of the day on a crowded campus. And while I genuinely wasn’t worried from a rational perspective, my dreams suggested that I was possibly worried on a subconscious level.

I rubbed my eyes, which felt like sandpaper, and started to slip quietly out of bed. I didn’t want to wake Greyson, who was still snoozing. I didn’t want to have another argument about my going to school today, either.

But despite my best efforts, my foot snagged on the sheet, and I nearly tumbled to the floor.

Awake in an instant, Greyson grabbed me around the waist to steady me.

“Careful.” He blinked himself awake. “Are you really going to go?”

“Yeah, I’m going,” I said. I was bracing myself for a counterargument, so I was surprised when he just nodded.

“Okay. Just give me a copy of your class schedule, so I know where you’ll be,” he said.

I didn’t see any harm in that, so I shrugged. “Okay.”

I grabbed my phone and texted him a copy of my schedule, then I climbed out of bed to get ready.

Greyson tucked his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. “Any thoughts about what it might mean, having a vampire in the mix?”

I thought about my fraught dreams. “Um, yeah, a few. What about you?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it a lot. A vampire kills someone—at least that’s what it looks like—and then tries to make it look like a werewolf did it. On Redwood territory.” He shook his head. “Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, pulling on my jeans. “But you’re right—it is weird. And risky, too. Werewolves and vampires aren’t exactly known to be on friendly terms—Mikah being the obvious exception.”

“Of course,” Greyson conceded.

“So if the vampire had been caught on Redwood land, it would’ve been really dangerous for them,” I went on. “And they would’ve known that.”

Greyson nodded slowly. “Maybe that was the point.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He narrowed his eyes. “Maybe the vampire’s a thrill seeker.”

I thought about this idea as I drove toward campus. When pressed, Greyson had admitted that he had no basis for this hypothesis. It was just conjecture—an attempt to make sense of what little we *did* know.

And now I was heading to campus, hoping I’d be able to learn more from Codsworth. He’d been really determined to experience a werewolf sighting, and I could buy the idea that he might’ve decided to stir up a little local interest in werewolves by planting some “evidence.”

But even if that *was* true, how would he have been able to involve a vampire in his scheme? I didn’t think Codsworth knew any vampires.

And then there was still the possibility that Codsworth himself was the killer. I’d never voiced that theory to Greyson, but I *had* thought about it, and I knew I needed to bear it in mind. If there was anyone out there who might have the agenda to make a crime scene look like a werewolf had been involved, it was Codsworth. Or maybe one of the other club members. They were fanatics. They might do anything to try to make it seem real… But I was going to start with the most likely suspect.

When I got to practice, everyone was already at the fieldhouse. With one notable exception.

“Where’s Codsworth?” I asked, looking around.

“He’s really upset about Eddie Wilson’s disappearance,” Gael said as he racked up his weights. “Did you know that Eddie and Codsworth were friends?”

“No,” I said quietly. “I had no idea.”

A wave of guilt washed over me. I felt instantly terrible that I’d ever considered the idea that Codsworth might’ve been involved in Eddie’s disappearance.

But then another, more suspicious thought occurred to me—what if Codsworth was just faking being upset?

It seemed like an outlandish possibility, but I couldn’t be sure it wasn’t true. So I went looking for him.

I found him in the weight room, and he looked up when I walked in.

“Cali, hi,” he said, glancing up, then looking back down at the ground. “I’m sorry for not being out there with the rest of the guys, but I’m not feeling well today.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Is there anything I can do?”

He shook his head. “No, thanks. I just need some space, I think. And who knows? Maybe Eddie will show up, right?”

He looked at me hopefully, and I stared back at him, frozen. I thought of the bloody sleeve, and its mysterious disappearance. Whoever that sleeve had belonged to probably wasn’t going to be showing back up anytime soon. But I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him that.

“Hey, you take all the time you need,” I said gently. I leaned down to hug him. “I’ll tell the guys and explain to Coach, if you want to sit this one out.”

He took a shuddering breath. “I think I’ll be okay. But thanks.”

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After practice, I was pretty convinced that Codsworth had nothing to do with whatever had happened to Eddie Wilson. He was too distraught. And as far as I could tell, he’d been at the party, and then he’d left with his friends. When would he even have had the time to murder someone, much less make that murder look like a werewolf attack and then hike *back* to the crime scene and take all the evidence away? It just didn’t make any sense. There’s no way he could’ve been involved.

And that was good for Codsworth, but terrible for me. He’d been my main lead, and now I had nothing. I’d already reached a dead end.

After I showered and changed in the women’s locker room, I shouldered my bag and headed off to my first class. In all the excitement of the last twenty-four hours, I’d neglected my studies. I hadn’t even cracked a book. My stomach twisted itself into an anxious knot as I thought about this. It really wasn’t a great way to start my return to school.

I was going to have to try harder and make school more of a priority. I had to make a promise to myself to dedicate time every day to schoolwork. I really wanted this, so I hoped my good intentions weren’t just wishful thinking.

I walked to class and dropped into a seat in the lecture hall, then dug around in my bag for my book.

“—and he just disappeared.”

“*Disappeared?* Really?”

“That’s what everyone’s saying. Poor Eddie.”

“Wait, who was it?”

“Eddie Wilson.”

I froze. I knew I shouldn’t have been surprised that the students sitting in the row in front of me were talking about the disappearance. CCU was a small school, and word always got around. I eyed the girls carefully, wondering if any of them knew more about what had happened.

I was about to lean over to ask the girls exactly that when the professor stepped to the front of the room.

“Hello,” Professor Wagner said, smiling out at the class. She was a tall woman, with tightly curled black hair and very white teeth. “I want to make a general announcement before we begin today. I have received a memo from administration, and they want me to inform you that they have added more on-campus security. There will be more guards patrolling, and more than fifty new CCTV cameras have been installed on campus. If you see anything suspicious, campus security asks that you report it immediately.” She looked around with another smile. “Okay! Now let’s get started. Today, we’re talking about the role of the self in the philosophical conversation.”

As Professor Wagner began her lecture, I struggled to pay attention. It wasn’t that I wasn’t interested in the role of the self in philosophy, but my thoughts kept straying to the crime scene. I kept picturing it in my head and running over the details, trying to figure out if I’d missed anything. I was still trying to make sense of what I’d seen when someone nudged me.

I looked at the girl sitting next to me. I recognized her and smiled, if a little warily. “What?” I whispered.

She smiled back, then leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Don’t look now, but there’s a super hot guy I’ve never seen before sitting right behind you. And he’s watching you.”

**Episode 4906**

I didn’t move. I had to fight the urge to twist around immediately, but I stayed still. I knew if I looked around to see who was staring at me, whoever it was would know what I was doing. If someone really was watching me, I needed to be careful.

My whole body had tensed up. There was a chance that whoever this was, he might have something to do with the vampire Big Mac had detected, or even the missing students.

I looked at the girl next to me. “Can you describe the guy?” I asked quietly.

She shot a subtle look over her shoulder. “He’s wearing a baseball hat pulled over his face, but I can still see that he has these really smoldering eyes. They’re the kind that you just can’t look away from.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She smiled, like she was really enjoying this. Apparently, she wasn’t too sad to be missing out on the lecture on the nature of self. “They’re grey. And he’s tall—almost too tall to fit into these shitty lecture hall seats. And *so* many muscles.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Anything else?”

She glanced back again. “Jawline.”

“Jawline?” I repeated.

She nodded. “It’s perfect.”

The girl’s face had started to flush, and I understood why. The guy sounded incredible… And familiar. I dug around in my bag until I found what I was looking for—a compact with a mirror. I opened it up and angled it so I could see who was sitting behind me.

It was Greyson.

I rolled my eyes and snapped the compact shut. Then I turned to the girl next to me. “It’s fine. It’s just my boyfriend.”

The girl frowned. “Is he your *ex*-boyfriend? If he’s stalking you or something, you can borrow this.”

She grabbed her keys from her bag and showed me the small can of pepper spray that was dangling from the fob.

I smiled at her, grateful that she was willing to look out for me—a girl she hardly knew—but shook my head. “No, he’s my current boyfriend. And I’m not going to pepper spray him. Probably.” I got to my feet. “Excuse me.”

I squeezed past her, then into the row behind me. As I walked toward Greyson, he slipped lower in his seat, like he thought I wouldn’t see him if he was slumped over.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, leaning over to hiss at him.

When he looked up at me, his eyes *did* smolder, just like my classmate had described. And they *were* hard to look away from.

I shook my head. I couldn’t let myself get distracted.

“I decided to audit your class,” he said quietly. “In fact, I’m auditing all your classes.”

“*What?*”

“Unofficially, of course,” he said with a shrug.

“Why?” I demanded in a hoarse whisper.

He hesitated for a moment. “I’m worried about you,” he finally admitted. “I just want to be sure you’re safe.”

I grabbed his hand and yanked him to his feet. I wanted to get him outside so I could really lay into him and remind him that we had an agreement, but before we could move, Professor Wagner spoke.

“Yes? The student in the back, with the baseball cap.”

Greyson and I looked at the front of the room.

Professor Wagner was looking at Greyson. “What do you think?”

Greyson shifted uncomfortably, and when I glanced around, I realized that everyone in the lecture hall was looking at us.

Greyson cleared his throat. “Well, I’m just auditing this class. And it’s my first day, so maybe someone else can answer.”

Professor Wagner narrowed her dark eyes. “I treat everyone who walks into this lecture hall as a student, so why don’t you give it a try?”

Greyson looked at me. *I have no idea what the question is. I don’t even know what class this is. Help me out.*

I wasn’t the type to enjoy watching my mate squirm, but just for a moment, I wished I were. Greyson had shown up here despite our arrangement, and he deserved to be called out, but I knew I wouldn’t do it. I didn’t want to embarrass him.

*I’ll try to help, but I wasn’t paying much attention either, thanks to you. Tell her that the self is bound up with your reflection on where you find yourself. And, according to Hume, the self is nothing more than an ever-changing set of experiences.*

Greyson gave me a quizzical look, then repeated my answer.

Professor Wagner raised her eyebrows. “Excellent answer. You should consider taking this course for credit.”

I rolled my eyes, realizing how easy it would be to cheat using the mind link. Not that I’d ever do that.

Professor Wagner returned to her lecture, and I grabbed Greyson’s hand and pulled him toward the back exit.

When we reached the hallway, I rounded on him.

“Explanation please,” I said tersely.

He shrugged. “It should be obvious, Cali. I wasn’t comfortable with you going to campus, so I figured this was a decent compromise. You still get to go, and I can still keep an eye on you.”

“Is that the real reason why you asked for my class schedule?”

“Yeah,” Greyson admitted.

I sighed. “I appreciate your concern, Greyson, but this isn’t going to work for me. Having you around is distracting. I should be in that lecture hall learning about the nature of self, not standing out here with you. I want you to leave, and to trust that I can take care of myself. Besides,” I added, thinking of the girl next to me and the way she’d gushed about Greyson, “if the other students see you, they’re all going to be jealous of me, and I don’t need that. Will you just go?”

He looked reluctant, but finally nodded. “Fine. But I want you to check in with me, okay? And if you come across anything suspicious—or anything you think might be linked to the missing students, or to Eddie Wilson, or to vampires—you let me know. Call me. Don’t go off and try anything on your own, please. Okay?”

“Okay, okay,” I agreed. “I wouldn’t dare. Besides, Lola is here—I’m not alone. Now go. I have to get back to the lecture.” I looked at him for a moment. “What are you going to do?”

He pulled off the baseball cap and ran his hand through his hair. “Well, now that we know there’s a vampire involved, I guess I need to fill Xavier in whenever he gets back from his little expedition. In the meantime, I should talk to the other allied packs—the Blue Bloods and the Cobalts.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You left out the Vanguards, you know.”

He groaned. “And the Vanguards.”

“I know Lucian is a pain in the ass, and we’re figuring out this whole alliance thing again, but his territory still borders ours. He needs to be kept aware of any threats.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right,” he said. “I’ll go. I’ll do it for Elle.” He leaned in to kiss me. “I’m sorry for spying on you. See you later.”

I watched as he headed off, then turned and walked quietly back into the lecture hall. I dropped into my seat and tried to focus on the remainder of the lecture.

“Stay safe,” the girl next to me said when the class ended.

“You too,” I told her.

I grabbed a coffee, and, as I headed toward my next class, I spotted Lola walking across campus. I waved at her, and she veered in my direction.

“Hey,” she said, jogging over. “Am I crazy, or did I see Greyson walking around campus earlier?”

“You’re not crazy,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“What was he doing here?”

“Spying on me,” I said flatly.

“What? *Why?*”

“I don’t know,” I said, “Maybe for the right reasons, but it kind of pissed me off.”

Lola laughed. “Yeah, I get that. If Jay pulled that crap, I’d be mad. Still…” She thought about it for a moment. “There is something kind of sexy about having your mate go to such lengths to protect you.”

“You think so?” I asked. “Even if it’s not something you agreed to?”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t you do the same for him?”

“I guess so,” I admitted. “Hey, we saw Big Mac last night.”

“What did she say?”

I filled her in on everything that had happened, from the missing evidence to Big Mac’s hypothesis about the vampire.

When I was done talking, Lola nodded.

“I knew it,” she said. “That backs up what happened at the party. I could’ve sworn I smelled a vampire. Not that I’m *glad* there’s a vampire hanging around,” she added quickly, probably reacting to my expression, “It’s just good to know that I can trust my senses. So, what’s the plan now?”

“I don’t know,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee. “And once Greyson tells the council, who knows? It might be out of our hands.”

“Have you thought about telling Mikah?” Lola asked. “I mean, the guy’s a detective *and* a vampire. He might have some insight.”

“That’s actually a really good idea,” I said. “It’s worth a shot, anyway.”

I pulled out my phone and texted Mikah.

*Can you help us out? I think we have a vampire problem.*

**Episode 4907**

**Xavier**

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn’t tell if Ava was angry with me. After she’d suggested that we try to entice the former Bitterfang members to join the Samara pack and I’d rejected the idea, she hadn’t said much to me. We’d kept running through the woods side by side, but we’d moved in silence, speaking only when necessary. And when we’d stopped for the night, she’d fallen asleep immediately.

And now that we were moving again, not much had changed. She wasn’t even running with me. We’d been running for hours, and she’d spent most of that time with Marissa.

I was pretty sure I was getting the silent treatment.

That just wasn’t going to work. I couldn’t be on the outs with my mate. I wanted us to work together, so I adjusted my course so I could run alongside her.

*Can we talk?* I asked.

She glanced sideways at me. *About what?*

*I know that you’re upset about the thing with the Bitterfangs, but you never gave me a chance to explain why I said what I said—*

*You really don’t have to*, she interrupted. *You made it clear that you’re the Alpha—and who am I to argue with the Alpha?*

There was a dangerous edge to her voice, and it echoed through my head.

I sighed. *No. Come on, Ava. That works for everyone else—if Knox or Blaine gave me attitude about a decision of mine, that would be different—but you’re not just a pack member. Hell, you’re not just my mate. You’re my Luna, and I take that relationship really seriously. I want you to feel free to disagree with me.*

She gave me a long look, finally slowing her pace. *Okay. Why can’t we make the Bitterfangs join the pack, then?*

*Well, we can’t* make *anyone join the pack*, I pointed out. *They’d have to want to.*

Ava scoffed, rolling her blue eyes. *Come on, X.* *It’s not like they have a lot going for them as it stands now.*

*That’s true*, I agreed. *And they certainly seem like far less of a threat than they did before. They actually just seem kind of pathetic, now. But do we really want pack members like them? I don’t think I need to remind you that up until very recently, we were mortal enemies. They were trying to kill us, remember?*

*Of course I remember*, she muttered.

*Besides*, I added, *I have enough trouble keeping Blaine, Knox, and Zipper in line. I don’t need to add more headaches when I’ve already got the idiot triplets turning my fur grey. And even if the Bitterfang wolves pledged their loyalty to me, who would ever trust them?*

Ava was quiet for a moment, then she sighed. *Yeah, I guess you have a point. I just know that the Samaras need some fresh blood. We need to show everyone that we’re a growing pack, not the shadow of what we once were.*

*That’s why I’m hoping that running into this nomadic pack will bear fruit for us. They’d be perfect. They’d come to us with no baggage. Okay, maybe they wouldn’t be* perfect*—they’d still have to earn the trust of the rest of the pack, and they’d still have to pledge their loyalty—but at least they’ve never tried to kill any of us. Of course, if we find them and they look as downtrodden as those Bitterfangs look, I might just change my mind.*

Ava snorted. *That’s true*. *They’re a pretty sad sight*.

She picked up her pace again, and I sped up too.

As I ran, I felt a renewed sense of hope and purpose. I might’ve stumbled a bit with how I’d dealt with Ava, but I’d identified the problem and managed to talk it through and get things back on track. And I still seemed to have the full support of my pack, which was invaluable. My determination to reclaim my Alpha credentials and my pack’s trust was beginning to pay off.

We ran for another ten miles, but as we crested a hill and started downward, a strange—yet somewhat familiar—scent wafted toward me.

*STOP!* I called to the pack, and I felt everyone pulled to a halt behind me. I glanced over my shoulder. *Knox, you stay with the pack. Keep an eye on the Bitterfangs.*

*Where are you going?* Knox asked.

*Ava and I are going to go check on something*, I told him.

*What is it?* Ava asked as I kept moving forward.

*I smell more Bitterfangs nearby. I think they’re just up ahead*, I told her. I inhaled deeply and shook my head. *I can’t be totally sure, but I swear I smelled the same werewolf at some point, during the last battle.*

*Whoa*, Ava said*. Okay. Let’s check it out*.

Without being told, she knew to stay quiet and low to the ground as we moved forward. I kept my eyes and ears sharp, staying keenly aware of any sound or movement in the trees.

Suddenly, I heard breaking branches, and Ava and I both stopped dead. We looked ahead and saw movement in the trees—something was coming right for us.

Without waiting for a signal, Ava shot forward with a snarl, slamming into a huge werewolf as it emerged from the brush.

Shit. I lunged after her. What the hell was she thinking? She should’ve said something—warned me, or let me take this wolf on. Ava was a skilled fighter, there was no doubt about that, but I was the Alpha here. I was faster, and stronger, and more experienced.

I was about to grab hold of the unfamiliar werewolf’s neck when something hit me from the side with the force of a battering ram, driving me into a pine tree. It was like being hit by a tank, and it nearly knocked all the air right out of me—nearly, but not quite. I turned toward the new wolf—huge and brown, with black eyes. I snarled, driving the wolf back.

We tussled and snapped at each other. He aimed a kick at me, which I dodged, then I swiped at him with my claws. He tried to dodge, but I managed to rake his muzzle, drawing blood. This stunned him for a second, which gave me an instant to look over at Ava and see how she was doing. She seemed to be holding her own, so I turned back to the brown wolf.

He crouched low, about to charge, so I didn’t give him the chance. I pounced before he could move, which caught him off guard. When I slammed him to the ground, he let out a bark of pain. I’d knocked the wind out of him and though he tried to fight back, he was weakened, and I managed to pin him down.

*Who the hell are you?* I demanded.

*You thought you could destroy us!* the wolf snarled. *The Bitterfang pack will never give up! Never!*

He snapped at me, nearly catching my eye with his razor-sharp teeth. He was fighting so hard, I knew I had no choice—I knew what I had to do. I leaned in, sank my teeth into his throat, and yanked, ripping the skin and muscle. Blood poured out, streaming across the frozen ground.

I tossed the still warm wolf’s body aside, just as Ava slashed her opponent’s neck with her claws. She stepped back as blood sprayed from the gaping wound in his neck.

*Are you okay?* I asked, rushing toward her. Ignoring the dying wolf at our feet, I looked her over carefully, checking for injuries. *Did he hurt you?*

She shook her head. She had a small cut on her face, but she looked fine, otherwise. *Nothing serious.*

*Thanks for defending me, Ava, but would you give me a chance to do it myself next time?*

She scoffed. *Sometimes you don’t get a chance.*

I rolled my eyes. *I’m just glad you’re not hurt.*

I heard footsteps and turned to see Knox, leading the rest of the pack toward us.

*We heard the fight*, he said, by way of explanation.

The four Bitterfangs stepped forward and looked at their fellow pack members, dead on the ground.

The sandy-haired guy looked at me. “When Malakai died, the remnants of the Bitterfang pack splintered into groups. Some decided to go Rogue, and some formed loose packs of their own. Others—like these two”—he nodded toward the dead wolves—“vowed to get revenge. They wanted to reclaim the power they felt we once had.”

I shifted back to human. “You can bury your dead, if you wish.”

The sandy-haired guy shook his head. “Thanks for the offer, but no. We don’t need to. When we left the Bitterfang pack, we left it for good.”

I nodded, pleased to hear him say that, though I still had no intention of inviting them to join the Samara pack.

“Alright,” I said, looking around at my people. “Time to keep looking for this nomadic pack.”

“You’ve already found us.”

I pivoted around and saw a group of werewolves stepping out of the woods behind us.

**Episode 4908**

**Greyson**

I was sitting in my car outside the pack house, thinking about just how badly I’d screwed up. I was going to have to do a lot to make it up to Cali. She’d been understandably pissed to discover that I’d been spying on her on campus.

Thinking back on it now, I felt pretty stupid—but I was okay with playing the fool if it meant that Cali would be safe. I couldn’t let anything happen to her. Not after everything we’d been through together.

Not to mention the fact that a murderous vampire on the loose was a serious threat. Serious enough that I felt compelled to let the council know. But my first obligation wasn’t to the council.

*I feel far more bound to the packs that make up the alliance. At least I know they’ll be proactive and have our backs—unlike the council. We risked our lives to fight off the Bitterfangs. The council did nothing.*

In the end, I decided that I *would* fill the council in, but not until I’d had a chance to talk to Mace and the others. I considered calling Mace right then and there to fill him in, but I was still trying to shake the whole class auditing thing from my head, so I decided to go to the Blue Bloods directly. It would be the perfect distraction.

I finally got out of the car and ran into the pack house to check in with Rishika.

“Nothing unusual to report,” she said. “Just the normal stuff. But I’ll call you if anything changes.”

“Thanks, Rishika,” I said. “I’m heading to the Blue Blood pack house—call me if you need me.”

With that, I ran right back out of the house, shifted in the yard, and took off through the woods toward Blue Blood territory. I’d tried to call Mace, but he hadn’t picked up. I was coming alone, and since we were allied, I didn’t think a quick stop by would hurt.

As always, sprinting through the woods in wolf form invigorated me and cleared my head like nothing else. I felt powerful and capable and ready for anything—so much so that I almost found myself hoping that I’d run into the vampire. If that happened, I’d be able to take it out quickly without having to involve anyone else at all.

I slowed down as I approached the Blue Blood pack house. There was a familiar car parked in the driveway.

*That’s Maren’s car. She must be visiting.*

I hadn’t really thought about Mace and Maren lately, but it was hard not to get right back to it now that I’d seen clear proof that their relationship was still going strong.

*Maybe that’s why he hadn’t answered…*

I shifted back to human, slipped on the clothes I’d brought with me in a backpack, and started toward the house. But then I stopped and turned around when I heard someone calling my name.

“Greyson! Hi!” It was Fenrir, bounding toward me excitedly.

I was hit with a strange mix of elation and sadness. I’d wanted so much to be part of this young werewolf’s life and had even at one point thought I was Fenrir’s father, but it wasn’t meant to be.

I crouched down and took Fenrir in my arms, scooping him up and spinning him around. “Fenrir! How are you?”

“I’m good, Greyson!” He shoved a toy in my face. “Look! This is my superhero toy! It flies, and watch!” He pressed a button on the action figure’s stomach, and it made a *Pew! Pew!* sound, much to Fenrir’s delight.

“That’s a pretty cool toy, Fenrir,” I said, just as the front door opened and Maren came walking out with Mace.

“Mommy! Mommy! Look who I found!” Fenrir shouted.

I put Fenrir down, hoping that I’d quickly overcome the awkwardness I suddenly felt. I wanted to be happy for Maren—she deserved to be with someone *good*. But as I stood there watching her and Mace standing so closely together, I wondered if I’d ever be able to wrap my head around the two of them being together.

“Hey,” Mace said, smiling.

“Hey, Mace… Maren, nice to see you,” I said evenly.

“You too, Greyson,” Maren said. “It’s been a while.”

“It has. I’m surprised to see you and Fenrir out here. Pleasantly surprised,” I quickly added.

Maren shrugged and glanced between me and Mace. “Yeah, we’re just here for the day. I try to bring Fenrir here regularly to spend time with Mace’s pack. You know, so he can learn about his werewolf side.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said before snapping my attention to Mace. The awkwardness wasn’t dissipating as quickly as I’d hoped. “I just came by to talk pack business. You got a minute, Mace?”

“Sure, man, of course,” Mace said. “Want to come in for a cup of coffee?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I followed Mace, Maren, and Fenrir into the house while Fenrir kept explaining all the features of his toy. I was grateful for his excitement—it was helping to break the ice.

“We’ll let you two talk,” Maren said, picking up Fenrir and disappearing back outside.

“Good to see you, Fenrir!” I called after them.

I followed Mace to the kitchen, where he poured me a cup of coffee.

“Hope having Maren and Fenrir here isn’t causing you any problems,” Mace said gruffly as we took a seat at the kitchen island. “For a while, Maren resisted bringing him here because of all the problems the alliance was having, but now that the worst is behind us, she’s been a little more open to it.”

“It’s taking a little getting used to, but honestly, I’m fine with it,” I said. “And I’m happy for you guys. Fenrir seems great, and that’s all that matters.”

“Good,” Mace said. “Glad to hear it.”

“Well, I came by because we might have a problem,” I said. “There’s something in our woods—a vampire, according to Big Mac. It attacked a human on Redwood territory, and that’s probably going to bring heat our way. I plan to alert the council—though I’ll admit, I was on the fence, since I doubt they’ll be of any help. But I wanted to let you know.”

Mace took this in, nodding slowly as he mulled the information over in the silence that followed.

“I’m glad you told me,” he said. “And you’re right—the council will probably make a mess of things, but you do have an obligation to tell them, unfortunately.”

“I know,” I said wearily. “But first, I’m going to notify Porter, Lucian, and Xavier. *Then* I’ll tell the council.”

Just then, I overheard Fenrir laughing with his mother. I got up, suddenly overcome with emotion.

“I should probably get going,” I said shortly. “I have a lot to do today.”

Mace walked me to the front door, where I stopped and turned to face him.

“What do you think about letting Lucian and the Vanguards back into the alliance?” I asked.

Mace cocked his head thoughtfully. “Lucian’s not always the best partner, but the Vanguards have lots of resources at their disposal. I’ll defer to you on the matter, but I think it’s probably a good idea.”

“Thanks for that,” I said.

“As for Porter, I’m happy to fill him in on the vampire stuff and see if he has any objection to letting Lucian and the Vanguards back into the alliance,” Mace offered.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully. “I’ll take you up on that.”

I heard Fenrir’s laughter coming from outside, and Mace and I exchanged an awkward glance before he reached out and clapped me on the shoulder.

“I’ve got some stuff to take care of myself. See you later?” he said, already heading back toward the kitchen.

“Yeah, see you.”

Once Mace was gone, I walked out onto the front porch, where Fenrir was playing with his toy, clambering over his mother’s lap. He sailed the action figure through the air before he launched himself off the porch and onto the grass, where he kept playing.

“Good talk with Mace?” Maren asked when she saw me.

“Yeah, it was fine,” I said. “Pack business—never a dull moment.”

“Tell me about it.”

We both went silent and watched Fenrir running around, squealing with excitement. He was such a happy kid… Maren was obviously doing a good job with him.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

Maren smiled. “He’s doing really well. Learning a lot about being a werewolf. Mace has been a good role model.”

Her words set off a pang of regret in the pit of my stomach.

“Good,” I said tightly. “I wish you all well.”

I picked up a football and tossed it to Fenrir, who caught it and went racing off, giggling excitedly.

I gave Maren a wave and then headed for the woods. I waited until I was out of sight of the Blue Blood pack house before I stripped down and packed my clothes away.

*I just want to shift and run as far away from here as possible. This was… a lot. I should be used to seeing Maren and Fenrir with Mace by now, but somehow, it still gets to me.*

Before I shifted, I glanced at my phone and saw a text from Cali.

*Off to my next class. All good.*

Relief flooded through me.

I finally shifted and started to make my way to the palace, but then I changed my mind. Maybe it was better not to bother with Lucian right away. I didn’t want to get sucked into any more wedding bullshit, and it would be nice to get the meeting with Cesaries and the council over with.

I wasn’t expecting them to do anything meaningful with the information I had for them, but with that chore out of the way, at least I’d be able to concentrate on trying to do something meaningful to protect Cali and my pack.

I shifted course and ran toward the council. It was out of my way, but it was something that had to be done. If I pushed myself, I would get there quickly and be able to get home at a reasonable time.

After speeding through the forest, I reached their encampment. I shifted back to human and quickly dressed before I left the cover of the trees.

“State your business,” one of the council guards demanded as I approached the main tent.

“I’m here to see Cesaries,” I said tightly.

“He’s in the sauna,” the lackey said.

*Ugh. The last thing I want is to sit and sweat with Cesaries. But I’ve come this far—I might as well get it over with.*

I pushed into the sauna, squinting against the rush of hot steam that immediately enveloped me.

“Ah, Greyson. Pleasant surprise. You’re welcome to join me,” Cesaries said good-naturedly.

“No, I can’t stay long,” I said. “I just came to report a possible vampire attack on Redwood territory.”

Cesaries arched an eyebrow at me but said nothing.

I bit back a surge of annoyance. “I’m also here to ask what the council wants to do about it.”

**Episode 4909**

I’d just finished my last class and couldn’t believe how quickly the day had flown by. It felt like I’d only just gotten out of bed.

*I’m so glad I didn’t let Greyson persuade me to stay at the pack house this morning. I would’ve missed so much… On the other hand, now I have hours of homework to do.*

School was just as exhausting as I remembered it being. And I’d never been amazing at it to begin with. Plus, I’d never been all that fond of homework. Wasn’t it enough that I’d attended class? It seemed like a sick joke that professors not only held you hostage in class for an hour, but were allowed to send you off with more time-consuming work to do later. How many thesis statements could I read and write?

*Another point against Lola for throwing me back into college life.*

I took a quick look at my phone and saw that Mikah still hadn’t texted back. I sighed and sent a question mark his way, then shifted gears. I wanted to check in on Codsworth and see how he was handling Eddie’s disappearance.

I found him in his dorm room, gloomy and brooding. I rapped on the doorjamb and waited tentatively in the doorway.

“Hey, just came by to check on you,” I said. “Should I come back another time?”

Codsworth brightened when he saw me. “No, you’re actually just the person I wanted to see. I’m sorry if I seemed out of it this morning—this whole thing with Eddie is just really getting to me. It’s just so… scary. I don’t really know how to deal.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said. “It’s totally understandable.”

“Thanks for understanding.” He sighed. “I spent most of the day skipping classes and trying to come up with a way to find Eddie. Feeling like I’m actually *doing* something to help is the only thing that might make me feel better.”

I shuddered, thinking about the bloody sleeve and knowing there was no way I could tell Codsworth about it—it would either upset him, or bring the cavalry right to the pack house door.

*Until we know for sure what’s happened to Eddie, I won’t say anything. There’s no point in getting Codsworth worked up before we even confirm what’s happened.*

At least now, I was convinced that Codsworth had nothing to do with Eddie’s disappearance.

“So… Have you come up with anything yet?” I asked. “Any ideas about how to track Eddie down?”

Codsworth managed a small smile. “I’m glad you asked. I think this is just the kind of thing the cryptozoology club should sink its teeth into.”

The image of a vampire’s fangs whirled through my mind.

“That’s awful!” I burst out. “Why would you say something like that?”

Codsworth arched his brows at me. “What do you mean? It’s just an expression. And a common one, at that.”

“Oh—yes. That’s right. I’ve heard it before.” I let out a nervous giggle.

*Damn. I’m really on edge. I need to calm down.*

“Everything about this sudden rash of disappearances—both townies and students—reeks of supernatural forces,” Codsworth said. “If anyone can figure it out, it’s the club members. I want to call a club meeting tonight to discuss some ideas I have.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I might even have a clue or two to share. Will you be there?”

A few minutes later, I was heading for my car and trying to decide if I should stay on campus until the meeting or go home first. It didn’t really make much sense to go home, and chances were that if I did, Greyson would try to talk me out of coming back.

It was already past sunset, and getting dark quickly. Maybe I’d just drop by the library and try to make some headway on my homework.

As I walked, I watched the students hurrying across campus. I just couldn’t believe that a vampire might’ve chosen CCU as its hunting ground.

*Why here, of all places?* I supposed it made some sense. A college campus was always filled with people, so it was abundant in that sense, but it had so much foot traffic…

*And even so, why do all this now? Where did this vampire come from? And how did they pick a random college campus in Oregon of all places… Wouldn’t USC or somewhere have been better?*

I heard someone calling my name and turned to see Chessa hurrying toward me. I was happy to see my friend—and even happier to know that she was safe.

“Hey, Cali,” she said breathlessly. “Any idea why Codsworth called a meeting tonight? If I’m going to make it, I’ll have to cancel some plans.”

“Codsworth wants to brainstorm about ways to find Eddie,” I said. “He thinks there might be some supernatural element at play in his disappearance.”

It felt weird telling Chessa this, acting like I didn’t think—or know—that the supernatural component to Eddie’s disappearance was almost a given. But it wasn’t like I could just tell Chessa or anyone else about my suspicions without bringing trouble to the Redwood pack and every other pack in the area.

“Codsworth also said that he found some clues about Eddie’s disappearance, and he wants to share those with us, too,” I added.

Chessa laughed. “I like Codsworth, don’t get me wrong, but he has the wildest imagination, doesn’t he?” She shook her head. “Don’t you think the police are more capable of investigating missing persons than a college crew team member-slash-monster enthusiast?”

I shrugged. “I suppose so, but Codsworth has a personal reason for wanting to investigate—he and Eddie are friends.”

Chessa’s eyes widened. “I had no idea! How awful—I’m sorry if I just came across as insensitive. I didn’t realize.”

I checked the time on my phone. “Looks like we still have some time to kill before the meeting. Want to come study with me in the library?”

Chessa shook her head. “I’d like to, but I have to take care of a few things if I want to make the meeting this evening.” She started to leave, but then turned back. “Did Codsworth say anything about those clues of his?”

“No,” I said. “He said all would be revealed at the meeting.”

Chessa smiled. “Then I guess I have no choice but to go. See you later!”

With a wave, she bounded off.

I headed in the other direction, toward the library, where I joined a table of students hunched over their books, tapping away on their laptops, cramming for exams, or catching up on sleep.

*This is so strange. It’s like I’m living two lives. In one of them, I’m a half-Fae with magical powers who’s also a* due destini *mate to two werewolves, and who lives in a werewolf pack house. And in the other life, I’m a coxswain and a regular college student, attending classes and club meetings alongside people who have no idea what I really am. It’s so weird.*

If my fellow cryptozoology club members had even the slightest idea of all the secrets I was keeping from them…

College had never been a massive priority for me, but I liked that I was making new friends, and I knew that graduating would make my parents proud. But with everything going on in my life right now, I was going to have to work hard to make that happen.

With a sigh, I hunkered down, cracked my science book open, and began to read. I immediately thought of Greyson, and how he’d needed my help to answer my philosophy professor’s question. I smiled to myself.

*He really needed me. He looked just like a deer in headlights. Even though he showed up on campus to watch over me, I was the one who ended up having to save* him*!*

Maybe saying that I’d had to *save* him was a little over dramatic, but it was the truth. My attending college had thrown Greyson into a new and unfamiliar world, too. And, as capable as he was, he’d still struggled to play the role. He’d needed my help to blend in this morning, and I’d been happy to do it.

I was grappling with a particularly challenging question on one of my assignments when my phone pinged in my purse. I fished it out and saw that it was a text from Greyson, asking when I was coming home.

*I have a meeting, but will come home straight after*, I replied.

I’d just turned back to my book when my phone pinged again.

Frustrated and wondering if Greyson was ever going to keep harassing me like this, I snatched up my phone, prepared to tell him to give me a break so that I could concentrate. But this time, it wasn’t Greyson.

It was a text from Codsworth. *Tonight’s meeting has been moved up. Meet on the football field in ten minutes!*

I stared down at the text, surprised—and worried.

*Why is he moving up the meeting? Did he find something?*

**Episode 4910**

I quickly packed up my stuff, realizing that I didn’t actually know where the football field was.

*And now I’ll have to lug all these books around, searching for the meeting spot. I should stop at my car, first. If I’m a couple of minutes late for the crypto meeting, big deal. It’s not like crew, where my teammates really rely on me. Codsworth can start the meeting without me. It was a last-minute change, anyway—I’m sure he’ll understand.*

I left the library and started toward the parking lot, keenly aware that the last bit of sunlight had gone. The stars were shining brightly, and it was a beautiful night—but I also seemed to be the only person walking toward the parking lot.

*It’s funny how the campus goes from buzzing with life and activity to ghost town in the matter of an hour. What I wouldn’t give to have just a fraction of that activity right now.*

When I reached the parking lot, I realized that most of the other cars were gone, and the lot was nearly deserted—students at CCU often had jobs to rush off to or social plans to fulfill off campus, and it showed. No one was hanging around except the crypto club, apparently.

*Wow. I never realized how creepy this parking lot gets at night.*

As I approached my car, the streetlight overhead flickered on and off, giving the entire place a sinister vibe. I wanted nothing more than to get my books in the car and rush off to meet the others. Then I’d be able to breathe a little easier.

I was struggling to balance my books in one arm while riffling through my bag for my keys with the other, when everything spilled onto the ground.

“Fuck!”

I bent down to collect my things, just as I heard footsteps behind me. I spun around, ready to use my magic. A guy was approaching and stopped suddenly, holding up his hands.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. I saw you drop your books. Thought you might need a hand,” he said.

The flickering street lamp finally died, casting us both in shadowy darkness. The guy reached into his pocket.

“Stop right there!” I said.

Already, I was gathering my magic, making sure it was ready to go.

He slowly raised his hand, flicking on the flashlight app on his phone. “I really am just trying to help.”

I sighed. All this talk of vampires and missing people was really getting to me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been soon edge.

“Sorry,” I said, finally bending down to collect my books, grateful for his light.

A second later, the streetlamp flickered back on and the man pocketed his phone.

“Thanks for the help,” I said.

“No problem. Have a good night,” he called over his shoulder as he started away.

I finally got the car door open and dumped my books inside, most of them spilling onto the floor.

Then I turned back and called out to the guy. “Hey! Do you know where the football field is?”

The guy stopped and pointed. “It’s behind the chem building. West side of campus. Only a few minutes’ walk from here.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I slammed the car door shut and hurried off toward the chem building.

*Shoot, I forgot to lock the car!*

I turned around, just as the street lamp flickered off again.

*Great. Tonight isn’t my night, it seems.*

I quickly checked that I locked the car and then rushed off again, my eyes slowly getting used to the dark.

I hit one of the main paths and was following it toward the football field when I heard something behind me.

Footsteps?

I slowed, not wanting to stop and give away to whoever was following me that I was aware of them.

*Maybe it’s the “nice guy” from the parking lot. He probably pretended to be helpful to hide the fact that he’s a serial killer, just like I was afraid of.*

I tried hard to block out the sound of my pounding heartbeat as I struggled to stay casual, listening hard for any more strange sounds.

For a few seconds, there was nothing. I sighed. The day had really gotten to me. Maybe I’d just been imagining the footsteps. But then as I got deeper into the campus, I heard the sound again.

This time, I stopped—and so did the footsteps.

*Okay. That’s probably just a coincidence. I need to stay calm… I’m not defenseless. I have my magic, and I know how to use it. But it’s probably nothing. I’m probably getting worked up for no reason.*

But what if it turned out to be Greyson? I thought about what he’d done earlier. Would he really try to follow me again after all that?

I reached for my phone, getting ready to send him a text… But then I realized with a jolt of fear that it wasn’t in my pocket. Either I’d left it in the library, or… I thought back to when I’d dumped my books in the car. Something had hit the floor harder than everything else.

*That was probably my phone. It must’ve been. I can go back and get it… But that would mean turning to face whoever’s following me.*

If it really was Greyson, there was one way to find out. I tried to reach out via mind link.

*Greyson, if that’s you skulking around behind me, I’ll never talk to you again.*

I waited for a reply, but there was only silence. I tried again.

*Greyson, is that you? Please say it’s you.*

Again, no answer.

I quickened my pace, knowing that if I could just make it to the football field, the others would be there, and I’d be safe.

Greyson would never joke around like this—or sneak around behind me at night. He knew that would only scare the living daylights out of me. He’d never do that.

*But if it’s not Greyson, then who is it?*

A terrifying thought hit me. Whoever was targeting the students had to know that I was Fae. I knew that they could smell blood. Why hadn’t that dawned on me until now?

*Maybe because you’re too busy trying to save other people when you can’t save yourself half the time?*

I shook off the dark thought. I could fight a vampire… I had magic and all that… Figuring out a plan so I could fight was a lot better than standing here feeling vulnerable and foolish.

Still, Greyson had been trying to protect me, and I’d given him hell for it.

*Was I so indignant at the idea of him checking in on me that I ignored the reality of the situation? That it really* is *dangerous to be on campus right now?*

Nerves had me breathing hard, but I didn’t want to break into a run. I’d never been a great runner to begin with, and it would only let my stalker know that I knew he was there. I needed to play it cool, get ready to lash out with my magic.

I saw the silhouette of the chem building up ahead, and, beyond that, the stands of the football field.

I pressed ahead, my magic bubbling. To the field, I was going to have to pass through a lengthy stretch of the path with no lights.

*Yeah, that seems like a mistake…*

I stopped just before the patch of darkness and turned to face my stalker. “Whoever’s out there, I’m armed!”

I waited and listened. It was deadly quiet. A sudden cold breeze kicked up, making my skin crawl.

I turned and started walking again, then I suddenly spun around. Still silent. Still nothing.

With a final burst of resolve, I raced toward the football field. By the time I made it, I was out of breath and gasping for air—more out of fear than exertion.

I stopped running and looked behind me, just as Chessa, Nathan, and the others came running up to me.

“What’s wrong?” Chessa asked.

I tried to laugh. “I don’t know, I… I thought I was being followed.”

Chessa looked past me into the darkness. “Weird. I don’t see anyone.”

“I probably imagined it,” I said uneasily. “It’s so dark out tonight, and there wasn’t anyone else around…”

“Makes sense,” Nathan said. “Everyone on campus is starting to get jumpy. And it’s probably better to be overly cautious at a time like this, anyway.”

“Maybe,” I said, finally starting to catch my breath. I took a look around. “Wait, where’s Codsworth?”

Chessa shrugged. “Beats me.”

“He texted me a while ago saying he was already here at the football field,” Nathan said. “I’ll send him a message, find out where he is.”

We all crowded around Nathan’s phone, watching as the message was marked as delivered, but stayed unread.

A chill raced down my spine as my mind went to the worst-case scenario.

*What the hell is going on right now? Is Codsworth missing?*

**Episode 4911**

**Xavier**

I was facing the group of werewolves that had just emerged from the trees. Instinctively, I stepped in front of Ava while assessing the group. If they made even the slightest move that I didn’t like, I wouldn’t hesitate to rip them apart.

*Am I really to believe that these are the nomadic Loneclaw? More than likely, they’re just more Bitterfangs. Which means that they’re a threat. I need to be sure that we stay one step ahead of them just in case*, I thought to myself.

I sent out a mind link to the Samaras.

*Be ready. We don’t know who these wolves are, no matter what they say.*

I glanced at the haggard Bitterfangs who had led us here, wondering if this had been their plan all along—to lure us to our deaths. If that were true and they’d betrayed the Samaras, they were going to pay a deadly price.

The wolf who’d spoken first looked first at the dead Bitterfangs sprawled on the ground before turning his gaze to me.

*You did this?* he mind linked.

I stared right back at him but didn’t answer. I was under no obligation to explain anything to these wolves. They were the ones plowing through an area of the woods that bordered our territory, and that meant that they needed to answer the questions. Not me.

I took a menacing step toward them and mind linked, *Where did you come from and what are you doing here?*

*We’re the Loneclaws*,the wolf replied. *And we’re from nowhere specific. But we’ve roamed far and wide—around Northern California, Oregon, Washington—we go where we want when we want. We don’t chain ourselves to any one area. We like variety. Freedom.*

Knox’s voice filtered in.

*How do we know they’re not lying? We should fight first and ask questions later! For all we know, they have reinforcements waiting in the woods to strike as soon as we let down our guards!*

*Calm down*, I snapped. *I’m handling this. And if that were the case, we’d smell it. Right now, we’re the only ones out here.*

I turned to the Bitterfangs who’d led us here. *Are these the Loneclaws? They don’t strike me as Bitterfang, but I can’t be sure.*

A Bitterfang wolf nodded. *They are the Loneclaws. And now we’ve done what you asked of us. We’ve led you to them. Now, we should be free to go, we don’t have any beef with you or your pack.*

I laughed. *When did I ever say that you were our prisoners? Go. And steer clear of Samara territory from here on out. In fact, you would be better off getting out of these woods altogether and avoiding any alliance territory. I’m being merciful and letting you go, but the other Alphas might not be so generous. And if I ever catch you trespassing on our land again, I WILL kill you.*

I looked the Bitterfang wolves in the eye as I mind linked, making sure that they knew I was serious.

Without another word, the Bitterfangs turned and sped off into the trees.

Knox’s voice reached me again.

*Why are you just letting them go like that? We should go after them. Finish them off. What if they regroup with reinforcements and come back to attack us?*

*Knox, you really are paranoid*,I said. *Sometimes, you need to realize that when you’re the dominant party, fears like the ones you have are groundless.*

What it boiled down to was that I wasn’t afraid. I wasn’t worried in the least about those scrawny Bitterfangs trying to circle back with more scrawny Bitterfangs, and I wasn’t afraid of the Loneclaws—or whoever they were—standing right in front of me. I was in control, and I was the strongest, which meant that I could show mercy when the situation called for it.

A shrimp like Knox didn’t understand that, and how could I expect him to? We weren’t cut from the same cloth no matter how much Knox believed we were.

I could see that Blaine was champing at the bit, too, while Zipper looked torn between staying put and hunting the fleeing Bitterfang wolves. I wished they knew that the root of their aggression was fear, but right now wasn’t the time to teach them that—not that they’d listen to me, anyway.

*I shouldn’t have to say this again, but let me remind all of you that none of this is anybody’s call but mine. Those two Bitterfangs are hardly a threat. But what IS a threat is defying your Alpha.*

*Say no more*, Knox replied. *Just trying to help… stop a problem before it happens.*

*I don’t need your help, but thanks*, I shot back. *We’re safe, and if I didn’t think so, I wouldn’t be handling things this way. Watch and learn.*

Blaine snarled a little and puffed out his chest, but then seconds later he uttered an insolent, *Fine! But if letting them go comes back to bite you in the ass—*

*Then it will be my ass with the bite marks, not yours. Now shut the hell up!* I snapped.

I was annoyed that they would dare challenge my authority in front of these unknown wolves, but at least I’d made it clear—for the millionth time it seemed—who was in charge. But I had a feeling this wouldn’t be the last time I’d have to put Knox and Blaine in their place.

I turned back to the Loneclaw wolves who were watching us closely but showing no outward signs of aggression.

*Are you the Alpha?* I asked the wolf.

There was an exchange of looks among the Loneclaws before another wolf stepped forward.

*We don’t have an Alpha*, the wolf said.

Ava scoffed. *You don’t have an Alpha? Then how can you call yourselves a pack?*

*It’s not that we don’t want one, we just don’t have one. That means all of us have equal say about what goes on in the pack. It works for us, so we haven’t taken pains to change things.*

They sounded a lot like the Pit Bulls. It was a good idea in theory, I guessed, but that kind of power sharing would never work for any pack I’d been a part of. No matter which way you sliced it, there always had to be a leader. That was the only way to get things done and be able to make quick decisions for the sake and safety of the pack.

*Where have you been? Where are you heading?* I asked. *And what are you doing in this area? Why stop here?*

*We don’t have an itinerary*, the wolf responded. *We go wherever we’re drawn. This was just where our latest journey has taken us, and we’re only passing through. No more, no less.*

*And I have no problem with that, as long as it doesn’t draw you into our territory*,I replied.

I thought about the mysterious wolf that had appeared in Redwood territory.

*Tell me, how far north have you gone since entering this area?* I asked.

*Not very far*, another wolf answered. *This is as far north as we’ve gotten, though we may end up heading farther north… with your permission.*

Knox snarled and took a few steps toward the Loneclaws, his fangs bared.

Knox was being overzealous, as usual, but I didn’t disagree with his sentiment. There was no way I was about to grant these strangers access to the alliance pack lands. Nor was I convinced that they weren’t actually Bitterfangs or some other pack masquerading as a nomadic pack.

*What do you plan to do?* Ava asked me. *Everything they’ve told you so far lines up with what Marissa told you. And I can’t quite pinpoint what benefit they would get from lying to you.*

*True*,I replied. *Nothing about what they’ve said suggests that they’re lying—the only thing still giving me pause is that they’re strangers too close to our territory.*

*Are you going to ask them about joining the Samara pack?* Ava asked.

*I’m still considering it, yes. But I’d like to question them a little more first.*

*They look a lot healthier than the Bitterfangs who led us here*, Ava said.

*That’s true, too. They don’t look like they’ve been starving like the others.*

Even though it was looking a lot like they were who they said they were, that didn’t mean I was ready to bring them into the fold. The Samaras needed new blood, that was a fact, but I wasn’t about to let just anyone join. I needed to learn more about them, understand what motivated them, determine if they had morals or if they were out to take whatever they could get before moving on and leaving destruction in their wake.

I was going to have to really talk to them to learn which of them were Samara material and which of them weren’t.

I was just about to invite them to join us on our trip back to the Samara property when a guttural howl boomed out of the woods.

Everyone turned just as a large group of snarling, howling werewolves charged right for us.

**Episode 4912**

Trying not to panic, I went to work trying to convince the others that just because Codsworth wasn’t reading his messages, it didn’t mean he’d gone AWOL. I was trying to convince myself of that, too.

“I’m sure he’s fine. Maybe he just had to get something, and he’ll be right back,” I said.

“But it makes no sense,” Nathan said. “I was texting with Codsworth only a short while ago.”

He held up his phone to show the text where Codsworth had said that he was waiting for all of us at the football field.

“That was only ten minutes ago,” Nathan added. “So, if that was true, then where the hell is he? Why has he now just dropped off the face of the Earth?”

“I can’t answer that, I only know that if someone tried to text me after I left the parking lot, they would see that I wasn’t reading my texts, either—but that’s only because I left my phone in the car, not because something bad happened to me. Maybe something came up and Codsworth just hasn’t had a chance to check his phone,” I said.

“Didn’t you say that Codsworth was going to give us some clues he had about Eddie’s disappearance?” Chessa asked.

“That’s what he said,” I replied, playing back the conversation in my head to make sure that I hadn’t forgotten anything.

Chessa chuckled. “Then maybe he was pranking us. He can be very dramatic.”

“What? He wouldn’t do that, not at a time like this and with how he’s been feeling about Eddie,” Nathan said. “Pranking is the last thing on his mind.”

“How would you know? Maybe this is how he’s coping!” Chessa threw back. “Everyone handles stress differently.”

“Well, if Codsworth deals with stress by luring us to a football field of all places and standing us up, I’m not into it,” someone said.

The club dissolved into arguing about what Codsworth would or wouldn’t do in his present mental state, and the more they argued, the less sure I was about what headspace Codsworth was actually in right now. I didn’t know him very well, after all. Maybe he *had* brought us all here as a joke… but that literally made no sense to me.

“Well, I’m leaving,” one of the other club members announced, shouldering his bag. “If he’s not going to show up, I have better things to do than stand here waiting on him and arguing with all of you.”

I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Codsworth could be weird, I knew that, but he seemed so earnest about Eddie’s disappearance. And he’d been really excited about whatever clues he wanted to show us. There was no way he was pretending to be that excited.

*So why would he trick people into meeting him and then not show up? It just doesn’t make any sense.*

As some of the others began to walk off, I grabbed Chessa and Nathan.

“We should go looking for him. Maybe he does need our help. I mean, we thought we’d be here for at least half an hour or so, right? Why not use that time to find him, just for our own peace of mind?”

Chessa groaned and rolled her eyes. “Fine. But where do we even start? He could be anywhere.”

I mulled that over for a second before saying, “We should start with his dorm room.”

As we made our way toward the dormitories, I couldn’t help but think about how I’d felt like I was being followed before. A chill raced down my spine at the memory of those strange footsteps that had seemed to move only when I moved.

“Glad you two decided to join me. I had a bit of a scare earlier,” I admitted. “I don’t think I would have had the nerve to do this search on my own after what happened.”

“What, that whole thinking someone was following you, thing?” Chessa asked.

“Yeah. It was just so weird. I was walking, and I heard footsteps, but then when I’d stop walking there was nothing. When I finally got the nerve to turn around, there was no one there. And then there was this strange wind that kicked up. It all just freaked me out. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the campus so empty, either.”

Chessa sighed and wrapped her arms around herself, a faraway look in her eye. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I had a similar experience on the way here,” she said.

That unsettled me even more. “What? Really?”

“Yes. It was just like what you said happened to you. Strange footsteps. Hairs standing up on the back of my neck. Feeling like I was being watched. But it wouldn’t make sense that we were both followed, would it?” Chessa added. “What, are there *two* people out creeping around?”

“I doubt that. Maybe it’s like I said before. All the missing students and disappearances have put us on edge. It’s making us imagine all kinds of things, monsters in the shadows and all that. Ha!” Nathan was trying to put up a good front, but his laugh was tinged with uncertainty.

*I wonder what would happen if they knew about the vampire. They would all freak out, right? Even though they’re in this club and should be a little more prepared and open than most, they wouldn’t be able to handle it. And there’s no way I can possibly tell them—they would have far too many questions. None of which I can answer.*

I believed wholeheartedly in the paranormal because I was one. Not only that, I was mated to two werewolves and had a mother and sister who were Fae. Even my dad was a werewolf now. But if somebody had tried to tell me this kind of stuff before I met Xavier, I would have thought they were full of shit.

*But Chessa already believes in the paranormal, although she won’t really talk about it. Nathan would freak all the way out if he encountered even half of what I’ve seen. No. There’s no way in hell I can tell them anything.*

We came to a stop outside of Codsworth’s dorm.

“So… how do we get in?” Chessa asked, staring at the locked door.

I hadn’t thought that far. When I’d visited him earlier, I’d gained access to the building just by following a bunch of students inside. Right now, though, there wasn’t anyone around. It was quiet as hell, and no one was coming in or going out.

“I don’t have a dorm key or pass. Do you, Nathan?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t live in this dorm, so it doesn’t make much of a difference.”

“Maybe we could just explain ourselves to the guard? Then maybe they’ll let us go in to check? Like a wellness check kind of thing?” I suggested.

“It’s worth a shot,” Chessa replied.

We peered inside the breezeway and then circled the building looking for a guard, but there wasn’t one. Only the locked door that needed a key FOB to open.

“But we can’t let that stop us. We have to find a way inside,” I said, searching the front of the building for any vulnerability we might be able to exploit.

I stood back and looked up and down the rows of windows.

“Does anyone know which room is Codsworth’s? Maybe we can toss a few pebbles at his window to get his attention.”

Chessa laughed. “Or, maybe since we’re cryptos we can just ghost our way in.” She gestured as a group of students approached the dorm.

I grabbed Nathan’s arm. “Let’s go!”

We quickly fell into step behind the crowd and followed them inside.

“Codsworth’s room is on the second floor, but I can’t for the life of me remember which room is his,” I said.

We started walking down the hallway when Chessa stopped in front of one of the doors. “My guess is that it’s this one with a picture of Bigfoot carrying an oar on it.”

“That makes sense. Guess I didn’t notice when I came before because his door was open,” I said.

Nathan knocked. “Codsworth? You in there? It’s Chessa, Nathan, and Cali!”

A guy poked his head out of one of the adjacent rooms. “Kurt went out a while ago.”

“Are you sure he hasn’t come back since then?” I asked.

The guy shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe?” He went back inside.

I tried Codsworth’s door. It wasn’t locked.

We all exchanged a nervous glance as we stepped inside. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting to find, but nothing in his room suggested that anything nefarious had happened. The only thing missing was Codsworth. Otherwise, the room was exactly as I remembered it.

Nathan let out a huge sigh. “So… this is a bust. What do we do now?” He pulled out his phone and scrolled back down to Codsworth’s messages. “And he still hasn’t read the text.”

Chessa looked down at the phone and then up at us. “I think I know someone who might be able to help.”

**Episode 4913**

**Ava**

In a split second, Xavier was on the attack—and that meant that I didn’t even get the chance to protect him like I had with the Bitterfangs who’d ambushed us before.

Xavier charged toward the approaching wolves with a fierceness that I would never grow tired of seeing. I might not have been fast enough this time to strike before he did, but I was close on his heels, and the rest of the Samaras were right behind me.

Xavier went right for the largest wolf, latching onto his neck and yanking the wolf down to the ground hard and pinning him there. With unchecked savagery, he ripped out the wolf’s throat and then moved on to another large wolf that didn’t even see Xavier coming.

I focused on the wolf right beside the one Xavier had just downed, and as soon as we collided, I recognized the scent.

Bitterfang.

I recalled what the other Bitterfangs had told us—that after Malakai’s death, some of the Bitterfangs had gone Rogue while others had banded together to seek revenge.

I didn’t have time to sort out these wolves’ intentions—they were attacking us, and that meant they had to die.

I tore into the wolf’s throat, eliciting an anguished howl as its blood flowed into my mouth. All around me were the sounds of fighting, and the Samaras were proving themselves as strong, relentless warriors.

And if I’d had any doubts about the Loneclaws before, they were gone. The Bitterfangs were attacking the Loneclaws, too, and the nomadic wolves were putting up a decent fight against the Bitterfangs’ ferocious attacks.

Marissa had teamed up with Josephine and together, they tore into one Bitterfang and took it down fast before bounding off to rip into another.

Knox, Blaine, and Zipper were holding their own, cornering a group of Bitterfangs and making quick work of them, ripping into soft underbellies, clawing out eyes, tearing out throats only to move on to another group and do the same.

*Knox might be a pain in Xavier’s and my ass, but he’s a hell of a fighter.*

As I spat out a mouthful of blood, an anguished howl drew my attention.

The Loneclaw wolf who’d first addressed Xavier was being overpowered by a much larger Bitterfang. Xavier, the others, and I had fought the Bitterfangs more than enough times to be well-versed in their unusual and fierce fighting technique, but this was obviously the Loneclaw’s first encounter with wolves as strong and vicious as the Bitterfang pack, and he was in over his head.

I tore through the thrashing, fighting bodies in an effort to get to him. Granted, I was driven more by my desire to take out yet another rampaging Bitterfang than to save a rando Loneclaw, but then two Bitterfangs bolted into my path, stopping my advance.

I snarled and clawed at them, fighting them off. We rolled onto the ground, one trying to hold me down while the other made wild, sloppy lunges for my neck. Out of the corner of my eye I saw another one approaching, and my heart started to race.

*Shit. I’m only barely holding my own against these two. If another one joins in, I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle all three of them at once.*

In the end, I didn’t have to worry. Almost as if out of thin air, Xavier launched into the fray, knocking down the approaching wolf and ripping out its throat, before bounding over and tearing into the wolf that was trying to hold me down and quickly slashing the wolf to shreds.

*Can you handle the other one?* Xavier mind linked.

*I’ve got him!* I replied. *Thanks for the assist.*

Without another word, Xavier raced to the Loneclaw’s aid.

While I grappled and fought with the remaining wolf, I saw Xavier tear the Bitterfang wolf off the Loneclaw and send it sprawling across the ground. As the Bitterfang scrambled to recover, Xavier charged it, burying his sharp teeth in the wolf’s neck and killing it instantly.

The gurgling gasp of the dying wolf seemed to act like a shockwave, causing the remaining Bitterfangs to disengage and attempt to scatter, but it was too late. We weren’t about to let them scurry off with their tails between their legs.

Together, the Samaras and the Loneclaws took off after the fleeing Bitterfang wolves and hunted them down, killing them one by one.

Once the dust settled, I surveyed the scene. It reminded me of the battles we’d had not long before with Malakai’s murderous, deadly Bitterfang pack. Fighting almost to the death, suffering losses on our side, many times barely escaping with our lives. It was a hell of a lot easier to fight them now that Malakai was gone and we knew what to expect.

*I wonder if there are more of them out there. Watching. Waiting. If there are, we’ll kill them all just like we did back when Malakai was running things. Just like we did today. There’s no one who can defeat us.*

I looked back at Xavier where he stood over a dead wolf, his fur smeared with blood, his eyes taking in everything around him. He’d never looked more powerful or sure of himself.

He locked eyes with me seconds before his mind link came to life in my mind.

*You okay?*

*Yup. Barely a scratch*,I replied as I went over to join him.

I felt a spark of satisfaction about how Xavier looked right now—completely in his element. He was happy, fulfilled, and right where he belonged. I’d seen it from the moment I returned to the world of the living. I’d told Xavier time and time again that he was so much more than Greyson’s second and that his talents were being wasted in the Redwood pack.

*And I was right. This is where he belongs.*

Being ambushed by a bunch of vengeful Bitterfangs wasn’t ideal, but it had given Xavier and his pack an opportunity to fight together. A challenging battle was the perfect way to learn how we all could work together to best our enemies without any of the alliance packs getting in the way or trying to take credit.

This was purely a Samara victory… even though the Loneclaws had helped, too.

I stood shoulder to shoulder with Xavier, wanting everyone—the Samaras and the Loneclaws alike—to see us together in our triumph after working together to protect our pack.

Wordlessly, Xavier and I watched the others return, their fur streaked with Bitterfang blood. They took us in and formed a semi-circle around us, waiting.

*This is how it should be. The pack realizing exactly who their leader is. There’s no mistaking it, now. Xavier is a force to be reckoned with, and he elevates his pack. That’s all anyone can ask of an Alpha. Hopefully everyone will think twice about challenging his decisions from here on out since once again, he’s proved himself.*

The Loneclaw Xavier saved shifted to human, and after only a split second of hesitation, Xavier did the same.

The Loneclaw turned to address the rest of his pack. “I want you all to recognize the risk the Samara Alpha took for us. We don’t have an Alpha right now, but when we do, this”—he pointed a finger at Xavier—“is an example of the kind of Alpha we want to lead our pack!”

The Loneclaw wolves offered up howls of gratitude and respect, and I swelled with pride.

*They’re acknowledging how great Xavier is. How capable and strong and how great a fighter he’s shown himself to be. This is what he deserves. I couldn’t have organized a better day for my Alpha.*

I knew that Xavier had taken on this quest to regain his pack’s respect after the Adéluce debacle. He’d not only done that, but he’d also established his Alpha-hood as legitimate and real. And if there was any question before about how or if his feelings for Cali might interfere or make him act strangely, no more.

*This is it. The Xavier I longed for, the Xavier he used to be. No mixed emotions about his old pack—this was pure Samara. Fighting for us. Risking everything—life and limb—for his pack. How can Cali compete with that?*

I shifted just as Marissa came walking over. She shifted, too, and clapped me on the back.

“Xavier kicked some ass today. He’s on fire right now,” she said.

I eyed Marissa closely. “Back off. Xavier is mine, and I’m not about to share him,” I warned.

Marissa reared back. “What? Of course not… I would never expect you to share Xavier with anyone at all.”

I picked up on my friend’s hidden meaning.

*She’s saying that I shouldn’t let Cali come between us again. I won’t. Not after today, not after I’ve seen exactly what I have to lose—the Alpha I always wanted to see in my mate. And now, I don’t believe that Xavier will, either. At least I can hope.*

One of the Loneclaws approached, shifting just before she reached me. “Excuse me, are you the Samara Luna?”

“Yes, I am. I’m Ava,” I said, waiting to see what she wanted.

“I was wondering if I could talk to the Samara Alpha,” the wolf asked.

I arched an eyebrow at her. “Oh? What for?”

“I’d like to ask him if I can join the Samara pack.”

**Episode 4914**

“Really? Who do you think can help us?” I asked Chessa. “Is it a detective?”

*And if so, what if the detective asks too many questions, questions I can’t avoid answering? Then what? I can’t worry about that right now, though. I suppose we need all the help we can get.*

To my relief, Chessa laughed. “Close, but not quite. It’s my friend Crispin. He wants to be a detective, but he’s really just a part-time campus security guard. He’ll make a good cop one day, though. He was born to solve crimes and stick it to bad guys.”

“Well… that could be useful. Does he have any connections in the police department?” I asked.

Chessa shook her head. “That might be stretching it a little, but I do know my friend has access to the security camera feeds, and that seems like the one thing we need to figure out this Codsworth thing.”

I brightened. “Really? That could really help! With the footage we might be able to piece together where Codsworth went after he left his dorm room.”

As Chessa stepped away to text her friend, I remembered that I’d left my phone in the car.

*I’d better go get it and let Greyson know everything that’s going on. I kind of wish that he* had *been following me tonight. I would feel a lot safer right now.*

Chessa looked up from her phone. “Crispin’s busy doing a shift right now, but he says he’ll be free in a little while.”

“Okay, that works. In the meantime, do you think you and Nate could walk with me back to my car? I need to get my phone, and after that scary walk from there to the football field, I don’t want to go alone.”

“Sure, I’ll come along,” Nate said.

“But what if Codsworth comes back here? Maybe one of us should stay behind?” Chessa suggested.

Nathan shrugged. “I’ll stay.”

I felt better knowing that Chessa was going to come with me, and after telling Nathan to text us if anything happened, we headed off.

As we stepped back outside, I studied the path leading from Codsworth’s dorm to the parking lot. At least this route had a few more lights than the last one.

“Any ideas about what Codsworth might be up to?” I asked Chessa.

“Honestly, it could be anything. Before you joined the cryptozoology club, Codsworth would disappear on his quests for Bigfoot clues or haunted houses. Following up on tips about supernatural activity that never panned out.”

Chessa gave me a look, and I laughed.

“Well, I guess we can never say that he isn’t devoted to his crypto calling,” I said.

“No, we can never say that. But anyway, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s at it again. Codsworth can be a little… absentminded, especially when it comes to his passion for all things supernatural. He’ll throw other things to the side to go chasing after the unknown in a heartbeat.”

*His passion could get him killed or cause him to stumble onto something he shouldn’t. I wonder where he could be. And if he randomly got caught up in his crypto stuff, why wouldn’t he just send us a quick text to let us know?*

“Look on the bright side,” Chessa continued. “Whatever it is he’s doing, he probably isn’t stomping around the woods looking for werewolves. He wouldn’t dare do that alone.”

I thought about that and decided that I had to agree. Codsworth was serious about staying on top of his crypto lore, and that meant that if he really did believe in werewolves—and I had every reason to believe that he did—he wouldn’t dare go off into the woods to stalk them all on his own.

We finally made it to my car. I quickly unlocked the door and immediately set about digging through the books that had fallen onto the passenger side floor.

“Got it!” I said after finding my phone exactly where I thought it would be—nestled under my science book.

As I’d suspected, I had several texts from Greyson checking in on me, but there was nothing from Codsworth.

“Chessa, give me a minute, okay? I’m going to check in with my boyfriend.”

I turned away and paced a little as I texted Greyson.

*Sorry for not responding before, but I accidentally left my phone behind in the car.*

Greyson’s response was swift, which meant that he’d probably been waiting and watching for my reply. I was glad that I’d come back for my phone so I could text him and not worry him any more than he probably already was.

*I’m with Cesaries*, he texted. *You okay?*

I hesitated before replying, unsure of how to answer. Technically I was… but it had been one hell of a night.

*But do I want to give Greyson all the details right now? Especially while he’s apparently in some kind of meeting with the council? I don’t want to worry him, and even though I’m a little spooked, I’m fine.*

*I’m fine*, I texted back.

*Glad to hear that. We’ll have to talk later… Cesaries needs me.*

*Good luck*, I replied before sliding my phone into my pocket.

Chessa looked up at me. “Everything okay with the beau?” she asked.

I sighed, thinking about all the things I’d conveniently left out of our little exchange. I was excited about the prospect of filling Greyson in later so he could help me make sense of things. Though, hopefully, if Codsworth showed up unharmed there wouldn’t be much to tell.

*Except about whoever was following me. Maybe it was nothing and so I shouldn’t get Greyson all worked up for no reason… but it didn’t feel like it was nothing at the time. It definitely felt like something, or someone was following me.*

“Everything’s good on his end,” I finally answered Chessa, my mind still racing. “Any word from Nathan?”

“No,” Chessa replied. “But Crispin texted and said he’s almost done with his shift. He said to meet him in the security office.”

“The security office? I have no idea where that is.”

“Don’t worry, I know where it is. Nathan will meet us there. Now it’s only a matter of time before we figure out what’s up with Codsworth,” Chessa said, the slightest hint of concern coloring her words.

I followed Chessa out of the parking lot while she gave me the lowdown on Crispin.

“So, I should warn you that Crispin comes off a little strange, almost like he’s stoned all the time, but I promise he isn’t.”

“Okay,” I said with a small laugh. “How do you know Crispin, anyway?”

“When I was a freshman, some of my classmates got a little too drunk at a rave. I don’t drink and wanted to leave, but everyone else wanted to stay and keep partying, go figure. But they insisted I use one of the security guards to escort me back. That’s how I met Crispin.”

“That’s a cool way to meet someone. And after that, I’m sure you knew that he was a stand-up guy that you can trust.”

“Exactly,” Chessa responded. “Crispin is super quiet, and he can be a little moody, but he’s a really good guy.”

Before long, we reached a large building where Nathan was waiting for us.

“Operation find your phone was a success?” Nathan asked me as we entered the building.

“Yeah, it was. A bummer that no one’s heard from Codsworth still. Now it *is* getting to be a little unsettling,” I admitted.

“Don’t worry, we’ll know what happened soon,” Chessa countered.

Nathan and I followed Chessa down a dark, narrow stairwell to the basement where the security office was. A tall, thin guy wearing a campus cop uniform was sitting at a desk before a wall of video monitors. He was busy entering something into a computer.

“Hey, Chessa,” he said without looking up. When he turned to face us, I saw the quickest flash of uncertainty in his eyes, and I wondered why.

“Hi, Crispin. This is Cali and Nathan. You two, this is Crispin.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Crispin said gruffly. “How can I help you guys?”

“We’re looking for a friend who went missing,” Chessa explained.

Crispin jumped up before Chessa had even gotten all the words out. “No! No way! I can’t get involved in something like that.”

“But, Crispin, it’s for a good cause,” I said. “We just need to know that our friend Codsworth is okay. That’s all. We won’t look at anything we’re not supposed to see. We just need to see something specific.”

“No. I could lose my job if I let you see campus video footage. You don’t have the proper clearance!” he exclaimed.

I moved closer to Crispin and looked him right in the eye, hoping to appeal to the part of him that was willing to stretch the rules for good reason. “I know it’s against the rules, but could we please, pretty please, just take a look at the security video?”

**Episode 4915**

**Greyson**

Cesaries slung a towel around his neck. “So, the remnants of the Bitterfang pack have set themselves upon a path of revenge. What would you like the council to do about it? You’re a young, powerful Alpha. Surely you’re not really coming to me for help?

I frowned. I’d known this would happen. The council had never given a damn about us before—why would they step in now? They didn’t help protect other packs—they protected the interests of the werewolf world at large, but really, most of all, they protected themselves. This didn’t usually extend to actually helping individual packs. In fact, more often than not, the council seemed content to throw an individual pack under the bus and let them face annihilation rather than try to protect them.

I didn’t say anything, but my face must have gotten the message across because Cesaries nodded and said, “Ah. Unless help is what you’re looking for? I can arrange to have someone look into it if you like.”

The dismissive way he offered the help, along with the very clear dose of judgment, rubbed me the wrong way. I wasn’t going to grovel after breadcrumbs of aid when he clearly didn’t give a damn what happened to us—and probably privately believed that asking for help in this matter made me a weak Alpha.

“No,” I said quickly. “I’m not asking for your help. I’m letting you know.”

“Huh. Well, we appreciate you coming all this way.”

*Sure, you do.* It took all my self-control to keep the disgust off my face. This was such a colossal waste of time.

Silence set in between us for a moment, and I considered how best to phrase my exit now that I’d done my duty of informing the council. I certainly didn’t want to spend another damn second in this hot, stuffy room where the only thing separating me from Cesaries’s balls was a thin layer of cotton and the humid air.

Then, Cesaries leaned back, manspreading with a casual confidence that was equal parts impressive and horrifying.

“You know, Greyson, I have always admired your tenacity. The strength and determination with which you’ve led the Redwood pack deserves praise. If every Alpha led their pack like you do, my job would be quite obsolete, I think.”

*As if it’s not obsolete already…*

Cesaries could take his praise and shove it. That wasn’t what I was here for. I knew I was a good Alpha—I’d worked my ass off to be good to my pack, to be the leader they deserved. And I sure as shit hadn’t done it for *him*.

“I imagine,” he continued, “that tenacity comes in handy with your *due destini* situation as well, does it not?”

I tensed. That was the last thing I’d expected him to bring up, mostly because it was none of his goddamn business.

“*Is* that situation still plaguing you and your brother?” he asked pointedly.

I considered keeping the details of my personal life close to the vest—where they fucking belonged. But since he’d outright invaded my private life and asked the question point blank, not to mention with all the authority of the council behind it, it was probably best not to blow him off.

“The *due destini* never really ends,” I said.

“Well, I hope you have enough things to busy yourself with then,” he said. “It seems as though you do. Just remember, Greyson, a good Alpha always has a good Luna by his side. I would hate to see you dragged down by all this…” He trailed off, then shrugged. “*Fate nonsense* and miss out on your true potential as an Alpha.”

My stomach clenched with fury, but I held my tongue. *Who the hell is Cesaries to say any of this to me? He’s not my father. He’s not a father figure to me. He’s just some asshat I occasionally have to pay obeisance to. He doesn’t get a say about my private life.*

Respect be damned, I had a few choice words resting on the tip of my tongue, and it took no small amount of restraint to swallow them down.

Ultimately, there was no point in stirring up the council. I’d done what I’d felt I had to do and notified the council of the continued Bitterfang threat; what Cesaries and his cronies chose to do or not about it would be on them.

I was done here.

I stood. “Goodbye, Cesaries.”

“Farewell, Greyson. Think about what I said.”

*Yeah, right.* I was going to actively strive to forget everything about our conversation. I stepped out of the sauna and grabbed my clothes. I tugged on my jeans and then checked my phone. Cali had called.

I immediately called her back. That would be so fucking typical—if I left her side to go warn Cesaries about the Bitterfangs and *that* ended up being the moment she’s in danger.

She answered on the second ring, and I had never been so relieved to see her face on the screen of the video call. “Love, what’s happening? Is everything okay?” I asked.

She looked back at me with a frown. “Why…are you shirtless? With a floral towel on your head? And why are you all sweaty?”

I groaned. “Do you have any idea the kind of horror show it is being in a sauna with Cesaries?”

She blinked, her eyes wide. “I didn’t even know the council had a sauna.”

I angled my camera toward the steam-filled sauna.

“And he’s in there?” she asked with a grimace.

I nodded. “I’m going to have nightmares for weeks about this, but that’s not important. Why did you call? Is everything all right?”

“Why did you go to the council and share a steam bath with the council leader?” she asked.

I shook my head with a sigh. “I came here to tell him about the Bitterfang threat and the vampire that’s running around.”

“Oh, I must have forgotten you were going to do that.”

“Where are you?” I asked, my gaze narrowing on the background behind her. “It looks like you’re calling from a dungeon.”

“You’re not far off,” she admitted. “It definitely feels like one. We’re just all so worried about Codsworth. He seems to be missing and he’s not answering his phone, so we went down to the security department on campus to try to look at the video footage to see if we can find him, but the guard won’t let us in.” She seemed to deflate more and more as she explained the situation.

“Wow. Another student might be missing?” What were the odds that the college Cali wound up attending was losing students to some mysterious threat?

Who was I kidding? This was Cali I was talking about. The odds were a hundred percent. It was sketchy enough when it was only a few students, but the fact that this seemed to be an ongoing problem that nobody had solved yet didn’t sit well with me. I didn’t want my mate hanging around campus if she was putting herself in danger by doing so.

“It was probably a waste of time,” Cali said. “We’ll have to find some other way to locate Codsworth.”

“Really? That’s it?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m just surprised you’re giving up so easily,” I said without thinking. “That’s not the Cali I know.”

She was quiet for a moment, a wrinkle forming on her brow, and then she nodded. “You know what? You’re right. I’m going back in there and demanding to see that video, and this time, I won’t accept no for an answer! Thanks, Greyson!”

She ended the call before I could get in another word.

*You massive idiot*, I seethed to myself as I stared at my phone. What the hell was I thinking? I should have just told her to go home. Why did I encourage her to jump even deeper into this? For all we knew, Codsworth might not even be missing. I tossed the floral towel aside, slipped my jeans off again and shoved them into my bag with the rest of my clothes.

I shifted and headed toward campus. How long would it take me to get there? Christ, I still couldn’t believe I’d encouraged Cali to pursue this, to potentially go *toward* the danger. What the hell was I thinking?

I picked up the pace. I was risking being seen by humans by moving so quickly, but it was dark out, and if anything, they’d just think they saw a big wolf.

I passed through Three Devils Point when I picked up a strong werewolf scent. I slowed, trying to place the scent. *Who could be out here?*

Then it hit me. I knew this scent. It was the same one as the mysterious Rogue wolf who’d shown up the night of the party. And the trail was fresh.

I stopped entirely, torn as to how to proceed. I knew Cali wasn’t alone on campus. This werewolf might have something to do with the bloodied sleeve, or maybe they’d know something about the vampire. Either way, it was trespassing on Redwood land.

I veered toward the werewolf’s scent, following after it. Then, just ahead, I saw her. She was a large werewolf, and she took one look at me before running away. I chased after her.

I wasn’t going to let her get away again.

**Episode 4916**

**Artemis**

Marius and I sized up the fortress. As far as fortresses went, this one was quite large. And of course it was. Why wouldn’t it be? Not one single part of this task had been easy so far, so why on earth should that change now? Why shouldn’t we be faced with a huge faction of guards and soldiers who were probably tasked with getting in the way of Marius’s bounty?

“We need to find a way in,” Marius suggested. “Preferably one that doesn’t end with our heads on matching pikes.”

I grimaced. “I’d say that’s a requirement for me.” I pointed to the open drawbridge, where locals were coming and going with ease. “We can blend in with the regular folks. It’s the simplest access point, and it seems far more practical than sneaking around. If we stick with the crowds, it’ll be harder to draw attention to ourselves than if we’re off on our own where we shouldn’t be.”

Marius shook his head. “Nope. Bad idea. I have a reputation around these parts. There’s probably a few bounties out on me. You think the guards on the drawbridge won’t recognize a payday when it walks across their path? No, sneaking in is better, even if it’s more work.”

I rolled my eyes. “First of all, you give yourself way too much credit for being memorable. Nobody’s going to recognize you because nobody’s going to be looking at you. Second, you’ll have to excuse me, but I’m not going to take advice from the guy who foolishly handed us over to the Crimson Gang.”

“Still sore about that, huh?”

I rested the urge to hit him. “You’re gonna have to let more than a day pass before I forgive you for that one.”

“But you *will* forgive me?” he asked hopefully.

“Not if you keep asking,” I snapped. Honestly, this whole thing just rubbed me the wrong way. He’d just given in and bartered our lives on a whim. “For the record, I would have escaped without you. In fact, I’m already regretting that I allowed you to stick around.”

“Oh, would you have escaped without me?” he mocked. “Would you have? You’ve only mentioned it a hundred times—I’m still fuzzy on the details.”

“It’s the truth.”

He shook his head. “You’ve got it backward, sweetheart. I saved your life—I could have left you to rot, but instead I slowed myself down to make sure you stayed safe.”

“You call this safe?” I growled. “You know what? Never mind.” I didn’t want to waste any more time on Marius and his overblown ego. I’d already lost more time helping him than I wanted to think about.

I’d come here to find my father, and instead I’d gotten pulled into one of Marius’s mishaps after another, putting me further and further away from my goal. As it was, I was beginning to think he was running some kind of con on me and at the end he wouldn’t know anything about Kadmos at all.

*No, he wouldn’t do that to me… would he?*

Gods, I wished I could trust him with even that little.

I shook myself. Whether I liked it or not, our lots had fallen in together and there was no point wasting time agonizing about it. I’d just have to make do until I fulfilled my end of the deal, and then I could go my own way and find Kadmos without anyone else standing in my way.

“Let’s find this bounty and then get out of here.”

I headed toward the drawbridge without waiting for a response and fell into step behind some of the locals who had come to sell or purchase goods from the open-air market just beyond the fortress walls. A long, belabored sigh, followed by heavy footfalls, told me Marius was, indeed, coming with me.

We were just crossing over the drawbridge when Marius suddenly grabbed me from behind.

“Let go!” I hissed, shaking him off. “What’s your problem?”

He nodded toward a WANTED posted on the wall just ahead of us. It was still several feet away, and the image was hand-drawn, but there was no mistaking that annoyingly handsome face.

*Gods dammit!*

A guard glanced our way, no doubt curious why we’d stopped walking. I immediately—and oh so casually—turned us around.

“What on earth did you do?” I hissed.

“I told you I am a wanted man!”

“I thought you meant your usual brand of low-brow thuggery. They don’t put up wanted signs with likenesses unless they’ve after someone really bad. So, I’ll repeat myself: What. Did. You. Do? Did you murder someone or something?”

My stomach twisted at the thought that, for all this time, I’d been traveling with a murderer. That I’d *kissed* a murderer. *Slept with* a murderer.

“You’re awfully high and mighty for someone who used to do the Kollector’s bidding with little complaint,” he sniped. “Your hands are plenty dirty too.”

“That was before. I’m not that person anymore! Now, stop dodging the question. What did you do?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t do anything! I told you bounty hunters have fallen out of favor lately. People have it out for me, and I don’t deserve it.”

If I rolled my eyes one more time, I worried they’d get stuck that way, so I settled for a frown. “We both know you’re no victim. Question is, did you turn someone else into one?”

Marius shook his head. “I’m no villain, but… fine. I may have done a few things that might seem—from a distance—to be somewhat questionable. Don’t worry about it. It’s not a problem.”

I groaned. “Seriously?”

“Oh, come on, Ari. Maybe you’re not the Kollector’s right hand anymore, but you act like you’ve never done anything wrong. I know for a fact you’ve skirted the law on more than one occasion.”

“Sure, I have, but my face isn’t the one on the wanted poster.” I sighed. “And what are the odds that that poster ends up on the fortress where your bounty is being kept?”

“I tried to warn you,” he began.

I cut him off. “If your bounty is inside, we have to sneak in, find them, and, assuming they’re being held, break them out, and sneak back out—all without getting caught. Do I have that right? Did I leave anything out?”

He grinned. “It’s the perfect plan.”

This time, I couldn’t stop myself from smacking the back of his head.

Several minutes later, after a lot of sneaking, we stared up at a wall on the far end of the fortress. It was the longest stretch of wall on the building, opposite the drawbridge—and therefore the most difficult and dangerous to try to breach. We had to scale a perfectly vertical wall of slick stone, and if we got high up enough and slipped, we’d smash our bodies on the ground below.

So, all in all, it was the perfect way to end the journey for Marius’s bounty.

Trying to focus on the task instead of all the ways it could go terribly wrong, I pointed out a thick vine that ran up the wall, leading to a small window.

“There. We’ll climb the vine and enter through that window.” I grabbed hold of the vine and began hoisting myself up. “You better be able to keep up.”

He climbed up the vine, hot on my heels. “You’d better not slow me down.”

I scoffed. “In your dreams.”

I climbed slowly, testing each branch and new length of vine to make sure it would hold our weight before continuing upward.

“How’s your ass?”

I frowned. “What?” I looked down to see Marius looking up at me. Or, more accurately, at my *ass*. “Stop staring!”

“There’s not much else to look at. And anyway, you were complaining earlier about the ride in the carriage, and then the horse. I just want to make sure you’re okay. Though, I do have to say, you look fine from here.”

I kicked his head.

“Ouch”

“Do us both a favor and keep your mouth shut and your eyes off my ass.” I turned back and kept climbing, hoping he hadn’t noticed the flush on my cheeks. He’d never let me hear the end of it if he knew the effect he still had on me—especially after he’d so deftly proved exactly why he and I would never, ever work.

We continued upward until we reached the window. It was smaller than it had looked from the ground. I’d probably be able to fit through, but it would be tight.

“Do you think you can fit through that?” I asked.

“I can make it.”

“Even with your big head?”

“Go inside, or I’ll climb over you.”

I pulled myself up and dropped down into a dark room. Upon first glance, it appeared empty. Good. Maybe something was finally going right.

I turned back to check on Marius when a voice called out through the darkness, “Who are you?”

**Episode 4917**

Adrenaline flooded my veins. I was pumped up and wouldn’t take no for an answer. My talk with Greyson was the exact boost I’d needed going into this task. He’d reminded me to never accept no for an answer—at least in this context.

*Context is everything, Caliana!*

I steeled myself for the confrontation to come. Besides, it wouldn’t cost me anything to at least try. What was the harm in asking? Or even demanding? Confidence was everything. Well, confidence *and* context—they were everything.

I pushed my shoulders back then stomped over to the closed door, brushing past a surprised Chessa and Nathan.

“What are you—” he began.

I pulled my foot back and kicked the door, expecting it to fly open like I’d seen in the movies. Only, it didn’t budge, and white-hot pain shot up my foot and into my lower leg.

“Holy shitballs!” I yelped. Hopping on one foot in agony was probably not doing any favors for my desire to look tough. I’d have to work extra hard to recover from that, since I’d obviously have to convince Nathan to open the door for me.

Chessa grabbed my arm to steady me, and I gingerly put down my throbbing foot. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m getting us that video,” I said. “I’m not leaving until I see it. Our friend’s life might depend on it!”

I kicked the door again, not quite as hard this time—I wasn’t an idiot, but I wanted to show them all that I meant business. Plus, I was a half-Fae. This was a normal door. How could I *not* beat it in a fight?

I pulled my leg back for another kick when the door suddenly flew open. I stumbled forward with the momentum of the kick, and Chessa’s hands on my arms were the only thing that stopped me from flying right into Crispin, who stood in the now open doorway.

“Hey!” he snapped. “You can’t go around kicking doors!”

I wasn’t about to apologize. First of all, the only damage I’d done was scuff the paint with the underside of my shoe; I was pretty sure that in our confrontation, I was the one who’d come away for the worse. Secondly, if he’d bothered to help us when I’d asked him, I wouldn’t have had to kick the door. So, in a roundabout way, my door-kicking was all his fault.

“I want to see that security tape, and I’m not leaving until I do,” I said once I’d straightened.

Crispin pointed to the sign on the door. “Can’t you read? It says CAMPUS SECURITY. Do you have any idea what that means?”

“It means you’re a bully who’s not interested in helping us find our friend!”

He scoffed. “It means I can’t just let anybody snoop around in the school’s security footage. If I did, it wouldn’t exactly remain secure now, would it?”

An argument was locked and loaded on the tip of my tongue. “That’s not—”

Chessa stepped between us, cutting me off. “Hey. Crispin.” She put her hands on his thin shoulders and faced him. “Can’t you just do us this one little favor? Just this once? We are all so worried about our friend—what with all the disappearances happening around campus—and we promise not to tell anybody that you showed the footage, okay?”

“And if we do find Codsworth,” I piped up, “I’ll personally make sure you get all the credit! I bet your bosses would love that!”

For a moment, Crispin started at Chessa, looking confused. Then, after a beat, the tautness in his brow smoothed away and he gave a vague smile.

“Sure.”

My jaw dropped. *Seriously? Just like that? He seemed like such a hardass. I was preparing myself for a screaming match, but all it takes is a little flirting on Chessa’s part?!*

*Or maybe he* really *wants to look good to his superiors?*

*I’ve got to learn her moves!*

Crispin stepped aside and let us inside the security room. It was small and cramped with all four of us, and it wasn’t really much to look at. A basic desk and chair with a couple of huge and outdated-looking monitors that were connected to live camera feeds throughout the campus. Your run-of-the-mill security footage station with no frills.

I couldn’t decide if it’d be fun to work security on campus, keeping my finger on the pulse of such a big place, or if spending all day staring at screens in this room would make me lose my mind.

Nathan closed the door behind us, and Crispin, who suddenly seemed resigned to helping us with our task, dropped down into the chair in front of the monitors. “So, what is it you want to see? There are literally hours of video and a bunch of different camera angles. It’d be helpful if you could narrow things down a bit. Do you know where on campus your friend might have been recently?”

“Can we start with a view of the dorm?” I asked, then told him roughly what time frame to skim through the frames. I’d been in the library at the time, but I figured it was as good a starting point as any other time.

Crispin hit a few buttons, and we sat back and watched as an exterior view of the dorm came up on the monitors. We watched the footage roll for a long string of seconds. No Codsworth. Just lots of other students coming and going. I realized then that this job would be absolutely untenable for me. Sitting around and watching people live their lives, just waiting for something interesting to happen.

*Hard pass. More power to Crispin for doing this, I guess.*

“Can we fast forward a bit?” Chessa asked. “As entertaining as this is, I don’t want to be here watching footage all night.”

Crispin nodded and, with a few clicks on the keyboard, the footage sped up. We stood there for a while longer, watching it play out and seeing a few students go in and out of the dorm.

“That’s him!” I pointed at the screen as Codsworth stepped out of the building. Crispin immediately slowed down the footage, and we watched as Codsworth was approached by someone who appeared just at the bottom of the frame, almost like they were purposely trying to stay out of it. Like they knew exactly where to stand.

And the fact that this person was dressed in all black, with their back to the camera, only heightened my suspicions.

*Who the hell is this shady person?*

Nathan squinted at the screen, echoing my thoughts. “Who is he talking to?”

I turned to Crispin. “We’re going to need you to enlarge and enhance.”

He gave me a dubious look. “This isn’t *CSI*.”

“Isn’t it?” I challenged. “I mean, most iPhones can do that nowadays.”

He rolled his eyes and gestured around the room. “Does any of this look like modern tech to you? This stuff is all from the nineties. What you see on the screen is the best you’re gonna get. Hell, you’re just lucky you’re here on a day when all the monitors are functioning at once. That’s the kind of equipment I’ve got to work with.”

I rolled my eyes and sighed, leaning closer to the screen to get a better view—just as the conversation ended and Codsworth and whoever he was talking to headed in opposite directions.

Chessa sighed. “Well, that could have literally been anyone.”

I blew out a breath. It was a clue, I guessed, but none of it was all that helpful. This wasn’t anything like I was hoping it would be.

“Can you play it again?” I asked Crispin. Maybe I’d notice something new a second time through.

I didn’t. But I did take a picture of the encounter on the monitor so I could study it later. Maybe with time, I’d catch something new.

“Do we know where Codsworth was going?” I asked.

“He’s headed in the direction of the football field,” Nathan offered. “That would make sense because he texted me to say he was already there when we were headed to meet him.”

“Kurt isn’t someone who flakes,” Chessa said. “I’m getting really worried.”

“Same,” I said. Then I turned to Crispin. “Do you have any cameras on the football field?”

He didn’t say anything, just pressed a few buttons, and the field appeared on one of the monitors from a high angle. It wasn’t a great view, but I hoped I’d still be able to recognize anyone I saw on the screen. I leaned in close, holding my breath, but the view remained the same—just an empty field until Nathan and Chessa appeared along with some of the other crypto members. Then, shortly thereafter, I appeared on the screen too.

But no Codsworth.

Dread weighed down my stomach as I turned to the others. “One thing’s clear. Codsworth never made it to the football field.”

**Episode 4918**

**Xavier**

I kept my expression neutral as I looked back at the Loneclaw wolf who had asked to join the Samara pack. It was the outcome I’d been hoping for when I’d first set out to find them—that, after proving ourselves a valuable resource, they would want in.  But I wasn’t going to impulsively say yes. I had to play this smart.

I’d hurt my reputation as Alpha by coming clean about Adéluce’s blackmail that had led to me taking the Samara helm. After what happened earlier, I liked to think I was beginning to repair my reputation in the eyes of my pack, but blundering through and telling this Loneclaw wolf she could join the pack right away ran the chance of sending me backward. I didn’t want to end up right where I’d started just because I couldn’t be patient and play my part.

Ava’s voice slipped through my mind. *What do you think?*

*I think it’s too soon to make that kind of decision*, I replied. *We need to learn more about them, have them earn our trust before we add them to the pack.*

*I agree*, she said.

*But I won’t deny it feels good to have wolves who want to join the Samaras, a pack many were ready to leave for dead not that long ago.*

*That’s all thanks to you—to what you’ve brought to this pack, Xavier.*

Ava’s complete faith in me as the Alpha never failed to buoy me. No matter what other shit was going on with our pack—and there had been plenty—she always had my back, like a true Luna should. I knew I’d done my best to help piece the Samara pack back together, and to be the leader it deserved, but none of this would have been possible without her. She’d brought just as much to this pack as I had, if not more.

*I knew you were the right choice*, she continued.

I wouldn’t argue with that. I *was* the right choice, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t searched high and low for someone else to be the Samara Alpha. None of them had offered the Samaras even an iota of what I’d brought to the pack. I might have taken the lead under less than ideal circumstances, but there was no denying I’d worked my ass off to defend and provide stability for this pack. I’d done the work, and I’d more than earned the praise Ava heaped on me.

*Thank you for asking to join*, I finally said to the Loneclaw. *It means a great deal that you would seek membership with our pack. The Samaras are a very selective pack.* I purposely avoided Knox’s gaze as I shared this. *But I’m certainly open to considering it.*

I turned to look at the other Loneclaws. *We’re heading back to the pack house now. If any other Loneclaw wolves are interested in joining the Samara pack, they should come back with us. I won’t make any guarantees about being allowed to join, but I’ll take into consideration the way you all just defended yourselves from the Bitterfangs. Clearly, there are some very strong fighters among you. The Samara pack was built on the strength of our individual pack members, and those who seek to join our ranks should be prepared to offer their strength as well.*

I glanced over at Ava, and she subtly nodded her approval.

*Well said*, she said through our mind link.

I looked back at my pack and gestured in the direction of the pack house. *Let’s go home.*

I watched as they immediately began to turn back toward the Samara territory without hesitation. There was no dissension among them anymore, no squabbling or debating—the Samaras were running like a well-oiled machine.

And they had me to thank for it.

I turned my back on the Loneclaw wolves and began my own journey home with Ava alongside me. It didn’t take long before footfalls sounded behind me, and I realized several of the Loneclaw wolves were following us home.

*Huh*. *I guess they really do want to join us.* They’d certainly be a strong addition to the pack; after seeing them fight, I knew that much. I didn’t want to get ahead of myself, but I couldn’t help thinking how the Samara pack would no longer be the baby of the alliance if all of these Loneclaw wolves joined us. We’d be no Vanguard pack where numbers were concerned, but we’d definitely be on the same level as the Blue Blood and Redwood packs. Hell, the Redwoods would probably be the new weakest link.

The thought made my stomach lurch, though not in an entirely unpleasant way. It’d be a fan-fucking-tastic change of pace for the Samaras to not be the underdogs for once.

The Loneclaw who’d asked to join the pack rushed up to fall into step next to me on the side opposite Ava.

*I’m Cresta*, she told me. *Thank you for welcoming us to follow you back to your pack house and thank you for helping us defend ourselves against the Bitterfangs.*

*You’re welcome.*

*We’ve been roaming for so long, we haven’t been able to forge many friendships*, Cresta continued. *Most of the packs we’ve encountered have treated us with suspicion and fear. But not you. You’re different. Better. Kinder.*

Ava’s growl echoed around us. *He’s my mate.*

It wasn’t an attack—it was a warning. A promise, really, that Ava wouldn’t hesitate to defend what was hers. A laugh rumbled in my chest, but I smothered it.

*Oh! I-I’m sorry*,Cresta sputtered. *I didn’t mean to sound like I was—*

*It’s okay*, I said easily. *Ava’s just kidding.*

Ava’s voice slipped through my mind and mine alone. *Am I kidding?*

*Are you serious?* I asked. *She wasn’t trying to come onto me, Ava.*

*And I wanted her to know exactly what dynamic she was walking into so there would be no misunderstandings*, Ava said breezily

I glanced her way, amusement bubbling up inside me. *Does she make you jealous or something?*

*How would you feel if other werewolves were throwing themselves at my feet?* she asked.

It was a fair question. I definitely wouldn’t welcome it. But then again, not a lot of wolves would dare do that, knowing she was my Luna.

*Or maybe*, Ava continued, *the question I should really be asking is if you just love seeing werewolves throwing themselves at* your *feet?*

I rolled my eyes. *Believe me, I’d love to see you throw yourself at my feet.*

She snorted. *When hell freezes over. You might be my Alpha, but we’re equal mates.*

Still, for all her tough talk, there was a lightness in her tone that made me smile. Made me feel safe and at home in the way that only Ava could.

I nudged her playfully. *Keep moving.*

I slowed to let the rest of the pack pass me, keeping a watchful eye over all of them as Ava joined Marissa near the front of the pack.

Sometimes, it took all my self-control to not pinch myself. I just couldn’t stop marveling at how things had turned out, how I was now the de facto Samara Alpha—and was doing a damn good job of it. How Ava, of all people, was with me again, at my side, tough and loyal and sexy as hell.

This wasn’t anything like the life I’d imagined for myself in recent years. Maybe this was more or less what I’d wanted all those years ago, before my father’s pack wars had torn mine and Ava’s lives apart, but I’d given up on that future. I’d moved on.

A lot had changed since those first happy days with Ava—and most of what had changed involved Cali. She’d changed my life, for the better. She’d given me new purpose, she’d brought Greyson back into my life, even if the chips had fallen in just about the worst possible way. And when everything had happened with Adéluce, I’d done it all not to become the Samara Alpha, not for Ava, but for Cali. And I’d promised myself that, no matter what it took, I’d win Cali back. I mean, I still loved her.

But what if that wasn’t enough? Where did love even leave us at this point? She and Greyson had never been closer, it seemed. She’d been the acting Luna for a long while now. Life seemed to be taking us in opposite directions.

And yeah, maybe I’d earned back my pack’s trust, but could I still win back Cali’s?

Regret twinged in my stomach. Some not-so-small part of me still wanted to fight for Cali, to take my rightful place at her side. We were still mates, after all.

But what about Ava?

I loved her, too, and I never wanted to hurt her. Not again.

I looked up at Ava padding down the trail ahead, and it struck me then that I hadn’t had any more headaches or light-headedness. Was it possible that I’d overcome my internal conflict? And if I had‚ what did that mean?

I brushed off the thought. *It’s probably just because this trip has been so distracting.*

Did that mean the headaches would come back when I returned to the Samara pack house? If they did, how was I supposed to handle that? It wasn’t like I’d be able to hide them from Ava. I’d already tried that, and I’d failed miserably.

My thoughts were interrupted by Knox falling into step beside me.

*It’s great the Samaras might be gaining some new pack members*, he said. *But how do we want them to prove themselves?*

**Episode 4919**

**Greyson**

I hauled ass after the mysterious werewolf, but she kept ahead of me, pace for pace. *How the hell is she so fast?* As an Alpha, it was incredibly rare that I ran into trouble keeping up with other werewolves, and in the vast majority of those cases, the other werewolves were Alphas as well. So what was going on with this werewolf?

In addition to being fast as hell—seriously, she was putting me through my paces just keeping her in my sights—she also had a knack for suddenly shifting directions, like a skilled running back might. All the strength and speed of those muscles veered left and right through the forest with a grace that almost seemed more feline than lupine. Just who was this Rogue?

Only, this wasn’t a football game, and she wasn’t a fucking cat. This wolf had trespassed on Redwood land and had even gone so far as to show herself to Redwood pack members and humans alike. It couldn’t be a coincidence that she was still hanging around after all that. What did she want? Was she looking for something? Or someone?

I reached out through the mind link and tried to connect with her, but she didn’t respond. *Of course this chick is gonna ignore me on top of everything else. If she’s going for the mysterious vibe on purpose, she’s sure as hell pulling it off.*

Superspeed or not, communicative or not, it didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to let her slip through my fingers like last time—I still had no fucking clue how she was able to get away before, seemingly without a trace. No tracks, no lead on her scent.

*She’s like the Usain Bolt of werewolves; she’s practically acrobatic in how she moves. She’s nearly impossible to track. She won’t talk to any of us, but she also won’t leave this territory alone either.*

Yeah, Mystery Wolf definitely had my attention, whether she wanted it or not. I pushed myself harder, putting on a burst of speed that made the world blur past me, and, oh so slowly, I began to gain ground on her. I couldn’t run like this forever, but hopefully, with a little luck, I wouldn’t have to. I’d only have to keep this up long enough to close the distance and pounce—and hope to hell she didn’t have any more tricks up her sleeves.

Suddenly, she veered off to the right, and I lost sight of her through a thick growth of trees. But her scent was still fresh enough for me to follow and nobody knew this forest like I did, so instead of outrunning her, I decided I’d try to outmaneuver her.

I changed direction, intending to cut her off on the other side of the trees. The blind spot worked both ways, and if she was aiming for maximum speed, there was only one clear and easy way through. She’d run right into my trap—into *me*.

*Let’s see her find a way out of this one.*

I raced ahead and reached the point where she should come barreling out from between the trees.

I came to a stop, my muscles burning and trembling with the effort of keeping up with her, and prepared to pounce. I might have had the upper hand in familiarity with the terrain, but I was under no illusions that she wouldn’t take off again at the first opportunity. I wasn’t gonna get another shot at this. I tried like hell to control my breathing, even though my lungs were desperate to gulp down oxygen like a fish on dry land.

I waited, and listened, expecting to hear her approach. But even when I strained my hearing, all I could make out was my own pounding pulse, my breaths, and the sounds of the forest at night—much louder now that two huge wolves weren’t barreling through the foliage.

She wasn’t coming my way. Not anymore.

I blinked, confused. *Could she have beat me here? How would that even be possible?* She was fast, but not so fast I wouldn’t have seen her up ahead of me. And even if she had tried to race ahead and foil my trap, wouldn’t I have caught her scent along the way?

I circled back, my muscles still trembling, my stomach sinking, pausing as I went to check if she was hiding somewhere. But when I made it back to the path I’d last see her on, the only thing I found was her lingering scent, which seemed to stop suddenly somewhere just ahead.

*Fuck!* I ground my teeth together to hold back an infuriated snarl. *She got away again.*

I was so pissed off, for a moment I couldn’t see straight. But then I pulled in a deep breath and forced myself to focus. She might have escaped, but her trail was still fresh. She’d left a clue behind. I drew in her scent and committed it to memory. If I ever unknowingly crossed her path again, I’d be able to recognize her right away—and this time, I’d get the upper hand.

Her scent was unique, unlike any werewolf scent I’d come across before. It was almost… intoxicating. Or maybe that was just from the thrill of the chase. But there was also something familiar about it, though I was certain I’d never met this wolf before she showed up in the woods the other night. I couldn’t even say that we’d ever met—I saw her, she took off, and that had been the pattern of our acquaintance ever since.

I blew out a breath. The wolf was a dead end, for now, but Cali could probably still use some backup, especially after I’d given her that terrible advice. And she was probably still at school. I hadn’t been chasing that other wolf for long.

I headed back toward the campus, trying to run as fast as I could, even though I still felt sort of depleted after chasing the other wolf. If I hurried, I should still be able to meet up with Cali. I didn’t love the idea of her playing Sherlock, especially when people seemed to be going missing. I knew Cali was stronger and more capable than most, especially where humans were concerned, but I also wasn’t about to take any chances with my mate’s safety. So, that meant I was going to be her Watson. Or maybe her Lestrade.

I knew better than to expect her to *not* get involved, after all. I’d fought that battle and lost enough times. And this wasn’t even some random person—this was one of her friends who had gone missing. What else was Cali supposed to do? And, of course, Cali being Cali, she wasn’t going to stop until she found out the truth.

I just wished she’d think about her own safety a little more often.

I was so caught up in my thoughts of Cali, how much I loved her, how much I missed her, that the voices singing caught me by surprise. The sounds were coming from a nearby group of humans, which meant I’d crossed onto campus property—and I was still in my wolf form.

I quickly ducked into the shadow of a nearby building and shifted back to my human form.

“I just saw a gigantic dog!” one of the humans cried out to the others.

I snorted. *If they only knew.*

I dressed quickly. As sketchy as it would be to run around on campus as a wolf, being a naked stranger and getting caught by the wrong people would probably be even worse.

I pulled my phone out and texted Cali. *Where are you?*

I hoped against hope that somehow, she was already back at the pack house, and I could bail on this campus search thing, but when the phone buzzed in my hand, I knew I was foolish to even hope.

*We’re at the football field.*

I sighed. I couldn’t imagine for the life of me what she’d be doing there. I texted back: *You’d better not be alone.*

*I’m not. I’m with my friends.*

*Just wait there*, I responded. *I’ll be there in a minute.*

I glanced around and took a moment to get my bearings. The campus wasn’t big, but I still wasn’t quite familiar with it. I thought I remembered seeing the football field earlier when I was trying to find Cali’s class. Now, I regretted that. I could understand why Cali was upset.

I hurried toward the field and found her standing with a guy I remembered seeing at the party, one of the crypto guys.

“You made it.” Cali hugged me before turning back to the guy. “Nathan, this is my boyfriend Greyson. Greyson, this is Nathan. He stayed here with me while I waited for you to get here.”

“Hey,” Nathan said, sheepishly waving. “I’m in the Crypto Club. Our other friend left so I was just waiting with Cali, but I really need to go read for class tomorrow.”

“We’ll walk you back to your dorm,” Cali said.

“Sure thing,” I said.

Cali’s voice slipped through my mind, and she quickly filled me in on the video. *Can you try to pick up Codsworth’s scent at the dorms?*

*I don’t know, love*,I said. *This is a college campus. It’s bustling with students. I don’t know Codsworth well enough to detect his scent among everyone else’s. I’m sorry.*

She sighed. *I understand.*

We reached the dorms quickly, and as Cali said goodbye to Nathan, he frowned and pulled his phone out of his pocket. His eyes went wide as he checked the display.

“Holy shit. It’s from Codsworth!”

**Episode 4920**

I grabbed Nathan’s phone out of his hand without thinking and held out the phone in front of the three of us. Nathan and I both read the text message aloud.

“Sorry I had to leave. Will explain tomorrow.”

I blinked, then waited, half-expecting another message to come through. It didn’t. I checked my own phone, shoving Nathan’s back at him, thinking that maybe Codsworth had reached out to me personally, maybe he’d shared a little bit more? Maybe… literally anything had happened beyond him ghosting us for all this time and then sending a mysterious *sorry, I’ll explain later* text that didn’t sound sorry or explain anything?!

“That’s it?” I snapped. “He’s sorry, and he’ll explain later? We’ve been out of our minds with worry! I almost broke down the door of the campus security office—”

“—you what?” Greyson asked, his eyes wide.

“It was more of an ineffective kick,” Nathan offered. “I think the door hurt her more than the other way around.”

I ignored both of them. “And that’s all he’s gonna say? What the hell? He couldn’t even be bothered to call us and tell us what happened?”

Greyson put a hand on my shoulder. “I mean, shouldn’t you be relieved? After all, it sounds like your friend isn’t missing. That’s good news, right? No need to continue this wild goose chase. No need to worry.”

I grimaced. “I mean… yes! Obviously, I’m happy he’s okay and not, you know, dying in a ditch somewhere or locked in a serial killer’s shed.” My mind had come up with a dozen possible scenarios and each of them darker than the last. “But I can still be mad, can’t I? He ghosted us! He flaked and made us worry about him, and now he’s sending this text like it’s no big deal. I was worried about him! It was a big deal to me.”

Nathan offered a weak smile. “I get it, but this is Codsworth we’re talking about. He doesn’t do anything without it playing into part of some bigger plan. He must have had a good reason to leave, and I’m sure, once he explains everything tomorrow, we’ll understand why he did what he did.”

Man, I wished I had the simple faith in literally anyone in my life that Nathan had in Codsworth. *What must it be like to take someone at face value? Even when they’re being sort of shitty?*

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said reluctantly. “But, for the record, Codsworth had better have an amazing explanation for us tomorrow. That’s all I’m saying.”

Nathan laughed. “Fair enough. Thanks for walking me back. I’ll let Chessa know that Codsworth is okay.”

Nathan’s phrasing eased some of the emotion that was wrapped tight around my chest. He was right. Whatever excuse Codsworth had—and it had better be a good one—the important thing was he was okay. This was *good* news.

I waited until Nathan was safely inside the dorm building to turn to Greyson. “My car is back in the parking lot. Maybe you want to walk me to it?”

He took my hand, twining our fingers together. “Of course I do.”

I’d been hoping that our walk to my car would be a nice chance to decompress with one of my most favorite people in the world, but Greyson’s grim expression stopped that wish in its tracks.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He sighed. “I would have been here sooner, but I came across the werewolf from the party.”

I stopped short. “What?! Why didn’t you lead with that?”

He nodded back toward the dorms. “Obviously, I couldn’t. I thought this whole scheme began because you were trying to convince your peers that werewolves don’t really exist? Might ruin everything you’ve worked so hard for.”

My lips twitched at the dry humor in his tone. “Okay, fair point. But why do you look so glum? What happened with the werewolf?”

“She got away,” he growled. “Again.”

A million questions swarmed my mind. Greyson was one of the strongest and fastest wolves I knew. I’d seen him chase down vampires and all sorts of other supernaturals. Another werewolf had definitely never been a problem. How could this other wolf evade him? And what had she been doing when he crossed her path? How did he even run into her again? Was it on purpose, or just crazy happenstance?

I didn’t realize I’d said all those thoughts out loud until Greyson shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Cali. I literally have zero answers. I have no idea why she was in the area again, or why she was in the woods the other day in the first place. It was nothing but chance that I crossed her path again today, and I don’t know how she managed to disappear.”

My stomach clenched. He sounded so frustrated.

“Can I do anything to help?” I asked. “Maybe I can go back and search for clues?”

“Um, hell no.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“I appreciate that you want to help, but you going out into the woods to track down that werewolf is just *not* going to happen.”

I opened my mouth to respond—or, more accurately, to argue—but Greyson continued on. “I understand that you felt you needed to look out for your crypto friends, and that certainly speaks to your character, but the bottom line is I don’t want you getting involved with a strange werewolf. Especially one I can’t even keep up with.

“In fact, I don’t want you to get involved in *any* of this—not when people are going missing, there’s a vampire on the loose, a ridiculously fast werewolf, and, possibly, a murder on the Redwood land. And you’re definitely not going to keep doing this searching at night, hanging around people I don’t know.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. *Oh, no, he didn’t.* I appreciated that Greyson loved me and wanted to protect me, but I drew the line at him telling me who I could and couldn’t hang out with, or when or where I could hang out with them.

Besides, he was being a gigantic hypocrite! “What about you?” I asked. “You went by yourself to the council. And then you chased that wolf—that one who’s so fast you can’t catch her? What if she’s a wild Rogue? What if she’d hurt you and you weren’t fast enough to protect herself? She sounds like just as much of a danger to you as anything else that’s going on around here might be to me.

He shook his head. “It’s different. I’ve also been to the council before, but more importantly, I’m an Alpha. And being an Alpha means I have to take risks and do things that aren’t expected of others—things that are for the welfare of the pack.”

Part of me wanted to lecture him still, but the pride in his voice was so endearing it made it hard to be upset with him.

Still, a boundaries conversation was probably in order. Maybe he and I were on different levels right now—I was trying to do the college thing; he was trying to lead the Redwood pack and keep everyone safe from any threat that popped up. But that didn’t mean he got to tell me how to live my life.

He got in the driver’s seat, and I let him drive me back home.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I turned to him. “You know I can’t just stop going to school. *Again.*”

“I know,” he said mildly. “And I’m not asking you to. I just want to make sure you’re with people we both trust at all times. At least until we figure this out. It’s great that your friend is all right, but that doesn’t change the reality of those other disappearances, does it?”

I frowned. “I guess not.”

I thought back to that strange feeling I’d had earlier, where I’d felt like I was being followed. Maybe a little extra caution wouldn’t hurt.

We got back to the pack house, and everyone else seemed occupied with their own things, thankfully. I didn’t want to have to explain to anyone else what I’d been through.

Greyson took my hand. “It’s been a long day, and I know you have crew practice tomorrow. Maybe we should call it a night?”

I nodded. “Sounds great.”

We headed upstairs to his room, and I eyed him. “I hope you’re not going to have a problem with me going to crew practice. I’m pretty sure I’ll be safe around guys like Bear, Schmiddy, and Gael.”

He laughed as we stepped into his bedroom and closed the door behind us. “Oh, I saw how they took care of you when you fell into the water. Maybe I should hire them as your personal bodyguards.”

I smiled. “I don’t need any personal bodyguard when I have an Alpha.”

I ran my hands over his chest, and he leaned down and captured my lips with his own.

**Episode 4921**

I planted my hands on Greyson’s chest and pushed, easily knocking him back onto the bed.

He laughed as he fell, then smiled even wider as I crawled onto the bed after him. “You know, if you think you need more personalized attention, love, I think that could be arranged. I never want you to feel unattended to.”

“Is that so?” I asked teasingly.

He nodded and grabbed my chin, pulling me into a kiss. I hummed happily, feeling my body relaxing against his. It had been a weird night, and I was grateful that Greyson was here with me.

He wrapped his arms around me and rolled me underneath him, covering my body with his, pressing his hips against mine.

I laughed as he reached down to unbutton my jeans. “And what about you?”

“What about me?” he asked, sitting back. He grabbed the back of his T-shirt and pulled it off in one smooth motion.

I didn’t answer right away, too busy staring at his chest, taking in his well-defined pecs and abs. Reaching up, I ran my hand over the smooth span of muscle, letting myself fixate on the way his abs created a V that disappeared into his jeans. How was he so damn good-looking?

My body was starting to burn, growing hot and restless. I had this glorious god of a man on top of me, and he was taking his time. I was ready for him to touch me, so I took matters into my own hands and reached for his belt.

“Oh, I was just wondering who’s attending to *you*, Alpha,” I said, feeling breathless. “Who do you have protecting *you*?”

A look of surprise flashed across his face. I’d succeeded in unbuckling his belt, so he took it from there and unbuttoned his jeans with a smile. He leaned down to kiss me again, his mouth hot against mine.

“You, love,” he said. “You protect me.”

“Because I love you,” I said, watching as he tugged off my jeans and tossed them to the floor. Now I was only wearing my T-shirt and my black panties.

He took a moment to look me up and down, his gaze hungry and possessive. He grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it up over my head. I ducked out of it and lay back, nearly naked under his gaze.

Greyson ran feather-light fingers from the inside of my knee up my inner thigh. “I’d never let anything happen to you, love,” he said, slipping his fingers inside my panties.

I shivered when they slid gently over my skin. “And I’d never let anything happen to you—*oh my god*.”

“What were you saying, love?”

I couldn’t speak anymore. He smiled and chuckled, a low rumbling sound as he stroked me. I gasped, closing my eyes as his finger slipped inside me.

I moaned as he found my clit and rubbed in small, slow circles. He kissed me again, smothering my cries with his lips. His fingers kept working me, and I was lost. The taste of him, the smell of him, the feel of his skin on my skin…

“More, Greyson,” I breathed, arching against the mattress.

Desperately, I pulled at his pants, not wanting anything between us anymore. He obliged, and soon he was wearing nothing. Greyson repositioned himself above me. He hovered there for a moment, just looking at me. I did the same, reaching a hand up to run my fingers across his bottom lip before hooking my arms around his neck.

Then Greyson pushed into me. I gasped, arching against his body as he pressed me into the bed. Our lips found each other, and he bit my bottom lip. I hitched my legs up around his waist, and he sank his hands into my thighs.

“Harder,” I panted, breaking our kiss.

He didn’t need to be told twice.

He increased his speed, holding my hips with his hands to keep me in place. Then he dipped his head down to capture my nipple in his mouth, his tongue swirling around the bud. My legs started to shake. I reached up and grabbed his hair to ground myself, digging my fingers into his scalp. When I cried out in pleasure, he growled, not letting up his pace.

We were climaxing at the same time, so hard and fast that the bed was starting to shudder.

“Fuck, Cali.”

He panted for breath as he wound down, his chest slick with sweat. I caught my own breath, running a hand through my messy hair. There was no way I’d be able to stand. My legs felt weak. Everything felt weak. I was made of jelly now. I kept myself wrapped around Greyson, loving the feeling of him next to me like this.

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Greyson had still been asleep when I’d woken up the following morning, so I hadn’t turned on the light. I’d moved quietly as I’d gotten dressed and grabbed my bag, but he’d woken up in time to kiss me goodbye. I’d prepped my defense in case he wanted to mount another argument about my not going back to campus, but in the end, I didn’t need it. He’d been surprisingly okay with my heading out. Sleepy, but okay.

“Text me,” he’d said around a yawn. “Or call me. Both. Keep checking in, okay? I want to hear from you. And let me know if anything strange happens, or if you hear anything that might be relevant.”

“I will,” I promised. “I’ll be in touch.”

Now, as I walked through the crisp morning air toward the fieldhouse, I was feeling good. I smiled a little to myself as I crossed the quad, thinking that I was going to miss the hot stranger checking me out in class, but I knew I’d been right to tell Greyson not to follow me around. That wasn’t why I was here. I had other things to focus on.

Besides, it wasn’t like I was walking around campus with blinders on. If anything, I was more hyperaware of my surroundings than ever. I knew I didn’t have werewolf senses, but I was clocking every student walking around me, every building door opening, the rustle of the wind in all the trees. I was keeping a sharp lookout, but everything seemed to be okay—safe, even.

When I reached the gym, I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. I was really hoping that I was about to walk inside and find Codsworth waiting, but when I pulled the heavy doors open, what I found was the crew team scattered around the room on various weight machines. I looked carefully around, but my heart was already sinking. There was no sign of Codsworth.

Gael was sitting up, taking a rest between bench press sets, and when he caught my eye, he raised a hand in greeting.

I walked over to him. ‘Hey.”

“Morning, Cali.”

“Good morning. Have you seen Codsworth?” I asked him.

Gael shook his head. “No. Actually…” He trailed off, but something about the look in his eyes set off an alarm in my head.

“Actually what?” I asked quickly.

He shrugged. “It’s probably nothing, but I got kind of a weird text from him earlier.”

My heart thudded. “What did it say?”

“That’s what’s weird—he said he was going to take a few days off.”

“Off?” I repeated blankly.

Gael nodded. “Yeah, I know. And he said he wouldn’t be at practice.”

“But Codsworth doesn’t miss practices, does he?” I asked. “Usually?”

“No, never. That’s why it was so weird. Taking a few days off just isn’t like him. And he wouldn’t tell me what was going on.”

“You asked?”

“Of course I asked,” Gael said. “But he wouldn’t say.” He was quiet for a moment, then shook his head. “He didn’t take time off when he tore his rotator cuff. He just used the rowing machine one-handed. He looked like a fucking idiot, but he didn’t miss practice. I hope he’s okay.”

“Yeah, me too,” I muttered.

I stepped away from Gael and pulled out my phone to message Codsworth myself.

*Hey, I heard you weren’t going to be at practice. Is everything okay?*

I pressed send and started to slip my phone back into my bag—if Codsworth wasn’t feeling well, he might still be asleep—but then I felt the vibration of an incoming text and looked down to see that he’d already texted back. But when I read the message, my eyes went wide with shock.

*Can you back the hell off, Cali? We barely know each other. I don’t need you to check up on me, and I don’t need your pity. Leave me alone.*

I stared at the text. Read it again. Then again. I was struggling to make sense of it. The text was unlike anything Codsworth had ever said to be before. Even when he’d acted like a jerk in the past, it hadn’t been like this. He’d never been *mean*—not really. He’d been catty.

And then another thought hit me, so hard that it nearly knocked the wind out of me.

Was I even talking to Codsworth?

**Episode 4922**

**Xavier**

*How do we want them to prove themselves?*

I leaned back against the headboard, staring up at the ceiling, and thought about the question Knox had posed to me. At the time, I’d blown him off, telling him I’d figure it out. But the question had stayed with me all night, and I’d been thinking about it since I’d woken up, turning it over and over in my head. How *was* I going to test the Loneclaws?

Because it wasn’t a matter of *if*—it was a matter of *how*. If the Loneclaw pack members wanted to join our pack, then they were going to need to do something to prove their worth. I wanted the Samara pack to grow in size and influence, but that didn’t mean I was just going to add any random wolves we stumbled across—that would be a recipe for disaster. They were going to have to pass some kind of test, first.

Though I had to admit, adding the several Loneclaw wolves who’d followed us back to the pack house would be a huge win for the Samaras. It would show every other pack in the territory that the Samara pack was growing into a force to be reckoned with—and that we were just as powerful as the Redwood or Blue Blood packs.

I looked over as Ava stirred next to me. The room was still dim, but I let my gaze wander over her face, which looked beautiful in the early morning light. Her dark hair was fanned out over the pillow, and I watched as her eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened. She blinked up at me sleepily, then yawned and stretched.

“What are you doing?” she asked, pushing herself into a sitting position and resting against the headboard next to me.

“Just thinking about how we can vet the Loneclaw wolves who want to join us.”

Ava nodded. “Yeah, we’ve got to do something. Have you thought of anything?”

I shrugged. “Nothing good. When Rishika and Ravi joined the Redwoods, they proved themselves in battle.”

Ava thought about that for a moment. “That’s as good a test as any. I wish we’d all paid more attention during the fight yesterday, but it does seem like the Loneclaws held their own. They all made it through, and that’s something—but they’d obviously need a strong Alpha like you to actually win against the Bitterfangs.”

I didn’t say anything, but I couldn’t ignore the feeling of pride that swelled within me at Ava’s words. I’d worked hard to be the best Alpha I could be, and that was what mattered, but it was nice to hear her acknowledge it.

“I’ve been thinking about it, too,” she went on. “About what we can ask of the Loneclaws. How we can ask them to prove themselves.”

“Yeah? Come up with anything?” I asked.

She ran a hand through her sleep-mussed hair, tucking it behind her ear. “I think before we even get to that part, we should probably talk to them. Get the lay of the land. Maybe that will give us some idea of how to test them.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. It’s a place to start, anyway.” I stood up and padded across the bedroom to the window. I looked out onto the lawn, where the Loneclaw had camped overnight. They’d agreed to it, but it had been my idea. It was too soon to bring them into the pack house. We didn’t know anything about them. “Should we get started?”

Ava nodded and climbed out of bed. We took quick showers and pulled on jeans and T-shirts, then headed downstairs.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, I heard voices coming from the kitchen. So there were a few people up and about, despite the early hour, but I wasn’t in the mood to socialize. Now that I was awake, I was feeling more restless than ever, and I was anxious to get this process started.

I glanced at Ava. “Ready?”

She finished twisting her still-damp hair into a messy bun on the top of her head and nodded. “Ready. Lead the way, Alpha.”

“Let’s go,” I said, and headed outside into the cold morning.

As we walked down the porch steps, I could see that we weren’t the only ones up early. Cresta was awake and standing in front of her tent. She didn’t look tired, so I suspected she’d been awake for hours, if she’d even slept at all. When she saw me, she turned and looked into the tent, speaking a few low words. Almost at once, the other Loneclaw wolves left the tent, already awake and alert.

Whatever else I could say about these wolves, they definitely weren’t lazy. That counted for something, didn’t it?

Cresta raised a hand in greeting as Ava and I approached. “Morning, Xavier. We’re ready for whatever test you decide to throw at us this morning.”

I grinned, pleased with her attitude. I liked that she both understood the lay of the land and seemed unfazed by it.

“There will be time for that later,” I told her. “First, my Luna and I just want to get to know you all a little better.”

Cresta looked a little surprised, but she nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. You want to know who you’re dealing with.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“Okay,” she said, slapping her hands together. “Who do we have? This is Grace, Milo, and Carmen,” she said, pointing to a woman with long blonde hair, a man with dark, thick curls, and a man with black hair and eyes that were somehow even darker. Looking into them felt like looking at the night sky.

“Good to meet you,” I said, nodding at each of them in turn. “I’m Xavier, and this is Ava. Where do you all come from? Not from around here, I’m guessing.”

Cresta snorted. “Not really from around anywhere.”

“You have to come from somewhere,” Ava said.  
 She shrugged. “Kind of all over, I guess. I’m from south of San Diego originally, but I haven’t been there in years. We all met in California,” she said, nodding toward the others in the group. “Down near Venice. We spent a lot of time there together. But I’m not sure where they all come from.”

“No?” I asked curiously.

“We don’t really talk a lot about our pasts,” Cresta said. “A large number of us find each other because of what we’re trying to escape, so no one pries. We travel together because we don’t want to travel alone.”

I took this in, thinking hard. I glanced at Ava, who looked like she was doing the same, and I wondered if the same thought had occurred to her. The Loneclaw wolves weren’t exactly a pack—at least not any pack I’d ever encountered. They’d happened upon each other accidentally and stayed together out of convenience, or because it was safer to travel as a group. They weren’t even like the other nomadic pack I’d met—the Pit Bulls had been fiercely loyal to each other. But the Loneclaws were more… flexible. Which was a potential drawback, but it could also be a benefit to me.

“You look like you’re feeling some feelings,” Cresta said warily.

I shrugged. “I was just thinking that it doesn’t sound like the Loneclaws are much of a pack.”

Much to my surprise, Cresta nodded.  “That’s true,” she agreed. “We just kind of find each other. The only reason we have a name is because the Loneclaw pack is for lost wolves. The name is there so the lost know they always have a place to be. A support system of sorts. But it was never meant to be forever, for anyone.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s supposed to be a temporary home,” she said. “Until you find your place. Your real pack. Or Rogue, if they choose that instead.”

I considered this. “I can understand settling for something temporary when you need companionship or the protection of a pack, but I’m not looking for wolves who are looking for another pit stop. I need wolves in my pack who can commit.”

Saying these words stirred something in my chest as I realized what I was saying. I’d left my old pack. I’d made a choice by joining the Samaras and committing myself and my life to the pack. My future was tied to the future of this pack. The Samara pack was it for me.

And if these Loneclaw wolves were good enough to join my pack, I wanted them to stay. I felt the pressure to make the pack as strong and influential as it could be—pressure that came from inside the pack and from outside—and I didn’t have time to waste.

I looked at Grace, Milo, and Carmen in turn. “If you join the Samara pack, it would be a permanent thing. You’d be Samaras for life.” I looked at all four of them, hard. “Is that something you’d all be able to handle?”

**Episode 4923**

*Can you back the hell off, Cali? We barely know each other. I don’t need you to check up on me, and I don’t need your pity. Leave me alone.*

I was still staring down at Codsworth’s text, baffled. I had no evidence, of course, but I just couldn’t shake the strange feeling the text had given me. It just didn’t *sound* like the Codsworth I knew. But maybe I just hadn’t seen this side of him yet. A little voice inside my head reminded me that I hadn’t really known him that long.

I thought about it for a moment and remembered that he’d been a real jerk when we’d first met, though I thought we’d gotten past that. I *thought* we’d become pretty good friends since then—even if I *had* gone into our friendship with ulterior motives. I’d wanted to keep an eye on him to keep his prying eyes away from my pack. But then I’d gotten to know him and grown to really like him. He was a good guy. Or at least I’d come to think so.

I glanced across the gym at Gael. He had said that he’d gotten a text from Codsworth, too, and that it had seemed odd for Codsworth to skip practice. But he was back doing another set of bench presses, so clearly, he wasn’t too disturbed by it.

Without knowing what else to do, I dropped my bag and got to work. During practice, no one said anything about Codsworth—or his conspicuous absence.

After I showered and changed, I headed to History of Dance. Today was going to be our first practical application class, and we were meeting in one of the school’s large, airy dance studios to work on the waltz.

I smiled to myself as I walked in. I’d never thought I’d find myself feeling grateful for Lucian’s insufferable galas, but thanks to his decadence and stuffy party-throwing style, I knew what I was in for with the waltz. Lucian liked to get loose in his personal life, but when it came to throwing events, he was all about tradition.

As I walked into the dance building, my stomach twisted a little anxiously. I was glad I’d convinced Greyson to let me come to campus on my own, but if there was one class I wished Greyson could “audit,” it was this one. I knew I’d feel more comfortable dancing in his arms than in the arms of a stranger.

When I walked into the studio, I was relieved to see that Lola was already there. She was on the shining wooden floor, sitting cross-legged, waiting for class to start. She smiled when she saw me and waved me over.

Dropping my bag, I walked toward her and gratefully joined her.

“Hey, girl. You had practice this morning, right? How was it?” she asked.

“Um…” I hesitated, wondering how much to say. I really wanted to catch Lola up on the whole situation with Codsworth—she’d be excellent at helping me decipher his weird message—but Lola didn’t really know him, so I wasn’t sure how helpful she’d be. How would she possibly be able to help me figure out if a text didn’t sound like him if she didn’t know what kind of text he normally would’ve sent?

Ugh, this was a mess.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Okay, Cali, I can tell you’re stressing about something—and I know you got in really late last night—so why don’t you just skip the indecision and just tell me already?”

I almost laughed. My best friend knew me too well. I opened my mouth to start the story, but then, before I could say a word, a tall, lithe woman stood up in front of the class and clapped her hands for attention. Next to her was Professor Teapot.

“Everyone, this is Professor Diaz,” Teapot said. “She’s one of the professors here for the dance program. She’s going to be assisting us today as we learn the waltz.”

“Hello,” Professor Diaz said, smiling around at everyone. “Thank you all for being here this morning and bringing all of the positive energy I can feel flowing through this room. We’re starting our practical journey today, and I hope you’re all as excited about that as I am.”

Lola caught my eye, and I had to stifle a laugh when she rolled her eyes. Apparently, she wasn’t *quite* as excited about the start of our dance journey as Professor Diaz.

“Like Professor Teapot said, today, we will begin with the waltz. It was born in the area we now know as Germany and Austria, and dates back to at least the thirteenth century. It began as a rolling folk dance—quite different to the dignified court dance we are familiar with today. We will discuss all the different iterations of this joyous movement when we get on our feet.” She clapped her hands again. “Now! The waltz is a partnered dance, so please find a partner. I do not care what the partnerships look like, but please do decide who will be leading whom.”

There was a low buzz as the rest of the class looked awkwardly at each other, trying to find a partner. It suddenly felt exactly like middle school, but when I looked over at Lola, I saw that she’d stretched out her hand toward me.

She was grinning. “Caliana Hart,” she said formally, “may I have this dance?”

I put my hand in hers, laughing with relief. “You may.”

We got to our feet, and I rested one hand on Lola’s shoulder, then took her hand in mine. Her free hand settled on my waist.

“Everyone is partnered,” Professor Diaz said, walking through the studio, looking at the pairs. “Good, good. Hand a little higher, please. Hands rest lightly at the waist, please. That’s right.”

She walked to the sound system and pressed play.

Soft, melodious music filled the studio. Everyone looked over at Professor Diaz, waiting for more instruction.

She had her eyes closed and was moving her hands to the music. Then Professor Teapot came up next to her and she extended out her hand. They began to dance together, their movements fluid, like they were reading each other’s minds.

“The steps are inside you. Feel the music,” Diaz said. “Let it flow through you. Let it enter your ears*,* work its way through your shoulders, then your ribs, then your hips, then your knees, all the way down to your feet and your toes.”

I stared at the two of them as they, quite literally, waltzed around the room.

“What the hell does that mean?” I muttered, suddenly feeling slightly sick.

“Um, professors?” another student called from the back of the room. “I’m letting the music flow through me but, uh, what are the actual steps to the waltz? Because we don’t… we don’t know them?”

Professor Diaz opened her eyes. She and Professor Teapot nodded at each other before Diaz began to glide around the room, sliding between the couples, who were all standing stock-still, staring at her in bewilderment. “Know them? By the end of our hour together, you will have *become* the waltz! It will inhabityou!”

Lola sighed and looked at me. “Any ideas?

I wracked my brain, trying to remember *anything* from the court dance part of Lucian’s parties. “I think the waltz has a box step? Maybe? Does that sound right?”

Lola frowned. “Maybe? I don’t know why, but that *feels* right.”

We began to move, tentatively, to the sound of a piece of music I recognized as Chopin. Taking their cue from us, the other students began to dance as well. I looked around at the other couples, hoping people were figuring things out, but it didn’t look good. Despite Professor Diaz’s promise, no one had yet *become* the waltz.

But the chaos did allow me some time to tell Lola about Codsworth. I filled her in quickly, about how weird he’d been acting, and how Gael had said he hadn’t sounded like himself, and how he’d ditched practice, which was completely out of character.

“—and then there’s this message he sent me, which just did *not* sound like him at all,” I finished, frowning as I remembered how short and angry it had been.

Lola took this in, thinking. “Okay, I have a question, and I’m wondering if you’ve been thinking the same thing: you say it’s out of character for him, but do you *really* know this guy well enough to be able to make that determination?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I have been wondering that.”

“And what’s the answer?” Lola asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just feel like I should listen to my gut on this one, especially with everything happening on campus with the missing people and stuff.”

“All right, very good, very good! Excellent!” Professor Diaz called, interrupting our conversation. “Now, I want everyone to switch partners!”

“Wait, what?!” I asked, but before I could do anything to stop it, I found myself in the arms of a guy I’d never seen before. He was tall, with brown hair and brown eyes.

I cleared my throat, trying to take control of the situation. “Hi, I’m Cali—”

“If you’re wondering about the missing students,” he said, “I might know something.”

**Episode 4924**

**Xavier**

The morning sky was a bleached-out grey, and the cold winter wind whipped around us. I gave the Loneclaw wolves a hard stare, but they didn’t flinch, and they didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah, Samaras for life. You’re looking for loyalty. We get that,” Cresta said immediately.

“For life,” Milo repeated firmly. “That’s what we had in mind.”

“This is exactly what we’ve been looking for. Commitment,” Grace added, nodding.

“The Loneclaw pack served a purpose—they were a pack when we all needed one—but being in a nomadic tribe wasn’t anyone’s first choice,” Carmen said. He shot a quick look at the other wolves, then back at me. “At least it wasn’t *my* first choice. It was kind of a last resort. None of us want a temporary pack to be the only thing we have. We want the real deal.”

Ava looked at me and raised her eyebrows. *That’s exactly what we wanted to hear*, she mind linked.

*Yep.*

*I feel like there’s some potential here.*

*Yeah, I think so too*.

I looked at Cresta and gave her a nod. “Okay. It’s good to know where you all stand. I’ve got a lot to think about as the Alpha, but I want you to know that whatever we decide, it won’t just be a matter of giving you a key to the house. There will be a trial before you could officially join the pack. It’s great that you want to join us, but we need to be sure that you can bring something to the table, too. Something that our pack needs.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Cresta said.

“We get that,” Milo said with a nod. “We’re not here to be freeloaders. We don’t just want to join the pack, you know—we want to be *part* of the pack.”

“Yeah,” Carmen said quietly, looking up at me. “We want to contribute. We want to build something with the Samara pack. To grow with it.”

Ava looked over at me, her eyes shining. *Pretty impressive.*

*It does sound good.*

*I think it’s you*, she said.

*What?*

She shrugged slightly. *I think you must be inspiring to them.*

*What are you talking about?* I asked.

*You’re a natural born Alpha, X. You always have been, don’t tell me you don’t know that*, she said. *And you’re the kind of Alpha who clearly impacts everyone around him. Just listen to them.*

Warmth spread through my chest at her words, but I kept my expression neutral as I turned back to the Loneclaw wolves. “Thanks for being so open with us. That’s going to make things a lot easier,” I said. “Ava and I are going to head back inside. The Samaras have a lot to talk about.”

Cresta nodded. “Of course.”

“Someone will bring you all something to eat,” I added.

“Thanks, man. That’s decent of you,” Milo said. “We’ve been traveling for a while.”

“It’s nice just to have a place to stop,” Carmen said, looking around. I noticed when his gaze strayed to the pack house, lingering for just a moment. Then he looked away, like he didn’t want to let his hopes get too high.

*This means something to them.*

I took Ava’s hand, and we turned and headed back toward the house. When we were a little ways away from the Loneclaws, she glanced up at me.

“Now that we know where they stand on the idea of joining us, we do need to come up with a real plan for how they can prove themselves.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, shoving a hand through my hair. “And we will. But first, I want to talk to the rest of the pack.”

“Why?” Ava asked.

“I want to make sure everyone understands what’s going on—that these wolves could be joining our pack if they’re able to pass whatever trial we come up with. I want us all to be on the same page. No surprises.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” she said.

“I need some coffee,” I muttered as we climbed the steps to the porch.

“You *look* like you need some coffee,” she said teasingly, nudging my shoulder with hers. Then she smiled at me. “I’ll make you a deal—you make me a latte, and I’ll gather the pack for a meeting.”

“I’ll take it,” I told her.

She nodded and headed upstairs while I walked into the kitchen.

I hadn’t made much coffee over the last year or so—every time I’d walked into the kitchen at the Redwood pack house, Torin had been cooking a stew or baking a pie or flipping pancakes, and there had always been fresh coffee. After a while, I’d stopped thinking about it.

But I’d been on my own for a long time before Torin had arrived, so I knew my way around a pot of coffee, and before long I’d poured two steaming mugs. I drank mine hot and black, and I chugged it down, draining the mug. Then I added milk after using some frothing thing she liked before carrying it to Ava in the living room. That was where I found the whole pack, looking sleepy, but curious.

I handed Ava the cup and looked around. The Samara pack was a good group, but we weren’t big enough. Everyone in the room was a good fighter and loyal to the pack, but there just weren’t enough of us. It would be a real boon to add the Loneclaw wolves to the pack. It was good we had the alliance, but I hated having to depend on anyone—especially the Redwoods. If we were ever to go up against another pack that was a real threat, one-on-one, it would be a tough fight for us.

“What’s going on?” Blaine asked, stifling a yawn.

“Why don’t you shut up and let your Alpha tell you?” Ava snapped. She glared at him, her look very clearly reminding him of his place.

I clocked it when Blaine glowered back at her. Dammit. I was going to have to deal with that later. It was a real fucking drag to see that even after all this time, Blaine was still a problem.

It wasn’t like I wanted to run my pack like a dictatorship. I always wanted to allow for discussion, and for pack members to feel heard, but it wasn’t good for a pack to have a few members who were always acting out and trying to undermine the Alpha. *Especially* in front of non-pack members.

I cleared my throat. “I wanted to talk to all of you about the Loneclaw wolves who are camping outside. They came back here with us and stayed, so we already knew they were interested to some degree, but Ava and I have just talked to them and confirmed that they’re definitely interested in joining the pack. It’s not a given, obviously. We’re not just going to admit anyone who asks—we’re going to have them go through some kind of trial to prove their worth. But before I tell them what that would be, I wanted to let you all know, and to hear what you think.” I looked around. “So, what do you think?”  
 It was quiet for just a beat. Then Marissa spoke.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said firmly. “I fully support adding new members to the pack, if they’re worthy. Getting Xavier as our Alpha was always just a first step for us. We need to grow our pack. Adding these wolves is a good idea. They seem like they’d be good additions?”

“Yeah, they do,” Ava said.

“There’s a risk,” someone called out from the back.

Ava rolled her eyes. “There’s always a risk. But you can’t have reward without risk, and I think there’s more risk in *not* adding any new members. And Xavier and I talked to them. They seem like good people. They understand that they’d have to prove themselves. They’re looking for a pack to be loyal to.” She looked around. “I think they have the potential to be assets to the Samara pack.”

“Then I say we do it.”

“Yeah, give them a chance.”

“I’ve been saying we need a bigger pack. I’m sick of pulling double shifts on guard duty!”

I chuckled, but I was glad to see that most of the pack members were speaking up in favor of the idea of a bigger pack.

I held up my hands for quiet. “Okay, okay, guard duty aside, a bigger pack is important. Bolstering our numbers would give us more power in the area, and more influence in the alliance. That’s big. That’s something we’ve been wanting for a long time.”

I looked around, assessing the expressions on everyone’s faces. Everyone was nodding and smiling, apparently on the same page. But then I caught Knox’s eye.

Shit.

There was a hard look on the shrimp’s face that set off a warning bell in my head, even before he spoke.

Then he stood and opened his big mouth. “I don’t want them to join.”

**Episode 4925**

**Artemis**

*Who are you?*

Shit.

I spun around to see a fortress guard standing in front of us. The guy was massive, his shoulders as wide as the door behind him, and he was staring at us, looking about as surprised to see us as we were to see him. And—most worryingly of all—he was holding an unsheathed saber. When I didn’t answer, he raised it, pointing it in my direction.

His eyes narrowed. “You got cotton in your ears, girl? I asked you who the fuck you were and what you’re doing in this fortress. Just looking at you, I can tell you don’t belong here.”

I still didn’t answer him. What was I going to say? My thoughts spun as I fought to come up with an escape plan, and, in my distraction, my gaze slid toward Marius. He was standing stock-still, just like me. The guard followed my gaze, and when he saw Marius, his eyes went even wider and gained a look of recognition passed, making my heart sink.

Shit.

“*Marius?*” the guard cried out. “What the fu—”

But before he could say another word, Marius sprang into action.

He lunged forward with my dagger in his hand. For an instant, I thought he was going to stab the guard, but at the last moment he flipped the blade and slammed the pommel into the guard’s temple. The sound it made practically echoed off the walls. The guard’s face froze in an expression of shock from the hit, then he crumpled to the ground in a heap, unconscious.

At that point, I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out in a rush and looked over at Marius, my heartbeat thudding loudly in my ears.

“What was it that you told me?” I demanded. “‘Not a problem?’ Was that it? Because correct me if I’m wrong, but this looks like a problem to me!” I shook my head, infuriated. “Are all the guards here going to recognize you? Because if so, then that’s something that we’re going to have to deal with sooner rather than later.”

Marius looked up from the guard at his feet, then slipped my dagger back into his belt and shrugged, apparently unconcerned. “No idea.”

I glared at him, fury replacing the fear and shock that had been coursing through my system. What was going on with him? Why was he being so deliberately obtuse with me? We were in a fucking fortress with his picture floating around and he’d just knocked a Fae out.

“*No idea*? That’s all you’re going to give me?”

He shrugged again.

“Gods, Marius, you need to use your words! All of them, in fact. You need to find the words to tell me exactly what you did to end up on a wanted poster, because you can bullshit me all you want, but that is not the kind of thing that just *happens*. This whole thing”—I gestured broadly—“has become a much bigger operation than I bargained for. I came to the Fae world for a reason, and it isn’t *this*. I have a mission of my own, but now here I am, standing in this stupid fortress and almost getting my ass caught in the name of some dumbass mission I don’t even understand!”

I paused, breathing hard, waiting for a response, but Marius didn’t speak.

I snorted with disgust. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I should’ve walked away the moment I saw you.”

And I meant that, too. But there was a part of me that knew I never could’ve done that. Not with all of our shared history. I never could’ve abandoned him—it was a foolish thought to think I could’ve been able to. Marius was like a flame, and I was a moth. It had always been like that. It was why I’d had to get away in the first place.

But that knowledge didn’t give me any peace. In fact, it only fueled my anger.

I stabbed my finger into his chest. “I need you to be honest with me. *Now*.”

Marius raised his hands, like he was surrendering. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? Is that what you want to hear, Ari?”

“What I want to hear is you telling me what the fuck is going on!” I snapped, exasperated.

“It’s really not that big a deal—”

“*Just tell me*,” I growled.

He took a deep, long-suffering breath. “Well, let’s just say that I was supposed to capture someone who’d seduced a duchess…”

“*And?*” I pressed.

Marius shrugged. “And it turns out I’m *also* quite adept at seducing duchesses. The duke was not impressed.”

He flashed his classic smile at me, but I’d known him far too long for that trick to work. He wasn’t going to charm me that easily, and I gave him a flat look.

“So, let me see if I’ve got this straight.” I glanced at the guard on the ground at our feet, then back up at Marius. “We’re in this situation—which has caused me to be derailed from my *actual* goal in the Fae world—because you couldn’t keep it in your pants during a job?”

“That’s really not an accurate depiction of the situation,” Marius said, shaking his head. “I think this has much more to do with the fact that they’re cracking down on bounty hunters, here. We’re on the very edge of the Light and Dark Fae borders, it’s ripe for trouble. Bounty hunters mixed with a war? You don’t know whose side anyone is on.”

“Really?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Yes! Well…” Marius looked thoughtful. “The border stuff is true, but I’ll admit, the duke probably isn’t helping our current situation either.”

I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. There, I gave myself the luxury of furious despair for only a moment before I took a deep breath and looked back up. I looked around, taking in our surroundings and getting my bearings. My eyes went to the unconscious guard again, and the sound of him calling out Marius’s name suddenly echoed through my head. I could only pray that no one had heard him yell it out. All we needed was for some puffed-up courtier with a pride problem and something to prove to the duke to get ahold of us and try to derail my father-finding plans even further.

I looked down when I felt Marius’s hand close around my wrist.

“What?” I snapped.

He gave my hand a tug. “Come on. We need to find Coriander.”

This gave me pause. “You know, this is the first time you’ve even said that name to me.” I shook my head. “What’s up with that?”

“What?” he asked.

“Why is getting information out of you like pulling teeth?”

He snorted. “Give me a break, Ari. We’re bounty hunters. We’re not known for being forthcoming. It’s just the way it is.”

I shifted on my feet, feeling a little uncomfortable. He was probably right, and I’d just forgotten how cutthroat the job usually was. “Well, once again, you’re putting us at a disadvantage by not telling me everything. Do you know how frustrating that is?”

Marius turned to face me fully, frowning. He looked truly upset, without a hint of his usual sardonic humor.

“I wonder if you have the right to lecture me about honesty, Ari,” he said, his voice strangely cool.

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“Oh, I can’t begin to *imagine* what it might mean, *Mistress Wrenthron*,” he said mockingly.

Shock hit me like a tidal wave, and my hackles went up in an instant. Fury swept over me, and I pushed past him deeper into the room, heading for the door.

The fact that he had a point about my hypocrisy fueled my anger even more, but there was no way I was going to concede his point, so I kept my mouth clamped shut.

I heard his footsteps behind me as I stepped toward the door, and when I opened it, he was at my side. Trying to ignore him, I opened it just a crack and peeked into the hallway. It seemed to be empty, but when I listened, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. I concentrated for a moment, listening until I determined that it was two sets of guards, coming at us from both directions.

That wasn’t great.

I turned to Marius. Judging by the grim look on his face, he’d reached the same conclusion.

“If we’re going to move, we need to do it now,” he said.

I nodded. “Okay. Whatever you say. What do we do now? Where’s Coriander being held? And how are we going to avoid these guards?”

Marius’s eyes had started to shine with something I recognized—it was the specific flash of light he got when he was possessed by a kind of crazed, devil-may-care energy. And it usually meant trouble.

And then, when he smiled at me, there was something distinctly feral in his grin.

“Oh, Ari,” he whispered. “Watch and learn.”

**Episode 4926**

I stared up at the guy, my body stiff with shock.

He trod on my toes, then stumbled back a step. “Whoa—sorry about that. And I didn’t mean to make it sound like I was eavesdropping on you, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation with your friend,” he said, tipping his chin toward Lola, who was dancing with a guy a head shorter than she was. She was leading again.

I nodded, realizing that I needed to be more careful when I was talking to Lola in public, no matter how distracted I thought everyone else was. Maybe we needed to come up with some kind of code.

“It’s fine,” I said, clearing my throat awkwardly. Then I tried to smile, but it felt forced. “Like I was saying, I’m Cali. What’s your name?”

“Nice to meet you, Cali. I’m Lennon. I host a radio show on the college radio station—98.7 WXFM. Maybe you’ve heard of it. *Listening with Lennon*?”

I shook my head. “I don’t listen to a lot of radio.”

“It’s a call-in show,” he said. “Students and faculty can call in about whatever. It’s all talk, not much music.”

“What do they call in about?” I asked curiously.

“Mostly gossip,” he told me.

“Gossip?” I repeated, surprised.

“Sure,” he said. “Campus gossip—who’s dating who, and who hooked up the night before.”

I snorted. “Okay, that sounds pretty funny.”

“It is, usually,” Lennon said. “But sometimes, it can get really weird. Like, yesterday, someone called in about some giant-ass animal on campus.”

“*What?*” I demanded, my heart leaping into my throat.

“Yeah, I know. Wild, right?” Lennon said, shaking his head. “I mean, I usually wouldn’t believe that kind of shit, but a few people called it in, and it’s starting to sound like the school should be getting animal control involved. I don’t know—it makes you think.”

“Think about what?” I asked, trying to talk normally, despite the giant lump in my throat.

“Think that maybe that animal—whatever it is—has something to do with all those missing students,” he said, then he shrugged. “I don’t know. I just report on this stuff, you know?”

“Sure,” I said faintly, my stomach twisting. My feet were still moving, and Lennon was guiding me around the room, but I was only vaguely aware of what was happening around me. My head was spinning. What if this sighting had been the wolf Greyson had chased the day before? If I’d learned anything, nothing like this was a coincidence.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that Lennon was still talking, and I tuned back in.

“—and it occurred to me that I could really use that kind of content, you know? So why not lean into it, right? So I asked my listeners to call in today with all the weirdest stuff they’d seen on campus. I want all the dirt,” he added with a grin. “If you and your friend want to swing by the station after class, you can listen to the show.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said slowly. “Maybe we will.” That actually sounded like a great way to collect a lot of information in a short amount of time. “Yeah,” I said, with more certainty. “Lola and I are totally down. We’d love to come by.”

Lennon brightened, and shot me a grin. “That’s great. That’ll be really cool. I’ve never had a live studio audience for my show. This will be totally new for me. Listen, I go straight from this class over to the station—we can walk over together if you want.”

“That’d be great, since I have no idea where the station is,” I told him.

“We are *gliding!* We are *gliding!* We are letting the music *sing* through us!” Professor Diaz called out. “Glide! Slide! Sing!”

I rolled my eyes and looked up at Lennon, who just laughed and shrugged. “I knew this class was going to be crazy—that’s why I signed up for it.”

We changed partners again, and I danced with Lola’s short king, who turned out to be a nice guy named Rob. Then I ended the class dancing with Lola, who did not look like she was *living* the waltz the way Professor Diaz intended.

She looked annoyed and was flinching whenever the professor spoke in her loud, high-pitched voice.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, taking this class,” she muttered.

I grinned at her. “You were thinking that you wanted to keep me company.”

“Oh yeah,” she said, shaking her head. “If I ever have a philanthropic urge like that again, hit me over the head with a two-by-four, will you?”

Professor Diaz finally walked over to the sound system and turned off the music. She clapped her hands for quiet and looked around. “You all did so well today. I hope you feel that this was as rewarding for you as it was for me. You are dismissed, but please familiarize yourselves with the tango for next week.”

Lola groaned and headed for her bag, which she’d tossed against the wall near the door.

“Lola,” I said, following her, “this is Lennon,” I said as Lennon walked over to us. “He does a radio show, and we’re going to listen in today. Sound good?”

Lola gave me an odd look.

“What?” I asked her, frowning.

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “Yeah, that’s fine with me. I love radio. I talk about it all the time. Let’s go watch a radio show,” she said, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

“Great!” Lennon said, smiling at us. “Right this way.”

He led us out of the dance studio and across the quad. A few minutes later, we walked into a building I’d never been in before.

“Which building is this?” I asked as we walked through the door.

“Communications,” he said. “This is the home of WXFM.”

“Got it,” I said, looking around the lofty atrium.

Lennon led the way through the atrium and up to the second floor. We walked through a set of doors to a smaller lobby, and then into what I gathered were the recording studios. There was one room with a large, glass window looking into a smaller booth. It had a long table with a few mics set up in front of an audio board.

Lola and I had stopped at the doorway, but Lennon walked right in and dropped his bag next to a chair. When he looked up and saw us hovering in the doorway, he waved us in.

“Cali, Lola, come on in. Have a seat,” he said, waving us toward a couple of chairs.

Lola and I finally braved the room and sat on the narrow chairs.

“Nice setup you’ve got here,” Lola said, looking around. It was incredibly cluttered.

“Yeah, it’s pretty great,” Lennon agreed, apparently not having picked up on her sarcasm. “Okay, as long as the red light is off, we can talk normally,” he said, pointing to a lightbulb just over his head, “but as soon as it goes on, you just have to listen. Got it?”

“Got it,” I told him. “That’s what we’re here to do, right?”

“Right,” Lola said.

Lennon nodded. “Great. I’m just going to go talk to Benson, my producer. Excuse me for a second.”

Lola waited until he left the room, then she turned to me. “Okay, do you want to tell me what the hell we’re actually doing here, Cali?”

I told her what Lennon had told me about his radio show and the huge animal people had reported to him, and my suspicion that it had something to do with the wolf Greyson had chased.

“People are calling in today with their weird stories of stuff they’ve seen on campus. It can’t hurt to listen,” I said.

Lola stared at me in disbelief. “God, Cali, do you really think we’re going to get any useful information from a bunch of crackpots phoning in to a call-in radio show?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “I know it might be a longshot, but at least it’s something. I mean, I know Lennon probably invited us because he thinks the radio show will help him get girls, but who cares? Why not take the opportunity to hear what people have to say? And not just the stuff that gets on the air, but every call?”  
 Lola glanced at the booth, where Lennon was speaking to his producer. She grinned. “He might not be wrong about the effect of his radio show.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lola, do I need to remind you that you have a boyfriend?”

“Do I need to remind you that you have *two* boyfriends?” she shot back.

I scoffed at that, but it did remind me that I needed to get ahold of Greyson. He’d wanted me to keep him in the loop, and I had updates. I dug in my bag for my phone and stepped out of the room to call him. I gave Lennon the “one-minute” finger, and he nodded, understanding.

“Cali? What’s going on?” Greyson asked, answering on the first ring. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but there *are* few things going on.”

“What’s up?”

“Well, I think Codsworth might be in trouble, and someone might’ve seen that wolf on campus last night.”

“That’s it,” Greyson said firmly. “I’m doing a sweep of your campus tonight. We’re going to find that damn wolf.”

**Episode 4927**

**Greyson**

“You want to do a sweep of campus?” Cali asked.

“Yes. Tonight.” I shook my head. “I’ve let this go on far too long as it is.”

*It’s unacceptable for an Alpha. I should’ve done better.*

Cali was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. But we’re going to need to be really careful. There are already reports of students seeing weird stuff around campus, we don’t need to add to those rumors.”

“Yeah, of course we’ll be careful,” I said. “I should be the one saying that to you.”

“I’m being careful!” she said.

I blew out a breath. “I know. And I trust you and your magic—it’s the rest of the world I don’t have any faith in. I just…”

“What?” she asked.

I paced across the bedroom to the window and looked out at the day, which was still gray. “I just wish I could keep you in the pack house.”

“Greyson—”

“I know you can look after yourself,” I said. My deep desire to protect Cali was at odds with knowing she wasn’t defenseless with her magic. “But there’s just a lot going on out there, and I’d feel so much better if I knew for sure that you were safe.”

She sighed. “I get that.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah. There *is* a lot going on—with Codsworth maybe still missing, and now this wolf stuff, I get where you’re coming from. I mean, it’s not like I could just use my magic out in the open, if I were to be attacked by someone in the middle of campus. But something tells me, that’s not where this person is operating.”

I rubbed my forehead. She was right, but I hated even thinking about the idea of Cali being in trouble or finding herself in danger. Fear and fury rushed through me at the thought of her having to defend herself. My free hand balled into a fist—I was resolved to handle this. Whatever the hell was going on, it was going to end. Tonight.

“Cali?” Someone on Cali’s end of the line was speaking. “Are you coming or not? We’re about to start.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m coming, just give me two seconds,” Cali said, her voice a little muffled. Then: “Greyson? I have to go. I’ll let you know if anything else happens over here. Text me when you’re heading over to campus?”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll start planning on my end and let you know about any decisions.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you soon.”

I ended the call and stared out the window for a moment, scanning the expanse of lawn, then the trees beyond. The trees looked dark, nearly black against the iron grey sky. I wasn’t expecting to see anything—scanning the surroundings was just a habit, a ritual. It was instinct. Everything looked quiet, but I felt restless. I was angry that the issue of this strange wolf was still unresolved, and that she’d evaded me time and again.

Slipping my phone back into the pocket of my jeans, I turned and headed downstairs. At the base of the stairs, I paused for a moment, thinking. I heard voices coming from the kitchen, a few from the living room, and a few from the den, where it sounded like a group of pack members were playing a video game. I was trying to decide who I wanted to take with me to campus to try to flush out this wolf. It probably made sense to take a small tactical team. More of a strike team, really—just my best. Or maybe I should just tell everyone to get ready to go. It was only one wolf—not exactly a pack war-level threat—but the more wolves we had searching, the better our chances of finding that wolf.

I walked into the kitchen and found Rishika at the counter. She was sitting in front of a bowl of soup, reading a book, and she looked up as I walked in.

“Hey, Greyson,” she said. “Torin made a chowder for lunch, if you’re hungry.”

“No, thanks, I’m fine.”

“It’s pretty good. I didn’t know I was a chowder person, but it’s not bad—”

“No, Rishika, I don’t want any,” I said sharply, cutting her off. I was feeling edgy and didn’t think I could handle any more chowder talk. “I want you to gather everyone for a meeting.”

She looked a little startled, but she was Rishika, so she didn’t question me. She just nodded and slid off her chair. “You got it. I’ll get everyone gathered in the living room. Three minutes.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

I walked to the fridge and pulled it open. It was well-stocked as always, but my stomach was too tense to feel hungry. I kept thinking of Cali walking around campus, unprotected. I knew she could watch out for herself—like she was always telling me she could—but it didn’t stop me from worrying.

I grabbed a bottle of water and chugged it, then tossed the empty bottle into the recycling bin and strode into the living room.

True to her word, Rishika had gathered the pack, and everyone was waiting when I walked in, crowded onto the couches and perched on the arms of the wing chairs by the fire, which was roaring.

“Okay,” I said, turning to face my pack. “You all know about this Rogue wolf we’ve been chasing. We’ve now heard reports that it might be somewhere near—or even on—the CCU campus.”

“Uh-oh,” Ravi said quietly.

I ignored him. “Students have seen it, and we can’t have that. We’re going to have to investigate the area and find this thing. Tonight*.* I’m sick of this chase, and I want it dealt with. One wolf can’t be allowed to keep causing all this trouble—especially now that the humans are starting to notice it.”

Violet looked around at the pack, then up at me. “Wait, ‘we’? Does that mean we’re all going to Cali’s school together?”

“Yep,” I said, nodding. “You’ll be splitting up into pairs, and each team will take a section of the campus to search exhaustively. You’ll be looking for anything that looks suspicious or out of place. I’m talking tracks, signs a wolf has been sleeping nearby, an unfamiliar wolf scent—and you need to act accordingly. Be vigilant, and report back to me.” I gave Jay a pointed look. “I don’t want anyone getting cocky out there. I don’t need any heroes out there tonight. I need a team.”

“Hey!” Jay said, looking offended. “I didn’t even do anything.”

“Yeah, well, that was for your other half,” I muttered. “Just pass the message along to Lola.”

Jay paused, like he was deciding how much offense to take. Then he shrugged. “Okay, fair point. I’ll tell her.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I grabbed it, then nodded toward Rishika. “Rishika will give you your assignments.”

She got to her feet and took my place as I stepped into the hallway to take the call. I was surprised to see Big Mac’s name on the screen.

“Big Mac?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“Lots,” she said, not bothering with a greeting. “Lots, Greyson.”

“What have you found?”

“Well, I can confirm that whatever was at the crime scene you took me to—or the crime scene that wasn’t, as the case may be—was a vampire. For sure. And it wasn’t alone.”

“*What?*”

“Don’t interrupt,” she snapped. “I can also tell you that it wasn’t a vampire I’m familiar with.”

“How can you be sure of that?” I asked, ignoring her comment about interrupting.

“Every paranormal creature has a specific magical signature. Don’t you werewolves know anything?”

I let that comment pass as I thought about what this information meant. “Well, I’m glad to get confirmation, but we already figured it was a vampire, and we were moving forward on the assumption that it was. I trusted you when you told me your hunch.”

“I know that,” she said, sounding irritated and not at all flattered by my faith in her. “That’s not the only reason why I’m calling.”

“Then what is it?” I asked.

“I told you the vampire wasn’t alone.”

“Right. A second vampire?” I asked.

“That’s what I thought at first, but there was something else strange about the crime scene. And then I realized it was the second trace—it’s both human and animal. Can’t say what kind of animal.”

“Could it be a werewolf?” I asked, my heartbeat kicking up.

“Could be,” she said shortly. “Could be something else. Skinwalker, selkie, unicorn—who the hell knows? Like I just said, I can’t say for certain.”

I took that in. I knew Big Mac liked to be conservative in her hypotheses until she felt totally confident, but I had an instinct, and I didn’t think it was a coincidence that everything was happening *now*. The vampire, the bloody scene, the Rogue wolf… I had a feeling that if I found that wolf, I’d find the vampire, too.

**Episode 4928**

**Xavier**

*I don’t want them to join.*

Shock made me go still, then an instant later, a spark of anger flared in my chest. Of course this was Knox’s reaction. The brat. I stared at Knox, wondering what the hell the kid was thinking. And I was about to ask him what he meant by that and why he’d said it when Donovan nodded.

“Yeah, I was actually thinking the same thing,” he said. “I agree with Knox.”

I shifted my gaze to Donovan, surprised. I’d expected a little pushback on this issue, of course—it wasn’t reasonable to expect unanimous agreement on every decision I made—but I’d figured I’d hear from Knox or Blaine. Those two had always been  thorns in my side, and they’d been in pissy moods lately. I hadn’t expected to get shit from Donovan, who’d always been pretty level-headed and reasonable.

I looked at him. “And why is that? Why don’t you want the Samara pack to grow, man?”

Donovan shook his head. “No, that’s not it. Come on, Xavier. That’s not it at all.”

“Okay, then what is it?” I pressed.

“I don’t know, it’s hard to put it into words…” He blew out a breath. “I guess I’m just worried that this is all moving too quickly.”

“What’s moving too quickly? The pack?” I asked with a frown, trying to follow his logic.

Donovan looked down for a moment, thinking, then back up at me. “Listen, Xavier, you’ve been a strong Alpha, and a good one—no one’s denying that. You got us out of tents, for which we’re all grateful. You got us into the alliance. You’ve gotten us through some weird supernatural shit. But the reality is, you haven’t been the Alpha of this pack for all that long. We’re only just starting to hit our stride. We’re just starting to get somewhere good, you know? I’m just worried that adding more people to our pack too quickly will put all that good stuff at risk. I get what Ava’s saying about risk and reward, but we have a lot to lose, and not much to fall back on. I’m worried that if we trust the wrong people, that could screw us up. For good, maybe.”

I mulled that over and nodded. “Yeah, l get where you’re coming from.” I looked at Knox. “Is that how you feel about it too?”

“Yes. Yep. Uh-huh. I totally agree with what Donovan said,” Knox said, nodding eagerly. Too eagerly.

I narrowed my eyes. There was something off about the way he was acting, and I suspected there was something else going on with him. “*And?*”

“And what?” he asked.

“And what’s the *other* reason why you have a problem with the Loneclaws, Knox?” I demanded.

Knox’s eyes went wide. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a problem with them. I just told you that I agree with what Donovan said. It’s not about the pack, specifically—it’s all that stuff about moving too quickly and hitting our stride and whatever. All that shit,” he said, waving vaguely at Donovan.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. There’s something else going on.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Knox said, too quickly.

I rolled my eyes. “Give it up, man. I know you’re hiding something, so just spit it out.”

“Just say it, Knox,” Ava added. “There’s clearly something more you have to say.”

I glanced back at her, and as I did, I saw that all the other pack members were leaning forward, watching Knox expectantly. Apparently, Ava and I weren’t the only ones who could tell when Knox was lying. No surprise there—he was a shitty liar.

Knox’s eyes darted nervously around for a moment, then he let out a frustrated groan, giving in. “*Fine*,” he conceded. “I’ll tell you. I have a… a *history* with one of the Loneclaws.”

“A history? What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

“A history,” Knox repeated.

God, he was impossible. “Which of the Loneclaws?”

“Milo.”

“Okay, so? Big deal.” I shrugged. “Why didn’t you just tell us?”

Knox looked down, suddenly unwilling to meet anyone’s eyes. “I didn’t want to talk about it. It’s not a story that casts me in a particularly positive light. But I think it’s important, because I want the pack to know what kind of people you’re considering for membership.”

He stopped talking, like he was hoping I’d tell him to forget about it if he waited long enough.

“Out with it,” I growled.

He sighed. “I knew Milo a little, back in California. When we were younger. I trusted him with something important.”

“What was it?” Ava asked.

Knox glanced up at her, then shook his head. “I don’t want to say.”

“What was it—”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said firmly. “It doesn’t impact the story. It doesn’t matter what it was. All you have to know is that I trusted Milo, and the guy screwed me over. And I don’t want people in this pack who I can’t trust. Letting people like that in wouldn’t be fair to the original Samaras,” he said boldly, looking me right in the eye.

There was something a little dangerous in Knox’s eyes, and I knew I needed to be careful about how I responded to this. Not that I was scared of Knox, but he’d just been forced to talk about something he didn’t want to talk about, and that was making him feel vulnerable, which made him more dangerous than usual. Vulnerability wasn’t a feeling that Knox had ever handled particularly well. He’d almost lost his wolf because he’d tried to dope his way out of being vulnerable.

So I maintained eye contact with him as I nodded slowly. “Yeah, I hear what you’re saying, Knox,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Good,” Knox said, sounding relieved, like the whole issue had been resolved.

But it wasn’t resolved. Not at all.

“But there are few other facts that we need to consider,” I said.

“Like what?” Knox demanded.

“Like the fact that we do need more pack members,” I said. “That’s both objectively true, and something that the majority of the pack members agree with. And if we can confidently add these Loneclaw wolves, having bigger numbers will benefit us in the end, for all the reasons we’ve talked about.”

Knox flushed. “I know that, but—”

I held up a hand to stop him. The last thing I needed was to get into an argument with him in front of the whole pack. Knox had a way of winding himself up, and I wanted to stop that before it started.

“I brought this issue to the pack because I want to know what you all think,” I said, looking around. “I value your opinions, I really do. But at the end of the day, I’m the Alpha, and I’m going to be the one making the final call on this.”

I turned to Knox, who was beginning to look undeniably mutinous.

“If you want to come to me and tell me the whole story, just the two of us, maybe having more information will change some things for me,” I said. “I promise that I’ll listen, and really consider what you’re saying. But if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. I’ll take what you’ve told us into consideration. I’m going to include you, all of you,” I added, addressing the whole pack, “in this process, whatever it turns out to be. But—”

“I can’t believe you’d do this to me!” Knox exploded, jumping to his feet. “I am standing here, telling you they’re not to be trusted, and you’re giving me some bullshit line about listening and learning? Give me a fucking break! They’re not to be trusted! Don’t let that bastard in!”

“Sit down, Knox!” Ava snapped, getting to her feet and moving to stand beside me. Her voice was icy, and her eyes were even colder. I nearly shivered as I looked at her.

Knox’s temper tantrum stopped abruptly as he froze, looking at Ava’s angry stare. He glared back at her, but he also shut his mouth and sat back down, his face flaming with fury.

I turned back to the pack, continuing on like I hadn’t just been interrupted by Knox losing his mind. “What’s really important at this point is that we are a unified pack—especially as we look to add members. We can’t show the Loneclaws any internal discord. That goes for all of us.”

I glanced at Knox, whose face was mottled now, red in some parts, pale in others—but furious all over.

“That means that no matter what we’re feeling, we have to stay neutral on the surface—present a united front,” I said, speaking just to Knox. “And if that’s something a pack member is unable to do, then I’ll have to remove that pack member from the situation.”

**Episode 4929**

I ended the call with Greyson and slid my phone into my pocket, then walked back into the studio and sat down next to Lola.

Lennon had looked anxious for me to rejoin them while I was on the phone with Greyson, but now that I was back, he barely glanced at me. He was leaning across the desk, chatting animatedly with Lola, who was chatting right back at him.

I knew Lola, and I knew that she’d never actually do anything to hurt Jay, but she didn’t seem to mind the attention from Lennon one bit.

Rolling my eyes at both of them, I cleared my throat, reminding them that I was in the room.

Lennon looked over at me. “Hey, Cali. I was just about to tell Lola about some of the weird calls we got on the show around Halloween last year.”

“Around Halloween? Weird how?” I asked, my ears pricking up.

Lennon’s wide brown eyes went even wider. “Ghost sightings.”

“Ghost sightings?” Lola asked.

We exchanged a glance.

He nodded gravely. “Yeah. Ghost sightings. Can you believe it? And not just one. We must’ve gotten thirty calls. At *least*. We’d never had anything like that before.”

“How do you explain the sightings?” I asked, my mouth suddenly dry.

“I don’t,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “I mean, it could be a lot of things. Mass hysteria brought on by too many scary movies? Maybe a wacky strain of weed being sold that week? Real ghosts? Who knows?”

I shot a look at Lola and saw at a glance that she was thinking the same thing I was—last Halloween, Silas had been messing with the Orb, messing with the balance between the spirit and the human worlds. There had in fact been ghosts around—kind of everywhere. I shuddered remembering them pouring out of the lake by the other pack house.

I was shocked that humans had had sightings, but at the same time, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t even considered this before. It was so easy to get wrapped up in our own little supernatural world—I’d never even thought about how the magical shit that happened to us might impact the human world. Of *course* they’d seen something. How could they not have?

“And we’ve had all this weird weather recently,” Lennon continued. “Did you notice? It was wild. Really unseasonable. Totally unpredictable. *That* wasn’t because of bad weed, right?”

I didn’t answer him. I didn’t know what I’d say. He was clearly referring to the imbalance in nature that had occurred when Seluna’s ashes had ended up in the wrong place and in the wrong hands—not that I could tell *him* that.

“I don’t know,” Lennon said, chuckling. “Living around here is just super weird, I guess. I don’t know what to believe, most of the time.”

I swallowed hard, my stomach twisting with anxiety. I was about to tell Lennon that maybe listening in on the show wasn’t such a great idea after all and that Lola and I needed to get going when the red lightbulb above us started flashing.

Lennon noticed as well and sat up straight. He pulled his headphones on and shot a grin at Lola and me. “It’s showtime, ladies.”

When the red light stopped blinking and stayed steadily on, Lennon took a deep breath.

“Hello, guys and gals and all the folks in between, this is DJ Baby Roo, and we are coming to you live from 98.7 WXFM. I’m ready to hear your weirdest, wildest, strangest stories from the CCU campus. Caller number one, you are LIVE!”

I had to put my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud out of shock and surprise at Lennon’s radio voice, which was so very different from his speaking voice. Next to me, I felt Lola shaking with surprised giggles.

Lennon, however, didn’t seem to notice us. He was completely focused on the task at hand, and he pressed a button on the board in front of him. “Hello caller! What’s your name?”

“Hi,” said a male voice. “I’d rather not give a name, is that okay?”

“Fine by me!” Lennon said cheerfully. “What do you have to tell us?”

I’d been listening hard, but I didn’t think I recognized the guy’s voice.

“I saw Professor Morgan from Sociology and Professor Regis from physiology coming up with a new class about *chemistry*, if you catch my drift.”

Lennon laughed. “Loud and clear!”

“Yeah, maybe Morgan and Regis shouldn’t be doing that kind of lesson planning on the third floor of the library,” the guy said, chuckling at his own joke.

Lennon hit another button, and a dramatic *DUN DUN DUNN!* burst out of the speakers.

I rolled my eyes as Lennon ended the first call.

“Caller number two, you are on the line,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“No name,” the guy said, and I narrowed my eyes, thinking that maybe his voice sounded a little familiar. “I have a crush on a new girl on my team, but she already has a boyfriend. *Two* boyfriends, actually.”

“Whoa!” Lennon said, his eyes going comedically wide.

“Yeah, exactly,” the guy said. “And I don’t know what to do.”

My mouth fell open in shock. I turned to Lola, expecting to see her looking similarly surprised, but she looked completely normal.

I leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “That has to be about me, right? Someone on the crew team?”

Lola rolled her eyes and knocked her shoulder against mine. “Don’t be so self-centered, Cali.”

“Any idea what I should do?” the guy asked. “My friends are no help at all.”

Lennon laughed. “Well, the way I see it, you’ve got a couple of options, my man. You can make a big romantic gesture—really pull out all the stops—or you can leave it alone.”

He pressed a button, and the room filled with the sound of a descending slide whistle.

“You think?” the caller asked.

“Absolutely,” Lennon said confidently. “Think about it—to get her attention when it’s already divided between two other boyfriends is going to be a pretty big task. Good luck, friend!” He ended the call. “Caller number three! Who do we have here?”

“No name.” The voice was shaking with fear.

Whoever this person was, they sounded terrified, and I leaned forward, wanting to catch every word.

“That’s fine,” Lennon said brightly. “Anonymity is our bread and butter. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I—I’m not sure,” the caller said hesitantly.

“Well, you called for a reason,” Lennon reminded him. “Why don’t you tell me what it is?”

“I think I might’ve seen something. Last night, out near the west parking lot. It was dark.”

There was a pause.

For the first time, Lennon glanced up at Lola and me, the humor gone from his face, replaced with curiosity. “And what do you think you might’ve seen?”

“Like I said, I’m not sure.” The caller hesitated. “It looked like it might’ve been someone dragging something. Something heavy. Really heavy. About the shape and size of a… a body. Just dragging it along the ground in the dark.” The caller took a shuddering breath. “I called the police, of course, and they came and looked, but they didn’t find anything. And when campus security got involved and checked the CCTV tapes, there wasn’t anything there, either. At all. Like, you could see me walking through the parking lot, then stop when I saw the figure, but it looked like I was staring at nothing. But I wasn’t! I wasn’t staring at nothing!”

“Okay, okay,” Lennon said gently. “I believe you.”

“That’s the thing,” the caller said. “I don’t know if *I* believe me. I’m starting to worry that nothing was there, and I was just seeing things.”

“Is that really what you think?” Lennon asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” the caller said. “I didn’t think so, but now… Maybe none of it was real.”

Lennon rubbed his head, then took a deep breath. “Well, I think you should start with—” He frowned. “Hello? Hello? Caller? Are you there? Can you hear me?”

There was no answer.

Lennon looked up at Lola and me. “He hung up.”

I realized I’d stopped breathing and sucked in a breath. I was horrified—both at the story and the memory of the fear in the caller’s voice. I went over the story again, thinking about how terrible it had to be to have seen something so unexplainable, and then to feel like you were going crazy when nothing appeared on the CCTV footage.

Then I realized something else, and my stomach twisted. That caller had seen this shadowy figure in the west parking lot. The west parking lot was right next to the football field—where we’d been the night before.

My heart was pounding as I leaned over to Lola. “We need to find out who that caller was,” I whispered. “And we need to find out *exactly* what they know.”

**Episode 4930**

**Greyson**

It was nearly dusk when the Redwood pack rolled into the Central Cascades University campus. The sky had stayed overcast all day, so I wasn’t sure when the sun had actually gone down, but it was getting dark by the time we parked and headed onto campus. We’d driven, mainly so that we’d be dressed when we arrived. We’d definitely blend in better if we were all wearing clothes for once. Plus, driving would mean we wouldn’t look windblown and disheveled—like some of us definitely would’ve looked—after running over from the pack house.

“Okay, everyone,” I said, glancing back at the pack as we strolled onto the well-manicured campus grounds. “This wolf likes to hide and is good at disappearing, so keep your eyes open.”

Taking my own advice, I looked around, getting the lay of the land. I recognized the quad from my last visit. It was the large, open center of campus, with the rest of the grounds shooting off in every direction like spider legs, leading toward the more distant buildings and parking lots. There still seemed to be students milling around—there were a few groups congregated at the tables in front of the student center, and a couple more on the benches by the side of the library, but, by the looks of things, most classes were over for the day and the campus was shutting down.

“Okay, Alpha, what’s the move?” Ravi asked, looking around. “Look around for a Rogue wolf, ask for some numbers from college co-eds in the meantime?”

I rolled my eyes. “Be careful. But most of all, blend in. I don’t want anyone getting kicked off campus before we actually find anything.”

“Okay, get into your assigned pairs,” Rishika said, turning to the pack. “Stay on your toes, everyone. Senses on high alert. And the second anyone scents the wolf, let Greyson know using the Alpha mind link, and he’ll have the pack converge on your location.” She looked around. “Everyone clear?”

There was a round of nods.

“Got it,” Sage said.

“Was that a yes on the co-ed phone numbers?” Ravi asked hopefully. Rishika glared at him, and he laughed and put up his hands in surrender. “Kidding, kidding.”

“What if we find the wolf, but she’s already hurting someone—or just doing something she shouldn’t be? Should we shift?” Violet asked.

“Absolutely not,” I said firmly. “Look around. We’re on a college campus. There are dozens of buildings, faculty coming in and out, students zipping around on scooters and bikes—we need to be *extremely* careful while we’re around this many humans. We can’t risk being seen; not when there have already been paranormal sightings.”

“So what should we do if we need to confront her?” Lilac asked.

“If it comes down to shifting or letting the Rogue get away, let the Rogue get away,” I said, without hesitation. “Let the wolf be the issue the humans focus on. We Redwoods don’t need to give anything away. Does everyone understand exactly what I’m saying?”

Everyone nodded.

“Yeah, we get it,” Violet said.

“Good,” I said. “Okay, head out. Stay in touch, and don’t shift.”

The pack dispersed. A few people had brought backpacks, which was a smart move. After they’d walked a dozen paces, they blended in seamlessly with the CCU student body.

Ravi stepped up to stand beside me with a grin. “Ready, partner?”

I nodded. “You’d better believe it.”

We walked west, heading toward the spot where Cali swore Codsworth had disappeared. We were quiet as we walked, looking around at everyone who passed, and into the dense pine trees that bordered the campus. The campus itself was carefully landscaped, but the woods surrounded it on all sides. It looked nice, but it sure made our job a hell of a lot harder.

Ravi sighed. “I really hope we get this over with soon.”

“Yeah, me too,” I muttered, glancing between two buildings as we passed.

“It’s stressful, man,” Ravi said. “Isn’t it stressful?”

“Isn’t what stressful?” I asked absently.

“Having some random wolf show up to screw everything up for the rest of us. We *live* here! Where’s the respect for us?”

“Yeah, it’s stressful,” I said. “It’s really not something I need on my plate right now.” My thoughts went to Cali. “I have other things I’d much rather be spending my time on. I’m sure you do, too.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ravi said.

We were quiet for a beat.

“Speaking of which…” I said. “How are things going with Marissa?”

Ravi looked over at me, clearly startled by the question. “Oh, yeah, I think things are going well.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I really like being around her. That seems like a good sign.”

I chuckled. “I’d say so. I’m glad to hear it, man. I have a lot of respect for Marissa. I don’t know her all that well, but it seems like she’s got a good head on her shoulders. She was a great asset during all the Adéluce drama.”

“Yeah, she’s a good fighter,” Ravi said.

“Well, I’m glad it’s going well for you. That’s great,” I told him, really meaning it.

Ravi grinned at me, looking appreciative. “Yeah, I’m glad too. I’m glad she made it out of all that stuff with Adéluce in one piece, too. I was worried about her for a while, there.”

“I was worried about everyone for a while, there,” I muttered, looking into the shadowy courtyard of a building as we walked by.

“Is it weird for you, Greyson?”

I looked over at him. “Is what weird?”

“That I’m dating someone from Xavier’s pack? A Samara?”

“What? No. Of course it’s not weird. I’m fine with whatever you want to do,” I told him quickly. Then I thought for a moment. “But, speaking of Xavier’s pack, I do have a question for you.”

“Go for it.”  
 “Does Marissa ever talk to you about Xavier?” I asked. “Or about her pack in general?”

“Nah, not really,” Ravi said, shaking his head. He shot me a rueful smile. “Uh, we don’t usually do a ton of *talking*, if you know what I mean.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes as I gave his shoulder a shove. “Come on, man.”

“What?” Ravi asked, feigning innocence. “We don’t! I’m not going to lie to you and tell you we got together because of our conversational chemistry, Greyson.”

“That is not something I want to hear about,” I said, shaking my head.

We walked for another few moments before Ravi spoke again. “Wait. Actually…”

“What?” I asked.

Ravi looked thoughtful. “Now that you mention it, Marissa *did* say something interesting when I saw her the other day.”

“What was it?”

He frowned. “She was talking about Xavier and Ava, and how they were doing really well as the Alpha and the Luna of the pack. She said that Xavier’s been really good for the Samaras. Everyone’s really happy with the direction he’s chosen for the pack.”

I took that in. It was interesting information, given everything I knew. I thought back to seeing Xavier at Elle and Lucian’s engagement party. When I’d seen him that night, Xavier had literally been medicated because he couldn’t physically bear being around Cali and Ava, together or separately it seemed.

So if things were going well, did that mean something had changed? And if so, what was it? Or had nothing changed at all? Maybe Xavier was still as conflicted as ever, but he was just getting better at hiding it. I wasn’t sure about that. Marissa was part of the Samara pack, and if an Alpha was doing badly, it was hard to hide that from the pack. But I still thought that Xavier was more fragile than he understood right now, or than he was willing to admit.

All I could do was hope that if my brother *was* only pretending that everything was fine, he was being careful. Keeping up a charade like that was hard work, and it just wasn’t sustainable in the long term. No matter how hard Xavier tried, it couldn’t last forever. And if he wasn’t being sincere, and things started to crumble, he wasn’t the only one who’d end up getting hurt. I just hoped he appreciated the fact that the whole Samara pack was depending on him. The burden of that was heavy as hell, but it was an unavoidable part of the mantle of responsibility that came with being the Alpha of a pack.

Still, though, Marissa’s assessment of Xavier’s success rang through my head.

Suddenly, I stopped in my tracks, and my tangle of thoughts was bulldozed away. We’d made our way to the far parking lot, and I looked around. It was fully dark now, and my senses were on high alert, every nerve-ending tingling.

Ravi turned to me. “You smell it too, yeah?”

I nodded. “I smell it.”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Yeah.” My heart was pounding hard. “It’s a vampire.”

**Episode 4931**

Lola and I exchanged a look as the call ended, both of us shocked by this lucky break.

“It could be really useful if we managed to track him down, but how are we going to do it?” I whispered to Lola. “The guy didn’t even give Lennon his name.”

We were so close to figuring out what had happened with Codsworth, and I was worried that if we didn’t act fast, the lead might slip through our fingers.

Lola pulled out her phone and typed out a quick message, then passed it to me.

*I can trace the call through the radio’s digital switchboard*, the message read.

I nodded as I handed the phone back to her. “I have no idea what that means, but it sounds good to me.”

Lola smiled and gave me a wink. “Just leave it to me, Cali. You know I’ve got skills.”

Boy did I. I just hoped those skills wouldn’t lead to us being killed or in jail.

The red light clicked off as Lennon’s show went into an ad break. He was grinning from ear to ear as he slid off his headphones and turned to look at us.

“So, what did you think?” he asked. “I was right, wasn’t I? People on this campus are super weird. And that’s not even the strangest story I’ve heard. Once, someone called in and said that they saw a bear on its hind legs, running through campus like it was late for class. Weird, right? I think people just like hearing their voices on the radio and are pretty much willing to say anything to make it happen.”

“Yeah, really weird,” I replied.

I couldn’t argue with the fact that people sometimes embellished perfectly normal events and turned them into much more than they were—that was basically cryptozoology club in a nutshell—but I had a hell of a lot more background information about the world’s oddities than Lennon did. And right now, that guy’s call was the only solid clue we had about Codsworth’s disappearance.

“Thanks for letting us sit in on the show,” I said to him. “It’s been a very enlightening experience.”

“It was a blast,” Lola said. “I’d definitely come back.”

I elbowed her in the side.

“You two are welcome anytime,” Lennon said. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll even let you sit in as guests on the show sometime. Give you a taste of show business.”

Lola’s eyes brightened. “I’d love that!”

I elbowed her again.

The red light started flashing as the ad break ended. Lola and I turned to leave, since it was time for Lennon to start broadcasting again. He gave us a wave goodbye as he slid his headphones back on and got to work, using his radio voice to introduce a string of pop songs.

Outside Lennon’s booth, the sound guy was still sitting at the mixing board, and I went still.

“How are we going to get past him?” I whispered to Lola. “You know, so you can do your digital tracking thingy?”

But then I realized that he was softly snoring. He was asleep.

Lola smiled. “This is going to be a piece of cake. Codsworth’s as good as found.”

She pointed at the open laptop sitting on the table next to the sound guy before she started to sneak past him, heading right for it.

I held my breath. The last thing we needed was for this guy to wake up and catch Lola messing around on his computer. What kind of excuse would work to explain something like that? *Oh sorry, we were just trying to check our email*? *We wanted to check out the specs on his machine because we’re in the market for a new computer*? *We made a mistake and thought the laptop was ours*?

*If someone fed me any of those excuses while pawing through my computer, I’d never believe them. In fact, depending on what I caught them doing, I might call campus security.*

I shuddered at the thought. I certainly didn’t want to be known on campus as the creepy girl who snooped through sleeping people’s laptops with her friend’s help. Not to mention the fact that Lennon could come walking out at any second and catch us. This was a very risky thing we were doing, but if it led us to Codsworth, then it would be worth it.

Luckily for us, Lola was good at sneaking around, and she was also being super careful, making sure to keep her typing quiet. She clicked through windows too quickly for me to follow exactly what she was doing, but in a few minutes, I heard her hiss out a low, “Yes!”

Then, she tiptoed back over to me and together, we left the studio, shutting the door silently behind us.

“Wow what a rush!” Lola burst out. “I found out exactly which dorm the call came from. It was the Waterley dorm, across campus. We can head over there right now—the guy’s probably still there.” She looked at her watch. “The call only came in a few minutes ago, but we’d better be quick. I have a feeling this is the best lead we’re going to get.”

Once we were outside, we headed for the Waterley dorm. My thoughts were going a mile a minute. If this person had really seen what he thought he saw, then that meant Codsworth could be in real trouble.

I shuddered as I remembered the fear I’d felt walking back from my car the other day—the sense that I was being followed. Stalked. What if that was what Codsworth had felt? It was scary to think of him needing help, but not getting any.

*I hope he’s okay. I don’t even want to think about what that tip could mean. What if Codsworth is…*

I stopped that thought in its tracks, not even wanting to *think* the worst. I was still hoping that all of this was just some kind of misunderstanding—that Codsworth really had just flaked on practice and gotten wrapped up in something, and wasn’t actually missing at all. But I wasn’t holding my breath. I didn’t have a good feeling about this.

We were about halfway to the dorm when my phone rang. I pulled it out and saw an unfamiliar number on the screen.

I answered hesitantly. “Hello?”

I was surprised to hear Chessa’s voice.

“Hey, Cali,” she said. “I heard from Nathan, but things still weren’t sitting right with me, so I did a little bit more digging. I’m really worried about Codsworth.”

Hearing that made me smile. I was glad there was someone else on the same page as I was.

“I actually got his mother’s information from the registrar, so I called his parents,” Chessa said.

“That’s actually a really good idea,” I said. “I’m guessing that you must’ve learned something, since you’re calling about it.”

*It’s just like I thought. There’s a normal explanation for all of this, and Chessa’s about to provide it.*

“I did, yeah,” Chessa said. “It turns out that Codsworth is really hurting over what happened to Eddie, so his parents picked him up from campus to take him on a trip.”

I frowned at that but didn’t say anything. Codsworth had told me that his parents couldn’t even stand to be in the same room, so it was strange to think that they’d volunteer to go on a triptogether.

*But maybe they put all that aside so they can be there to support their child. I suppose I’d do the same thing, if it came down to it. But if that’s the case, why didn’t Codsworth just tell us that instead of standing us up on the football field? He was going to tell us everything he found out about Eddie’s disappearance—he was so excited about the clues he had—but then he just up and leaves for some trip?*

Lola poked my shoulder and gestured at the building in front of us. “We’re here.”

“Thanks for telling me,” I said quickly. “At least we know he’s safe.”

“Yup, nothing to worry about,” Chessa said. “Talk to you soon!”

As I ended the call, I realized that Chessa’s news hadn’t done much to assuage my worry. In fact, I was more worried than ever. Codsworth running off on a trip with his parents just didn’t make sense, and I was growing more confused and nervous by the second.

Lola and I followed a group of students in through the entrance to the Waterley dorm, but then Lola stopped suddenly, her face twisting up.

“Whoa, Lola, what is it?” I asked. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Which was admittedly a funny thing to say, considering the fact that I knew exactly how her face looked when she saw ghosts, on account of all the supernatural encounters we’d had.

Lola’s eyes were growing wider by the second. “I smell blood, Cali. A lot of it.”

**Episode 4932**

**Xavier**

I leaned back into the booth, and Ava snuggled in beside me. It was nice to have a night out—even if it was just at a local dive bar. It was rare for us not to have some huge problem hanging over our heads, and it was a relief to finally have some fun together without having to worry about some immediate threat.

The rest of the Samaras were scattered throughout the bar, drinking and just generally having a good time. The Loneclaws had come along, too, and were scattered between Samara groups. There was a lot of laughing, yelling, and talking, and even a little innocent roughhousing.

I was watching every interaction closely, interested in seeing how the Loneclaws behaved with lowered inhibitions—especially while drinking and surrounded by humans. Being able to stay centered while navigating the human world was an important part of being a werewolf. Our collective safety and privacy depended on it.

I’d known werewolves who got a few drinks in them and picked fights with anyone in the vicinity—humans included. That sort of thing always escalated quickly. I wanted to bring new blood into the pack, but I *didn’t* want to saddle it with any hotheads or assholes.

So far, it seemed like everything was going alright. The two packs were mingling, and there was an ease and lightness to the air that boded well for the potential merger.

Marissa was chatting with Cresta and Grace at the bar. Milo was with Donovan, and the two men appeared to be having a calm, earnest conversation. I could only hope that whatever they were discussing was helping to assuage some of the issues Donovan had with the Loneclaws joining us.

If we were going to absorb their pack, I wanted everyone to be on board. If I brought them on and a lot of people had issues with that decision, it would cause too many problems down the line. I wasn’t at all interested in having to deal with a bunch of infighting. I had enough to worry about without adding that to the pile.

I glanced at Knox, who was sitting right across from me. He hadn’t said much all night—he was just staring at Milo, his hands curled into fists. He was clearly working overtime to control his temper, and I could respect that. I’d watched the first interaction he and Milo had had as we were leaving the pack house, and it had been intensely awkward.

Milo seemed a little less bothered than Knox was, though I could tell that the Loneclaw was acutely aware of Knox’s simmering dislike. Milo had remained calm, overall, but I’d picked up on his anxiety the moment Knox had stepped into view. There was obviously bad blood on both sides, but neither one of them seemed to want to air things out.

*Whatever it is, they need to squash it. It’ll be trouble if I bring on a new pack member when an existing pack member already has a problem with him. And it could be something small and unimportant, knowing Knox. That kid has such a short fuse—he seems to get worked up about anything and everything.*

Milo got up from the table he’d been sharing with Donovan and made his way over to our table. He put on an easy smile as he approached, and I appreciated the effort—though his smile did waver just a bit when he snuck a glance at Knox.

“How’s it going?” I asked Milo. “The Loneclaws seem to be in okay spirits. Lots of drinking being done, and everyone’s still managing to keep a level head.”

“For sure,” Milo said. “This bar is great, and I have to admit, it’s good to be around a community of… like-minded individuals again. We’ve been on the road for so long that the idea of staying put is sounding better and better—though I know nothing’s been decided yet,” he added quickly. “This is a good group, is all I’m saying.”

Knox couldn’t quite hold back a scoff, and I shot him a glare that could’ve cut through steel. I wasn’t about to let his vendetta blow what was turning out to be a good night. I respected Knox’s feelings about Milo, but this was about more than him and his hang-ups with the guy. I had the pack to think of. I only hoped that Knox would come to understand that.

“Want to play darts?” Milo suddenly asked Knox.

*Nice. He’s offering Knox an olive branch. Let’s see if the shrimp takes it.*

Under the table, I felt the jolt of Ava kicking Knox in the shin when he pointedly ignored Milo’s question.

“Ow!” Knox hissed, before covering it up with a cough. He sighed, finally looking up at Milo after plying us both with a pointed look. “Fine, Milo. Let’s do it. But be warned, I’m going to kick your ass.”

Ava and I watched as they headed for the dart board.

“Maybe I should join them to make sure this doesn’t go off the rails,” I said. “We’re having a good night, and I’d like to keep it that way. Also, Knox looks like he’s only just barely holding back from popping the guy.”

But before I could get up, Ava gripped my hand. I paused and looked at her.

“Is any of this a good idea?” she asked.

Her eyes followed Milo and Knox as they plucked their first round of darts from the board. One of them had already gotten a bullseye, and for peace’s sake, I hoped it was Knox. I had a feeling his mood would only worsen if Milo ended up beating him.

“I can’t think why Knox would have such a big problem with this wolf we’ve never even heard of before,” Ava continued, narrowing her eyes as she watched them throw their next round of darts. “It’s so weird. I don’t get it.”

I shrugged. “We have no idea what the details are… Though it’s clear that Knox hasn’t forgotten a thing.”

Ava nodded. “Yes, and that’s not exactly surprising, since I know that Knox was—still is—petty, so it might be nothing more than a stupid grudge on his end.”

I laughed. “I can definitely buy that. And yes, Knox is still petty through and through. His attitude’s been getting better, but he still has a knack for acting like an immature kid. This is probably just another one of those incidents, if I had to guess.”

“Knox aside, the Loneclaw thing seems to be going pretty well, right?” Ava finally tore her gaze away from Milo and Knox—who thankfully hadn’t killed each other yet—and looked around at everyone else. “They seem to be acclimating. Meshing well and all that.”

“They are. Now we just have to see how they handle more stressful situations. We both know that the pack deals with its fair share of problems and conflicts. We need to choose new members who can keep a cool head at all times.”

Suddenly, I heard Knox’s voice rise up above the rest of the noise.

“You’re a fucking cheat!”

Knox was in Milo’s face, poking him in the chest and advancing on the other wolf until he’d backed him up against the bar.

I groaned. “I’d better get over there before they cause a scene.”

Walking with purpose, I reached the two wolves quickly and shoved myself between them, pushing Knox back a few steps. I glanced at the dart board. There were already four darts in the bullseye. I rolled my eyes.

“What are you two fighting about? You’re both doing well, by the looks of it,” I said wearily.

“That’s the problem!” Knox bit out. “That’s why we need to up the stakes, but this guy wants to cheat.”

Milo sighed. “That’s not true. I just wasn’t interested in making some stupid bet, and that made Knox lose his goddamn mind.”

I resisted the urge to let out another groan. I was going to have to get these two in line. I wasn’t about to sacrifice building up the Samara pack over a stupid-ass grudge. Especially when I was well aware that Knox could be insufferable.

I wasn’t going to take Milo’s side over Knox’s or anything, but I could relate to the Loneclaw wolf’s exasperation with the shrimp. It was written all over his face.

“If you two can’t keep it together, if this is going to turn into a bigger problem, then you need to get the hell out of here,” I said tightly. “Show some responsibility for your own behavior. I’m not about to deal with your bullshit while we’re in a human bar.”

I whispered that last part, throwing a pointed glance at a couple of humans, who’d already sensed that something was amiss and were watching us closely.

For a second, it looked like Knox was going to fight me on it—which wouldn’t have surprised me in the least, knowing our history—but there was a loud bang, and we all jumped.

“What now?” I muttered, turning around just in time to see the bartender throw a left hook at Carmen.

**Episode 4933**

I was horrified. Not only was Lola saying that she smelled blood, but she’d just told me that there was a *lot* of it. I wasn’t ready to consider the implications of that little tidbit.

*This can’t be good—and it can’t be a coincidence, either. There’s something strange and dangerous happening on campus, and it seems like we’re right in the middle of it.*

“We have to find out what happened!” I said to Lola. “What if someone’s hurt or needs our help?”

 Lola winced. “From what I can tell, whoever it is might be beyond help. The air is clogged with the smell of blood.”

I was glad, for once, that I didn’t have as good a sense of smell as Lola. I had no interest in smelling blood with every inhale. I was perfectly happy to stay in the dark in that regard.

Lola took the lead, obviously following the smell. I was right on her heels and hoping that somehow, this was all just some big misunderstanding.

The trail led us to a closed dorm room door with a blank whiteboard hanging on it. Lola took a surreptitious look around before wrapping her fingers around the doorknob and giving it a sharp twist.

I heard the crack of the lock breaking, but luckily, the hallways around us were empty. The last thing we needed was someone catching us right in the middle of breaking and entering.

I took a quick look around, searching for cameras. If there were any, I couldn’t see them.

*Let’s hope there aren’t any, or we’re in big trouble.*

Lola pushed the door open and, taking a deep breath, I followed her into the room. I quickly shut the door behind us after taking one last look around to make sure no one had seen us go in.

It was a small single room with one bed along the wall, and a desk in front of it. It was obvious from the state of the room that there’d been some kind of struggle. The desk chair had been knocked onto its side, and I let out a gasp when I spotted a pool of blood seeping into the carpet next to the bed.

I couldn’t be sure, but I had a feeling that whatever had gone down here had *just* happened. I held a hand to my mouth as I realized that we might’ve only just missed the person responsible.

*And if we’d run into the killer, they might’ve tried to kill us, too—though we wouldn’t have made that easy for them.*

“This is awful,” I whispered. “Someone’s hurt. Badly. I don’t want to think that the guy who called or whoever this person is… is dead or something, but there’s so much blood…”

Lola was looking around, taking it all in. She frowned. “You know what? I smell that vampire again. The same one I smelled at the regatta afterparty. They were here. They’re probably the one who did this.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said grimly. “It means the vampire realized that this guy knew something that could create a problem for them. It also means that this guy did see exactly what he thought he saw.”

“And paid for it,” Lola added.

“Yeah, but how could the vampire have realized that so quickly? Were they listening to the radio show or something?”

Lola and I had moved fast, and the call couldn’t have come in more than ten or fifteen minutes ago. So, in that time, the vampire had somehow made it to this dorm room and taken out the caller.

“Don’t know,” Lola said. “But didn’t the guy mention that he’d filed a police report? Maybe the vampire somehow got access to that, and the timing of him calling in was just a coincidence.”

I shook my head, my eyes stuck to the pool of blood. “I don’t want to risk assuming that it’s a coincidence. I think we need to operate on the assumption that there’s some kind of connection.”

“True. And in our world, coincidences are rarer than the actual crazy stuff that happens to us all the time,” Lola said. “There’s definitely something going on here, and it’s probably linked to Eddie’s disappearance, and maybe…” Lola trailed off awkwardly.

*I know what she’s not saying—Codsworth. She was going to say that whatever happened to this guy might’ve happened to Codsworth, too.*

“Exactly,” I said. “But I wonder if that means that Lennon is a suspect? Or even the sound guy? They heard the call, too. They’d know how to use the computer to track the caller as well, right?”

Realization dawned in Lola’s eyes. “They might be in cahoots with the vampire! Even though the sound guy is a less likely suspect, since he was knocked out when we saw him last. I’m not sure he heard anything.”

“Maybe he was just pretending to sleep,” I said.

Lola shook her head. “I doubt it. He probably would’ve dropped the charade when he saw me snooping through his laptop.”

I nodded. “You’re right about that. But I really don’t want to think that Lennon’s is in on it. I like him! He was nice.”

“He doesn’t seem like the type,” Lola acknowledged. “But the sound guy… Maybe he *does* know more than we think.”

Lola walked over to the desk and started rummaging through it.

“Look,” she said, after a few seconds. “I found a name. Macaulay. Looks like he’s an engineering major. Does Codsworth even know any engineering majors?”

“No way for me to know that,” I said. “God, this is all so crazy. I don’t know what to think.”

*The more information we get, the more complex this entire mess becomes. What the hell is going on here?*

“Remember that call I got?” I asked. “It was Chessa. She said that she got in touch with Codsworth’s parents, and that they came and picked him up to take him on some trip—to cheer him up about Eddie.”

Lola frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? So maybe Codsworth’s okay.” She glanced at the pool of blood. “Though this guy—Macaulay or whatever—obviously isn’t.”

“But that’s the thing,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t think what Chessa told me is true. Codsworth told me that his parents don’t get along, like at all. Why would they suddenly appear and take him on a trip? It feels off to me.”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, it does sound a little too convenient. And weird, too. Who would just up and leave for a trip when they just called for an urgent meeting and told a bunch of people to drop everything and rush over? Makes no sense.”

“Also, it’s kind of extra weird that Chessa talked to Codsworth’s mom, but not to Codsworth himself,” I added. “Why wouldn’t he just call? And why would he be avoiding everyone? I don’t know Codsworth all that well, but the text he sent seemed out of character.”

I thought of the text again, remembered how strange and stilted it was.

“That text and Chessa’s call, paired with all the other strangeness…” I motioned to the room we were in, and a chill raced down my spine. For all we knew, we were standing right in the middle of a murder scene. “Nothing about any of this makes sense.”

Lola plucked a sticky note off Macaulay’s desk. “Look, it’s a case number.”

She handed the note to me. Right underneath the case number, there was a scrawled line saying that someone named Agent K was supposed to follow up “tomorrow.”

“Wow, an *agent* is on the case?” I asked disbelievingly. “Do you think he got the FBI involved?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t think so. But if they *are* involved, that’s going to make the situation a hell of a lot messier. This case is going to blow up, and we don’t need to be anywhere nearby when it does.”

“And that means we should get the hell out of here,” I said. “Being in this room right now makes us look really guilty. There’s no way in hell we want to be here when someone catches wind of this Macaulay guy’s disappearance. How would we even explain ourselves?”

Lola raised her eyebrows. “We *couldn’t* explain ourselves. I don’t even think *I’d* be able to talk us out of this one. And I have a feeling that Greyson would frown upon the idea of us getting involved in a murder investigation. Just a hunch.”

I groaned. “It’d be like the whole Tony thing, all over again.”

“But at least we know that Xavier has nothing to do with this,” Lola said.

Sighing, I took in our surroundings one more time, taking note of all the signs of the struggle, including the bloody carpet. It was a grisly sight, and I wondered if anyone could possibly survive losing all that blood.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and Lola let out a bloodcurdling scream.

**Episode 4934**

**Greyson**

Ravi and I paused in the doorway of the dorm room. The vampire scent had led us here, and I took in the scene in front of me with shock. Cali and Lola were standing in the middle of the room, looking back at us with shock that mirrored ours.

Everyone was frozen.

Finally, I found my voice. “What the hell are you two doing here? Cali, you told me you were at that radio thing!”

*Now that I really think about it, it’s no surprise that Cali and Lola are here. They always find themselves right in the middle of trouble. It’s like Cali’s drawn to it—and Lola isn’t much better.*

Ravi looked past them. “Is that blood on the ground? I thought I smelled a hint of it, but I was so focused on the vampire…”

“Have you two been touching things in this room?” I asked, looking between the two women, already certain that they had.

Lola gave me a sheepish look and slowly stepped away from the desk with her hands up. “I didn’t touch *much*… I mean, nothing that matters anyway. Or I don’t think I did.”

Lola started looking around, her face drawn in panic.

I frowned at her. “This isn’t good. The vampire clearly either kidnapped or *killed* someone in here, by the looks of it. We need to leave. Now. I don’t want either of you getting mixed up in a police investigation.”

“Why are you two here, anyway?” Cali asked.

“Like Ravi said, we picked up the vampire’s scent and followed it all the way from the west parking lot,” I told her. “The others are hunting for the werewolf, but we couldn’t ignore signs that there was a vampire on campus, so we followed it.”

“The smell was faint, but we managed to keep track of it,” Ravi said proudly. “My nose never fails me… Usually. I’m still surprised that I didn’t pick up on how much blood there is up here, but this campus is jam-packed with all sorts of smells. I almost puked when we walked by a locker room. Lots of sweaty, rank stuff in that place,” Ravi shuddered, then nodded at the open door. “But we can compare notes later. We really do need to get out of here. It’s only a matter of time before this place is crawling with cops.”

We all stepped back out into the hallway and Lola pulled the door shut before doubling back and using the edge of her T-shirt to wipe her prints off the doorknob.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “You go to college here, so it’s not outside the realms of possibility that you’d visit this room.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure that would go over really well with Jay,” Lola said sarcastically. “Me visiting some random guy’s dorm room—he’d be thrilled.”

I rolled my eyes. “But it wouldn’t be true, so what would it matter?”

Privately, I couldn’t help but think that if she and Cali had just stayed out of this, Lola wouldn’t have to worry about her prints being all over a victim’s room, or about what Jay would think of it.

I turned my attention to Cali, who looked worried. “Cali, did you touch anything?”

Cali held up a sticky note. “Nothing but this.” Then she looked at it, horrified. “Oh no, I just took something from a crime scene! What if this is the evidence that would’ve cracked the case, and now I’ve got it, and this guy’s parents never see his killer face justice because of me!”

“Honestly, Cali, I think that’s the least of our worries,” Lola said dryly.

*I agree with Lola. If this thing actually blows up and we get caught in the blast zone, a single sticky note won’t matter much. At least I hope it won’t.*

“Come on, Ravi’s right—we shouldn’t be hanging around here,” I said, ushering everyone toward the exit. “Especially Ravi and me. We don’t live on campus and have no clear reason to be skulking around this guy’s dorm. One wrong move and we’ll get pulled into a shitstorm.”

I could still smell the vampire, but the scent was quickly getting lost in the chaos of all the other people coming and going and living in this massive dorm. It was a wonder that we’d been able to track the scent as well as we had in the first place.

*I can’t believe we keep missing this damn vampire! It always seems to be one step ahead of us, no matter what we do. This is the second time we’ve missed it—and we still have no idea where that lone werewolf is. What kind of Alpha can’t even handle threats as tiny as a Rogue wolf and a lone vampire?*

It was starting to feel like I was losing control. I had no idea why I was faltering like this all of a sudden. I was used to being on top of my game, but right now, I couldn’t have been more *off* my game.

I didn’t think any of the fate bullshit Cesaries had spewed had merit… But then again, I was fucking up left and right, and I had no idea how to stop it. What if there was some truth to his words? What would I do? I needed to protect Cali and the pack, but I couldn’t do that if something was off with my senses and instincts.

*If I could just catch that werewolf, then at least I’d have something to go on. I have a feeling that the wolf might be the key to everything—but I could be wrong. I seem to be wrong all the time, lately.*

I was startled by a hand on my arm, and I looked down to see Cali looking up at me, her expression soft.

“You okay?” she asked. “You looked like you were a million miles away.”

“I’m fine,” I lied, feeling even more on edge, since my inner turmoil was obviously written all over my face. I didn’t want to worry her. And how was I meant to tell her that I was doubting myself more than ever? And that the *due destini* and the complicated nature of our relationship might be responsible?

*No. I’m not about to let Cesaries get into my head. Cali has nothing to do with any of this. I’m probably just having a run of off days. No one’s perfect all the time.*

“Greyson, you don’t need to worry. We’ll figure this out, okay?” Cali said. She reached up to stroke the side of my face. “We always do. When you really think about it, this is nothing compared to some of the other things we’ve dealt with.”

I smiled down at her, overcome with love and affection for her. She always looked on the bright side. And even though I was a little concerned that I hadn’t managed to hide how distressed I was, I was happy she was able to sense when something was up with me without having to be told.

“I know we will,” I agreed, even though I didn’t feel all that confident right now. “I just want to keep you safe. I want to find this wolf and this vampire and figure out what they’re up to.”

“We *will.*”Cali squeezed my arm. “I can tell that you’re getting in your own head about this, and you shouldn’t be.”

“I am,” I admitted. “I’m just having a hard time shaking this Rogue wolf stuff on top of the vampire stuff. We just can’t seem to grab an advantage, and it’s driving me up the wall. Before, I was thinking that the wolf and the vampire were connected, but now I’m starting to wonder if they’re two separate problems. And I hate that idea even more.”

*So much for enjoying some post-Adéluce peace. The more I think about all of this, the more I worry that we’re only dealing with the tip of the iceberg. What if this whole thing spirals out of control and hits us at home? What if I’m not quick enough to protect everyone from whatever’s coming?*

Ravi sniffed ferociously at the air before he shook his head and caught my eye. “I can’t even find the vampire’s scent anymore. Must be all the people around, mucking it up.”

Just as he said the words, a group of frat boys came barreling past us, giving us curious glances as they disappeared into the night.

“What are we going to do? Without a scent to go by, we’re kind of lost,” Ravi said.

“I have an idea,” Lola said. “Since I have the caller’s name and phone number now, I think I can track his phone.”

“What?” Cali demanded. “How?”

“Just watch,” Lola said, already tapping away at her phone. A few minutes later, a triumphant grin spread across her face. “Got it! His phone is somewhere in Old Town.”

Ravi stared at Lola, shaking his head. “You are literally terrifying. Remind me to never cross you, okay? I value my privacy.”

Cali started tugging at my hand. “Come on, what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

**Episode 4935**

I kept my hand wrapped tightly in Greyson’s and was comforted by his touch. The expression on his face told me that he was seconds from telling me to stay behind, despite our conversation earlier. I knew he meant well, but there was no way I was staying behind. Not now.

He’d been trying to keep me away from this campus since we’d first learned about all the disappearances, and his concerns had only increased since we’d seen the strange Rogue wolf and smelled traces of the vampire in our woods. But I wasn’t about to let him get a word out.

“I’ve been trying to figure this out from the beginning,” I said, launching straight into pleading my case. “We’re close. I can feel it. Plus, Codsworth is my friend, and if there’s even the slimmest chance that something’s happened to him, I should be allowed to do something about it. And even if this is all a false alarm and he’s okay, *someone* got hurt. Someone else could be getting hurt right now, and I have the power to stop it. I’m magic for a reason.”

“Cali—”

“And if I can use my magic to stop someone from hurting and killing people, then I’m not going to turn my back on that opportunity just because my fighting makes you anxious. I’m just not built that way.”

Greyson’s face softened at the last part, and I squeezed his hand.

“Greyson, I don’t want to have this conversation again. I know you worry about me, and I know you’re about to ask me to stay behind because you want to keep me safe. I love that you care about me so much—you make me feel so supported, so protected. But it’s not like I’m going into this alone. I’ll be with you the whole time. I’ll be safe. And I can help make someone *else* safe.”

I moved my hand up to cradle Greyson’s face. He leaned into my touch and covered my hand with his.

“I know that, Cali. I love your passion, and your compassion, too,” he said. “And I know you’re strong, and can protect yourself.” He pulled my hand away and kissed my palm. “But I’ll never stop trying to do everything I can to keep you out of harm’s way.”

Lola cleared her throat. “Not to interrupt this beautiful moment or anything, but I think we should probably do what this phone tracking app says, before the trail goes cold. Right now I’m picking up a signal. It seems like maybe it’s moving, so let’s not lose it.”

“Right, we should get moving,” Ravi said. “A crime was just committed on this campus—the two non-students will be suspects for sure. Not to mention all the other Redwoods who are crawling around campus searching for that wolf. If we’re trying to avoid unwanted attention, we’re not doing a great job of it right now.”

“You’re right. Let’s go,” Greyson said.

We all started walking, putting as much distance as we could between ourselves and the Waterley dorm.

“And you’re right, Lola,” Greyson added. “We were lucky you picked up the trail, but there’s no telling how long this guy’s phone will keep putting out a signal—especially if someone doesn’t want him found.”

I was just glad that Greyson hadn’t pushed back about my coming along. He’d gotten better about being less overprotective—he hadn’t put up too much of a fight about my involvement in our fight with Adéluce—but I knew he’d never stop being protective over me. It was just the way things were between us.

*And I know that Greyson believes in my power and my usefulness in battle, and that just makes me feel so proud. He’s so strong and such a good fighter… It feels good that he thinks I can hold my own.*

We were really listening to each other, and working together to do some good. Eddie had disappeared, something was going on with Codsworth, and this Macaulay guy was obviously in deep trouble, too. While we didn’t know much yet, I was confident that we were at least a few steps ahead of the authorities. Since we couldn’t go to the police with what we knew, we kind of owed it to everyone to do whatever we could to stop whoever was raising hell on campus.

We headed toward the lot where the Redwoods had parked their cars. It was funny, how relaxed I felt with Lola, Ravi, and Greyson at my side. It was a far cry from how afraid I’d been, walking to meet the others on the football field.

“I texted everyone,” Ravi said. “Told them to meet us in the parking lot so we can make sure everyone’s accounted for, and then all head out together.”

By the time we arrived at the lot, everyone else was already there waiting for us.

Rishika greeted us all before turning her attention to Greyson. “Our part of the mission was a complete bust,” she told him. “No one found a trace of a wolf. Not one scent on the breeze, not one sighting.” Rishika shook her head, frustration written across her face. “I wish we had better news.”

Greyson frowned as he took that in. “Okay, thanks for the update. We’ll follow up on that later and brainstorm about how we might pick up the trail again. In the meantime, we need to focus on tracking down this vampire. We followed its trail to a dorm room—”

“And there was a LOT of blood,” I interjected.

“Yeah, but no body,” Greyson continued. “So we think the vampire might’ve taken another student, but we don’t know for sure. But Lola is tracking the potential victim’s phone, so Ravi, Cali, and I will drive out first and lead the way, with Lola directing us,” Greyson said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Rishika said, ushering the rest of the pack back to their cars.

Lola wasted no time jumping into the front passenger seat of Greyson’s car, while Ravi and I took the back seat. Greyson got in, started the car, and pulled out of the lot.

“Make a left here to head toward Old Town,” Lola said, her gaze riveted to her phone. “It’s not far, thankfully. Only a few miles.”

We drove on, Lola giving blow by blow directions that took us deeper and deeper into the neighborhood. It was an area I wasn’t very familiar with, and I quickly lost any sense of where we were. I just kept looking out the window, watching as the buildings lining the road grew increasingly older.

I thought back on all the blood I’d seen in the dorm room, and my stomach twisted. I felt so bad for Macaulay, wherever he was. He’d called in a tip because he’d wanted to help, too, and look where it had gotten him.

*And was his tip really about Codsworth? Could the body have been his? And if this vampire got Codsworth, what’s to stop it from coming after the rest of my friends? Or even the cryptozoology club, because the vampire knows we’re worried about Codsworth and might bring it unwanted attention?*

I took a deep breath, trying to push all my frantic thoughts away. This wasn’t the time to spiral. I needed to stay calm if I wanted to be ready for what we might find at the end of this drive.

“Shit!” Lola hissed.

I sat forward in my seat. “What? What is it?”

Lola stared down at her phone for a few seconds, her brow crinkled in concentration. “I’m not really sure. The circle’s just bouncing around now, moving quickly. It’s going too fast and acting too weird to be a car… I bet the vampire’s rushing around too quickly for the tech to keep up.”

Lola smacked her phone in frustration as the dot continued to bounce around wildly.

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked. “Should we close the app and reopen it or something?”

“I thought about doing that, but I’m afraid that we might lose the signal,” Lola said, scowling. “We’re barely hanging on as it is. One thing’s for sure—my phone isn’t going to be able to keep up with an object moving at vampire speed for much longer. We’re moving too slowly to catch up, anyway.”

“Then we need to go faster,” I said, tapping Greyson on the shoulder.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said tightly. “The last thing we need to do is speed and attract attention from the cops. The first thing they’ll ask is where we’ve come from—and we don’t want to answer that.”

“But we have to do something!” Lola said. “We’re not going fast enough, and soon we’re going to lose them altogether and end up right back at square one!”

“Okay then what do you suggest we do?” Greyson asked.

Lola’s only reply was to fling her door open while the car was still moving, jump out, and take off into the night.

**Episode 4936**

**Xavier**

I rushed toward the bar, preparing to pull Carmen away. But in the short time it took for me to make it over to him, all the angry energy seemed to dissipate.

“Everything’s fine, not to worry,” Carmen was telling the bartender. “No apologies necessary.”

The bartender’s face was bright red, and he was rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. “I’m so sorry,” he said, stumbling over his words. “I really am—I don’t know what happened—I just saw your face out of the corner of my eye, and the next thing I know I’m pissed and… I’m really, really, sorry, man.”

Carmen looked up at me and shrugged.

“Wait, what happened?” I asked, glancing between Carmen and the bartender. “Is everything really okay here? Because it looked like he socked you good,” I said, glancing at the bartender.

“I think it was a classic case of mistaken identity,” Carmen said, almost cheerfully. “The bartender thought he knew me—”

“I don’t know him!” the bartender exclaimed. “I thought he was someone else. I’m really sorry, though. All your drinks are on me for the rest of the night,” he told Carmen. “And thanks for being so cool about that. I don’t know if I would’ve been quite so gracious in your position.”

“Hey, don’t mention it,” Carmen said. “A mistake’s a mistake.”

“I’m impressed with how you handled yourself,” I said to Carmen. I was still in disbelief at how calm he was. I could tell that the bartender was still shocked, too. “It’s amazing how well you just de-escalated that situation. I know from experience that once a bar fight kicks off, it’s hard to pull it back.”

“Tell me about it,” the bartender said before walking away.

Once he was out of earshot, I turned to Carmen. “So, what *really* happened?”

Carmen shrugged. “It happened just like I said—I know it’s surprising, though. I’m actually really good at talking myself out of crazy situations. I keep a cool head, and I’m not all that reactive—which I know is practically unheard of for a werewolf.” He smirked. “But that’s what I’d bring to the table for the Samara pack. The power of diplomacy.”

I grinned, appreciating how hard the Loneclaws were working to make a good impression. It was one thing to want them to join, but it was another thing entirely for them to try so hard to prove themselves. Everything I’d seen tonight—from Carmen’s quick thinking to Milo trying to smooth things over with Knox—showed that they were serious about joining the pack.

It felt good to think that we might’ve found a group of wolves who were worthy of joining our ranks. It gave me hope that building the pack all the way back up to its former glory wasn’t an unrealistic goal.

I clapped a hand on Carmen’s back. “You should order a round of those free drinks for everyone.”

“You got it,” he said, already beckoning to the bartender, who rushed over to take his order, still apologizing.

I stepped away from the bar and started back toward my seat, but Donovan fell into step beside me.

“Hey, Xavier, you got a second?” he asked, nodding toward the entrance to indicate that he wanted to talk outside.

“Sure,” I said.

I reached out to Ava via mind link. *I’m going to step outside with Donovan and see what he wants. I should be back soon.*

*Don’t be gone too long*, Ava said. *I see the bartender pouring a bunch of shots. You don’t want to miss such a beautiful team building moment.*

I sent a smile her way before I followed Donovan outside. I was feeling good—mainly because I appreciated how rare it was for us to have an honest to goodness fun night. There’d been minimal drama, and there was actual cheerfulness in the air.

“What’s up?” I asked Donovan. “You having a good time tonight? I know you were a little skeptical—”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you that you were right about the Loneclaws. I’ve been talking to all of them, and I think they’d be great additions to the pack… And Cresta’s pretty cute.”

I laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. “Glad to hear it. I was hoping that spending a little time with them would ease your fears. I still want to see them in action, and it takes time to really get to know people, but this has already been a good night for us.”

Now that Donovan’s anxiety about the Loneclaws had dissipated, I just had to deal with Milo and Knox. It was obvious that Milo was willing to let bygones be bygones, but Knox was truly talented at holding a grudge. Getting them on the same page was going to be a tall order, but as long as Knox remembered that I was the one who’d be making the final decision, everything would work out.

Donovan and I were turning to walk back into the bar when someone slammed right into me. I let out a grunt and stepped back, looking down.

“*Cali?*” My mouth fell open in surprise. “What are—”

My words were cut short by a shooting pain in my head. It was so bad that I swayed on my feet. The shock and severity of it was a lot to deal with out of nowhere. I had to stop myself from pressing my fingers into my temples. I took a deep breath, willing the pain to fade, even a little.

Cali was breathing hard, and she leaned down for a few beats with her hands resting on her knees as she caught her breath.

“Lola!” she called out, tilting her head to the side. “Lola, what the *hell*? Why would you do that?”

I twisted around and spotted Lola, standing a few feet away with her phone in her hand.

“Shit! I lost the signal!” she said, stamping her foot. “I wasn’t fast enough!”

I didn’t have the slightest idea what was going on, and I was tempted not to ask. But when it came to Cali, it was so hard for me to mind my business—even though the pain in my head was all but begging me to get as far away from her as I could.

“Cali? Is everything okay?” I asked.

Cali gasped, and finally stood up straight. “Xavier? Wow. What are you doing here?”

I gave her a strange look and gestured at the bar behind me. “I’m here with the Samaras. I think the bigger question is, what are *you* doing here?”

*She and Lola are obviously up to something—as usual.*

Then, much to my chagrin, I heard my brother’s voice in the distance.

“Cali! Wait up!”

*Oh, they’re in the middle of dealing with some Redwood issue. And shit, my head is really,* really *starting to hurt. I don’t know how much longer I can deal with this pain.*

I’d thought I was past this. I didn’t feel any pain at all anymore when I was with Ava, or else I might’ve remembered to bring Big Mac’s medicine with me. But it wasn’t like I’d expected to randomly run into Cali on the street.

I shook my head and gritted my teeth. I pulled in a deep breath, but the pain lingered.

*I can do this. I’ve dealt with worse pain than this before. I’ve suffered all kinds of cuts and bruises and savage bites, but there’s something about this pain that takes my breath away like nothing else.*

I decided to focus on my brother’s voice, of all things. Mostly, I focused on how much better my night would’ve been if I’d never heard it, and that seemed to do the trick. Once I stopped thinking about Cali, the pain subsided.

Greyson came jogging up, his expression darkening when he spotted me.

“Have you seen anything?” he asked.

“Hello to you, too,” I said. “And what kind of question is that? Seen what?”

I was already annoyed with my brother, but I’d take that over the pain in my head any day.

I was tempted to say *not my problem* and get back to the Samaras—this was our night, and I didn’t need to get wrapped up in any Redwood bullshit. In the back of my mind, Cali’s words to me on the day of her regatta, about the Redwoods not being my problem anymore, came to mind.

*But they always seem to be in my orbit. No matter where I go or what I do, I always seem to stumble onto them. I wonder why. It’s one thing to run into them in our woods, but it’s entirely another to run into them in a random neighborhood.*

“A vampire,” Greyson said. “We’re tracking a vampire.” Then he stopped and gave me an appraising look. “We could probably use a little help, if you have the time.”

Before I could even answer, Ava’s voice rose from behind me. “Sorry, Greyson, but this doesn’t sound like a Samara problem.”

**Episode 4937**

I kept my eyes on Xavier. He hadn’t so much as glanced at me since Greyson had come running up.

*He must be in pain. I hate that he has to deal with that just because he’s near me. It’s not fair! Why did things have to turn out this way? It’s enough that our emotional bond has been damaged—why does it have to be almost physically impossible for him to be near me if Ava’s anywhere nearby?*

“It’s not your problem *yet*,” Greyson snapped at Ava. “There’s a good chance that this vampire is hurting humans, and eventually, that’s going to affect all of us, one way or another. If you don’t think that kind of thing will touch the Samara pack, then by all means, stay out of it.”

“As if we can ever stay out of anything the Redwoods are wrapped up in. At this point I’m starting to think you’re all stalking us,” Ava said, glancing at me.

There was another Samara wolf standing nearby. I was pretty sure his name was Donovan. I could tell by his body language that he was on Ava’s side and didn’t feel like doing us any favors.

I bit my tongue. I wanted to say something to Ava—Donovan, too—to make it clear that bumping into them had been an honest mistake, and that the Redwoods were too busy to waste our time stalking the Samaras. But Greyson was already talking again, and I knew that getting in an argument with Ava right now wouldn’t help anyone… Even though it would’ve been very cathartic for me.

“I just get the feeling that this vampire is taunting us,” Greyson was saying to Xavier. “It’s bullshit. I don’t know what their endgame is, but I have a feeling it’ll fuck us over if we don’t get ahead of it.”

Ava had her arms crossed and didn’t look convinced, but Xavier was nodding. He seemed to be warming up to the idea. He pulled Ava aside to talk to her, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

Greyson came to stand next to me, watching Xavier and Ava, too.

“Do you think they’ll help?” I asked him.

Greyson shrugged. “I really don’t know. Xavier’s such a wildcard these days, I have no idea how to predict his decisions anymore.”

*And he’s still so hot and cold with me—and the pain he experiences because of my presence isn’t helping matters.*

“That’s true,” I said. “He’s always been hard to read, but now it’s like looking at a brick wall.”

Xavier’s back was to me, but I watched as Ava’s expression slowly softened into acceptance. I was struck by the obvious strength of their partnership. It wasn’t that long ago that Xavier hadn’t even been able to stand being around Ava, but now it was painfully obvious how well they communicated. They knew how to talk to each other. How to work together. How to *be* together.

I turned away to avoid looking at them. From somewhere deep in my mind, a bitter thought rose to the surface. I’d always felt at a disadvantage with Xavier because Ava was a werewolf like him, and it was at times like these that I really felt the pain of that. It was a connection Xavier and I could never share.

Another minute went by before Xavier came back over. He was still taking pains not to look at me. Even though I knew the reason why, it still hurt.

“We’ll help,” Xavier said to Greyson. “Donovan and Ava are heading inside to round up the pack, and then we can get back on that vamp’s ass. You’re right about one thing, at least—a vampire running around causing havoc is bad for all of us on many levels.”

I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my mouth. There was something exciting about doing things with Xavier again.

I grinned up at him. “Thanks, Xavier.”

Xavier winced at the sound of my voice, and I took a step back, feeling a fresh wave of hurt and disappointment.

*I can’t believe it’s come to this. He literally can’t even stand to hear the sound of my voice!*

Xavier noticed that I was edging away and took a stubborn step forward so that he was still in my space. The subtle act of defiance put a little wind back in my sails.

“Greyson!” Lola called out. “Come here a sec.”

*You okay?* Greyson mind linked. *I’ll stay right here if you need me. Just say the word.*

I squeezed his hand. *No, I’m good. Go ahead.*

I watched him go and then turned back to Xavier, who was trying his best to act like he was unaffected by my presence.

“I have to admit, I’m a little surprised that you agreed to help,” I said. “I know it’s hard for you to be around me and Ava at the same time.”

Xavier shrugged. “I might have an ulterior motive. We’re thinking of adding some new wolves to our pack—a bunch of wolves from a nomadic pack called the Loneclaw. I want to put them to the test, see how they perform in high-stress situations. This is the perfect opportunity. It’ll give me an idea of how they’ll integrate into a pack like ours, which experiences its share of conflict. Joining the Samara pack isn’t for the weak of heart.”

“Wow, I’m surprised—you’re really looking to bring in new pack members? I didn’t realize that was something you were interested in doing.”

Xavier flashed me a wry grin. “Yeah, the Redwood pack doesn’t have to be the default pack for everyone. There are other options. Good ones.”

Before I could react to that, he was already back to discussing the Loneclaw pack.

“I just really want to find out if I can trust them, and helping the Redwoods track this vampire seems like a good opportunity for them to prove themselves.”

Before I could reply, the Samaras started spilling out of the bar.

“We got the signal back!” Lola announced, almost jumping up and down with excitement. “We need to get going before it disappears again! It’s close!”

We were a huge crowd now, with the Redwoods, the Samaras, and the Loneclaws all joining forces. We all started moving, following Lola and Greyson. Xavier stayed right next to me.

“Anyway, I think this is a good thing for the Samaras,” he said. “We need a win, and growing our numbers will be exactly that. We want to become a force to be reckoned with, and this is one way to achieve it.”

I liked that he was still talking, as though our conversation had never been interrupted. I felt a surge of warmth at his nearness, at his eagerness to talk to me, despite the pain it had to be causing him.

*That means something, right? He cares enough about me to fight through the pain just to be near me—just to talk to me. I’ve been wondering about how he feels about me, but isn’t this all the proof I need to know that he still cares?*

There was something that felt so right about this moment. It didn’t quite feel like old times, but it was close.

“I never really thought about how much trust an Alpha has to have in their pack,” Xavier said ruefully.

He glanced to the side, and I caught his gaze for the briefest of moments, though it felt like it went on forever and ever. I didn’t want it to end. My heart started pounding, and I felt like I was floating on air.

*This is it. Exactly what I’ve been missing all this time. Just being around Xavier. In his presence. Talking about anything.*

And then Xavier said, “There’s nothing more important than trust. I’m learning that.”

I frowned, just as Ava jogged up between us.

“Hey, X.” Ava looked at me but otherwise didn’t bother to acknowledge my presence. “We need to figure out where the Loneclaws need to be positioned—you know, in case there’s a fight. I want to make sure we can keep an eye on them the entire time.”

Xavier slowed to stay in step with Ava. He seemed to have forgotten that I was still next to him. It was like a punch in the gut, a sharp reminder of our current situation.

*I’m not the one he’s confiding in these days. Not anymore. And I’m not the one he trusts more than anyone.*

Wincing again, Xavier slowed down even more, slipping his hand into Ava’s as the distance between us grew.

Frustration bloomed in the pit of my stomach, and the high I’d been feeling, simply from being next to Xavier, quickly turned into a crash.

*I guess that in this case, it’s just easier to build new trust rather than waste time repairing trust that’s been broken.*

A hard realization crept up behind me. No matter how much I wanted it to happen, maybe there just wasn’t anything Xavier could do to fix what was broken between us. And what would I do if he couldn’t?

**Episode 4938**

**Artemis**

I shot Marius a disdainful look. “What, you think you can do better than I can? Please. Like you could teach me anything at all. You *do* remember how many times I’ve *literally* saved your ass, right? Because I’ve just about lost count!”

I chuckled to myself, thinking about the arrow incident. It had been a funny injury, but it had also been touch and go for Marius for a second there. He was a disaster. He’d been ducking danger from the moment I’d laid eyes on him again. I was fairly convinced that if it weren’t for me, he’d be dead.

*He’s lucky that I’m too nice to tell him that right to his face! There’s no point rubbing it in… At least not right now.*

Marius cackled. “And believe me, I’m glad my ass is in good hands.”

I blushed, and was immediately furious at myself for doing so. I hated how easily I reacted to him. It was as surprising as it was annoying.

I shoved him in the shoulder and then gave him a sharp grin. “I have an idea. Let’s make this a game. Might as well make the most of this bullshit detour, right?”

Marius brightened and leaned forward, his eyes shining with excitement. “I’m listening.”

I trailed a finger slowly down his arm and he shivered, but then I snatched my dagger out of his hand and held it up between us.

“See?” I said. “Like I told you, I’m better, faster, smarter, all of the above. I always have been. Admit it, you never even saw that coming!”

“Well played,” Marius said. “But I still want to know what this game is. It sounds like something that’ll be right up my alley”

“It’s going to be a race, of sorts. You go left, I’ll go right,” I said, nodding in each direction. “We make our way past the guards, and whoever finds this Coriander guy first, wins.”

Marius seemed to think it over for a second before nodding once. “Deal.” He fluttered his eyelashes at me. “But I have one question. What do I win if I get to Coriander first?” He took a suggestive step toward me. “I have a few ideas, if you’d like to hear them. You know I can be quite descriptive when I want to be.”

“No,” I said flatly. “And I don’t need any of your ideas. If you win, you’ll get the satisfaction of a job well done—and let’s not forget, you’ll also get to live through this. That’s why we’re here in the first place, because *your* ass is on the line!”

“But that’s boring!” Marius whined. “I want something fun! Like—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence!” I snapped. “And I’m not about to stand here and listen to you complain. GO!”

Without waiting to see if he was listening, I took off down the hall, heading right, as agreed. If Marius was stupid enough to linger after that? Well, clearly he wasn’t all that interested in winning.

I reached the first corner and took a peek around it, quiet and careful. Two guards were heading right for me. I tilted my head, listening and counting to myself as I waited for them to get closer.

*This is going to be a piece of cake. They look like rookies—or close to it. I’ll take them down easily, then I’ll go after Coriander.*

The second the guards were less than a few feet away, I flung myself around the corner, punching one in the temple and kicking the other in the throat simultaneously. Both guards went down hard. One was already unconscious, and the other was rolling around on the floor, clutching his throat and gasping for air. I sat on that one’s chest and pulled him up by the collar.

“Tell me where I can find Coriander,” I snapped, giving him a shake. “Where are you holding him? And don’t try to protect him—it won’t work out well for you.”

The man gasped, still struggling to breathe. He paused and choked something out.

I leaned closer. “I can’t understand you! Say that again!”

He gasped again, rasping out a piece of a word—still not enough to make out. I was starting to get pissed off.

I leaned forward, dragging the tip of my dagger along his throat. “I don’t want to have to ask you again. You need to tell me what you know. Now! But before you answer, take a moment to decide whether or not Coriander is important enough to die for.”

The guard tried to shake off my hold, but I held on tight.

“You’re really starting to get on my bad side!” I shouted, shaking him again.

Finally, he groaned and whispered something.

“Still can’t hear you! Say it louder, or I might get clumsy with this thing!” I held the blade right in front of his eyes, so that he could get a good look at it.

He started shaking his head. “They don’t pay me enough for this!” he rasped. “You want Coriander? He’s two flights up and four corridors to the right. You’ll know him when you see him.”

I grinned and brought the pommel of my dagger down hard, right in the center of his forehead. The guard’s head made a loud, echoing thud as it hit the ground—but I was already running away, my silent footsteps carrying me down the hall and up the stairs.

*That took a little longer than I planned, but I’m sure I’ll still make it before Marius. There’s no way I’m going to lose to him!*

With quiet ease, I took out a couple more guards on my way. And then I saw it—the last turn that would take me to the final corridor.

*I did it. I made it through the guards—and I got here first! I definitely beat that little shit Marius to his own bounty. But I’m not surprised. I’m better than him. He knows it, I know it. It’s the truth. It’s a wonder he’s ever caught a bounty in his life.*

I couldn’t wait to lord this over him. I could see the disappointment on his face now. Suddenly, something occurred to me; I was actually having *fun.* That was the last thing I’d expected to find, back in the Fae world—to end up enjoying myself. Especially with a man from my past who I’d never expected to see again.

With a near-silent yelp of glee, I rounded the corner… and found Marius standing at the other end of the hall, mirroring me. I narrowed my eyes as we both took in the sight of the barred door, midway between us. My legs tensed.

*There’s no way in hell I’m going to let him win. I’ve come too close for that. I have to prove a point—to show him that I can sweep the floor with him anytime, anywhere! The only thing standing between me and sweet victory is a few short yards…*

I launched myself forward, just as Marius did the same. Time seemed to slow, and I could’ve sworn I heard Marius laugh as he bolted for the door. But then we were both reaching for the handle. My fingers hit the cool metal a split second before Marius’s. I couldn’t help it. I had to rub it in.

*What’s the point in winning if I can’t be a bad sport about it? And there’s no one more deserving of a little razzing.*

“I beat you! Hah! I fucking *beat* you!” I crowed, pumping a fist in the air and then jamming a finger in his face. “The funny thing is, you actually thought you had a chance!”

Marius’s eyes went wide, and he slapped a hand over my mouth. “What are you *doing*? We need to be quiet! Coriander could be anywhere!”

But I could hear the mirth in his voice. He was obviously having as much fun as I was.

I slapped his hand away from my mouth, but he didn’t move away. We were so close to each other, now. So close that I could see the tears collecting in the corners of his eyes from the effort of holding back his laughter.

He leaned forward, almost close enough to brush his lips against mine…

And then someone cleared their throat behind us. I looked away from Marius, and right there, standing on the other side of a partially barred door was a man in filthy clothing. It looked like he hadn’t bathed in years, and his hair was a massive, tangled bird’s nest.

“Ah, you must be Coriander,” Marius said, turning to face the man, throwing on a little charm even though Coriander was, for all intents and purposes, his enemy.

Coriander suddenly stuck his hands through the bars and grabbed me, using the chains on his wrists to choke me. His voice was like gravel in my ear as he shouted, “And who the fuck are you?”

**Episode 4939**

**Greyson**

I glanced over my shoulder and searched the mass of moving bodies for Xavier, who I found walking with Ava at the head of the rest of his pack.

I left Lola so I could lead the way. I slowed down to fall into step with my brother. Ava eyed me but didn’t protest. Good.

Xavier gave me an appraising look before he turned to Ava. “Hey, why don’t you go check in with the rest of the pack and make sure they know what they’re doing? For one thing, make sure they know to follow my orders. No one else’s.”

He shot me a pointed look.

“Sure,” Ava said. “Give me a holler if you need me.”

She planted a kiss on Xavier’s cheek, met my eyes, and then left us to talk.

I didn’t waste a second. “How did you convince Ava to bring the Samaras into this? She didn’t seem keen on the idea at all.”

“I don’t have to convince Ava of anything,” Xavier snapped. Then he took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I have a headache—it’s putting me on edge.”

I nodded, surprised by the apology.

*Wow, has hell frozen over? Do pigs fly now? I can probably count on one hand the number of times Xavier has apologized for being an asshole. Really, if he apologized to me every time he was a jerk, he wouldn’t have time to do much else.*

“Ava knows I’m the Alpha, and she respects that,” Xavier continued. “She follows my lead like she’s supposed to. We communicate well and respect and support each other, even if we’re not always on the same page. That’s all there is to it. She’s my Luna, and together, we’re a united leadership team for our pack. You know what it’s supposed to be like.”

*Now that’s the Xavier I know—but I guess I’ll try not to take that as a dig.*

“And besides, there is a reason for the Samaras to get involved in this—other than the need to neutralize the vampire threat. We’re testing out some potential new members,” Xavier said. “Trying to see how they handle themselves.”

Surprised, I looked back at the group Samaras again and realized that there were quite a few faces I didn’t recognize. That was unusual. It wasn’t like the pack was huge.

“Where did these new members come from?” I asked. “Is there something I should know about?”

Xavier gave me a hard look, and I could tell that he was working overtime to keep his response cordial.

“No, nothing for you to worry about,” he said. “They’re all part of a nomad pack—the Loneclaw. They don’t mean any harm. They’re just looking for somewhere to belong, and I’m hoping that might be with the Samaras. But it’s not a done deal yet.”

I nodded, taking that in. “As long as you can vouch for them.”

“I don’t know them well enough to vouch for them, but as far as I can tell, they seem to be above board,” Xavier said. “But I should mention that we did run into some Bitterfangs out in the woods. They lived up to their name—they were feeling bitter as hell about our victory, and wanted to make sure we knew it.”

“What?” I said, my hackles rising. “Where are they now? I should tell Rishika to increase patrols—”

“Don’t get all worked up, Greyson,” Xavier said. “We already took care of it. The Redwoods don’t need to worry. It’s a done deal. We beat them.”

I nodded, wanting to take him at his word. But honestly, I was having a hard time squaring this competent, strong version of Xavier with the heavily medicated mess I’d seen a few days ago, at Lucian and Elle’s engagement party.

“In any case, I’m hoping this whole vampire incident will let me find out how these Loneclaw wolves work with the Samaras, and an outside pack.” Xavier laughed lightly. “I guess I should be thanking you for bringing us along.”

Something about that grated on my nerves. “We’re not here to teach your baby wolves how to handle themselves. We have a dangerous problem on our hands that needs to be taken care of. This isn’t a proving ground.”

Xavier put up a placating hand. “Relax, brother. That’s not how I meant it. I’m just taking advantage of the situation. Isn’t that what you’d do if our positions were reversed? Or is it only okay when you do it?”

I thought about saying something biting, but I was having a little trouble finding my footing. I just couldn’t imagine how Xavier was handling his Alpha duties so well while simultaneously dealing with his mess of a mate situation. I’d seen the pain that had flashed across his face the moment Cali had come near him.

*How the hell is he handling this? He said he was in pain, but he seems to be pretty clear headed. Maybe even a little less combative than usual. I can’t wrap my head around it. Is it all an act, or is he as in control as he seems?*

I wanted to ask Xavier the question, but I couldn’t think of a way to do it that didn’t sound insulting. And besides, I was sure that Xavier’s response would be somewhere along the lines of it not being my business, and although he wouldn’t be entirely wrong about that, I was still curious.

*We’re getting along right now, so why ask a question that’ll blow that? We’re not in a position to deal with a fight between Alphas right now. We need to focus, especially when there might be a bunch of amateurs in our hunting party right now. I’ve never heard of the Loneclaw pack, and that means I have no idea how they’ll handle themselves in battle.*

We needed to focus on the matter at hand—the vampires. The vamp had given me the slip so many times that I felt like this might be our last chance to actually catch it. I didn’t want to be distracted enough that the vampire managed to slip through my fingers yet again.

So, instead of starting an argument, I just said, “That’s good that you’re looking to add some pack members.”

“I’m glad you think so, but I’ll remind you that you don’t need to think about what’s good or bad for the Samara pack. Focus on Redwood issues,” Xavier said curtly. “Now that I’m a pack Alpha myself, I know how much work it is to run one pack—you don’t have the bandwidth to worry about mine.”

I was irritated, but there was no real heat in it. I had no desire to get into a screaming match with Xavier. Still, I wasn’t about to let him get away with that little comment.

“You’ve dropped a lot of your shit on me— of course I’m going to think about you and the Samaras,” I retorted. “How could I not?”

Xavier gave me a look that told me he was about to push back, but then Lola called out from up ahead.

“I think I’ve found it!” she shouted. “Right there!”

I pushed my way to the front and saw that Lola was pointing at a house halfway down the block—and it was a sight to behold.

Xavier came up beside me and let out a low whistle. “Yikes.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I said.

The house was beyond decrepit—it looked like it should’ve been condemned a long time ago. The yard was overgrown, there were holes in the roof, and a bunch of the windows were cracked or shattered. The smell of blood and vampire was thick in the air. I also smelled something burning—definitely wood and fabric, and maybe flesh, too.

“The neighborhood association has to hate this place with a passion,” someone said.

I grimaced. “This is going to get messy. I can tell.”

I had no idea what we were up against, here, but after numerous fights with vampires and wolves and Fae and everything in between, I’d developed a sixth sense for pinpointing when shit was about to hit the fan.

“Isn’t it always?” Xavier replied. “I think at this point, it’d be more efficient to announce when something’s going to be a piece of cake.”

“And don’t hold your breath for that,” Lola said.

Cali moved up to stand next to me. “That place is a creepy dump,” she said. “I don’t know what I expected to find, but it wasn’t this. It looks like it’s about to fall down.”

“Seems fitting, somehow,” I said. “A broken-down house for whatever evil soul is out here attacking innocent people.”

I wasn’t excited about the prospect of dragging the Redwoods into another conflict so soon after our tangle with Adéluce, but we had to stop this vampire before it caused any more trouble for us.

“So, how should we handle this?” Cali asked. “Should we split up?”

**Episode 4940**

Greyson nodded. “I think we should split up into groups,yes. Three areas should do it, one group at the front of the house, one at the back, and one inside.”

“I’m going inside,” I volunteered, hoping that Greyson wouldn’t push back.

I was relieved when Greyson nodded—though I was still surprised that he didn’t even seem to have noticed how eager I was to head for the spot where the action would presumably be. He’d clearly made more progress in trusting me to handle myself in these types of situations than I’d realized.

While he and Xavier stepped away to discuss the details of the plan, I took another long look at the house. It really did look terrifying.

*Why would anyone want to live somewhere like this? I’m not even a wolf and I can smell the stink in the air. Death and rot and decay. If I’d walked by this place alone—night or day—I’d literally cross the street to avoid it.*

“Ugh. I really don’t want to go in there,” Lola said.

“I just hope that Codsworth isn’t in there,” I said grimly. “Actually, I hope no one’s in there except the vampire. Then maybe we’ll be able to get this over and done with tonight.”

I was hoping that this wouldn’t be some long, drawn-out fight like some of the other’s we’d dealt with in the past. The war with the Bitterfangs had dragged on for forever, as had our battle against Silas and the revenants. I was more than ready for a one and done kind of conflict.

“Agreed,” Lola said, staring at the house too. “Though we followed that Macaulay guy’s phone here. And all that blood…”

I nodded. “I know. It’s not looking good. But I’m trying to stay positive.”

“That’s a good idea,” Lola said. “And Cali, I know that Greyson will be keeping an eye on you—he always does—but I want you to promise me that you won’t do anything rash. And please don’t run off on your own, no matter what you think you hear or see. We have to stick together. For everyone’s safety.”

I nodded. “You’re right. I’ll stay close to you and Greyson—I won’t run off or anything.”

*I wouldn’t want to run off alone in that place anyway. Who knows what’s lurking in there? Nothing good—that much is obvious.*

“Glad to hear it,” Lola said. “This is going to be stressful enough without having to worry about you getting yourself into a bind.”

“Cali!” Greyson called.

I turned to look at him as he came walking over, and Xavier headed back to the Samaras.

“Half of the Samara will take the back,” Greyson said. “Half the Redwoods will deal with the front—Rishika will lead that group. And the two of us, along with Lola and Jay, will handle searching upstairs. Xavier, Ava, Cresta, and Marissa will take the first floor. Knox, Milo, Sage, and Zainab are going to take the basement.”

I nodded, realizing that I didn’t recognize a few of those names. I figured those had to be the potential Samara members Xavier had mentioned.

*I hope these new wolves can handle themselves. I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for them to keep watch outside… But it’s not my place to decide their tactics. That’s for Xavier and Ava to figure out. It has nothing to do with me. Ava and Xavier have made that very clear.*

I knew that thought was a tad mean-spirited, but at least no one would know about it except me. And besides, it was true. Things were different between Xavier and me now, and I knew my input was never really welcome. More than that, Ava would probably bite my head off if I tried to make any suggestions at all.

Taking a deep breath, I fell in with my group as we made our way through the rickety, rusted front gate and up the crumbling stairs to the front door.

“Geez. This place is a true dump,” Lola said as we took in the sight of the door, which was twisted and gnarled in its frame. “How the hell has the city not condemned this place? I’m scared it’s going to collapse on top of us as soon as we open the door.”

Jay laughed. “You spoke too soon.” He pointed at a soiled piece of paper lying on the porch that read *CONDEMNED*.

“Wow. I’m not sure if I feel better or worse, knowing that,” Lola quipped, stooping down to read the fine print.

“I feel worse,” I said. “Though I guess it’s good that the city is on top of things… I’m not sure why they haven’t torn it down yet, though.”

“Same, and that means that it could be just as dangerous as we suspect to go in here,” Greyson said. He turned a serious glance on me. “Please be careful, Cali. It’s not just the vampire we have to worry about, now. We’ve got to be mindful of the structure, too. There might be rotten floorboards inside, crumbling ceilings—the works. You could really get hurt if you’re not careful.”

“Fun,” Lola grumbled. “We’re about to enter a literal house of horrors.”

Greyson pushed the front door, and it drifted open quietly. The air was heavier inside than outside, and the stench was almost enough to knock me flat. I was trying my hardest not to gag. I couldn’t even imagine how Lola and the wolves were dealing with it, since their sense of smell was a hell of a lot stronger than mine.

There was a staircase directly in front of us, and Greyson took a step forward and stared off into the darkness before he turned back to us. “Let’s keep our phones handy, and don’t shift—there might be humans here.”

Everyone nodded, and Greyson took my hand. “Stay close, Cali. This place doesn’t feel right.”

I squeezed his hand. “I know what you mean. And don’t worry, I’m not leaving your side.”

I took a look around, realizing that somehow, the place looked even worse on the inside than it did on the outside.

With Jay and Lola bringing up the rear, we started to climb the stairs. It was so dark in the house that I could barely see anything, but I felt confident and safe with Greyson holding my hand. If he hadn’t been with me, I was sure I’d have been stumbling and falling all over the place. I shuddered at the idea of entering a place like this alone.

*For Codsworth’s sake, I hope he’s not here. This place could drive someone insane with fear.*

Every few feet, a beam of light from the streetlamps outside streamed in through the dirty windows. But that did more harm than good, because rather than adjusting to the darkness, my eyes had to start from scratch every time we walked through a bright spot.

We finally reached the top of the stairs where two hallways stretched out in either direction, both of them lined with doors—some closed, some open, a few hanging off the hinges.

“We’ll go this way,” Jay said, pointing down one of the dark corridors. “You want to take the other one?”

Greyson and I nodded, and he gripped my hand tighter as he led me away from Lola and Jay. I heard their footsteps trailing off into the distance behind us.

*Please let them be okay… And us, too. I’ve been in some creepy places and dealt with so many creepy things since meeting Greyson and Xavier, but this place is one of the worst.*

I realized that everything was quiet, just as Greyson went still. He cocked his head to the side, listening.

“I think I heard something,” he said. “It’s coming from the room at the very end.”

“Any idea what it is?” I asked, my mouth dry. “Could it be an animal, or…”

Greyson shook his head. “No idea.”

I gulped. A place like this could very well have an infestation of epic proportions. Even though I knew it was probably a long shot, I hoped that Greyson had actually just heard a bunch of raccoons or squirrels running around.

Inch by inch, we moved forward, and once we reached the last room, I saw that the door wasn’t completely closed. Shit. I held my breath as we moved forward.

Greyson pushed the door open wider, just enough for me to see a figure hunched over a body. The figure’s shoulders were shaking, but it wasn’t making any sound that I could hear.

I leaned into the room, trying to get a better look, and the floor creaked loudly under my weight. The figure’s head snapped up, and it took me a split second to recognize Chessa, her blood-red eyes boring into mine as a thick stream of red liquid poured down her chin.

Chessa jumped to her feet and hissed at us, baring her sharp, bloody fangs.

**Episode 4941**

“Get off Codsworth!” I screamed as rage unlike any I had ever felt bubbled up from deep within me.

Without thinking, I pushed past Greyson and hoped to hell that I wasn’t too late to save my teammate. Just as I moved to attack her, Chessa lunged toward me. Not missing a beat, I summoned my magic and blasted Chessa in the chest. She let out a gut-wrenching scream as she flew through the air and crashed into a large mirror. Shards of glass fell all around the bloodied vampire as she cursed at me.

Ignoring her, I turned to Codsworth. He was still lying motionless on the floor. His usually sun-kissed skin looked pale. Before I could get to his side, Greyson pushed me back. He shifted as he mind linked with me.

*No! Stay back. Let me handle this*, he said.

With no choice but to do what he said, I watched as Greyson charged toward Chessa. She was back on her feet but looked somewhat dazed after the blow I had dealt her. Still, her eyes were fiery red and fresh blood dripped from her fangs.

*Codsworth’s blood…* I thought.

My fingers clenched into my palm as I resisted the urge to blast Chessa again. There was no way for me to hit her without hitting Greyson as well.

While they squared off, I tried to tamp down the shock and utter sense of betrayal I was dealing with. I still couldn’t believe that it had been Chessa the whole time. I’d thought she was my friend, but I was wrong.

It had all been a ruse, and Codsworth had paid the price for it.

Once again, I wished that I could do more than just gawk at Greyson and Chessa as they went at it. With the anger surging within me, I knew I could blast her to kingdom come. If only I could take my shot.

Greyson slammed into Chessa, and they both crashed to the floor with a mixture of howls, growls, and hisses. Unable to help Greyson, I scrambled to get to my feet and slipped on the blood in the process. It was soaking into my clothes and drenching my hands.

Chessa let out a bloodcurdling scream as Greyson sank his teeth into her arm. It wasn’t much of a bite, but enough to draw blood and make the vampire recoil. I glanced at Greyson over my shoulder, then made my way to Codsworth.

The blood on the floor felt warm and sticky as I crawled over it. My stomach turned, and I took deep breaths through my mouth to keep the nauseating stench at bay. Greyson and Chessa lunged at each other again and landed close to where I was. They knocked me back on my butt, driving me back, away from Codsworth. I was tempted to conjure my sword, but they were moving too fast for me to try. One wrong move and I would hurt Greyson.

I waited with bated breath, then made my move the second they rolled out of my way. Moving fast, I got to Codsworth and flipped him over to see if he was still breathing. When my eyes landed on his pale face, I screamed.

It wasn’t him. It wasn’t Codsworth.

*How is this possible?* I wondered.

I shook my head, unable to accept it. Was it some kind of illusion?

*What is it?* Greyson asked via mind link.

He had Chessa cornered and looked ready to rip her throat out. Chessa growled at him, cornered but not ready to give up.

I couldn’t be sure, but… it looked like the guy from the dorm who’d told me and Chessa that Codsworth was out. His neck was covered in so many bites that it looked like Chessa had gouged it out. I wondered if I was too late to save him. His eyes were staring up at me, but they were unfocused and glassy.

*Is he even alive?* I wondered.

*What’s wrong, Cali?* Greyson asked again.

He shouldn’t have. As soon as he turned his head my way, Chessa took her chance. She leapt up on him and bit his shoulder. Her fangs dug in deep, and Greyson howled as he tried to buck her off his back. With a violent shake, he knocked her off his back and onto the floor.

Chessa landed on her knees, then jumped back to her feet. Instead of going for Greyson again, she turned her fiery eyes to me. She let out a screech, then lunged for me before Greyson could stop her. She slammed her body into mine and we both tumbled onto the ground. I hit my head and saw stars for a moment before I managed to scramble back away from her.

The guy from the dorm was still bleeding away on the floor, but Chessa’s attention was solely on me. She licked her bloodied lips like she was starving for more. Her eyes were filled with a wild kind of bloodlust that made a shiver run down my spine.

“Give me that sweet Fae blood,” she said, her husky voice barely recognizable.

“Never!” I screamed.

Chessa growled as she reared her head back to bite me. I tried to move away, but she was too fast. Chessa pinned me to the floor, her wretched breath making me want to vomit. I slapped her face, making her laugh. She held my arm down, then clamped her fangs down on me.

I gasped as pain radiated throughout my body. I fought harder to push her off, then paused. My need to fight was suddenly dulled by a warm sensation that washed over me like a soothing balm. The sound of my heartbeat slowed until its steady beat sounded like a lullaby. A dreamy, calm feeling took over, and I could no longer remember why I had been so afraid.

Chessa moaned as she sank her fangs deeper into my skin. I knew she was feeding on me and that I had to stop her, but I was too tired to do anything other than just breathe. Besides, it didn’t feel that bad. Why resist when it felt so nice?

With Chessa draining every bit of my resistance, I reasoned it was best to rest up and fight again later. My eyes began to droop. I decided to take a nap while the vampire drained me dry.

Just as I started to drift off, Greyson’s howl snapped me back. I heard the sound of his claws on the floor moments before he slammed into Chessa. His powerful jaws bit into her arm and wrenched her away from me in one swift move.

The pleasant feeling I had given into quickly gave way to a sharp pain in my neck. I put a hand on my neck, and it came back covered in my blood. My eyes focused on Greyson as he stood in front of me.

“Greyson?” I said, still a bit fuzzy.

*You’re bleeding*, he said via mind link.

I tried to sit up and was hit with a wave of nausea. Just as I got my bearings, I saw Chessa rising behind Greyson. I raised a trembling finger to warn him, but the vampire took off in a flash.

Greyson shifted back and held me in his arms. He checked the severity of my wounds, cursing Chessa with every breath. I was able to answer every one of his questions as I came back down to Earth.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” I said.

Apart from feeling a bit woozy and the pain in my neck, I was totally fine. Despite Chessa’s hunger, she hadn’t been able to get too much of my blood. I looked around, expecting her to attack us again.

“Where did she go?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Greyson said. “All I care about is making sure that you’re okay.”

He helped me get to my feet and held me in his arms until the Earth stopped shifting on its axis. We were both covered in blood thanks to Chessa, but it wasn’t only our blood.

*The guy from the dorm!*

I staggered over to the prone body. Blood was still gushing from his open neck wound, pulsing with every heartbeat.

“Who is he?” Greyson asked.

“He’s from the dorms,” I said. “I don’t know his name. He has the same build as Codsworth, so I assumed… He’s still alive. Maybe I can save him.”

“Can you handle it alone?” Greyson asked. “I need to go after Chessa.”

“Go ahead, but be careful,” I said. “She’s fed plenty.”

Greyson took one last look at the student, then at me. With a silent nod, he shifted back and ran out of the dark room. I turned back to the poor guy and put a hand on his wound. His pulse was growing fainter by the second. I wasn’t sure what to do other than to try and slow his bleeding.

*I wish Torin had come with us*, I thought.

As I tried to think of what to do, the guy gurgled something.

“I’m sorry, I can’t understand you,” I said, leaning closer. “What?”

He clasped a cold hand around my wrist and tried to lift his head. His lips moved fervently, but hardly a sound came out.

“What?” I asked. “Can you tell me who you are?”

The guy tried again and again, but I couldn’t make anything out of his hoarse whispers.

“Hold on, okay?” I said. “It’s going to be okay.”

It was wishful thinking. He was bleeding out fast, and I still had no idea what to do about it. I turned to the door and called for help. The guy tightened his grip on my wrist, pulling me closer. His eyes began to take on a distant look.

“… others,” he whispered.

“What? Others? Do you know where Codsworth is?” I asked.

He gasped. “T-The… others… th-the crypt…”

**Episode 4942**

**Xavier**

I led Ava, Marissa, and Cresta along a rotting hallway while doing my best to ignore the endless layers of cobwebs we had to walk through. Disgusting. The house reeked of death and had all the makings of a vampire lair.

I wasn’t crazy about being there.

Ever since Iñigo used me as his personal blood bag, I had developed a visceral dislike of vampires. And my experience with Adéluce hadn’t made things any better. A part of me was terrified of them and what they could do, while the rest hated every fiber of their being.

Not that I could show either emotion.

I was the Samara Alpha. I had to lead from the front, which meant that I couldn’t show fear. As the Alpha, it was my job to instill confidence in the hearts of my pack members. I had earned their trust and wasn’t about to lose it because vampires gave me the creeps.

We reached a closed door. I leaned forward but couldn’t hear anything on the other side. I mind linked with Ava. *I’m going to open it*, I said. *Be ready for anything.*

She nodded. I wrapped my hand around the doorknob and got ready to turn it when I heard Cali’s scream. Forgetting all about the door and my pack, I turned back toward the front of the house. Ava and the others followed me, but I didn’t bother explaining to them why I was retracing our steps. I couldn’t do anything other than race to Cali. She was in trouble, and I had to go to her.

Ava would have to understand why without my having to explain it to her. And if she didn’t… well, then, we would talk about it after. At that point it was just one more thing we had to deal with.

The pounding of our feet echoed off the walls, but it felt like we were running in place. I couldn’t get to Cali fast enough. My heart jackhammered in my chest as my mind raced with every worst-case scenario possible. My imagination ran wild as it conjured up one gruesome image after another.

*Did something happen to Greyson?* I wondered.

*Was Cali screaming because of something that was about to happen to her?*

I tried to mind link with her, but all I got back was a series of broken sentences. None of what she said made any sense to me. Was she so hurt that she couldn’t mind link properly?

Running faster, I made it to the upper hallway and charged into the first room. Empty. I stifled a frustrated cry, doing my best to keep myself together.

*Where the hell are they?*

Ava came up behind me. “I’ve got their scents.”

I had been so upset about Cali being hurt that I hadn’t thought to check. Ava stared at me with a blank expression, and I wondered when she was going to point it out to me. She was no fool, and I hadn’t bothered to hide my feelings.

Stepping out of the room, I picked up Cali’s scent and followed it down the hall to an open doorway. Inside it I could smell the unmistakable stench of death and blood. Cali was crying inside, and I didn’t hesitate to run in to save her.

But she wasn’t the one who needed saving.

Cali had her back to me and was hunched over a motionless body. There was blood everywhere, and the room was in chaos. Shattered glass from a broken mirror covered the floor, and everything else had been turned upside down.

*What the hell happened in here?* I wondered.

And then Cali turned around to stare at me. She was covered in more blood than the dead guy, and she had two very distinct fang marks on her neck.

“Cali!” I said, rushing to her side.

My hands moved of their own volition as I tried to gauge how bad her wound was. Had a vampire actually fed on her?

“What happened?” I asked. “Are you okay? Where’s Greyson?”

“I-I’m fine. Really,” Cali said, then looked at the body next to her. “But… h-he died. I couldn’t save him.”

Cali looked ready to burst into tears, but I couldn’t spare much emotion for the guy right now. All I cared about was making sure that she was okay. The thought that she’d been fed on made my head spin and my stomach roil.

*How the fuck did Greyson allow a vampire to bite Cali?*

I cursed under my breath and wondered why the hell I had left Cali in his care. He clearly wasn’t up to the task. I would’ve ripped that vampire’s throat out if it had so much as looked at Cali’s jugular.

My brother, on the other hand, let Cali get attacked and then apparently took off.

Ava and the others stood over us, waiting for me to decide what to do next. As the stench of death invaded my nostrils, I did my best to stay focused. Easier said than done. My head began to pound, and I started to feel light-headed. My worry, my fears, and my responsibilities all came crashing together until it felt like I was being sucked under.

As much as I wanted to give in to what I was feeling, I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*. Cali needed me and I had to be there for her. I mind linked with her. *Take deep breaths*, I said. *It’s going to be okay. I’m here.*

“Who is he?” Ava asked, staring at the body.

Cali shook her head. “I don’t know. He died before he could tell me his name.”

“Damn, that’s awful,” Cresta said.

“What about Greyson?” Marissa asked.

“We found my friend Chessa feeding on the guy in here and faced off with her,” Cali explained. “She’s the vampire… I had no idea.”

“Is that when she attacked you?” I asked, feeling unmitigated rage toward my brother.

Cali explained what had happened and how she got bitten. I still thought Greyson had failed her but kept it to myself.

“Greyson ran off after Chessa while I tried to save him,” she said, looking down at the body again.

“He just left you?” I snapped.

My outburst drew a silent glare from Ava. Her silent disapproval made my head pound harder.

“He didn’t leave me,” Cali insisted. “I told him to go. Go and find him. Help him!”

I blinked my eyes rapidly trying to numb the searing pain that threatened to split my head open. It was unbearable, but I gritted my teeth and tried to ride it out without saying a word. Unfortunately, Ava noticed almost immediately.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I should have known better than to think I could fool her. For better or worse, she was my mate.

I gave her a brisk nod. “I’ll be fine. We should go and look for my stupid brother.”

“You didn’t see him on the way in here?” Cali asked. “He went out the same door you just came through. Why didn’t you run into him?”

There was a desperate quality to Cali’s voice that both made me feel for her and also irritated me. It wasn’t the time to be jealous, but it was hard to ignore her heartfelt plea especially since it wasn’t directed at me.

*Would she have felt the same if I had run off?* I asked myself.

There was a time when she would have, but it had long passed. It seemed like a lifetime ago, and I wasn’t ready to accept that what we had was really over. It didn’t feel like it was over to me.

“We didn’t see anyone,” Marissa said, making Cali worry more.

As the others went back and forth, I tried to figure out where my brother would have gone. The house was so big that it was entirely plausible that we had missed each other. I had no idea where to start searching for Greyson, and I wasn’t sure that I wanted to leave Cali to do so.

Ava turned to me. “What do you want us to do?”

*Leave so I can stay and care for Cali*, I thought.

I stared at Cali despite knowing that Ava would see my hesitancy. Cali had already been attacked once, and I wasn’t about to let it happen again. But she wasn’t my mate.

Both women stared at me, waiting for me to make a decision. The best thing I could do was get away from both of them so that my aching head could get a break.

“Xavier?” Ava said. “What do we do?”

As I opened my mouth to tell Marissa to stay with Cali, I heard pounding footsteps approaching us. I moved to the doorway, ready to handle whatever was coming our way. If it was an unwelcome surprise, it was about to get one right back.

Suddenly, Lola and Jay came in. Lola took turns looking between Cali, the body, and the blood. She shook her head, unsure of what to address first.

“What the hell happened?” she asked.

“We found the vampire. It’s Chessa, but she got away,” Cali said.

“Lola, Jay, you two stay with Cali,” I said. “We’re going to look for Greyson.”

“Fine by me,” Lola said, “No way am I leaving her after seeing her like this.”

With a nod, I got ready to run out the door. Once again, the sound of pounding footsteps made me pause. Moments later, Greyson came running up.

“Where the hell—” I started.

Greyson held up a hand. “I have Chessa trapped.”

**Episode 4943**

**Greyson**

The first thing I saw when I stepped back into the room was that Xavier was standing far too close to Cali. He was rubbing his temples and pretending not to notice how Ava was glaring at him. She had a dark expression on her face, clearly as displeased to see Xavier practically on top of Cali as I was.

*Screw it. I can’t get caught up in their problems*, I told myself.

“I chased Chessa all the way up to the third floor,” I said. “She barricaded herself into one of the rooms.”

“So you didn’t trap her,” Marissa surmised.

“I couldn’t get in, but she can’t get out,” I said, then turned to Xavier. “We’re going to need your help.”

“Who’s watching Chessa now?” he asked. “Who’s to say that she hasn’t already escaped?”

Xavier’s tone was laced with accusation. I didn’t take kindly to it and puffed out my chest to remind him that he wasn’t the only Alpha in the room.

“I ran into Zainab and Sage, who came up to tell me that they didn’t find anything in the basement,” I said. “They’re both keeping watch outside the room Chessa is in. They’re making sure she stays put.”

Before Xavier could find something else to harp on, I pushed him aside and checked on Cali. I hated having to leave her but was happy to see that she looked more like herself. She was still a bit pale, which only made me want to wring Chessa’s neck even more.

I knelt down by Cali’s side and stared down at the man whom she had thought was her teammate. He had bled out in the time I was away, not that I was surprised. Chessa had basically torn his neck out.

“I guess he didn’t make it,” I said, stating the obvious.

Cali looked away as she wiped a tear. “We were too late.”

Though the man was a stranger to her, it still pained her to not be able to help him. Cali had a bigger heart than she knew what to do with. I wrapped her up in my arms and comforted her. She hugged me back as the tears streamed down her face.

Xavier cleared his throat, no doubt unhappy to see how much Cali relied on me. I rubbed her back before turning to my petty little brother.

“Well? Are we going to go finish her off or what?” he said.

Despite not appreciating the interruption, I agreed with Xavier. The sooner we got rid of Chessa, the better.

But it could wait until after I was sure that Cali was okay. I held her tighter, wishing that I could take away some of the guilt she was feeling. She probably thought it was somehow her fault that the guy had died.

I was reminded of what Cesaries had said to me about fulfilling my “potential” as Alpha. As an Alpha, certain priorities would always come before others. I had a responsibility on my shoulders and a duty to fulfill—

*Screw it*, I thought.

Chessa wasn’t going anywhere. I could spare the time to comfort Cali who was clearly in shock. An innocent man had died in her arms, and I had to be there for her while she was so distraught. Why couldn’t my brother stop being a dick for one second and see how upset she was?

“The sooner the better,” Xavier insisted.

“Th-The guy said something about the others,” Cali said, composing herself. “And a crypt.”

“What about it?” Ava asked.

“Maybe he meant that the others might be here or wherever Chessa has her crypt,” Cali explained. “Maybe we can still save Codsworth?”

Her question divided the group instantly and caused an argument. One side wanted to go to Chessa and finish her off, while the other wanted to save the hostages. Both sides were vehement about theirs being the right course of action, and neither was looking to give in.

“We have to save them,” Cali said. “Of course we do. Chessa’s already trapped and under guard.”

“And she just fed, which means she has the strength to break out anytime,” Ava insisted. “We need to go take her out now.”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “Look what she did to you. You want to risk that happening again?”

He glared at me, then turned back to Cali.

“I don’t want it to happen to me again,” Cali said. “But more importantly, I don’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

We all stared down at the body. I wrapped an arm around Cali’s shoulders and felt her tremble against me. She was terrified of having more blood on her hands.

“I hate to break it to you,” Marissa scoffed, “but chances are they’re already dead.”

Cali shook her head. “They might not be. Chessa might be using them as blood bags.”

“It’s a total waste of time,” Cresta chimed in.

“Saving lives is not a waste of time,” Lola said.

“It is if they’re already dead,” Marissa said. “Which they most likely are.”

Both sides continued to argue back and forth about what to do next. I was torn. In a way, I agreed with both sides’ arguments. My first instinct was to go kill the vampire. We had her trapped. The longer we waited, the more time she would have to strategize.

I understood where Cali was coming from. Codsworth was her friend. She didn’t want her friend to die at the hands of a ruthless vampire. Even if Codsworth happened to be her nemesis, Cali would still feel guilty about those that Chessa had captured. If there was even the slightest chance that any of them were alive, then every second counted.

Unfortunately, while we knew exactly where Chessa was, none of us had any idea where her crypt could be. The house was too large to search quickly and even if we could, there was a chance that the crypt was somewhere else entirely.

“Fine, take us to this magical crypt then,” Marissa said. “Oh, that’s right. You have no idea where it is.”

“We can split up and find it,” Jay said.

“Or we can go kill that vampire and *then* go searching,” Ava said.

I let them argue for a few more seconds, then cut in. Time was of the essence, and we had bickered enough already.

“I don’t want anyone snooping around the house until we either kill Chessa or know that she’s left. Since we have her trapped, I’m hoping for the first scenario. If there is a crypt, then we’ll have to find it later,” I said, then turned to Cali. “I’m sorry, but we have to confront the most dangerous situation first.”

She took a moment to process my words, then nodded. “I understand.”

I gave her a quick hug, then turned to Jay. “Get the others and meet us in the third-floor hallway.”

“Got it,” Jay said, then ran out of the room.

I glanced at Xavier. “Let’s go kill that vampire.”

Xavier gave me a terse nod, and I thanked my lucky stars that he didn’t choose to argue instead. It seemed he had a bone to pick with me about every decision I made. Everyone followed me out of the room, and Cali walked right beside me.

“What do we do about… um, the guy?” she asked.

“We’ll handle it later,” I promised.

The truth was, the guy was dead. His worries were over while ours were very much ahead of us. There was nothing we could do to bring him back, and I wasn’t sure I wanted the pack to get involved in hiding the body. It was bad enough that things had gone as far as they already had.

We made it to the foot of the stairs where Zainab met with us. She explained that Sage was still watching the door.

“As far as we can tell, she’s still in there,” she said.

“Good, let’s join her,” I said.

We went upstairs, and I was once again hit by the stench of death that seemed to emanate from every corner of the house. The others waited for me to lead the charge. I tried to twist the knob, but it was locked.

“Let’s just kick it down,” Xavier suggested.

I nodded. “Once it gives, we can just rush her. She might be able to fight one of us, but not all of us.”

“Sounds good to me,” Xavier said.

“We go in first,” I said.

I knew there was no way that Cali would stay back. While I wasn’t going to try and make her stay away, I would make sure that she wouldn’t go in first. Xavier and I would attack first and take Chessa out quickly.

He and I took offensive stances by the door as I started to count us down. The others did the same.

“Three… two…” I started.

“Wait!” Cali said, cutting in. “Maybe we can talk to her.”

Xavier and I exchanged knowing looks. There was no talking to a vampire like Chessa. That ship had sailed. I moved Cali back and started to sound down again.

“One!” I said.

Xavier and I kicked the door down. The old wood splintered and flew every which way as it flew open. We rushed inside, ready to leap into a fight with the vampire. But the room was empty.

*How the hell did she escape?*

**Episode 4944**

Nobody wanted to get Chessa more than I did. She had betrayed my trust and killed an innocent person. There was no way we could let her escape. She had some explaining to do, and I would use my magic if I needed to. I followed Greyson and Xavier as they rushed into the room. I didn’t care whether they didn’t want me to join them.

Not that I would let that stop me. Obviously.

Seconds after my two mates stormed the room, I ran in after them. I got ready to conjure my sword, expecting an all-out brawl. Instead, I found Xavier and Greyson staring around the room looking confused. A moment later, I understood why.

There was no one there. Despite what Greyson had said, Chessa was long gone.

“Where the hell is she?” Xavier snarled.

“She was in this room, I swear,” Greyson said. “Sage!”

Sage ran in with an incredulous expression on her face. “I swear I never left this door!”

Just then, I remembered a creepy old monster movie I had seen on TV. Every five minutes, the monster would pop up from random places to claim another victim. My eyes slowly climbed the wall and raked the ceiling as if Chessa might be there, ready to drop down on us.

Thankfully, there was nothing up there except cobwebs, cracks, peeling paint, and a dusty light fixture. Chessa had seemingly vanished into thin air.

Something brushed against my arm, and I jumped only to see that it was Lola standing beside me. For a second I had convinced myself that Chessa was using some kind of cloaking magic and was lurking around us unseen.

*Stop creeping yourself out, dufus*, I chastised myself.

“I hate to state the obvious,” Lola said. “But the bitch has left the building. She must have found a way out.”

I walked to the only window in the room. It was so old that it had been painted shut dozens of times. The glass was covered in a layer of grime and cracked, but still intact. There was no way that Chessa could have opened it without breaking it. Besides that, it was a tiny window. She wouldn’t have fit through it.

Leaning closer to the window, I looked out at the grounds below. Was Chessa out there? But how? Sage and Zainab were keeping watch. Surely, they would have heard something.

As I racked my brain for possible answers, Jay walked into the room with the rest of the pack. They glanced around and soon looked as confused as we were a few minutes prior.

“Where is she?” Jay asked.

“Gone,” Greyson said through gritted teeth.

“Did any of you hear or see anything on your way up here?” Xavier asked.

Everyone shook their heads. Chessa had managed to slip through our fingers. It was incredibly frustrating, though some took it worse than others.

Ava scoffed. “Great. Now what? Let’s just go back to *our* pack house.”

I bit my tongue to keep from telling her to go right ahead. We could take on the vampire on the loose without her and her cliquish pack.

But I kept my mouth shut.

I knew how my comment would make me look, and I didn’t want to add more fuel to the fire. Ava had been in a shit mood from the start, and I reminded myself to stay out of it. I wasn’t sure if she was upset because she didn’t want the Samaras to be involved or if she was upset because Xavier was the one to get them involved.

*Best not to find out*, I thought.

“Has anyone ever tried one of those escape rooms before?” Cresta said, breaking the tense silence.

Everyone turned to her, waiting for an explanation. I was sure we had all heard of escape rooms before, but I wasn’t sure how it was relevant to Chessa’s great escape.

“What about them?” Greyson asked.

“Basically, you get put in a room with your group and you all have to work together to find a way out,” she said. “There are always clues and sometimes even a hidden passage.”

Memories of the Vanguard palace came to mind. It had hidden panels tucked behind paintings, secret passageways between the walls and hidden tunnels at every dead end.

The house we were in was nowhere near as big or as elaborate as the palace, but it was big enough to keep more than a few secrets. I figured that Chessa was clever enough to have anticipated some kind of attack and planned ahead for it. Had she chosen this house because it had a hidden way out?

*If I were a vampire, I’d totally think that way*, I thought.

“Why don’t we all look for possible hidden panels or secret exits?” I suggested. “If we don’t find Chessa, we might still be able to find her crypt.”

“Yeah, awesome idea,” Ava muttered.

But she, along with everyone else, searched every square inch of the room. They patted the walls, pulled up floorboards and even checked the ancient crown molding for hidden levers.

“Help me up, babe,” Lola said.

Jay hoisted her up on his shoulders, and she checked the ceiling for any hidden passageways. There had to be one in the room. Scanning the room, my eyes eventually landed on the broken dresser. I made my way toward it and caught my reflection in the dusty mirror.

I grimaced.

I looked like death warmed over. My hair was all over the place, and my clothes were torn in random places. Blood and dirt stained the fabric as well as my skin. I would need about ten showers and a week-long bath to feel clean again.

Just as I got ready to look away from the ghastly sight of myself, I paused. Why would a vampire need a mirror? It wasn’t like they could see themselves in it.

Stepping closer to the mirror, I noticed that there were handprints in the dust. They look fairly recent, and I was certain that none of us had put them there. So, who did?

I reached out to touch the mirror. It shifted slightly. Drawing a breath, I pulled it away from the wall to reveal a hidden passageway. A cold, dank draft cooled my skin.

“Hey! I found it!” I said.

Greyson and Xavier were the first ones to come over to confirm my discovery. They jostled each other to look into it before confirming my suspicions.

“I can pick up Chessa’s scent,” Greyson said.

“Me too. She definitely went this way,” Xavier said.

He started to climb into the passageway when Greyson suddenly pulled him back. The brothers looked ready to come to blows.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Greyson asked.

“What does it look like?” Xavier snarled. “Do you really want to keep wasting time?”

“I thought we were doing this together?” Greyson asked.

Xavier scoffed. “What? You want to go in first? By all means, big brother. Lead the way.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Greyson argued.

“Sure, it’s not,” Xavier said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Then what did you mean?”

“We should be making a plan of attack instead of acting impulsively,” Greyson said. “What if this is a trap? We don’t know what’s in that passageway.”

“And we won’t ever find out by just standing here,” Xavier said.

They went back and forth until I let out an exasperated breath. While they were content to argue for the rest of their lives, I wasn’t going to stand there and listen to them. Not when Codsworth was still out there.

“Is this really the best time to argue?” I asked.

Greyson took a breath. “I think it would be a mistake for everyone to go this way.”

“Fine,” Xavier said. “Then what should we do? Twiddle our thumbs and hope she stakes herself?”

Greyson glared at Xavier, resisting the urge to punch his brother. I glared at them both so that they wouldn’t forget why we were in that creepy house in the first place.

“I suggest the two of us go into the passageway,” Greyson said, then turned to the others. “We’re going after her. The rest of you go with Cali and see if you can find the crypt. Maybe there are survivors.”

I was surprised by Greyson’s plan. While I did want to find the crypt as quickly as possible, I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of my two mates disappearing into a dark, dank passageway to hunt down a murderous vampire.

Though it set my teeth on edge, Greyson’s plan made sense. He and Xavier were the best fighters. If anyone could take on Chessa and kill her, it would be them.

Seeing the residual worry on my face, Greyson mind linked with me, *We’ll be okay, love,* he said. *Don’t worry.*

*Easier said than done*, I replied.

He gave me a brief smile, then turned to his brother.

“After you, *Alpha*,” he said.

**Episode 4945**

**Xavier**

I risked a glance at Ava and saw that she had that broody expression on her pretty face. She didn’t have to say anything for me to know that it meant trouble.

Oh well. Neither she nor anyone else was going to change my mind about hunting that vampire down. I had to do it. I would deal with the consequences later.

My head throbbed, and I nearly barged into the passage again. Greyson assumed I was just trying to assert myself as an Alpha in front of the Loneclaws. While he wasn’t completely wrong, he was way off base.

More than anything, I was desperate to get away from Cali and Ava. Just thinking about them together hurt my head, but being in the same room with them was becoming unbearable. It felt like the walls were closing in, compounding my pain.

My head felt like it was caught in a vise grip. The pain was so intense that I had to steady myself against the dresser so that I wouldn’t stagger. I tried to be as subtle as possible, hoping that no one noticed.

“After you, *Alpha*,” Greyson said.

I all but leapt into the narrow opening. As I got ready to crawl through the hole, Ava mind linked with me, *You better be careful, or I’ll kill you*, she said.

I smiled, somehow feeling grateful for the threat. She may have been mad at me, but she still cared about me. That had to count for something.

“I promise,” I said.

I waited briefly to see if Cali would mind link too, but she didn’t, so I moved deeper into the passage. I couldn’t read her face and wasn’t sure how she felt about me in any sense. Not that I had the time to worry about it. I had to stay focused. Greyson had already let Chessa escape; I wasn’t about to let that happen again. Together we would track her down and kill her.

Though Chessa had been clever and strong enough to avoid us until then, Greyson and I had enough experience to take her down. We knew what to do and had killed vampires far more powerful than the one we were hunting.

The passageway grew narrower and narrower until I had to turn sideways in order to keep moving forward. I took the opportunity to wait for Greyson. The last thing I wanted was for us to get separated in here. If the passageway became as maze-like as the rest of the house, we wouldn’t be able to find each other or a way out.

I gritted my teeth as one of my shoulders scraped against a sharp piece of stone. I could hardly move, let alone get comfortable. Any thought of shifting into my wolf form fell out of my head. There was no way I could shift and not get stuck.

*The sooner we get out of here, the better*, I thought.

Greyson tapped me on the shoulder, making my heart skip a beat. I kept my face neutral but glared at him in the darkness.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“I was waiting for you,” I said.

“Well, I’m here, so let’s go,” he said.

“Do you want to crawl over me too?” I asked. “Take the lead since you’re so keen on being the Alpha of Alphas.”

“I’m not keen on anything other than finding this vampire and killing her,” he said. “We don’t have time for your bad attitude right now.”

“And yours is absolutely stellar, right?” I balked.

We bickered for another minute before Lola called into the passageway. Beyond annoyed with my idiot brother, I moved down the tight passage. As I squeezed my way along, I felt the vise around my head loosening. The farther I got from Ava and Cali, the better I felt.

Before tonight, I thought I could handle the pain of being around them. But I was wrong. It was obvious that I couldn’t overcome what was happening to me without some help. Still, I refused to return to Carlson Greene. Fuck that guy.

I could manage without him, but not bringing Big Mac’s potion had been a huge mistake. Luckily, the farther away I got, the less my head ached. It was nearly gone when I ran headfirst into an overhead pipe. Biting back a curse, I closed my eyes until the pain stopped radiating between my temples.

*So much for the no headache thing*, I thought.

Cursing again, I stooped down to avoid hitting my head again. The wall above angled in, which meant that we would have to stay low until we got out. If things kept up like this, we would be slithering on our stomachs.

*Why couldn’t Chessa have chosen a larger escape route?* I wondered bitterly.

Greyson came up right behind me, somehow managing to miss the pipe. He scented the air, and I did the same. I was sure he could still pick up Chessa’s smell as well as I could. My stomach roiled as the stench of nauseating death overwhelmed my nostrils.

We were definitely on the right track.

I kept shuffling forward, eventually coming to a sharp turn. There was barely enough room to squeeze through, so I had to scrape my face against the jagged-edged wall. Just as I was about to move forward to give Greyson more room, he yanked me back and made me bang my head on another pipe.

“Fuck! What the hell was that for?” I asked.

Without saying a word, Greyson snapped a piece of exposed wood from the wall and tossed it ahead of us. There was a flash of movement followed by a loud snapping sound. Looking down, I saw a large, clawed trap with silver jaws. The piece of wood was trapped between the individual claws, broken into dozens of pieces.

“That would have been your leg,” Greyson said.

“Thanks,” I said in a voice barely above a grunt.

Chessa wasn’t stupid. She was ready for us. That trap was clearly meant to maim a werewolf. If I had stepped in it, I probably wouldn’t have survived it.

“There might be more surprises like that,” Greyson said. “Be very careful.”

“Count on it,” I said.

With eyes wide open, we each stepped over the trap and kept going. I kept my eyes on the treacherous path ahead. Was Chessa still somewhere inside? I reached another sharp turn and was about to pass through it when I heard a loud crash behind me.

I had to strain my head to look, but finally I saw that the passageway behind me was empty. Where the hell was Greyson? Did he veer off onto another path somehow?

Just as I was about to call out his name, I heard a loud groan. I followed the sound until I found its source. Greyson had fallen through the floor and was hanging onto the edge. He stared at me pointedly.

“Mind giving me a hand?” he asked.

I hoisted my brother up, which wasn’t easy considering I could only use one arm. The passage was too narrow for me to offer him both. We did our best not to touch the walls around us in case they were booby trapped or too derelict. Both were too risky.

“Guess that means we’re even,” I said, turning back to keep pressing ahead.

As I worked hard to avoid matching Greyson’s fate, I started to feel a breeze on my face. Eventually a silver light broke the darkness. Chessa’s scent mixed with the smell of the outdoors. I looked ahead and saw that I had reached a barred window that was still ajar. It overlooked a moonlit yard down below.

“She couldn’t have gotten far,” Greyson said.

I got his message: keep going.

Without a word, I reared back and jumped out of the window. I shifted just before I hit the ground and landed lightly. Chessa’s redolent scent hit my nose, and I ran after it, knowing that Greyson would be right behind me.

Dead leaves and small twigs crunched under my paws as I ran. No longer confined to the narrow passageway, I enjoyed the feeling of the breeze on my face. I was in my element in my wolf form, as well as on the hunt. I couldn’t wait to catch my prey and rid the world of another dangerous vampire.

The trail led me deeper into the woods. Though I ran fast, I kept my eyes out for more traps. Chessa would have been expecting us to give chase out here too.

Suddenly, I picked up the scent of something that I wasn’t expecting. A werewolf? I came to a sudden stop, and Greyson slammed right into me.

*I smell a werewolf*, I said via mind link.

*Not just any werewolf*, Greyson answered. *I recognize her. She’s the one I’ve been looking for.*

We both turned to look ahead just as the werewolf we scented stepped out from behind a tree.

**Episode 4946**

**Artemis**

I clutched desperately at the chains tightening around my throat, trying to get my fingers underneath them, to gain some minor bit of relief, so I could at least pull in a tiny sip of air. But the chain was too tight.

Horrible, pained rasping sounds came from my throat as the chains dug into my neck when Coriander hoisted me off the ground.

“Coriander, put her down,” Marius demanded, stepping forward.

Instead of releasing me, the man only tightened his hold. If he kept this up and I couldn’t draw in some air soon, I was going to pass out. And then where would that leave us? It wasn’t as if Marius could handle this without my help. I didn’t even know if I could trust him not to leave me at Coriander’s mercy if it benefited him.

I threw Marius a glare, and for a moment, I wished I could mind link. *Wanna try something that’ll actually work this time?*

“Not until you get me out of here,” Coriander growled, yanking the chain wrapped around my neck for good measure. “Either I go free, or she dies.”

*This is going just great…* Spots started to appear in the corners of my vision. I didn’t have long before I’d black out. I stopped fighting against Coriander’s hold, trying to preserve my rapidly deteriorating stores of oxygen.

“But we’ve come to free you,” Marius insisted.

*He’s not exactly lying*, I thought as the world narrowed to a pinpoint. *We* were *freeing Coriander—or, at least, that was our plan—so we could then hand him over.*

At that, the brute’s grip eased up ever so slightly, allowing me to gulp down air between gagging and choking. It more dragged out the torture than provided relief, but at least I was still conscious.

“Marius?” Coriander asked, his brows knitting together.

Marius grinned that arrogant, shit-eating grin, and even though I hated it, I felt nothing but relief at seeing it now. Because, if anything, it had to mean my chances of surviving this encounter were improving.

“The one and only,” Marius said, puffing out his chest.

“Why the hell should I believe a thing you say?” Coriander spat. “For all I know, you’re planning to betray me at the first opportunity.”

*It’s like he’s psychic*, I thought sarcastically.

“You don’t have to trust me,” Marius said, “but if you don’t, I’ll just leave you here to rot. It’s your choice.”

“And what about her?” Coriander hoisted me up a little higher again with a sneer. He was still giving me just enough oxygen to stay conscious. My neck was in agony, and pain streaked down my spine and up into my skull. One thing was certain: whether I walked away from this or not, I was definitely going to feel it later.

Marius shrugged. “She means nothing to me. Do what you want.”

My eyes narrowed, and I stared daggers at him. *Seriously? Forget this.* I wasn’t going to wait around for this pathetic excuse for a negotiation to end—it had already gone on way longer than I was comfortable with. I slipped a leg between the bars and back-kicked Coriander. He grunted in pain and released the chain around my throat. I collapsed in a heap at his feet, coughing and gasping as air rushed back into my tender, swollen throat.

Marius immediately rushed over and dropped to his knees beside me. “Are you okay?”

I smacked him. Hard. “You didn’t seem to care a second ago. I mean nothing to you, remember?” My voice was little more than a rasp, barely intelligible, even to myself, but I could tell from his expression that he got the message.

His lips curved into a sheepish grin. “I was bluffing, wasn’t I?” He offered his hand, and I slapped it away before lifting myself to my feet.

*I never should have made this deal with him.*

While Marius and I were having our little moment, Coriander was slumped on the floor of the cell, groaning and clutching his crotch. I didn’t feel even a little bit sorry for the guy. If anything, I was just sorry I hadn’t been wearing thicker boots. Maybe something with a steel heel. Now, that’d make him think twice before trying to strangle someone.

I rubbed my tender neck and gestured to Coriander. “There’s your guy. Let’s grab him and get the hell out of here.”

Marius stalked to the door and tried to wrench it open. “It’s locked.”

I sighed, then winced at the pressure it put on my throat. *Of course it’s fucking locked.*

He looked around. “There must be a key somewhere.”

“The guards…” Coriander gritted out as he slowly rose to his feet. “They keep the keys on them. If you really intend to free me, we’ll have to break the door down.”

“Stand back,” Marius warned Coriander, then he rushed forward and rammed the door—shoulder first. Predictably, he practically bounced off the thick wooden surface, wincing and clutching his shoulder.

*How on earth did I get stuck with someone so useless?*

I rolled my eyes. “Do you really think they’d make a prison door that’s weak enough to be knocked down by one Fae alone?”

He glared at me, his cheeks reddening. “Look for something we can use as a wedge then. Unless you have a better idea?”

I shrugged. “You’re the guy with all the answers. Go for it.”

As Marius searched the cell, I approached the door and inspected the lock. I’d used my magic to open a lock before, back when Cali first came to the Fae world. But it had been a long while since I’d used my magic that way. I didn’t even know if I *could* use my magic in that capacity anymore. I was more in control of my magic than I had been since I’d broken my Fae promise to my mother, but picking a lock wasn’t something I’d tried since then either…

A loud *crack* pulled me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see Marius approaching the door with a broken flagpole.

“It’s the best I could do,” he said. He shoved one end under the door and heaved with all his might to try to push the door upward and break the lock. All that happened was Marius grew rather red in the face.

He turned to me, panting. “A little help?”

“Stand back,” I said.

He chuckled. “Come on, Ari. We both know I’m stronger than you.”

“Are you?” I grabbed hold of the pole, pulled in a deep breath, and summoned my magic while pushing down on the wedge. Focusing my magic on the lock, I pushed it through the mechanism as I pressed on the wedge.

Seconds later, the lock snapped and the door swung open.

Marius and Coriander stared at me in shock. I just smiled.

“I… I must have loosened it, or something,” Marius muttered.

I tossed the flagpole across the cell. “Or something.”

Shaking his head, Marius grabbed Coriander by the arm. “Let’s get out of here before we attract company.”

Coriander planted his feet on the stone, holding up his chained hands. “What about these?”

“They make lovely bracelets,” I said. “Very stylish. They’re staying on.”

I wasn’t about to trust this guy after he’d already tried to kill me once. I still didn’t even know for sure what his deal was—only that Marius needed to deliver him for the bounty to repay his debt. Ignoring Coriander’s protests, we retraced our steps and worked our way past the guards as quickly as possible.

Some of the guards were regaining consciousness as we passed. “Hey, stop,” one called out feebly as he staggered to his feet.

I leapt up and kicked him into the stone wall, and he dropped like a sack of flour, unconscious once more. We made our way to the window that we’d come in through. I climbed out first, making sure the coast was clear before signaling to the others.

Coriander crawled out next, followed by Marius. Within seconds, Coriander slipped on the rock wall and dragged Marius down with him. They crashed in a heap of limbs at my feet.

“Let’s get going,” I said as they collected themselves. The sooner we dropped this guy off, the sooner we could get back to the reason I’d come to the Fae world in the first place—to look for Kadmos.

Marius led us into the surrounding woods, and once we were under the cover of the trees, heading up the crest of a hill, Coriander stopped.

“I’m out of prison now. Why don’t you set me free and you won’t have to bother with me anymore?”

Marius shook his head. “Sorry, I can’t do that. There’s someone waiting to meet you.”

His eyes narrowed. “Who?”

Marius pointed down the hill. “Just down that way, and all your questions will be answered.”

I took in the view and then froze in horror. It felt like all the air had been sucked out of my lungs. I turned on Marius, hissing, “What the hell are you thinking? That’s the Dark Fae court.”

“And that’s where I have to take him.”

I shook my head. “If I go there, I’m dead.”

**Episode 4947**

**Greyson**

I knew this werewolf. It was the one I’d chased down before. The one who had trespassed on Redwood territory the night we’d staged the “wolf” sighting for Codsworth and his club and had first ended up on the trail of that vampire.

*Over and over again, this Rogue werewolf keeps showing up while we’re hunting this vampire. It can’t be a coincidence.*

I didn’t know how, but this werewolf and Chessa had to be connected. I just needed to figure out how and why.

*No time like the present…*

I pushed Xavier off me and scrambled after the wolf at full speed. I wasn’t about to lose her again, not after how long I’d spent chasing her. I charged toward her and managed to lunge at her before she had a chance to run off. I landed on her, driving her into the ground and pinning her beneath me. The wolf struggled to break free, but I overpowered her. One of the perks of being an Alpha—even a wolf as strong and fast as she was couldn’t match me when push came to shove.

Xavier came running over. *Is this the one?*

I nodded.

The wolf struggled beneath me, trying to wriggle out of my grip, so I bit down on her throat, careful not to break the skin but making damn sure there was no missing the intent behind my actions. Staring up at me with fear in her dilated pupils, she went limp beneath me and finally gave up the fight.

Now that she was finally still, I had a chance to take her in. There was a splash of purple in her eyes, and a ring of dark fur around her neck. Her breath was rapid at first, but slowing now. I finally had her at my mercy. Finally, I could learn everything I’d been so desperate to find out, and a myriad of questions raced to the forefront of my mind. Who was she? Where had she come from? How was she connected to Chessa? How did she end up in Redwood territory? And why did she run the first few times but give up the fight now?

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time for a Q&A. The longer we lingered out here, the more we risked Chessa’s scent trail going cold.

Suddenly, the wolf shifted beneath me. She was still pinned down to the ground by my giant paws—which looked all the more huge now that she was in her human form, her face inches from my own. The purple in her eyes was more pronounced, and her white skin was flawless. I was suddenly aware that she was naked beneath me, and so, so vulnerable.

I backed off, almost ashamed by the position she was in, though I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong. The wolf—no, the *woman*—held my gaze, her eyes defiant like she was daring me to look away from her. I shifted back to my human form as well, and we stared at one another, the air thick between us as each of us waited for the other to make a move.

Seconds later, Xavier shifted and broke through the tension. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

Slowly, the woman drew her stunning eyes away from mine and looked at Xavier. “I’m Kendall.”

I searched my memory, trying to see if the name felt familiar. *She* certainly seemed familiar, though I couldn’t quite identify why that was. Maybe because I saw her before on my land and chased her then?

No… It felt deeper than that. But I couldn’t explain any of it.

Xavier shot me an annoyed look and stepped closer. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. In that moment, I felt a flash of gratitude for my abrasive brother. Maybe he was a pain in the ass ninety-nine percent of the time, but in this moment, he was getting the information we needed. The information that, for yet another unknown reason, I wasn’t totally capable of obtaining at the moment.

“I was just exploring the area,” Kendall said, seemingly unconcerned by Xavier’s tone. “Is that a crime?”

He scoffed. “It could be.”

At that, I finally found my voice. “You were trespassing in my territory,” I said, trying to find the conviction that I knew I should feel. “That *is* a crime.”

“It was a mistake,” she said. “I got lost. I didn’t mean any harm.”

“You got lost?” I frowned. “That’s awfully convenient, don’t you think? Where were you going, anyway?”

She started to get up, and, as if by reflex, I offered her a hand. Her skin was pleasantly warm and soft against mine. A detail that did a hell of a job of distracting me from the task in front of me. Once she was standing, I dropped her hand.

Xavier’s voice slipped through my mind. *What should we do with her? It’s your call.*

I wished I knew. I couldn’t shake the sense of certainty that this Rogue was somehow connected to Chessa, maybe even to all the people who were going missing on Cali’s university campus, but I also couldn’t find a meaningful reason to actually hold her accountable. All I had were suspicions. What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

“Have you seen or smelled a vampire around?” I asked her.

“Yes, actually. I detected a vampire scent recently, but I had trouble tracking it.”

My frown deepened. *That* was not the response I’d been expecting. “Why would you want to track a vampire?”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” she pointed out.

“We have our reasons. It’s been seen on our territory, and—”

Xavier cut me off with a huff, and I couldn’t even find it in myself to be too annoyed with him about it, because why the hell was I explaining myself to this Rogue anyway?

“Enough of this crap,” he snapped. “You can’t expect us to believe that you just happen to be tracking a vampire—that you just happened to get lost on our—” he cut himself off. “On *Redwood* land.” He turned to me. “She’s clearly lying. I don’t care if she’s a Rogue or not, she should still know where she is—a werewolf pack’s territory.”

He wasn’t wrong. Our scent had to be all over these woods. If she’d been running around for days, as I suspected she had, then she knew for certain where she was and that these lands were inhabited by other wolves already.

*She has to be hiding something*. But something about her told me she wasn’t a threat. Unfortunately, I didn’t exactly have much to take on faith with this mysterious wolf either.

I met Kendall’s eyes. “Just tell us the truth. Please.”

“I am. I’m a Rogue. I’m new to the area, and I’m *so sorry* I didn’t know anything about your precious pack territories,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I have my personal reasons for hunting that vampire—reasons that are none of your business—and the truth is, every minute we stand around here playing junior detective, the vampire we’re all trying to find is getting farther away. So, we can stay here and play twenty questions, or we can track that bloodsucker down. Which is it going to be?”

*Wow.* She’d really put me on the spot. I couldn’t afford to let Chessa get away—not again. She was hurting innocent people, and I couldn’t let that stand. Not while I was the Redwood Alpha. And while I did have a million questions for this mystery woman, she hadn’t posed a threat to me. Even when we’d spotted her the night of the party, she hadn’t actually done anything to hurt anyone, and she easily could have killed Codsworth when he stumbled into her path. Instead, she’d run.

I pulled in a deep breath and made my decision. I turned to Xavier. “We need to go after Chessa.”

Xavier glanced at Kendall. “I just hope you’re not making a mistake.”

*That makes two of us.*

I looked back at Kendall. “You’re coming with us. No more of this Rogue bullshit interfering with pack business. If you interfere, you will see the consequences.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, but she didn’t say anything. And, a few moments later, the three of us had shifted back into our wolf forms and were on the vampire’s trail again. Now that Kendall was traveling with us, I was on edge trying to track Chessa and keep an eye on Kendall at the same time. Thankfully, I had Xavier as backup.

*Why do I feel like I know Kendall? Or, at least, like I’ve met her somewhere? I guess I could have encountered her during my own time as a Rogue, but I’m pretty sure I would have remembered eyes like that.*

After a beat, I realized the trail was veering off, backtracking.

Xavier mind linked to me. *The bloodsucker is heading back toward the house.*

Horror raked its claws through me. Chessa was heading back toward Cali.

**Episode 4948**

I bit my lip as I looked around the room. With the dead guy lying in the middle of the floor, the ambience certainly left a lot to be desired. And yet, as creepy as this place was, the danger was outside, there in the woods I could just make out through the grime-stained window.

*I hope Greyson and Xavier are okay.* I hated the idea of them going out to track down Chessa alone, but I had to trust them. I had to have faith in them—they were both Alphas. They could take down one vampire together, couldn’t they?

Besides, I couldn’t just sit here and worry about them. There were still lives at stake. At least, I hoped there were still lives at stake… which was kind of a creepy thing to admit, but the alternative was that everyone was already dead and nobody—not even Codsworth—could be rescued.

I gulped. *No, I won’t let that happen. We’re going to save him. We’re going to save as many people as possible.*

“Are you sure you heard that dying guy correctly?” Lola asked. “You’re sure he said the ‘crypt’?”

I could tell she wanted me to be wrong. Hell, *I* wanted to be wrong. Just being in this creepy murder house was awful enough. Descending into a bona fide crypt was *not* my idea of a good time.

I played the guy’s words over in my head. “I can’t really be sure of anything, but I can’t imagine what other word he might have said. And since we’re dealing with a vampire, it seems reasonable there would be a crypt somewhere in this house, doesn’t it? At the very least, we should check the whole house. And if there is a crypt…” I grimaced. “Wouldn’t the most likely place be the basement? Isn’t that where crypts usually are?”

Ava snorted. “We already checked the basement.”

Knox nodded. “We didn’t find anything down there.”

I tried to figure out how to approach this with diplomacy. I didn’t want them to think I didn’t trust their judgment, but also… I didn’t totally trust their judgment.

“I know,” I said carefully, “but you were looking for a vampire, not a crypt. I think it’s worth checking again to see if—”

“If we missed something?” Ava cut in. “Do you really feel like you have to micromanage every step of this?”

I forced myself to stand tall and not shy away from the confrontation that always seemed to crop up between Ava and me. I wanted to keep the peace, especially considering the mixed company we were in and all the lives that were on the line while we argued, but I also refused to be intimidated by her. After all, it wasn’t *her* friend who would die if we didn’t find the crypt.

“You can stay up here if you want to,” I said. “It’s your choice. But I’m going down to the basement. It’s a place to start, at the very least. And if we come up empty, then we’ll move on to the first floor.”

I felt Ava’s eyes boring into the back of my head as I moved toward the door with Lola hot on my heels. *At least I have Lola’s support.*

Moments later, footsteps following behind us, along with a loud and long-suffering sigh, told me Ava and Knox had followed after us. They were coming down to the basement after all.

Sage led us to the basement door, and it was every bit as creepy as I’d imagined it would be.

“Be careful everyone,” Sage said, “the steps are ready to collapse. You should probably take it one person at a time.”

Jay stepped forward. “Let me go first. Just in case there’s trouble.”

I shook my head. “I can do it.”

“Yeah, you can. But Greyson will have my ass if something happens to you.”

I couldn’t really argue with that, so I stepped aside as Jay started down the stairs.

The stairs groaned and creaked beneath Jay’s weight, and my teeth ground together with worry. Had I just sent him into a death trap? A sharp *crack* made me gasp.

“Jay!” Lola cried. “Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine. Just watch out for the middle steps. They’re the worst.” A few agonizingly long moments later, with more creaking and groaning, Jay’s footsteps scuffed against something that sounded like stone. “I’m at the bottom. The stairwell’s clear for the next person!”

I took a deep breath, then gingerly headed down the stairs. My heart raced as each step groaned beneath me, but I made it to the bottom and the rest of the group followed after, one by one.

I scrunched up my nose and gagged. “What on earth is that smell? It’s disgusting.”

“I have a feeling we’re about to find out,” Jay said solemnly.

My stomach flipped over, but I breathed slowly through my mouth, which helped a tiny bit. *Why would Chessa choose a place like this anyway? Doesn’t she get repulsed by nasty smells too?*

Once everyone was down the stairs, I took the lead. We crossed the dank room, and I brushed away cobwebs and tried not to throw up from the stench, which was only getting worse. I wished I knew what we were looking for. I’d gotten lucky when I found the mirror that covered the passageway upstairs, and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be that lucky again.

“Spread out and keep looking,” I said to the group.

“Looking for what?” Ava muttered.

I bit back a retort and moved on to the next room with only the flashlight on my phone to guide me. Hopefully the battery wouldn’t die soon. I didn’t have the benefit of werewolf eyes—or in Lola’s case, hybrid eyes—and it was dark as hell down here.

Zainab’s voice echoed through the basement. “I think I found a light switch!”

Moments later, weak yellow light flooded the basement, coming from a single old bulb. I breathed a sigh of relief, then, gagging a little bit at the continued stench, turned my flashlight off and stowed my phone.

*I’m honestly surprised there’s electricity in this place at all.* The intense murder vibes didn’t exactly scream, *“We have utilities!”*

We were in a narrow corridor, trudging through a couple inches of water when a splashing sound echoed. I turned to see Cresta on her hands and knees in the water. She must have tripped.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m fine.”

Milo hunched down by Cresta’s feet. “I think she found something.”

We all gathered around. A metal ring was just visible beneath the surface of the murky water.

*That sure looks important.* “Could this be the way to open the crypt?” I asked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jay said.

I jumped back as he pulled up on the ring—and the door connected to it—to reveal a hatchway. We all stared down in disbelief.

*Holy crap. There really is a crypt down there, isn’t there?*

I glanced at Ava, who was staring down at the hatch with a frown. Even though I’d proven her wrong, I didn’t feel an ounce of satisfaction about it. It was one thing to look for a crypt in the most logical place to find it when it was still only a hypothetical destination. It was a whole other thing to actually find and *enter* said real-life crypt.

And, oh my god, the *smell*. It practically knocked me over, and it was coming from the hatch. I didn’t know how all these werewolves with their sensitive noses were able to tolerate it.

I peered over the edge of the hatch, where stone steps led down into a dark hole. *Because of course we’re going into an even deeper, darker, and more horrifying place… It’s practically the textbook definition of a “crypt.”*

“Well?” Ava pressed.

“I can go first,” Jay offered.

I shook my head. “I’ll lead the way.” I had my phone with its flashlight, and I could use my magic to protect myself if needed. Besides, I wanted to show Ava I wasn’t afraid.

I took a moment to reach for my magic, to keep it ready to use just in case, and then I stepped down through the hatch with my phone’s flashlight guiding me. The stairs seemed to descend downward forever, winding around and around until I couldn’t see any light from the basement above. Finally, I reached the bottom.

“What’s even down there?” Lola called from the steps above me. The rest of the group had followed me down.

I held up my phone. The stairs led to a brick wall. *That doesn’t make any sense! Why build a set of stairs to nowhere? Or why build over whatever the stairs led to?*

I looked around, hoping I was missing something, but there was nothing else. Just some steps and a wall. I was about to turn back when Lola appeared behind me.

“I smell blood.” She stepped forward to examine the bricks and found one that pulled out. She reached into the hole the brick had left behind, and moments later a *click* sounded. The wall slowly rotated open, and Lola and I jumped back with twin screams.

“What the actual fuck?!” Lola gasped, staring ahead at the newly revealed room.

I couldn’t speak. I could barely breathe.

The room looked like a meat locker… only the meat was human.

**Episode 4949**

I jumped back in horror, instinctively throwing my hands up in front of me. Only with my magic locked and loaded, I accidentally sent a blast of magic into an empty meat hook, causing it to swing back and forth from the ceiling, the old, rusted metal squeaking and groaning with each swing.

I backed into Lola, who backed into Jay, who stumbled back into Zainab, and the chain reaction continued until I heard Ava’s irritated voice snap, “Watch it!”

I couldn’t believe this was real. This was like something out of a horror movie. Something that not even my worst nightmares could conjure.

*I wish Greyson were here.* It wouldn’t change just how fucking terrifying this all was, but I’d feel just that tiniest bit safer with him here next to me. But he wasn’t here. I had to do this without him. If I backed out now, I knew I’d regret it for the rest of my life.

If Codsworth was here, I had to know. I had to get justice for him and everyone else Chessa had attacked.

No matter how horrifying it all was, no matter what happened next, there was no backing down now.

Lola stepped forward, her voice no louder than a whisper. “Are they all… dead?”

I didn’t know. I didn’t *want* to know. I glanced backward over my shoulder. Everyone else seemed frozen in place, similarly disabled by the horrific sight in front of us. I read their faces and knew I must look the exact same way they did. None of us wanted to take another step farther, to get any closer to the carnage in front of us. Nobody wanted to see the truth that lay before us.

And yet, we had to. *I* had to, if I wanted to save my friend.

Slowly, my heart hammering in my chest so hard I was sure everyone in the room could hear it, I raised my phone. The flashlight illuminated the open space in front of us. Bodies hung upside down from the ceiling on the meat hooks.

I took in a deep breath, then gagged. The scent down here—which I now knew had to be decomposing bodies and gore—was overwhelming. I fought back the bile that tried to rise up my throat and cautiously stepped forward.

The ground stuck to my feet, and each step made a squelching noise. I didn’t have to look down to know why. In fact, I was pretty sure that if I did look down, I would lose what little control over my body I had left.

It took all of my courage, but I forced myself to look at the closest body. It wasn’t Codsworth, but whoever it was, they were definitely dead. Relief mixed with a soul-sick dread, and my heart and stomach dipped at the same time.

This was… horrible. No, worse. There wasn’t even a word for the carnage and loss and violation that stretched out in front of me. All these people who’d been taken, brutalized, and then strung up like animals.

I turned away from the dead body. I’d have to check all of them, wouldn’t I?

Tears burned in the corners of my eyes. I didn’t know if I could do it.

“Codsworth?” I called out, my voice thick with the emotion I was trying like hell to keep at bay. The fear and horror and grief and disgust. The deep, deep dread that made me regret ever coming here.

The only sound I heard, save for Lola’s breaths behind me, was dripping. And, either because they sensed that I couldn’t do this alone, or they just didn’t want to wait around in this fetid crypt all night for me to muster up the strength to check each of these bodies for my friend, the others began to move past me and enter the room. Many of them pulled out their phones too, turning on the flashlights, which cast terrifying shadows around the room and made it seem like the bodies were moving.

I forced myself to take another step forward when a voice called out, “In here.”

I looked around. “In where?”

Lola pointed to a cement sarcophagus-looking shape. “The voice is coming from there.”

I took Lola’s hand, and slowly, we approached the sarcophagus. My magic sizzled around us, ready to blast anyone—or anything—that jumped out at us. I glanced over at Lola, whose fangs were out and ready to tear any threat to pieces.

We stopped a foot away. There was a heavy cement lid on it, slightly ajar.

“H-Hello?” I croaked.

A scraping sound answered from within the sarcophagus. Lola and I each took hold of the cover and tried to pull it open, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Help us,” Lola called out to the group, and Jay, Ava, and Knox all pitched in, and we managed to push the lid off.

A new, fouler scent rose up from the sarcophagus. I gagged, then heaved, barely keeping the contents of my stomach down. My eyes burned.

I forced myself to peer over the edge, then jumped back with a scream as an army of cockroaches poured out.

*Oh my god! Can this get any worse?!*

I waited until the roach stampede abated before trying to look inside again, this time raising my cell phone light. I gasped, my eyes landing on the emaciated face of a man. He could have been in his twenties or his eighties, it was impossible to tell with the state he was in.

Beneath greying wisps of hair, his eyes were dilated, and he reached a bony hand toward me. “Help me.” His voice was barely more than a whisper.

I hesitated, and Lola stepped up to help. “I’ve got this.” She brushed past me and leaned over. She grabbed the guy’s hand and pulled him up, and Jay and Ava joined in to help lift the man over the ledge.

The man crumpled against the sarcophagus lid, clearly too weak to stand on his own strength for long.

“Who are you?” I asked. “What happened to you?”

He looked around, his eyes wild. “We can’t stay here. She will come back. She always does.”

“Do you mean Chessa?” I asked.

The man pulled back in terror. “She’s the devil!”

Jay caught his arm. “It’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.”

“Are there others?” I asked. “People like you who were… um, trapped?”

He just stared at me like I’d just spoken in a foreign language. I felt sort of bad asking him so many questions when he’d clearly been through hell and needed help. Lots of help. He’d probably need to be hospitalized once this was all said and done. But he was the first of Chessa’s victims to survive long enough for me to get some information. I *had* to find Codsworth, one way or another. And who better to ask than this guy?

“I’m looking for my friend,” I explained. “I think… I think Chessa took him too. A guy named Codsworth.”

Recognition flashed in the man’s eyes. “Codsworth?”

I nodded. “Yes, do you know where he is?”

The man raised his arm and pointed. We all turned to look—he was pointing to one of the bodies hanging from the meat hooks. I gasped and felt my knees go weak.

*Is he… is he really dead then?* “No,” I whispered. “No, please.”

But then the guy turned and pointed to another body. “Codsworth,” he muttered. Then he pointed to another, and another, and another, muttering Codsworth’s name each time.

The realization hit me, and relief—and guilt—almost knocked me off my feet. *He’s in shock. He has no idea what he’s saying. Clearly, they can’t all be Codsworth.*

“Guys, we need to check the bodies,” I said, still shaky at the prospect. “See if anyone’s alive and if they match Codsworth’s description.”

We moved around the space quietly, checking the bodies. Each of the bodies I checked had gaping holes in their necks. No doubt from Chessa. As I turned to check a body, I bumped into another one and stumbled back as dead eyes stared back at me.

Once again, saliva filled my mouth, and I forced it back down. Something hard pressed against my back, and I blindly felt around until my fingers wrapped around something. A handle? I tugged on it, and another door opened to reveal yet another dark room.

A whimper sounded from inside the room. Someone was in here.

I held up my cell phone light and raked it around the room until I came to Codsworth, chained to the wall by his arms. Blood stained his neck and shirt, and his head was tilted to one side, revealing gruesome bite marks.

“Oh my god!” Tears blurred my eyes as I rushed toward him. “You’re alive! Don’t worry. We’re here to save you.”

I reached for the chains, trying to find a way to break them, and turned to call over my shoulder to the others. “I found him! He’s in here—”

A crash sounded from outside the room, followed by a scream.

**Episode 4950**

**Greyson**

Xavier and I raced back toward the house, followed closely by Kendall. I honestly wasn’t even really paying attention to Chessa’s scent now that we’d discovered she’d returned to the house. But every so often, when I did tune in to her scent, I noted it was getting stronger and stronger the closer we got to the house.

Guilt slammed into me, filling the space between my breaths. *I should have fucking known the vamp would do this. There’s a house full of victims back there—Cali included.*

I wouldn’t call myself an expert in vampires by any means, but it was almost unheard of to meet one who didn’t go crazy for the chance to drain a Fae’s blood. And Chessa didn’t seem special in that regard.

*If anything happens to Cali, I’ll never forgive myself.*

How could I have fallen for this trick? It was the oldest one in the book! Leading your adversaries away only to circle back and go in for the kill while they were gone.

I felt nothing but relief as that horrible, decrepit house came into view. We were close now. Soon, I’d be at Cali’s side, and I wouldn’t let anything hurt her. My only comfort was that she wasn’t alone in that horror show of a house. There were enough werewolf pack members—Redwood and Samara alike—to fight off a dozen vampires. Chessa might be cleverer than most vampires—I’d give her that—but she was no Adéluce. She couldn’t overpower that many people to get to Cali.

As we reached the stone steps leading to the house, I shifted back to my human form and hurried toward the door without waiting for Xavier. I knew he wouldn’t waste time. Not with Ava in the house too.

In the back of my mind, I wondered which of his mates he was more concerned about. Ava was his Luna, and despite the odds, genuine love had clearly blossomed between them while he’d been following Adéluce’s orders. Sometimes I still didn’t believe they’d found a way back to each other, considering they literally had the messiest history of anyone I’d ever known. But there was no denying the feelings between them.

But where did that leave Cali on Xavier’s radar? He wasn’t compelled to treat her like shit anymore, but things definitely didn’t seem warm between them at present.

*Is he rushing to save Cali? Or Ava? If they’re both in danger, who would he save first?*

As I reached the front door, a scream erupted from inside the house, and horror made me freeze for a split second, which was apparently all Xavier needed to catch up and plow into me.

“What are you doing?” he snapped. “Get the hell out of my way!”

He tried to shove past me as I tried to make my way through the door, and in the end all that happened was we tripped over each other and crashed through the door into the entryway of the house.

I scrambled to my feet, too focused on protecting my mate to get pissy with my brother. “Cali!” I called. “Cali?! Where are you?!”

We rushed to the stairs to retrace our steps to the second floor when shouts broke out, but not from upstairs.

Xavier frowned. “It’s coming from the basement.” He raced off, and I followed after him as fast as I could without sending up both sprawling down the stairs. As it was, I only just kept from tripping down the stairs and plowing right into my brother.

*It’d serve him right if I returned the favor.*

We reached the basement, a foul-smelling room with a few inches of murky, stagnant water on the floor. Good thing nearly everyone who’d come with us had werewolf healing abilities—this was the kind of place that required broad spectrum antibiotics when everything was said and done.

Xavier didn’t hesitate when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He moved across the room to a corridor and stood next to an opening in the ground. It was dark inside, and frankly, was definitely the kind of place where some supernatural monster might torture and murder someone.

*I have to hand it to Chessa. She’s got the vibes down pat.* Once we killed her, I made a mental note to burn this whole fucking place down.

My brother stepped down into the hatch without hesitating, and I continued to follow hot on his heels.

As we descended ever lower into this hell mouth that Chessa called home, I tried to mind link with Cali.

*Love? Are you okay? Can you hear me?*

Silence answered back. *Maybe it’s the stone walls. Maybe they’re blocking our connection.*

At the bottom of the stairs, Xavier suddenly lurched to a stop in front of an open doorway next to a brick wall. “What the fuck?!”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard *that* in Xavier’s voice—his usual brand of gruff aggression colored by… disbelief? Shock? Horror?

I joined him and, when I saw what he was looking at, I knew for sure it was horror that had colored his tone. Because—

“Holy shit.” I gasped. “What the…?”

“This is so fucked up,” Xavier whispered. “No, *beyond* fucked. This is—”

“Evil,” I finished for him.

I’d seen some messed-up shit in my life. But none of it compared to this—human bodies hanging from hooks like animals, blood everywhere, along with that putrid scent that I now knew was rotting flesh, and Jay, Knox, and Zainab fighting against a sallow toothpick of a man who was pinned to the wall, gnashing his teeth and screaming, trying to break free.

His was the voice we’d heard from upstairs. Shrill and raspy all at once. He looked like the walking dead.

I forced myself to look past the bizarre and gruesome scene. “Where’s Cali?”

“Greyson?”

Her voice had never sounded as sweet as it did in that vampire’s chop shop. She was standing next to what looked like an open sarcophagus made of cement, helping Lola hold up a bloodied and barely conscious Codsworth.

Xavier rushed over to Ava. “What the hell is going on down here? Who is this guy?” He nodded at the living corpse who was still fighting Jay, Zainab, and Knox.

I hurried over to Cali, dodging the bodies hanging in my path, and wrapped my arms around her. I breathed in her scent. Despite all the time she’d spend in this filthy, fetid house, her sweet scent still lingered, and I felt some of the fear and dread in my chest come unknotted.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “We found him.”

“I can see that. But who’s the other guy?” I asked.

She shrugged. “We don’t know. We found him in the sarcophagus when we were looking for Codsworth. We helped him out of it, but then he started screaming. Jay and the others are just trying to stop him from hurting himself. I think…” Her throat bobbed, and she cleared it before continuing. “I think he’s lost his mind.”

If he had, I wouldn’t blame him. This place was enough to make even the strongest of people crumble in on themselves. I was so damn proud of Cali for her strength, even if I still wished she’d never gotten involved in this manhunt in the first place.

“Did you have any luck finding Chessa?” she asked.

I shook my head. “We followed her scent back here…” I looked over my shoulders and realized for the first time since I’d rushed into the house that Kendall wasn’t behind us.

*She must have slipped away when Xavier and I weren’t looking.*

It was annoying, but I couldn’t worry about that right now.

“Hey!” Cresta shouted from between the racks of bodies. “Some of these people aren’t dead!”

“Help Codsworth get out of here,” I said. “The sooner everyone’s evacuated, the better. The fact that Chessa came back this way means she could strike at any minute.”

Then I left her side to go help the others find any survivors. Jay, Zainab, and Knox began leading the emaciated man toward the stairs, while Xavier and Ava helped another victim who looked like he’d just been pulled off a meat hook.

I got the nightmarish task of making sure we hadn’t forgotten anyone—werewolf or victim. Once we’d finally freed the last of the humans who were still alive, I led them upstairs.

Cali sidled up to me. “Codsworth is really weak. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Let’s bring him to the pack house,” I said. “Torin can help heal him. It’s less risky than taking him to a hospital.”

The abrupt reality check brought me up short. *How could we possibly explain any of this to medical personnel without raising all kinds of alarms?*

“We should bring everyone back to the Redwood pack house,” I announced. “Now, let’s get out of here.”

As we started to move toward the door, one of the victims shrieked and pointed at the guy who’d come out of the sarcophagus.

I rushed over to the shrieker. “It’s okay.”

“No!” the guy insisted! “You don’t understand! He must be killed!”

The shrieker lunged toward the sarcophagus guy, who struck him in the head with a brick, killing him instantly.

**Episode 4951**

I recoiled in horror as the guy collapsed. Blood spilled across the concrete floor, pooling in red patterns that I had to will myself not to look at.

Without missing a beat, Greyson lunged at the guy who’d jumped out of the sarcophagus and slammed him against the stone wall with bone-shattering force. The brick fell from the man’s hand, and he struggled to free himself, looking wild-eyed and feral.

“We’re all in danger!” he screamed. “*Danger!* Don’t you understand?”

I took a deep breath and started to bend to check the guy bleeding on the ground, but Lola grabbed my hand and pulled me back.

“Cali, don’t,” she said quietly. “There’s no point—it’s too late.”

“But I should check to see—”

“The guy’s dead.”

I looked down and saw that she was right. The man’s eyes were open, and there was blood. So much blood.

I had to look away. And when I did, my gaze fell on the guy from the sarcophagus, who was still struggling against Greyson’s hold. Anger surged through my chest.

“You killed him! Why did you do it?” I demanded. My hands tingled, my fury triggering my magic.

“Easy,” Lola said, pushing my hands down when I started to aim them at the guy.

I balled my hands into fists but let her push them down. Still, without her intervention, I knew I would’ve blasted him, to punish him for what he’d done.

But that freaked me out, too—we were in this completely inhuman place, and I was thinking about *punishment*?

I shook my head, wondering how I was supposed to process the horror I’d just witnessed while simultaneously *not* thinking about it at all.

“Okay, so what are we going to do with this asshole?” Xavier said, moving to stand next to Greyson so he could glare at Sarcophagus Guy.

“That depends on whether or not this asshole decides to calm down,” Greyson growled.

Xavier glanced around. “If we don’t get some of these victims help, we’re going to end up with a lot more casualties.”

I followed his gaze and saw that he was right. The rescued victims were in bad shape— bloodied and gaunt, staring at me with hollow, haunted eyes. I could only imagine what they’d been through. Codsworth looked worse for wear too, and my heart ached.

“Xavier’s right,” I told Greyson. “We need to get them to Torin.”

Greyson glowered at Sarcophagus Guy. “You try anything—*anything*—and I’ll kill you. You got me?”

The guy nodded, and Greyson gave him one last shove into the stone wall for good measure before he released him.

“Let’s go,” he snapped. “Back to the pack house. Sage, Zainab, you two keep an eye on this guy.”

Sage and Zainab nodded and took their places on either side of Sarcophagus Guy, and Greyson moved to stand next to me. I was relieved to have him beside me again, and I took a deep breath, trying to regain my composure after a weird, horrifying experience.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that, love,” Greyson said quietly. “But at least we managed to rescue your friend.”

“I know,” I said, my voice shaking a little. “He looks awful, but I’m glad we found him before things could get any worse—”

“We’re going the wrong way!” Sarcophagus Guy screamed from behind us. “This is the wrong way! Can’t you see that?”

“If that guy doesn’t shut up, I’m going to knock him out,” Xavier snarled.

I turned around to look at the guy, who hadn’t moved from the spot where Greyson had left him.

“I get that,” I told Xavier, “but think of what he’s been through down here. He’s probably traumatized.”

“He’s refusing to move,” Zainab said, walking over to Greyson. “What should we do?”

“Let me handle this,” Xavier said. He started walking toward the guy, but I put my hand on his arm to stop him.

“Come on, Xavier,” I said. “He’s obviously not in his right mind—we don’t know what Chessa’s done to him. Give the guy a break.”

Ava—who was glued to Xavier’s side, as usual—let out a derisive snort. “Right, so he can freak out and kill someone else? Great advice. You want to start taking bets on how many people he kills?”

I bristled. Why the hell did Ava always have to be so damn confrontational?

I knew the answer, of course—because she was Ava. That was enough of a reason.

Greyson walked back to Sarcophagus Guy.

“What’s your problem?” he asked. He sounded angry, but at least he was taking the time to ask.

Sarcophagus Guy looked freaking terrified. He was pale and sweating, and his eyes were darting around nervously, like he expected to be attacked at any moment.

His paranoia must’ve been infectious, because the longer I watched him, the more nervous I felt. I shot a look over my shoulder, half-expecting Chessa to burst out from around a corner or something.

“We can’t go that way,” Sarcophagus Guy said, nodding toward the door.

Xavier scoffed. “Why not?”

The guy looked around again, then lowered his voice. “Because it’s a trap.” He looked straight at me. “She’ll get you. She’ll get every single one of you.”

I shuddered, a thrill of fear making its way up my spine. I just couldn’t believe this was Chessa they were all talking about. The woman I’d thought was my friend.

“Maybe we should listen to him,” I said uneasily.

“Why should we believe anything this guy says?” Ava asked.

Sarcophagus Guy gestured to his throat. “Look what she did to me!”

I looked and saw the bruises—fang marks.

“*Why?*” he demanded, his voice a desperate plea. “Why would I lie to you about this? If she catches me, she’ll kill me, too. Just don’t go that way,” he said, pointing to the doorway.

Xavier looked at the doorway, then the guy, then shook his head. “Listen, I don’t give a damn which way we go—either way, we’re getting out of here alive.”

I bit my lip, unsure of what we should do. Weirdly enough, I felt a strange kind of sympathy for Sarcophagus Guy. I’d meant what I’d said—I couldn’t imagine what he’d been through, or how traumatized he was.

But still, there *was* something off about him, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on what. Maybe whatever I was sensing had something to do with what he’d been through.

“What do you think?” I asked, looking up at Greyson.

He was frowning as he looked around, smelling hard. “It’s hard to tell,” he said slowly.

“Why?” I asked,

“Chessa’s scent is here, but it’s everywhere else, too,” he said. “That’s the problem.”

“Marissa and I picked up some fresh air coming from the way this guy’s pointing,” Jay interjected, nodding at Sarcophagus Guy.

No one spoke for a moment as we all turned toward the doorway.

Finally, Greyson spoke. “Okay, follow me,” he said firmly, decision made. He led the way toward the doorway, and I stayed close.

I kept my magic bubbling right below the surface. I was ready to blast the moment anything went wrong.

Greyson pulled open a heavy metal door and stepped out into a narrow hallway. I followed, and we walked down the hallway until it opened up into a large room.

As I looked around, my eyes widened with shock. There were dead animals everywhere, mounted on the walls like trophies. There were deer with wide, majestic antlers, a bobcat with its mouth wide open, an eagle with outstretched wings, as though it was in mid-flight; and—most alarmingly—a large, white wolf. I looked up into its eyes, which had been replaced with glass replicas. They were blue, and stared down at me vacantly in a way that sent a chill through my bones. The effect was deeply creepy.

A cool breeze curled around me, and I tore my gaze away from the taxidermy to see where the hell it was coming from. Across the large room, there was a door. It was slightly ajar, though there only seemed to be darkness on the other side.

As one, we all headed toward it, but we stopped when we heard a low, threatening growl.

The blood in my veins seemed to freeze, and everyone looked around, trying to find the source of the sound.

“What was that?” I whispered.

“Don’t know,” Greyson muttered. He looked around again. “Let’s just keep going.”

I glanced up at him, and, as I did, I looked past him and locked eyes with a mounted bear I hadn’t noticed until that moment, rising just above my head. Its glassy eyes were staring down at me, and I shivered with inexplicable fear.

We’d just started toward the door again when a high-pitched screech echoed through the large room.

“Holy shit!” I shouted. I whirled around and saw that the mounted animals had begun to move.

Worse—they were moving to attack.

**Episode 4952**

**Xavier**

The taxidermy animals were leaping off the walls to attack, and I didn’t have time to make sense of what the hell was happening. If I’d been alone, I might not have believed my eyes, but everyone else in the room was freaking out like it was absolutely real, so I just moved.

The animals were sure as hell moving. Bears, elk, deer, moose, mountain lions, badgers, racoons, and squirrels were snarling and howling, shrieking and hissing as they pulled free of their mounting, ran the circumference of the room, then closed in on us.

On instinct, I scanned the room for Ava, then Cali, making sure they were safe. I flinched and swore when something sharp pierced my leg, then looked down to see that a wildcat had sunk its teeth into my calf.

“Let go!” I snapped, kicking the thing off and sending it flying into a charging moose.

“OUT!” Greyson bellowed. “EVERYONE OUT! NOW!”

I might’ve laughed if I hadn’t been trying to keep a wild boar from eating my face. What the fuck did he *think* we were going to do? We were all trying to get out!

All around me, the Samaras and the Loneclaws had gone into battle mode and were defending themselves against the onslaught of rampaging taxidermy. Across the room, the path to the open doorway was blocked by a trio of snarling boars with lethally sharp tusks and absolutely no manners.

Great. Really terrific. The only way out of this hellhole was through them.

I looked around at my pack and nodded. We all shifted, and I lunged, attacking the animal closest to me, which happened to be a rabid-looking elk. I rammed into its side, sending it crashing into the wall with enough force that chunks of plaster started raining down onto the floor. The elk fell, and I jumped onto it, tearing into its neck. The taste of rancid flesh and bone filled my mouth, and I couldn’t spit it out fast enough.

Something landed on my back, and I twisted around and grabbed an eagle in my jaws. I threw it to the ground, then lunged for a mountain lion that was bearing down on Lola.

Jay joined me, and the two of us took the beast down. We worked together seamlessly, not even needing to mind link—we just *knew* which one of us would pull the lion down, and who would rip out its throat. It made me remember how close Jay and I used to be, and how much I missed the guy. I still really wished he’d agree to join my pack, but I also realized that this wasn’t really the time to bring it up.

Our fight with the mountain lion had scared the boars off, and I shifted back to human and waved everyone toward the open door.

“Come on! The path is clear! Let’s move! Now!”

I was standing with my back to the wall, which meant I could see the whole room—including Sarcophagus Guy, who looked strangely unbothered by the chaos. Everyone else was fighting for their lives, but he was just standing there with his eyes glazed over, almost like he was in some kind of trance.

What the fuck was that about? What, did he expect someone to carry him to safety?

I shook my head, frustrated as hell. We should’ve either left the guy to die in the basement with the rest of the corpses, or killed him ourselves. He was both a liability and a threat, plain and simple.

“Protect the humans!” Cali yelled. She’d summoned her magic sword and was currently using it to stop a lunging coyote in its tracks. A single slice and it fell to the ground, cut in half.

Ava—who was standing next to the still body of a lynx—looked up at me and spat out a mouthful of blood.

*You should take your own advice, X*, she said. *Let’s get the hell out of here.*

But as she started to step toward me, Sarcophagus Guy let out a bloodcurdling scream and leapt forward, jumping onto her back. He reached around and wrapped his hands around her face, pressing his fingers into her eyes like he was trying to gouge them out.

I moved before my brain even processed it. Half a moment later, I slammed into the guy, tearing him off Ava’s back and hurling him to the floor, then pinning him down.

The guy was out of his mind—gasping and gnashing his teeth and screaming, practically foaming at the mouth. It looked like he had rabies or something.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” I demanded, though I wasn’t expecting an answer. Keeping a tight hold on him, I looked over my shoulder to make sure Ava was okay.

She looked alright, if a little shaken, and was picking herself up off the ground.

My instinct was to rip the guy’s fucking throat out. He’d tried to hurt Ava, and I couldn’t ignore that, no matter what Cali thought. Maybe the guy *was* traumatized, but that didn’t give him the right to go around attacking Ava.

But before I could make a decision either way, I heard Ava’s howl. The sound set off alarm bells in my head, so I punched Sarcophagus Guy and rolled off him. I turned around in time to see Ava struggling with three wolverines. They kept jumping on her, tearing at her legs, and as soon as she got one off her, another pounced.

*Dammit.* I lunged to help her, but something massive and furry hit me like a speeding truck. It was the bear, and it flung me into Greyson and Cali.

All three of us were knocked to the floor, a jumble of arms and legs. The bear had somehow made me bleed, and it ran down my face in a warm stream as I scrambled back to my feet and over to Ava. Knox had joined the fight against the wolverines, and when I got there, I wrapped my arms around one of the things’ necks, pulled back, and snapped its spine in one quick movement.

The animal went limp, and I dropped it to the floor. I made quick work of the other two and then raced over to Ava, who’d collapsed.

She shifted back to human and curled in on herself. She was clutching her shoulder, which was bleeding heavily. The wolverine’s bite had mangled it, but when I crouched down next to her, she shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “I’m okay. I’ve had worse.”

That might’ve been true, but all I could see was the blood and the torn skin, and my stomach clenched with fear. “Let me look at it.”

Ava pushed herself to sitting and grabbed my arm, giving it a shake. “Xavier, I’ll heal. What’s wrong with you?”

I rocked back on my heels. “Yes, yeah. Of course.”

What *was* wrong with me? The bite did look bad, but in the chaos of the fight, I must’ve gotten confused. I must’ve been thinking of Cali. Ava was a werewolf. She could heal major injuries in minutes. Cali, though? A bite like that could’ve killed her.

I glanced over my shoulder and spotted Greyson, helping Cali up. She looked relatively unharmed. Cali knew to stay away from the kind of fights Ava courted in battles like this.

I could feel Ava’s eyes on me, so I turned back to her and reached out to help her to her feet. If she’d noticed my glance at Cali, she didn’t say anything, just stood up and brushed herself off.

Across the room, Jay finished off the last of the animals with a snarl and a vicious bite, then shifted back to human.

Greyson looked around, counting heads. “Just making sure everyone’s okay,” he said, by way of explanation.

We were surrounded by chaos—I’d never seen anything like it. We didn’t usually fight inside, and definitely not with such a wide variety of animals. There were fur and feathers everywhere. Pieces of dead animals littered the ground, along with pools of blood—rivers of it, really, and streams, and trickles. And the human victims we’d rescued looked even worse, now. *More* horrified, which I hadn’t thought possible.

Shaking my head, I put my arm around Ava’s shoulders and led her toward the open door. But before we could reach it, the door slammed shut and something blurred past me.

I blinked, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks, but then I picked up a scent—Chessa’s scent. I caught it only an instant before she appeared right in front of us, her fangs bared and her eyes red.

Those terrifying eyes went to the humans, who recoiled when they caught sight of her, screaming and begging for mercy. Then her gaze shifted back to me.

“Now, now,” she said, her voice low and creepily musical. “You don’t really think I’d let you leave with my playthings, do you?”

**Episode 4953**

I jumped when Chessa appeared. I was startled by her sudden appearance, yes, but more than anything, I was shocked by the way she looked. Aside from the fangs, which were sort of hard to ignore, she didn’t look anything like the woman I’d met at crypto club. Then, she’d just seemed like a regular young woman in her early twenties, but now, she looked like a stranger. More like one of the wild animals we’d just fought than the woman I’d thought was a friend. The only real difference was the fact that she looked even scarier. Those animals had seemed to fight simply because they’d been bound to, but Chessa’s eyes were flashing with menace, chilling me to the bone. How had I never noticed that about her? How had I missed it?

My best friend in the world—Lola—was a vampire. *How* had I managed not to notice the signs in Chessa?

Lola had picked up her scent at the party, but we’d all assumed it had belonged to some kind of outside source. Chessa had been at the party, but no one had suspected her then—why would we?

As I looked at the woman I’d once considered a friend, I felt a strange mix of emotions—disappointment, frustration, and anger. And the anger wasn’t just directed at Chessa for fooling me—it was directed at myself for *allowing* this vampire to fool me. If I hadn’t gotten involved in crypto club, Chessa might never have come after me—and consequently the pack.

But that wasn’t fair, either. If we hadn’t ended up facing her now, she would’ve gone after someone else, and eventually made herself someone else’s problem—probably someone far less prepared to deal with her than a group of werewolves, vampires, and Fae. I thought about the humans we’d just rescued from that terrible room. I hated to think about what would’ve happened to them if we hadn’t gotten involved and decided to investigate this hellhole. Hell, we still weren’t totally safe, but at least now they hopefully had a fighting chance because we were here.

But thinking about this place brought up other questions. Chessa’s lair was secret and well-hidden, which made me wonder how long she’d been doing this. Were there more victims out there who we weren’t aware of? People who needed to be rescued?

My heart was pounding with fear, and I started inching toward Codsworth, who was so pale and sweaty he looked like he was about to pass out.

Chessa hissed at me, and when she lunged, I reacted instinctively. I raised my hands and shot a blast of magic straight at her, sending her rocketing backward. She flew through the air and slammed into the wall. The blast would’ve knocked a human out cold, but Chessa managed to stay on her feet and shake it off. She came at me again, but this time I had a harder time tracking her, and I sent an errant blast of magic shooting over her shoulder.

Behind me, I heard the sound of shifting. Moments later, Greyson and Xavier—both in their wolf forms—charged toward Chessa.

She sidestepped them easily and came at me again.

Shit.

I summoned my shield and blocked her lunge, sending her flying to the side.

“You’d better stop, Chessa,” I said. “I don’t think you realize how much danger you’ve gotten yourself into. You’re in a room full of werewolves. You can fight your ass off, but there’s no way you’ll be able to take all of us out.”

Chessa rounded on me, her eyes practically sparking with malevolent fury. “Not everyone here is a werewolf,” she reminded me.

I assumed she was referring to the humans—the victims we were attempting to rescue—but now wasn’t the time to ask for details.

“You’d be better off just giving up,” I advised her.

She hesitated for half an instant, then shook her head. “I’m not giving up. There’s something I need to fix.”

“To fix?” I repeated. “What are you talking about—”

But Chessa had already turned to Sarcophagus Guy and was glaring at him with those terrifying eyes of hers.

“You traitor!” she spat.

The guy’s eyes opened even wider, and his face went pale as a sheet. “B-But I did what you t-told me to do!”

Chessa grinned at him. “Very good. And now I’m telling you to die!”

She leapt at him, ripping into his throat with her fangs. Blood began to pour down his chest, and I stumbled back in shock. Then, recovering myself, I fired off a blast of magic, but it *just* missed, sailing over her shoulder and exploding against the wall. Chessa jumped, blurring by me, and slammed into Jay.

He screamed as Chessa sank her fangs into his neck.

Lola sprang into action, flying at Chessa with her own fangs bared. “Get your fucking fangs off my mate!”

She ripped Chessa off Jay, and the two of them went at it, crashing around the room with blinding speed. They were so fast, it was hard to follow, and everyone scrambled, trying to stay out of their way.

Finally Chessa shook off Lola’s grip and got to her feet. She wiped a smear of blood from her mouth and looked around.

“This has only just begun,” she said darkly, and before anyone could reply, she was gone.

“Fuck,” Lola spat. She got to her feet and went to Jay, who had his hand pressed to his neck, stemming the flow of blood.

He looked at Lola as she walked toward him and grinned. “You’re a badass—you know that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lola said. “Let me see your neck.”

But Jay was still grinning. “And you’re not just a badass, either—you’re *my* badass.”

Horrified, I looked down at the lifeless body of Sarcophagus Guy, crumpled at my feet. He was dead, there was no doubt about it.

I swallowed as a sick feeling welled up in my throat.

“Can we get out of here?” I asked quietly.

When I looked around, I saw that the rescued humans looked even more terrified than I felt, and my heart went out to them.

“We need to go,” I reiterated. “We have no idea if Chessa’s going to come back.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Xavier said, taking Ava’s hand and leading the way toward the door.

Everyone followed, and as we reached the heavenly relief of outside, I caught up with Greyson.

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking him over. The good thing about him being naked all the time was that it made checking for wounds easier, and Greyson had a few.

In fact, everyone did. Scratches and bites and marks that were already purpling into bruises. Everyone but me, that was. I eyed the long gash on Greyson’s ribs and the bite mark on his shoulder with tempered concern. They didn’t look great, but I knew he’d heal.

It was the humans I was most worried about. They were in such bad shape. All of them had physical wounds, but the psychological ones were the biggest cause for concern.

“They’re going to need years of therapy,” I said quietly, shaking my head as I looked up at the small group in front of us, lumbering along like zombies.

Greyson nodded. “Hopefully we can get them out of here to begin with so they can get the help they need. I can’t believe this was going on and she was doing this right under our noses,” he said. “She should be running for the hills from us, but she’s not… What kind of vampire attacks a group of werewolves?”

“One who’s completely lost her mind,” Xavier said. He was walking nearby and glanced over at us darkly.

“I can’t argue with that,” I said heavily.

“If that vamp dares come after us again, I’m going to tear her to pieces,” Xavier said savagely.

“Not if I get to her first,” Ava said. We walked for a few more seconds, then she added. “So, what are we going to do about them?”

“About who?” I asked, confused.

Ava rolled her eyes and tilted her chin, indicating the group of traumatized humans lumbering along in front of us. “The humans.”

“You mean Chessa’s *victims*?” I said shortly. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, but I do know that they need our help. They didn’t do anything to deserve this. And they’re only human.”

“Are they?” Ava asked, looking thoughtfully at the group.

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

She shrugged. “It means that we really don’t know what Chessa was planning to do with them. Maybe she’d already started to turn them.”

“Have you forgotten that Codsworth—my friend—is one of those victims?” I snapped, annoyed.

Ava shrugged again. “Whatever. Maybe I’m wrong.”

“Yeah, maybe you are,” I said hotly.

“But maybe I’m not,” Ava added. “Maybe I’m right. In which case, you might as well face facts—they might have to die.”

**Episode 4954**

**Greyson**

As I watched Cali and Ava spar, it was a struggle to hold my tongue. As much as I wanted to come to Cali’s aid in the argument, I knew it wouldn’t help. I was hoping the two of them would manage to work this out on their own. I knew that if I intervened on Cali’s behalf, then Xavier would do the same on Ava’s, and then the conversation would cease to be about Chessa’s victims and escalate into something else completely—something uglier, no doubt. I wanted to avoid that.

I shoved a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated. This was a blatant reminder of why I wanted to rebuild my relationships with my brothers—so we could have disagreements about what to do without every conversation threatening to turn into an all-out war. I wanted so badly for us to start dealing with loaded topics like adults.

“What are you talking about?” Cali demanded, glaring at Ava. “Because it sounds like you’re planning on *killing* the people we just rescued.”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Ava said pointedly. “Though I’m being reasonable, considering the circumstances. There’s no point in denying the fact that it might become necessary.”

“Why would you even—”

“Allow me to point out the obvious,” Ava interrupted, sounding annoyed as she nodded toward the humans. “These people have seen things they should never have seen. Things no human should *ever* see. What exactly do you think is going to happen when they finally recover? If they actually recover at all?”

Cali gaped at her for a moment, then wheeled around to look at me. “You don’t agree with her, do you?”

I knew I was in dangerous waters, so I tried to keep my answer diplomatic.

“I do see where she’s coming from,” I admitted. “We have to think about the potential exposure risk—and these humans have seen werewolves and vampires. Seen them in ways they might not be able to rationalize away.”

“I agree with Ava,” Xavier said, without hesitation. “We have to think of the risk to our packs.”

I bristled as I looked at my brother. “I’ll bet you agree. So what? Are you going to kill them, then?”

“If I have to,” he retorted.

I snorted. “Okay, say you do kill them—who’s going to make sure you don’t lead the police investigating all these missing people right to our door?” I narrowed my eyes. “Do I need to remind you of the fallout after you killed that guy? What was his name? Tony?”

Obviously angered by the reminder, Xavier narrowed his eyes right back at me. “So what do you suggest? What choice do we have?”

“There has to be a choice,” Cali said quickly, starting to sound panicked. “There’s always a choice.”

I heaved a deep sigh, thinking. “Okay, before we make any decisions, I think we should heal them. We just won’t know what they do or don’t remember until they’re physically well. But I don’t think we should just let them die, and I don’t think we should kill them, either. Not yet. Not until we know more.”

Cali didn’t look particularly pleased about this, but she must’ve been satisfied enough, because she stopped arguing, which I took as a good sign. Xavier and Ava stayed quiet too, which effectively put an end to the conversation—at least for the time being.

Xavier and Ava exchanged a look, then dropped back to walk with their pack. When they were gone, Cali took a step closer to me.

“Thanks for taking my side, Greyson,” she said quietly.

I smiled down at her. “Well, it *was* the Cali thing to do.”

“It was the *right* thing to do,” she corrected. “And you know it, too.”

I didn’t answer. Honestly, I wasn’t as certain about that as she was. I did think that Ava and Xavier had made some good points. There was no telling what the humans had seen, or what kind of risk it would put us at to keep them around, but I was willing to at least wait and see before we made any final decisions.

“I feel so bad for Sarcophagus Guy,” Cali said.

“Do you?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “I mean, I’m assuming he was under some kind of mind control—it looked like Chessa was making him do whatever she wanted. Guard the victims.”

“True,” I said. “It’s too bad Artemis isn’t here—we’d be able to solve our little human problem with her mind manipulation magic.”

“Yeah, I wish she were here too,” Cali said with a sigh. “But not just so she could help us. I miss my sister.”

I put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. Then I remembered something.

“Hey,” I said. “You’ve erased people’s memories before.”

“Well, I-I mean, kind of,” she said, looking a little cornered. “But I’ve only ever done it by accident, and no more than those two times… And I don’t really know *how* I did it. I just really needed to be able to wipe those people’s memories in the moment, and it just… happened. Artemis is the one who actually knows how to use that ability. She’d be the safer bet by far, if we needed something like that done.”

“I know that,” I told her. “But if we were faced with a choice, like a literal life-or-death scenario, wouldn’t it be better for you to try, rather than do nothing at all?”

Cali looked nervous. “I don’t know…”

“Cali—”

“But what if I accidentally scramble their heads or something?”

“Listen, let’s not even worry about that right now,” I said, shaking my head. “Let’s just get them back to the pack house and get them healed up. Who knows? Maybe Codsworth and the others will think the whole thing was just some strange dream.”

Cali didn’t look convinced, and admittedly, I was still worried too. I looked at the humans, thinking hard. They all looked scared, but there was no way to be sure that there wasn’t another brainwashed Sarcophagus Guy in their number. We were going to have to watch them closely. Maybe even bring Big Mac in. Perhaps she’d be able to help, somehow.

When we finally reached the pack house, Torin was waiting on the porch, and when he saw us, he ran down to meet us. Sage had run ahead to tell him we were coming and to fill him in, but he still looked surprised when he saw the state of the humans.

“Bring them in,” he said briskly, quickly recovering his composure.

As the humans trudged up the steps to the house, I stared into their faces one by one, wondering if there was any way to tell if Chessa had brainwashed herself a backup Sarcophagus Guy had been. The humans all looked haggard and worn, but none of them stood out. How could I possibly be sure, though? As tragic as his death had been in the moment, at least Chessa had solved the problem of what to do about Sarcophagus Guy.

I shook my head and headed into the house myself. I stopped in the laundry room and grabbed a pair of sweats, then went back into the hallway. I wanted to find my brother, and I spied him standing with Ava and the rest of his pack in the living room.

“Hey,” I said, walking over. “Xavier, can I talk to you for a second?”

He nodded and followed me into the study, and I pulled the door shut.

“I was wondering if you could reach out to Mikah—he might be able to help us deal with the vampire mind control issue. Cali’s been trying to get in touch with him, but she hasn’t heard back.”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know what he and Gabe are up to these days, but I can try. I was going to ask Mikah about that taxidermy nightmare, too. Was that some kind of vampire thing? I’ve never seen anything like it before. Never even heard of it.”

“Me neither,” I admitted.

Xavier was looking edgy, and I suspected he was wondering if Chessa was more than just a vampire. After everything that had happened with Adéluce, I definitely couldn’t blame him for his anxiety.

There was a beat of awkward silence as Xavier and I looked at each other.

“How’s Ava?” I asked.

“How’s Cali?” Xavier asked, speaking at the same time.

Another beat of silence.

“Cali’s going to be okay,” I told him. “She’s more shaken up than anything else. But I saw that Ava got a pretty bad bite back there.”

Xavier nodded. “It’s already healed. No worries there.”

“Good,” I said. “Good.”

“Yeah.”

We were heading into what was shaping up to be another magnificent awkward silence when we were interrupted by a knock at the door. I went to open it, only to find Kendall, who was eyeing me with a wide smile.

“Well?” she asked, spreading out her arms. “Is this formal enough for you?”

**Episode 4955**

**Artemis**

Marius rounded on me, looking floored. “Wait, *what*? What do you mean, you’re not coming?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” I demanded. “I’m not going with you to the Dark Fae court, Marius. End of story.”

“End of story my ass!” He shook his head. “You do realize it’s *literally* my head on the line here, right? And I happen to be rather fond of my head. I’m reliably informed that it’s the prettiest part of me.”

The joke was automatic, delivered like a line in a play. There was no humor in Marius’s voice, now—it was all bite. In fact, he sounded downright angry, almost bitter, and the look on his face told me that strolling down the hill and into the Dark Fae court was the absolute last thing he wanted to be doing, but it was the hand he had been dealt, so he had to get on with it.

“You don’t understand,” I told him, trying to sound reasonable. “I can’t go with you. I really can’t—”

“We don’t have time for this,” he said briskly. “Just come with me. You said you’d help me, and this is part of the helping. You hide bodies and you wipe up blood and you go to places you might not like with people who might not like you. That’s just how it fucking *is*, Ari. You know that as well as I do, and you can’t just back out now—”

“The hell I can’t!” I snapped. “I can do whatever I want. I didn’t promise you anything!”

I privately thanked the gods for that. Whatever Marius and I had going on was strictly casual. Being locked into a Fae promise to assist Marius with whatever suicide mission he had planned was the last thing I needed. I’d broken a Fae promise once before, with my mother, and the result had been a disaster that had taken weeks to recover from. But I still knew that if I *had* made the mistake of making a Fae promise to help Marcus, I would’ve broken it now. Because I *really* couldn’t go with him to the Dark Fae court. It was insanity. Marius and I were mostly friends—and I wasn’t going to lie to myself and deny the fact that we had a connection—but I wasn’t going to risk my life for the guy. Apart from being an objectively idiotic thing to do, going to the Dark Fae court would also dramatically lower my chances of making it back to Rishika, which was something I’d promised myself I would do.

Marius was still glaring at me, so I took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

“I offered to help you because I needed something from you in return,” I said bluntly. “That’s all, okay? Cruel, maybe, but honest. That’s what we offer each other, right?”

Marius took this in, his gaze steely. After a moment, he nodded. “Right. And that’s all, huh? Pure transaction? That’s the only reason why you’re here?”

I set my jaw and tried not to waver, even as he moved toward me, stepping over Coriander’s unconscious body.

“You were just using me this whole time, Ari?” he asked. “That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Yes,” I said, fighting to keep my voice level.

He narrowed his eyes, searching my face. “You weren’t sticking with me because we have a real connection or anything, right?”

I swallowed hard. If I said no, I’d be lying. I *did* have a connection with Marius—I always had. Once upon a time, the power of that connection had really freaked me out—and, as it turned out, it still did. But this was not the time to get sentimental about our shared history, or dig deeper into this weird thing we had between us. I balled my hands into fists at my sides and clenched my jaw. I knew what I had to do—I needed to protect myself, and I needed to protect Marius.

“Listen to me,” I said, making my voice frosty. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but sex doesn’t equate to some cosmic connection, Marius—”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about,” he snapped. “We’ve always had something deeper, Ari. You know it, and I know it. But apparently, that doesn’t matter. Not to you.”

I let out a frustrated breath. “It doesn’t matter if we have something, or if we ever did! You don’t get it! And I can’t explain it either, okay?”

He scoffed. “Oh, that’s *really* helpful. How did I go so long without realizing that you were such a coward?” He tipped his chin down the hill, toward the structure. “They’re not going to realize you’re a… You know.”

A *Wrenthorn*.

He didn’t say the name out loud, but it rang out in the silence. We both heard it, and we both flinched.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” I snapped.

“Is it because they’re after someone named Artemis?” He shrugged. “It’s a common enough name. You can’t really be that scared. I honestly thought you were braver than that.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” I said, feeling frustrated. I didn’t want to be having this conversation at all, but I *really* didn’t want to have it out here, in front of a Dark Fae fortress, and with Coriander passed out at our feet. “Just stop, okay?”

“Ari—”

“And you should keep in mind that it was *your* wanted poster that was plastered everywhere,” I continued, talking over him. “I saw how that worked out for you, so forgive me if I don’t want my own poster hanging next to it. I’m not going with you, and that’s that. If you’re mad about it, then stay mad. We’ll deal with it the next time we cross paths, another five years from now.”

This seemed to hit Marius like a slap across the face, and he took a step back, his eyes flashing with pain. Then they closed down, shutting me off.

“Fine,” he said stiffly. “Fine.”

He reached down and shook Coriander, who opened his bleary eyes.

“What happened?” he slurred.

Marius didn’t answer the question, just dragged the guy to his feet and shot me an icy glare. “If you’re not going to come with me, then stay the hell out of my way.”

I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but Marius had already started off down the hill with Coriander on his back.

“Fuck,” I spat, watching him move farther and farther away from me.

I felt edgy and anxious, so I turned my back on him, unable to keep watching. I ran a furious hand through my hair and weighed my options. I could go after Marius and help him, like I’d told him I would. But I had to think logically—I had to be smart about this. I’d had my fair share of run-ins with the Dark Fae court, and if any of its courtiers remembered me—or, more importantly, remembered what I’d done—then I’d be fucked. My thoughts went back to when I’d killed Lysander, and the encounter I’d had with the Dark Fae in the Fae market, back in New Orleans.

Not to mention the fact that if my search for Kadmos happened to become public knowledge, then I’d be double fucked.

When I turned back around, Marius was gone.

“Fucking hell,” I breathed.

I wasn’t even aware of my feet as they carried me toward the fortress. Everything was quiet as I made my way toward the towering structure. I didn’t see any guards as I drew closer and, when I spotted a broken window, I just knew that was how Marius had made it inside. I was through the window before I had a chance to think about it.

Inside, I dropped to the ground and looked around.

That was when I heard the voices.

*Shit*.

There was a group of guards heading my way.

If they caught me, that wouldn’t end well. I was an intruder here, and it would be difficult to continue with my search while I was rotting in a cell.

So really, I only had two options: go toward the voices, or go the way I figured Marius had gone.

I looked up—there were low rafters just above my head.

Okay, so maybe there was a third option.

The voices were getting closer—I needed to make a decision, and fast. I took a step back, then sprinted. I took a running leap and reached up, stretching for the rafters. And I *just* missed.

I thudded back down to the stone floor, the sound echoing down the corridor.

When the voices paused, I realized the guards must’ve heard it.

Then I heard running feet, and they were heading right toward me.

*Shit shit shit*…

If they were running, then it was time for me to do the same.

I took another step back and tried again, running at a dead sprint. I leapt again, throwing absolutely everything I had into reaching the rafters.

**Episode 4956**

“—and they were being held for who *knows* how long. I don’t think they’ve had anything to eat or drink in days. Some of those wounds look like they’re infected—and take a look at that guy’s eye,” I said, pointing to a guy with dark, curly hair. “I think he might have pink eye.”

“Got it,” Torin said, nodding as he surveyed the survivors of Chessa’s house of horrors. “I’ll get to work right now.”

“Thanks, Torin,” I said, though I was a little distracted by the sound of Greyson’s voice behind me.

Though it wasn’t *his* voice that had distracted me, it was the voice that answered him—a female voice that I didn’t recognize.

I stepped out of the kitchen and into the front entryway. Immediately, I spotted Greyson in the doorway of his study, speaking with a woman. She was tall and beautiful, and, as I stepped toward them, I was surprised to see that her eyes were *purple*, of all colors.

Something sharp shot through my chest. It wasn’t jealousy—not exactly. It was more of a pointed curiosity about the identity of the woman who was speaking to my mate.

“Hi,” I said, stepping over to them and breaking into the conversation. I smiled at the woman. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Cali, this is Kendall,” Greyson said. “She’s the Rogue who turned up at the party.” He raised an eyebrow at the woman. “It seems we share a mutual interest in vampires.”

This surprised me. “Why are you interested in vampires?”

Kendall flashed me a quick smile. “It’s personal.” She looked back at Greyson. “Like I was saying, I’m a program coordinator at CCU.”

“So why are you here?” Greyson asked. Then he smiled. “Lost again, Rogue?”

Ahh, so that’s what she was…

Kendall raised an eyebrow. “If you’ll recall, you asked me to make a formal introduction. So that’s what I’m doing.”

“You were trespassing,” Greyson said mildly.

The purple flecks in Kendall’s eyes seemed to flash as she narrowed them. “I was taking a walk in the woods. Get over it.”

There was clear tension in the air, and I looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Um, have you two met before?” I asked.

Greyson didn’t look away from Kendall. “Yeah, we ran into each other while we were out searching for Chessa. Only Kendall decided to go her own way. Where *did* you go, incidentally? You were supposed to come with us.”

This revelation took me by surprise. I’d had no idea Greyson had even *met* this woman, never mind made battle plans with her.

Kendall shrugged casually. “That was your plan, not mine. And you’re not *my* Alpha, so now that I’ve formally presented myself, have a good night.”

With that, she turned and walked out the door. Greyson watched her go with an unreadable expression.

“Um, want to tell me what that was all about?” I asked.

He strode forward and shut the front door, flipping the lock into place. “I told you I’d handle it. Don’t worry about it.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure Greyson even believed what he was telling me, but I figured it would be pointless to press. Still, I *was* curious about Kendall.

“She said she knew about vampires, right?” I said. “If she’s got some kind of specialized knowledge about them, maybe she’d be able to help us deal with Chessa.”

“I highly doubt she’d be able to contribute,” Greyson retorted.

“She said—”

“She said she has an *interest*, not knowledge,” he interrupted. “We don’t need the help of a hobbyist. Besides, I’m not sure if anything Kendall’s told us is the truth.” He shook his head, looking frustrated. “But I’m not going to worry about that. Not right now. Right now, I’m going to worry about the humans we brought back. Speaking of which, I need to go check in with Rishika. I’ll see you later, love.”

He walked past me and into the kitchen, and I was left alone, feeling bewildered—both because of Greyson’s behavior, and because of Kendall’s mysterious visit. She’d just been so brusque with Greyson, and neither of them had seemed interested in telling me why. What was going on *there*?

I turned, thinking I might head upstairs for a shower, but then Lola called to me as she came down the stairs.

“Hey, who was that woman?” she asked, nodding toward the door.

“I’m—I’m not sure,” I said truthfully.

Lola gave me a strange look. “I find that hard to believe. You were just talking to her.”

“Um, well, her name is Kendall…”

Lola stared at me. “Yeah. *And?*”

“And what?” I asked, starting to feel flustered.

“And who the hell is she? What do you know about her?”

“I don’t know, Lola,” I said helplessly. “Not much.”

She shook her head. “Girl, if someone that hot showed up to talk to *my* mate this late at night, I’d want to know everything about her.”

“No, it’s not like that,” I said quickly. “Greyson wouldn’t be tempted like that.” I thought for a moment. “Though I guess I *am* a little curious who she is… Also, why did she show up at the party and then just immediately run off?”

“See, now you’re asking the right questions,” Lola said, nodding approvingly. She grabbed my wrist and tugged. “And I know just how to find the answers.”

“Which answers?” I demanded as Lola towed me into the living room,

“All of them.” Lola sat on the couch, then pulled her laptop off the coffee table and onto her lap.

I sat down next to her and watched as she opened the computer and got to work.

“What are you looking for?” I asked as she typed furiously.

She rolled her eyes. “Cali, at the very least, we should be able to do a simple search. How many Kendalls work at… What did she say she did?”

“She said she’s a program coordinator at CCU… You were eavesdropping!” I said, narrowing my eyes.

Lola shrugged, looking unapologetic. “A little. For your sake.” She entered the information into a search field and then smiled. “Gotcha.”

I leaned over so I could see the screen, and there was Kendall’s photo, staring out from the official CCU website. She looked distant and professional in the picture, and was smiling, displaying a set of perfect teeth.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Lola said. “She really is a program coordinator.”

I eyed the photo closely. Those purple eyes gave Kendall a strangely beautiful, otherworldly quality that was obvious even in the professional photo.

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

“Do you really doubt me?” Lola asked. She started typing again, navigating from page to page so quickly, it was hard to follow. “Okay, you never saw any of what I’m doing right now, okay? You know, if the Feds come knocking.”

Startled, I looked up at her, but before I could ask if she was serious, Lola laughed.

“Got it!”

“Got what?”

“Her address,” she said. “405 Elm Circle. That’s right by campus. Makes sense.”

“Lola, what are you—”

“And here’s her dating profile,” Lola added, a few keystrokes later.

My brain was spinning at the same speed at which Lola was working, and I reminded myself not to try to hide anything from her—at least not online. I wanted to ask how she’d gotten us to this point so quickly, but Lola was already reading the dating profile out loud.

“Okay, she says she’s into pickling—very Pacific Northwest, Kendall—and tall men with a love of cats, and hiking—Cali, are you keeping up? This is basic, but it could be important.”

I shook my head. “Lola,” I said, laughing. “I wanted to know about her, I guess, but I don’t think her Tinder profile wasn’t exactly what I was hoping to find.”

“Really? That’s a shame, because this thing is a goldmine. Hang on, here she’s describing herself—that’s important. Athletic, loves the outdoors…” Lola snorted. “Yeah, I’ll say. Hey, I wonder if it’s code for ‘werewolf’ when people put that in their dating profiles. You know, so wolves can find each other.”

I laughed and as Lola kept digging deeper into Kendall’s online footprint, I happened to catch sight of Xavier. He was walking down the hallway, toward the front door. Ava was next to him, and the Samaras were behind him. It looked like they were all heading out for the night.

Xavier was talking to Ava, but he happened to glance up, and I caught his eye. He held eye contact for a charged moment but was interrupted when Zainab shoved past him and into the living room.

“Cali! There you are!” she said.

“What’s up?” I asked, shooting to my feet, my anxiety spiking when I saw the worry on her face.

“Your friend—the one we rescued—he’s not doing well.”

I gasped. “Codsworth?”

She nodded. “Torin needs you. Right now.”

**Episode 4957**

**Xavier**

The headache spiraled up the back of my skull, twisting around my forehead and pushing against my temples. It was crushing my head like a fucking vise—not the most pleasant thing in the world. I gritted my teeth, trying to endure the pain the best I could. I didn’t want anyone to know what was happening. Luckily at least, the woods were dark as we walked back to the Samara pack house. The sunlight would’ve made it worse—though the agony was already so intense, it was hard to imagine a more intense version of it.

I was frustrated, too, because I might’ve made it out of the Redwood house just fine if I hadn’t crossed paths with Cali just as I was leaving. She’d glanced at me from the living room, and I knew I should’ve turned away, but I hadn’t. And because I’d been with Ava at the time, now I was paying the price. There’d been a spike of pain when Cali and I had locked eyes, and it had only gotten worse.

I’d hurried the Samaras out of the Redwood house, and now I was doing all I could to hide my pain. Now that I had a better handle on our potential new pack members, I didn’t want to let them see me affected like this.

“Hey, do you know that woman Greyson was talking to?” Ava asked me.

“Yeah, kind of,” I said, rubbing my temple. “I mean, I don’t know her, but I know *about* her—well, a little about her. Her name is Kendall. She’s a Rogue.”

“Really?” Ava said, sounding surprised. Her expression darkened. “She was the wolf who was trespassing on Redwood territory?”

I nodded, and Ava’s eyes flashed dangerously.

“It’s one thing if there’s a Rogue on Redwood land, but if that wolf sets one foot on our territory…” She trailed off, but the threat was clear.

“I don’t know what she’s doing around here, but apparently, she’s claiming it has something to do with vampires,” I said, giving Ava all the information I had about the mysterious Kendall.

Ava frowned. “Vampires?”

“So she says.”

Ava thought about that for a moment. “I wonder if she’s got some connection to what’s going on.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Maybe she knows one of Chessa’s victims.”

I mulled that over for a moment. “Maybe. That might make sense. But all we have is this wolf’s word on the truth of any of the information she’s given us. And when the shit hit the fan with Chessa in that hellhole, where was she?”

Ava snorted. “Nowhere to be found.”

“Exactly.”

We walked in silence for a few seconds, then Ava shot a look over her shoulder at the pack, following behind us. “So?”

“So what?” I asked, rubbing the back of my neck.

“*So*, now that you’ve seen them in action, what do you think of the potential new recruits?”

I thought about the question. What *did* I think of them?

“They held their own back there,” I said. “I think they’ve proven themselves worthy of consideration, at least. And I think having Cresta join us would be a real coup. She was quick on her feet.”

“I agree,” Ava said. “She was fast and strong, but she was problem solving, too. You could see it happening. She’s a smart fighter. But they all did a good job—Milo, Carmen, and Grace were all capable fighters.”

“They were,” I said, “but I’m not ready to make anything official. Not yet. We still don’t know much about them. Maybe if they spend more time with us, we’ll be able to see how they fit in. It’s not just about how they fight.”

“I know.”

We walked for a moment as I thought about the pack.

“Building a strong pack is like putting a puzzle together,” I said. “All the pieces have to fit together just right. You can’t have all corner pieces, and just because these wolves showed some courage when they ran into a vampire—”

“And a room full of taxidermy animals that came to life and started attacking them,” Ava added.

“—doesn’t mean they’re going to fit in with the Samaras,” I went on. “I mean, think about it. This is a great pack, but we still have problems with the shrimp and his cronies. They’re okay fighters, and complete pains in the ass.”

“You know, it’s possible that if you stopped referring to my cousin as a crustacean, that *might* help fix those problems,” Ava said dryly.

“Maybe I’d stop calling him a shrimp if he stopped acting like one,” I shot back.

Ava sighed. “I could try talking to him again if you think that might help—”

“Don’t bother,” I said shortly. “I don’t see the point. Knox is just Knox, right? I mean, you’ve known him longer than me, but it seems to me that he’s going to make up his own mind about where he wants to be.”

Ava pushed a hand through her dark hair, looking a little tired. “I guess.”

Up ahead, the Samara pack house came into view.

“Can Marissa assign the new recruits rooms in the house?” I asked Ava.

“I’m sure she can handle that,” she said.

I started to nod but stopped myself. It made my head throb even worse. It was annoying as hell. I hadn’t even been thinking about Cali since I’d left the Redwood pack house, so what the hell was the deal?

I was trying to keep my expression neutral, but I must’ve winced, because Ava looked over at me, her expression anxious.

“Xavier, is that still bothering you?”

Shit. I wasn’t sure how to answer, so, in absence of any good ideas, I played dumb.

“Is what still bothering me?”

Ava stopped walking and put her hand on my arm to stop me as well, then leveled a stare at me. “Really, Xavier? Are you seriously going to pretend that you didn’t start developing a headache back at the Redwood pack house?”

I scoffed. “Come on, Ava. We just fought a vampire and a bunch of creepy animal zombies. Excuse me if I’m feeling a little ragged in the aftermath. I guess I’m not the young man I once was.”

“Ugh, thank god we’re back,” Marissa said, walking past us toward the house.

“I’m exhausted,” someone said.

“Is there any food?”

“Should we order pizza?”

The whole pack seemed relieved to be home, and I looked around. I didn’t want to get into a whole thing with Ava—at all, but certainly not out here, so publicly. Besides, arguing with her only ever made the headaches worse. I knew she wouldn’t want that, but admitting it to her would mean admitting that I knew what she was talking about.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her a little ways away from the rest of the pack, who were streaming out of the woods and toward the pack house.

“I got beat up pretty bad back there too, Xavier,” she reminded me sharply, “but I’m feeling okay again. Because I’m a werewolf, and we heal.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it,” I said honestly. I turned her so I could look at her shoulder, then ran my fingers over the spot where she’d been bitten. The mark was almost completely healed, and her skin was nearly back to its usual silky smoothness. “I don’t want my mate to suffer.”

She turned back and leveled a steely gaze at me. “Yeah, neither do I.”

There was a beat of weighty silence between us that only ended when Josephine walked over.

“Xavier, Ava, what are we supposed to do with the newcomers?” she asked.

This was my way out of this conversation with Ava, and I took it gratefully.

“I’ll deal with them,” I told Josephine. I started toward the house, but Ava was at my side in a moment.

She put her hand on my arm and then turned to Josephine. “Talk to Marissa—she can deal with room assignments for the new people.”

I took a deep breath. I should’ve known better—I certainly knew *Ava* better, which meant I knew she wasn’t going to drop this.

“Okay, I’ll go ask her,” Josephine said, turning toward the house.

Which left Ava and me alone again.

I turned to Ava. “I’m fine,” I insisted.

“Xavier, I’m not blind,” she said. “I can tell it’s still happening.”

I tried to hold her gaze, but it made my head pound so badly I thought I was going to throw up, so I looked down at my feet instead. I pinched the bridge of my nose and tried to breathe through the pain.

I wasn’t looking at her face, but I could see Ava shifting her weight between her feet—she was agitated, which I heard in her voice when she finally spoke.

“Xavier, I can see you’re in pain,” she said flatly. “So when are you going to do something about it?”

**Episode 4958**

I sprinted out of the living room and into the hallway, where I stopped, momentarily stalled. I looked around as I realized I had no idea where Torin had taken the human victims to heal them. In all the confusion when we’d all poured into the pack house, I hadn’t seen where anyone had gone. Making a guess, I’d just started toward the stairs when Zainab grabbed my wrist.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Upstairs?”

Zainab shook her head. “Torin took them all down to the basement.”

“The basement?” I repeated. “Why?”

“We thought it would be smart to keep them quarantined, at least until Torin can figure out what’s going on with them,” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” I said absently. “That’s probably a good idea.”

It was probably the right move, keeping them away from everyone else, given the way Sarcophagus Guy had turned evil with no warning, but I was unnerved by the idea of keeping Codsworth in the basement after he’d already been through so much with Chessa.

“Lead the way,” I told Zainab.

She nodded, and I followed her down the hall to the basement door, then down the steps. The basement always felt colder than the rest of the house, and after sitting in the warm living room, it felt especially gloomy. As I walked down the steps, I was struck by the memory of when Greyson had been locked in the basement because we’d been worried that he was becoming a revenant.

I didn’t think I’d ever been as scared as I was back then.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I rounded the corner and almost ran into Torin, who took a startled step back.

“Cali!”

“Torin!” I said. “Hey, what’s going on?”

He looked worried. “Cali, I’m sorry to tell you that your friend, Codpiece—”

“Codsworth.”

“Right, Codsworth. Unfortunately, he’s not responding so well to the treatment.”

“What’s going on with him?” I asked.

“Well, part of the problem is that he’s just lost so much blood,” Torin said. “But I’m also having trouble healing him because of the vampire herself.”

I frowned. “Chessa? What do you mean?”

“She must’ve done something to him, but I don’t know what. He keeps drifting in and out of consciousness. He’s been rambling, but it’s nonsensical. I can’t get him to respond to me.” Torin bit his lip. “I was just coming up to find you, actually. I was hoping that seeing a familiar face might help him regain his senses. Kind of like smelling salts.”

I narrowed my eyes, not at all jazzed about Torin’s analogy, but I nodded. “Yeah, let’s give it a try. Where is he?”

“This way,” Torin said, waving me down the hall.

“How are the others doing?” I asked as we walked.

“Better. They’re shaken, and there were some wounds, but nothing too serious. They’re all resting now, and I’m hoping they’ll recover soon. Codsworth is right in here,” Torin said, opening a door that led to a small room.

I stepped inside and immediately saw Codsworth lying on a narrow cot. He opened his eyes, squinting against the light from the hall, and I saw a look of recognition pass over his face when he saw me. Torin was right—I was smelling salts.

Codsworth reached out his hand, and I stepped forward to take it. His skin felt cold and damp, but his grip was surprisingly strong. He pulled me close and strained upward, struggling—but not quite managing—to sit up.

“D-Did your boyfriend turn into a werewolf?” he stammered in a hoarse whisper.

I froze. Torin had told me that he was out of it, so that was *not* a question I’d been expecting to hear. What the hell was I supposed to say? What *could* I say?

Codsworth’s face was flushed, and I could see that he was feverish, but he kept talking.

“I *saw* it happen,” he said urgently. “And not just Greyson. They *all* turned.”

“All?” I squeaked. “Who all? What are you talking about?”

He looked around wildly. “Where am I? Am I in a pack den or something?”

Holy shit. How had he put all that together?

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Come on, Codsworth—you’re not well.”

He tried to sit up again, but this time I stopped him, easing him back down onto the cot.

“Hey, just relax, okay?” I looked desperately to Torin for a little guidance. *What should I do?* I mouthed.

“Should I go get Greyson?” Torin asked quietly.

I hesitated for just a moment, then shook my head. I didn’t think it was necessary to involve Greyson. Not yet, anyway. First, I needed to find out for sure what Codsworth actually believed. Besides, maybe he was still convincible. Maybe I could make him believe that all of this was just in his head.

Besides, I wasn’t exactly sure what Greyson would do if it became clear that Codsworth remembered what had really happened. There’d been some talk of what to do about the humans that had made me very nervous, and listening to Codsworth now was making me feel even more alarmed. It was up to me to shut this down.

I knew I was a terrible liar, but I had to give this a proper try, so I squared my shoulders and cleared my throat. “Codsworth, you’ve had a terrible shock. I don’t think you know what you’re talking about. *I* don’t know what you’re talking about. You had an accident. Maybe you hit your head?”

This sounded unconvincing, even to my own ears. If I were Codsworth, I wouldn’t fall for this in a hundred years.

Apparently, Codsworth felt the same way, because he shook his head and struggled to sit up again. It looked like he was growing more agitated with every second, and my lame denials were only making things worse.

“Look at my neck, Cali!” he said, pointing at the fang marks scarring his neck. “What do these look like to you? Because they’re not mosquito bites.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, my voice higher than normal.

“I’m saying I was attacked! By a vampire!” Codsworth insisted.

“A vampire? Codsworth, come on—”

“Don’t you get it, Cali?” he burst out. “They’re real! Paranormals are real, and they’re out there! All this time, people have been doubting me, but I was right. And I’m going to prove them all wrong.”

His eyes had taken on a crazed light, quite apart from the glint of his fever, and I wasn’t sure what the hell I was going to do about it. I wished I could just wipe his mind of the whole thing, but I didn’t dare try. It didn’t always work, and it was too risky. But maybe there was another way to contain this. Maybe it was time to tell the truth.

I took a deep breath and leaned in closer to Codsworth. “You need to stop.”

Codsworth looked up at me, clearly surprised, but then shook his head. “No. No, Cali! The world needs to know about this. They have to know what’s going on right under their noses. People are so blind, but once I tell them, they won’t be able to deny the truth.”

I gritted my teeth. I was determined to get through to him. I wasn’t going to admit anything, but I wasn’t going to deny anything, either. That wouldn’t work.

I tightened my grip on his wrist. “The best thing you can do right now, Codsworth, is not talk about this anymore. To anyone. *Ever*.”

He opened his mouth—probably to voice an objection—but I spoke over him.

“I’m telling you this for your safety, Codsworth,” I said firmly. “Listen to what I’m telling you. Your life just might depend on it.”

And then it was like the penny dropped. Codsworth’s eyes went wide, and when he looked up at me again, it was with an air of dawning realization.

“I remember now,” he said quietly. “*You’re* one of them. I saw you do things, too. What *are* you?”

My heart was pounding as I leaned even closer. “If you saw me in action, then you got a taste of what I’m capable of.”

He pulled back, fear flashing across his face.

That look hit me like a punch to the gut. This wasn’t what I had wanted. I didn’t want my friend to be afraid of me. I didn’t want *anyone* to be afraid of me. But what choice did I have? He was threatening to expose us all.

“Listen to me, Codsworth,” I said, more urgently than ever. “Just do as I say. Pretend that you don’t know anything.”

“I…” He hesitated, then shook his head, clearly undecided.

“Just trust me, please,” I begged him. “You have to believe me—I’m trying to protect you. If I promise to help you with everything going on, will you keep your mouth shut? Can you promise me that?”

**Episode 4959**

**Ava**

Xavier sighed, and I could see in his face that he wanted to stop arguing. I did too.

It wasn’t that I *liked* arguing with him, but I was so tired of him seeing her—Cali—and then being all torn up about it afterward. I hated it. It filled me with a kind of anger that felt like poison, coursing through my bloodstream.

What the hell had happened to Xavier being broken up with Cali, anyway? And what had happened to him being fine with it? What had happened to Xavier being *my* boyfriend, *my* mate, *my* Alpha?

Adéluce had died—that was what had fucking happened.

I knew the death of the vampire-witch—and the end of all the curses she’d cast—was what had brought all this shit back. From the moment I’d realized why Xavier had left the Redwoods and come to the Samaras—and to me—I’d struggled with figuring out what was real and what had only happened because of Adéluce’s intervention. I’d worked hard to accept the uncertainty, but it hurt. It still hurt. Even though Xavier had said that he loved me, and that he was choosing to stay with me, even after Adéluce’s death, the looks at Cali still hurt. I wanted him to be mine—all mine.

But as I stood there in the woods with the winter wind swirling around me, I knew it wasn’t fair to be angry about it. The situation had once been reversed, but now I was in a position I’d never been in before. Back before the pack wars—before Xavier had killed me, before I’d fucked everything up—things had been different between us. I hadn’t been forced to share him. He’d been mine, and mine alone.

But now, Cali felt like she had a claim to him, and I fucking hated it. Worse than that, I couldn’t ignore it. I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t real. I’d seen their connection, and as much as I wished I could keep ignoring it and pretending it didn’t exist—as much as I wanted to be confident in only my relationship with Xavier—it was hard. I’d never been good at sharing.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Well?”

Xavier rubbed his jaw, and I heard the rasp of his five o’clock shadow against his palm. The quiet scraping noise sent shivers down my spine as I imagined what it would be like to kiss him and feel that roughness against my skin… But I suppressed those thoughts.

“What do you want me to say, Ava?” he asked. “I’m working on it. I’ve told you so many times that I’m here with you, that I’m all the way in on this.”

I raised an eyebrow. “For now.”

He sighed again. “If that’s how you choose to look at it, then that’s on you.”

I could feel my hackles rising, but Xavier must’ve seen them too, because he stepped toward me and unwound my crossed arms, then took my hands.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Let’s go inside.”

My jaw ached from being clenched so tightly, but I let him lead me into the house, where the rest of the pack was milling around in the living room and the kitchen. I could smell coffee brewing, and someone had burned some toast, but we ignored all that and headed upstairs, then to our bedroom, where Xavier shut the door. He turned to me—still holding my hands—and looked into my eyes.

I tried to stay strong, but as I stared back into his blue eyes, I could see myself being disarmed by the intensity of his gaze.

Fuck.

Why did he have that power over me?

“What?” I demanded, trying to keep my voice icy.

“I’m not accusing you of anything, you know,” he said. “We’re mates, Ava. I care for you. I love you. You know how long it took me to find my way back to what we have. It wasn’t an accident, and it wasn’t a fucking whim.” He tightened his grip on my hands. “I need you to focus on what we’re building, and what we have together. No matter what, I’m going to rebuild this pack. With you.”

My heart ached, almost seeming to expand in my chest, and I nodded at him, gripping his hands tightly. I knew he was telling me the truth—I could see it in his eyes, and I’d seen it in his actions. I knew how hard he was working on the pack, and I knew he was doing it in part because it meant something to me.

Even during the worst of our time together, he’d always known how much my pack meant to me, and now he was here, standing by my side, helping to rebuild it. He was right—that wasn’t an accident.

He leaned toward me, looking into my eyes. “I’m handling this, okay? I promise.”

My breath caught in my throat. It was just… a lot, having him so close to me and hearing him saying these things—all the things I’d been wanting to hear. And the thing was, I believed him. I wasn’t completely sure if it was because I *wanted* to believe him so badly, or if I really was sure that he was telling the truth. In the end, maybe that didn’t even matter.

Xavier had made a choice, and now I was doing the same. I was choosing to put my trust in him, like I always had. Like I always would. Maybe it was a curse, how much I wanted to believe in him, but I didn’t care.

I reached up and gently cupped his cheek. “I don’t want to lose you, X.”

He shook his head. “I’m right in front of you, Ava. Look at me.”

“I am,” I said softly. Then I rose up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips.

He kissed me back, and there was a hunger in him that I recognized, because it was the same hunger I felt for him. I *wanted* Xavier—I wanted his heart and his mind and his body. I wanted all of him. I wanted to possess him, and when he had his hands on me—his mouth, his lips, his tongue—I wanted him to possess me.

He pressed his tongue into my mouth, sliding it along mine, penetrating and scorching. There was nothing separating us, and I could feel his arousal hardening against me. I rocked myself against him, heat pooling below my belly. It made me feel weak at the knees—something I didn’t feel often—and I loved that only Xavier could make me feel that way.

His hands were everywhere, his fingers digging into my flesh, holding me tight. I could feel possessiveness in the way he held me, like his hands were brands, marking me as his.

And I wanted it. I wanted to be his, I wanted the world to know. *This* was what I desired—even with the mindfuck that was Xavier’s continued connection to Cali and the Redwood pack, it always made me feel secure when he was close, when he had his hands on me, when he was with me in the truest, deepest sense. To be here with him—to be Xavier’s sole source of comfort—was an honor, and I loved it.

He slid his hand roughly around my ass and picked me up, then tossed me onto our bed. My stomach fluttered with excitement when I saw the fiery look in his eyes as he stared down at me. His gaze swept up and down my body as I lay below him on the bed. The look in them was hungry and possessive and told me I was in for a good time.

“You ready for this?” he asked me gruffly.

Arousal was flooding through me as I nodded. “Yes,” I panted. “I don’t want to wait.”

With a wolfish grin, he crawled onto the bed, shoved my legs apart, and pushed into me. I gasped, astonished by the force and pressure, then rocked against him, his shaft stroking my clit.

“Oh fuck,” I moaned.

I wrapped my legs around him, opening myself up for him and inviting him in deeper. He took the invitation and drove into me again, then again. Then again.

I was biting my lip so hard I could taste blood, and when Xavier kissed me, he growled, lapping it up. He held the kiss, making me moan into his mouth as I drew closer and closer to climax. He was teasing me, controlling me as he sped up—almost making me climax—then slowed down, leaving me trembling at the very edge.

“Harder!” I gasped, pulling away from his kiss. “*Please!*”

“I love it when you beg,” he breathed, then increased his speed, not letting up as I began to shake.

“God yes, Xavier, yes,” I cried, grabbing fistfuls of the sheets as I orgasmed hard enough that I forgot to breathe.

When I finally managed to open my eyes, Xavier was looking determined, and I knew he was close. I clenched myself around him, and it pushed him over the edge.

“*Ava*,” he moaned. “Ava, *fuck*.”

He shook as he climaxed, grabbing me and holding on tight. I stayed with him, not loosening my grip on him, letting him wind down inside me.

He finally let out a satisfied sigh and, finished, rolled to the side, gathering me into his arms.

“Feel better?” I asked softly.

He hummed an affirmative response, squeezed me again, then rolled out of bed and to his feet.

I turned to him and propped my chin on my hand. “Where are you going?”

“I have to call Mikah for Greyson,” he said, looking around the room.

“Why can’t Greyson do it?”

“That is an excellent fucking question,” he said. He located his phone and grabbed it from the dresser, then pulled on a pair of sweats. “I’ll be quick,” he said as he stepped into the hallway.

I frowned after him. I didn’t like the idea of Xavier doing Greyson’s little errands. Calling Mikah was something Greyson could certainly do himself, so why was he making Xavier do it? Was this some kind of power move?

Annoyed that I didn’t have the answers I wanted, I got to my feet and headed into the bathroom for a shower. I turned the water on, and when I turned to step in, I saw a flash of movement through the bathroom window. I stepped toward it and looked out onto the grounds.

It was Milo—the Loneclaw wolf who Knox had been concerned about—and he was walking away from the pack house. As I watched, he glanced back at the house, like he was checking to make sure that no one was watching him, then kept walking toward the woods. About halfway down the lawn, he stopped, looked around again, then shifted and sprinted into the woods, disappearing into the darkness.

I stayed still, staring out the window, my head buzzing with one question—what the hell was he up to?

**Episode 4960**

Codsworth hesitated for a moment.

“You want…” He seemed to be struggling to piece it all together. “You want me not to tell everyone in the crypto club that everything we’ve been ridiculed for believing is actually *real*? You want me to bury the truth, Cali?”

I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. It was clear that Codsworth only saw this as an exciting, vindicating discovery, and despite everything he’d been through, he still had no clue about the seriousness of his situation.

I took hold of his shoulders and looked him squarely in the eye. “Will you promise me?”

He looked torn for a moment, then he nodded. “Okay. I promise.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, but an instant later, it hit me—I’d just made a bargain with him. Yes, I had made him promise to keep his mouth shut, but I had also made a promise in return—that I would help him. I had no problem with helping Codsworth, but had I just turned that into a Fae promise? I knew there was a risk that I’d done exactly that, but this was a dangerous situation, so maybe it couldn’t be helped.

Codsworth was still looking up at me. “Are you a witch, Cali?”

“What?” I asked, looking down at him, surprised. “A witch?”

“I saw you using… something,” he said, his eyes wide. “Some kind of invisible force.”

Shit. Okay, I was going to need to figure out a way to explain that. I couldn’t tell him what I actually was. My mom had made it crystal clear that I couldn’t tell anyone I was Fae. Not if I could avoid it.

So I decided to go with a vague answer.

“I’m not as human as you thought I was,” I said.

Codsworth’s eyes went wide as dinner plates, and he opened his mouth to ask what I was sure would’ve been a thousand more questions, but I held up my hand to stop him.

“And that’s all I’m going to say about it,” I said firmly.

Codsworth closed his mouth and let my words sink in. Then his lip began to tremble, and the color drained from his face. “I thought she was going to kill me.”

“I know,” I said softly. I really felt for the guy—it was clear he was still terrified by the memory of Chessa. “She drank your blood, Codsworth. She used her fangs on you. She threatened you and your friends. And the things she did to some of the others…” I trailed off. “How long have you known Chessa?”

“Not long,” he admitted. “I only met her when I joined the crypto club last semester. But we used to hang out together after club meetings, talk about paranormal stuff. It was fun.” He shook his head. “I had no idea that she was a vampire. That she was preying on other students.”

“Nobody knew,” I assured him. “Nobody. You can’t blame yourself.”

He nodded. “I know I shouldn’t, but it’s hard not to.”

I took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We’re going to stop her, okay?” I looked over at Torin. “And he’s going to help you recover.”

Codsworth followed my gaze. “Is he a doctor or something?”

I hesitated for a moment. “Or something.”

Torin eyed Codsworth. “Um, I’m going to do some more… patient evaluation,” he said vaguely. He’d been watching *Grey’s Anatomy*, and it was clearly paying off.

Codsworth’s eyelids began to droop. He looked tired, and I gave his hand a squeeze and stood. “I’m going to let you get some rest.”

“Cali!” Codsworth called.

“What?” I asked, turning back.

It looked like it was a struggle for him to keep his eyes open, but he was fighting to stay awake as he looked at me. “You need to be careful.”

“Of what?” I asked. There were already far too many things I needed to be cautious about.

“Chessa,” he said. “She asked me a lot of questions about you.”

“About me?” I asked, surprised.

Codsworth nodded. “She told me she wanted to get to know you better…”

He trailed off, and his eyes drifted shut. He was asleep, or unconscious, and didn’t say anything more.

I just stood there for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts. I hated that Chessa had hurt Codsworth so badly, and I was furious that she’d manipulated him the way she had, using their friendship against him. I wished I could do something to get rid of that haunted look in Codsworth’s eyes. It was fear, yes, but it was guilt too. He’d done nothing wrong, but he *had* been used. I had no doubt that Chessa had used him to lure me in. She knew I was Fae—she’d said something about my Fae blood. And I knew that vampires had a thing for Fae blood.

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. This whole thing must’ve been some kind of game for that cruel, twisted vampire. But if so, it was a game that had to end. And I was going to make sure that Codsworth and the other humans we’d rescued got what they deserved—justice.

I glanced over at Torin and saw him moving between the narrow cots, checking in on his patients. He might not *quite* be a doctor, but he had a great bedside manner, and I was certain I was leaving my friend in good hands, so I headed up the basement stairs and started looking for Greyson. I needed to tell him that Codsworth knew the truth.

I checked the kitchen—no Greyson. The living room—no Greyson. I was about to head upstairs when my gaze snagged on the half-open door of the study near the front door, and I decided to give that a try.

When I knocked softly, the door swung open and I saw Greyson behind the desk, sipping from a glass of dark liquid—whiskey, probably.

He smiled when he saw me and waved me inside. “Come in, love. Did you check on Codsworth? How are they all doing?”

“Okay,” I said honestly. “Torin said we’re going to have to wait and see with some of them, but he’s doing everything he can. But there is something you need to know.”

“What?” he asked.

I sat on a wing chair and pulled my knees up to my chest. “Well, I don’t know about the others, but I talked to Codsworth, and he remembers what happened to him.”

I watched Greyson closely as this sank in. He put his drink down and got to his feet, walking over to me and pulling me into a hug.

“I’m sorry if I worried you earlier when we were talking about how to handle Codsworth and the others, Cali,” he said softly. “I have no intention of harming any of them. They’re here, and I’m happy about that. They’re safe in this house.”

“Yeah?” I asked, leaning back so I could look up into his face.

He nodded. “Of course.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and hugged him back. “Thank you.”

“I’ll talk to Big Mac about it in the morning,” he said. “We’ll figure something out. Okay?”

I nodded against his chest. “Okay.”

“Now, how about we head upstairs?”

“That sounds incredible,” I said, realizing how exhausted I felt.

He took my hand and led me upstairs. I changed into my pajamas and brushed my teeth, then slid into bed next to Greyson, who’d already warmed up the cold sheets. I rested my head on his chest and tried to get comfortable, but, as tired as I was, sleep just refused to find me.

Every time I closed my eyes and let the darkness close in, all I saw was Chessa. Her red, glowing eyes. Her fangs. The blood, the crypt with her victims, the taxidermy army closing in, Codsworth’s terrified, haunted eyes…

I rolled over, and Greyson wrapped his arms around me, pulling me against his chest. This seemed to help, and I was just starting to drift off when there was a rustling crash from downstairs, and I jolted awake.

Greyson opened his eyes as well, looking at me. “I’ll go check it out. I’m sure it’s just someone getting a snack. You know how Torin stacks stuff up in the pantry. Something probably fell.”

But I got to my feet. “I don’t want to be alone,” I told him. “I’ll come with you.”

“Just go back to sleep, love.”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s no way I’m going to fall asleep now.”

He sighed. “Fine.”

I followed him downstairs. I could tell that his senses were on high alert as he looked around, sniffing the air and listening for movement.

The pack house was dark, but there was a dim light glowing in the kitchen, and we walked toward it.

*Be careful*, I said through the mind link.

Greyson nodded as we approached the doorway.

The refrigerator door was open—that was the source of the glow—and there was a figure standing in front of it, illuminated by the light. Mikah turned to look at us with a smile that didn’t quite hide his fangs.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “What’s this about a vampire?”

**Episode 4961**

**Greyson**

“Xavier said I should drop by,” Mikah said. “Good to see you two again.”

*Wow, my brother actually listened to me for once. Is it upside down day?*

I glanced at the time. “Thanks for coming—though you could’ve waited ’til morning.”

Mikah shrugged. “I’m a vampire—‘morning’ is a relative term.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Glad you could make it.”

I was certainly surprised and grateful to see the vampire—especially since Cali had been reaching out to him without any luck. But after the night we’d had, I was excited to get back to bed with Cali and put the last few hours behind me, at least for the night. But now that Mikah was here, that wasn’t an option. I supposed that was part of being Alpha—foregoing rest and recharge for the sake of the pack.

“No problem,” Mikah said. “Though I should mention that Xavier didn’t tell me much. Said something about a vampire problem, which is as vague as it gets in our world.”

“It’s more than a problem,” Cali said. “We have a basement full of her recovering human victims.”

Mikah scowled darkly. “I’m so damn sick of vampires going off the rails like that and giving us all a bad name. Don’t know why some vampires find it so difficult to color within the lines.”

“It seems to be happening more and more,” I said. “It’s starting to seem like there are more vampires who want to shirk the rules than those who are willing to keep a low profile. Sabyr, Iñigo and his gang, those vampires at the Renaissance faire—and let’s not forget Adéluce.”

Mikah snorted. “Who could everforget Adéluce? It feels like we were *just* fighting her. Though since she was half witch, at least the vampires don’t have to shoulder all the blame for that. But either way, she certainly had no interest in sticking to the status quo—just like this new vampire of yours.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I’m starting to think that the whole out-of-control vampire situation is more of a problem than you’re willing to admit.”

Mikah scowled. “Do you really want me to list the problems we’ve had with werewolves? I don’t think you’re in any position to paint vampires as the most problematic supernaturals.”

“Yeah, let’s not forget your new Rogue, Kendall,” Cali said. “She seems to be the type to live by her own rules.”

Mikah arched a brow. “Who?”

I waved it off. “I didn’t call you here to talk about werewolves. Let’s not waste time.”

“Of course not,” Mikah said with a knowing sort of smile. “Tell me what you know about this vampire.”

“She was a friend of Cali’s from school,” I said. “At least that’s what Cali thought. A bunch of students went missing, and now we know why. Chessa, the vampire, was kidnapping them.”

Cali shuddered. “Kidnapping them and taking them to her house of horrors. It was awful. So much blood and death and godawful things I’ve never seen before and hope I never see again. Including a whole freaking room of taxidermy animals that somehow came to life and attacked us! We barely made it out of there alive, and—”

“The taxidermy animals attacked you?” Mikah interrupted. “Are you sure they were really dead to begin with?”

I scoffed. “Some of them were mounted on the wall, so yeah. They were dead.”

“Yes, when we first walked into the room, they were frozen in place—I remember noticing the glass eyes on one of the wolves. The place was like a creepy zoo of dead animals,” Cali said. “One second, they were unsettling but definitely dead, and the next they were coming at us full force. It was kind of horrifying.”

Mikah nodded, clearly pondering what we’d told him.

“It reminded me of the revenants, in a way,” Cali added. “They were like zombies.”

“I have heard of something like that happening before,” Mikah said. “But it was years ago. A vampire was known to have used animals to protect his lair—that was back in the time before supernaturals made any efforts to get along with humans.” He muttered an expletive. “But I don’t remember any details. I’m not sure if he had them mounted like this Chessa woman, or even if his animals were dead. Maybe there was something else at play.”

“But I don’t get it. How could they be dead and still attack us like that?” Cali asked. “As far as I’m aware, vampires don’t have the ability to reanimate dead things at will.”

“There are several possible explanations—and obviously not all vampires are alike,” Mikah added, with a touch of irritation. “Plenty of us have different abilities, and others use what they have in different ways. It’s clear that Chessa possesses some ability that allows her to bend these animals to her will—though it might not actually be a form of necromancy. Maybe she has the power to control sawdust with her mind, or a witch gave her a charm that grants her temporary telekinesis.”

“I get it,” I said. “Any idea what happened to the vampire you’re talking about? The one who controlled animals?”

*Maybe there’s some link between that vampire and Chessa, though I don’t know how that would help us.*

Mikah winced. “I was told that the animals eventually turned on the vampire and ate him for a midnight snack.”

Cali scrunched up her face in disgust. “Wow. That’s… gross.”

“Can’t have been pretty,” Mikah said lightly. “Just more proof of the idea that just because you *can* do something, doesn’t mean you should. Anyway, I’m happy to help you track down this Chessa. I think Charlie could be a good asset in this, too, what with him being a hunter and all.”

“Agreed,” I said. “I really appreciate your help, Mikah. We need to stop this girl before she snatches any more victims. What she’s doing could easily attract the kind of attention with the power to endanger supernaturals all over the world. We have to catch her before she exposes us all.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Mikah said. “And I’m not too proud to admit that she sounds powerful. I will say, I’m a little curious about her, too—I’d like to see her in action.”

“How’s Gabriel? Why didn’t he come?” Cali asked. “We need all the help we can get.”

“He and I just wrapped up the case we were working on, and it was a big one,” Mikah said. “That’s why I haven’t been responsive, Cali. But now that it’s over, you know Gabe can’t sit still. He immediately took on a new case involving a centaur. It’s fairly complicated, from what I understand.”

Cali and I glanced at each other, then back at him.

Mikah smirked at us. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

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A short while later, Cali and I were back in bed. It was nice, ending a long, hard, dangerous day with my mate by my side. I’d been fantasizing about this moment all day.

Cali sighed and laid her head on my chest. “I have to admit, I feel better with Mikah staying here. He seems more curious about Chessa than scared. And at least with him here, we can *try* to stay one step ahead of her.”

“I’m happy he’s here, too,” I said. “Maybe in this case, it takes a vampire to catch a vampire.”

Really, though, I liked to think I was perfectly capable of taking care of Chessa myself, without any outside assistance. It would’ve been stupid to turn down expert help, but I couldn’t ignore the part of me that wanted to solve this problem on my own.

I leaned down to kiss Cali on the top of her head, and she snuggled against me.

“I still can’t believe all that weird stuff we saw,” she said, her voice drowsy. “It was like something straight out of a horror movie.”

“I can’t believe it either—and it’s pretty hard to shock me these days,” I said. “Guess it’s a reminder that I still haven’t seen everything the supernatural world has to offer.”

Before long, my eyes drifted shut, lulled by Cali’s steady breathing as she fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, I was in wolf form, leading the pack as we tracked Chessa through the woods.

We hadn’t gone far before we arrived at a clearing. There was blood splattered everywhere—splashed against tree trunks, drenching what looked like every blade of grass. The scent of death was thick in the air.

Chessa was hunched over, draining the blood of a struggling girl who was crying out for help, scrabbling uselessly at Chessa’s bloodstained clothes as she tried to fight her off.

“Help me!” the girl wailed. “Please! Help me! She’s killing me!”

A Samara wolf raced ahead.

*Get back here now!* I mind linked.

The wolf turned to face me, and I immediately recognized her as Kendall. She shot me the wolf equivalent of a sneer, blood dripping from her mouth. Then she went to join Chessa in attacking the screaming human.

*Stop it!* I shouted. *Kendall! Why aren’t you listening to me? I told you to stop!*

I took a few uncertain steps back as animals started pouring out of the woods, racing over to join Kendall and Chessa in feeding on the screaming human.

Alarmed, I turned to face my pack, but they were gone.

*Where are they? Where’s Cali? They were here a second ago.*

I was starting to panic, and, as the girl’s screams reached a fever pitch, I bolted upright in bed.

I let out a harsh breath and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

*It was just a dream.* *Thank fuck.*

But I knew what was at the heart of it. If I couldn’t take down a single vampire, then how could I possibly continue to call myself the Redwood Alpha?

**Episode 4962**

**Xavier**

Ava and I were tracking Milo through the woods, staying low and keeping our footsteps silent. He was moving fast, but we were keeping up easily.

*I’m glad I didn’t doubt Ava when she told me about Milo leaving the pack house. Still, I have no idea why he’d doing this. I suppose in some ways, I’m actually glad that he decided to run off. It’s keeping Ava from bugging me about the headaches, and it’s giving me a chance to really see what Milo’s about.*

As far as the headaches went, I was glad that Ava seemed to have decided to believe my assertion that I could handle it all on my own—though I hated that I’d lied to her. Whenever I’d kept things from Cali in the past, it had always blown up in my face.

*Why can’t I learn? I’m hardheaded, I guess. But sometimes, hiding the truth is better than worrying someone you care about—especially when I don’t have a clear solution yet. I just need time to figure this out on my own without Ava riding my ass about it.*

My two mates were practically identical in the way they always involved themselves in my problems, but the similarities ended there. Cali always used to offer to work with me, to help me, whether I wanted it or not. I’d never faulted her for that. But Ava was far more aggressive about making sure I got things done, almost threatening me if I didn’t take care of whatever issues she found fault with.

I supposed both approaches were occasionally effective—but neither one of them made me any more willing to disclose my problems.

Ava’s mind link entered my thoughts, jarring me back to the present.

*Milo’s scent is getting stronger*, she said. *We’re gaining on him. Won’t be long now before we find out what he’s up to.*

*Then we should stop,* I replied. *I’m not about to be led into a trap. We barely know anything about Milo, and Knox clearly has plenty of issues with him. Maybe he has valid reasons, after all. Let’s stay on our toes until we figure out exactly what we’re dealing with.*

*Agreed*, Ava said. *We both need to be careful.*

I moved ahead of Ava, putting myself between her and the fleeing werewolf, and I crouched down as Milo came into view.

He was panting, and quickly turned to face us. *What are you doing here? What do you want?*

I straightened and took a few deliberate steps toward him. *We want to know what you’re doing out here, Milo.*

Ava moved to my side, her gaze locked on Milo. My heart swelled with pride. My mate was ready to defend me if needed, and it felt good to know that she had my back.

Milo took a few steps back and glanced nervously between Ava and me. *I don’t want any trouble.*

*Glad we agree on that*, I said. *Nobody wants any trouble. But don’t get me wrong—I’m willing to dish it out, if needed.*

*I’m not doing anything wrong*, Milo insisted. *I just didn’t feel like I belonged in the pack house, so I left.*

I was thrown by that. *What’s that supposed to mean? Didn’t Marissa set you up in a comfortable room?*

Milo met my eyes, which I appreciated. *That’s not it, Xavier. It’s just that… Well, after what I saw tonight, I felt like I wasn’t…*

He looked away.

*Go on*, Ava prodded. *Out with it.*

*I don’t want you two to take this the wrong way*, he said, *but I’m not sure I’m a good fit for the Samara pack.*

*Really?* I asked. *How could you possibly determine that? We’ve only spent a short time together.* I turned to Ava and spoke privately. *What the fuck is he talking about?*

*Why do you think that, Milo?* Ava demanded, taking a step toward the wolf.

*What I mean is, I saw how you all took on that vampire—and the way you fucked up those strange walking dead animals*, he said. *Everyone was just so confident, and they worked so well together. How can I possibly step into something like that without screwing it up? It’s just too much pressure.*

Ava spoke to me privately. *This guy’s spent so much time in that half-assed nomadic group, he doesn’t understand how a pack like ours functions. He’s clearly interested in being part of our pack, but we don’t even know if he’s ever had an Alpha before.*

*That makes sense*, I said before turning my attention back to Milo. *I agree with you, Milo, and I get where you’re coming from. But you have to understand that the reason why we seem so confident is* because *we’re part of a pack. Packs are integrated—we work as a team. It isn’t always pretty, but it works. That fight proved just how* well *it can work.*

*But none of you hesitated for a second*, Milo insisted. *From what I could see, you worked perfectly with that other pack—the Redwood? No one missed a mark; the attack was coordinated. Some of you seemed to communicate without mind linking, or even sharing so much as a nod.*

It was good to hear that an outsider had picked up on our elevated fighting technique, and it gave me even more confidence in the idea that the Samaras were a force to be reckoned with—with or without the Redwoods or any new members joining the fray. But tonight’s fight had definitely taught me the value of numbers.

*Listen, Milo*, I said. *Tonight was intense, and I get why you’re shaken. If that kind of thing isn’t something you’re used to, it can be overwhelming. But if you stay with us, you will learn—if you want to. You’ll get to see why it was so easy for us to come together and fight.*

Milo paused, thinking this over. He seemed to have relaxed a bit, and Ava and I were more relaxed, too, now that we knew he wasn’t up to anything sinister. He was just feeling uncertain, and honestly, that was his right. We didn’t know him, and he didn’t know us—and what he *did* know of us indicated that, as a pack, we were the type of wolves who threw ourselves into dangerous situations without hesitation or fear. That was probably a lot to swallow if you were used to running from place to place, never staying put long enough to court the types of conflicts we dealt with on the regular.

*I’ll admit that I’m tempted to remain a Rogue*, Milo finally said. *It seems easier. No strings—and no run-ins with vampires who can sic dead animals on you, so—*

*I can’t stop you*, I interrupted. *But I do think you should come back to the pack house. No pressure at all—I’m only asking you to give us a chance to get to know you, and to give yourself a chance to get to know us.*

Milo seemed to think about that for a moment, then he nodded. *Okay. I’ll come back. But I’d rather sleep out here, if that’s okay with you.*

Ava shrugged. *Let him freeze his ass off out here, if that’s what he wants.*

*I have no problem with that*, I told him. *I’ll have a few pack members work with you in the morning, give you some training that’ll help you feel more confident in situations like the one we encountered tonight. Does that sound good?*

Milo nodded. *Yeah, that sounds good.*

*Great*, I said. *Now let’s head back. You might prefer it outside, but at least stay close to the house.*

I led the way back home, my head hurting again. I hoped it was happening because I’d hit my head multiple times tonight, and not because of the lingering effects of my prolonged exposure to Cali and Ava. I didn’t know for sure, either way.

I was just happy that we’d taken care of the Milo problem quickly, and without any violence. He didn’t appear to be a threat—which was the last thing I needed from someone I’d just invited into our pack house.

*What do you think about Milo?* Ava asked me. *I have to say, he seems a little… soft.*

I snorted. *You’d call a slab of granite soft.*

*Well, it is, at first*, she joked.

*I get where you’re coming from*,I said, *but not everyone can be as fierce as you are. I think we should give the guy a chance—but that doesn’t mean I don’t still have questions. And the good thing is, for once, I know exactly where to go to get answers.*

*Thanks again*, Milo said as Ava and I shifted and made our way into the house. *For understanding, I mean.*

“Don’t mention it,” I called. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. Get a good night’s sleep, okay?”

As soon as we were inside, I made a beeline for Knox’s room and banged on his door.

“Whoa, hold your horses!” he shouted, clearly peeved. A few seconds later, he yanked the door open, his annoyed expression deepening when he saw me. “Xavier? What do you want?”

Deciding to ignore his disrespect, I got straight to the point.

“No more fucking around, Knox,” I said curtly. “What happened between you and Milo?”

**Episode 4963**

I was jostled awake by Greyson slipping out of bed. I yawned and opened my eyes to see him staring down at me with a troubled expression on his handsome face.

“Sorry, Cali. Didn’t mean to wake you. I just can’t sleep. Was thinking that maybe I should go for a walk or something.”

“I’m sorry you can’t sleep, Greyson.” I yawned. “I can tell something’s bothering you. Is it because of what happened today?”

Greyson sat back down beside me. “That’s part of it, I guess.”

I took his hand in mine. “Did you have a nightmare?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

“Come here,” I said, dragging him back to bed and pulling him against me. “Tell me about it.”

Greyson was quiet for a moment before saying, “I don’t remember the details, but I’m pretty sure it reflects some of the things I’m worried about. It was like everything I fear about this Chessa thing came to a head in the dream. And even though I can’t remember exactly what happened, the bad feeling I got from it is still here.”

I stroked his hair and stayed silent, giving him the space he needed to sort it out. Not pushing him.

He turned suddenly and propped himself up on his elbow. “Do you think I’m a good Alpha?”

I was taken aback. “What? Of course I do! Is that what’s bothering you? Do you feel like I don’t think you’re a good Alpha?!”

Greyson shook his head. “No, that’s not what I’m asking you. I know you love me and respect me and all, but if you weren’t my mate, would you think I was a good Alpha? A good leader?”

“What brought this on, Greyson? Do I need to remind you about the basement full of people who owe you their lives? And with the way the pack responded I think there’s no doubt they believe in you.”

“I know that, but sometimes I wonder if I’m making the right decisions or if people only listen to me because I’m their Alpha.” Then he smiled. “I’m sorry for putting this on you. Guess I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said quickly. “And I get it—it’s a lot being responsible for the fate of so many people. Having to make snap decisions without much time to weigh all the possible outcomes.”

“Yeah, I enjoy it most of the time and I feel like it comes naturally to me, but sometimes…”

“I know. It can get overwhelming. But one thing’s for certain: I’m happy you can talk to me like this. It’s important for us to be able to share our insecurities and worries with each other. It makes me feel closer to you.”

I knew that Greyson wouldn’t share these types of fears with anyone else. He would never want to show any fear or uncertainty to the pack—and I knew that was for the best.

I snuggled up to him, reveling in his warmth. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re the best Alpha in the world.”

Greyson smiled. “Thanks, Cali, that means a lot.”

He leaned down and kissed me, and as the kiss began to heat up, I forgot everything—Chessa and her house of horrors, Greyson’s worries, my own fears and uncertainty—and concentrated on nothing but being present with my mate.

I arched into his touch as a large, warm hand found my right breast and squeezed. Greyson’s breathing was starting to quicken, and his tongue swirled and twisted hungrily in my mouth. *Shit.*

“Greyson,” I breathed as he rolled on top of me, his weight pushing my legs apart to receive him. I gasped when I felt the press of his erection against my center. I spread my legs wider and rolled my hips against him just so he would know that I was ready for him. I wanted him to take me whenever he wanted.

His hands tunneled purposefully under my shirt, and in one swift move, he pushed it up and over my head and then quickly discarded my sweatpants. He leaned back to look me over, his eyes dragging languidly over my nakedness.

“God, you’re so damn beautiful, Cali. From head to toe.”

He pressed another hungry kiss to my lips while his hand sailed down from my breasts, over the quivering warmth of my stomach, to the hot wetness gathering between my legs. He palmed me, pressing the heel of his palm against my clit. I gasped out a sigh of pleasure that he quickly covered with his lips.

“You’re so wet,” he whispered against my mouth a finger slowly circling my opening before he pushed it inside.

I cried out, the sensation sending chills whipping through my body. I spread my legs wider and pivoted along his finger, starving for him.

Our gazes connected as he continued his exploration, expertly navigating my depths before leaning in and pressing his lips against mine. With a moan, he pushed his tongue into my mouth as he shifted his weight back on top of me.

His fingers left me, and I felt my yearning spike in the few seconds before his cock pressed against my fluttering belly. He rested there for a beat before he reached between us and plunged deep inside me, filling me up.

My breath caught in my throat as my entire body went slack, but my Alpha surged and rolled on top of me, not missing a beat.

His lips explored my throat, his teeth dragged across my lips. His tongue traced a hot line from my mouth to my chin down my neck and then to the space between my breasts. He rested his head there as his thrusts gained momentum, and soon he was rocking against me hard, driving me down into the bed while shocks of pleasure threatened to blow my mind apart.

He rose on his strong arms, and I reached up to touch the corded muscle of his biceps. His flesh was hard and hot under my fingertips, and his eyes found mine as he drove in deep, his hips slamming against mine causing a small scream to slip out of my mouth.

Still holding himself up above me, his eyes on mine, he moved only his hips, thrusting and rolling and plunging and driving deeper and deeper until I surged up against him with a gasp.

“Yes, Cali, come for me, love. Yes.”

I saw the set of his jaw as he watched me collapse back down onto the bed, my eyes wide and riveted to his as I bucked and writhed against him. My ankles were locked around his waist, and I used my legs to work myself up and down his shaft. He still hovered above me, letting me use him to prod and press into me at my own speed, taking my orgasm to mind-blowing heights.

He finally lowered his body down on top of mine and kissed me deeply. I reached down and squeezed his ass, pulling him in deeper. His cock went rigid deep inside of me before I felt the warm rush of his orgasm accompanied by his sharp intake of breath.

“Cali,” he grunted as his hips rose and fell against me, faster and faster and harder and harder until he collapsed in a heavy, sweat-slicked heap on top of me.

We lay that way for a while, both of us drifting in and out of sleep before Greyson peeled himself away and rolled over onto his back, bringing me with him and wrapping me in his arms. I felt safe and protected in his embrace, and I closed my eyes, thinking about everything Greyson had said.

*He shouldn’t ever doubt himself. He’s the Alpha for the job, and I’ll support him in everything he does—any and every decision he makes for the sake of the pack. I wonder if I should make sure that the others show their support… but maybe that would be too much.*

Other than the nightmare, I wasn’t sure what had prompted Greyson to second-guess himself, but one thing was for sure: the pack was strong and worked together well because of Greyson. He’d earned not only their respect but the respect of other Alphas, too.

And I suspected that although Xavier would never admit it, even Xavier knew deep down that his brother was a good and capable Alpha. They’d worked together so well today and had pushed aside their little disagreements along with the awkwardness that still came into play whenever Xavier was around.

*And maybe Chessa got away this time, but her victims are safe. I know that with Greyson and Xavier working together, with the help of the others, she won’t be so lucky the next time we meet.*

Once again, I thought of the people in our basement recovering from their injuries—Chessa’s innocent victims. It was disgusting when a supernatural abused their power over humans and hurt them just because they could.

*Torture is more like it. Chessa gets pleasure from hurting humans, and that’s not right, she has to pay.*

In that very moment, I resolved myself to getting justice for Codsworth and all of Chessa’s other victims—especially the ones who weren’t lucky enough to escape with their lives. And I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that happened.

**Episode 4964**

**Xavier**

“So? To what do I owe this pleasure?” Knox asked, glaring. He had a gaming controller in his hand and looked thoroughly miffed that I would dare interrupt him.

My headache was irritating me more and more by the second. It was like someone was tapping on my head with a hammer, and I was tempted to yank the controller out of Knox’s hands and throw it out the window, but I kept my anger in check. If I blew up at Knox right now, it wouldn’t help matters, and Ava would probably figure out that something was up.

Right on cue, Ava appeared behind me and shoehorned herself between us. “You heard Xavier. We need to know what happened between you and Milo.”

Knox pivoted his glare to his cousin. “Why?”

I gritted my teeth. “Because I asked you. And because you made a point of mentioning he wasn’t to be trusted, so it only makes sense that we would want to know why.”

Knox frowned. “What did Milo tell you?”

My headache was worsening.

*Why can’t the shrimp just answer a simple fucking question? Why is he being so cagey about this? If he didn’t want to talk about it, he never should have mentioned that he had a problem with Milo in the first place.*

“I haven’t asked Milo,” I said evenly, working overtime to keep my cool. “I want to hear what you have to say so I can determine who should or should not be invited to pledge the Samara pack. Is that okay with you?”

Knox finally seemed to get the message. “He can’t be trusted. That’s all you need to know.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a little vague, Knox. Why? Why can’t he be trusted? Is he a thief? A murderer? What?”

I was really starting to lose my patience, and the throbbing in my head wasn’t helping matters.

Knox glanced at Ava but her closed-off expression showed that she wasn’t about to give him the out he was seeking. He seemed uneasy, and I couldn’t tell if it was because of what he knew about Milo or if he was just this put out by having to give me details.

“Tell me what happened,” I pressed. “I need to know if this guy is going to be a problem. This is less about you and your vendetta than it is about whatever bullshit feud you have with this guy. So out with it!”

Knox looked uncomfortable before uttering, “Kaleigh.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?” I growled.

Knox hesitated before saying, “When we were in high school, he asked her out when he knew I was going to.”

*Is this guy serious right now?*

Rubbing my temples, I looked at Ava. “Am I missing something here?” I turned back to Knox. “Are you basing Milo’s trustworthiness on something that happened in high school? Over a *date*?”

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but now that I really thought about it, this was exactly the kind of thing that Knox would get hung up on. The shrimp felt slighted, and he’d held onto that for years.

*Boo-hoo. Big deal.*

“Go back to your game,” I deadpanned as I made my way out.

“Hey, don’t say I didn’t warn you!” Knox shouted, coming out into the hallway. “Things like that show a person’s character—or lack thereof! He’s not to be trusted!”

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The next morning I was on my morning run, feeling better now that I’d put a bit of distance between myself and Ava. The headache had lingered all night, but now that I was out in the fresh air and running through the woods, I felt revitalized.

I couldn’t avoid Ava—I knew that—nor did I want to. I enjoyed being with her, especially when we were on the same page. And even when we weren’t, I appreciated her no-bullshit manner of operating. And now that I knew that Knox’s problem with Milo amounted to nothing but a high school grudge, I could talk to Milo later with a clear head.

My thoughts inevitably shifted to the vampire. I needed to know what the Redwoods were planning to do about the people they’d rescued. And more than that, I wondered what Greyson was planning to do about Chessa.

I slowed down as I reached Redwood territory. The pack house loomed in front of me, and I spotted Rishika in the yard training with Sage, Charlie, and Violet. I broke through the trees and felt a strange burst of happiness when they all acknowledged me with a wave.

*At least they’re not all shunning me like before. That was rough.*

I shifted and bounded up onto the porch and realized too late that I’d just walked inside—like I used to. No one had stopped me or even seemed to notice, so I let the awkward moment pass.

I headed to the kitchen and stopped when I spotted Cali. She was stretching up on her toes to pluck a travel mug from the top shelf of one of the cupboards. Her hair was still wet from the shower, and she was in her own world, unaware that anyone was watching her.

I paused at the threshold and watched her silently, afraid that if I made the slightest sound it would shatter this moment. My wolf stirred as I took in the length of her body, the way her hair trailed down her back, wetting her silky night clothes. I fought a strong desire to stomp right over to her, take her in my arms, and kiss her.

*I used to be able to do that whenever I wanted. Whenever the mood struck, she was mine. The only thing stopping me now is… what? Ava?*

I might have two mates, but I wasn’t going to do that to Ava—not again. I’d promised her I would keep my distance when it came to Cali, and that was what I was going to do.

I hadn’t wanted things to go the way they had with Cali in the first place—hurting her by acting on my feelings for someone else, let alone Ava—but Adéluce had pushed things in this direction, and along the way, I’d redeveloped feelings for Ava that I never expected. It complicated things, but not so much that I didn’t know exactly what I needed to do to keep from making things worse.

Besides, I wasn’t here to stir that particular pot of trouble.

Cali turned, suddenly aware of me. “Xavier?”

All at once my heart melted and my wolf stirred again when she smiled, a look of pleasant surprise on her perfect face.

“Is something wrong?”

I was suddenly aware that I hadn’t moved. I took a step toward her, clearing my throat to hide how flustered I was. “Can I help you with that?” I reached over her and then hesitated, looking down at her. “Which one?”

Cali’s eyes never left mine. “The one with the flowers.”

I had to force myself to break the look between us. My heart was racing as I took down the floral travel mug and offered it to her, all too aware of how close we were, how her scent—mingled with the smell of her damp hair—was driving me mad with desire.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the mug.

Our fingers touched and a jolt of electricity jarred me.

I leaned down, unable to resist, no longer wanting to. Forgetting my vow to Ava and thinking of nothing else but how good it would feel to taste her lips, I kissed her.

She moaned, and I pulled her into my arms and lifted her onto the counter. My wolf was raging, and I gave in, pressing against her as I ripped off her clothes, hungry for her, needing her like never before.

I paused and took in her naked body, noting the way her beautiful breasts rose and fell with her choppy breaths.

“Xavier, I want you,” she breathed, raking her fingers down my chest, and letting them come to rest on my waist band. A split second later, she tugged my pants open and yanked them down my legs, letting my shaft spring free.

“I want you too, Cali. I think about you all the time,” I said, gasping when she took me into her hand. She wrapped her fingers around me and tugged, sending a bolt of pleasure reeling from the tip of my cock down my shaft and all the way through my body.

Hungry to taste her again, I leaned forward and pressed my lips against hers. Our tongues danced and mingled between our mouths. I slipped my hand between us and slid my hand up to cup her breast. Then I bent down and took her nipple into my mouth and suckled it as she threw her head back and ran her fingers through my hair.

With my lips and tongue busy worshiping her breasts, I ran my fingers along her hot, slick folds before teasing her clit between my index finger and thumb. She wrenched her legs wide and leaned back, her hands slowly guiding my cock between her legs…

A loud crash snapped me out of the fantasy. I looked down between us to see that the mug had slipped between our fingers and hit the floor.

It took all the effort I could muster to bury the residual feelings from my fantasy as we both bent down to retrieve the mug, nearly butting heads and making things even more awkward.

My fingers connected with the cool metal first, and as I grabbed it, my brother appeared behind us.

“Hey, Xavier, what are you doing here?”

**Episode 4965**

**Artemis**

I clung to the ceiling as the guards poured down the hall, screaming at each other to find the intruders. I swung myself up and out of sight just in time, wrapping my arms and legs around one of the thick wooden beams overhead.

I noticed with no small amount of dread that my dagger was dangerously close to falling from the holster at my waist, but there was nothing I could do about that now. I was going to have to hope that the guards moved on before it slipped free.

I felt a drop of sweat form on my forehead as I strained to hold on, doing all I could to control my breathing. I glanced down. The guards had stopped right below me, and I uttered a silent prayer that they wouldn’t look up.

There were three of them—definitely one more than I could handle. If Marius were here, I might have a chance… but he wasn’t, and it had been my choice to let him walk. It had seemed like the right idea at the time….

*I can’t think about Marius anymore. He’s gone, just like I wanted. Now I can concentrate on the reason I’m here in the first place—finding Kadmos.*

“You hear that?” one of the guards said, looking around wildly. “I thought I heard something.”

“Me too,” said another. “Do you think it was the intruder?”

The guard took a few steps down the hall and peered around a corner, then returned to his buddies after coming up empty.

“No one there. Maybe they’ve already high-tailed it out of here,” the guard said.

*Yes. Stop looking. We’re gone. Nothing to see here.*

The bead of sweat was on the move, and I froze as it rolled down my nose, tickling me as it went so that I had to resist the urge to sneeze. Then I watched in horror as it fell… and landed on one of the guard’s hats. I held my breath, waiting for them to react, but thankfully, he didn’t notice.

I slowly exhaled the breath I was holding.

*Shit. That was too close for comfort.*

Then I felt the dagger slip further out of my holster. I was trying not to panic, but it was hard to stay calm when all that stood between me and a possible ass-kicking was the dagger hanging precariously from my belt. I quickly contorted my body, trying to change positions to stop it, but I couldn’t do much without giving myself away.

I watched, frozen, as it slipped out the last inch and clanged to the floor right between the three guards, who all looked up at once.

“There she is! Get her!”

As they reached for their weapons, I swung down, kicking two of the guards in the face and landing on the third. I wrapped my legs around his neck and threw my body forward, using the momentum to drive him to the ground.

He gasped as he hit the floor, the wind knocked out of him.

I jumped to my feet as the other two guards recovered and ran right for me. I plucked my dagger from the floor and held it out at them.

“Stop right where you are! Trust that I know how to use this thing!”

The guards skidded to a stop, hesitating.

“You’re trespassing,” one of the guards hissed. “Just surrender and no one has to get hurt!”

I made a quick assessment. I could either take a chance and try to subdue both guards at once, or I could turn and flee in hopes of outrunning them. That would be the easier way out… maybe. I had no desire to kill the guards. This was Marius’s battle, not mine. I was just a visitor, and a reluctant one at that.

I feigned a lunge at them with my dagger outstretched and they jumped back, tripping over the fallen guard as I made a break for it.

Running as fast as I could manage, I raced down the hallways with my eyes fixed on the small window ahead of me. I had no idea how many guards might be waiting for me on the ground floor, so this was my only chance.

*Will I even be able to fit through there? It seems only* just *large enough…*

An arrow whizzed by my head and shattered the window. As another arrow whizzed by and struck the wall, I took a flying leap, made my body as small and compact as I could, and soared through the small square, barely clearing the sides of the windowpane.

I yelped as I found myself free-falling into the pond below, hoping it was deep enough and I wasn’t about to hit the bottom and break every bone in my body.

I nearly cried out with glee when I splashed into the water, which was only *just* deep enough to safely break my fall. I surfaced quickly and wasted no time swimming to the shore. I glanced over my shoulder as arrows rained down from the shattered window above and hit the ground around me.

“Stop her!” I heard the guards shouting. I squinted into the distance and saw more guards streaming out of the fortress, shooting arrows as they sprinted after me.

I ran like my life depended on it, which was pretty much the reality of my situation. If even one of those arrows hit me, I was a goner.

*Keep going, put one foot in front of the other. You didn’t come all this way to get thwarted by a bunch of amateur guards with shitty aim!*

Once I made it out of range of the guards’ arrows and was safely shrouded in the woods, I slowed down and leaned against a tree, trying to catch my breath. I was cold and soaking wet, and my thighs and calves ached from running so hard, but I was glad I’d made it out of there alive.

I didn’t pause long, knowing that the guards might still be in pursuit. We’d escaped with one of their prisoners. There was no way they were going to give up so easily.

I picked up speed and could barely make out the road through the trees. I sprinted toward it and hit the path running, making sure to keep one eye on the road ahead and the other behind just in case I was being followed.

*I can’t believe I let Marius talk me into going in there in the first place! But then again, that’s one of his strengths, being able to talk people into doing what he wants them to do. It’s kind of impressive to think that he was even able to convince me.*

But not anymore. I’d made the right choice breaking away from him. And if it weren’t for Marius’s smooth-talking ways and his little puppy-dog pathetic eyes, I never would have gone to the fortress in the first place.

I was happy to leave him to deal with his own problems. I had enough problems of my own and I was an idiot to let myself get wrapped up in his. Just like before. I guessed old habits really did die hard.

*But I wanted to help him… so I guess I let myself be convinced.*

I was on my own again, just how I’d started, but soon it dawned on me how much things had changed. Being alone, dealing with things on my own—that was how it was before I met Marius and that was how I’d lived after I left him. It had served me well.

But the more I ran, the more aware I became of just how alone I was now. It never used to bother me. In fact, I used to prefer it. But then I found Cali and learned about my mother. And then there was Rishika, who I’d fallen in love with…

Now, everything was different. I had a family and friends—people who cared about me and who were waiting for me now. People who wanted me to come back in one piece.

*Is there really anything here for me? What if I never find my father? Or what if I learn that he’s dead? Or, perhaps worse, what if he wants nothing to do with me?*

I had to stop thinking like that. I had come to the Fae world with a purpose, and I’d let Marius distract me—just like he always did. Marius might think he wanted me, but I wasn’t sure he really knew what he wanted.

*Marius will be fine without me. Like me, he’s a survivor. He got himself in some trouble, but now that he has Coriander, he’ll turn him in and be cleared to do what he wants.*

But even as I had that thought, I realized that the truth of Marius’s situation was hard to ignore. I couldn’t stop wondering what would happen if he screwed up… and knowing Marius, that was a very real possibility. If it weren’t for me, he would’ve been captured several times over already.

*He needs me.*

I stopped walking.

*Marius.*

*Fuck.*

I turned back, knowing that I had to go back.

I had to help him.

**Episode 4966**

**Greyson**

While I was surprised to find Xavier in the kitchen with Cali, I wouldn’t think much of it… except that Xavier seemed rattled. He and Cali were taking pains to avoid looking at each other, and the energy in the room was just… off.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, my gaze plastered to my brother who seemed like he was having a hard time looking me in the eye.

Xavier abruptly shoved the mug he was holding into Cali’s hands and stepped away. He immediately reached for the coffee pot as he said, “Everything’s fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

I glanced at Cali who was concentrating a little too hard on the travel mug, fiddling with the top and using every ounce of strength she had to try to twist it open—to no avail.

*Weird. Why is she focusing on that cup so hard? It’s like she’s using it as a distraction.*

I turned my attention back to Xavier. “Oh, I don’t know why I would think anything’s wrong. Maybe it’s because you’re *acting* like something’s wrong. And it’s also really early in the morning,” I said. “What are you doing here at the crack of dawn?”

Xavier shrugged. “I just stopped by to check on the people we rescued. Those humans saw a lot of shit last night. It was no fault of their own… but it’s not a good position for us to be in. What are you planning to do about them?”

Cali was silent, still trying to open the travel mug. I took it from her, noting that she seemed to be avoiding my eyes, too, as I opened it for her and set it down. I took the coffee pot from Xavier who was just holding it like he was trying to look busy—kind of like Cali—and poured the hot liquid into Cali’s cup.

“Thanks, Greyson. I was never going to fill that thing up at the rate I was going,” Cali said around a strained laugh.

*Is it just me, or is this room full of awkwardness? No one’s looking anyone in the eye. Cali’s tense as hell, Xavier seems skittish. What just happened between them? Do I even want to know?*

I pulled two more mugs from the cupboard and poured both myself and Xavier a cup. I slid one toward him.

“I haven’t decided what to do about the humans yet,” I told him. “But I’m open to suggestions.”

Xavier nodded at me as he picked up his cup and sipped from it. “I called Mikah.”

“I know. He’s here,” I replied. “And he’s willing to help. We’re going to need it. Chessa is slippery and fast as hell. Mikah will be just the edge we need to bring her down.”

Xavier took that in. “I’m here to help, too. I’m not as fast as Mikah, but if we can corner her somehow, I’m just as deadly.”

I smirked at my brother, unsurprised by his confidence. Clearly, Chessa’s prowess hadn’t hit his confidence quite like it had mine. “I appreciate that. I think we’re going to need everyone’s help if we’re going to take Chessa out.”

It was always better for everyone involved when Xavier and I acted like peers instead of sworn enemies. Alpha to Alpha, instead of Alpha rivals out to prove something. At least Xavier seemed like he was finally trying to keep things civil—though maybe he was trying a little *too* hard.

I shifted my gaze back to Cali, who was still being unusually quiet. She took a tentative sip of her coffee when she caught me looking at her.

*Yeah. Something definitely happened. Cali has never had a great poker face.*

Mikah’s upbeat voice cut through the uneasy silence of the room as he came walking in. “Hey, Greyson, Cali, I spoke to Charlie and—”

Mikah stopped when he saw Xavier. “Xavier! Didn’t know you were here.”

“Hey, man, thanks for coming,” Xavier said, reaching out and taking Mikah’s hand. “Just got here. Hoping we can all put our heads together on this vampire thing. Glad you could come and lend your expertise.”

“No problem,” Mikah said. “Given the choice between chasing vampires or chasing centaurs, I’m going to choose vampires every time. Centaurs can be a royal pain.”

“What were you talking to Charlie about?” Cali asked.

“I was just checking that he’s joining us. He is.”

“Good,” Cali said. “And it probably wouldn’t hurt to have Lola’s input, too.”

As Cali and Mikah talked, I began to feel a little better about the whole Chessa situation. I had a lot more to work with than I’d originally thought.

“This is all fine and good,” Xavier said. “We can all go hunting for the vampire. But in the meantime, what are we going to do with the people you have locked downstairs, Greyson? They’re a liability if I ever heard of one.”

“I’m planning on talking to Big Mac to see if she can do something to erase their memories,” I said.

“And what if she can’t?” Xavier countered. “What then?”

I shifted my gaze to Cali.

“Then I’ll try to do it,” Cali replied. “But only as a last resort. I don’t really feel comfortable trying that ability out on people without knowing if there will be any side effects. But if there are no other options… I guess we’ll have no choice but to attempt it.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced, and I was starting to wonder what he would do if we couldn’t do anything about the humans’ memories. Just how far was my brother willing to go?

“I’m going to be so late!” Cali suddenly blurted out.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Late? For what?” I asked.

Cali was scrambling. “Coach has made it clear that I can’t be late to any more practices. I have to go!”

She went for the door, but I stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “Go? You do realize that there’s a vampire out there, right? A vampire who knows exactly who you are and has already attacked us. And Chessa is a CCU student. You might as well walk around with a bullseye on your head!”

“I agree with Greyson,” Xavier added. “It’s way too risky to go out alone right now—especially to your campus.”

Cali sighed and eyed us both. “Why is it that you two always seem to agree with each other when you don’t want me to do something? Wouldn’t it be nice if you could agree on other things?”

“Like what? Nothing is more important than your safety, Cali,” I said.

“Not to prove your point, but he’s right. Chessa already got a taste of your blood, and vampires go crazy for it,” Xavier said.

“Which means that she’ll stop at nothing to get more of it. You need to stay home—where it’s safe. I’m not going to feel bad for being on the same page with Xavier about that,” I added.

*Why can’t Cali appreciate the fact that we’re watching out for her best interest? I know that she’s strong and can take care of herself, but that doesn’t mean that she needs to put herself in harm’s way all the time.*

“Why don’t I go with Cali?” Mikah suggested. “Not only can I watch her back and protect her from Chessa the animal whisperer”—Mikah smirked, pleased with himself for coming up with that—“but I might be able to learn more about Chessa, too. See what makes her tick. And I can bring Charlie along if that’ll make you and Greyson feel better.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Not to mention that I doubt Chessa would do something in broad daylight on a busy campus,” Cali said.

I shook my head. “I doubt that’s true. This is the same vampire who walked into a room of werewolves without hesitation.”

“I’m not getting kicked off the crew team because of some deranged vampire!” Cali shouted.

The room was quiet for a few moments before I finally spoke up.

“Okay, but Mikah better stick by your side,” I relented.

Mikah sighed. “I already said I would. I know vampires better than any of you. She’ll be in good hands. I promise.”

“Good, thanks, Mikah.” Cali threw a pointed look at me and Xavier. “And let’s not forget that I’m pretty good at taking care of myself, too. Now, I’m going to go get ready.”

“And I’ll go get Charlie,” Mikah said.

Once they were both gone, Xavier turned his still skeptical expression on me. “Are you sure that was the best idea?”

I shrugged. “Maybe not, but we both know that Cali isn’t going to listen to us. At least this way, she’ll get what she wants—her freedom to go to campus and make practice on time—and we’ll get what we want, her protection.”

Xavier sighed and looked away, his jaw shifting around in thought. “Maybe one of us should go with her.”

“You’re welcome to, if Cali agrees,” I said. “In the meantime, I’m going to talk to Big Mac… You want to tag along for that, too?”

**Episode 4967**

I was racing around my room, hoping and praying that no professors called on me in any classes today since I hadn’t studied at all. And it wasn’t like I didn’t have a good excuse—I was trying to stop a vampire!

But what professor would believe that? And better yet, what professor could I even tell? We already had plenty of humans on our hands who knew too much, so there was no way I was about to add to the pile—no matter how good an excuse it was.

I realized that I still had my travel mug in my hand—the one that Xavier had helped me get. I closed it tight and sat it near my things so I wouldn’t forget it. I was surprised that Xavier had shown up out of the blue, and it was nice to see him… as always. And I realized that it was even more of a pleasure to see him without a scowling Ava by his side. That was a rare occurrence these days.

But it had been weird and even embarrassing when Greyson showed up. Not that anything had happened between us. We’d dropped the mug, big deal. But I knew deep in my heart that something *could* have happened. I knew Xavier well enough, and I knew myself, too. There’d been that familiar electric feeling in the air between us, and the look I’d seen in Xavier’s eyes… I knew it well. Desire… and maybe something else.

*Even so, what did Greyson actually interrupt? One of our patented staring matches? The start of a conversation? A kiss?*

I felt a little guilty. Not because I still had feelings for Xavier—I would never throw shade on my own feelings, and Greyson knew that—but because whatever *could* have happened would have taken place right in the Redwood pack house. This after I’d helped Greyson realize what a great Alpha he was. Or at least I’d tried to. I could only imagine how hurt he would have been if he’d walked in on something.

*I need to stop worrying about something that didn’t even happen. It might have been a weird moment between Xavier and me—one of many—but there are way more pressing worries today—like not getting kicked off the crew team for being late for the millionth time.*

I snatched up my mug and bag and headed for the door, but just before I stepped outside, I stopped in my tracks.

“Shoot! What about Codsworth?”

I hadn’t gone down to check on him yet. I raced downstairs, suddenly drowning in guilt. How could I have forgotten about him? I’d gone through so much to save him from Chessa, and now he’d just slipped my mind.

*Who knows what he’s thinking? Holed up in our basement and recovering from a vampire attack of all things. I need to stay close to him, so he doesn’t panic and do something stupid. And more than that, I need to be there for him as a friend right now.*

I rushed downstairs, stopped in the kitchen to grab some food for him, and raced down to the basement where I found him lying on the cot with his eyes closed. He was so still that for a moment, I feared the worst. But then he groaned and sat up, looking surprised to see me.

He saw the food and shook his head. “I’m not hungry.” He gestured to a tray. “That guy, Torin, brought me breakfast earlier. It was really good, too. Is he a chef or something?”

“Something like that,” I said. “And I’ll be sure to tell him you said that. He’ll be over the moon.”

*Leave it to Torin to offer the kind of hospitality I’m apparently incapable of right now.*

“So, how are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Like I’ve been hit by a bus—but somehow better than yesterday,” he replied. “My neck still hurts like hell.” He massaged his neck and winced, then shook his head. “I still can’t believe everything that went down. All these years following the supernatural as a hobby and searching for any sign that they existed, and all the while one was sitting right under my nose.”

“I can’t believe it myself. Chessa of all people…” I shook my head, wondering if I’d missed some kind of sign from her.

“Oh, where are you going?” Codsworth asked when he noticed that I was carrying my books.

“To campus,” I said. “Crew practice is starting soon, and I’ll make it if I leave in the next few minutes.”

Codsworth’s eyes went wide. “*Crew?!* I nearly forgot what day it is.”

He started to get up, and I rushed to stop him. “Wait, Codsworth. You can’t go.”

Codsworth stopped and looked at me with confusion. “What? Why not?” He lowered his voice. “I already promised not to say anything.”

“I just think it’s a terrible idea… and I’m pretty sure my two mates upstairs aren’t going to let you go, no matter the promises you made.”

“Wait a minute… I’m not the one in the wrong here. *I* was attacked. And I’ve never missed a day of crew. I’m going.”

I stood in front of him, stopping him from getting up. “You’re not going anywhere,” I said, hating that I was having to put my foot down.

Codsworth reeled back, recoiling in fear as his hand flew up to his neck.

“I’m sorry, Codsworth. I didn’t mean to frighten you. But it’s not safe for you to leave. Not yet. We didn’t catch Chessa, and that means she might be out there looking for you. The safest place for you is right here where my friends can protect you.”

Codsworth nodded slowly, his fear slowly draining away, though I could tell that his uneasiness remained. “And what about you? Chessa made it sound like it’s you she wants.”

“Well, I’m not thrilled about that, but just like you, I have friends looking out for me, too.”

“That’s good to know. After what I saw in Chessa’s creepy-ass vampire lair, I’m happy to know that you’ve got someone watching your back. I’ve studied vampires extensively, and Chessa seems like one with quite a few tricks up her sleeve. She pulled things I didn’t even know vampires were capable of!” Codsworth said almost excitedly.

“I know—but I’ve got a few tricks of my own, and I won’t be alone. I’ll be okay. But if I don’t get to campus in time for crew, as strange as it is to say it, Chessa will be the least of my worries. Coach told me that I need to be on time from here on out or there’ll be hell to pay.”

Codsworth nodded knowingly. “Yeah, he’s pretty flexible until he’s not. You’d better go—but you’ll come back to help me, right?”

“Of course,” I said. “After all, we made a promise to each other. We’ll have each other’s backs.”

Codsworth sighed and finally relaxed completely, looking tired all of a sudden. He laid back down on the cot and closed his eyes. “For sure, Cali. And good luck at crew. Just another reason to hate Chessa. Not only did she try to kill me, but now she’s ruining my crew attendance record. Unlike some people, I actually take crew seriously and take pride in never missing a day or being late.”

I winced. “Thanks a lot, Codsworth. Get some rest, and I’ll see you after school.”

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A short while later, I pulled into the CCU parking lot with Mikah riding shotgun and Charlie in the back seat.

“Stay out of sight, you two. Keep a low profile no matter what. After Greyson’s little surprise pop-up in my lecture hall, I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself. Normally, I don’t think anyone would notice, but with the disappearances on campus, everyone’s on edge and super vigilant.”

Mikah scoffed. “Please. I don’t need to be told to stay under the radar. I’m a vampire. We invented stealth. You won’t even know we’re here.”

“And I couldn’t look *more* like your average, run-of-the-mill college student,” Charlie said. “But I get your point. I’ll keep a low profile.”

“Thanks again,” I said as I leapt out of the car and booked it to crew practice.

“Cali, so glad you’re here and *on* *time*,” Coach said, checking his watch and giving me a smile of approval. “Though I can tell by how out of breath you are, that it was no easy feat. If you need some tips on time management, I think there’s a course you can take—”

“Thanks, Coach,” I said brightly. “I think I’ve got it under control. Just a busy last few weeks, that’s all. Things should be calming down now.”

*Yeah right. If anything, things are about to get even more intense as we work to locate Chessa. But he doesn’t need to know that.*

I moved past Coach to join the rest of the team, and Gael cornered me immediately.

“Hey, Cali. Just want to let you know that the team’s been talking, and we know that Codsworth went missing the other night—and from what I hear he’s still nowhere to be found. So, we’ve decided to report him missing.”

**Episode 4968**

**Xavier**

I was in the car with Greyson, but my mind was still back in the kitchen with Cali. Snatches of the fantasy I’d had about her kept playing through my mind, and I was having a hard time pushing the images away. Especially when I kind of didn’t want to. The fantasy was as close as I’d gotten to making love to Cali in so long that I was having a hard time shaking it.

Greyson kept glancing over at me, and I was starting to wonder if he was going to interrogate me about what he thought he might have walked in on between Cali and me.

But there was nothing—at least as far as Greyson or even Cali knew—for him to interrogate me about. It had all been in my head, and that was where it would have to remain.

After the fifth time Greyson glanced at me, I growled, “What?”

“Just wondering if you’re up for this,” Greyson asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you seem distracted and you keep rubbing your temples,” Greyson replied. “I can take you home if you like.”

I jerked my hand away from my head. “I’m fine. Just keep your eyes on the road.”

I wasn’t sure how convincing I sounded. My headache had returned full force right after my little fantasy with Cali and had been building in intensity ever since. I’d hoped that coming with Greyson would help—and it was one of the reasons I hadn’t made a big deal about accompanying Cali to the campus.

Greyson chuckled. “You’re a horrible liar, brother. You know that, right?”

I glared out the window. “I have a headache. Big deal.”

Greyson reached over and popped open the glove compartment. “Help yourself.”

I spotted a bottle of painkillers.

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine.”

Greyson shrugged and snapped the glove compartment closed. “Suit yourself. You always have liked doing things the hard way.”

I turned to look out the window again. In some ways, I felt like I deserved the headache. It was what I got for waffling in my feelings toward Cali. I still loved her, and I doubted that would ever change. But I loved Ava, too, and was trying to make my life with her.

But the constant push and pull with Cali was literally tearing me apart—and it was what was causing all this pain. I only wished that by some miracle, this would all go away, and the pain would dissipate so that I could actually think straight.

And then there was the question of what to do about it. Therapy? Never going to happen. I’d considered it, but it just didn’t feel like the right move. There had to be something better than spilling my feelings to some hack who would probably prescribe breathing exercises, or worse yet, state the obvious and tell me to make a decision.

*If it were as simple as all that, I would’ve done it already. But how can I choose when I’m literally torn between two women that I’ve come to need in my life?*

I couldn’t help but think things had been a lot simpler when I could barely stand to be in the same room with Ava. But that ship had sailed, and it had become clear that I needed Ava in my life. If I didn’t, I easily would have left her behind in favor of reigniting things with Cali.

I realized that we’d arrived at Big Mac’s only when Greyson turned and called to me from the walkway of her house. “You coming or not?”

I took a deep breath, trying to relax and push away the headache. I got out of the car and followed Greyson up to Big Mac’s door which swung open as we approached, revealing Big Mac’s seemingly perpetual glare.

“What a pleasant surprise,” she deadpanned. “And what luck. Not one, but two Evers brothers.”

I stopped my hand as it headed toward my throbbing head. Seeing Big Mac was only making it worse.

“Your son and his brother are here!” Big Mac called over her shoulder to Mrs. Smith.

“We actually came to see you, Big Mac,” Greyson said.

Big Mac groaned and threw her hands up in the air. “Great. Why am I *not* surprised? What did Cali do this time? Accidentally blast a world leader with her errant magic?”

“No—and it’s not what she’s done, but what she might do,” I said. Big Mac was all that stood between Cali having to use her Fae magic to blank Chessa’s victims’ memories, and I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that simply because Cali wasn’t keen on doing it.

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

I was starting to feel light-headed, and I braced myself against a wall. “Can we come in? I think I need to sit down.”

Big Mac swung her scrutinizing gaze my way and then stepped aside, opening the door wider to let us enter. My headache blazing, I lowered myself into a chair while struggling to downplay just how much pain I was in.

I did my best to focus as Greyson quickly filled Big Mac in about Chessa and her victims. “So long story short, they saw a bunch of stuff they shouldn’t have seen. Ideally, we would like to clear their memories before they go out into the world and share what happened to them. Is that something you can do? Erase their memories of what happened?”

“Oh, Greyson, you should know by now that the real question is not can I, but will I. The answer to the first question is maybe, and the answer to the second is definitely not.”

Just then, Mrs. Smith came walking in and pulled Greyson into a big hug. “Greyson, so good to see you! Why didn’t you tell me you were stopping by?”

“It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing,” Greyson muttered. I could tell he was still trying to sense whether or not Big Mac was serious about not helping to clear the humans’ memories.

“Well, either way, I’ve made you a big cup of white chocolate mocha. Come!” Mrs. Smith took Greyson by the arm and led him toward the kitchen.

Once they were gone, Big Mac zeroed in on me. “Xavier, you look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I grunted.

“I was going to ask you how things are going with the whole two mate thing, but the answer is written all over your face. Isn’t the elixir working?”

“It works fine, but I haven’t been taking it.”

Big Mac raised a brow at me. “And why not? I used the last of my special herbs to make it just for you. If you weren’t going to use it, I wouldn’t have wasted my time or materials. I swear, all of you Redwood and Redwood adjacent folks are the most maddening group I’ve ever encountered, which is saying a lot since I’ve attended my share of witch conferences!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose as my headache raged and thought of Ava.

“I didn’t mean to waste your time or your herbs, Big Mac. I was just trying to overcome it on my own. It’s not like I’ll be able to rely on the elixir forever.” I sighed. “And now I just keep thinking about how I told Ava that I had everything under control. I thought I was getting better.”

Big Mac huffed. “A real genius, aren’t you? Maybe you shouldn’t think so much.”

“Big Mac, usually I find your playful prodding and poking charming, but I have to say that right now, you’re making things a lot worse.”

Big Mac sighed, softening. “I might be able to give you something to help with the headache.”

I perked up at that. “What? Really?”

She reached into her pocket and pulled something out. “Here. It’s Tylenol.”

I begrudgingly took the pills she offered and dry swallowed a couple before grunting, “Thanks.”

Big Mac shot a glance toward the kitchen as Mrs. Smith and Greyson came walking back in. “In the meantime, Xavier, you really need to work this out or you’re only going to get worse.”

“Xavier, I brought you your mocha,” Mrs. Smith said, handing me the mug of steaming liquid. It smelled great, and my mouth watered in anticipation.

*If I’m lucky, this will at least boost my mood a bit. If anything can do that, Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha can.*

“Big Mac, I have to ask… Why won’t you erase the victims’ memories? I mean, honestly, I’m sure they’d prefer it if they never had to think about what happened to them ever again,” Greyson said.

“Maybe so, but what you’re forgetting is that they’re humans. Humans are fragile. And before I even *think* about tampering with their thoughts and memories, I would need to know if there’s a blood bond between the victims and the vampire who attacked them. If there is, my magic could make things worse.”

I swallowed down another huge gulp of the mocha and asked, “How much worse?”

“It could kill them,” Big Mac said. “And I’m not willing to take that chance. Are you?”

**Episode 4969**

I was alarmed at the team’s decision to report Codsworth missing, and as the others gathered around, I realized that the entire team was on the same page.

“This is getting weird. Codsworth never misses practice. He has the best attendance on the team. And on top of that, he’s always the first one here. Why would he all of a sudden just up and miss practice without telling anyone?” Patel said. “It doesn’t track.”

“I know. It’s weird. Something might be wrong. What kind of team are we if we don’t report him missing? We have to look out for each other,” Bear said.

*Oh no. If they report Codsworth missing, who knows what might happen? All the attention we’re trying to avoid bringing to this whole thing will come rushing in and we won’t be able to stop it. Big Mac might be able to blank the memories of a couple of humans, but there’s no way she can wipe the memories of the entire world!*

“You can’t!” I blurted out.

Gael looked at me, confused. “What do you mean we can’t? Why not?”

“Because he’s not missing!” I said.

The team exchanged confused glances and then threw a bunch of questioning looks my way.

“He’s not missing?” Bear asked. “Then where is he? Because Coach made it clear that we were all supposed to be here today, and Codsworth isn’t. Crew team is his life. He would never let us down like this without any sort of explanation. Coach hasn’t heard from him either, and there’s no way he would just blow us off unless something was really wrong.”

Everyone murmured their agreement, their eyes plastered right on me. I couldn’t help but fidget under their scrutiny.

“I was texting with Codsworth and then he suddenly ghosted me, which he never does,” Schmiddy said. “Between that and him just skipping practice out of the blue, I think we need to take this seriously and tell someone.”

“Agreed,” the others chimed in.

“But I talked to him, and he’s fine!” I said. “I really think you’re all blowing this out of proportion. Everyone has an off day or two once in a while.”

I could feel beads of sweat forming along my brow, and I hoped that no one else had noticed. I was also having a really hard time making eye contact with them. Every single time I met one of my teammates’ gazes for too long, I started to think that they were on to me.

*Why isn’t lying easier for me to do by now? Some people make entire careers out of lying and I can’t even do it without sweating through my practice clothes. The horror of being found out is almost too much to handle.*

“Well, if he’s fine, Cali, text him and tell him to get his ass down here. Coach will be here any minute, and he’ll make us do extra laps if we’re not here as a complete team,” Gael said.

I gulped. “I can’t.”

Everyone looked at me expectantly.

“What do you mean you can’t?” Patel shot back. “You said he was fine, so text him and tell him to get his ass in gear. Otherwise, what’s really going on? None of this is making sense.”

“Agreed,” Bear said solemnly. “What gives, Cali?”

“He’s not here… because… he’s sick,” I said. “Really sick!”

“But you just said he was fine,” Rodrigo replied. “Which is it? Is he fine or is he sick? Because if he’s really sick, then maybe we should call his parents—”

“No!” I said a little too loudly. “We don’t need to call his parents. I just meant he was fine because he’s not missing. But he does have a… cold. He doesn’t want to get anyone else sick, so he’s been hanging low. You know Codsworth. Super considerate and responsible.”

“Okay… then why didn’t he respond to our texts?” Patel asked. “Even if he’s sick, he should be able to at least tell one of us what’s up with him.”

“His phone died,” I said quickly.

*I wish they would stop interrogating me! I’m making a mess of this!*

The others seemed to be processing what I was telling them before Gael said, “Well, I guess we’ll have to start practice without him, then. Let’s go. We’ve already wasted enough time.”

Relieved that the inquisition had finally drawn to a close, I started toward the boathouse. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I spotted both Mikah and Charlie watching me.

*What the hell? What are they doing? I specifically told them to keep out of sight, and now here they are pretty much striking a pose right in the middle of campus.*

I hung back, waiting until the rest of the guys entered the boathouse before I marched right up to them.

“I thought you said I would never know you were here,” I hissed at Mikah. “You told me that vampires know how to stay out of sight. Standing in the middle of the quad is not staying out of sight.”

He shrugged. “A change of tactics. It happens.”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess I feel better knowing you two are nearby, but you *have* to keep your distance,” I said.

A moment later, Bear came running up to Charlie and Mikah. “Hey, who are you?”

“Um… They’re just some friends of mine,” I said, stepping in front of them.

Bear smiled. “You have a lot of friends, Lil’ Hart.”

Mikah smiled. “Yes, she does. But I’m sure you can imagine why. Cali’s amazing.”

“No argument there,” Bear replied before turning his attention to me. “Gael wants you to take the four-seater out.”

“Okay, be right there!”

As Bear turned to go, he glanced at Charlie. “You should try out for crew. You totally have the build for it.”

Charlie grinned. “Maybe I will.”

I shot Charlie a glare and gave Bear a swift but playful push back toward the boathouse. “Let’s go, Bear. I’m on thin ice with Coach as it is. Don’t want him to think I’m late when I’m actually here.”

I glared back at Mikah and Charlie as I followed Bear. They both waved, pleasant smiles on their faces. I was glad they were so nonchalant about this whole thing because I certainly wasn’t.

I just wanted this day to be over so that I could get back home and help Greyson and Xavier figure out what to do about the humans recuperating in our basement.

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After a grueling practice, I went to get my books for class and found Mikah and Charlie waiting by my car. I slowed when I saw the looks on their faces.

“Oh no. What’s wrong, now?”

“She’s here,” Charlie replied.

I looked around. “Chessa? She actually showed her face on campus after last night? Where?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Mikah said.

“I sensed her presence,” Charlie explained. “It was almost like I felt her essence all over campus. She’s been busy. Obviously, she’s not as spooked about what happened last night as everyone else is.”

I sighed and stared forlornly at my books. I was going to miss class, I knew that, but what could I do? Finding and stopping Chessa was more important.

I gestured to Charlie. “Lead the way!”

Mikah shook his head. “Sorry, Cali, but you’re not going.”

“What?” I bristled. “What do you mean? Why is everyone hell-bent on telling me I can’t go places?”

“I know it’s frustrating, but I really think it’s best if Charlie and I check things out, first. I promised Greyson that I would keep an eye on you, and I’m taking that seriously.”

“But you do understand that if you and Charlie go after Chessa you’ll be leaving me on my own, right? Didn’t you also tell Greyson and Xavier that you would stick by my side? Not take your eyes off me?”

Mikah sighed and passed Charlie a look. “Fine. I guess you have a point.”

“I’m glad you’re finally starting to see things my way,” I said.

Mikah led the way back toward campus. Still following Chessa’s scent, Charlie moved ahead and turned toward the football field. I suddenly remembered the other night when it felt like I was being followed. I’d taken this same exact path. And now, I had to wonder if it was Chessa who’d followed me.

*But how could it have been her when she was on the football field with Nathan and the others when I arrived? She’s not capable of being in two places at once, is she?*

But maybe she didn’t have to exactly be in two places at once. Chessa was a vampire, and vampires were fast. She could have easily trailed me and then made it back in time to join the others.

As Mikah, Charlie, and I approached the field, I noticed that it was completely empty except for a lone cheerleader on the opposite end of the field doing handstands and flips.

Charlie stopped and looked around. “She’s here.”

Confused, I looked around, too. “She is? Where?”

Suddenly the cheerleader stopped her flips and charged right for me, grabbing me faster than I could react. Chessa hissed, showing her fangs.

“You took my toys, and now I’ll take your sweet, sweet Fae blood!”

**Episode 4970**

**Artemis**

I couldn’t believe that I was actually turning around, but I was. I had to go after Marius. I wouldn’t be able to continue my mission with a clear conscience if I didn’t. It was an unexpected choice to make, and I was still trying to make sense of it myself, but it’s what I was going to do.

Marius would probably believe that I was doing it because of… *other* reasons. But I laughed that off. I was only doing what a friend was supposed to do, nothing more, nothing less.

*But friends… Is that what we are?* I scoffed. *Are we colleagues? Buddies? There has to be a better way to put it. We’re both bounty hunters. Isn’t there some kind of code that binds us together? Maybe that’s why I’m so eager to go help him.*

Even if that wasn’t the case, I knew I had to find him—bounty hunter code notwithstanding. Otherwise, what kind of person was I?

I had no interest in regressing back to the person I used to be—a loner with a chip on my shoulder who took pains to demonstrate how little I cared about anyone but myself. I couldn’t be that person again, not when I’d come so far and finally dug myself out of the hole I used to be trapped in.

The Kollector had taken everything from me. He’d nearly destroyed me and kept me wrapped so tightly around his finger that if not for Cali and my mother, I might never have broken free of him. And if Marius was in a shitty situation with someone who might rival the likes of the Kollector, then I had to help him even the score.

It was exactly what Cali had done and it was what I needed to do for Marius now. I couldn’t let him stay beholden to someone he was so afraid of. That was a bad place to be, and as much as Marius drove me crazy, I didn’t want him to feel that.

But now I had to find Marius again. I was starting to worry that I might have lost him somewhere in the vast Fae woods.

*I should be able to do this, right? After all, it’s not like he could have gotten that far already… he’s fast, but not that fast. And he’s dragging Coriander along with him, and that has to be slowing him down.*

I moved into the woods and took off running. I glanced back at the fortress, realizing that there was no way I would be able to go back there—and I doubted that I would ever need to. But straight ahead through the woods lay the Dark Fae court. A place I never wanted to see again and might not be able to avoid.

*Marius must have gone this way if he was looking to reach Dark Fae territory. And I doubt he would use the open road. Way too risky.*

I couldn’t deny that even the thought of entering the Dark Fae court sent chills through my entire body. I didn’t want to go there at all. There was nothing good waiting for me there, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit I was scared.

Not only would they try to stop me once I got there, they might also be aware that I’d killed a member of the Dark Fae court when I was in Oregon. And that would mean a death sentence. There were no two ways about it.

I took a breath, telling myself over and over that I’d faced way worse things than this. Too many to list, actually. But if I’d managed to hold my own against the Kollector and escape him, I could handle the Dark Fae. I just had to be smart and keep my wits about me.

Steeling myself against the unknown, I plowed ahead. I was unsure of what I was going to do when—no, *if—*I ran into Dark Fae, but I was prepared to do whatever I could to best them. I still had my dagger, and it was perfect for getting me out of all kinds of binds. I wasn’t at all afraid to use it to ensure that I didn’t end up dying or imprisoned in Dark Fae territory.

I slowed down and studied the ground. I dropped to my knees and leaned close to the dirt, examining the patterns in the mud and the leaves. I felt a sense of pride when I saw all the telltale signs that I was on the right track—footprints and a trail that indicated something was being dragged.

*That something has to be Coriander. Who else could it be out here in the middle of the wilderness? And these tracks are fresh, which means he couldn’t have gotten far. I’m probably right on his trail.*

Encouraged, I picked up my pace. I remembered how I’d managed to teach Cali some of the tricks of my trade. Tracking had always been one of my strengths, and I was excited to put the skill to use again.

But then the dragging trail stopped abruptly, and I couldn’t immediately find where or *if* it picked back up again.

I looked around, wondering if I’d over shot the trail. Had Marius veered off in some other direction? Maybe to avoid being followed? That was the type of thing he would do. I used to admire him for always managing to stay one step ahead of his marks and his pursuers. It didn’t always work, but I appreciated the effort most of all.

I retraced my steps and doubled back to right where the drag marks had stopped. They were gone without any indication of what happened, but luckily, his tracks were still visible, and they were aimed right for the Dark Fae court.

I kept low to the ground and then paused, listening. I could just make out a bunch of muffled grunting sounds. Moving between the trees and keeping my steps light, I advanced carefully.

It didn’t take long for me to spot Marius walking a few paces up ahead and laboring under the weight of Coriander, who he had slung over his back.

*No wonder the dragging stopped. Marius is carrying the guy!*

I increased my speed to catch up with them, and Marius stopped abruptly and turned slowly around, his eyes staring wildly. “Artemis? I must be dreaming… or on the verge of passing out from exertion. Is that really you?”

I caught up to him, working overtime to fight the smile I could feel forming on my lips. “Of course it’s really me. I tracked you down because I felt sorry for you. I know you can still use my help.”

Marius’s expression brightened, and he dropped Coriander like a sack of potatoes. He was in disbelief. “You came. I truly can’t believe that you did.”

I took one step closer to him—so close that his clean, earthy smell invaded my nose.

We shared a long, heated look, and I knew in that instant that I’d made the right decision. It felt right. Marius was a little rough around the edges and didn’t do things the way I did them, but that was what I liked about him. He was his own man.

Coriander groaned on the ground, and Marius silenced him with a kick. Then he gestured to me.

“Come here, Ari.”

I suddenly felt like I was having one of those out-of-body experiences. I didn’t know what exactly made me obey and start walking toward him. A feeling? A memory? But whatever it was, I kept walking until I was in his arms, and I leaned up so that he could capture my mouth with his.

The kiss felt good even though I wasn’t sure about what I was feeling—whether it was just circumstantial because I was so giddy about finding him so quickly or if these feelings welling up in the pit of my stomach had been there since I met him.

All I knew was that I didn’t want to be anywhere else. I opened my mouth to receive him, realizing with no small amount of surprise that I was happy to let him take the lead and guide the pace and intensity of the kiss.

Marius wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer as he kissed me. I felt it everywhere in my body, and warmth spread through me. And I hated to admit it, but it was incredibly satisfying. Even though I was still looking for Kadmos, even though I was technically wasting time sucking face with Marius of all people, I was happy and content to be right where I was.

When we finally broke for air, Marius stroked the side of my face and looked me in the eye. “So, are you coming with me?”

I broke our gaze to look past him. The court was close, I could feel it. Just through the woods. Probably not even a mile away.

I returned my gaze to his and smiled—an easy smile that I felt with every fiber of my being. “Yes. I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 4971**

I couldn’t breathe. I struggled to draw in air, but Chessa’s hands around my neck felt like a vise-grip, and I couldn’t get any oxygen. Dark spots were starting to appear in my vision as Chessa began to drag me away from the others.

Mikah and Charlie lurched forward to stop her, but she aimed her red, menacing eyes right at them.

“If anyone takes another step, I will drain every drop of her sweet Fae blood and leave her withered corpse for dead. Do you hear me?”

I’d heard her, and I struggled again, trying to break free. I was trying to stay as calm as I could—trying not to panic—but that was hard when my vision was starting to darken from lack of air. I knew that even if Mikah and Charlie couldn’t help me, I could protect myself, but I needed to concentrate to summon my Fae magic. It never worked out well when I tried to use it while freaking out.

Mikah and Charlie had stopped when Chessa spoke, but now they started moving again, inching toward Chessa and me again. It was a standoff and a dance, with Mikah and Charlie moving a step, then Chessa dragging me an answering step backward.

Chessa aimed her glare at Mikah, who was watching us closely. “Why are you helping them?” she demanded. “You’re a vampire. Have you no shame? You’re betraying your own kind!”

Mikah shook his head. “No, I’m not. Vampires decided long ago to live alongside humans and other paranormals. It’s *you* who’s lost your way, Chessa.”

She laughed at this, the sound high-pitched and devoid of happiness. “Well, that makes sense. I think very little of modern vampires. If anything, it’s the vampires of today—vampires like *you*”—she added, glowering at Mikah—“who have lost your way. You have forgotten the path that we are supposed to walk. You have forgotten what it is that makes our kind superior to other paranormals—and especially to *humans*.” This last word she spit out like it was something disgusting in her mouth.

I could feel my magic building, but I was still struggling to breathe. The darkness in my vision closed in—was I going to pass out?

“Who are you?” Mikah asked, looking at Chessa. “How old are you?”  
 She laughed again, clutching me tighter against her. “Are we going to play twenty questions now? Is this a job interview?” She gave him a terrifying smile. “Why so curious?”

Mikah narrowed his eyes. “You must be old.”

She scoffed. “Old enough to know what the hell I’m doing.” And with that she jerked my head to the side. This exposed an expanse of my neck, and without another moment’s pause, she bit down.

The moment her fangs pierced my skin seemed oddly stretched out, like time was moving in slow motion.

Then the pain took over.

It felt like the fire of the sun had ignited in my skin, ripping through me with nuclear power. It exploded something in me, and I let loose with a blast of magic. It hit Chessa at close range, and she went soaring backward.

Suddenly free, I stumbled in the opposite direction and tumbled to the ground. My survival instinct was in full-swing, and I scrambled back to my feet. I could feel warm, sticky blood dripping from my neck where Chessa’s fangs had pierced my skin. When I put my hand up to the injured spot and pulled it away, my fingers were slick with blood.

The sight of my own blood on my hand enraged me, and without giving it another thought, I charged toward Chessa, summoning my sword in one hand, my shield in the other. I felt both of them in my hands as I sprinted toward the vampire.

Chessa—recovered from the blast of magic—had risen to her feet, and when she saw me charging toward her, she smiled, looking almost happy, like she relished my aggression.

I gritted my teeth as I neared her. I was going to wipe that smug grin right off her face.

But before I could reach her, Mikah grabbed hold of my arm, pulling me back. “Stop, Cali! Stop! Not here.”

“*What?*” I gasped, whipping around to look at him in surprise.

His dark eyes flashed with frustration and fear, and he shook his head. “Think about where you are, Cali. You can’t show your magic in public.”

All at once I remembered where I was. I looked around. I was on the CCU campus, about to fight a vampire using my weapons that I’d summoned by Fae magic. I was standing on a football field, for Pete’s sake. There could be students watching from anywhere.

But I couldn’t let Chessa get away.

I released my sword and my shield, and they both vanished in an instant, but I wasn’t about to give up.

First I glanced around, then I sent another blast of magic toward Chessa, who dodged it easily and blurred away.

“She’s escaping!” Charlie bellowed, charging toward us.

Mikah, Charlie, and I all raced after Chessa’s quickly retreating form. Mikah was the only one who could keep up with her, and he surged ahead of us. But just as he was about to reach her, Chessa accelerated, becoming more smoke than matter, and a second later she was gone.

I stopped in my tracks, my heart racing with the effort of running. “Where the hell did she go?!” I looked around, spinning in a circle as I tried to locate her. And when I finally found her, my stomach dropped.

She was sitting in the empty bleachers, a smug grin wide on her face. “Wa-hoo! Way to go! Keep running! Run ’til you fucking drop! You’ll never be able to catch me!”

I was worried that she was right, but I wasn’t about to give up. So when she stood and began to move speedily toward the center of campus, I charged after her. “Follow her!”

Sprinting as hard as we could, Mikah, Charlie, and I followed Chessa toward the main quad—the center of campus—where I saw that a block of classes had just let out. Chessa stopped moving as a blur when she saw them but was able to move deftly among the masses of people, occasionally shoving a student, seemingly just for the fun of it.

There were so many people that I struggled to keep an eye on her. I was also trying hard to look normal and not draw attention to the fact that my friends and I were chasing a vampire across campus.

“Be careful,” Mikah warned softly. “Chessa’s acting irrationally.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I muttered, dodging a pack of students looking down at their phones.

“Which means that she could attack a student at any moment,” Mikah went on. “She’s not being careful anymore. She’s not going to care about the consequences.”

That idea hadn’t yet occurred to me, and I felt my stomach drop. Mikah was right—she was laughing at us, and she didn’t care what she did, or to whom.

Up ahead, I saw Chessa pause by a couple of guys. From a distance, I couldn’t tell if she was just chatting with them or if she was threatening them.

Then the posture of the two guys changed. They straightened up, spun around, and began to march toward me. They neared me and stopped, blocking my way.

I tried to move around them, but they kept stepping in front of me, refusing to move.

“Shit,” I muttered, looking at the vacant stares of the guys.

“They’re in a trance,” Mikah said softly, leaning down to speak to me.

“Did Chessa do that?” I asked.

Mikah nodded, looking at the guys with a dark expression. “I think so. I think this Chessa person might have developed some rather terrible abilities.”

“She’s getting away!” Charlie hissed, stepping toward us.

We followed his gaze and saw Chessa moving through the crowd. She stopped when she reached the edge of the quad and looked back at us. She smiled her gruesome smile and winked, then blurred away, disappearing in an instant.

The two guys in front of me shook their heads. They looked at me, then at each other, both wearing twin masks of confusion.

“What happened?” one asked.

“I dunno,” the other guy said, shrugging.

They turned and started away, both stumbling a little before they found their footing again.

I stared at them for a moment, then in the direction Chessa had vanished. I couldn’t believe she had gotten away.

Mikah sighed and rubbed his head. “I should make some phone calls—”

“Cali!”

I turned at the sound of my name and saw Lola and Jay walking toward us.

“What happened?” Lola asked. “I thought I saw Chessa!”

“You did,” I confirmed, which made Lola’s face darken.

“She was here?” she growled. “Why’d you let her escape?!”

I opened my mouth to tell her we hadn’t *let* her do anything, but I stopped when someone else caught my eye. It was a familiar figure, and they were staring off in the direction that Chessa had disappeared.

“Kendall!” I called out. “What are you doing here?”

**Episode 4972**

**Greyson**

Frustrated, I passed a hand over my eyes. I had to admit that I wasn’t thrilled to hear Big Mac talking about any kind of bond. I felt like we’d had enough trouble with bonds already. We’d had mate bonds, sire bonds, and now we were dealing with blood bonds?

“What are you talking about?” I asked her. “What the hell is a blood bond? What does that mean?”

Big Mac glared at me. “Use your brain, Greyson. When a werewolf turns someone, they can develop a bond, right? A sire bond. You of all people should know about that,” she added tartly. “Well, when a vampire turns someone, something similar happens. They can develop a bond as well, though the strength of it can vary.”

“Vary how?” Xavier asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “It depends.”

“On what?” he asked.

She heaved a long-suffering sigh. “On a variety of things.”

I rolled my eyes. I had already decided to ignore the barb she’d tossed at me about sire bonds—I was used to her acid tongue by now. But her explanation had left me with a really big worry. How the hell was I supposed to know if there was a blood bond between the survivors and Chessa?

There was a part of me that thought that it would have been a hell of a lot easier if the humans Chessa had corralled in the basement had just died, though I knew the thought was selfish and cruel. So I kept it to myself.

Out loud I asked, “So is there a way of determining whether a blood bond exists in these people?”

She shrugged and rolled her eyes. “*Ugh*. Let me go grab a few things.”

She stomped angrily away, and my mom followed. Xavier glanced over at me, a snarky smile on his face.

“When she and your mom get married, that ray of sunshine is officially going to be your stepmother.” His grin widened. “One big happy family, right?”

I glared at him. I wasn’t in the mood for Xavier’s shit at the moment and was about to fire back by asking how his headache was working out when Big Mac walked back into the room, a bag in her hands.

“Okay,” she said huffily. “Let’s go.”

Xavier and I both looked at her blankly. “Where?”

“Do you want me to determine if the vampire’s victims share a blood bond with the vampire or not?” she asked huffily.

“Yeah, of course,” I started, “but what should we—”

“Then let’s go! I need to see them.”

We convinced Big Mac to let us drive, rather than having her blip us back to the packhouse, by reminding her that I’d have to come back at some point and get my car if we blipped.

“The last thing I want is another visit,” she muttered under her breath, then slid into the back seat.

It didn’t take long to get back to the Redwood pack house, and when we got inside, Rishika was waiting for us.

“Hey, there you are. I’ve been looking for you,” she said.

“What’s up?” I asked, tossing my car keys on the table by the door.

Rishika didn’t look happy. “I just went down to talk to Torin and check on the humans.”

“How are they?”

“They’re becoming more aware of where they are,” she said darkly. “And they’ve been asking a zillion questions. They want to be released.”

“Released?” I pushed my hand through my hair with a groan. “I’m not interested in letting anyone go, at least not right now. Not until we figure out what the hell is going on. If any of them have this blood bond, who knows what Chessa can do with them.”

“Blood bond?” Rishika asked, looking confused.

“I’ll explain later,” I told her.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” Big Mac announced, and headed toward the basement.

Xavier and I followed her.

Sage was in the kitchen and looked over at us as we reached the door. “Be careful down there,” she warned.

“Why?” I asked.

“They’re acting strange,” she told us. “Especially Macauley.”

Big Mac snorted a response. “Of course they’re acting strange. Anyone would act strange after being used as a blood bag for a vampire. Think about it, girl,” she snapped. Then we headed down the stairs and looked around.

She seemed to think for a moment, then pulled out a few items—a feather, a rock, and a ball of twine. “Bring the survivors together,” she instructed me, without looking up.

I nodded and looked up at Sage, who had followed us down the stairs. “Help me out, would you?”

“Sure,” she said, and set off down the hallway.

I went the other way and opened the doors to the first room. Eddie, Codsworth, Macauley, and the girl, Charlotte, were inside, and they all looked up when I walked in. Well, most of them looked up.

Sage had been right about Macauley. Unlike the others, who were sitting on their cots, looking tired but relatively normal, Macauley looked agitated. He was on his feet, pacing in a corner, walking back and forth. Maybe he was just freaked out—I wouldn’t blame him for that.

“Come with me,” I said, waving them out of the room.

When we joined Big Mac in the weight room, Xavier pulled me aside, away from the others.

“Have you heard from Cali?” he asked quietly.

I hesitated, thinking about the question before I answered it. I knew Xavier wasn’t thrilled about Cali going to campus by herself, but that really wasn’t his concern anymore. Though I knew that it was. Xavier was with Ava, and he was part of the Samara pack, but I knew that he would never stop caring about Cali and her welfare, and—on some level—I got it.

I shook my head. “Not yet, but I’ll check in with her after Big Mac does… whatever it is she’s going to do.”

“Okay, everyone inside the circle,” Big Mac said, pointing to the middle of the weight room where she’d made a big circle using small mounds of pink salt.

Macauley sneered at Big Mac. “Why should we do what you want? You’re keeping us prisoners in this place.”

Xavier took a step toward Macauley, getting right up in his face. “How about because we saved your ass. Would you rather we’d left you where you were—left you to die?”

I agreed with Xavier, but I knew his aggressive attitude wasn’t going to get us anywhere, so I stepped between the two men. “Go stand where you’re supposed to stand,” I said to Macauley, pointing to the circle of salt. “Do this, and hopefully we’ll let you all go. That’s what we want too, man.”

Macauley didn’t look happy, but he moved begrudgingly into place.

Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte were already inside the circle, waiting. Big Mac walked to the center, held up a bunch of some kind of herbs, and—using her magic—lit the thing like a candle. As the smoke curled up, she turned slowly, facing each of the humans in turn. She muttered something under her breath as she looked at each of them.

I took a cautious step back. I didn’t know what Big Mac was up to, and the last thing I wanted was to get caught up in some witch magic. I’d had enough of that to last me a lifetime. When I looked around, I saw that Codsworth had started to tremble. Was he really that scared?

But when I looked at him, I saw that the veins in his head were bulging and had turned purple in color. I glanced over at Xavier to see if he had noticed this too. He had, and he was looking at Codsworth with raised eyebrows. Then, as we watched, the veins in the foreheads of the others turned purple as well. They bulged and pulsed menacingly, and the humans stood stock-still, as though they were frozen. They weren’t breathing either and each of them gasped, like they were choking. They looked like they were suffocating.

I was getting uncomfortable and was starting to wonder how far this was going to go when Big Mac shouted something in a strange language and snuffed out the burning herbs with her fingers.

This released some kind of hold on the survivors, and they all gasped hungrily for air, their veins receding once again.

Big Mac turned to me, her expression dark. “Well, that’s it.”

“What’s it?” I asked.

“They all share a blood bond with Chessa. Except that one,” she said, pointing to Macauley.

Xavier looked skeptical. “You sure about that? Because if anyone seems like they would, it’s Macauley.”

Big Mac made a dangerous sound in her throat. “Are you questioning me, Xavier Evers?”

“Does that mean we can go now?” Macauley asked loudly, glaring over at us.

I hesitated. If Macauley really had no blood bond, then Big Mac would wipe his memory and we could release him back into the world—and get him out of our faces.

I was just wondering what the hell I was going to do about the others when Macauley screamed and—quick as a flash of lightning—lunged for Eddie.

**Episode 4973**

Kendall looked over at me, then past me at Mikah and Charlie. “Funny.”  
 “What’s funny?” I asked.

“I was about to ask *you* the same thing,” she said coolly. “What are you doing here?”

I opened my mouth to answer, then closed it again. Kendall had so much effortless confidence, and it was kind of unnerving. I wasn’t sure what to say, or what to do with my hands.

Luckily, Lola stepped to my side and spoke, saving me.

“We go to school here,” she said. “What’s your excuse?”

Mikah and Charlie were walking over, and Kendall’s purple flecked eyes flicked over them briefly, then back at me. “I work here,” she reminded Lola. “And I was just heading to the dining hall. For some coffee.”

I thought about the information Lola had gathered about Kendall when we were stalking her online—she *was* a program coordinator for CCU, so I supposed it made sense that she was on campus. But it did seem oddly convenient that she just happened to show up right when we were tracking Chessa—a vampire. Greyson mentioned to me that Kendall had an interest in vampires. That was the reason she’d given for trespassing on Redwood territory, after all. And the way she had answered made me think her little stroll across campus was about more than just a cup of shitty coffee from the cafeteria.

“Did you happen to see Chessa?” I asked.

She looked at me for a moment, then past me, tipping her chin toward Jay, Charlie, and Mikah. “And what about these three? They’re not students, so what are they doing here?” she asked, ignoring my question.

There was a beat of awkward silence as I looked at Lola and Lola looked at Jay. How was I going to explain them?

“Um, they’re kind of part-bodyguards, part-detectives,” I explained, deciding to go with the truth. “They’re helping us track down Chessa.”

“What exactly is your interest in vampires?” Mikah asked.

Kendall’s gaze lingered on Mikah. “I don’t like them,” she said flatly.

Mikah chuckled. “I appreciate your honesty,” he said, though there was something in his voice that suggested what he felt wasn’t exactly appreciation.

I cleared my throat, hoping to redirect the conversation before things got out of hand. “Since you’re being so open and transparent with us, Kendall, maybe you can tell us the truth.”

She shifted her gaze to me. “The truth?” she repeated.

“Yeah, the truth. Were you really out here for coffee? Or were you out looking for Chessa?”

If Kendall was surprised by my question, she didn’t show it. “Maybe both,” she said with a smile. “But now that Chessa has managed to elude us all, I guess I really do need that coffee.”

“Maybe we need some coffee too,” Lola muttered as Kendall started away.

After a few steps, Kendall stopped and turned back. “Happy hunting,” she told us. “But you should be careful.”

“What do you mean, *careful*?” I asked.

The purple flecks in Kendall’s eyes seemed to flash as she gazed at me. “Chessa’s not like other vampires.”

This threw me. *What does that mean?* I wondered.

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“Noticed what?” Lola asked.

“She managed to escape you—the *five* of you,” Kendall added pointedly, “in broad daylight. Nice detective work on that, by the way,” she added with a smirk, then turned again to walk away.

“If you know something, you should tell us,” I blurted out.

This made her pause, and she looked over her shoulder at me, frankly curious. “And why is that?”

I suppressed an irritated sigh. “It seems like we’re all looking for the same thing, right? So why not work together—share information. It’ll make things easier for all of us.”

“I don’t think we want to work with her—” Lola started, gesturing to Kendall, but I ignored her and powered on.

“If you really think Chessa is a threat—and clearly you do—then it makes sense to do what we can—*whatever* we can—to stop her, right?” I continued.

Kendall thought about this for a moment, mulling it over. “So what did you have in mind?” she asked.

“Come back to the pack house with us. We might have some information that could help you.” I looked over at Lola, who was staring daggers at me. “*What?!*”

“Okay,” Kendall said after a moment. “I’ll come.”

“You will?” I asked, surprised. Somehow, I hadn’t expected her to agree.

“Yeah. I’ll go get my bike and I can follow you back. I’ll meet you in the south parking lot in, what?” She looked down at her watch. “Ten minutes?”

“Yeah, sounds good. South lot. See you there,” I said.

Kendall nodded and walked away. I watched her for a moment, and when I turned back around, Lola was glaring at me.

“*What?*” I asked again.

Lola’s eyes went wide. “What did you just do?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, I get that you’re suspicious, but I can’t see that it makes sense not to work together if she knows something.”

“I don’t know, Cali,” Charlie said, shaking his head. “What do we actually know about her? Maybe it’s not a great idea to get too cozy with someone like Kendall.”

I had just opened my mouth to explain myself, but Mikah spoke first.

“I agree with Cali.”

I looked over at him in surprise. It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate the support, but it kind of surprised me. “You do?”

“Why?” Lola asked.

Mikah shrugged one muscular shoulder. “Think about it. It’s obvious that Kendall is right—Chessa’s *not* like other vampires. Not like any other vampires I’ve run into. It’s not just that she’s blazingly fast—though she is that—but she also seems to have some kind of mind control abilities. You saw what she did with those two dudes. She has an ability to turn whoever is around into a de facto army. And that’s not even *starting* on the thing with the animals.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Lola said, with a shiver.

“I think that if Kendall has any information that can help us stop Chessa, then why not bring her into the chase?” Mikah explained reasonably.

Jay gave Mikah a curious look. “Kendall just insulted you to your face. Said she didn’t like vampires.”

“So what?” Mikah said with a shrug. “The way I figure it, that really doesn’t matter much. We don’t have to all like each other in order to work together, do we?”

I had to admit that I saw the logic in that. I’d had to work with Ava a few times, and we’d managed that. And Greyson and Xavier worked together all the time, and they weren’t the best of friends.

So I nodded. “Let’s head to the parking lot.”

As we walked over, Lola stepped to my side, giving me a suspicious look.

“Cali, are you sure about this?” she asked.

“No,” I admitted. “Not really. But I really don’t see the danger—”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Lola asked, looking floored. “You don’t see the danger?! Do you not *see* Kendall when you look at her?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Do you really not see how beautiful she is?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I wondered.

“No one *that* pretty isn’t keeping some secrets,” Lola said, narrowing her eyes.

That made me laugh, which felt good after the day we’d had. “Well, maybe that’s true—”

“It is, trust me,” Lola interjected.

“But what’s that saying? Keep your friends close and your beautiful enemies closer?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if that’s really a winning strategy, Cali. Do I need to remind you of our experience with enemies? My experience with enemies is that you want to kill them before they kill you.”

“I suppose that’s true,” I said thoughtfully, walking along the path toward the south end of campus. “But there’s nothing to suggest that Kendall is our enemy. Or that she wants to kill us. Besides, there’s another saying—the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Lola gave me a sideways look. “Did you get a book on pithy quotes for your birthday or something? Where are you coming up with these?”

I laughed as we made our way toward the parking lot and wound our way to my car. We didn’t get in, but waited, looking around expectantly.

Ten minutes after we agreed to meet, I heard a rumbling in the distance and looked over to see a motorcycle heading toward us. When it drew near, I saw that Kendall was riding, and when she pulled up, she was wearing a black leather jacket and a black helmet with a mirrored visor.

Shit. She really did look like a badass. Maybe Lola was right—maybe I should be more careful about having her around.

Kendall flipped up her visor and tipped her chin toward the exit. “Well?” she asked, revving her engine. “What are we waiting for?”

**Episode 4974**

**Xavier**

I lunged and grabbed onto Macauley’s shirt, tearing him away from Eddie. Then I shoved him back, pinning him against the wall. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demanded.

Macauley stared at me, his wide eyes wild and bloodshot. His mouth was smeared with blood, making him look like a feral animal.

“What the hell, man?”

Behind me, Eddie was screaming hysterically, “He bit me! He actually fucking bit me!”

I glanced over at Eddie, who was holding his bleeding neck. When I turned back to look at Macauley, he was licking his lips, revealing fully grown fangs.

Shit. Another fucking bloodsucker.

Macauley hissed like a snake and struggled against me, trying to shove me away. He reached for Eddie again, who stumbled back in fright, making him trip over Big Mac.

“Watch it!” she growled as she tumbled to the floor.

I shoved Macauley back into the wall. “Stay still, asshole!”

But instead of staying still, he jerked his head toward me, trying to reach my neck. The guy was skinny as a rail, but he was stronger than he looked. The fever for blood had given him strength beyond his own. But it didn’t surprise me. I’d seen it before. That’s just how vamps were—once they got a taste of human blood, they wanted more. But I wasn’t about to let this newborn vamp use me as a blood bag to quell his appetite.

As Macauley gnashed his teeth, reaching for me—trying to bite—I looked over at Greyson. “Hey! A little help here!”

Greyson was helping Big Mac back to her feet, then hurried over to me, putting his arm against Macauley’s neck to restrain him.

Macauley snarled and tried to reach Greyson, but Greyson leaned back, out of reach.

“Strong little bastard,” he muttered.

“You can say that again,” I said. With Greyson restraining him, I eased up and reached for a set of shackles from the closet in the corner of the room. I grabbed a set and cuffed it around Macauley’s hands, then attached it to his feet.

This infuriated Macauley, and he tried to come after me, but the shackles stopped him in his tracks, and he fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.

They were doing the job for now, but I didn’t believe the shackles were going to hold him for long, so I looked around for something else to use against him.

Resting on the far wall near the door was a wooden chair. I strode over and snapped off one of the legs, then turned back to the raging vampire.

“W-What are you going to do to him?” Codsworth stammered at me.

I looked over at the guy, who looked as skinny and emaciated as the rest of them. “The best thing to do is to stake the kid before he starts snacking on all of us—”

“*Nooooooo!*” Codsworth screamed.

This drew everyone’s attention, and all eyes were on Codsworth, who looked horrified.

“What’s your problem?!” I demanded.

Codsworth shook his head. “This isn’t Macauley’s fault! He didn’t do anything wrong! He didn’t ask for this to happen! You kill him, and then what?!”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“What if all of us turn into vampires?!” Codsworth asked, gesturing wildly toward Charlotte and Eddy. “Are you going to stake us, too?”

I wanted to slap the guy, just to get him to shut up. He was hysterical. And—yeah—maybe he had a right to be, but what the hell was I supposed to do? I had a newbie vampire on my hands, and they could be extremely dangerous. Sometimes more dangerous than the older vamps. This wasn’t the time to show compassion or mercy.

But behind me, Greyson sighed.

“Maybe he’s right.”

I opened my mouth to argue with Greyson that Codsworth was, in fact, *not* right, but as I did, I looked down. I was standing next to Macauley, holding the broken, sharpened end of the wooden stake against his chest. Macauley was looking at it with tears coursing down his face.

I had seen crocodile tears, but this was the first time I had ever seen *vampire* tears. Was he just pretending? Was this a way of disarming his victims before he lunged again and tried to suck our blood in a feeding frenzy.

Then I looked down at my hand, clutching the weapon, and I thought of Cali. She always tried to find another way. Even when it seemed like there was no choice, or no way around some kind of inevitability, she always tried to find one. She was always making time for compassion, always willing to show mercy.

I gripped it for another moment, then lowered my makeshift stake.

“Fine,” I spat. “But you all better find a way to restrain him while we figure out what the hell we’re going to do.”

The whole room was in chaos. Codsworth was weeping now, holding himself as he shook. Eddie was hunched against the far wall, still trembling with shock and fear, as Sage sat next to him, trying to dress the still-bleeding wound on his neck.

“Sage, go get Torin, will you? And find Rishika,” Greyson said.

Big Mac brushed herself off and put her herb bundle back into her bag. “We need to talk about what to do from here.”

I heard the meaning of her words, even though she wasn’t coming right out and saying it—not only was there this new twist with Macauley to deal with, but we had the others, with their blood bond to Chessa. Big Mac was wondering what the hell we were going to do with any of them.

She had said that Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte all shared a blood bond with Chessa. I didn’t even know what the hell that meant. Was Codsworth right? Were they all going to turn into vampires?

And why the fuck couldn’t Big Mac just tell us straight what was going to happen? Why did that witch always have to talk in riddles? It was like she enjoyed being difficult.

I was feeling frustrated as hell, and as Rishika stepped into the room and looked around, taking everything in, I felt my headache returning with a fury. The pounding in my head was so intense it startled me, and I looked around, confused. Why was it so bad all of a sudden? I wasn’t anywhere near Cali or Ava.

But then my phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I looked at the screen, I saw that it was Ava calling.

Now I knew why my headache had come back. I must have sensed Ava was about to call, like a freaking sixth sense, only this one made me miserable.

“Hey,” I said, answering the call. “Everything okay?”

“Xavier? Where the hell are you?” she asked.

I signed and rubbed my temple. “I’m dealing with some stuff with the Redwoods.”

There was a pause on her end, and I could see her reaction to this in my head. She wasn’t pleased—I could hear that in her silence—and I wanted to let her know it wasn’t what she thought, and that Cali wasn’t even here. But she spoke again before I got the chance.

“Okay, fine. Is there a *reason* you didn’t bother to let me know you were leaving?” she asked, her voice brittle now. “Or anyone else for that matter, so someone in the pack knew why their Alpha had just run off?”

I could feel the eyes of the room on me. I knew everyone was watching and I turned toward a wall, trying for a measure of privacy. “Can we not do this right now, Ava?”

“Can we not what—”

“I’m dealing with a vampire problem, and I kind of need to concentrate so I don’t end up dead or turned, okay?”

I could practically hear Ava grinding her teeth, but when she spoke again, all she said was, “Fine. But we’re not done discussing this.” And she ended the call.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and, head pounding, headed upstairs, with Greyson on my heels. When we got to the kitchen Zainab walked in from the hallway.

“There you are, Greyson. I was just looking for you,” she said.

“Why?” Greyson asked.

Zainab jutted her thumb over her shoulder. “There’s a vampire at the door to see you.”

Greyson frowned and—wondering why the hell a vampire would come to the pack house—I followed Greyson down the hall to the front door.

When we got there, a tall, well-dressed woman stood on the porch, looking into the house. She didn’t look like any vampire I had pictured in my head, but her smell confirmed that she was one.

She nodded when she saw us.

“Can we help you?” Greyson asked.

“Hello. My name is Greer, and I’m from the vampire council.”

“The vampire council?” I repeated, startled.

“That’s right. I understand you have a problem.”

**Episode 4975**

The drive back to the pack house was uneventful, although I kept on eye on the rearview mirror the whole way, watching Kendall on her motorcycle.

And when I pulled into the long, circular driveway, I saw an unfamiliar car parked in front of the house. I was still looking at it in confusion when the roar of the motorcycle came to a sudden stop behind my car.

I got out of the car. Lola, Jay, Mikah, and Charlie did the same.

“Who does this belong to?” Lola wondered, eying the strange car.

Jay took a step toward the car and drew a deep breath. “Well, I can’t tell you *who*, but I can tell you *what*.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“This car belongs to a vampire,” Jay said.

Charlie tensed immediately. Jay noticed and put his hand on Charlie’s arm.

“I doubt this is a hostile visit. People who want to eat you don’t usually park in your driveway,” he said reasonably.

“You expecting another vampire?” Kendall asked, swaggering toward us. She eyed the car, then the pack of us, still looking at it. “Seems like your pack attracts them. What’s up with that?”

I glared at her, wondering if asking her to come back here with us had been a stupid idea.

“We weren’t *expecting* any visitors,” I told her. “I have no idea what’s going on.” I looked over at Mikah, wondering if he had any insight, but he just smiled and shook his head.

“You know, vampires don’t all know each other. But I have a foolproof method of finding out who it is.”

“What is it?” I asked quickly.

He gestured toward the house. “Why don’t we just go in and see?” he said dryly.

“Right,” I muttered. I was embarrassed—why would I expect Mikah to know every random vampire who parked in front of our house.

But there was something off about this. I had a bad feeling as we walked toward the house, and I wondered if this had anything to do with Codsworth and the other humans who had been victimized by Chessa. Had something happened to them while we were gone?

As we headed up the porch steps, Lola fell back a step, so she was walking next to me. “I’d keep an eye on that Kendall if I were you,” she whispered to me.

I didn’t answer, and as we reached the front door there was a noise from behind us. There came the pounding of running paws, and I whipped around to see a wolf I recognized running toward us. Recognized, but didn’t welcome.

It was Ava, and as she approached, she slowed to a stop and shifted from her wolf form to her human form. She shook her dark hair as she shifted and stretched for a moment, showing off her perfect body, then reached around and grabbed the bag she had slung over her back.

“*Ugh*, thank goodness she brought clothes,” Lola muttered, rolling her eyes.

A few moments later, dressed in jeans and just a T-shirt, despite the cold temperatures, Ava walked up the steps toward us.

“I’m here to see Xavier,” she announced.

“This day just keeps getting better and better,” Lola muttered. She turned and headed inside.

Ava caught sight of Kendall and gave her a once-over. But she said nothing about her as we all walked into the house.

“Cali, you’re back,” Greyson said, walking over as I came in. He put his arms around me and pulled me into a hug, then turned to look at Kendall, a look of surprise on his face. “What’s she doing here?” he asked me.

“I invited her. And she agreed to come over so we could talk about the vampires—share some information.”

Greyson took this in, his face still registering surprise.

“I guess I probably should have checked with you first,” I admitted.

“Yeah, that might have been good, but she’s already here, I guess, so we’ll get on with it. And what about her?” he asked, glancing at Ava, who was looking around, peering down the hall into the kitchen.

“Xavier,” I said simply.

Understanding, Greyson nodded. “Well, come on in,” he said, gesturing toward the living room. “Everyone, this is Greer, and she’s from the vampire council.”

The *vampire council*? What the hell was the vampire council? They had one of those? I was about to ask this question to the statuesque woman in the wing chair, but I was momentarily distracted as Ava walked over to Xavier and hugged him.

I shook my head and turned back to Greer, who was wearing a conservative business suit. She didn’t look like any vampire I had ever seen, but I guess it was all relative, wasn’t it? How many vampires had I really seen…

“What can we do for you?” I asked.

She smiled, and I noticed she didn’t show her fangs. “I am here to ensure that you are able to apprehend the reckless vampire.”

“How did your council know about that?” I wondered.

“I contacted them,” Mikah confessed.

“You did?” I asked, surprised.

Mikah nodded. “It was the right thing to do—the only thing, really—given how dangerous Chessa is.”

“Well, whatever, that’s fine. I’m glad you got in touch with them if it helps us put an end to this vampire issue. If having the council onboard will help us catch Chessa, I’m all for it. But I do want to make one thing clear,” Greyson said, turning his attention to Greer.

“And what’s that?” she asked sharply.

“I want to make sure we all understand that I’m not about to cede control of my pack or my territory to the vampire council. Or control over this pursuit. I will do things my way.”

“Got it,” Greer said, raising her hands in surrender. “I have no interest in causing friction between the vampire council and any local packs. I am here because having a vampire like Chessa running wild is upsetting the natural order of things, and the sooner we can contain her, the better.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What exactly do you mean by *contain*?”

Greer looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. “I suggest that the werewolf pack concern itself with the capturing of Chessa, and leave the rest to the council.”

This woman was obviously a lot more put together, but the way she spoke reminded me of Cesaries and the werewolf council. They had done the same thing that Greer was asking us to do—let the werewolves do all the dangerous work of finding the outlaw, before they stepped in to mete out what *they* called justice.

My thoughts went to Helix, and how he had been sentenced to die by the council.

“I hope there are some things you can tell us,” Greyson said, looking at Greer.

She nodded. “Of course. The council believes that Chessa is merely the current name of a vampire that has been eluding the council for years. She’s used a dozen different names.”

“So who is she really?” I wondered.

“If it is the same vampire, then she’s an ancient one, who has acquired a certain set of abilities that make her very difficult to capture. She’s faster than most others, she’s cunning, she’s fearless, and she’s reckless. She has the ability to manipulate the minds of her victims, which makes her especially dangerous and destructive. She seems to favor certain populations, and let’s just say this isn’t the first time she’s chosen a college community to terrorize.”

“God, is that all?” Lola muttered, shaking her head.

“No, not at all. I’ll have a more detailed brief sent over to you at the email address you provided,” Greer said, nodding to Greyson. “In the meantime, the council would like to take custody of Chessa’s latest victims.”

“Um… why?” I asked hesitantly. “What are you going to do with them?” My thoughts went to Codsworth and how scared he already was. The poor guy just wanted his life back—his *normal* life back.

I looked over at Mikah. He had been the one who contacted the council, and I wondered if he knew what they would do to the humans.

But Greyson was already shaking his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Excuse me?” Greer said coolly.

“It’s not going to happen.”

Greer clenched her jaw. “And why is that? Wouldn’t it make sense for us to take them off your hands? We have the resources necessary to—”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Greyson said vaguely. “But this is Redwood territory. The vampire council has no jurisdiction here.”

Greer’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and I got a flash of the powerful supernatural creature that she must be. “Perhaps you don’t understand, Mr. Evers. If you refuse to hand them over voluntarily, then the council will have no choice but to act.”

“Act *how*?” I asked, feeling a fluttering of anxiety.

Greer looked coldly at me. “We will have to take them by force.”

**Episode 4976**

**Greyson**

Cali shook her head. “What does the vampire council want with Chessa’s victims?” she asked. “They’re all completely traumatized, and besides, they’re not vampires.”

I was wondering the same thing, and I was glad that Cali had asked. And I agreed with her—though even if I *hadn’t*, I wouldn’t have let Greer know it. Or Kendall, who was watching me closely. And Greer could throw around threats all she wanted—like I’d said, she had no jurisdiction here, and I wasn’t about to give in to her attempts to intimidate.

I thought back on the dream I’d had the other night—about the way I’d been unable to make Kendall listen to me, and how I’d believed I’d lost my pack. I wasn’t about to let that dream nonsense affect me, though, so I gave Greer a cool look. “If I were you, I’d think hard before making any more threats. Does the vampire council *really* want to go to war with the Redwood pack?”

Greer scoffed. “I hardly think that’s what we’re talking—”

“Let me remind you that you just told us the vampire council disapproves of what Chessa has been up to, and of the kind of attention she brings to the whole vampire community,” I said. “And I know your interest in the victims of her crimes isn’t borne of sympathy for the innocent humans she preyed on. It’s clear all you care about is avoiding the kind of scrutiny that someone as reckless and dangerous as Chessa can bring to you. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

Greer didn’t answer, but there was something in the set of her jaw that told me I was on the right track.

“So,” I continued, “if you’re looking to avoid bad press, I can tell you right now that it won’t look good if the vampire council is seen to be using force against a werewolf pack—and in that pack’s own territory, no less.”

Greer’s face looked flushed, but the look she gave me was cold as ice. “Well, you seem to have this all figured out, don’t you?”

“I’m just doing what an Alpha is supposed to do, lady,” I said bluntly. “I’m looking out for my pack. And let me offer you a little advice—you might spend a little less time threatening me, and a little more time focusing on your own council and its members.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. “You might live to regret this decision, Mr. Evers, but I will respect it. For now,” she added warningly.

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t care too much about her threat, which felt vague and empty.

She picked up her purse, then turned and headed for the door, pausing for a moment to glare at Lola with obvious disdain. But when she reached the doorway of the living room, she stopped and looked back at me.

“You’ll be hearing from us,” she said. Then she headed for the door.

When the door was shut behind her and we were sure she was gone, Mikah turned to me.

“Okay,” he said, “that was *not* what I was expecting when I called the council.”

“What *were* you expecting?” I asked.

“I certainly wasn’t expecting them to take such a hardline stance,” he said. “I’m sorry about all that.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, waving it away. “We asked you for help, and you did what you thought was right. Nothing to apologize for.”

Mikah eyed the path Greer had taken to leave the house. “Yeah, maybe. But you need to be careful, Greyson.”

“Careful about what?”

He looked back over at me. “You don’t want to fuck with these people.”

“I’ll take that into consideration,” I said dryly. “But honestly? You’d be better off warning the council that they don’t want to fuck with me.”

Mikah raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, maybe I’ll do that.” He shook his head. “I’m going to go check on Macauley. Go see about our newest addition.”

As Mikah walked out, Cali stepped to my side and touched my wrist.

“For what it’s worth,” she said quietly, “I think you did the right thing, just now.”

I smiled at her. “Well, that’s worth a lot to me.”

She looked tense. ‘There’s just no way of knowing what the vampire council would do to the survivors if we handed them over—though I imagine it wouldn’t be a great situation for them.”

“No, I don’t think being released to the vampire council would be a winning lottery ticket for the humans,” I said dryly.

“The council might see them as something they need to cover up, permanently. But that’s not fair,” Cali went out, looking gradually more outraged. “None of them had anything to do with Chessa’s rampage. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

She looked so distraught I reached for her and pulled her into a tight hug. I hated to see her getting so worked up, and this situation was clearly really distressing for her.

“Cali, I think you have the most loving, most empathetic heart of anyone I’ve ever met.”

She held me tight, and I felt her take a shaking breath. “I don’t think I’m doing anything special. I’m just doing what anyone with a sense of compassion would do.”

I was more cynical than that—I didn’t think there were many people out there who would care as much as Cali did, but I kept that to myself. Now wasn’t the time to argue.

“It’s fine that we’re keeping the humans,” I said, rubbing her back, “but you’d better start thinking about what the hell we’re going to do with them.”

She sighed. “I know, and I wish I had a solution for that.”

“Plus, we still need to talk to Big Mac about the blood bond situation. I don’t know anything about them.

“But there must be something we can do to break them, don’t you think?” She leaned back so she could look up at me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Breaking any kind of bond is really difficult, if it’s even possible at all,” I said.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “So what happens if we can’t break them? What do we do then—”

“Hey, Cali,” Lola interrupted, walking over, “I know there’s a lot going on and everything, but we do have a problem we need to address right away.”

“What?” Cali asked, looking over at her friend.

“Well, in case you’ve forgotten, we have a very young vampire downstairs, possibly going out of his mind right now. Rishika was just telling me about him.” Lola looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. “I know what Macauley’s going through right now. He’s ravenous for human blood—and worse than that, he’s not able to control himself. At this point, he’d be willing to do anything to anyone to get what he needs.” She shook her head darkly. “It isn’t safe to have him around right now.”

“So what should we do with him?” Cali asked.

Lola blew out a breath. “I don’t know. It’s not really safe to take him anywhere else, either.”

“Are you saying we should’ve handed Macauley over to the council?” I asked, surprised.

Lola shot Cali a sheepish look. “I don’t know. That might’ve been the right thing to do, for him at least.”

Cali balled her hands into fists. “That’s completely unfair. We should at least try to help Macauley. It’s not like he *asked* to become a vampire.”

I shoved a hand through my hair, thinking this over. Cali was right—but Lola was right, too. Macauley hadn’t asked for this to happen to him, but that didn’t make it any less dangerous to have him in our pack house.

“Listen, we’ll do what we can do to help him, but maybe Xavier wasn’t totally off base when he held that stake to Macauley’s heart.” I saw Cali go pale as I said this, and I kept talking quickly. “I’m just saying that may end up being the only choice we have, here.”

Cali and Lola both gasped.

“You can’t mean that,” Cali said, shaking her head.

“I’m not going to rule anything out just yet,” I said, trying to stay reasonable. “Not where the safety of my pack is concerned. And as it stands, right now, Macauley is a genuine threat to us.”

Cali frowned. “Greyson—”

“*But* I’m willing to talk to Big Mac before I decide anything,” I added. “I want to see if she can offer any solutions—but I’ll tell you right now that I’m not feeling optimistic about this.”

Cali looked terrified. “Would you… Would you really stake him, Greyson?” she asked quietly.

I thought long and hard before I answered her question. I knew she was against the idea, but I wasn’t going to lie to her, so I answered honestly. “I would kill anyone who threatened my pack, Cali. Anyone.”

“Hang on,” Lola said suddenly.

“What is it?” Cali asked her.

Lola smiled. “I might have a better idea.”

**Episode 4977**

**Xavier**

My head was about to explode. At least it felt like it was. I was standing at the far end of the living room, my back pressed against the wall, as far as I could get from everyone else, but it wasn’t helping. Thirsty after her run, Ava had gone into the kitchen to get something to drink, but that hadn’t done anything to help the headache that felt like dozens of nuclear bombs exploding in my brain.

The pain had been bad when I’d gotten Ava’s phone call, but now that I was standing in a room with both her and Cali? It was excruciating.

I took a deep breath and slowly blew it out through my nose. I could’ve groaned from the pain of it, but I was fighting to keep my expression neutral. I didn’t want to let it show in front of anyone, but especially Ava. She’d notice if anything was off, and then she’d know that I’d been lying to her about the severity of the pain—and after I’d already promised that I had it under control.

And if Cali happened to notice pain in my expression, she’d want to do something about it. And that would only piss Ava off, because she *really* didn’t want Cali doing anything for me.

Ava had already suggested that I see a therapist—a suggestion I wasn’t overly enthusiastic about. Throwing Cali back into the mix would only make an already bad situation even worse.

No, that wasn’t going to work, so I was going to have to just suck it up and fight through the pain until I could get back home to the pack house, take a big dose of Big Mac’s elixir, and figure it out from there—when I could think clearly again, that was.

I took another breath and glanced around the room, my gaze stopping on Kendall. She was standing patiently near the door, quietly observing the chaos around her. She hadn’t said much of anything—in fact, had she even said a word to me at all?

Fuck it—I didn’t care. That was definitely *not* my problem.

I pushed a hand through my hair. I was about ready to head home. There wasn’t much I could do here—especially not with my head blowing up the way it was. As I headed out of the room to find Ava and let her know, I passed Cali and Lola.

“—I don’t think asking Emmett to come up is the best choice right now,” Cali was saying, but Lola was already shaking her head.

“He’s a superstar at Tottenville,” Lola insisted. “*And* he’s a vampire scientist. He could help!”

I thought bringing some vampire specialist in for this sounded like a shit idea, but I was in too much agony to comment, so I walked past them and out of the room.

I found Ava in the kitchen, where she was drinking a glass of water.

“Hey,” I said. “Let’s go home.”

She nodded, put the glass in the dishwasher, and followed me out the door.

When I stepped outside, I drew in a breath of cold air and felt the pain ease, ever so slightly. It wasn’t much, but I would take it. And as we started running, I found that the farther away from the Redwood pack house I got, the less my head hurt. Being away from Cali lessened the pain, made it almost bearable.

Ava looked over at me. *What do you plan to do about Knox and Milo? And the rest of the Loneclaws?*

When I didn’t answer, she shook her head.

*You’re going to have to deal with it, X.*

The pain had lessened, but only slightly, and I could still barely see straight. But I gritted my teeth and answered her, trying to sound normal. *What do you think we should do?*

Ava thought for a moment. *Well, we’ve really only heard one side of the story, right? I know you have no reason not to believe Knox, but it wouldn’t hurt to hear Milo’s take on what happened. Anyway, it would give you a chance to talk to him, maybe get to know the guy a little better.*

*Yeah, that’s a good idea*, I said, quick to agree to Ava’s plan. I was willing to do just about anything to distract myself from this headache. The elixir was just going to have to wait.

When we got to the pack house, we found Milo sitting with the other Loneclaws in the backyard. Ava and I stopped at the treeline and shifted back to human. She handed me some joggers and a T-shirt from the bag on her back, and we walked over to where they were sitting.

“Xavier!” they chorused as we approached. “Ava!”

I was heartened to see the positive reception. It was good to see everyone being supportive.

“Listen,” I said, “Ava and I wanted a chance to talk to each of you alone. We’ve seen you all in a combat situation, and now we just want to get to know you a little better. Give you a chance to learn about the Samara pack, and give the Samara pack a chance to learn about you. Milo, you’re up first,” I said, nodding toward the guy.

Milo got to his feet and followed us into the house. I led the way to my study, but when I shut the door, my head gave a massive throb of pain.

Letting out a slow breath so I wouldn’t groan in agony, I leaned against my desk. I wasn’t trying to look cool or intimidating—the pain in my head was making it hard to stand steadily.

“Ava, why don’t you start,” I said, my voice tight.

Ava looked over at me and her eyes narrowed for just an instant, but then she turned her attention back to Milo. “How about you tell us what happened between you, Knox, and Kaleigh.”

Milo looked confused. “What? Kaleigh? Why do you want to know about her?”

“Humor me,” Ava said, and I could hear the hard edge to her voice.

Milo seemed to have heard it as well, because he squirmed a little, looking uncomfortable. “Is that really necessary?” he asked. “Did Knox say something to you?”

My patience was already whisper-thin, and it faltered when he started hedging.

“Just tell us what happened,” I snapped.

Ava looked over at me with a questioning frown, then she looked back at Milo. “Just tell us about Kaleigh.”

Milo sighed, then shrugged. “I don’t know what there is to tell. She was this girl I had a crush on when I was in high school. I was too nervous to ask her out, so I asked my friend—Knox—for advice. Knox told me he’d try to talk to her—you know, get the scoop, find out if she had any feelings for me. A week goes by, and he doesn’t say anything. The next thing I know, Knox and Kaleigh are going out on a date.”

I rubbed my temple, trying to alleviate the pain. This was getting us nowhere. It was just becoming a case of he-said-he-said.

I looked up and leaned toward Milo. “You’re sure that’s how it happened?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Milo said firmly.

“And what happened after that?” Ava asked.

“Nothing. I never spoke to either of them again,” Milo said, glancing between us.

Ava sighed. “Okay. Thanks for being so… *open* with us, Milo.” She opened the door and Milo—getting the message—started to leave.

But then he stopped in the doorway and turned back. “It happened a long time ago. I’ve moved on.”

“I’m sure you have,” I said, then gestured for him to leave.

Milo nodded and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

When he was gone, I turned to Ava. “Well? What do you think?”

“I think he’s lying,” Ava said, without hesitation.

That surprised me. “How can you be so sure? Couldn’t Knox be lying?”

She rolled her eyes. “I know my cousin, Xavier. He can be a prick sometimes, but he wouldn’t lie about something like that.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I kept my opinion to myself. I gritted my teeth—all I wanted was for this headache to go away.

“I guess it comes down to deciding if we care,” I said. “I don’t care about Kaleigh. Do you?”

Ava laughed. “No.”

I shrugged. “Well, as long as Knox and Milo can refrain from killing each other over the issue, then it shouldn’t be anything we need to worry about. And if they do become packmates, I hope they’ll just be able to move past it. Like Milo said, it was a long time ago. I’m going to head upstairs… I need to check on something real quick.”

Without waiting for an answer, I opened the door and went for the stairs. My vision had started to blur, and my head throbbed with every beat of my heart. I made it to my room and yanked open the bedside table drawer, desperate for the elixir.

Where the hell was it?

I rifled through the drawer’s contents, but I couldn’t find it. I was sure I’d left it there. I needed something to help with this damn headache—or at least to buy myself some time. What if I couldn’t find it?

Nausea rolled through me at that thought. What was I going to do? I couldn’t keep feeling this pain. But I couldn’t tell Ava that the elixir was missing, or even ask if she had it. If I did, she’d know that I’d lied.

**Episode 4978**

“I don’t know, Lola,” I said doubtfully. “I’m not crazy about involving any outsiders in our vampire problem—Greyson isn’t crazy about having Kendall along for the ride, as it is. And now that Mikah’s told the vampire council… It’s starting to feel like things are getting out of hand.”

We already had a basement full of humans that knew a hell of a lot more than they were supposed to, and it seemed we were pulling more people into the problem by the hour. I knew that Greyson wanted to keep things simple—as simple as they could be, considering—and involving yet another outsider wasn’t going to help with that.

Lola let out a frustrated sigh. “I get that, but bringing Emmett on makes perfect sense. Emmett knows about this kind of stuff. He has a lab, he helped with the revenants, he helped me deal with all my hybrid stuff. We’d be stupid not to enlist his help on this. Vampires know how other vampires think—especially older, seasoned vampires. We could really use his expertise.”

“I can’t argue with you, Lola—he did help us,” I conceded. “But let’s not forget that he also made Jay really jealous.”

Lola scoffed. “Whatever. Jay has nothing to worry about, and he knows it. He’s my mate, and I love him.” She pulled out her phone. “I’m going to call Emmett now. Just to see if he’s even available. How do I look?”

I frowned at my friend. “Are you serious? Didn’t you just say—”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I’m *joking.* Besides, who cares what I look like? I’m making a phone call, not a Tinder profile.”

I grimaced. I didn’t think Jay would find any of this amusing… But I was willing to go along. Emmett *had* helped Lola deal with her vampire heat blood lust thing, so maybe he’d be able to help with the blood bond issue. I supposed we were at the point where we needed all the help we could get.

As Lola left to call Emmett, Greyson came and pulled me aside. “Have you talked to Kendall? Has she said anything that might help?”

“No, haven’t talked to her much since we arrived,” I said. “I was hoping that you and I could maybe talk to her together?”

Greyson cursed under his breath and shook his head. I could tell that he was still wound up from the meeting with the vampire council leader, Greer. I couldn’t blame him. Greer had strutted in like she owned the place, and now we were on her and the vampire council’s radar—which was yet another stressor for him.

“Kendall had an opportunity to speak up during the confrontation with Greer, and she didn’t,” Greyson said. “We shared all the information we had on Chessa, and what did Kendall give us in return? Her presence? That’s not enough.”

I thought about what Greyson was saying and quickly realized that he had a point. Kendall hadn’t said much of anything since she’d arrived. She’d just stood back and observed.

“You’re right,” I said. “The whole point of bringing her here was to share information about Chessa, but that hasn’t happened. I’m sorry, Greyson. I know I should’ve talked to you before bringing her—”

“It’s not that I’m upset about you bringing her,” Greyson said. “It was a smart thing to do. I’m just upset that the information sharing has been a one-way street. Kendall needs to give us something, or she’s going to have to stay out of our way.”

“Well, let’s talk to her now,” I said. “See what she knows. She must know *something*, otherwise why would she have come?”

Kendall didn’t seem the nosy type, not really, and it wasn’t like she’d insisted on coming. I’d done that. Maybe she could still be useful to us as a fresh source of ideas on the matter. I didn’t particularly blame her for not speaking up to Greer, either. I could understand Greyson’s frustration, since he would’ve liked some back up against the aggressive vampire councilwoman, but I wondered if it would even have been Kendall’s place to speak up. I wasn’t going to say that to Greyson, though.

Greyson nodded. “I’d like to find out.”

I led Greyson over to Kendall, who immediately said, “So, can I see the survivors?”

She took a tentative look around.

 Greyson was clearly taken aback. “What? Why?”

“Do you have a plan for helping them? Or do you just plan on keeping them trapped here in your pack house until inspiration strikes?” Kendall flashed a sweet smile.

“We’re working on it,” Greyson said through clenched teeth. “And it’s none of your business what we plan to do with them—this is *our* problem. You still haven’t said why you’re so interested in seeing them.”

Kendall was quiet for a moment, then said, “Because I might be able to help them.”

“How?” I asked.

“I’ve seen what vampires can do,” she said. “The kind of destruction they can leave in their wake. Sometimes just talking to the victims can reveal something about the vampire in question.” She shrugged. “If you have any concerns about my motivation, just come with me. I have nothing to hide.”

Greyson considered Kendall for a few beats. “I’ll allow it. But after that, I want some answers from you.”

Kendall eyed him coolly. “I’m an open book.”

I wasn’t sure what was going on, or what, exactly, Kendall had planned, but I knew we needed all the help we could get.

“Come with me, I’ll take you to talk to them,” I said to her.

I led the way downstairs and then into the larger back room where Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte were huddled together on one of the cots. They looked up almost fearfully when we entered the room, and I realized abruptly how much I hated to see Codsworth in this state.

“The other one, Macaulay, is in the room down the hall, for his and everyone else’s safety,” I told Kendall. “He tried to attack one of the others.”

“Got it,” she said as she approached the three survivors.

She knelt in front of them.

“You three holding up okay?” she asked gently.

Codsworth nodded, pulling his blanket tighter around his shoulders. “As well as we can, under the circumstances.”

“Glad to hear it,” Kendall said. “I know this was a shocking thing to go through, but stay strong. We’re figuring out how to help. You did nothing wrong, remember that. You’re the victims here, and you didn’t deserve what happened to you.”

I was surprised by the compassion and understanding I heard in Kendall’s voice. It was a side of her I hadn’t really expected to see. I didn’t know her well at all, but I never would’ve imagined that she was the type to speak so kindly to strangers.

*I wonder if her interest in vampires is more personal than we thought. Maybe she had a family member or a friend who was tortured by a vampire. Or maybe she experienced something herself?*

Kendall pulled each of the humans into a hug, and they all responded as if they really needed it. I felt a little bad that I hadn’t thought to be so gentle with them. But with everything going on, I hadn’t had time to really spend much time making sure they were coping with this awfulness. I was doing my part by trying to track down the vampire responsible for their suffering.

“I’m going to help you all,” Kendall said. “I promise.”

“Can we leave soon?” Codsworth asked. “I have a life to get back to. I’m not interested in staying locked in a basement for however long someone else decides is necessary.” Codsworth’s gaze flicked to me before returning to Kendall. “I just want to leave. Call my parents. Get back to school—regain some sense of normalcy.”

Codsworth’s words struck me deep, and I felt really bad all over again about keeping them locked up down here. But we didn’t have a choice. And it wasn’t like we weren’t doing everything in our power to help them—to figure out a way that would let us protect them and ourselves at the same time.

“You’ll be able to leave shortly,” Kendall assured him. “Just hang in there a little while longer while we make sure you’re safe.”

Kendall nodded at me, and I turned and led her back upstairs, feeling a little uneasy about what had just happened. I was grateful that Kendall had been kind to the humans, but I was still a little unclear on her motives.

“Do you think you might be giving them false hope?” I asked. “We don’t actually know when they’ll be ready to leave. And it really isn’t up to you to decide when and if they leave.”

Kendall was about to answer, but before she could, Lola came rushing up to us.

“Good news, Cali!” she burst out. “Emmett’s on the way!”

**Episode 4979**

**Artemis**

As we got closer to the Dark Fae court, the buzz I’d felt after making out with Marius began to fade, replaced by a sense of dread. Going anywhere near the Dark Fae court was a mistake—dangerous for a whole host of reasons.

But I also knew that Marius wouldn’t be dissuaded. As risky as this little excursion was, it was his chance to get a clean slate, and I wanted that for him. I wanted it enough to risk my life and my freedom—in no small part because he was the key to tracking down Kadmos.

Before I knew it, we were approaching the fortress—there were too many of these lately. Hard to get into, hard to leave. Coriander began to stir, twisting and writhing on Marius’s shoulder. I put my hand on my dagger, ready to whack him with the pommel if he caused any trouble. There was no way I was going to let Marius get this close only for Coriander to ruin everything.

We approached the guard at the gate with caution, though we were both taking pains to act natural. As far as I knew, the guard didn’t have the slightest clue who I was, and I was going to act accordingly.

“We have a delivery for the court,” Marius told the guard. “Please let us pass.”

The guard gave us an appraising look before dragging his gaze across Coriander’s body, hanging heavily over Marius’s shoulder.

“You can leave the prisoner with me,” the guard finally grunted. “I’ll make sure the court gets him.”

Marius took a step back, subtly angling Coriander’s body away from the guard, like he was worried that he might try to snatch him away.

“Thank you, but no. I need to deliver this in person.” He gave the guard a thin smile. “I’m sure you understand.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what you need, and I *don’t* understand,” the guard said flatly. “You can either leave the prisoner here with me or take a walk.”

Marius’s expression turned stony. “I’ve come here with a gift that the Dark Fae court will not be happy to miss out on. I urge you to reconsider. If you turn me away and the Dark Fae court gets wind of it, it might cost you your job—not that this is much of one.”

The guard scowled and took a step forward, his hand on his sword. “And I urge you to drop the prisoner and leave, or take a hike—before I lose my patience.”

Another guard appeared from behind the other one and looked us up and down.

“Follow me,” he said.

The first guard started to argue with his colleague but obviously decided against it. With a loud sigh and a frown in Marius’s and my direction, he stepped aside and allowed us to follow the other guard through the gates.

The guard led us inside, then down a long corridor that opened out onto a large room.

“Wait here,” he ordered before leaving and shutting us in.

Coriander was fully awake now, and struggling like crazy to free himself.

“You can’t do this to me!” he shouted. “I have rights, you know! Rights that YOU are violating!”

“You should’ve thought about that before you tried to run away,” Marius replied snidely. “The Dark Fae court can be very unforgiving. Just relax and deal with the consequences of your actions, Coriander. Take it from me, that’s the best way.”

Marius tossed Coriander to the floor, then checked to make sure his legs and hands were still bound tight.

“You’re an asshole!” Coriander spat.

“If you think that’s an insult to a man like me, you’re sorely mistaken,” Marius said lightly.

As we waited, I looked around the room. The walls were covered in portraits of Dark Fae nobles, some I recognized and some I didn’t. I wondered if my father’s portrait was among them. I looked, but didn’t see it immediately, though that didn’t mean it wasn’t here. There were a *lot* of portraits.

Marius joined me. “I can’t thank you enough for coming back to me, Artemis… Though how could you not?” He flashed me a smile. “Admit it—I’m irresistible.”

He stepped close, and I felt the heat of his body washing over me. It was strange how easily and quickly I responded to him. Damn him.

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks and shoved him back. “I came after you because you said you’d help me. We had a deal, and—”

“Excuse me, hello,” a woman said as she pushed into the room. “She’ll see you now.”

Marius flashed a relieved smile and bent down to pick up Coriander. “We can continue this conversation later.”

“Or not,” I muttered.

We followed the secretary into an adjacent room, where a regal woman sat waiting for us. She had to be part of the court itself—it was obvious. She was dressed in fine clothes, and looked fresh faced and bored at the same time. The idea that there were dozens more Dark Fae just like this woman here made my skin crawl. The court was not where I wanted to be, and yet here I was.

Marius, showing no regard for her implied authority, walked right up to her, dropped Coriander at her feet with a thud, and said, “You wanted me to bring him back, he’s back. You’re welcome.”

The woman wasn’t paying him any attention—she was staring past Marius, looking right at me. I met her eyes, knowing that if I dared to look away, the woman would win. I didn’t know why she felt the need to engage in a staring contest, but she was wrong if she thought I was going to back down.

*I’m not going to give in so easily. My guiding principle is to always show strength, no matter what. Even when you’re up against a wall with a knife at your throat—actually,* especially *when you’re up against a wall with a knife at your throat.*

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about this woman suggested that she wouldn’t hesitate to use a knife to slit someone’s throat. No wonder Marius was so determined to get Coriander back to the court. Its members were dangerous, and I was glad he’d brought them an offering, of sorts.

The woman held my gaze, unwavering, as she flapped a dismissive hand at Marius. “You are free to go.”

I sighed, letting out a long breath.

*Could it really be that easy? Did I get all worked up and worried for nothing?*

I shot Marius a look—the sooner we got out of here, the better. But apparently, Marius had other ideas.

“Hold on,” he said. “I want that in writing.”

This finally drew a reaction from the woman, who turned her full attention on Marius. “You don’t trust me?”

“Please don’t take offense,” Marius said, putting up his hands. “I don’t trust anyone. In writing, please, Celeste. It’ll do wonders in helping me sleep at night.”

*Why does that name sound familiar?*

Celeste mulled that over. “Very well.” She gestured to the secretary and threw a pointed glance at one of her guards. “Watch them while I attend to his request.”

The guard gave Celeste a tight nod as she and the secretary left the room.

As soon as they were gone, Marius turned to me, his eyes sparkling, a huge smile on his face. “We did it! My debt with Celeste is about to be officially erased. *Finally!*”

“And so am I!” Coriander groaned. “You bastard.”

Without giving the man so much as a glance, Marius stepped over Coriander and pulled me with him to look out the window. He gestured at the horizon. “Now we can walk free—no one breathing down our necks, no need to fear what awaits us around every corner.”

“Yes, but what about the wanted posters?” I demanded. “None of those had anything to do with this debt, or paying it off.”

Marius waved this off as trivial. “Don’t you get it? With the Dark Fae court off my back, I’m free to fulfill my promise to you.” He took me by the shoulders. “Now, I can devote all my attention to helping you find Erimentha!”

I had to admit, his enthusiasm was contagious. I felt a surge of hope. If we could do that, we’d finally be one step closer to finding my father. I’d had my doubts about Marius, but he’d kept his promise.

“Looking for Erimentha will be the very first thing we do when we get out of here,” Marius said.

The door opened, and Celeste returned with the secretary in tow, breaking the moment between us.

The secretary unrolled the scroll in her hands and read it. “This document hereby states that you, Marius, have fulfilled your debt to the Dark Fae court in the matter of Coriander, and have no outstanding business with this entity. Signed, Celeste.”

She rolled the scroll back up and looked to Celeste for direction.

Marius gave an exaggerated bow and motioned to Coriander. “Thank you. And now, he’s all yours.”

Marius reached for the scroll, but Celeste held up a hand.

“Wait.” She glanced at me. “There’s someone you need to meet.”

Slowly, I reached for my dagger—just as a guard walked in and pointed right at me.

“She’s the one!”

**Episode 4980**

It was getting late, and I was alone in my room, trying to catch up on the class I’d missed earlier. Unfortunately, I was having a hell of a time trying to concentrate.

Most college students could focus on their studies without the distraction of dealing with vampires, but it wasn’t like I could use that as an excuse. Deadly vampire on the loose or not, I had homework to do—and unless I wanted to flunk out of school, I was going to have to buckle down and do it.

*When I really stop and think about it, Lola enrolling me in school against my will has caused me a lot of undue stress. I was so on the fence about going back to college, and now I know why. My life is too busy to accommodate writing papers and taking notes and being prepared for discussion in tutorials.*

I was about to slam my textbook shut in frustration when Greyson came walking in. He stopped short when he saw what I was doing. “Oh, I can come back later. Don’t want to interrupt your studies.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly. I could tell that he really wanted to talk, and I’d be much happier looking into his eyes than at the words in my textbook. At this point, I was ready to grab for any distraction available. I was just going to have to stay up late and finish the rest of my homework later.

*Thanks again, Lola. I thought I’d put all-nighters behind me.*

I scooted over to make room for Greyson on my bed, and he sat down with a sigh. I could tell that he was stressed over this Chessa thing, but trying his hardest not to show it.

“I talked to Kendall before she left,” he said. “Still can’t figure her out. She didn’t offer much, just a few things about Chessa’s background—and the fact that she has access to the school’s records. But I don’t know how much help that will be, since we know from Greer that Chessa fabricates her identity—and has done it many times in the past.”

I nodded, agreeing. “Yeah, I can’t get a read on Kendall either. Though I have to admit, she surprised me when I took her down to meet with the victims. She was so compassionate and understanding… Sweet, even.”

Greyson cocked his head, considering this. “Really? I guess that’s a good thing. Though it doesn’t tell me any more about what her angle is.”

“Just know that I’ll support you, whatever you need,” I said. “If you don’t want to work with Kendall, that’s okay with me.”

Greyson smiled. “I know you’ll support me. I never doubt you. You’re the one constant in my life.”

He took my hands and kissed them, then pressed his mouth to mine to kiss me deeply.

I leaned into it, flattening my hands against the rigid planes of his chest and enjoying the warmth of his body and the bursts of his breath into my mouth as our kiss deepened. We both needed this—a moment to reset in each other’s arms. A second to show each other how much comfort we could offer.

All at once, I wanted more—to pull him into bed and forget all our problems for an hour or two… But I knew that now wasn’t the time.

When we broke apart, I caught my breath and then asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I’m hoping that Big Mac can do more than we can,” he said. “We know about the blood bonds; we’ve confirmed they exist. Now, it’s time to find out if there’s anything we can do about them. If Big Mac could wipe Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte’s memories, that would solve a lot of our problems.”

“I’m just happy that you’re willing to take a less drastic route than staking them all,” I said, realizing how crazy it was that I was even saying those words seriously. This was my life—full of supernaturals and dealing with all the problems that came along with them, including the possibility of routine-and-necessary murder being committed for our safety at every turn.

We both turned at the sound of commotion from downstairs, and Greyson groaned. “Never a moment’s peace. What the hell is happening now?”

I wasn’t in the mood to return to my studies, so I went downstairs with Greyson to see what was going on.

We both stopped when we spotted Lola at the front door, hugging someone. Jay was standing off to the side, his arms crossed.

“Who is that?” Greyson asked. Then his forehead creased. “Wait, is that Emmett?”

I immediately recognized the hot Tottenville teacher. “Yes. Didn’t Lola tell you he was coming?”

Greyson nodded slowly. “She might have. I’ve just been so distracted by Kendall and the council stuff that it slipped my mind.”

As Lola fussed over Emmett, I glanced at Jay, who was clearly not happy. I stepped forward and put a firm hand on Lola’s arm to interrupt her hug with her former mentor.

Emmett looked over at me and smiled. “Caliana! So good to see you again!”

“Emmett, same to you,” I said. “Welcome back.”

“Glad to be back—and to be of help,” Emmett said, shaking Greyson’s hand.

“Good to see you, Emmett,” Greyson said. “And we need all the help we can get.”

I sidled up to Lola and whispered in her ear. “Keep it together, Lola. Jay might be understanding, but that doesn’t mean he won’t feel a little jealous. You and Emmett have history.”

Lola clearly wasn’t listening—her eyes were riveted to Emmett. “Is it possible that Emmett looks even better than he did before?” She was nibbling at her nail, clearly lost in thought. “Maybe he’s been working out or something. Eating better, maybe. Something’s got him looking positively—”

I glared Lola into silence, and she widened her eyes at me as if to say *what?* Then she made her way over to Jay and made a big show of wrapping her arms around him and kissing him, trying just a little too hard.

“So, I have to say, I’m eager to get to work,” Emmett said, rubbing his hands together. “Lola’s already filled me in.”

“Great,” I said. “I can take you right downstairs to the victims, if you’re ready.”

But before I could start walking, Emmett turned to Lola, his expression sad. “I heard about Jacqueline.”

The room fell silent, and I saw the pained look on Lola’s face.

“We all miss her so much,” Lola said.

“I do too. She was an exceptional student, with a fierce spirit.” Emmett ducked his head and cleared his throat. “But I suppose you all didn’t call me here to reminisce. We have serious work to do, after all.”

“And anything you *can* do will be appreciated,” Greyson said. “We can compensate you—just let us know the price—”

Emmett waved that off. “I’m doing this for science!”

We finally made our way down into the basement, where we introduced Emmett to Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte.

“Nice to meet you all—and my sincerest apologies for what happened to you,” Emmett said to them before turning to Greyson and lowering his voice a bit. “I’m very interested in seeing the one who’s turned. But first, I want to draw some blood.”

Obviously overhearing, Codsworth and the others recoiled. I felt their pain, and was horrified by the prospect of causing them any more trauma.

“Are you sure that’s necessary?” I asked. “They’ve already been through quite a lot already.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—I should’ve been clearer,” Emmett said, producing a syringe from the pocket protector in his tweed jacket. The sight of it seemed to make everyone relax a bit. “I mean to use this, of course.”

I turned back to Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte.

“He’s here to help,” I said. “I promise that while you’re here, we won’t let anyone else hurt you. Anyone we bring down to see you will be trying to help fix this mess.”

“Is he a doctor?” Codsworth asked. “Or some other kind of medical professional? I’m not in the business of letting strangers poke me with things. I just went through that with Chessa, and I’m not keen on repeating the experience.”

Emmett, Lola, Greyson, and I exchanged an awkward look.

“He is a doctor,” I said. “Kind of. He’s a research scientist.”

“Renowned in my field,” Emmett added.

Codsworth and the others nodded and seemed to relax a bit.

“I’m really good with these things,” Emmett said brightly as he produced two more syringes and went to work drawing blood from Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte, who relaxed even more when Emmett proved himself to be precise and efficient.

When he was done, Emmett slipped the three vials of blood into his pocket protector and smiled warmly at his new patients. “I’m going to have to take this back to my lab. Once I take a look at it, I’ll send an update as soon as I can.”

“Thanks?” Codsworth said, almost as though it were a question.

Emmett nodded, then turned to me. “Now, if you’ll take me to see the other one?”

“Right this way,” I said.

Halfway down the hallway to Macauley’s room, Emmett stopped and turned to Lola. “You shouldn’t stay here.”

Lola’s eyes widened. “What? What do you mean?”

“I mean that it’s no longer safe for you to be here, Lola,” Emmett said seriously. “You need to make yourself scarce.”

**Episode 4981**

I grabbed Emmett. “What are you talking about? Why isn’t Lola safe?”

I had to wonder if Lola’s hacking had finally caught up to her. Was someone about to come knocking down the door looking for her?

“Lola’s a hybrid, which as we both know makes her very unique,” Emmett said. “And very interesting to a lot of different people.”

I thought back to Emmett’s initial fascination with Lola—how he’d been obsessed with studying her, and had conducted experiments with her blood when she was at Tottenville.

“I don’t understand how my being a hybrid suddenly matters,” Lola said. “I’ve been a hybrid for a while now, and I’ve managed to keep everything under control. What’s changed?”

“The vampire council,” Emmett said simply. “They have a lot of… strong opinions about anomalies within the vampire community. And Lola is definitely an anomaly.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “So what if they have opinions? Why are they suddenly relevant?”

“It’s one thing for an academic—a scientific researcher like me—to know about Lola’s… abilities,” Emmett said. “But there are those whose interest won’t be so harmless. There are those who view hybrids as a threat—who think that Lola’s very existence is a challenge to that of non-hybrid vampires.”

Lola nodded slowly, taking this in. “I’ve been wondering why Greer gave me that strange look before she left. I just thought she was trying to intimidate me or something.”

Emmett nodded. “There’s no doubt in my mind that Greer is suspicious of you, Lola, and has already discussed your… uniqueness… with members of the council. Which is why I think you’d be better off leaving the pack house and going somewhere else. Somewhere they won’t be able to find you. Not even Tottenville would be safe. The council has way too many contacts there. After all, they helped found Tottenville in order to better integrate vampires into the modern world.”

“I can’t believe this,” Lola grumbled. “So now this Chessa thing is messing with *my* life, too? I wish we could’ve staked that bitch when we had the chance!”

Emmett shrugged. “I’m afraid you’re right. The council never hesitates to involve itself in matters like this one—which is why I think you should get out of here as soon as you can, before they come back for you.”

“I think you’re wrong,” I said. “The safest place for Lola is here, with her pack. We can protect her.”

“I’m not arguing that,” Emmett said. “I just doubt that Greer is going to ignore someone the council will view as a threat. That’s all. And now that Greer knows Lola is here…”

“Well, I’m not worried,” Lola said. “Let them come. I’m just as much a werewolf as a vampire. I know how to protect myself against a bunch of nosy vampires with chips on their shoulders.”

I made a mental note to talk to Greyson about this, so we could figure out a way to keep an eye out for Lola, just in case. Emmett might’ve been wrong, telling Lola to run and hide, but he was most likely right about the danger of the council’s interest in my friend.

We approached the room where we were keeping Macauley, and I stopped Emmett before he could slip inside.

“Be careful,” I warned him. “He’s unstable. Unpredictable.”

Emmett didn’t seem all that fazed. “I’m sure you’re right. Most young vampires are like rabid dogs. Their need for human blood is overpowering.” He gave Lola a look. “I’m sure you remember your early days as a vampire. You were certainly a handful.”

Lola’s cheeks colored in a rare show of embarrassment, but she said nothing.

“But not to worry,” Emmett continued. “I’m experienced with this kind of thing.”

“What are you planning to do to Macauley?” I asked him.

“Draw some blood, like I did with the others.”

“Good luck with that,” Lola said. “The guy’s a maniac.”

Just to be on the safe side, I readied my magic as we pushed into the room. Not wasting a moment, Macauley immediately lunged at us. I raised my hand and nearly blasted him, but thankfully, the chains yanked him back before he—or I—could do any damage.

Macauley hissed, baring his fangs, his eyes blood red and flitting frantically between the three of us until his gaze came to rest—unnervingly enough—right on me.

Emmett slowly approached Macauley. “Calm yourself. I know this is a new and frightening experience for you,” he said softly. “But I urge you not to do anything you’ll regret. We’re here to help.”

Macauley seemed to be listening to Emmett, but his gaze was still glued to me. I kept a safe distance, my magic simmering gently beneath my skin. I knew all too well how attractive my Fae blood was to vampires.

“I want to help you,” Emmett told Macauley. “But in order to do that, I’m going to have to draw some blood.”

Emmett took a confident step toward Macauley, a fresh syringe primed and ready in his hand. But as soon as he tried to insert the needle, Macauley lashed out, suddenly wild with rage.

Emmett, still cool as a cucumber, tried again. “Keep your eyes on me, son. It’ll all be over in a second.”

I was pretty sure that Emmett was trying to use some form of mind control on the young vampire, and for a brief moment, it seemed to be working—right up until the point where Emmett finally jabbed him with the needle.

Macauley reared back, snarling and kicking and straining against the chains. He hissed and almost managed to bite Emmett’s arm, moving with enough force that he nearly yanked the chains clear out of the wall.

Emmett finally retreated, his syringe filled with Macauley’s blood, and motioned for us to follow him out of the room. He closed the door behind him, then turned to face us.

“I have to admit, I’m a little taken aback,” Emmett said.

“What?” I demanded. “Why? I thought you said his behavior was normal.”

He shook his head. “I was wrong. I’ve never seen someone so far gone in so little time. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do to help him.”

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“And he said that there’s something strange going on with him, something he’s never seen before, and that means Macauley is basically a lost cause,” I said to Greyson, a short while later.

Greyson shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Great. Just great. That’s the worst news we could’ve gotten. I didn’t think there’d be a way to make Macauley human again, but if he’s too wild for even a vampire expert to deal with, then that really doesn’t bode well.”

I didn’t reply, knowing that there was no point in asking exactly what that meant. An out-of-control vampire was bad for everyone—werewolves, vampires, humans… Literally everyone.

“If what Emmett says is true, then that means the council and I are probably in agreement about Macauley,” Greyson said grimly. “We might have to kill him. I’m not seeing any other choice.”

I absolutely hated hearing that. It didn’t seem right. Thanks to Chessa, Macauley might’ve been turned into a vicious vampire, but that didn’t negate the fact that he was a young student with family and friends who would be devastated by his death. The idea that we might end up having a hand in his death just seemed *wrong*—even though he wasn’t leaving us much of a choice.

“You’re not wrong, Greyson,” I said. “But do you think you could hold off on making that decision for a bit longer? Or would you prefer to hand Macauley over to Greer and the council? Let them deal with it, since it is technically vampire business?”

Greyson scoffed. “It might be vampire business, but there’s no way in hell I’m giving in to their demands.”

“Then maybe that’ll buy Macauley some time,” I said. “At least time enough for us to talk to Big Mac and see if there’s anything she can do to help.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Greyson said with a shrug. “But if she can’t help, we’re going to have to make some very hard choices over the next few days.”

“And there’s one more thing,” I said.

Greyson’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh no. What?”

“Emmett had a warning for Lola,” I said. “He said the vampire council might have her on their radar, now. Because she’s a hybrid.”

Greyson cursed under his breath. “Of course. I saw the way Greer looked at Lola—she was definitely interested in her. That could be a real problem.”

“Yes, that’s what Emmett thinks,” I said. “He advised her to leave the pack house and lie low for a while.”

Greyson shook his head. “No, that’s not happening. She’ll be safer here with the pack than she would be hiding somewhere else without us.”

“That’s what I told Emmett,” I said. “And I doubt that Lola would do it, anyway. That’s not her style, the whole running and hiding thing. And the vampire council is already threatening action over the custody of Chessa’s survivors—I don’t see them backing down on this.”

“I don’t either,” Greyson said grimly.

“Then that means tensions could keep rising between us.” My pulse quickened as something occurred to me. “What are we going to do if the vampire council attacks?”

**Episode 4982**

**Greyson**

I gripped Cali’s shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze. “Don’t worry about that, Cali. Not even for a second. If the vampire council attacks, then I fight back. *We* fight back. The Redwood pack will defend our home, our packmates, our territory, and our allies from anyone who tries to control us.”

I felt Cali relax a little under my touch. “I know that. But I don’t want to get into another fight—not so soon after the last one. I’m enjoying the peace we have right now. Sure, we’re fighting with Chessa at the moment, but that’s hardly an all-out battle.”

“I know that jumping into another major conflict right now isn’t ideal,” I conceded, “but if the vampire council decides to get aggressive, we’ll have to do whatever it takes to protect our pack. Honestly, though, I don’t think it’ll come to that.”

“You don’t?” Cali asked, looking hopeful.

“I don’t,” I confirmed. “It would be a terrible mistake for Greer to assume we’ll just roll over if she comes back here, trying to flex her muscles. Attacking our pack would have a domino effect that she wants no part of. Our alliance wouldn’t stand for it. The vampire council would find itself going up against the Redwood, Samara, Blue Blood and Cobalt packs. Possibly even the Vanguard. I sincerely doubt they’d want to start an all-out war with us over something like this.”

Cali nodded, sighing. “You’re right—it *would* be a stupid decision. But I’m still worried about Lola. It’s been hard for her, coming to terms with being a hybrid. I don’t want her to feel like this is yet another problem created by something she can’t help.”

“I understand, but you really don’t need to worry,” I said. “I promise to do everything in my power to keep Lola safe. And don’t forget about Jay. He won’t let anyone touch his mate. You know that.”

Cali relaxed, just a little. “You’re right. Just like I told Emmett, Lola’s place is here with us, where we can watch her back. We’ll make sure she’s okay, whatever it takes.”

“Exactly,” I said firmly. “Incidentally, did Emmett happen to give a timeline for the tests he’s going to run?”

Cali nodded. “He said he’ll need about twenty-four hours.”

I nodded. “Okay, I suppose that’s not all that long to wait. I just hope he comes up with something that’ll help. We can’t keep those humans locked up down there forever. The sooner we can let them go, the less we’ll have to worry about the vampire council’s interest in attacking us.”

Cali pulled me into a tight hug, resting her head on my shoulder. I bent down to inhale her scent and wrapped my arms around her.

“You good?” I asked.

“I’m good,” Cali said. “Thanks. You always know how to make me feel better.”

“Good—that’s kind of my job,” I said with a smile as Cali pulled away to look me in the eye.

“And you’re great at it.” She stood up. “I’m going to go check on Lola, make sure she’s not secretly freaking out.”

“Please do,” I said. “We all know that Lola’s freakouts can make her do things she shouldn’t.”

“Exactly,” Cali said. “It’s definitely better to get ahead of that kind of thing before you have to try to stop it when she’s already on a roll. Find me later?”

I nodded and squeezed her hand, then she left.

Once she was gone, I made my way to my study. I needed a moment alone to think. I was doing everything in my power to keep the pack safe—I truly believed that. It felt like lately, I’d been in overdrive in that regard, mainly because of Cesaries’s dig about my being a good Alpha. But there was still something I just couldn’t stop thinking about…

Kendall.

How did she fit into all this? I wanted to know what her deal was, and that meant I was going to have to be a little more proactive when it came to her.

I got up and left my study to search for Mikah. He was a detective—maybe it would make sense for us to talk to Kendall together.

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A few hours later, Mikah and I found ourselves standing at an address that Lola had given us. It was a small, unremarkable house, not too far from CCU.

“We’re not here to intimidate,” I reminded Mikah. “I’d prefer it if we could establish some kind of trust with Kendall. She’s not an enemy. Yet.”

“Agreed,” Mikah said easily. “If she feels threatened, she’ll be a lot less inclined to open up.”

I led the way through the front yard and up onto Kendall’s porch. I knocked on the door, scanning the property. The weatherboards needed a paint job, and the yard was more weeds than grass. Something about the state of the place didn’t fit Kendall—but to be fair, I knew next to nothing about her.

Kendall opened the door, in the process of drying her hair with a towel. She glanced between me and Mikah, her expression only a touch more animated than blank. “May I help you?”

I was hit by the scent of her shampoo, and her own scent underneath it—the one I’d followed while trying to track her.

“I’d like to talk,” I said. “I think that we might’ve gotten off on the wrong foot, before. I’m hoping we can fix that.”

Kendall eyed Mikah with a bemused smile. “Am I so dangerous that you needed to bring a bodyguard along?” Regardless, she stepped aside to let us in. “I assure you, that level of precaution is unnecessary. I don’t bite… Unless I have reason to. Do I? Have a reason?”

I met her eyes, noting again those odd flecks of purple. “Not unless you give *me* one.”

I looked around the modest living room as we stepped inside. It wasn’t exactly a mess, but was heavily lived in. There were clothes everywhere, and the scent of recently cooked food hung in the air.

“Sorry, I was showering,” Kendall said. “Wasn’t expecting guests. Would’ve picked up a bit if I’d known you were stopping by. And I’d offer you something to drink, but again, you didn’t call before you came, so all I have is water.” She gave me a wooden smile.

I waved that off. “Don’t worry about any of that. Only reason I’m here is because you didn’t exactly open up all that much about Chessa, or what you claim to know about her. Did you?”

Kendall gestured for us to sit. I did, but Mikah stayed standing. A few. Seconds later, he started strolling around the room, looking around.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said, glancing at Kendall. “I have a thing about thoroughly taking in my surroundings.”

Kendall shrugged. “Knock yourself out. I have nothing to hide.”

“So, is there anything else you know about Chessa?” I pressed. “Anything *we* should know? Stuff we *wouldn’t* be able to find out with a Google search?”

Kendall sighed. “What kind of info are you looking for? It would be easier if you were a tad more direct. It might save us some time, don’t you think?”

“Agreed,” I said. “Honestly, I don’t know much about Chessa, other than the fact that she’s an old vampire with extraordinary abilities who’s shown a reckless interest in college students.”

Kendall nodded but said nothing.

*God. Getting info from this woman is like pulling teeth. What gives? She seems to want to help, but then she just… doesn’t.*

“Add to that the fact that you never quite explained why you’re so interested in Chessa,” I added pointedly.

“I didn’t explain because it’s personal,” Kendall said. “I don’t owe you an explanation about why I do what I do. Just like you don’t owe me an explanation about why you do what you do.”

“But don’t you think that’s dangerously vague, given the circumstances?” I pressed. “Tracking a vampire isn’t like collecting stamps or bird-watching—it comes with a lot of risk.”

Kendall sighed. “Maybe I lost a brother to a vampire once.” She glanced at Mikah. “Or maybe I just don’t like vampires. Take your pick.”

There was still something she wasn’t telling me. I could feel it.

“When you were trespassing on Redwood territory, you managed to vanish into thin air,” I said. “We pursued you, but quite frankly, there was nothing *to* pursue. I lost your scent like it was never there in the first place. How?”

“Maybe you’re not as good a tracker as you think,” Kendall said. “Ever considered that?”

I got up, irritated. “Let’s go,” I said to Mikah.

I walked to the door, and as Mikah and I stepped back out onto the porch, I turned back to Kendall.

“If you want to live here, you need to play nice,” I said.

“I never play nice, and I don’t live here.” Kendall closed the door in my face.

Pissed off, I raised a fist to pound on the door, but then Mikah grabbed my arm, stopping me. “She’s not going to cooperate, man. Leave it.”

I scowled. “What a waste of time.”

Mikah smirked. “Not exactly. I found this.”

He reached into his pocket and produced a driver’s license. It featured Kendall’s picture, but was accompanied by an entirely different name.

**Episode 4983**

I was staring at the driver’s license that Mikah had “borrowed” from Kendall, confused and intrigued.

“That’s definitely Kendall’s picture,” I said. “There’s no mistaking the purple in her eyes… But who the hell is Abigail Field?”

“I intend to find out,” Mikah said.

Greyson slammed his fist down on the table, startling Mikah and me both. “I feel like I got played! I took her at her word, and now look! She has an alias! You can’t get any shadier than that. And now she’s gotten away with trespassing in our woods, probably lying to our faces all the while. Pisses me off!”

“Take it easy,” Mikah said. “I’ve seen her type before. She’s probably just a low-level con-artist. New in town and looking for a mark or something. Doesn’t necessarily mean that mark is us.”

“That’s optimistic of you,” Greyson groused. “Don’t put anything past Abigail, Mikah—I sure won’t. And I wouldn’t bother dealing with her at all if I didn’t think she knew something that could help us. And everything else aside, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve seen her somewhere before.”

“Yes, but where? I’m pretty sure *I’ve* never seen her before.” I looked at Mikah. “Do you recognize her?”

“No, and I think I’d remember her.”

“She’s not exactly forgettable, even if forgetting her is all you want to do,” Greyson said gloomily.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? I mean, she *is* stunningly beautiful, but maybe that wasn’t what you meant?”

“No,” he agreed. “I’m just saying that she rubs me the wrong way.”

Mikah snorted quietly. “That much is obvious—it might’ve been one of the reasons why she shut down. She probably sensed your unease. And she lives by herself, so maybe she’s not all that used to talking about herself. We’re strangers, after all. If she’s gone to such great lengths to craft another identity or lie about her name or whatever, she’s hardly likely to be all that forthcoming with us.”

“How do you know that?” I asked Mikah. “That she lives alone?”

“Because when I looked around her living room, I noticed that there weren’t any signs of another occupant. And it wasn’t just the physical signs, either—there were no other scents in the place.”

“But that alone isn’t enough to make me suspicious,” I countered. “Plenty of people live alone. And you guys didn’t see her with the victims downstairs. She was so kind and gentle with them. She can’t be *that* bad.”

Greyson held up the license. “So what do we make of this, then?”

“Everything that Lola found out about Kendall seems to check out,” Mikah said thoughtfully. “But sometimes, a puzzle piece can fit a little too neatly.”

“What does that mean?”

Mikah frowned. “I can’t quite put my finger on it yet, but it almost feels like Kendall’s background is just a little too perfect. We’ve found nothing that deviates from what we already know about her—*except* for the license. I’m going to do some research on her alias. Abigail Field. Maybe it’s the key we’ve been looking for.”

“Let’s hope so,” Greyson grumbled. “The longer she remains a mystery, the more pissed off I get. I have half a mind to go right back to her place and ask her directly what she’s up to.”

“No,” Mikah and I said in unison.

“Let’s just work with what we have so far,” I said. “The license is a good clue.”

“Listen to your mate,” Mikah said to Greyson, getting to his feet. “In the meantime, I’m going to go check on Macauley. I can’t help but feel for the guy. What he’s going through is worse than an addict trying to kick heroin. I think I’m going to try giving him a little human blood to calm him down.”

My eyes went wide. “You’re going to *what*? You can’t just steal somebody’s blood and feed it to the feral vampire in our basement!”

Mikah pulled a pouch of blood out of his coat. “It was donated. Relax. I have a friend who works at the blood bank.”

With that, Mikah took off.

“He’s an interesting guy,” Greyson said a second later.

“He is,” I agreed. “He’s smart, and always seems to keep his cool. When you think about it, that’s kind of the exact opposite of Gabriel. Not that Gabriel isn’t smart, but…”

Greyson laughed. “I get what you’re trying to say. Opposites attract, right?”

I picked up the license and examined it carefully, though I wasn’t sure what I was expecting to find. “Maybe I can do some research of my own. Lola’s good at this kind of stuff. Maybe together, we can find something useful.”

Greyson shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt for the two of you to give it a go. Anything you find out could end up being helpful.”

Encouraged, I slipped the license into my pocket and went to find Lola. She was going to be so excited to have a legitimate reason to do her favorite thing: snooping in other people’s private business.

I bounded upstairs and ran into Jay as he was coming out of Lola’s room. He looked angry, which wasn’t a typical mood for him.

“Hey, Jay, what’s wrong?” I asked as he stomped past me, heading for the stairs.

“Lola’s being reckless, as usual,” Jay grumbled. “I heard about the council’s threat. I think she needs to take the risk a little more seriously. But, of course, she’s just playing it down and acting like it doesn’t matter.”

“You know Lola,” I said. “She doesn’t want to make a big fuss about it. But Greyson is aware of the risk, and the pack is going to do everything we can to keep Lola safe.”

“That’s good, but maybe you can talk to Lola anyway?” Jay asked. “Get her to understand the danger and take it more seriously? She listens to you. Mostly.”

“Sure, I’ll do that,” I said.

I couldn’t blame Jay for feeling a little anxious. Lola was his mate—it was natural for him to worry about her. Greyson would be just as nervous if I were the one in danger.

Jay made his way downstairs, and I went into Lola’s room.

“Hey, Cali, glad to see you!” she said brightly. “Did Greyson have any luck getting more info on Kendall?”

“I think we should maybe talk about Jay first,” I said tentatively. “He’s really worried about you.”

Lola blew out a big breath. “I know, I know. But he shouldn’t be! I can take care of myself, and there’s no way I’m about to let some random council push me around.”

“I get that, Lola,” I said. “But maybe you could do a little more to reassure Jay that the pack house is the right place for you? I’m sure he’s beating himself up, thinking he’s not doing enough to protect you.”

“Fine,” Lola said, huffing. “Now that that’s settled, what did Greyson find out? I’m dying of curiosity, here.”

I pulled out the license and showed it to her. “Mikah found this at Kendall’s place.”

Lola brightened when she saw the license, immediately grabbing her laptop.

“Well, this can’t be right,” she said, what felt like a few seconds later. “Abigail Field died five years ago at the ripe old age of 101!” She turned her laptop so that I could see the obituary, which featured a photo of a very elderly Abigail Field.

Lola checked the address. “She lived at this address in Ohio.”

I took that in. “Okay… But it’s a super common name probably. The question is why would Kendall have a license with someone else’s picture and information on it to begin with? Why would she need a fake ID?”

“Maybe it’s because she’s a serial killer.”

I rolled my eyes. “That seems unlikely. Isn’t it possible that it’s just a fake ID? Maybe Kendall used to use it to buy booze or something.”

“Well, there’s only one way to know for sure.”

Lola had a look in her eye that only ever meant trouble.

*Oh no. What is she up to now?*

“If Mikah was able to score *this* by just standing around in the living room, imagine what we could find if we searched the entire house!”

“What?” I demanded. “You mean *break in*? No, I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Lola scoffed. “Why? It would be easy as hell. We know she works at CCU, so we can just pull up her schedule, find out when she teaches her class, and then go to her place when we know she’s out! Piece of cake!”

I was ready to keep arguing, but then I heard a strange scraping sound at Lola’s window. I stopped talking, my hackles up, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

“What the hell is that?” I said, edging toward the sound.

“What? That scratching noise?” Lola waved it off. “It’s nothing. Probably just the fucking squirrels. Some mornings, they literally wake me up with all their racket.”

She picked up a pen cap and hurled it at the window, but the scraping sound only got louder.

I edged a little closer, then yanked back Lola’s blinds and screamed. Chessa was trying to break in.

**Episode 4984**

**Xavier**

I was pacing back and forth in my room, my head screaming with pain. I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that no amount of Advil or Tylenol was going to help this headache.

*If I could just remember where I put the damn elixir! I can’t believe I* misplaced *it! I was so sure that I put it in the drawer… I even remember burying it under some shirts, so that Ava wouldn’t find it.*

But I’d been dealing with a lot lately—I’d probably gotten distracted and put it somewhere random. I sprawled out on my bed, wishing the pain would just go away, if only for a few minutes. Big Mac had told me that she didn’t have any more of the herbs she’d used to make the elixir, so going back to her wouldn’t help—it would probably make things worse, overall, considering Big Mac’s attitude.

*I can’t believe I was so sure of myself. I just* knew *that I could keep the pain under control and solve this problem on my own. That’s how I like to roll—making sure to solve my own problems—but clearly, that isn’t in the cards this time.*

I hopped off the bed and nearly collapsed when I was hit with a wave of pain and dizziness. I was rifling through my drawers one last desperate time when I spotted a business card sitting on my dresser. Carlson Greene.

My first impulse was to pick the thing up and rip it to shreds… But maybe this was a sign. Ava had told me to seek counseling, and I’d initially done it. But the thought of doing it just seemed pointless, so I canceled it when she wasn’t looking. But Ava was right more times than not—I had to admit that.

*Honestly, she deserves better from me, and the truth is, I’m not handling this well at all. Is it really so beneath me to admit that I need help? At least now, I can actually* ask *for help—when Adéluce was in charge, I couldn’t even speak the words. Why am I wasting time being so stubborn about it now?*

I hadn’t hesitated much before I went to Big Mac for help—was asking Carlson Greene for help really all that different?

I did know one thing for sure—I had to do something about this pain. My head felt like it was about to topple right off my neck. This was no way to live.

I grabbed my phone and quickly dialed Carlson’s number. The receptionist transferred me this time, and I almost hung up when the man’s voice flooded the line.

“Hello? Carlson Greene, super therapist extraordinaire! How can I help you?”

I cringed internally, hesitating before blurting out, “I need to make an appointment… Another one. I canceled my previous one.”

“Oh, certainly, sir. And who is it I’m speaking to?”

I had to force the words out. “Xavier Evers.”

“Okay, Xavier Evers,” he said cheerily. “Good to have you back. I have an opening tomorrow at noon, if that suits you?”

“Fine,” I grunted.

“Great, Mr. Evers. I look forward to—”

I ended the call.

The guy was still annoying as ever. Just the sound of his voice seemed to amplify my disgust and overall pain level. I put the phone down and went to the medicine cabinet, wondering if it was time to try the standard painkillers again.

*Can werewolves overdose on human painkillers? I sure hope not…*

I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror on the medicine cabinet and stared at it. “You’re doing the right thing, Xavier.”

I bent down and took a huge, sloppy drink from the faucet, and as I wiped my mouth, I realized that my headache was actually starting to fade. I stood there, not moving, afraid that the tiniest movement would bring the pain back. But it continued to ebb away, and after a few more frozen seconds, I marched back to my phone.

*I knew it! I* can *control this. It just takes a little bit of grit and determination—not some hack “doctor” asking personal questions. I don’t need Carlson fucking Greene.*

I called Carlson again but was met with a recorded message.

“Feeling down?” the recording began. “Not to worry, Carlson’s in town! Leave a message after the tone to schedule your first step toward happiness.” But instead of the promised tone, I was left with a, “Mailbox full!” notification.

I hung up, cursing.

*And now my headache is starting to come back. Ugh…*

Another sign, I supposed. I was going to keep the appointment. It didn’t seem like I had much of a choice.

I fell back onto the bed and had just covered my head with a pillow when I heard the door open. Ava’s intoxicating scent filled the room, and I peeked out from under the pillow as she came walking in with a strange look on her face, closing the door behind her.

I sat up, noticing that my headache was gone again.

*Good. That means I won’t have to pretend I’m not in pain.*

“What do you want?” I asked, looking up at her.

She smiled, undoing the robe she was wearing. “You, X. I want you.”

I smiled back. I had no problem with that. Ava looked amazing. Under the robe, she was wearing nothing but lacy, barely-there lingerie, and her hair was all tousled. She straddled me and hit me with a scorching kiss, her soft lips insistent and strong and setting the pace.

I gave in to her, suddenly noticing how warm her skin was.

I pushed back. “Hey, are you okay?” I asked. “You seem a little feverish.”

“Actually, I’m burning up,” she joked, leaning toward me again and licking her redder than normal lips. “And only you can cool me off.” She was still smiling, but her expression was almost serious when she looked me right in the eye. “But only if you’re up for it.”

I didn’t mention the recurring headache, or how I’d only just begun to feel some relief from it. It was gone now—I might as well enjoy the reprieve.

“I’m up for anything you want to throw at me,” I said, which wasn’t a lie. I wanted her, and now that the pain was gone, I’d actually get to enjoy whatever she had in mind.

Ava was almost being a little *too* aggressive. She shoved me down onto the bed and started grinding her hips against me, throwing her head back and moaning in ecstasy. She flipped forward and kissed me hard again before her hands went to work tearing off my clothes.

“Yes, this is what I want. All of this,” she said, her gaze drinking me in once I was lying naked beneath her. She rose up onto her knees and pulled her panties to the side, biting her lips as she gripped my face between her hands. “You like what you see?”

I looked down at what she was showing me, and my entire body flushed with heat—though I was still a lot cooler than she was.

“I like it,” I grunted.

She smiled, then threw her head back and started grinding against me fast and hard—so much so that my body and the bed were shaking. Then she leaned forward, pinned my hands to the bed, and stuck her tongue down my throat.

It was almost too much to keep up with, and while I liked Ava’s take charge attitude in the bedroom, this seemed like something else entirely.

Even though my mind was lagging a little behind, the rest of me wasn’t. I was hard, and every part of me was responding to Ava through the confusion. I gasped when she took me in her hand, then gasped again when she lowered herself onto my shaft, crying out when I slid in deep.

“Ava—”

She slapped her hand over my mouth. “Let me do all the work.”

She grabbed my hands and put them on her waist, and I held on for dear life as she jerked and rocked against me, bouncing up and down. She flipped her hair this way and that, her beautiful breasts bouncing and her body trembling as she rode me.

“Fuck,” I groaned out despite myself, arching up from the bed and clenching my jaw in pleasure.

Getting into it despite my confusion, I flipped her over onto her back, pinned her writhing limbs to the bed, and stroked her hard, pressing my lips to hers and sliding my tongue into her mouth. I dueled with her frantic tongue, which seemed hell-bent on dominating mine.

Only a moment later, Ava arched against me, her thighs clenching tightly around my waist as she reached her climax. She raked her partially shifted claws down my back, drawing blood. She shook and quivered once more before falling back down to the bed, still breathing hard.

“Ava, what—” I began, but then my own orgasm took over, throwing my thoughts out of whack until I reached the other side, panting against the side of Ava’s flushed cheek.

I lifted myself up, hovering over her and kissing her. She smiled up at me, but then she gasped, her eyes rolling back in her head as she passed out.

“Ava? Ava! What the *fuck*? Can you hear me?!”

And then I saw it—a wolverine bite on her shoulder. The one from earlier. I watched in horror as the wound began to open back up…

**Episode 4985**

**Artemis**

I froze, my heart pounding as the guard stared at me with obvious distrust.

“This is ridiculous!” Marius said. “What’s this guy even talking about? We’ve never seen him before in our lives.”

I looked more closely at the guard, and my stomach clenched. There was something familiar about him, but I couldn’t quite figure out why… *Had* I seen him somewhere before? He certainly seemed to think so.

“Are you certain?” Celeste asked the guard, never taking her shrewd gaze off me.

“I’m positive,” he said. “She’s the one we encountered at the portal.”

*Oh shit.*

Dread knotted up tight in the pit of my stomach. I *did* remember him. Sort of. He was one of the guards who’d chased Adair, Torin, and me when we were leaving the Fae world.

*But how is he even remembering me at all? I thought I wiped his memory!*

Apparently, my memory magic wasn’t quite as foolproof as I’d hoped.

I took a step back as casually as possible, keeping my expression neutral as my grip tightened on my dagger.

Celeste’s eyes narrowed. “It seems you attempted to trick my guards, but you didn’t quite succeed. What do you have to say for yourself?”

What I *wanted* to say was that this bitch could go fuck herself, and the guard along with her, but since I didn’t want to get myself murdered—and I still had hope that I could avoid that particular fate—I kept my lips sealed.

And in the absence of my response, Marius sprang into action. He scooped up Coriander and hurled the behemoth of a man at the guard and Celeste.

“Artemis, run!” he shouted.

I dashed for the door, knife out, ready to take down anyone who got in my way. But just as I reached the doorway, the sounds of fighting and struggling sounded behind me. I skidded to a stop and turned to see Marius being held by the guard, who had a knife pressed to his throat.

“Artemis, is it?” Celeste asked. “Well, Artemis, if you set one foot outside of this room, I’ll have my guard slit your friend’s throat. You don’t want that on your conscience, do you?”

I froze in place. Everything in me was screaming to run, but I couldn’t just leave Marius to die.

“Get out of here!” Marius snapped. He struggled in the guard’s grip as much as he could without cutting his own throat on the knife. “Don’t worry about me! Save yourself!”

The guard pressed the knife even harder into Marius’s throat, until a thin line of red sprang up along the blade. As it turned out, that was too much for me to bear.

“Stop it!” I cried.

“Back away from that door,” Celeste said.

I ground my teeth together so hard, my molars creaked. This was *exactly* why I’d never wanted to be in a relationship, why I’d kept to myself for such a long time. Anyone you were foolish enough to care for could be used against you. At least when I was alone, I could do whatever I wanted without fear of hurting anyone else.

*But Marius… I can’t just leave him to die.*

Even if it meant I might be ensuring my own death.

With a long, shaky breath, I lowered my dagger.

The second guard hurried up and snatched it from me, then pushed me toward Celeste.

“Why did you do that?” Marius hissed. “You could’ve escaped! You—”

“You made the wiser choice,” Celeste interrupted. “Now, tell me the truth. Are you or are you not the one who used memory manipulation on my guards, some time ago?”

“Don’t answer that!” Marius said.

He received a fist to the stomach for his efforts, courtesy of the guard, and he hunched over with a wheeze.

“That…” he gasped out. “Seems… Unnecessary.”

“I’ll answer,” I told Celeste. “But only if you can guarantee that Marius will remain unharmed.”

“It’s a little late for that,” he rasped.

Celeste raised one elegant brow. “I don’t think you’re in any position to negotiate.”

I held my ground. I’d encountered plenty of Celestes in my life. If you showed even a hint of weakness, they’d happily tear your throat out. Since I’d already shown my hand where Marius was concerned, I needed to make up that lost ground, or she’d eat me alive.

I lifted my chin, staring defiantly back at Celeste. “If you want answers, then release Marius.” I gestured at Coriander, who was sitting up on the floor, dazed. “Marius did nothing but bring you what you wanted. He’s innocent.”

“Oh, I very much doubt that,” Celeste said darkly.

Marius looked up at Celeste, his eyes begging her to show him a mercy that I doubted she was capable of.

Finally, she turned her gaze back to me. “He might’ve brought me something I wanted, but he also brought *you* here—to my home. Therefore, he must shoulder some responsibility.” She gestured to the guard and held out a hand. “Let me see that dagger.”

The guard handed her my dagger, and my fingers itched with the urge to yank it from her perfectly manicured hands.

Celeste examined the dagger, turning it over in her hands with an eerie kind of familiarity. When she was finished, she looked up to glare at me. “How did you get this?”

Adair had given it to me, and given its twin to Cali, but I couldn’t exactly tell her that.

I shrugged. “I picked it up at a market. Maybe I can find a similar one for you the next time I visit.”

Predictably, Celeste wasn’t amused. She nodded at the guard standing by Marius. “Kill him.”

My heart jerked as the guard drew his sword. I lunged for him, but another guard yanked me back.

“Okay!” I screamed. “I’ll tell you!”

Celeste smiled coldly. “I thought you might say that.”

She held out a hand and the guard lowered the sword that had been inches away from gutting Marius.

In that moment, I hated Celeste more than I’d hated anyone in my life—save for the Kollector. But she was coming in at a very, *very* close second. As she approached me with my dagger in her hand, I wished more than anything that I could snatch it away from her and stab her a hundred times. Once for me, once for Marius, and ninety-eight times for the countless others who’d been hurt or killed at her behest.

Her cold eyes were fixed on me as she walked a large circle around me, like she was examining something she might purchase at the market. I stood there, stock-still—I didn’t trust myself to move without lashing out at this cold-hearted bitch.

“You seem familiar,” Celeste finally said.

“That’s pretty unlikely,” I said tightly. “I’d remember meeting someone as awful as you.”

“You’d better dull that sharp tongue of yours, or I’ll have it dulled for you,” Celeste said. Her words were a promise signed in blood—a promise I knew she had every intention of keeping. “I would certainly remember meeting someone as savage as you,” she continued. “And yet, there *is* something undeniably familiar about you.” Her voice dropped into something low, dangerous. “Tell me, Artemis. Are you one of his bastards?”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” I said.

“The more I look at you, the more I see of him—there’s no question,” she said. “Please stop lying to me. I know now who you are. You’re one of Adair’s bastard offspring.”

I nearly choked on my shock. It was chilling that Celeste had come so close to the truth, even though she was ultimately off the mark.

“I wonder which whore he slept with to bring someone like you into the world,” Celeste mused, smirking.

I jerked against the guard’s grip on my arms. Gods, if I could just break free and wrap my hands around her throat, I’d squeeze that smug look right off her face.

“Don’t try to deny it…” Celeste paused. “Unless you *are* one of his whores?”

And here I thought I’d reached the greatest amount of horror I was capable of feeling. With one question, Celeste had proved me wrong. Disgust rushed in, so potent that I knew there was no hiding the look on my face.

*Me? Adair’s mistress? My* uncle’s *mistress? Sorry, but this isn’t that* *dragon-stabby show Rishika’s always talking about.*

“I am *not* his mistress!” I snapped. “Or his bastard!”

Celeste looked unimpressed.

“I told you not to lie to me.” She held up the dagger. “I know who gave you this dagger. It has Adair’s family crest on it. It’s not something you could pick up at a market. I know he gave it to you. Now tell me.” She stepped closer and held the tip of the dagger to my throat. “How do you know Adair?”

I hesitated. Telling my secret could ruin everything. It might only give Celeste more of a reason to want to kill me.

But then again, she was already one swipe of that dagger away from slashing my throat open, right here and now. What did I have to lose?

“I wasn’t lying—Adair isn’t my father, or my lover!” I burst out. “He’s my *uncle*.”

**Episode 4986**

I leapt away from the window with a screech, slamming into Lola and sending us both crashing to the floor.

“She’s trying to break in!” I screeched.

I was still sort of flopping around on top of Lola in my shock, and she pushed me off with a grunt of effort.

“Cali! Why are you getting so freaked out over a squirrel?”

I scrambled to my feet, hauling Lola up after me and trying to drag her to the window. She dug in her heels once she was upright, though, and I was reminded again just how much stronger my friend was than me.

“It’s not a squirrel!” I insisted. “It’s Chessa!”

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “It had better fucking not be,” she muttered, marching over to the window.

I gasped. “What are you doing? Get away from there! She’s gonna get you!”

Lola glanced at me, her eyes red and her fangs out. “I’m putting an end to this.”

She started to pull up the blinds, and I rushed over to try to stop her.

“Lola, no!” I hissed. “You can’t take Chessa on by yourself. She’s dangerous and ancient, remember?”

“So what?” Lola demanded. “I’m dangerous and young! Plus I’m a hybrid—I have all the advantages that come with being a werewolf *and* a vampire. I can take her.”

“No!” I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away from the window. It was like trying to move a boulder. “We need to go get the others—not try to take her on by ourselves.”

Only Lola had already pulled back the blinds. She turned back to me, her eyes back to their usual color and her fangs gone. “Are you sure it wasn’t a squirrel? I don’t see anything.”

“What?” I peered over her shoulder. There was nobody there—nothing except for our reflections in the window, staring back at us. “I… I swear I just saw her. She was right there, clawing at the window.”

“Kill the lights,” Lola said.

Turning the lights off while a bloodthirsty, ancient, superpowered vampire was trying to break into the house and kill us all didn’t seem like a great plan, but Lola was clearly running the show now, so I reluctantly flipped the lights so she could peer outside into the darkness and see in greater detail.

“I don’t see anything, Cali.” She turned back to me. “I really don’t think there’s anything out there. Maybe your eyes were playing tricks on you? Or maybe you were so worked up about Chessa and the fate of the survivors in the basement that you just imagined that you saw her.”

I shook my head. “No, absolutely not. I mean, sure, I’m terrified of Chessa showing up and finishing what she started, but I know what I saw. I didn’t imagine anything—it wasn’t a dream or a hallucination. Chessa was right there, as real as you are.”

Lola sighed and walked past me to turn the lights back on. “Okay, but no matter what you saw, it isn’t there anymore.”

“Fine.” I yanked the blinds shut and headed for the door.

“Wait, where are you going? We still have research to do.”

I stopped in the doorway. “I need to tell Greyson what I saw. Just to be safe. You coming?”

“Fine,” she groaned as we left her bedroom. “But I’m going to tell him I didn’t see—”

The sound of breaking glass cut us off, and we whipped around to see the blinds flapping, and shards of glass on Lola’s bedroom floor.

Lola blinked. “What the hell?”

I wasn’t confused at all. I knew exactly what had just happened.

I slammed the door shut and pressed my whole body against it. “Get Greyson!”

Before Lola could move, Charlie, Violet, and Lilac came running over.

“What was that?” Charlie asked.

“We heard something break,” said Violet.

I pushed myself harder against the door. “I… I think Chessa just broke into Lola’s room.”

Charlie’s face twisted into a snarl. “Let me in. I’ll take care of her.”

“No!” I shook my head wildly.

*Why do so many people want to go toe to toe with one of the strongest vampires we’ve ever faced?*

“Cali’s right,” Violet said, and relief rushed through me. Then she added, “You’re not going in there alone. I’m going with you.”

“I’m going too!” Lola declared.

“Oh my god! Do you all have a death wish?” I demanded. “Nobody, and I mean *nobody* is going in there until we get Greyson! So please, just—”

“Shh!” Lilac interrupted. “There’s someone in there! I can smell a vampire.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying!” I whisper-yelled. “*Chessa is in there!*”

Violet glanced at Lola—who’d gone back into red-eyed vampire mode—and then back to Lilac. “Are you sure you’re not smelling Lola?”

Lola glared. “Watch it, flower girl.”

“I’m not saying that you *smell*,” Violet said. “I’m just saying that you’re in vampire mode, and Lilac’s talking about smelling a—”

Lola huffed loudly. “We all know what you mean.”

The squabbling continued, punctuated by my pleas for someone—anyone—to go get Greyson. Our mind link had long since stopped working from so far away—likely after Kira had died, it had faded much like the fake Luna mark on my shoulder that was practically just a shadow. And then shock and horror rushed through me as I felt the doorknob begin to turn under my hand. I tightened my grip, trying desperately to hold the door shut.

“Get Greyson!” I begged. “Please! Chessa’s trying to open the door! We can’t stop her from getting inside!” I mentally cursed myself for inviting her inside during that party. Now the evil vamp had access to our home.

At that, the bickering came to an abrupt stop. Lilac turned on his heel. “I’m on it.”

He raced down the stairs. Charlie ran back to his room and returned with a stake in hand and a crossbow strapped to his back, just as Lilac returned with Mikah, Rishika, and Greyson in tow.

Sweat sprang up on my palm, loosening my hold on the doorknob.

“I can’t keep holding it!” I burst out.

“Everyone, stand back,” Greyson said, taking control of the situation.

His voice slipped into my mind. *It’s going to be okay. I’m here, love.*

All my fear and tension rushed away, and I felt myself regaining some of my composure. My mate was here. Everything was going to be okay. He wouldn’t let anything happen to me, or to anyone else. He definitely wouldn’t let Chessa go on the rampage inside our pack house.

As relieved as I was to let Greyson take control, I was also so proud of how my mate never failed to rise to the occasion. *We’re so lucky to have him leading our pack.*

“Rishika, Ravi, stand guard by the door and be ready. If Chessa gets out, we can’t let her reach the stairs. I’m going into the bedroom. Charlie, Lola, Mikah—you three follow me in.” Greyson put a hand on my shoulder. “Okay, Cali. Let go of the door.”

My hands shook, not just from the strain of holding the door shut, but because I knew what was on the other side. The horrors of the crypt were still fresh in my mind, after all. I knew exactly what Chessa was capable of. And I could only imagine the horror and gruesome chaos she’d wreak on the pack house, given the chance.

*What if something goes wrong? What if my holding the door shut is the only thing protecting the people I love?*

And then I remembered what Greyson had told me.

*It’s going to be okay.*

I took a deep breath, gathered my magic, and released the doorknob. Then, in a blur of movement, Greyson shoved the door open with his shoulder and charged into the room. The others rushed in after him, with Rishika and Ravi lingering at the door.

“What the hell?” Charlie said.

I forced myself to look into the room, mentally preparing myself for the sight of my pack—my family—fighting a clever, bloodthirsty vampire.

Shock rooted me in place. The room was empty. The blinds flapped in the breeze floating in through the broken window.

“She was here!” Lola hissed.

I could only stare. How could Chessa have slipped through our grasp *again*? Last time, she’d been on her home turf and had been able to access a ton of secret passages. But Lola’s room didn’t *have* any secret passages.

“She must’ve gone back out the window,” I said. “But if she was going to give up that easily, why did she even bother to come in?”

“Let’s go outside and track her,” Charlie said. “If we hurry, we might be able to hunt her down.”

Greyson turned to Mikah. “Any thoughts?”

A scream ripped through the air.

“That came from the basement,” Greyson said, heading for the door. “Lilac, Ravi—stay here in case she comes back.”

Greyson led the rest of us downstairs, where the rest of the pack was already gathering, no doubt trying to investigate the scream. Greyson moved to the front of the group, and I stayed right behind him.

“Everyone, be on your guard,” he ordered.

We descended to the basement. The doors to the rooms where the survivors had been kept were open. Every room was empty.

When we reached the last room, the one where we’d been holding Macauley, the door was slightly ajar. Greyson pushed it open.

Codsworth, Eddie, and Charlotte were standing with Macauley’s chains in their hands, their skin casting an eerie glow.

I gasped. “Macaulay’s gone!”

**Episode 4987**

**Xavier**

Whatever sense of tired satisfaction I’d felt in the afterglow of my surprising but amazingly intense session with Ava evaporated the moment I saw the wounds on Ava’s shoulder. They glistened and oozed blood like they’d just been created.

*What the hell is going on? Those wounds should’ve healed by now.*

Ava’s eyes fluttered open, and she gave me a sultry smile that, under any other circumstances, would’ve heated my blood and gotten me ready for another intense round of sex.

“Let’s do that again,” she purred, reaching for me and trying to pull me against her naked body, slick with sweat that I was only now realizing wasn’t *just* from our intense coupling.

Her hand slipped down my bare torso and she was headed south toward my cock, but now, all I felt was fear. This wasn’t Ava feeling turned on—something was wrong. But *what* was wrong with her? Her eyes were glassy—not how she’d looked coming in here—and that heat I’d felt was now rolling off her in waves. No, this definitely wasn’t just from the sex. She had some kind of fever.

“I think I’m good,” I said gently, breaking her grip on me and entwining our hands instead.

She pouted. “Why not? I think it sounds like lots of fun.”

I pulled back. *Since when does Ava pout?* No, all the signs were staring me in the face, practically screaming at me to acknowledge them. Something was seriously wrong. I kissed her forehead. Her skin was on fire—the heat of it nearly burned my lips, and I could taste the salt of her sweat.

“Come on, Xavier.”

She reached for me again, trying to pull me in and causing the wound on her shoulder to open up even more. Blood was slipping down her arm, now, staining my skin and the bedsheets. Panic rose inside me like a wave that threatened to drown me, but I pulled in a deep breath and tried to stay calm. Ava wasn’t in her right mind, clearly, which meant it was all the more important that I stayed calm and collected. I had to take care of her now, even if that meant shoving all my feelings aside. If I needed to, I could fall apart later.

I caught Ava’s arms, all too aware of how easy it was to feel the rapid thrum of her pulse beneath my fingers. “I need to rest, Ava. We both do. How’s that sound?”

Her eyes were all but unfocused now, and she smiled dreamily with a yawn. “Rest sounds nice.”

She sort of collapsed against me and closed her eyes, and I gently eased her down onto her pillow. She didn’t move. Her skin was sallow and damp with sweat. She looked awful. And her shoulder still hadn’t stopped bleeding.

I just couldn’t make sense of any of this. Did Ava have some kind of flu? Yes, she’d been acting a little strange earlier, but she hadn’t been full-on sick and bleeding. I think I would’ve noticed *that*.

*Should I suck it up and call Greyson, see if Torin can come over and heal her?*

After our disastrous team-up at Chessa’s horror show mansion, I was all too happy to put some distance between myself and my brother for a while longer, but I wasn’t sure what else to do. *Was* there anything to do? If this was a flu, should I just let it run its course?

But, no, that didn’t seem right either. I’d never seen a flu that inhibited a werewolf’s healing abilities, and if I didn’t get that under control, we’d have much bigger problems than Ava feeling under the weather.

“Xavier?”

I focused on Ava, who was awake again, staring up at me with a frown.

“Go back to sleep,” I said.

“Why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?” she asked. Then her eyes widened, and she gasped. “Am I a ghost again? Am I trapped in the spirit world?”

She struggled to get up, her movements as frantic as they were pathetically weak and clumsy.

*Well, shit.* This was a place I’d never imagined her sickness-crazed mind going. But then again, I hadn’t exactly imagined being in this situation, period.

I firmly pressed down on her good shoulder to get her to relax. “Ava, no, no. Take a breath. It’s nothing like that. You’re as alive as I am.”

She looked up at me with those glassy, haunted eyes. “Then why are you upset?”

I sighed. It was really a pain in the ass that, even as out of it as she was, she was still perceptive enough to worry about *me*.

“I think you might be sick,” I confessed. “I’m just worried about you. That’s all.”

She frowned. “I want to get up. I need a shower.”

For a moment, I considered fighting her on it, but then I sat back and helped her sit up. “I can’t see any harm in that. Maybe it’ll help break your fever.”

I was helping Ava to her feet when there was a knock on the door.

“Who’s there?” Ava mumbled. She started toward the bedroom door with the shaky steps of a newborn foal, but I turned her around, steering her toward the bathroom.

“Ava, it’s me.” Knox’s voice drifted through the door. “I want to talk to you.”

*Knox. Perfect fucking timing, as per fucking usual.*

The last thing I needed was Knox sticking his nose into this weird situation. I didn’t want anyone seeing Ava like this, so weak and vulnerable. Not until I could figure out what was wrong with her and how to fix it. She was the pack’s Luna; it was important that she was a source of strength. If the pack saw her like this, it could cause panic.

“She’s busy,” I called.

“It’s important.”

Ava, seemingly oblivious to her cousin, standing only a few feet away, slipped her arms around my neck and pressed her body against mine.

“Let’s take a shower together,” she whispered.

God dammit. She was driving my wolf mad with lust, but I couldn’t give in to it.

“Shower first,” I said, hoping that by the time she was done, either her fever would be broken and she’d be a hell of a lot more lucid, or she’d forget the implied promise of what came after.

I led her into the en suite, prodded her into the shower, turned on the water to the temperature she preferred, and closed the shower door behind me before heading back to deal with Knox. I took a moment to throw on some sweats, then opened the bedroom door—just as Knox was raising his fist to knock again.

He tried to look past me into the room. “Where is she?”

I blocked the doorway. “She’s in the shower. You got a problem with that?”

“I guess not.” Then he frowned as he focused on something on my face, just below my eye. “Did you cut yourself shaving?”

I wiped my cheek and looked at my hand. There was blood on my face, alright, but it wasn’t mine. It was Ava’s. It must’ve come from her wound.

Knox’s eyes narrowed. “Wait, you still have stubble on your cheeks. Why would you have a razor cut? Something’s not right.” He pushed past me into the room and stopped short when he saw the unmade bed, which was also stained with Ava’s blood. He rounded on me with a snarl. “What the hell did you do to my cousin?”

*Seriously? This asshole picks* now *to become a detective? I don’t need to deal with his bullshit.*

I grabbed Knox by the collar of his shirt and hoisted him up. “Your cousin is in the shower, like I said.”

As if on cue, Ava’s voice drifted in from the bathroom. She was singing.

“Listen, I know you’re close to Ava, but even you probably don’t want to walk in on her right now,” I said. “You’re not that kind of close.”

“But that’s her blood!” Knox sputtered. “I can smell it!”

“I hate to break it to you, but Ava likes it kind of rough.”

Knox swallowed. “I didn’t need to know that.”

I shoved him toward the door. “Then you should’ve stayed in the goddamn hallway. Ava will talk to you when she’s done.”

As Knox stepped back into the hallway, I caught his arm.

“What did you want to talk to Ava about anyway?” I demanded.

“Milo.”

I groaned. “Dude. Just give it a rest.”

“But—”

I slammed the door shut, took a moment to gather myself, then returned to the bathroom to check on Ava. She was standing stock-still in the shower, looking down at her feet.

I reached in to shut off the water, then yanked my hand back with a gasp. The water was steaming hot.

*What the hell is wrong with her?*

I turned off the water and pulled her out. Her skin was bright red from the hot water, and her wound was still open and bleeding. I wrapped her in a towel, scooped her into my arms, and carried her back to the bed.

Ava shivered as I laid her across the mattress, and I piled the blankets on top of her. As I was doing this, she seemed to notice me for the first time since I’d left her in the bathroom.

“Xavier.”

“I’m here.” I took her hand. It was clammy and trembling. I needed to get her help. “You should sleep. I’ll be back.”

Her voice reached me as I made it to the door.

“Are you going to her?” she asked.

“Who?”

She muttered something I couldn’t make out and closed her eyes.

I slipped out, closing the door behind me, then hurried downstairs. As I reached the ground floor, I heard a crash, then raced outside to find Knox and Milo fighting.

*What now?*

**Episode 4988**

**Greyson**

Irritation lashed at me as I stared at the empty room that had once held Macauley—a.k.a. the dangerous, newly turned vampire we’d had locked up in the basement for safety.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what had happened.

“Chessa helped him escape, or the others helped him,” I mused, glancing at the line of open doors along the corridor. “But why would they do that? There’s no reason to.”

“Chessa must be using the blood bond to manipulate them,” Mikah said. “With the power of the bond at her disposal, she can make them do pretty much anything she wants.”

“But what *does* she want? Why take him at all?” Cali asked from her place behind me. “And why did she break into Lola’s room in the first place?”

She was frowning, and I wanted nothing more than to smooth the tension away from her brow. She’d been so brave throughout this nightmare, and I was so proud of her—even though I still wished Cali had never gotten herself caught up in all this in the first place.

But that was my mate, wasn’t it? She was nothing if not a helper. And no cost was too great when it came to helping the people she cared about.

Then, realization hit me. *And maybe that was exactly what Chessa was counting on—a distraction to give her a chance to make her move.*

“Goddammit,” I cursed. “She set us up. It was a distraction. She broke into Lola’s room to create a diversion, so we wouldn’t hear her breaking Macauley out. I should’ve known.”

*I knew who we were up against. I should’ve known better.*

Mikah put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Hey, don’t blame yourself. If we’ve learned anything about Chessa, it’s that she’s cunning. She’s had years to sharpen her skills. Since this is our first time going up against her, we’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

“Why would Chessa want Macauley?” Cali asked. “He’s dangerous, of course, but only because he’s completely inexperienced. Even with the blood bond or the sire bond or whatever they have between them, I can’t see him being all that useful to her.”

Mikah shrugged. “I wish I knew her plan. I do have a few guesses. I can’t say for sure why she wants him—it could be that she didn’t intend to turn him. Or that she wanted to kill him. Or maybe she feels responsible for him *because* she turned him. We could spend all day trying to figure out Chessa’s motivations and never come close, so I don’t think it’s worth the trouble. What I do know is that we need to get Macauley back. Whatever Chessa’s reasons for taking him, they can’t be good.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I muttered. This vampire chick had been bad news from the moment she’d trespassed on our territory. I couldn’t imagine a scenario in which her master plan didn’t end in some awful, catastrophic way.

“What about Codsworth and the others?” Cali asked. “You guys all saw them glowing, right?”

“If I had to guess, I’d suspect that has something to do with the blood bond. I’m curious to see what Emmett’s research will reveal,” Mikah said. “In the meantime, I think our best course of action is to keep the remaining victims confined to their rooms under lock and key.”

After making sure a couple pack members stayed behind to put the survivors in their rooms and make sure they couldn’t escape again—I wasn’t taking any more chances with this group—I led Cali and Mikah back upstairs and gathered the rest of the pack.

“Alright,” I said, “if our first objective is getting Macauley back, we need to put together a hunting party. Charlie, Mikah, Rishika, and Cali—you’re coming with me to find him.”

Cali’s eyes widened, and I could tell she was surprised that I’d chosen her. Honestly, I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of putting her in danger, but her magic could give us an advantage—and against Chessa, we’d need every advantage we could get.

I turned to Ravi. “I need you to stay here, and be on the alert. Jay, I assume you’ll keep an eye on Lola. Everyone else, let’s head out.”

Chessa and Macauley had a head start, however small, and the sooner we got out there and started tracking them down, the better our chances of finding one or both of them. Whatever Chessa’s plan was, Macaulay seemed important to her, so getting him back to the pack house would benefit us through sheer virtue of throwing a wrench into Chessa’s plot.

I led the group out of the house, making sure to keep Cali at my side. She was an asset to this hunt, but I wouldn’t put her in harm’s way if I could help it.

Charlie examined the ground as we approached the tree line. “There’s a trail—it smells like Macauley. Seems like he headed for the woods.”

We kept moving toward the trees.

“I don’t understand,” Cali said. “If Chessa wanted Macaulay, wouldn't she have taken him when he escaped?”

“Maybe she wanted to experiment,” Mikah suggested, his voice just above a whisper. “By letting him come all the way back here, she would’ve gained a better sense of the level of control she can exert over him to make him come to her.”

“Huh…” I thought about that for a minute. “Maybe that’s something we can exploit. It could give us an advantage—two birds with one stone and all that. Macaulay can lead us right to Chessa.”

“We need every advantage we can get,” Mikah said quietly.

I didn’t respond. He was right, and I kind of hated it.

Every minute or so, Charlie paused to check the ground to make sure we were still on the right track. I was picking up Macauley’s scent myself, but the wind kept shifting, making it difficult to determine which direction the young vampire might be headed.

A few more minutes passed as we quickly and quietly made our way through the woods. Then I stopped short, sniffing the air.

“Does anyone else smell that?” I asked.

“What is it?” Cali asked.

I drew in a deep breath. Nothing. “I… I must be wrong. I thought for a second that I picked up Kendall’s scent, but I don’t smell it anymore.”

“Let’s keep to the task at hand,” Mikah said. “We’re getting close.”

“There!” Cali said, pointing ahead at a dark figure stumbling through the woods.

I hid my surprise at the fact that she’d been the first to see him.

“Let’s surround him,” I said.

“Careful everyone,” Mikah said. “He’s a new vampire, which means he’s probably so desperate for blood, particularly human blood, that he’s liable to do just about anything. And the severity of his craving will make him faster, stronger, and more unpredictable.”

“Great,” Charlie deadpanned. “And here I was hoping he wouldn’t go easy on us.”

“Is anyone picking up Chessa’s scent?” I asked.

“I’m not,” Rishika said.

“I don’t smell her either,” Charlie said.

“Okay, let’s focus on Macauley first,” Mikah said.

“Mikah, if you distract him, then I’ll be able to knock him out,” Charlie suggested.

It felt like we were stalking a wild animal—something dangerous and unpredictable.

“I’ll be ready to blast him if things go sideways,” Cali said.

I nodded at Mikah. “Go ahead.”

I took one side of Macauley, and Cali took the other, while Mikah circled around to get in front of the new vampire.

Mikah dangled a bag of blood. “Is someone thirsty?”

Macauley snarled and staggered toward Mikah. Charlie crept up behind him, but just before he struck, the young vampire whipped around and snarled, snapping his teeth at Charlie.

Charlie leapt backward to avoid being bitten, and Macauley recovered quickly, fixing his gaze on Cali. He charged toward her, hissing, his teeth bared. I rushed to intercept him, but Cali already had her hands up and her magic ready. She blasted Macauley and sent him flying.

Mikah was ready, and when the vampire got to his feet, he clocked him in the face and he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

I rushed over to Cali, wrapping my arms around her. My heart was still racing from the terror of watching that young vampire race toward her. I hated that she could’ve been hurt, but I was so proud of her. She’d more than held her own.

Mikah slung Macauley over his shoulder, and we all headed back to the pack house.

When we made it back, I stopped short when I saw Kendall standing on the porch.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I felt bad about the way I dismissed you. I wanted to apologize.” She glanced over my shoulder at the others. “Is this a bad time?”

“We had a little vampire problem, but it’s been resolved.”

Jay raced outside. “Something’s wrong.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What do you mean? Is Lola okay?”

“Everyone’s feeling weird, including me. Look at this.”

Jay pulled down his shirt to reveal a glistening wound on his chest.

**Episode 4989**

I could tell just by looking at him that Jay was freaking out, which was freaking *me* out, because he was usually so calm and levelheaded. I couldn’t peel my eyes away from the wound on his chest.

*What on earth is going on?*

Greyson turned to Mikah, who still had Macauley tossed over his shoulder. “Go take care of Macauley. Make sure he doesn’t get the chance to escape again.”

Mikah nodded and headed inside, and Greyson turned his attention back to Jay.

“Take a breath,” he said firmly.

Jay did, blowing out the air slowly.

“Okay,” Greyson said. “Now tell me exactly what’s going on.”

Jay was leaning heavily on the porch railing for support. How long had he been unsteady on his feet?

“I was sitting with Lola,” he began, “and I suddenly started to feel… off. Lola thought maybe I had a fever or something, so I went to get a drink, and that was when I noticed that some of the others were acting strange.”

“Strange how?” Greyson asked.

Jay shrugged, then wiped at the sweat that had broken out at his hairline. His breathing was a little more rapid than it had been moments ago, even though all he was doing was standing in front of us. “Some of them were standing around, staring at the wall. Others were mumbling incoherently. A few of them even got into a shouting match—”

Suddenly, Jay’s knees buckled, and Greyson caught him around the waist. For several moments, Jay was completely slumped against Greyson, who was the only thing keeping him upright.

Then, just as suddenly as he’d collapsed, Jay shoved Greyson back and stumbled away, falling on his ass on the porch. “Get the fuck away from me, man! I know you want Lola, but you can’t have her! She’s mine!”

I blinked. *What the heck?*

Greyson held his hands up in front of him. “Jay, I get that you’re upset, but you need to back off. This is too much.”

“I’ll show you too much!” Jay took a wild, uncoordinated swing at Greyson, who easily dodged the attack.

I stood back, wide-eyed. This wasn’t like Jay at all. It was like he’d completely lost touch with reality.

I jumped back with an *eep!* as Jay took a wild swing at Greyson, who easily avoided the blow.

*Is this really happening?!*

Charlie came running up, his shirt shredded and an ugly, shimmering wound on his arm. He glared at Rishika. “Why are you in charge all the time?”

“Hey, take it easy.” Rishika held her hands up, a sign for him to back off just as much as a gesture of peace. Charlie was formidable, but I had no doubt that Rishika could kick his ass if the situation called for it.

Charlie just laughed, then ran back into the house.

I watched him disappear through the door, my brows knitting together in confusion.

“It’s like they’ve all gone crazy,” I told Greyson. “What on earth is happening?”

But Greyson didn’t seem to hear me. He was staring at Kendall. Somehow, in all the craziness, I’d completely forgotten she was even there.

Greyson approached her, his expression dark. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Then he winced and clutched his arm. His hand came away slick and shining with blood.

My jaw dropped. Greyson’s wound had reopened all on its own.

I stepped between Kendall and Greyson. I was worried that whatever was going on, it was starting to affect Greyson—and if that happened, I had no way of knowing how he’d react to Kendall. He didn’t like her under the best of circumstances. What if whatever was going on caused him to lash out at her?

Kendall must’ve had the same thought, because she backed up.

“You should probably try to do something to help him,” she told me.

*Yeah, no shit.* I thought. Who was she to pop in—unhelpful as ever—and try to tell me how to handle my own mate?

Before I could formulate a response, Mikah rushed out of the house. “It’s hell inside. Everyone’s fighting each other.”

“Come on, Greyson,” I said, taking my mate’s arm. “Let’s go inside. It sounds like the pack needs our help.”

As soon as we stepped inside, I saw exactly what Mikah was talking about. Lola and Jay were at each other’s throats, in the middle of a screaming match.

“Just who do you think you are?” Lola screeched.

“I’m your mate!” Jay growled. “That used to count for something!”

Greyson’s arms slipped around my waist. “We need to be careful.”

“I know.” I looked around the pack house in utter confusion, dread knotting up my stomach. “It’s like some kind of mass hysteria or something.”

Mikah sidled up to us, eyeing the rest of the pack warily. “I don’t feel affected at all. What about you, Cali?”

I shook my head. “This is really freaking me out, but otherwise, I feel totally normal.”

He frowned. “There has to be some kind of explanation.”

I looked past him and saw a frazzled Torin racing around, trying to close everyone’s open wounds. Meanwhile, Rishika, Ravi, Violet, and Lilac were trying desperately to stop all the fighting.

Realization hit me, and I gasped.

“What is it?” Mikah asked.

“The wounds… They’re all from Chessa’s taxidermy army. Everyone was bitten—everyone except me, Rishika, Ravi, Violet, and Lilac. And look who’s not acting crazy.” I nodded toward the small group of peacekeepers who were trying to keep the pack from devouring each other.

“I wasn’t bitten either,” Mikah said. “That would explain why we’re not affected—though we still have no idea what to do about those who are.”

Kendall appeared behind me, and I frowned. *I thought she left? Why is she still hanging around? Why is she* always *hanging around without ever actually being helpful?*

“You might want to get out of here,” she said.

My brows rose. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not a werewolf,” she said. “And if things get more out of control, you could get hurt. Your mate could even be the one to hurt you.”

Her words struck me to my core. I couldn’t imagine Greyson ever hurting me, but Kendall didn’t look like she was joking. Even so, how could I just leave everyone when they could be a danger to themselves and each other?

“She could be right,” Mikah said. “It might be for the best if we get some space from everyone else. Rishika, Ravi, Violet, Torin, and Lilac are handling things as best as they can. The best thing we can do to help is try to figure out how to fix this.”

Reluctantly, I nodded, and Mikah, Kendall, and I stepped out onto the porch. I tried to ignore all the shouting from inside the house. At least nobody had drawn blood. Yet.

“The only explanation I can think of is that Chessa’s animals were infected with something,” Mikah said.

“Infected?” I repeated. This was just getting worse. “Infected with what?”

He shook his head. “I wish I knew. But whatever it is, it’s clearly only affecting those who were bitten during the battle.” He side-eyed Kendall. “Of course, you wouldn’t be affected because you ran off before it happened.”

“And which one of us looks like the smarter one now?” she asked.

Mikah’s eyes flashed, but I put my hands up before they could start squabbling, too. “Hey. Cool it, you two. This isn’t the time to air grievances. We need to find a way to help the pack before they kill each other. Any ideas?”

I glanced at Kendall, who shrugged.

“I’m just a program coordinator,” she said. “This is above my pay grade.”

My eyes narrowed. *Would it kill her to at least* try *to help? Even just once? Why does she keep showing up and hanging around if she’s so indifferent?*

But I kept my *many* criticisms inside. I’d just told Mikah not to fight with her, so I couldn’t very well do it myself.

“Do we know of anything that can be used to tranquilize werewolves?” Mikah asked. “It’s obviously not a permanent solution, but it’d buy us some time.”

“LIPS has something like that,” I said, thinking out loud. “They tried to use it to tranquilize the pack. It might work, but I’m not sure if we’d be able to get it.”

My mind swam with concerns. Most importantly, what were we supposed to do about this strange infectious disease? What if it was fatal? Could my Fae blood be of any use in healing the pack? How much would they need?

Torin rushed out onto the porch, looking haggard. “We have to do something! I can’t get the wounds to heal, and they’ve stopped even letting me try.”

“The connection here is Chessa,” Mikah said. “She used mind control on her victims, on Macauley. I think the only way to save everyone is to kill her.”

I nodded, determined. “Then that’s what we’re going to do.”

**Episode 4990**

**Xavier**

A growl erupted from my chest as I stared at Milo and Knox, who looked like they were trying to kill each other.

*Goddammit! I do not have time for this shit!*

Wading into the fight, I wrenched Milo and the shrimp apart. “What the hell is wrong with you? This is a pack, not an MMA grudge match!”

But neither of them seemed to be listening. Knox was half-shifted, a bloody scratch oozing on his back, while Milo snarled viciously. One of Milo’s shoulders was dripping blood.

“Get out of my way!” Knox snapped. “I need to put this lying asshole in his place! He’s making shit up!”

“It’s the truth, and you know it!” Milo shouted. “You’re just jealous!”

“I don’t care about your juvenile bullshit,” I snapped. “Are you two seriously going to waste your time bickering about this? You want to fight over a girl? Go back to high school.”

I wrapped them both in a headlock and dragged them farther out into the yard. How the hell had this fight escalated so quickly, anyway? I was *just* talking to Knox upstairs. It had taken *maybe* ten minutes to get Ava out of the shower and tucked into bed before I’d gone downstairs.

*Speaking of Ava…*

With each of them locked in my grip, it was impossible to miss the heat radiating from Knox and Milo—or their clammy, sweat slicked skin.

*Do they have fevers too? Did they catch whatever illness Ava has?*

I twisted around to call back to the pack house over my shoulder. “Marissa! I need a hand!”

There was no response—from Marissa or anyone else. I snarled in frustration.

*What the hell is going on?*

I didn’t have time for this. Ava was sick—really sick—and she needed me. I needed to get help for her. I needed to check on her, to make sure she was stable, and instead, I was wasting my time on these two gigantic pains in my ass.

There was nothing for it. As much as I wanted to keep these two separate from the rest of the pack—and far from anything breakable in the house—nobody was stepping up to help. So, with their heads still locked under my arms, I dragged them back into the pack house. I needed to find Marissa. She’d help me with this.

The whole time, Knox and Milo sniped at each other and tried to keep fighting, though their wild punches mostly just hit me, because of fucking course. I’d have kicked them if I’d been confident that I wouldn’t trip—

My foot caught on something, and I hit the ground hard. The *moment* Milo and Knox broke free from my hold, they lunged at each other again. Clearly, getting their asses dragged back to the house hadn’t done a damn thing to cool either one of them off.

I scrambled to my feet, ready to break up their fight again, but then my gaze caught on what I’d tripped on.

Or rather, *who*.

I blinked. “What the fuck?”

Josephine and Fausto were making out in the middle of the foyer like a couple of horny teenagers.

“Hey, I hate to interrupt,” I said, reaching for Josephine to break up the PDA, “but I could really use some help—”

Fausto shoved me so hard, I stumbled back. “Stay away from my mate!”

“*What?*” I demanded, but he was already turning back to Josephine, who pulled him into a heated kiss and picked up right where they’d left off. Meanwhile, literally four feet away, Milo and Knox were still in the middle of a brawl, punching and kicking, biting and snarling and clawing, and throwing every possible combination of insults and slurs at each other for good measure.

*What is going on? Is my entire pack losing their goddamn MINDS?*

“Can you guys please, please, please SHUT THE FUCK UP?” a feminine voice shouted.

I turned to see Cresta on the staircase, clutching her head.

“You’re all being so fucking loud!” she snarled. “I can’t *think*!”

I hurried over to her. “Thank god. I need your help. I think something’s wrong with those four…”

I trailed off as I registered her glassy eyes, her blank expression, and the sweat beading on her forehead.

Dread dropped into the pit of my stomach like a stone as I pressed my hand to Cresta’s cheek. I had a feeling I already knew what I was going to find, but I wasn’t glad to be right.

Cresta was burning up.

Suddenly I became aware of more sounds echoing through the house—shouting, wild, maniacal laughing, moaning, glass breaking, wood snapping, drywall collapsing, something big and expensive sounding crashing to the ground…

It was official. My whole pack had gone mad.

For a moment, I was paralyzed, unsure of what to do. How to possibly fix this without running from one fire to the next with no way of actually stopping anyone. And then I took a breath, waded through the fighting and chaos, and headed upstairs to check on Ava.

At the end of the day, she was the one I cared about most in this pack. And no matter what happened to everyone else, if I could figure out how to help Ava, then she’d be able to help *me* fix the pack. Together. Like the mates we were. Like the Alpha and Luna we were.

But as I made my way upstairs, a strange burning sensation started climbing up my leg. My head began to throb, and I stumbled on the staircase and somehow ended up tumbling back down the stairs and landing on the floor, just a few feet away from where Josephine and Fausto were still locked in each other’s arms.

Dazed and bleeding, I staggered to my feet. *Why is my head hurting? I made the appointment with Carlson Greene. Isn’t that enough for now?*

I clambered to my feet, forcing myself to ignore the pain as I climbed the stairs. I ducked just in time to avoid the chair that Knox swung toward Milo. When I reached the hallway that led to Ava’s room, the burning in my leg became too painful to ignore. I pressed a hand against it, trying to relieve the pain, and my hand came away wet with blood.

*I must’ve cut it when I fell…* But then a memory raced to the forefront of my throbbing head. I was bitten on that same leg, wasn’t I? By one of those taxidermy animals? Did falling reopen my wound?

And then I remembered something else. Ava’s wound had reopened earlier, too.

*Ava… I need to check on her.*

I staggered through the pain for a few steps, and then suddenly, I couldn’t remember what I was doing.

*This isn’t the Redwood pack house. I shouldn’t be here. I… I should be with Cali.*

Suddenly, I craved her like I never had before. I wanted to feel her skin against mine, to taste her, to hold her…

*She’s my mate. She belongs to me.*

I started to turn back, but when I looked down the stairs, I was suddenly hit with a bout of vertigo, and I tilted sideways, grabbing onto the railing just before I fell over.

Ava’s scream broke through the fog, sickness, and confusion.

*Ava. She needs me.*

I stumbled back down the hallway, ignoring the sounds coming from the various bedrooms I passed. My head felt like it was going to explode. I had to get to Ava. She was in trouble.

I reached for the doorknob, but my hand suddenly wouldn’t cooperate. I struggled with the door. *Why the fuck did I close it, anyway?*

I rammed the door with my shoulder, shattering the wood and tumbling into the room. Ava was standing naked on the window ledge, trying to open the window. I fought through the pain and sickness to reach her.

“Ava!”

She didn’t seem to hear me.

“Fucking window,” she cursed. “Why won’t you *open*?”

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “Why would you want to open the window? Don’t you realize it’s locked?”

She ignored me again and finally just punched the window. The glass shattered and cut into her hand as she tried to clear the shards away.

I grabbed her around the ankle. “Stop this! What are you doing?”

“Get away from me!” she hissed. She tried to kick my hand away, but I held on tight. Blood dripped onto me—from her hand and from her shoulder wound. “Don’t try to stop me. I have to go!”

“Go where?” I tried to shake the fog from my own head. I couldn’t understand what she was doing. “Ava, you’re not well. You need to rest.”

“I don’t need rest. I need to go!”

I pulled myself up, pain flaring with every breath, then wrapped Ava in my arms and ripped her away from the window. We collapsed to the ground in a tangle of limbs, and she clawed at me, trying to break free.

I rolled on top of her, pinning her to the ground. The pain was so intense I was seeing spots, and blood blurred my vision. I shook my head to clear it, which only made the room spin even faster. A wave of nausea slammed into me. I swallowed it back.

“Ava, stop!” I burst out. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She fixed me with a cold glare. “I’m going to kill Cali.”

**Episode 4991**

“The only problem with our plan is the fact that we don’t have the slightest idea where Chessa is,” I pointed out. “I don’t like that at all. I’m sure these weird symptoms are only going to get worse the longer it takes us to find her. Half the pack is already losing it—I really don’t want to find out what ‘worse’ looks like.”

I never would’ve expected our tangle with the reanimated animals in Chessa’s house of horrors to lead to this—our pack losing its collective mind.

Even now, I could hear things breaking inside the house, a loud argument, and the sounds of someone either eating something delicious or having sex—I couldn’t quite tell which. What I did know was that if we didn’t break the Redwoods out of Chessa’s hold, we were going to have a big problem on our hands.

“First things first, we find Chessa’s scent,” Rishika said. “We know she’s been through the woods recently—her trail won’t be that hard to find. And don’t forget—we’re a force to be reckoned with. Chessa can try all the dirty tricks she wants, but the Redwood pack has beaten enemies far more intimidating than her.”

Everyone nodded, apparently trying to stay positive. I was a little more skeptical.

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said. “This whole time, Chessa’s been able to move around freely, without any of us realizing. We shouldn’t underestimate her. We did that before and now look—our pack is under siege.”

“It could be worse, I guess,” Kendall said with a shrug. “They could be ripping each other apart right now, or dying from festering animal bites. A little petty infighting and overzealous banging isn’t anything to get all worked up about.”

“But we don’t know how that’s going to progress, and that’s the problem,” I said curtly. “Also, it’s not exactly comforting to think that the pack is under Chessa’s influence in any way, even if they *aren’t* fighting to the death.”

“Good point,” Kendall said.

“Well, no matter what, standing around isn’t going to help matters.” I turned to Rishika. “You and Charlie are our best trackers—you two should lead. The sooner we track her down, the sooner we’ll be able put an end to this madness. Also, going after Chessa will prove that we’re not afraid of her.”

“That would normally be a good plan, Cali, but I don’t think Charlie’s going to be much help,” Rishika said. “The hunter has left the building—he’s just as affected as everyone else. He’s not a safe bet right now.”

I sighed. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten that.

“You’re right,” I said, already trying to pivot to the next best solution.

“Don’t forget, I’m a pretty good tracker, too,” Mikah reminded me. “Especially when it comes to other vampires. I should be able to sub in for Charlie and help Rishika pick up Chessa’s trail. But we should move fast, before whatever trail there is can go cold.”

“Thanks, Mikah,” I said, feeling slightly overwhelmed, but not hopeless. “I guess we’re going to have to work with what we have.”

“And I’m not so bad at the whole tracking thing either,” Kendall interjected. “From the looks of things, you need all the help you can get. And don’t forget, Chessa’s counting on this—she’s expecting this chaos she’s sewn to cause lots of confusion and throw you all off balance. If you want all your people to come out of this thing in one piece, we have to stop her before she can launch another attack and exploit the weakness she’s created in your pack.”

As much as I hated to hear her calling the pack weak, I wasn’t about to argue with her. There were only a handful of people who hadn’t been affected, and we had no idea how bad the symptoms were going to get. Right now, we were at Chessa’s mercy. But that wouldn’t be the case for long, if I had anything to say about it.

Greyson joined us on the porch, and I couldn’t help but notice how worried he looked. “I’m going to contact Big Mac. We could use her help. Maybe she knows how to counteract whatever Chessa’s done.”

Greyson’s wound was still open.

*That’s not looking good. Everyone else with a wound has completely lost it.*

Greyson met my eyes, obviously sensing my concern. “Don’t worry, Cali. I’ve got this under control.”

“But Greyson, don’t you remember what happened with the revenants?”

I did. He’d been taken over by Letifier completely. I couldn’t help but be afraid that the same could happen to him now… We didn’t fully know what Chessa was capable of.

“I know you’re scared, love,” he said. “This is different than the revenants… No matter what happens, we’ll end Chessa. She won’t be able to do any of this to anyone else again. It’s what we’ve done before, and we’ll do again. Okay?”

I nodded at my mate, though I didn’t feel particularly sold. But I was just going to have to take his word for it. Greyson was strong, and he’d never led us astray before.

“We’d better get going,” Mikah said just as a fresh wave of ruckus erupted from inside the house.

“What about them?” I asked. “We can’t just leave them unsupervised—not while they’re in this state. They could kill each other, destroy the pack house—anything.”

“You’re right,” Greyson said, his eyes on the pack house. I could tell he was thinking hard about what to do. “And Rishika’s too valuable to leave behind, so I’ll put Ravi in charge along with Violet, Lilac, and Torin.”

I bit my lip, mulling that over. “Let’s just hope that’s enough. We don’t have any idea what’s really going on with them. There’s no way of knowing what else Chessa might have in store for them.”

“And that’s why we have to get to Chessa, right now,” Greyson said. “Mikah, lead the way. We have a vampire to catch.”

With a tight nod, Mikah took off, his head moving jerkily as he tried to pick up Chessa’s scent. I fell into step beside Greyson, keeping one eye on Mikah and one eye on him. My mate was strong, and I knew he’d do his best to counteract Chessa’s efforts, but I was still feeling a little edgy.

*Are you sure you’re okay, Greyson?* I mind linked.

*I’m fine, Cali*, he said. *But if you see me do anything that suggests otherwise, let Rishika know.*

*Okay, I will*, I said, hoping it wouldn’t come to that.

I was doing my best to keep Greyson from picking up on it, but I was worried. I knew that Greyson was always reluctant to admit any weakness, and that he took his role as Alpha seriously. But I also didn’t want him to let his pride get in the way—not that Greyson made a habit of that. I only hoped that he was as in control as he thought, and we wouldn’t have to find out how Chessa’s animal wounds might affect him.

“I’ve got it,” Mikah said excitedly. “Got her scent!”

“Good job, Mikah,” Greyson said.

All the werewolves shifted, and I climbed onto Greyson’s back. I pressed myself against him and held on tight. It always felt good to put my arms around him—it kind of made me feel like I was protecting him from Chessa.

The group sped up, moving quickly through the woods and farther away from the pack house. I wished I could’ve done more than just ride along, but I wasn’t a werewolf, and I wasn’t a vampire, so I had my limitations.

*I may not have brute strength, speed, or supernatural senses on my side, but I’ve got my magic. Chessa has another thing coming after what she’s done to those innocent people and to Greyson and the Redwoods.*

I glanced back at Kendall, who hadn’t shifted yet, wondering again what her story was. I was still thrown by the gentle side of her I’d seen when she’d spoken to Chessa’s victims, especially when every other moment I’d spent with her had left me more suspicious of her motives. I knew Greyson felt the same way. No one could get a good read on her, and I hoped that wouldn’t come back to bite us.

Mikah suddenly stopped, a puzzled look on his face. “Shit. I had it, but the scent’s started fading in and out.” He turned in a circle, frowning in concentration. “It’s making it a hell of a lot harder to track her.”

Kendall set her backpack down. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does,” I said. “How are we supposed to find her if we keep losing her scent?”

But Kendall didn’t seem to be listening to me. She unzipped her bag and pulled something out.

“Maybe there’s more than a scent to track,” she said, revealing a walkie-talkie-looking device with a small rod protruding from the top.

Greyson shifted back to human and eyed the device. “What the hell is that?”

**Episode 4992**

**Xavier**

Ava’s aggressive behavior was making it perfectly clear that she wasn’t joking. I knew the dark tone she was using very well, and I was even more familiar with the deadly look in her eye. Ava was a killer—one of the deadliest wolves I’d ever known. If I didn’t get a handle on her, there was no doubt in my mind that she would race off to kill Cali.

Cali’s magic gave her an advantage, but she’d be no match for Ava if that failed and they ended up going toe to toe. Cali would put up a fight, but if she made one wrong move, one misstep, Ava would kill her. And I would die before I let that happen.

I grabbed Ava, pinning her arms to her sides as she struggled to break free. “Ava, you can’t just go and kill Cali! What are you talking about?”

“Why can’t I?” Ava snarled. “She can be killed, just like anyone else. You and Greyson bend over backward trying to protect her, but without either of you, she’s an easy target. Too easy.”

I was working to control my anger, but as I pictured Ava hurting Cali, that was becoming harder and harder to do.

“You’re not going to kill Cali, because I’m not going to let you!” I ground out. “Calm down and get a grip, Ava. You need to fight off whatever’s influencing you right now before it gets the best of you and you make a mistake that you can’t come back from!”

Ava’s expression twisted into a sneer. “That’s just like you, Xavier. Always putting Cali first, no matter what. Always protecting her!”

“Cali is still my mate!” I snapped. “Nothing’s going to change that!”

“Which is precisely *why* she has to die!” Ava hissed. “Don’t you see? Cali is the source of all our problems. Eliminate the source, eliminate the problems. It’s simple. I’m surprised I haven’t thought of this before. I would’ve saved us all a lot of grief if I’d gotten rid of her a long time ago.”

“That’s not true!” I snapped. “Cali isn’t the source of our problems—whatever’s going on between us is on me. It has nothing to do with Cali. Can’t you see that? For you, Cali is a convenient target—but she isn’t the issue.”

Ava barked out an almost hysterical laugh. “That’s where you’re wrong, Xavier. Our problems have *everything* to do with Cali. She’s like a lovesick puppy! A nuisance! And the only way we’ll ever get any peace from her is if she’s dead!”

“And what happens if you’re wrong, huh?” I demanded. “What happens if you kill Cali and nothing changes? What if things get worse? Who will you blame then? Not to mention the fact that hurting Cali would start a pack war. Greyson wouldn’t just shrug off you murdering her.”

*Nor would I.*

“I’m not worried about any of that,” Ava said breezily. “I know you’ll protect me, no matter what. Besides, you hate her as much as I do!”

*Whoa. Now I* know *Ava’s lost it! How could she ever think that I hate Cali? That couldn’t be further from the truth. Ava knows that, too. It’s the reason why we have so many disagreements and arguments about Cali.*

“Why would you say that?” I demanded. “What makes you think I hate Cali? She’s my mate!”

“Stop saying that!” Ava snarled. “You’re not the fucking *due destini*. You can choose if you want to! So choose *me*! Get it through your head that *I’m* the one you want. That *I’m* the one you’re meant to be with. Then you’ll understand why Cali has to die.”

I slowly let go of Ava, at a loss for words. She was practically foaming at the mouth with hatred. The look in her eye was enough to frighten even me, and I wasn’t actually sure how to calm her down. It was clear that she was beyond reason.

“I did choose you, Ava,” I said, fighting for calm. “I’m here with you, not with Cali—”

Ava shoved past me, catching me by surprise.

“Out of my way, Xavier! You think you’re an Alpha? An Alpha doesn’t hesitate. An Alpha takes action. And when the Alpha can’t—or won’t? That’s when his Luna has to step in. I’ll make the choice that you’re too weak to make.”

As Ava stormed toward the door, my wound started hurting again. Moments later, my head began to throb, too. I sagged against the wall, trying to regain my bearings and push past the blinding pain that seemed to be coming at me from all sides.

“Do not go looking for Cali!” I hissed through clenched teeth. I was done trying to reason with Ava. I had to put my foot down and stop this before something really fucking terrible happened.

Ava whirled around and pinned me to the spot with a glare. “Just try and stop me.”

She opened the door.

I hated that it had come to this. But I knew that if I let her go, she’d do exactly as she’d promised and try to kill Cali. And I had to protect Cali by any means necessary. There was no other option.

I ran after Ava and slammed into her from behind, the momentum sending us both tumbling down the stairs. We crashed to the ground floor and landed in a heap. Ava was underneath me, bloodied and bruised, her eyelids fluttering.

Other people had heard the noise and were streaming into the hall.

“What the hell?” Knox burst out, looking at Ava’s prone form in horror.

The shock of the fall had snapped me back to my right mind, and I slowly lifted myself off Ava.

*What have I done?*

“Are you okay, Ava?” I gently shook her, trying to rouse her. “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to—”

In a split second, Ava shifted and lunged. Her head collided with my chest, sending me flying back against the stairs. She was on me immediately, snarling and snapping her teeth and trying her level best to tear my throat out.

*This isn’t Ava’s fault! I have to fight her off but I can’t hurt her. Something’s very wrong with her… But none of this is my fault either, and she’s* my *Luna—how dare she disobey me like this?*

As I fought Ava off, my anger started building again. My wolf was howling at me to retaliate, to stop Ava once and for all.

Unable to resist, I shifted, my wolf howling as I threw Ava off. As she crashed into the wall, I whipped around to face her. I bared my teeth at her and growled, daring her to go in for another attack.

As soon as Ava regained her footing, she did exactly that, leaping on top of me and trying to sink her teeth into my throat.

Snarling, I tossed her off me again. This time, she crashed into a table.

“Leave her alone!” Knox shouted. “Stop it! Don’t touch her!”

But Ava wasn’t letting up, and I was only going to be able to fight her off without hurting her for so long before my survival instinct took over and I did some real damage.

Ava pounced on me, and again, I fought her off and slammed her to the ground, hard. She scrambled under my weight, scratching and biting and trying to rip me to pieces, but I was too strong, and I easily kept her pinned down, her neck exposed.

Immediately, I was hurled into the past. We’d been in this position before—when I’d killed her for what she’d done to my mother.

*How easy it would be to do that again, to tear her throat out and send her back to the spirit world—permanently, this time. Then the headaches would be gone, along with the constant push and pull between her and Cali.*

Ava had said that Cali was the problem, but even if that were true—and it wasn’t—it wouldn’t change the fact that Cali was only half of the issue. Ava was the other half. And right now, she was pushing things to the point of no return. Shit, she was practically begging me to make the choice she’d been going on about before—the choice between her and Cali.

*And with Ava gone, I’ll finally be able to get Cali back, take her away from Greyson so that she’s by my side again, right where she belongs.*

My anger was quickly tempered by desire—desire for Cali, and no one else. I met Ava’s eyes, and in that moment, she was little more than a stranger to me—she was nothing but the obstacle that stood between me and my one true mate.

And Ava was staring back at me with such hatred and evil in her eyes that it made my decision so very easy.

*Kill Ava. Get Cali back. That’s the only way you’ll get your life back. The real life that you* want*—your life with Cali. Soon, all this Samara bullshit with Ava will be nothing but a distant, unpleasant memory.*

My heart bursting with excitement, I reared back and bared my teeth at Ava, ready to go in for the kill.

**Episode 4993**

**Greyson**

Kendall didn’t bother looking up at me as I waited for an answer to my question, too busy concentrating on the strange device in her hands. She was pushing buttons and turning dials with an ease that suggested she’d used the thing many times before.

“It’s a K-52,” she said simply, like she expected us to know what that meant.

Cali and I exchanged a *WTF* look.

“I’m going to need a little more explanation than that,” I said. “What does it do, and how did you get it? I think we all deserve to know about the tools you’re using.”

Kendall glanced up at me, annoyance obvious in her purple eyes. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” I growled.

Kendall let out an exasperated sigh. “It tracks vampires, okay?”

“Not okay,” I retorted. “Where’d you get it?”

I shot Rishika and Mikah a look, mostly because I was wondering if Mikah recognized the device. But if he did, he wasn’t letting on—he looked just as perplexed as the rest of us.

Kendall pressed a button, and the device hummed to life, emitting a blinking blue light. “I took it from a hunter. He didn’t need it anymore.”

“How does it work?” I asked.

“God, is that important?” she snapped. “If I tell you, then what? You going to build one of your own?” She shook her head. “All that matters is that this thing will help find Chessa, and that’s what you all want, right? Or should I put it away and let you guys keep sniffing the air *hoping* to catch a whiff? Either we stand around here doing nothing, or we use the K-52 to hunt her down—your choice.”

I didn’t like Kendall’s attitude, or her vague answers. She was really starting to piss me off.

Cali put a hand on my shoulder, her mind link coming through clear and calm. *Maybe we should let her try. It might help us. We can always ask questions later.*

Taking Cali’s advice, I gestured at Kendall. “Go ahead.”

“Great,” Kendall said, flashing me a syrupy sweet but ultra-fake smile. She was already pointing the device at the ground, a clear indication that she’d already made up her mind before I’d given my approval.

It was strange how the more I interacted with Kendall, the less I seemed to know about her. I thought about the fake ID Mikah gad found, the way she came and went when she pleased, all her evasive answers, and now this K-52 thing. She was full of secrets, I could tell, and she wasn’t in any hurry to confide in us.

I stepped closer to her. “What’s your deal?”

Kendall glanced at me, still looking deeply annoyed. “What deal are you referring to?”

“Why are you helping us?”

“What makes you think I’m doing this for you?” She wasn’t looking at me—she’d turned the device over in her hands and was examining what appeared to be a small battery pack.

“If you’re not here for us, then why *are* you here?” I demanded. “Why are you so interested in our vampire problem? Because that’s what it is—*our* problem. Why are you so gung-ho to make it your problem, too?”

Kendall stopped fiddling with the device and looked at me angrily. “Do you really need me to explain that my brother was killed by a vampire?”

“You already told me that,” I said tersely.

“And that’s the point,” Kendall said under her breath, her eyes back on the device. “I told you why I’m here, but clearly that answer wasn’t good enough for you, so now you have a bug up your ass about me.”

I gritted my teeth and was about to reply, but then Cali stepped between us. “Kendall, that must have been terrible.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine losing a sibling like that,” Rishika added. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

I said nothing, just kept watching Kendall, who was concentrating on the device so hard that it was almost like she’d forgotten all about the rest of us. I appreciated Cali’s compassion—as always—but was she being played? Were we all being played?

“It *was* terrible,” Kendall finally said. “The worst thing that’s ever happened to me, by far. He was only fifteen when he was killed. Went to a basketball game and never made it home.” Kendall’s voice was raw with emotion as she glanced up at me. “So forgive me, Greyson, if I happen to have an unusually strong interest in vampires. And forgive me if I don’t care what you think about it.”

*She’s putting on a good show, I’ll admit it, but is any of this true? How can I know what I’m dealing with when she’s so closed off?*

I looked at Mikah. He was a good judge of character. Maybe I could pull him aside and get some insight. But before I could take that idea any further, the K-52 made a clicking sound, and Kendall’s expression turned pensive.

When she spoke again, the raw note in her voice was gone and her tone was all business. “It’s picked up Chessa’s trail. We’ve got her.”

I had no idea how the contraption worked, or if it really had detected Chessa, but giving the thing a shot was better than not being able to pick up the vampire’s scent at all. The situation was calling for me to trust Kendall—or rather, her device. At least for now.

As I followed Kendall, I found myself having to blink a bunch of times to keep my vision clear. It was like the entire world had suddenly been concealed by a pane of oil-smeared glass, and I couldn’t get it to sharpen up, no matter how hard I tried.

My taxidermy wound was starting to ache, and strange sensations were radiating out from it and flowing to every part of my body. I felt a little faint and stumbled a step before quickly recovering, hoping no one had noticed. The burning sensation in the wound was getting worse by the second, and my brain suddenly felt heavy, my thoughts sluggish.

I knew what was at stake here, and I knew that I couldn’t allow myself to be pulled away. I’d told Cali to let Rishika know if I started acting strange, but I didn’t want to alarm her if I didn’t have to. I didn’t want Cali to worry and be distracted from keeping herself safe. I needed to protect her, and right now, the only way I could do that was by hiding the fact that I probably needed a little help myself.

I steeled myself against a fresh wave of the strange pain, trying my best not to show how much it was affecting me. The pack needed me to be strong. Cali needed me to be strong. And that meant dealing with the pain until we got through this thing, found Chessa, and destroyed her.

*Showing weakness isn’t an option. I’m the Alpha. I’m strong and powerful, and Chessa’s magic isn’t going to stop me from doing whatever I need to do to protect my pack. I’m fine. I’ll get through this. I don’t need anyone’s help.*

But then I started to wonder if those thoughts were rational. Was I putting the pack in worse danger by hiding how much trouble I was having? By concealing the fact that whatever Chessa’s wounds were doing to the others was also happening to me? Did I owe it to Cali—and to everyone else—to tell them that I wasn’t exactly at my best?

I honestly couldn’t help but remember what had happened with the revenants. Except, I couldn’t let any fears stop me from acting. Whatever happened would happen—I could at least do some fucking damage now.

I pushed that thought away almost as quickly as it formed. I was going to have to power through this. I *could* power through it. I had no choice. And of course I was thinking rationally. My thoughts were as clear as they’d ever been. I was going to fight through the pain and do what I had to do to protect the pack. To protect Cali.

*We have to kill Chessa. That’s all. I just need to stay focused on that until I can make it a reality. Then, everything will be okay—her death will free the pack from Chessa’s influence, and I won’t feel strange anymore. As soon as Chessa’s dead, everything will go back to normal.*

We’d just made it to a particularly thick section of the woods when I picked up Chessa’s scent. My heart leapt.

*I don’t need Kendall’s little toy now that the vampire’s close. I can take it from here. Things are going just as I thought they would. We’ve found Chessa, and now it’s time to show her exactly who she’s fucking with.*

I gestured for everyone to stop. Kendall’s device was clicking rapidly in her hands.

“There she is,” Rishika whispered, pointing ahead.

But I was already charging forward, my teeth bared and ready to tear the vampire apart. I shifted when Chessa came into view, focused on my target and nothing else.

*This ends now.*

**Episode 4994**

Only seconds ago, I’d been watching Greyson touch his wound repeatedly. And though I could tell he’d been trying his best, he hadn’t managed to hide how much pain he was in. Not from me.

I’d immediately started to worry that he was being affected by the wound like the rest of the pack—which would've made sense, particularly because Chessa was nearby. I’d wondered if we were about to have an out-of-control Greyson on our hands, and I had no idea how—or even if—we’d be able to handle a bite-crazed Alpha.

But apparently, my worries about him were unfounded.

As soon as Chessa came into view, Greyson reacted quickly and decisively—just like the Alpha I knew and loved. But I knew what Chessa was capable of. She’d proven herself to be one of the most dangerous adversaries we’d ever faced—it was so hard to believe that the sweet girl I’d met in cryptozoology club was the same evil woman standing before us right now.

My attention went back to Greyson, who was rushing at Chessa, snarling. I had faith in my mate and knew that Greyson was everything an Alpha was meant to be, but I also knew that he still might need our help. That was what we were here for—to offer our support and follow the Alpha’s lead.

*Greyson trusted me enough to bring me along because he knows that I have my magic and that I can fight. I can’t let him down.*

I leapt into action, sprinting after him and conjuring my sword. Rishika raced past me, back in wolf form and growling. Adrenaline pumped through my body as I realized we were about to throw everything we had at Chessa.

I was ready to put an end to this.

I watched as Greyson leapt at Chessa, his snarls ripping through the air, his sharp teeth glistening in the moonlight. I knew exactly what the moment of contact would look like, and although I didn’t think I’d ever get used to the sight of people being torn apart. Of course, I could try to rationalize with myself that Chessa had hurt others. It was the only way that I was going to remotely be okay with it.

*Wait a minute… Is Chessa* smiling*?*

A second later, the vampire was gone. It was as if she’d never been standing there at all.

Greyson crashed into a tree, literally snapping it in half. It crashed and fell, taking a few other trees down with it. Mikah, Kendall, Rishika, and I rushed out of the way of the ensuing destruction, all of us looking around to make sure we weren’t walking right into one of Chessa’s attacks.

“Greyson!” I shouted, torn between the urge to make sure he was okay and the need to figure out where the hell Chessa had gone. We’d come too far to make a mistake that would make us lose to Chessa.

I remembered what Mikah had told us—Chessa was an ancient vampire, and that meant she was experienced, fast, cunning, but she was no Adéluce. Sure, she’d already shown us that we’d have to stay on our toes, and I was worried that if we made one wrong move, it would end in disaster… but when wasn’t I?

We could do this, we’d just had a few… setbacks.

Greyson got up and turned around, scanning the area. I recognized the look on his face well—he was in hunting mode.

Rishika’s growl drew my attention—it could only mean that she had Chessa in her sights. She stalked off into the darkness, and I followed, finally seeing what she’d spotted. Chessa was standing beside a cluster of trees, her fangs bared.

Rishika’s growl turned into a snarl as she leapt at the vampire, but then, just like it had happened with Greyson, Rishika’s attack failed to land when Chessa slipped away at the last second.

Chessa’s laughter reverberated through the trees as Rishika let out a huff of frustration and circled around, looking for the vampire.

But this time, I’d actually managed to track Chessa’s movements and spotted her standing off to my left. Maybe I could try to anticipate where she might end up. Could that get me anywhere? But right now, I had to attack—this had gone on for too long already. Chessa wasn’t making things easy for us, and that meant I had to take any chance that presented itself.

Planting my feet, I swung my sword as Mikah lunged at Chessa’s other side. I gritted my teeth, preparing to make contact and hoping that together, Mikah and I would be enough to take Chessa out. But Chessa slipped away once again, just as Mikah reached her.

My sword sliced through empty air, and I screamed in frustration, just as Chessa reappeared off to my left again. Regaining my balance, I followed through on the swing and kept my sword moving but, again, I sliced through nothing but air. The momentum of the extended swing nearly cost me my footing and Chessa appeared again, cackling.

“Nice try, Fae, but not nice enough!” she said. “Maybe you should stick to juggling boyfriends and leave the fighting to us!”

Chessa laughed again, but it was cut short when Kendall slammed into her, and they both went crashing to the ground.

The two of them struggled, Kendall working to maneuver Chessa under her paws so that she could go for her neck, but Chessa was holding her own.

I moved in, ready to strike again if I got the chance. I was furious that I’d missed Chessa before—and pissed that I’d given her an opportunity to taunt me.

Chessa hissed as Kendall finally found an opening and drew the vampire’s black blood, missing her neck by inches and biting down on Chessa’s shoulder instead.

Chessa screeched in pain and lashed out, hitting Kendall hard. Her superior strength sent the purple-eyed wolf sailing through the air, and a second later, she landed on her back in a thicket.

I readied my sword again, determined to finally do some damage. Greyson and Mikah leapt into the fray, but once again, Chessa easily evaded them. Her laughter rose on the breeze, seeming to come from everywhere at once. We all twisted around, trying to figure out where she’d ended up.

I swung my sword again just as Chessa popped back into view, to my right this time. I swung and missed, yelping as my momentum shifted and my sword disappeared. Twisting, I blasted her with my magic—it connected. Chessa blew back, going flying. She landed a few yards away, and tumbled almost cartoonishly across the ground. She finally rolled to a stop at the base of a tree and cried out in pain.

“Who’s going to get the last laugh now?” I shouted. “Still think I should stay out of the fight, or have you finally realized that I’m more than up to the challenge?”

I felt good—like I deserved to be here, fighting alongside the wolves and vampires. And, not for the first time, I’d helped win us a tactical advantage.

“Surround her! Don’t let her get away!” Greyson shouted.

Chessa eyed us as we closed in, clutching her bleeding shoulder, her fangs bared. Anyone else in her position might’ve begged or pleaded for their life, but Chessa just sneered.

“Oh, isn’t this cute,” she said. “The werewolf and his mate, fighting—*badly*—together. Look how many of you it took to bring me down. You should be ashamed of yourselves!” She threw her head back and laughed again, and the sound seemed to slice into my brain. “And you call yourself supernaturals! What an insult to our kind!”

“Ignore her!” Kendall snapped. “She’s just trying to mess with you—to get you to make a mistake out of anger. She’s beaten and she knows it.”

As we all edged closer, my heart pounded as I tightened my grip on my sword, relishing the feeling of my magic surging through me. When Chessa lunged toward me, her snapping fangs came within an inch of my leg.

I stumbled back, swinging my sword wildly and losing my balance. I hit the ground as Chessa blazed past me, almost too fast to see.

Greyson rushed to my side. “Cali, are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me!” I said, scrambling to my feet. “Just don’t let Chessa get away!”

“Lucky for us, she left a blood trail,” Rishika said, pointing to a smear of dark blood on the ground. “We can follow it.”

But before we could do exactly that, I heard the sound of rapidly approaching footfalls. I kept my sword at the ready, but I couldn’t see who was coming—it was way too dark.

Three wolves suddenly burst out of the trees, then shifted in midair. Lilac, Violet, and Ravi landed on their feet, breathing hard.

Ravi kept running and slammed right into Greyson. “We couldn’t stop them!” he panted.

Greyson grabbed his shoulders. “Who?”

Ravi swallowed. “The pack! They attacked us, and they’re coming!”

**Episode 4995**

**Xavier**

I was staring at Ava’s throat, recalling the way her blood had tasted the day I’d killed her—a haunting flavor that I hadn’t forgotten, even after all this time. I thought about the prospect of tasting it again, of sinking my teeth into her flesh, of feeling her warm blood pouring into my mouth…

I let my gaze travel slowly up from Ava’s neck to her eyes. She was still for now, and looking up at me like she’d heard every thought that had just passed through my head. I hesitated.

*What the hell am I doing? I love Ava. She’s my mate. How did it come to this? I can’t hurt her! I certainly can’t* kill *her. She’s not herself right now—I have to stop this.*

Taking advantage of my second of indecision, Ava unfroze and tore into me, sinking her teeth into the exact same spot where I’d been wounded by Chessa’s possessed taxidermy animals. The pain was blinding, and Ava’s attack had caught me totally off guard. In fact, I’d been one second from walking away from the fight.

*But even with Ava’s bite, the taxidermy wound shouldn’t hurt this bad. These wounds are more than just wounds—they must have something to do with why we’re acting so strange. Why my mind keeps going blank, as if I don’t have any control over my own actions….*

But even as I realized that my wound was affecting me, too, my anger began to recede. After a few seconds, I felt like I was finally starting to regain control. The blurred vision, the headache, the freshly opened wound—I could fight through it, now. But would Ava let me?

I twisted out of her grip and couldn’t help but yelp in pain. The agony of her teeth ripping through my flesh was enough to make my vision swim, but I managed to keep Ava pinned down. Ava was in a rage now, still trying to tear herself free and lashing out at me with her claws, slashing my skin into ribbons.

I struggled to restrain her without hurting her, doing my absolute best to counter her wild attacks without drawing blood. I hadn’t fought like this with Ava in a very long time—it was a real reminder of how strong she was, and how vicious she could be.

*Ava, stop it! I’m not trying to hurt you!* I mind linked.  *Please, let’s talk about this. Figure out how to stop whatever’s going on with you, together. It’s me! I’m not your enemy!*

Ava snapped at me, nearly reaching my throat. It was clear that she wasn’t listening.

I had to stop her. I had no choice.

*Ava, this is for your own good*, I mind linked. *You’re giving me no choice.*

Then I slammed her head into the floor, knocking her out cold.

I hated that I’d been forced to do that to her, but what choice did I really have? If she’d kept attacking me full force, she would’ve killed me, or I would’ve been forced to kill her. Knocking her out seemed like the better option. At least now, I could take a second to figure out my next move without simultaneously keeping Ava from tearing me apart.

I was about to get to my feet when I heard Knox’s low growl. I turned to face him—just as Knox’s wolf slammed into me. We both slid across the floor and slammed into the wall, sending pictures crashing to the floor.

Once again, I was fighting to keep one of my own pack members from ripping my throat out.

I considered trying to reason with Knox, to explain what had happened to bring me and his cousin to blows, but a single glance at Knox’s eyes told me that he was just as crazed as Ava had been. He was almost rabid, like the taxidermy animals who’d wounded us. He wasn’t going to listen to a word I said.

Even now, my own wound ached and burned as I struggled to fight Knox off. I didn’t want to kill him—though admittedly, if it came to that, I wouldn’t lose much sleep over it. Ava would be upset, but Knox’s death would solve a lot of my problems. It would also send a handy message to Blaine, and Knox’s other minions.

I could see it now—the pack down a few members, but more in sync than ever. I wouldn’t have to answer to Knox, or deal with his snide remarks and his tendency to challenge me at every turn. And really, who could blame me if I decided to put him out of his misery? He was actively trying his damnedest to rip my throat out.

I shook my head hard, stopping myself from going too far down that line of thinking. That wasn’t right. Knox, as annoying and maddening as he could be, was part of my pack. And it wasn’t his fault that he was behaving this way—no more than it was Ava’s fault that she’d attacked me and tried to kill Cali.

Knox was under some kind of influence that I didn’t understand, and I had to treat him like he was sick, and not in control of his own actions.

I quickly pinned Knox to the ground, growling as menacingly as I could manage. He relaxed a little, but his eyes still had that crazed glint, and I knew that if I made one wrong move, he’d kill me.

*Snap the fuck out of it!* I mind linked to him, hoping that, unlike Ava, he might actually listen to the words. *I’m trying to* help *Ava. She attacked me! I knocked her out to keep her from harming me—or herself! You saw how she was acting! Did it really look like I was the aggressor?*

Knox frowned in confusion for several seconds before his reply reached me. *Get the fuck off me. Ava’s hurt! I have to help her.*

Cautiously, I released him, and he immediately scrambled to Ava’s side.

I heard Josephine warning Cresta to stop, and I turned to see Cresta waving a knife in Josephine’s face.

Taking a deep breath, I looked around, taking in the total chaos that had engulfed the pack house. Some of the Samaras were arguing, some were engaged in fully-fledged fights, and some were locked in feverish embraces. There was also a group sitting on the floor, gorging on what looked like the entire contents of the kitchen.

*Has everyone gone simultaneously insane?*

But then I realized that not everyone was acting as crazed as Ava, Knox, and Cresta. Josephine, Perrie, Donovan, Geraint, and Fausto seemed like themselves, but they had their hands full dealing with Marissa and Milo, who were currently threatening them with partially shifted hands.

*Why are some of the pack members acting totally out of control while others aren’t? What the fuck is going on?*

Then I touched my wound and realized that everyone who was behaving erratically had been bitten by the taxidermy animals. It was like they’d all been infected with rabies and lost their minds.

*But if I can fight it off, why can’t they? I was wounded, too, and even though my thoughts have gotten away from me a few times, I managed to regain control. Maybe they can do the same.*

I ran over to Cresta, shifted back to human, and knocked the knife out of her hands. She reared back from me, like she was afraid that I was going to follow it up with an attack. But instead, I pushed her aside, and Josephine quickly restrained her.

I turned to quickly address the pack members who still had their wits about them.

“We need to lock everyone up until we can find a cure for this mind fuckery!” I shouted.

Donovan, Fausto, and the others quickly went to work rounding up our crazed pack members, but it was a tall order.

I heard Ava groaning and whipped around. She’d gotten to her feet, and was currently staggering toward the door.

“Ava, where are you going?” I asked, afraid to hear her answer.

When she turned to look at me, her eyes looked dead. They’d looked the same way when I’d killed her.

*But I stopped myself this time! I didn’t lose control and kill her, did I? Is Ava dead?*

Ava turned around and kept walking toward the door. All the affected Samaras dropped what they were doing and followed her out.

“What the hell?” Perrie asked, her eyes wide with fright.

I couldn’t answer her. I had to follow them. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard myself screaming that this was wrong, but I didn’t listen. I couldn’t resist.

Ava picked up speed, leading us through the door and out onto the porch, where she suddenly stopped.

Chessa was standing in the yard, her clothes torn and bloodied. She smiled at us as we filtered out, one by one.

She waved at us. “My puppets—hello. You’re coming with me!”

**Episode 4996**

**Artemis**

I waited for Celeste’s response as she pinned me in place with her cold, hard gaze. She held my dagger up to the light and turned it over in her hands, almost like she was admiring it.

“You say Adair is your uncle, but you might be lying,” she mused. “Adair hasn’t been seen or heard from in a long time. Maybe you stole this dagger. Maybe you even used it to kill him. You’re a stranger, and I’m not particularly inclined to believe a word you say.”

“But you yourself noticed the resemblance between us,” I pointed out.

“I’ve not forgotten that, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t kill Adair,” Celeste countered. “I fail to see how your uncanny resemblance to the man holds any significance whatsoever. It could be a coincidence. Or not.”

I scoffed. “Why would I kill my uncle? I have no reason to wish him harm.”

Celeste seemed to ponder that. “If you are who you say you are, that would make you Kadmos’s daughter.”

Marius gasped and twisted around to stare at me, his eyes wide, his jaw dropped.

Ignoring him, I kept my eyes on Celeste. “And that would make you a person who understands how families work.”

Celeste gestured to one of the guards. “Take her away. She’s lying, and I’m tired of her games. I have other business to attend to, and I don’t intend to waste my evening sparring with a charlatan.”

“Leave her alone!” Marius shouted. “Don’t touch her!”

“You are in no position to make demands,” Celeste snapped. “You’re lucky I didn’t throw you in a cell the moment you walked through my doors. Do not mistake my mercy for weakness.”

“I’m not lying!” I shouted as the guards took me by the arms. “Kadmos is my father. I don’t *need* to lie to you!”

Celeste’s face twisted into a mask of anger. “How *dare* you make such a claim when I *know* you’re lying! Kadmos’s only child died!”

“That’s just what everyone believes—even Kadmos himself,” I said. “In fact, that’s the only reason why I came back to the Fae world—to find my father and let him know that I’m alive. If I weren’t being held here against my will, I’d still be on that mission right now.”

Celeste cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at me. “Well, lucky for me, there’s a very simple way for me to find out whether or not you’re telling the truth.”

She got up and headed for the door.

“What about Marius?” one of the guards asked her. “What should we do with him?”

“I will spare him. For now.” Celeste fixed her gaze on me. “But if you’re lying, believe me when I say that I will have both of your heads.”

The guard shoved Marius to the ground and followed Celeste out, locking the door behind him.

I rushed to Marius’s side and tried to help him up, but he jerked away.

“What have you done?” he demanded. “That was *not* the right move!”

“What have *I* done? Weren’t you there? I just saved your life!”

“Kadmos’s daughter? *Really?* You should’ve come up with a better lie than that. She’ll find out the truth, and then we’ll both pay the price. You’re smarter than this, Artemis. Celeste isn’t someone you want to play games with. She’d have us both killed for a lot less than lying to her face!”

“Who said I was lying?” I demanded. “What if it’s the truth? What if I *am* Kadmos’s daughter? It’s like you said—why would I lie about that?”

Marius scoffed, but I could see that he was starting to come around to the possibility. He eyed me silently for a few seconds, his face flicking through emotions in a way that would’ve been hilarious under different circumstances.

“Wait,” he finally said. “Are you saying that you’re really, truly, literally Kadmos’s daughter? This isn’t some kind of weird, ridiculously inappropriate game?”

I could see that he was starting to look at me with new eyes.

I held his stare. “It’s the truth. I’m Kadmos’s daughter. He’s the man I’m looking for.”

To my surprise, it was actually a relief to finally reveal this to Marius after having kept it a secret for so long.

But then Marius turned his back on me.

“You should’ve told me,” he muttered.

“Why?” I asked. “What difference does it make? I’m telling you now. Don’t act like our relationship has ever involved the two of us telling each other every little thing. I’m sure you have your secrets—I have mine too. What’s the issue?”

Marius whirled on me, his face red with anger. “This isn’t about my secrets—it’s about yours. You didn’t tell me. You kept it to yourself!”

“As is my right!” I snapped, my own anger rising. “I don’t owe you anything, Marius. And don’t even *think* about getting on your high horse right now. If I’m not mistaken, you completely hid the whole Dark Fae court bounty thing from me. Why is it okay for you to lie by omission, but not me? It’s just like you, living by a different set of rules than you expect others to abide by!”

“That was different!” Marius fired back. “I was only trying to protect you!”

“Oh, and that worked out *great*, didn’t it? Maybe if you hadn’t tried to ‘protect’me and told me the truth from the beginning, we wouldn’t be at Celeste’s mercy right now!”

My frustration was growing. I couldn’t believe Marius was being so bratty. We’d only just reached a place where I could talk to him without wanting to slap him. In fact, he was lucky I hadn’t slapped him five minutes ago for being such an ass about this.

Marius’s eyes were still blazing. “And if you’d told me who you really were, we might not—”

Celeste came banging back through the door, followed by the guard and a stern-looking woman dressed in a gilded robe.

Celeste pointed at me. “Her.”

*I don’t like the sound of that. What’s this about? And who is that woman?*

I reached for my dagger before I remembered that it had been confiscated.

“Ingrid here is a priestess,” Celeste told me, “and she’s going to perform a simple test to determine whether or not you’re telling the truth—because there’s no way I’m going to take your word for it. If what you’re saying is true, then you have nothing to fear.”

Ingrid approached me, her pinched mouth pressed into a tight line.

“Hold out your hand,” she snapped.

I had no idea what these two women had in store for me, but I did know that I was telling the truth. Whatever this woman was about to do, if she didn’t confirm what I’d said, then both Marius and I were as good as dead. I only hoped that Ingrid the priestess was on the up and up.

I held out my hand, Ingrid removed a small blade from a fold in her robe and slashed my palm. I refused to wince, or cry out in pain—I just kept staring defiantly at Celeste. I wanted her to know that she wasn’t going to rattle me.

*I have nothing to hide, and I want her to know that. I know the truth. Kadmos is my father, and this Ingrid woman had better prove it. I can’t wait to see the look on Celeste’s face when she finds out that she was wrong about me.*

Ingrid squeezed my hand, letting the blood drop into a heavy wooden bowl.

Marius suddenly lurched toward us. “Stop!”

He reached for the bowl, but the guard smacked him in the head and Marius dropped heavily to the floor.

“You didn’t have to do that!” I said, yanking out of Ingrid’s hold so that I could go to Marius’s side.

“Calm down,” Celeste said. I heard the eye roll in her voice. “Don’t make the same mistake as your friend here, or you’ll be lying beside him before you know it.”

I stayed put and shook my head, taking a moment to try to come to terms with the spot Marius and I were in.

*What was Marius thinking, trying to grab that bowl? Why would he do that? I hope he’s not seriously hurt. I’ve already spent enough time nursing his dumb ass back to health.*

Ingrid wrapped the bowl in a shimmering cloth, then held it out at arm’s length. I waited, watching the woman closely and hoping that she wasn’t about to pull a fast one.

The entire room was silent as we all stared at the bowl. Waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

*What the hell? Is the bowl broken? Did her little ritual fail?*

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected from this whole dramatic procedure, but absolutely nothing was happening.

*Is that good or bad? Is the bowl meant to explode if I’m lying? What’s the deal?*

After a few more uneventful minutes, Ingrid finally removed the cloth from the bowl.

The blood was gone.

“The test is complete,” Ingrid announced.

Celeste strolled over and peered into the bowl. “So? Out with it, Ingrid—is she telling the truth?”

**Episode 4997**

“We have to go, right now!” Ravi said, his voice shaking. “They’re moving fast, and they’re out for blood.”

Greyson grabbed my hand and sprinted toward the thickest, deepest part of the woods.

“Everyone, move as quickly and as quietly as you can, and stay close,” he instructed. “We need to avoid them so that we aren’t forced to hurt them.”

I fell right into step with Greyson, but I was troubled. We were being attacked by our own pack. What would happen if they caught up to us? Would we have to fight our own packmates? Would they kill us if we didn’t fight them? It made me sick to my stomach just thinking about it.

I remembered when Lola had first been turned into a vampire, how difficult it had been for her to control herself. She’d attacked me, drunk my blood, and come close to draining me dry as she struggled to control herself. I realized with a jolt of horror that this could end up a lot worse than that.

I was doing my best to keep up with Greyson, but he was practically dragging me along, pulling at my arm every few yards to get me to hurry up.

*Sometimes, I think Greyson forgets that I’m not nearly as fast as he is. If I could run as fast as him and the others, I would.*

“We’re letting Chessa get away, you know!” Kendall said. “I’m not about to let that happen.”

She jerked to a stop. Greyson and I stopped, too.

“And what are you planning to do, exactly?” I asked her.

“I’m going to go after Chessa,” Kendall said matter-of-factly. “Like we planned.”

“You’re making a mistake, Kendall,” I said. “You’re not going to be able to take on Chessa all on your own. We’ve all seen what she can do—and that was when we were all fighting her together!”

She was definitely a tricky foe—how in the hell was Kendall planning on taking her on alone? It seemed like she had a death wish. I looked at Greyson.

*Aren’t you going to stop her?* I asked him, incredulous.

“Thank you for your concern, but I can handle myself,” Kendall said. She started to head back the way we’d come.

“Wait!” Greyson shouted.

Kendall stopped and turned around, her arms crossed over her chest. “What?”

“You’re right, Kendall, but so is Cali,” Greyson said. “You don’t stand a chance against Chessa on your own. But if we kill her, she won’t have control over the others anymore.” Greyson glanced at Mikah. “Do I have that right?”

Mikah nodded. “You do.”

Greyson turned his attention to Ravi, Lilac, and Violet. “You three have to draw the others off. Keep enough distance between you and them, but let them chase you. Lead them away from us so we won’t have to worry about being ambushed when we face Chessa.”

He turned back to me.

“You, Rishika, Mikah, Kendall, and I are going to keep tracking Chessa. She’s a lot stronger than we anticipated, she’s proven that, but I’m confident that we can still beat her with cool heads and good tactics.”

“Got it,” Ravi said, heading off with Lilac and Violet in tow.

*I can’t believe they’re about to lure away our suddenly homicidal packmates. How did things spiral so out of control so quickly?*

At least Greyson’s plan was a good one. I just hoped it would work.

“We’ve wasted enough time standing around here gabbing. Are we going after them or not?” Kendall pressed.

Greyson glared at her. “We’re going.”

“I’ll get us back to the blood trail,” Mikah offered, already taking off into the darkness.

In the distance, I heard a cacophony of familiar voices—our raving pack members. Everyone else heard it, too, and we braced ourselves until we realized that the sound was getting farther away. Ravi was putting his part of the plan into action.

I took off after Mikah, along with the others, but it took me a split second to realize that Greyson wasn’t by my side.

I turned back, already prepared to give him an earful for not staying close, but then I saw that he was standing stock-still, facing the opposite direction.

“Greyson!” I called out, but he didn’t respond. Didn’t even move. I hurried over and grabbed his shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

Greyson’s head snapped around to look at me, like he was noticing me for the very first time.

“I thought I heard something, that’s all,” he mumbled.

I paused to listen. “Can you hear it now?”

Greyson shook his head slowly, like he was trying to dash away a thought. “No. We’d better catch up with the others.”

As we ran, I glanced at Greyson. Something seemed… off. The way he’d just been staring straight ahead… It was like he’d been in a trance. And it was extremely weird that he hadn’t even noticed that I’d come back to get him at first.

I snuck a look at his wound as we ran. It still hadn’t healed. It actually looked even worse than before, though I supposed it was possible that he’d re-injured it during the fight with Chessa. I was counting on that being the case, since I didn’t even want to consider the possibility that there was some other reason to explain why a wound that should’ve healed by now was still red and bloody.

*But what if I’m wrong? What if it’s something else? What if there’s something really wrong with Greyson? What if he’s falling under Chessa’s control, like the others?*

I had to warn Rishika, just in case.

Greyson and I finally caught up to the others, who’d slowed down and were examining something on the ground. Once we got close enough, I saw what they were looking at—Chessa’s blood trail.

“Rishika,” I whispered, glancing at Greyson. I waved Rishika closer. “Rishika, I need to talk to you about Greyson.”

Rishika sidled over, eyeing Greyson as she did. He was focused on Mikah and Kendall as they all examined the blood trail and discussed our next move.

“What is it?” Rishika asked.

“I’m worried about Greyson,” I said. “Something’s wrong.”

“I’m worried, too,” Rishika admitted. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

*Thank you*, I mouthed as we went to join the others.

“There’s more blood the farther the trail goes,” Mikah pointed out. “She’s slowing down.”

I thought back to the moment when Kendall had bitten Chessa. It must have been a worse injury than I’d realized.

“Be ready for anything,” Greyson warned us.

“Something’s coming!” Rishika hissed.

I scanned the trees, wishing that I could see as well in the dark as the others. I heard *something*, but it was faint, and in the darkness, I couldn’t see anything but the trees.

Suddenly, Greyson grabbed me and pulled me down to the ground, just as something came charging toward us on thundering hooves. The others scattered with yelps of terror, and I watched, wide-eyed and scared half to death, as an enormous moose trampled across the ground I’d just been standing on.

“That was huge!” I whispered, my voice shaking. I could barely breathe. “It would’ve killed me!”

I thanked our lucky stars that everyone had gotten out of the way—and that I hadn’t been mown down by a charging moose.

Greyson was helping me up when we heard the telltale sounds that meant the moose was coming back toward us.

“This way!” Greyson said, pulling me with him to press against a tree.

This time, I saw the moose’s eyes as it passed within an inch of me. They were glassy and dead-looking—just like the eyes of the taxidermy animals who’d attacked us.

*Could the moose be one of them? Sent by Chessa to attack us, or at least slow us down while she recovers?*

In a flash, Mikah leapt up, grabbed the moose around the neck, and swung himself up onto the charging animal’s back. Moments later, he sank his fangs in deep.

The moose reared up on its hind legs, trying to buck Mikah off, but Mikah held on and went in for another bite. This one was closer to the moose’s neck than the first, and it spilled a river of blood before that moose finally hit the ground.

Mikah spat out a mouthful of blood in disgust as he climbed off the fallen moose.

“I’m never doing that again,” he grumbled.

Suddenly, I spotted Xavier, Ava, and a bunch of other Samaras stalking toward us.

At first, I was excited to see them—the Samaras would be good reinforcements, and with their help, we might really be able to take Chessa out.

But as they got closer, I realized that their gait was strange—almost zombie-like. Something was very wrong with them. And then, as they came closer, it hit me—it was the look in their eyes. They had the same glazed, faraway look as the moose’s eyes. And that could only mean one thing.

*Shit.*

**Episode 4998**

**Greyson**

I was trying hard to break through the fog that kept clouding my brain, but I was having a hard time keeping it together. It didn’t help at all that my Chessa-cursed wound was throbbing like crazy. I knew that I was being affected by the same force that had told my pack members to chase Ravi and the others through the woods.

But I wasn’t ready to give in. Not yet. I’d told myself that I would fight this thing, and that was what I was going to do.

I kept Cali close to me as Xavier and the others materialized out of the darkness. I started to ask my brother why he was here when I noticed the strange look in his eyes. Ava had the same look, along with the other Samaras who were with them. Chessa had gotten to them, too. They weren’t themselves, and that meant they were a danger to us all.

“Get back to your pack house!” I barked. “You’re all under Chessa’s control. Fight it if you can, snap out of it, but no matter what, get the hell out of here and don’t come a step closer!”

They offered no response, just kept ambling toward us. I wasn’t even sure if they’d heard me at all. I was starting to feel very light-headed, and I had to work overtime to stay on my feet.

“Are you okay, Greyson?” Cali asked me, but her voice sounded far away.

I turned away from her. I couldn’t meet her eyes. If I did, she’d take one look at me and figure out what was happening—that I was just as doomed as Xavier and the others—and I didn’t want to alarm her.

*And if she gets even an inkling that I’m being affected, she’ll try to stop me. She’ll want to send me home. I can’t let her do that, and I can’t hurt her, either. The best thing for me to do right now is avoid her. It’s the only way.*

I saw Kendall watching me. Her purple eyes seemed to draw me in. I felt a familiar pull, something drawing me to her. Something outside of my control that seemed to be taking over.

I took a step toward Kendall just as my mind suddenly cleared, and I forced myself to turn away from her weirdly compelling gaze. I had to stop Chessa. That was the only thing that mattered. I had to fight Chessa’s strange mind control, or we’d all be screwed.

There was a sudden blur of motion, and then Chessa appeared before us. The wound on her shoulder was gruesome and still pouring blood. She smiled grimly, seemingly oblivious to the wound and looking as deadly and determined as ever.

“You’re all bigger fools than I thought if you really believe you can stop me,” she said. “I’ve been hunting superior prey for far longer than any of you have even been alive. This is child’s play. You might as well give in to me—it’ll be a lot easier that way.”

I was struggling to keep my mind focused, now. Part of me was desperate to destroy Chessa, and part of me wanted to go to her and stand by her side. It would be so easy to just let go and stop fighting and let her guide me.

Gritting my teeth, I shoved the strange, dangerous thoughts out of my head.

“You aren’t the first to try and control me, Chessa,” I ground out. “As you can see, it doesn’t work. Give it up.”

Chessa laughed. “Well then, I guess you’re a stronger man than your brother, because I have him completely under my control.” She turned to Xavier. “Kill him!”

Xavier started toward me, but then Cali jumped between us. “Stop! You have to stop this, Xavier! This isn’t you! Please!”

Xavier hesitated, staring at Cali.

“Remember who you are, Xavier,” she urged him. “Come to your senses and see what you’re doing. We’re your friends. You don’t really want to hurt us. If you’re going to kill anyone, let it be Chessa. She’s responsible for this. She’s doing this to you—all of you! She’s taken your free will!”

“And kill this half-Fae, too,” Chessa hissed. “She’s annoying me. Attack! Now!”

Ava started toward Cali, her glazed eyes red with anger. She reached for my mate, her partially shifted claw stretching toward her, raking the air. I stepped forward, ready to throw myself between them and defend Cali when Ravi, Lilac, and Violet came bursting out of the trees. They were bleeding, and breathing so hard, it looked like they’d been running for their lives—and I was certain they had been.

“We couldn’t stop them,” Ravi managed between breaths. “We tried, but they’re too strong, too far gone. They’re completely out of control. I’ve never seen anything like it. We barely escaped with our lives. They wouldn’t even follow us. At first, it seemed like it was working, and then they just changed course and started going their own way.”

“Of course they didn’t follow you!” Chessa snarled. “They’re my puppets! They only listen to me—one of the many perks of reaching my advanced age. Mind control—the most useful tool in my tool box. But sadly, none of you will live long enough to gain the power that I have gained.”

She stepped back and raised her hands.

“Now my puppets, attack!” she shouted. “Leave not one of them alive!”

As the Samaras and the Redwoods started closing in, I realized that I had no idea how to stop what was rapidly turning into a pack war that none of us wanted. The only blood I wanted to spill was Chessa’s, but in order to get to her, I was going to have to fight my brother. I couldn’t see any way around it.

*I can’t believe it’s come to this. I’m going to have to attack Xavier if I want to stand a chance at stopping Chessa for good.*

As Xavier began to close in, I barked out a string of orders that I hoped would make a difference. “Fight defensively, everyone! These are our friends! Protect yourselves, but do what you can to lessen the damage you cause them.”

Xavier shifted as he lunged at me, his huge paws slamming into my chest as he drove me down to the ground. I shifted a fraction of a second after he did, doing all I could to avoid his powerful jaws and his rapid-fire attacks without causing my brother any damage.

This was going to be one of the hardest fights I’d ever had, simply because of the restraint I was going to have to use against my brother. I didn’t want to kill him—I couldn’t do that. But I didn’t want to die, either.

The fight was already raging around us, friends fighting friends, everyone snarling and scratching and biting. It was a terrible thing to see, and it pained me to realize that things had descended so far into chaos.

*I have to stop this, before we kill each other. But my brother’s not making it easy.*

Xavier bit me hard on the arm, and my Chessa wound screamed in pain. I lost my breath and for a moment, it felt like the world stopped.

*I’m fighting my brother, but why? I care about Xavier, and he cares about me. We shouldn’t be fighting like this. Don’t we both want the same thing?*

I shook my head, realizing that I was confused. Xavier was trying to kill me. It was as simple as that. He wanted me dead, and he was doing everything in his power to make that happen. For Chessa. He was doing Chessa’s bidding now. He was one of her puppets.

Anger swelled inside me, and I sank my teeth into Xavier’s shoulder. Xavier reared back and howled in pain, but recovered quickly and snapped at me.

My own wounds felt like they were throbbing in time with my harried heartbeat. It was too much pain for me to endure while also trying to fight strategically. I felt like I was seconds from passing out. Everything had taken on a strange, hazy quality. I couldn’t see straight. The air was shimmering around me.

Xavier suddenly stopped fighting and backed off, shaking his massive head. I watched him, trying to figure out why we were fighting, why I could taste my own brother’s blood in my mouth. Weren’t we on the same side?

*We have to kill the others for Chessa*, I told my brother. *She wants them dead, and we can do that for her.*

Xavier nodded, and I clambered to my feet and went to stand shoulder to shoulder with my brother. Quietly, in almost perfect sync, we observed the fighting going on all around us before we took off to join the fray.

But then Cali’s scream pierced the air, drawing our attention. What I saw when I turned toward her nearly made my heart stop.

Chessa was attacking Cali.

**Episode 4999**

Chessa’s hands were like a vice around my throat. Cackling gleefully, she drove me back at a disorienting speed before she slammed me up against a tree, knocking the wind out of me. I clawed at Chessa’s hands, trying to pry them free, but I wasn’t strong enough, and her grip on my neck only tightened.

I was gasping for breath, trying not to panic and failing miserably. There was no one to help me. Everyone was fighting everyone else—even Greyson and Xavier were busy trying to rip each other’s throats out. My vision was beginning to dim, and I realized that after everything I’d been through, this might really be the end.

Chessa hissed and opened her mouth, leaning close and clearly preparing to bury her fangs in my throat. I twisted and fought in her grip, trying everything I could to get out of her hold, but it was no use. Her fangs were the only thing I could see clearly in the darkness.

*I can’t let her bite me. Chessa’s* not *going to be the one to kill me. I’m not going to let it happen. I refuse to die tonight.*

I finally tore my gaze away from Chessa’s razor-sharp canines and zeroed in on the gaping wound that Kendall had given her. It was a weakness if ever I’d seen one, and I knew I had to exploit it while I still had a chance.

I jammed the fingers of my free hand into the wound, using my nails to scrape it as hard as I could. Touching the disgusting, slimy wound turned my stomach, but I was prepared to do whatever it took to get away from her.

Chessa screamed in agony and released me. Quickly, I called up my magic and blasted her, driving her back.

Bolstered by this small victory, I summoned my sword and was getting ready to swing when Chessa blurred and was suddenly behind me, her sharp nails digging into my flesh as she dragged me backward, my feet dragging across the ground. A second later, she hooked an arm around my neck and squeezed tightly, choking me.

Struggling against Chessa’s hold and trying to keep a clear head, I made another attempt to blast her with my magic, but I couldn’t breathe, let alone concentrate hard enough to attack. I kicked at Chessa and twisted and bucked against her hold, but it did nothing. She was too strong.

Xavier and Greyson stopped fighting and raced toward me, both shifting back to human. I could feel Chessa’s foul breath on my neck as she hissed out a harsh warning to my mates.

“If you take one more step, she dies!”

Greyson held up his hands, and he and Xavier froze in place. “Let her go! Now!”

“You want her? You can have her!” Chessa hissed—and then I felt the sharp, burning pain of her fangs sinking into my neck.

My screams died in my throat as Chessa began to feed on me, her fangs tearing my skin, the horrible sucking sensation fast giving way to a pleasant, light-headed feeling. But I knew there was nothing pleasant about this situation. I knew exactly what Chessa was doing, and how it was going to end. I had to stop her, or she would drain me dry.

“Stop!” Xavier and Greyson were screaming, their faces twisted in horror.

And suddenly, Chessa did just that. She stopped drinking. I felt my blood dripping down my neck as Chessa pulled her head away, smacking and slurping in my ear as she licked her mouth clean.

“Fae blood is usually far too delicious to waste,” she said. “But if you don’t leave me alone, I’m going to rip her throat out—I promise you that. You’ve lost. All of you have lost. Look around. Your friends are tearing each other apart, and I’ve got your prize in my hands. I win.”

Realizing that I’d only get one shot at this, I fought to clear my head and finally managed to conjure up my sword. Screaming with effort, I swung it over my head and slammed the glowing blue blade of magic into Chessa’s wound.

Chessa screamed and stumbled back, finally releasing me. I tumbled to the ground and clutched at my throat, gasping. My sword flickered as I struggled to catch my breath. I felt awful, and I was all too aware of the burning throb in my neck from Chessa’s bite.

Greyson and Xavier were at my side immediately, helping me to my feet as I tried to get my bearings. I shook my hand and my sword vanished, freeing up a bit of strength. I braced myself on Greyson’s shoulder, using him for support. I was unsteady on my feet, and even though Chessa couldn’t have drunk all that much of my blood, I still felt weak, and my thoughts were fuzzy.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said to Greyson and Xavier as they fussed over me. “Get Chessa. Don’t let her get away again!”

“Oh, I won’t,” Greyson growled, and then in the next second, he and Xavier were lunging at the vampire and tackling her to the ground.

I heard footsteps rushing toward me and turned to see Lola approaching. I was happy to see my friend—until I realized that she had that same damn glassy look in her eyes. Her fangs were out and gleaming in the moonlight, and she was staring at my neck.

“Lola?” I said, my voice thick with fear. I was still recovering from Chessa’s attack and didn’t feel at all prepared to fight Lola off. I was still trying to regain my strength. “Lola, it’s me, Cali. Please. Please see that it’s me. Please don’t hurt me.”

But Lola wasn’t listening, and her gaze hadn’t moved from my neck. With a hiss, she grabbed me, the strength of her grip taking my breath away.

*I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t want to hurt my friend!*

I shoved at Lola, but she barely budged. She was so much stronger than me, and I wasn’t at full strength, too weak to even gather my magic.

I shrieked in surprise when Mikah jumped between us, pulling Lola off and tossing her away. His gaze flicked to the bleeding fang marks on my neck, and I backed away from him, worried that he was going to attack me next. It was getting to the point where I didn’t know who to trust out here.

“The marks will heal, don’t worry,” Mikah said, then he shot past me and joined the fight against Chessa.

I sagged against a tree, overcome with relief. I kept one eye on Lola, who was still on the ground, and the other on Greyson and Xavier, who had Chessa cornered. The vampire was bleeding from several wounds, but she still had the usual smug look on her face.

I took a breath and gathered my strength. Mikah was right—my wounds would heal, and I’d be good as new in no time. Chessa had bitten me, but it wasn’t the first time, and she hadn’t drained me dry.

I summoned my sword and marched toward her, ready to strike.

*This time, she isn’t going to get away. I’m going to destroy her. It’s gone on way too long now.*

Chessa hissed and snarled, her gaze darting between us. Suddenly Kendall pushed past me, her eyes on the vampire. What was she going to do? Did she really think she could take this vampire herself?

“We’ve got you right where we want you, bloodsucker. You’re finished!” Kendall shouted. And before I could even process what was happening, Kendall drove a stake deep into Chessa’s chest.

Chessa hissed and screamed, the sound so shrill that everyone covered their ears. She looked more shocked than anything else, and she clutched at the stake, her eyes wide.

But Kendall didn’t let up. She kept gripping the stake, steadily driving it deeper into Chessa’s heart and pushing the vampire back until the stake had made it all the way through Chessa’s body and into the tree behind her.

And then, just like that, all the fighting stopped. There was nothing but the sound of the forest at night, and the splat of Chessa’s blood hitting the mossy ground.

Kendall planted one foot on Chessa’s torso and pulled on the stake, which slid out with a sickening sound that I hoped never to hear again. Chessa crumpled to the ground, her body limp and still.

I watched the defeated vampire with a mixture of disgust and relief. Chessa’s hold over our packs and the humans she’d terrorized was finally over… But something wasn’t right.

I looked at Kendall, who was breathing hard, her gaze on Chessa and the stake in her hand. I looked at the spot of blackened blood—Chessa’s—on the tree that she’d been impaled on.

I held my breath. I watched, waiting for what happened next—the same thing that happened every time a vampire died. But it never came.

*Why isn’t Chessa turning to dust?*

**Episode 5000**

Everyone was moving toward Chessa, but I called out to stop them.

“Don’t! Don’t get too close. Something’s wrong—this might be some sort of trick. Be careful!” I shouted.

For all we knew, Chessa was still alive and just playing possum, luring us in and hoping that we’d let our guard down long enough for her to strike.

“Well, technically, vampires aren’t alive at all,” Ravi pointed out.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Thanks for the lecture, Van Helsing Junior.”

Kendall wiped the blood from her stake as I cautiously approached Chessa’s body. She wasn’t moving, but I wasn’t convinced. I leaned a little closer, still on high alert. She looked dead, but once upon a time, we’d thought we’d killed Adéluce and couldn’t have been more wrong. I did *not* want a repeat of that fiasco.

“Should we stake her again?” I asked. “Just to be sure?”

Kendall shrugged and held out the stake. “Go for it.”

I took the stake. It was heavier than it looked—so much so that I nearly dropped it. I didn’t exactly *want* to drive the thing into Chessa’s heart, but everyone was watching, and I’d never live it down if I chickened out now. That, and I really did want to make sure Chessa was dead. I wasn’t about to leave this to chance.

I hefted the stake over my head and grimaced as I thrust it down toward Chessa’s chest. Moments before it made contact, Chessa’s eyes snapped open and she grabbed the stake, easily stopping my momentum.

I screamed in shock, struggling as a hissing Chessa tried to take control of the stake, twisting it this way and that, trying to yank it out of my hands.

Kendall jumped in, pushed me aside, took control of the stake, and rammed it through Chessa’s chest once again, giving it a hard twist for good measure.

Chessa screamed in agony and slumped over, then went still. Kendall leaned in close to inspect her, then turned back to look at me.

“Dead enough for you?” she inquired.

I stepped close to get a better look, and I still wasn’t convinced. “She’s still not turning to dust. I might not be an expert on vampires, but I’ve seen enough of them die to know that once they’re staked, they’re supposed to dissolve into dust.”

Mikah walked calmly over, his eyes on Chessa. “There is one way to be absolutely sure.”

He planted a foot on Chessa’s shoulder, grabbed her head, and pulled. Moments later, Chessa’s head tore free of her neck with a disgusting sound, sending blood spraying everywhere.

“Gross!” I screeched, grimacing.

Kendall rolled her eyes, dropping the stake into her bag. “That was a nice touch, but not at all necessary. She was dead. *Dead* dead.”

*She’s done this before. Staking vampires. She was so good with that stake, and she didn’t seem as worried as I was about Chessa not turning to dust. I guess she technically hadn’t been wrong anyway…*

“Chessa was very, very old,” Mikah said. “That means it might take an extra moment for her to disintegrate—she probably learned a few self-preservation tricks over the years. But I’ve yet to meet a vampire with the ability to come back from a decapitation.”

Mikah tossed Chessa’s head aside like it was a sack of garbage. It hit the ground and rolled to a stop a few feet away, the eyes open and staring lifelessly at me.

I shuddered and looked away.

A moment later, Chessa’s headless body began to tremble, and then, to my pleasure and relief, it exploded in a puff of dust.

Kendall cocked her head and kicked at the pile of dust at her feet. “And that’s that.”

I looked at the werewolf, wondering how she was so unfazed about all this.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” I asked her.

“Comes with the territory,” Kendall said with a shrug. She slung her bag over her shoulder and frowned up at the sky, as if trying to determine what time it was.

Blood was still dripping from my neck where Chessa had bitten me, and I was starting to feel a little woozy again.

Greyson threw an arm across my shoulders to steady me. “Torin can take care of that when we get home,” he said. “For now, just hang in there.”

“I can do that,” I said, wrapping my arms around Greyson’s waist and snuggling into his chest.

I looked around, happy to see that everyone seemed to be recovering. It was like a fog had lifted.

“What the hell are we doing out here?” Charlie asked, rubbing his temples. “And why are my clothes all shredded?”

“My fists hurt—like I’ve been punching something,” Knox said.

“You can all thank Chessa for the confusion,” Lilac said. “Everyone who was bitten by her taxidermy animals from hell ended up under her control. But thanks to Kendall, Chessa’s little reign of terror is over and done with.”

“Wow. I need a drink,” Ravi said warily. “Maybe more than one.”

“I second that notion,” Lola said after planting a long, messy kiss on Jay’s lips.

“And I third it,” Jay said happily. “Why don’t we go back to the pack house and celebrate yet another victory?”

For maybe the first time since we’d met Chessa, Greyson cracked a genuine smile. “I think that’s an excellent idea. Everyone’s welcome! We can toast to narrowly avoiding total destruction for the fifty-second time!”

Everyone cheered.

“Thanks again for your help, Kendall,” I said earnestly. “You should come back to the pack house, too. We’d love to have you.”

Kendall seemed ready to decline until Greyson came walking over.

“Yes, please come,” he said. “I’d like to pour you a drink or two—there wouldn’t even be a celebration if you hadn’t gotten involved.”

Kendall sighed, then flashed a grin. “Okay, sure. I’m game. I could use an opportunity to kick back and let loose. That was one hell of a fight.”

“That settles it,” Greyson called out. “Party at the Redwood house!”

All the wolves shifted, and I climbed onto Greyson’s back. We covered the short distance back to the pack house in no time, and I could sense that everyone was starting to feel better, all their wounds healed or healing.

*What a relief. We did it. Killing Chessa really broke the control she had over the pack. Our plan worked.*

“How are you feeling?” I asked Greyson as soon as he’d shifted back.

“Like I’m overcoming one hell of a hangover, if I’m being honest,” he said. “But I do feel more like myself. It took a lot out of me, fighting Chessa’s influence, trying to keep my shit together. I’m just glad that’s over.”

“Me too,” I said.

Greyson’s gaze flicked toward the puncture wounds on my neck. “You need to go see Torin. Have him look at the bite.”

Greyson took my hand and led me to where Torin was setting out a plate of mini cocktail sandwiches. I had no clue how he’d whipped them up so fast, but they looked delicious.

“Cali, Greyson! I’m so glad you two came out of this thing in one piece,” Torin said. His gaze immediately landed on my neck. “I suppose you want me to take care of those?”

“Please,” I said. “I’m not interested in walking around with vampire bite battle scars.”

As everyone began to celebrate, Torin went to work healing me. Once he was done, I pressed my fingers to my neck. As always, it was uncanny—like the wounds had never been there at all.

“Thanks, Torin,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “Try one of my egg salad sandwiches! Guess the secret ingredient, if you can.” He thrust the dish out in front of me.

I took one of the sandwiches and bit into it. “Yum! Is the secret ingredient… mustard?”

Torin beamed at me. “Yup. Can’t get anything past you!”

Greyson and I laughed, and then I found myself gazing into my mate’s eyes. The bite marks were gone, Torin had made sure of that, but I still felt a little… strange.

Greyson eyed me. “Wait, what’s wrong? Are you still in pain?”

I didn’t answer, too busy staring at his lips, his chest, his eyes.

“Is there anything wrong about wanting to kiss my mate?” I asked.

I pulled him close and smashed my lips against his, inhaling his musky scent. I was immediately surprised by the intensity of Greyson’s response. He wrapped his arms around my waist and walked me backwards until I was pressed against the wall, boxing me in as he deepened the kiss.

I raked my nails across his chest, wanting nothing more than to rip his clothes off and see all of him. His hands slid down to cup my ass, and I moaned against his lips. Searing heat prickled all over my body, and I felt like I was slowly losing control—and like I might explode if I couldn’t have him right here, right now.

Greyson pulled away, breathing hard, his eyes on mine.

“What’s gotten into you, love?” he rasped.

“I don’t know,” I said, my fingers moving of their own accord and unbuttoning Greyson’s shirt. I didn’t know what was going on with me, but I felt *ravenous*—hungry for Greyson in a way I didn’t think I’d ever felt before. I leaned into the feeling. “But how about we go upstairs and have a little celebration of our own?”