**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 39**

**Episodes 5001–5120**

**Episode 5001**

My hands slid up Greyson’s chest, gliding over his muscles. Heat flooded through me, and my knees started to feel weak. I didn’t know why this *need* had hit me so suddenly—all I knew was that I wanted Greyson. I wanted him *bad*.

Greyson must have felt the same way, because he slid an arm beneath my butt and lifted me up, his lips still pressed to mine.

“Where are we going?” I murmured, speaking against his lips.

“Upstairs,” he growled.

His eyes were still closed, so we crashed into the doorway, and the walls, and the small table near the stairs. Greyson gave a grunt of pain, but his hold on me didn’t loosen. He held me up against the wall and slid kisses down to my jaw, then my neck, where Torin had just healed the vampire bite. I leaned my head back with a sigh, but when I half-opened my eyes, I saw Ravi looking at me from the doorway of the living room. He looked confused, but when he saw me looking at him, he quickly looked away.

“Greyson,” I murmured.

He didn’t respond, just nipped the base of my throat.

I swallowed the gasp that elicited, then cleared my throat. “Greyson, everyone’s looking at us. We’re drawing attention. Maybe we should tone it down.”

“When has it mattered before? Besides, it won’t matter at all when we’re in the bedroom,” he said, his voice low and gravelly. “Won’t be anyone looking at us there.”

And he straightened and started up the stairs.

His lips were back on mine, and I let myself be convinced, sinking into his kiss without another thought. My body felt like it had been set on fire. Everything felt hot, and I ached for Greyson. I wanted his hands on me, his mouth on me, his—

“Oh shit!” I burst out when Greyson tripped on the stairs. He kept hold of me, but I looked down to see what had made him stumble. Jay and Lola were already on the stairs. Lola was on top of Jay, straddling him, and she glared up at us.

“Watch where you’re going!” she snapped at Greyson.

“We’re going upstairs,” Greyson told her.

Lola turned back to Jay. “Well, we’re already here. Go find your own place.”

I pulled back from Greyson’s embrace and wriggled out of his arms.

“Maybe we should just cool it a little,” I said breathlessly, getting my feet back under me.

Greyson’s eyes were hazy with want, but I saw him shake his head, like he was trying to clear it.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, not looking entirely convinced. “Um, do you want to head back downstairs then?”

*No. Screw Lola and take your mate to his room.*

“Sure,” I said, shaking my head. I needed to cool off.

I took a deep breath, then another, trying to get my breathing under control. I was almost feeling completely normal—and then we stepped onto the first floor. That was when the fire inside me flared up again, hotter and more intense than ever. I grabbed Greyson and pulled him into a kiss, biting down on his lower lip.

“Cali, whoa,” he breathed, pulling away from me. “I thought you said you wanted to stop.”

“Yeah… I did,” I said dazedly. “I do.”

I gave my own head a shake. I was confused and feeling fuzzy, unable to think clearly. Logically, I knew we should cool it, but my brain was having a really hard time convincing every other part of my body.

“Yes,” I said, taking a step away from Greyson to lessen the temptation. “I do want to stop.”

As we walked toward the living room, I wondered what the hell was going on. Was the vampire bite responsible for making me feel so woozy? Torin had healed me, but Chessa had been a powerful vampire. Maybe it took longer to get back to normal after a super strong vampire bite.

When we stepped into the living room, I stopped dead in my tracks. Xavier was in there, and he wasn’t alone. Ava was with him, and he had her pushed up against the wall next to the fireplace. They were making out like crazy, and she had her legs wrapped around his waist. And, to make it worse, they were both—like everyone else—completely naked. They were literally inches away from having sex.

Nope. Nope. I did *not* need to see that.

I knew Xavier and Ava were together, of course. I’d seen them at the summit, I’d seen their entire Luna ceremony, but still. It never felt good to see such a blatant reminder of their relationship—and in my living room, no less.

I wheeled around to Greyson. “Kiss me.”

He frowned. “But you just said—I thought—”

“Don’t think,” I instructed him. “No thinking—just kiss me. *Now*.”

Greyson didn’t need to be told again, and he pressed his lips to mine, digging his fingers into my hair. This did what I wanted it to do, successfully emptying all the thoughts from my head. All I was thinking about was Greyson, and his body, and my body, and what our bodies could do together.

“Excuse me. Excuse me!”

I pulled away from Greyson and looked over at Torin, who was standing in the doorway of the living room, looking around with a frown on his face.

“What?” I asked.

“What in the gods is going on here?!” Torin demanded.

I scowled. I didn’t want to answer the question. I didn’t want to bother with Torin at all. All I wanted was to be with Greyson. The man I loved. My mate. Right now.

Torin shook his head. “I don’t know what the hell is going on. I mean, I’m glad you killed that nasty vampire, but what the hell happened to everyone?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked shortly, feeling annoyed.

Torin’s eyes widened as he looked back at me. “What am I *talking about*? What do you mean, what am I talking about?” He gestured around. “I’m talking about the fact that everyone in this house is making out! I mean, I know that werewolves are horny by nature, so that accounts for some of this, but this is kinda strange, by any measure. Like, this is practically up to Fae standards right now—do you understand how hard that is?”

Greyson’s hand tightened around my ass, making me gasp with pleasure. I did feel how hard it was… But Greyson wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at Torin, and his expression had darkened.   
 “Torin’s right,” he said. “Something’s going on.”

“Okay, fine, something’s going on,” I muttered, grabbing for Greyson’s neck and pulling him down so I could kiss him. I didn’t give a rat’s ass what was going on. I wanted his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth, my hands on his—

“Stop, Cali,” he said, gently pulling away.   
 “What?” I whined.

“Look around,” he said softly.

I didn’t want to, and it was hard as hell, but I pulled my eyes away from Greyson. Ava and Xavier were still going at it—Ava had started to moan—and when I looked back at the stairs, I saw Jay and Lola too, kissing and groping like teenagers in the back of a car. Everyone was making out like horny teenagers.

Torin was right—werewolves *were* highly physical, highly sexual creatures—but people usually didn’t make out like this, in front of everyone.

Well, that wasn’t completely true. Lola probably would’ve made out in front of everyone—and had, now that I thought about it—but it was pretty out of character for Greyson and me.

And under normal circumstances, Xavier *probably* would’ve had more sense than to do what he was doing in front of Greyson and me.

I thought hard, trying to figure out what was going on. Maybe it had something to do with killing Chessa, once and for all. Like, maybe everyone was just so relieved that they had energy to burn.

But that didn’t make sense. We’d celebrated other victories in less… public ways.

“Maybe it has something to do with the bite Chessa gave me,” I said to Greyson, putting my hand to my neck, where Torin had healed the wound. “Maybe that’s what’s making me so lusty…”

I trailed off. Even if the vampire bite *had* turned me into a horny monster, how did that explain everyone else? Chessa hadn’t bitten everyone.

Greyson hadn’t been bitten, for example, but he’d been ready to jump my bones not a minute ago.

And none of the others had been bitten by Chessa either. So that couldn’t be it.

But it had to be something. There had to be some explanation for what was happening.

Then it hit me, so suddenly that I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Cali?” Greyson asked, looking at me anxiously. “What is it?”

“It was the animals!” I announced.

Greyson frowned, looking confused. “What animals? What are you talking about?”

“The taxidermy animals! The ones that attacked us, Greyson. That’s what must be behind this!”

This didn’t seem to clear anything up for Greyson, and he still looked baffled. “The taxidermy animals are making everyone make out?”  
 “Yes!” I exclaimed. “Don’t you see? Chessa’s infected us all with horny rabies!”

**Episode 5002**

“*Horny rabies*,” Greyson repeated, looking incredulous.

Hearing him say the words proved just how absurd it sounded. But wasn’t it kind of true? How else did we explain what the hell was going on right now and this Fae-esque orgy going on in the pack house? Still, I definitely heard how it sounded now, so I quickly backpedaled, thinking hard.

“Okay, not rabies, probably, but *something’s* obviously going on. I mean, look around,” I said, gesturing to the living room and the stairs. “There’s clearly something wrong with everyone. Torin saw it right away, and he’s right—there’s always a general, I don’t know, sexy air when it comes to werewolves, but this is another level. So what are we going to do?”  
 Greyson glanced around, looking thoughtful, then shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, there are worse things than everyone being horny.”

I shot him an angry glare, but that only made him laugh.

“What?” he asked, still chuckling. “There *are* worse things than this. At least we’re not, I don’t know, *decaying* or something. People are just… excited. We have plenty of rooms here… No one’s skin is falling off, right?”

“Don’t jinx us,” I growled. Then I looked at Torin. “Can you do something, do you think? Heal everyone from this somehow? Or should we call Big Mac to do something?”

“And *what* would we ask her to do something about?” Greyson asked.

“About…” I waved my arms, indicating everyone nearby, including Sage and Zainab, who were rolling around in front of the fire together. “About *this*. This isn’t normal, is it? I didn’t even know vampires were capable of doing stuff like this.” I paused. “Though I suppose there’s still a lot I don’t know about the supernatural.”

“I don’t know…” Greyson said, looking like he wasn’t ready to make any decisions.

“We need to figure *something* out,” I said firmly. “Before this gets worse.”

“Worse how?” Greyson asked, grinning at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Before this turns into an orgy or something—like the Aspen pack always wanted—and then, I don’t know, everyone drops dead.”

I was very freaked out by the situation, but I also realized that Greyson was right—as weird as this was, things could’ve been much worse. But I couldn’t relax about it like he could. There was always an anxious part of me that wondered when the other shoe was going to drop, and things were going to get worse.

“Hey,” someone said, and I turned around to see Mikah walking toward us.

“Hey,” I said.

“Okay, so this is fucking weird,” he said, nodding around.

“Yes!” I said, glad that he seemed to have retained his senses. “What’s going on? Is it dangerous?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I think it’s just Chessa aftereffects.”

“Aftereffects?” Greyson asked.

Mikah nodded. “Yeah. But it should eventually subside, probably in the next few minutes would be my guess.”

“That’s good I guess,” Greyson said. “Why is it happening at all?”

Mikah looked thoughtful. “Vampires can develop certain abilities, as they get older. And Chessa was pretty old, so this might take a while to wear off.”

I shot a glance at Xavier and Ava, who were still going at it, and hoped fervently that whatever this was would wear off sooner rather than later. Seeing the two of them together—even after Xavier had kissed me and sort of tried to bridge the gap between us—well, it was difficult to watch.

I tore my gaze away as Ava dug her nails into Xavier’s back. I didn’t want to look at that, and I definitely didn’t want to think about it. Not now, not when I was feeling so… hot.

I took a deep, cleansing breath, and, to my surprise, it actually did help. I felt a little better. More in control—though still pretty lusty.

“Cali?” Greyson asked. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at him, caught for a moment by how freaking handsome he was. I stared at the sharp angle of his jaw and the straight line of his nose. His eyes were dark and stormy as he looked down at me, and it made me want to jump on him and—

“Yes,” I said, snapping out of my fantasy. “Yes, I’m fine. I’m just trying to get my bearings again.”

“Well, when you get those bearings—and if you’re both feeling up for it—it’s time to release Codsworth and the rest of Chessa’s victims from the basement,” Mikah said. Then he looked around. “But, uh, maybe the werewolves can get dressed first.”

“Good thinking,” Greyson said with a nod.

“Yes,” I said quickly. “Yes, we need to let them go. Of course.”

In all the excitement—and in the midst of my overwhelmingly lust-filled thoughts—I’d actually forgotten all about Codsworth and the others. I felt terrible that they’d slipped my mind, but I had to remind myself that Chessa’s bite had affected my ability to think. Besides, feeling guilty was useless. I needed to act now—I could let myself feel terrible later.

Torin had wandered off again, but Mikah was still eyeing me curiously. While I couldn’t help but blush, I tried not to react too obviously.

I cleared my throat. “I think I’ll go check on Codsworth.”

“Before you go,” Mikah said, putting his hand on my arm, “I have to warn you, they know about the pack. And that could be a problem.”

“I know,” I told him. “And I get that it might be dangerous. Codsworth is probably traumatized, but once he realizes he’s out of danger, he’s going to want to start talking. He’s going to want to share this discovery with the world. His belief in the supernatural is something he’s super passionate about.” I sighed. “It’s not going to be easy to convince him that everything he saw wasn’t what he *thought* he saw.”

“No, it’s not,” Mikah agreed. “Do you have a plan?”

I shook my head. “No. I have no idea what to do.” I sighed. “If only Artemis were here. She could’ve wiped their memories.”

“Do you think you could do it?” Greyson asked. “You’ve done it before.”

“Yeah, *once.* By accident,” I reminded him. I shook my head doubtfully. “I don’t know. It’s not a reliable ability for me at all. And it’s especially unreliable when I’m… when I’m in this state of mind.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed hungrily when I said that, but he took a step back and shook his head. “Okay, I’m going to go get dressed,” he said. He looked over at me and added, *And maybe take a cold shower, too.* “Then we’ll figure out next steps.”

I nodded. “I’m just going to go check on them for now.”

Greyson headed upstairs, and I started toward the basement stairs.

When I walked into the small basement room where Codsworth was sitting with Charlotte and Eddie, Codsworth looked up at me.

“Hey, Cali,” he said. “What’s all that noise upstairs?”

“Noise?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah, all the thumping and yelling. What’s going on?” he asked.

Shit. He’d heard us.

My face flushed, but I thought fast. “Oh, everyone is—uh—celebrating a birthday.”

Codsworth frowned. “A birthday? Well, why aren’t we up there celebrating with you? Why are we down here in this basement?”

“Where are we?” Charlotte asked, looking around with a confused expression.

This stopped me, and I eyed her cautiously. “We brought you here, remember?”

The group stared back at me, their faces blank.

I looked them over and saw that all their bite marks had been healed. There was no sign of them at all. Thank goodness for Torin.

But that didn’t solve everything. I still had no idea if this group had been infected like the others.

I heard footsteps on the stairs, then I looked back to see Greyson walking down the hall. He was wearing jeans and a dark blue T-shirt, and his hair was still wet from what must have been a remarkably fast shower.

When he stopped next to me in the small room, Codsworth glanced between us.

“Wait, isn’t that your boyfriend?” Codsworth asked me. “Is this his house?”

Charlotte took a breath, but it was shallow and shaky, like she was starting to panic. “What happened to us?”

“Have we been drugged?” Macaulay asked.

“I don’t remember coming here either,” Eddie said, shaking his head.

I glanced over at Greyson. *They’re acting like their memories were wiped. They don’t remember anything.*

Greyson looked doubtful. *Do we believe them?*

I looked back at the group, who were all looking up at me with pale, worried faces. I studied them, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. It didn’t *look* like they were trying to fool me, but I couldn’t be absolutely sure. And if they were lying, it could be dangerous—both to the pack and to them.

But if they weren’t lying, then how could their memories have been wiped?

Codsworth shot to his feet, looking agitated.

“What’s going on?” he demanded, glaring at Greyson and me. “I want answers. *Now!*”

I stepped forward. “Codsworth—”

“No! Tell me! What happened to us?”

**Episode 5003**

**Mikah**

*Okay, so if everyone in the house is horny, does that include you?*

Looking down at the text from Gabriel, I heaved a sigh and dropped my head into my hands. This question was really my own fault. I should’ve known that if I told Gabe about what was going on in the pack house, our conversation would take a sharp turn. My mate was rarely serious and loved to tease—especially me.

*No, I’m fine. I wasn’t bitten by a vampire’s plaything or by the actual vamp*, I texted back.

*Shame about that*, he replied. *I wonder if I could convince a vampire to bite my neck.*

I laughed to myself as I typed my response. *Just say the word.*

*Don’t tempt me.*

I shook my head. *Okay, I gotta go. Just focus on the job, okay? I’ll see you soon. Don’t die.*

*Okay*, Gabriel texted back. *But only because you asked so nicely.*

I smiled to myself, even as a flash of heat washed over me. That happened a lot while talking to Gabriel. Or being with him. Or thinking of him. Or seeing something that vaguely reminded me of him. It didn’t take much for me to feel hot and bothered, where he was concerned.

I slid my phone back into my pocket, and when I looked up, my gaze landed on Kendall. I was in the hallway, leaning against the wall, and Kendall was in the living room, far enough away that I let myself stare at her for a moment without her noticing.

I frowned as I looked at her, my brain straining. I was still trying to place her, but I hadn’t had any luck.

But I *had* been meaning to talk to her, so I pushed away from the wall and walked into the living room.

“Hey,” I said.

She looked over at me. “Hey.”

“I wanted to tell you that I was impressed with the way you handled yourself, earlier.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, her gaze assessing.

“Yeah,” I said. “Not bad at all for a program coordinator.”

She raised a brow, and I saw a spark of amusement in her violet eyes.

I crossed my arms. “I guess I wasn’t aware that dispatching vampires was something college administrators were often trained in.”

“Oh, you’d be astonished at the things that go on during staff inservices,” she said with a smirk. “Besides, don’t *you* have other skills? Are you saying you don’t know how to do anything besides—what was it that you said you did? Detective work?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“But surely that’s not all you do,” Kendall said. “It wouldn’t be so strange if you, say, played the piano, for example. That’s a useful skill, but not something you’d necessarily need to do during an investigation, right?”

I looked her over, even more curious than before. “Well, no, but playing the piano is a fairly benign hobby—like gardening. Whereas killing vampires…”

Kendall smiled at me. “Mikah, what is it that you really want to know? As much as I’m enjoying this little rhetorical tango, why don’t we just stop beating around the bush?”

But before I could say anything, Sage stumbled over to us and looked up at me. “Mikah, that lady vamp Greer from the vampire council is here. She’s asking for you.”

“Okay,” I said with a nod. I looked back at Kendall. “If you’ll excuse me? I’ll be right back—we can continue our talk.”

“Sure,” she said, a small smile on her face. “Can I go back to kissing Zainab?”

“Have fun,” I said. Then I walked to the front door, where Greer was waiting.

She gave me a solemn nod. “Mikah. I stopped by to see how our little problem was going.”

“Our little problem is dead,” I told her. “Chessa will tarnish our collective reputation no more.”

Greer looked surprised, but then she smiled. “Well, I am impressed. The old ones can be difficult.”

“That’s true,” I said. I could feel a pair of eyes on me, and I shot a glance over my shoulder to confirm what I already knew—Kendall was watching us closely. I looked back at Greer. “I did have some help.”

“And you’re sure she’s dead?” Greer asked.

The popping sound I’d heard when I tore off Chessa’s head came to mind, and I nodded. “Yes, I’m sure. Chessa is dead. You can cross her off your list with confidence.”

“Good,” Greer said briskly. She turned to leave, but then she stopped and looked at me again, this time with narrowed eyes. “I can’t help but notice, Mr. Navarro, that you seemed to take some pleasure in killing this vampire—one of your own.”

My hackles rose. “That’s not the case at all,” I said tersely. “I simply did what had to be done. There was nothing pleasant about it.”

Greer thought about this for several seconds, then she nodded. “Understood. Goodbye to you, then.”

I watched her go, then shut the door and walked back to Kendall.

“So, is the council satisfied?” she asked.

“They should be,” I said shortly, still irritated by Greer’s insinuation. “A vampire like Chessa could’ve caused considerable trouble for the council if we hadn’t stopped her.”

Kendall looked amused. “Indeed. Maybe they’ll give you a medal,” she said, then turned and sauntered away.

Greyson walked past her, eyeing her curiously, then looked over at me. “Sage told me Greer was here?”

“She was,” I told him. “She left. The council just wanted to follow up. I told them Chessa was dead, and she left. I doubt any of us will be hearing from them again anytime soon.”

“That’s a relief,” Greyson said. “The last thing this pack needs is trouble with the vampire council. Our own council is bad enough. But we’re all really grateful for your help, Mikah. The pack would’ve gotten to Chessa eventually, but we dealt with her a hell of a lot faster with you here.”

“Thanks. Glad to be of service,” I said with a half-smile. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kendall, still watching me. I leaned a little closer to Greyson. “Tell me, what do you make of the program coordinator-slash-vampire killer?”

“She’s a head-scratcher, that’s for sure,” Greyson said.

“You’ve got that right,” I muttered. “So, what’s happening with Codsworth and the rest of the humans? What are you planning to do with them?”

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t know. We might not have to do anything.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “I don’t think that’s wise, Greyson. They really do know too much. Letting them back out into the world would cause all kinds of problems—”

“No, I know,” Greyson interrupted. “But they don’t remember any of it.”

I stared at him. “Wait, what? They don’t remember? Any of them? How is *that* possible?”

“Wish I knew,” Greyson said. “Cali was wondering if they might’ve developed some kind of group amnesia. Some kind of reaction to the trauma.”

“I guess that’s *possible*,” I said slowly, but I had my doubts. “Still, you should hold off on releasing them for now. I need to do something first.”

Greyson nodded, and I strode over to Kendall, who was standing near the fireplace.

“It’s time to continue our talk,” I said.

“Is it?” she asked.

I put a gentle hand on her elbow, then led her out of the living room and into the study. I closed the door and turned to see that she was watching me closely.

“Should I be worried?” she asked.

“Worried?” I repeated.

“Well, I am alone with a vampire. And I don’t have my stake with me.”

I wasn’t amused. “I have a few questions for you, if you don’t mind—and I want some straight answers. No more cutesy banter.”

Kendall looked unfazed by my serious tone. “You know, I’m starting to wonder if that conversation with the council didn’t actually go very well.”

I ignored the dig. “Chessa’s survivors seem to have forgotten everything about her. They don’t remember a thing—not the crypt, not Chessa herself. Nothing.”

There was a strange flicker in Kendall’s eyes as I spoke. It almost looked like amusement.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” she asked.

“Potentially,” I said. “But I don’t understand how it happened.”

Kendall shrugged. “I’m not a psychiatrist, Mikah—though I did take Psych 101 my freshman year. Fascinating stuff. Got an A. Did you know that the human brain has, on average, eighty-six billion neurons? Those neurons create an incredible range of behaviors. Probably too many to be able to understand, let alone predict.”

I forced myself to take a deep breath. She was doing it again—dodging instead of giving straight answers. “I don’t need a TED Talk on human behavior, Kendall. I need you to stop bullshitting me.”

She managed to look offended. “You asked for the truth. Did I tell you a lie?”

“Truth seems to be something that you enjoy manipulating,” I said. “Maybe I didn’t make myself clear before. I want answers. Memories don’t just disappear without cause.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Kendall said breezily. She took a step toward the door. “Good luck figuring it out.”

I stepped in front of her, blocking her exit.

“I don’t need luck. I already know what happened.” I narrowed my eyes. “I know who you really are.”

**Episode 5004**

**Xavier**

I had no idea what the fuck had come over me. Or Ava. We’d gotten carried away. I hadn’t hesitated when I’d grabbed Ava and pinned her against the wall—I’d only realized I’d gone too far when I’d spotted Cali out of the corner of my eye.

She’d been standing in the doorway of the living room, looking anxious and upset as she’d watched Ava and me going at it like teenagers.

I wasn’t an idiot, and I wasn’t *that* insensitive. I could tell that she’d been upset.

The weird thing was, the burning desire I’d felt for Ava had started to fade as soon as I’d pulled away from her. And now, it had been replaced by something else completely—a pounding, but familiar, headache.

Ava—her lips still kiss-swollen—eyed me. “Hey, maybe we should head back to the house.”

I agreed, but I still hesitated. I glanced around and saw Samara wolves lounging in the living room. I knew there were more in the den and kitchen.

“In a little while,” I said.

Ava frowned. “Xavier—”

“Everyone’s been through so much—let’s just let them chill for a bit. I’m fine,” I said, grinding my knuckles into the tight ring of pain around my head.

“Xavier, I really think we should—”

“Greyson needs to talk to me,” I said—he was waving me over from the doorway. Normally, I wouldn’t have been nearly so jazzed to talk to my brother, but he was giving me the excuse I needed to avoid further discussion about my headache, so I took it, even though talking to him was possibly the only thing worse than a migraine.

When I joined him in the hallway, I glanced up the stairs, where I’d seen Jay and Lola making out earlier, but now, they were now nowhere to be seen. I smiled to myself—knowing the two of them, they’d probably retreated to the privacy of their bedroom.

“Okay, so we’ve got a situation,” Greyson said. “Chessa’s victims—Codsworth and everyone else—they’ve completely forgotten what happened to them.”

“*What?*” I demanded.

“I know. No one I’ve talked to has any idea how it happened, but their amnesia seems to be legitimate. Obviously, it’s for the best if their memories *have* been wiped. Now, I’m just trying to figure out what to do with them.”

“The easiest thing would be to bury them in the woods,” I said jokingly. “They know too much.”

“I’m being serious,” Greyson snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “What do you want me to say? Letting them go would be risky. They *do* know too much.”

“I thought so too, but now they don’t seem to know much of anything,” Greyson said. “But they’re starting to get suspicious all over again. Questioning why they’re here at all.”

We both turned as Kendall hurried out of the study. She looked around for a moment, then moved toward the kitchen—and presumably the back door.

Greyson watched her closely as she passed. I watched him watch her, his eyes following her closely.

“You need something from her?” I asked, wondering what that was about.

He shook his head, not taking his eyes off the statuesque woman. “I don’t know. There’s just something about her that bothers me.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I agreed. “Though she is a badass—you saw how she handled that stake. Maybe I could get her to join my pack.”

Greyson snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that. She’s a Rogue—and I get the sense that she’s not the type to answer to anyone.”

Mikah emerged from the study and started after Kendall.

I reached out and grabbed his arm as he strode past. “Hey. Any idea what to do about Codsworth and the rest of the humans?”

“You should let them go,” Mikah said immediately.

I was floored. “Just like that?”

Greyson looked as shocked as I felt. “Have you even talked to them?” he asked Mikah.

Mikah shook his head. “I don’t have to. They’ve forgotten what happened, and they won’t remember it ever again.”

There was a beat of stunned silence as Greyson and I shared a look.

I wanted to believe Mikah—and to trust Gabe’s mate. I really did. And I had no reason to doubt Mikah, but…

“How can you be sure Codsworth isn’t faking it?” I asked.

“They might’ve realized that they were in danger and decided to fake amnesia to convince us to release them,” Greyson added.

“That’s not the case,” Mikah said firmly.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “You know this for sure?”

Mikah suppressed a sigh. “I wouldn’t do anything to risk the pack, or to expose more humans to things they should never know about. Listen, I’m the one who ripped Chessa’s head off—I want this whole episode over just as much as you do. Just trust me, okay? You can let the humans go.”

I looked at Greyson. He was looking back at me, a question in his eyes. I nodded, ready to give Mikah the benefit of the doubt.

Greyson thought for a moment, then he nodded too. “Okay. We’ll let them go.”

“It’s the right move,” Mikah said. “The sooner you get them out of here, the better. I don’t need to remind either of you that this is a werewolf pack house. Codsworth’s memories might be gone, but it wouldn’t take much for him to make new ones.” He pointed to Ava and Marissa, who were sitting on the couch, still naked. “That’s weird enough, but if one of your pack members shifts, all this shit will start all over again.”

“That’s true,” Greyson said. He stepped into the living room. “Okay, heads up—we still have humans in the house, so everyone needs to be on their best behavior until they leave. Those who live here and have access to clothes, get your asses dressed. Those without clothes, borrow something or stay upstairs.”

This announcement was met with grumbles from the assembled wolves.

“I know this is a pain,” Greyson said, raising his hands. “But we can celebrate properly once they’re gone. How about a barbecue?”

This was met with cheers from the rest of the pack.

“*Yes!*” Ravi whooped, thrusting a fist into the air.

Greyson turned to look at me. “That okay with you?”

Typical. That might’ve been a good question to ask me *before* he’d made the announcement. I didn’t mind the idea of a celebration, but I probably would’ve preferred to wait until my headache passed—though there was a real possibility that it wasn’t going anywhere. And now everyone was excited about a party, which meant I just had to be okay with it.

And the truth was, the wolves did deserve some fun. I was really proud of my pack—how they’d worked together and risked their lives to deal with Chessa.

“Yeah, sounds good to me,” I said, and the assembled Samara wolves cheered.

Across the room, I saw Ava frown. A second later, she got to her feet and walked over to me.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Are you sure about this? I didn’t think you were feeling that great.”

Shit. I should’ve known that she wasn’t going to drop it.

I shrugged, trying to look casual. “I’m a little worn out, but I can power through.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Cali as she left the kitchen. As she started upstairs, my headache intensified.

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “I wish you’d stop trying to do that, Xavier. If you want to head home, you should go. It’s your decision. The pack will understand.”

I opened my mouth to argue my position but stopped myself. Was it possible that Ava wanted to leave not because of me, but because *she* didn’t want to go to the barbecue?

Suddenly, I found myself wondering if Ava had seen the way Cali had reacted to the sight of us making out. Worse, had *I* reacted to being watched by Cali in a way that Ava had noticed?

I’d certainly taken note of Cali and Greyson going at it, and it hadn’t felt good. It never did.

“So?” Ava asked, interrupting my spinning thoughts. “What will it be?”

I shook my head. “No, we should stay. Celebrate. Have fun.”

Ava gave me a long, assessing look. Finally she said, “Okay, we’ll stay.” Then she paused for a moment. “I’m starting to realize that the Redwood pack is your home away from home. And I’m fine with that—as long as you remember where your true home is.”

I considered this for a moment. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cali speaking with Greyson on the stairs, and I wondered if Ava was right. My head was pounding so hard, it was difficult to see straight—but was I resisting going home because I wanted to stay with the Redwoods? Or was it because I wanted to be close to Cali?

**Episode 5005**

**Greyson**

“You’re going to let them go?” Cali asked, clearly shocked. “All of them?”

I nodded, glad to see the relief in Cali’s eyes. She smiled at me, and I wondered how long it had been since I’d seen her smile so brightly. That thought broke my heart a little, and I wished I could see her looking so happy all the time.

“All of them?” she asked again.

“Yep—Codsworth, Charlotte, Macauley, and Eddie.”

Cali threw her arms around me. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear it.”

I patted her back. “And I’m glad to be doing it.”

“I was really worried about what you were going to do,” Cali admitted, pulling back to look up at me.

I thought of Xavier’s joke about burying all the humans in the woods, but I decided not to mention it to Cali. She was so happy—I didn’t want to ruin her mood.

“Thanks, Greyson,” she said. “And thanks for telling me.”

She started toward the stairs, but I caught her wrist.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

She frowned. “I’m going to the basement to tell them they can leave.”

“You can be the one to tell them, but hang on a second, okay?” I said. “We need to wait until the pack’s ready to play human. And Codsworth and the others clearly have some questions about what they’re doing here, and why they can’t remember anything. We need to come up with a reasonable solution for that.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Cali said confidently.

“Why not?” I asked warily.

“Because I have it all figured out.”

“You do?”

Cali nodded. “I was talking to Lola, and we came up with a plan. We’re going to tell them they came to a party over here and had too much to drink—”

“Okay, that *had* to be Lola’s idea,” I said, snorting.

Cali smiled. “It was, but I think it’s a good one. I still feel a little bad about lying to them, though… And I’m not really sure what we do about some of them being officially considered missing…”

“Don’t worry about that right now, I can always call Big Mac and see what she can do to help. For now, one thing at a time,” I said. “And I know you’ll be able to sell it to the humans. But I’ll go with you, just in case they start asking questions.”

“Good idea,” Cali said.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. “I know we got a little heated earlier because of the residual stuff with Chessa, but after the barbecue, I wouldn’t mind picking up right where we left off.”

Cali inhaled sharply, then reached up onto her tiptoes to kiss me again. Her kiss was long and deep and filled with a hunger that made my pulse race. I could feel that same powerful urge percolating beneath my skin. It was like before, when we’d been working through Chessa’s hormone whammy, but this time, I knew that my reactions were all because of Cali.

I leaned into the kiss, pushing my tongue into her willing mouth and letting my hands wander downward. I slid them to her hips, then around to her ass. She leaned into me, and I wondered if there was anything in the world that felt half as good as she did when she melted into my arms.

I felt the hem of her shirt with my fingers and pressed my hand against her warm skin. As she moved against me, she let out a small moan that made it harder for me to remember that there were people downstairs and I’d just instructed the pack to be on their best behavior.

Best behavior was not on my mind as I pushed Cali up against the wall, grinding into her and kissing her thoroughly. My hands slid up to cup her breasts, feeling their softness as I squeezed. She gasped against my lips as I grabbed harder, my want growing more urgent.

“Greyson,” she murmured.

I hummed distractedly, brushing my thumbs against her taut nipples.

She moaned and dropped her head back against the wall. “You shouldn’t be doing that,” she breathed. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why not?” I asked, moving my kisses to her jaw, then down to her neck. There was this spot right behind her ear that always made her shiver, and I dragged my tongue along the skin.

She hissed and grabbed my shoulders, her nails digging in.

“Greyson, think about this,” she said, though her voice was slow and syrupy.

“You’re *all* I’m thinking about,” I assured her, kissing my way down her neck.

“There are people downstairs,” she reminded me. “We should head back down there.”

I hummed. “*Should* is the keyword there, love. Maybe we should go back downstairs, or maybe we should go to my room.”

I kissed her neck again, and she moaned so loudly that she clapped her hand over her own mouth. That pushed me over the edge, and I grabbed her ass and lifted her into the air.

Automatically, she wrapped her legs around my waist, and the pressure of her against my cock nearly did me in.

“Room,” I growled. “*Now*.”

Cali—wide-eyed—nodded. “Absolutely.”

I kissed her again as I strode blindly to my room. Even though my eyes were closed, my other senses took over, and I made it inside, then kicked the door shut.

I grabbed the back of her shirt and pulled it up. Cali pulled out of the kiss and raised her arms, letting me slip the shirt over her head. Then she squirmed in my hold and wiggled to the ground. She unbuttoned her jeans and tugged them off, and then she was wearing nothing but her panties.

I took a step back to look at her, letting my eyes rake up and down her perfect form.

She smiled and rested her hands on my chest. I thought she was going to start feeling me up, but instead she shoved me, pushing me down onto the bed. My legs caught on the mattress, and I sat down with a surprised chuckle.

“Hey, watch it,” I said.

She grinned as she climbed onto me, straddling my lap. “You watch it.”

I smirked back at her. “Oh, believe me, I plan to.”

She blushed as I grabbed her butt with both hands and guided her onto me, so she was rubbing my cock with her sex.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and dropped her head back, moaning.

“No,” she said after a moment, shaking her head like she was drunk. “In me. Now.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

She grabbed my pants and pulled them down, and when she lowered herself onto my lap again, I drove myself inside her.

“Oh god, *Greyson*,” she moaned, squeezing her eyes shut. “Oh god, yes.”

“I like the sound of that,” I murmured, then shivered as I felt her body close around my cock.

She was still for a moment, then I grabbed her hips and began to rock her.

She made a small whimpering noise and buried her face in my neck. “Oh god, you feel so good.”

“You feel amazing,” I breathed, pumping harder.

I felt her tensing, and then she began to buck. She was getting closer, so I pushed harder, driving myself in again and again.

“You need to be quiet,” I whispered.

She opened her eyes like I’d startled her, then she nodded at me. Moments later, she bit her lip as she came, barely keeping herself from crying out. She pulsed around me, pushing me over the edge.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed as pleasure washed over me.

Finished, she kept rocking until she was sure I was finished, then she leaned forward and kissed me breathlessly.

I smiled at her. “That was fun.”

She smiled back. “Yeah, it was.”

Neither of us said it, but we were both feeling it—I could tell. The sex had been great, but somehow, it hadn’t been completely satisfying. Maybe it had something to do with the people downstairs, or how unsettled everything was at the moment, but I definitely felt like I still wanted *more*, and there was something about the look in Cali’s eyes that told me she felt the same way.

“Greyson? Greyson! Where are you?”

Someone was calling me from downstairs.

“Shit,” I said, dropping my head onto Cali’s naked shoulder.

“I think someone wants you,” Cali said with a slight smile.

“I don’t want to go,” I said with a groan. “I just want to stay here with you, in my little Cali bubble.”

Part of me wondered if I wanted to say because I was a little unsatisfied, and was hoping for round two. Scratch that, my cock already needed it…

Cali must’ve felt the same, because she pulled herself off me and shot me a wild look. “Don’t go far. I’m definitely not done with you yet.”

**Episode 5006**

**Artemis**

*Is she telling the truth or not?*

The question rang through the air, echoing in my head, and I gritted my teeth. I knew in my heart that I didn’t need a test to know who my father was, but what the hell? If that was what it took to put an end to Celeste’s suspicions and accusations, then fine. Whatever.

The tall, solemn sorceress closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she turned to look at Celeste, who was standing just behind her.

“This girl is who she says she is.”

“*What?*”

The sorceress nodded. “She is the daughter of Kadmos—”

“How can that be?” Celeste demanded. “How?”

The sorceress gave her a curious look. “Do I need to explain how babies are created?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Celeste snarled. “And don’t get smart. I know damn well how babies are made—I’m asking about her specifically,” she said, pointing at me with a shaking finger. “How is it that your very existence remained a secret all these years? We all believed you dead. Adair never mentioned you.”

I shrugged, and Celeste rounded on the sorceress.

“You’d better be right,” she snapped. “I will not react kindly if you are wrong about this.”

The sorceress drew herself up to her full—considerable—height, looking offended. “I am not wrong. The magic I performed here reveals only the truth.”

My mind raced as I considered my options. I wondered if I should try to fuel this confrontation. Cause some kind of distraction and give myself a chance of escaping.

If I’d been alone, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat, but escaping now would probably mean abandoning Marius, whose fate remained in Celeste’s hands. And I had no illusions about what that fate might be, especially if I escaped without him.

For a whole host of reasons I couldn’t even begin to list, I was really wishing that I’d never met Marius at all. It would’ve made moments like this so much easier.

Celeste whipped around to glare at me again. “You! Can you explain any of this?”

I knew I had to tread carefully.

“What do you know about me?” I asked cautiously.

“Only that Kadmos’s only child died soon after being born,” Celeste said. “And for more than twenty years, the entire Fae world has believed this to be true. And now I’m being told to believe the opposite? That you’ve been *alive* this whole time?”

“Very much alive,” Marius quipped, like he couldn’t help himself.

Celeste shot him a deadly glare. “May I remind you that your life is hanging by a thread, boy? A very fine thread indeed.”

I sighed, resigned. I was going to have to tell her the whole story.

“I was kidnapped at birth,” I said. “That’s where the dying story comes from. And I had no idea who my parents were until…” I hesitated, wondering how much to say. I didn’t want to make Celeste aware of Cali and my mother. That would probably be dangerous for them.

“Until what?” Celeste demanded.

I cleared my throat. “Until years later,” I said. “Someone I knew from the orphanage told me about the kidnapping plot.”

Celeste was quiet and seemed to be thinking about what I’d said.

“But why,” she started slowly, “would someone go through the trouble of kidnapping you if they ended up leaving you at some orphanage? What was to be gained? There was no ransom demand.”

“It was to prevent the peaceful end of the war between the Dark and Light Fae. My father married a Light Fae. A baby born to them could’ve shown the Fae world what was possible.”

“I know that,” Celeste hissed. “Don’t speak to me as though I’m a fool.”

I suppressed a sigh. “So they kidnapped me and spread the lie that I’d died soon after being born.”

As I spoke, I kept my eyes on Celeste. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Marius, who I had a feeling was staring at me in complete shock as I revealed mountains of information about my past. I’d let him in on some of this, but not all of it. Not nearly all of it… Why did I feel so bad about lying to him?

Celeste eyed me carefully. “And now you’re back.”

“Right.”

“To search for the father you claim you didn’t even know existed until recently. A man who, by all accounts, died years ago. Kidnapped by a mysterious group you cannot even name.”

Well, when she put it like that, it did sound absurd. Still, I wouldn’t let her take my convictions away from me. I’d come too far for that.

I looked up into Celeste’s accusing eyes. “Yes. And if you let me go, I’ll continue my search.”

Celeste held my gaze for a moment, then looked away. “I see. But there are things to take into consideration, you see. This changes everything.”

“How does my search for my father change anything?” I asked, a knot of worry tightening in my stomach. “There’s no hidden agenda here. I’m just a daughter who wants to find her father—he has no idea that I even exist.”

“Spare me the sob story,” Celeste snapped. “You aren’t just any daughter, and you know it. And Kadmos certainly isn’t just any father. He’s the heir to the Dark Fae throne. And despite your foolish belief that your father managed to stay alive—undetected—for the last twenty years, the odds are that Kadmos is long dead. And if that is the case, it makes you vitally important.”

I shifted on my feet, growing more uncomfortable with every passing moment.

“I just want to find my father,” I said. “That’s all. All this talk of heirs and courts…” I shook my head. “I want none of it. It doesn’t interest me. I was a bounty hunter for years. I worked on the fringes of the law, in the shadow of both the Dark and Light courts, and—”

A courier burst into the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“What is it?” Celeste demanded.

“There’s been an attack on one of the border villages.”

Celeste looked agitated. “Give that information to the commander. Go!”

The courier rushed out.

Celeste looked at me closely, walking around me in a circle. She was trying to intimidate me, and I had to admit, it was kind of working. My heart pounded faster and faster as the silence in the room grew thicker.

“You say that none of this is of your concern,” Celeste finally said, her booming voice piercing the quiet. “The Dark and Light Fae courts, the war—but the war is still very much *our* concern. My concern. And right now, that makes it your concern, girl. There are constant flare-ups and skirmishes. Tension is constantly building. Sooner or later, full-blown conflict will erupt again. That is the endless cycle between—”

“So what?” Marius demanded, interrupting Celeste’s diatribe. “What do you expect Artemis to do? You want her to single-handedly stop the war? You said it yourself—it’s an endless cycle. You and everyone else and all your resources haven’t been able to do anything about it for centuries. So just let Artemis go. Keep me if you want, but let her go.”

I almost rolled my eyes but managed not to. Marius’s appeal would be meaningless to Celeste, but I had to admit that I appreciated the effort, and the self-sacrifice. Whatever the hell our messed-up relationship was, he was willing to stick his neck out for me. But I was worried that if he wasn’t careful, Celeste was going to take advantage of that and chop his head off.

But when I looked at Celeste, I saw that she wasn’t listening to Marius. She wasn’t even glowering at me anymore. Her eyes had gone curiously blank, and she was staring off into space. She was quiet for a long moment, and when she finally turned back to me, she wore a hint of a smile. It was small—just enough to unnerve me completely.

My heart sank. This couldn’t be good. It wasn’t hard to do the math—there was nothing good about this situation, so what could’ve made Celeste happy?

She stared into my eyes. “There are those who’d be very interested to know that the heir to the Dark Fae court is alive, and back in Dark Fae territory.”

I swallowed hard but didn’t speak. I needed to find out what she had in mind.

“Adair abandoned his duties when he fled, and his family,” Celeste said, a furious scowl twisting her face. “But perhaps the Dark Fae no longer have need of him.”

“Why not?” I asked, though I was very afraid of the answer to this question.

Celeste’s eyes went wide, like she was surprised. “Why would they, now that they have you?”

Shit. That was why I’d been afraid of the answer.

Celeste’s dark eyes flashed as she took a step toward me. “So, no, Artemis. I’m afraid I won’t be letting you leave.”

**Episode 5007**

**Greyson**

I pulled my pants back on, then handed Cali her shirt, which I’d thrown across the room. Even though I wanted to go for round two, it was probably good that someone had called for me. Cali and I could stay up here for hours, and that probably wasn’t the move after what we’d just gone through.

Or maybe it was. Either way, I was going to circle back to my hands all over her.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile as she pulled it over her head.

That smile did something to me. I wanted nothing more than to stay with Cali, just like this, in our room, alone and unbothered. And when Cali looked up at me, her eyes flashed, and I could tell she felt the same, but I knew—just like she did—that we needed to be responsible and think of the pack. I was the Alpha, after all, and I needed to get back downstairs.

And we had the humans to worry about. We needed to get them out of here. Mikah had said to let them go, and the last thing I wanted was for them to be hanging around my pack house if they didn’t need to be here. Especially since they were humans.

There was another factor in play, too—I really did feel bad for them. Cali was right; they’d all been traumatized by what had happened with Chessa. Whether they remembered it or not, they’d been through an ordeal. They’d almost had their lives cut tragically short, and for what? So some fucking weirdo vampire could feed from them and keep them as pets while she slowly killed them?

I wasn’t naïve. I knew some werewolves could do some pretty fucked-up things, but it always seemed to me that vampires were the ones who always did the most fucked-up shit of all.

“Why is it always vampires?” I muttered, pulling my shirt on.

Cali looked up at me. “What do you mean?”

“Ninety percent of the time, when we find something completely screwed up, there’s a vampire involved.”

She frowned. “Don’t let Mikah or Lola hear you say that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why not? They’d probably agree with me. No one likes a supernatural who goes rogue and makes the rest of your kind look bad.” I glanced at her. “Ready to head downstairs?”

Cali buttoned her jeans. “Ready.”

Despite her confirmation, I saw how her eyes lingered on me, and I knew she’d have preferred to stay with me. This vampire-created-need we were all feeling was something else. I wondered if this was one of the ways Chessa had kept herself surrounded by people.

I said as much to Cali, and she looked thoughtful, considering the possibility. “That makes sense. I can feel myself getting kind of…*desperate*.” Her eyes sparkled. “What wouldn’t I do right now?”

I groaned with want but shook my head and took her hand. “Downstairs.”

“Got it,” she said, taking a deep breath.

We headed down to the main floor, and I looked around. It’d been Rishika who’d called me, so where was she? There was a group of werewolves in the living room, and I was pleased to see that everyone was dressed and no one was making out, which was a relief. I was glad they’d obeyed my orders.

Hearing footsteps, I turned to see Rishika walking out of the kitchen.

“Everything good?” I asked her. “I heard you calling.”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” she said. “Everyone’s acting very human-style normal, as requested. I wanted to check if you wanted me to proceed with everything for the barbecue?”

“Yes, let’s just keep things normal, yeah?” I said wryly.

Rishika nodded. “Of course.”

I looked over at Cali. “Ready to go down to the basement?”

She nodded. “Ready.”

When we got downstairs, we found Codsworth and the others waiting for us.

He looked up at us as we walked in. “What’s going on? We’ve been talking, and none of us can remember a damn thing. It’s like our memories were erased.” His eyes narrowed. “I’ve heard about stuff like this. The CIA has a secret mind research lab in Nevada. They do tests like this all the time.”

I laughed. “Well, you’re in Oregon, and I think your memory issues have less to do with any covert operations and more to do with how much you had to drink.”

Codsworth’s frown deepened, and he looked profoundly confused. “Drink? What are you talking about?”

“You don’t remember the party?” Cali asked. “Beer pong? Shot roulette? Never have I ever? The games got a little out of hand,” she added with a laugh, though I could tell it was forced.

Shit. Cali was terrible at lying. We should’ve brought Lola down to sell the story.

I eyed Codsworth, trying to figure out if he was buying this, but then he reached out and grabbed Cali’s shoulders, pulling her into a hug.

“That’s right!” he exclaimed. “Of course! You brought us all down here to sleep it off.”

“Exactly,” Cali said shakily.

He leaned back and grinned at her. “Thanks for looking out for us.”

Charlotte and Eddie joined the group hug.

“I don’t remember a thing, either,” Charlotte said, laughing, “but it sounds like one hell of a night.”

Cali looked over Codsworth’s shoulder and met my eyes. *Well, we did it!* she said.

I smiled at her, then waved the humans toward the door. “Okay, let’s get moving. We’re going to get you home.”

I walked up the stairs first and checked the immediate vicinity for nudity and/or orgies, but everyone and everything seemed normal, so I walked the humans to the front door.

“I’ll call you an Uber,” I offered, pulling out my phone. But when I looked up, I caught sight of Kendall in the living room.

I sent the request for a car, and—as Cali waited with her friends—I walked over to where Kendall was standing. A strange, familiar feeling washed over me as I approached, which confused the hell out of me. I had no idea why I would feel like that, or where the hell that feeling was coming from.

Kendall eyed me as I stepped toward her, then tipped her chin toward the door. “Looks like everything worked out with the prisoners.”

“They aren’t prisoners,” I said shortly, a little offended by the comment.

“What would you have called them if they hadn’t lost their memories?” she asked keenly. “Do you need to look up the definition of prisoner? I’m sure I could round up a dictionary. It’s something about not being free to leave a place.”

I ground my teeth. The last thing I needed right now was English lessons from Kendall. “Well, we don’t have to worry about that, so what’s the point of thinking about it?”

Kendall smiled. “There’s no point. I was just curious about what you would’ve done.”

For a moment, I considered her question. What *would* I have done if Codsworth and the rest of them hadn’t lost their memories? Letting them go with that kind of knowledge could’ve been catastrophic—and not just for our pack, but for the entire paranormal world. I had no idea what they would’ve said, and to whom.

So what would I have done?

I probably would’ve gone to Big Mac for help, to see if she had any ideas. Or just hoped Artemis came back from the Fae world. Or—hell—maybe I’d even have convinced Cali to try the memory manipulation magic she’d managed in the past.

But I’d be damned before I said any of that to Kendall. I barely knew the woman—why should I tell her anything?

So, because Kendall was so good at it herself, I ignored the question. “You’re still here, so I assume you’re sticking around for the barbeque?”

Kendall looked surprised. “And why would you assume that?”

There was something about how incredulous she was—like she wouldn’t even *consider* staying to attend a party with us—that really got under my skin. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to. I’m sure you have a lot of other people to piss off. But we just had a major victory, and we like to celebrate our victories around here. And barbecues are a wolf pack thing. Food, drinks, fire. Most packs hold them regularly. Maybe this is news to you, though—you don’t seem to be part of any pack.”

Kendall rolled her astonishingly purple eyes. “Just because I’m not part of a pack doesn’t mean I don’t know what a barbecue is or why packs hold them. This might come as a surprise to you, Greyson, but I’m very familiar with pack traditions and rituals.”

I was done with this conversation. I didn’t know why I’d even started it. “Great. Good for you. Stay, go—I don’t care. It’s up to you.”

I’d turned to walk back toward the front door, where Cali was waiting with the humans, when Kendall spoke again, making me stop in my tracks.

“You don’t like me very much, do you, Greyson?”

**Episode 5008**

The barbecue was in full swing, and I was glad to see all the packs getting along so well—even the Loneclaw newcomers seemed to be meshing well with everyone else. Given the fact that Xavier had left the Redwoods to be with Ava and become the Samara Alpha, I’d had concerns that there would always be a little bit of residual tension between our packs. But if there was, I couldn’t tell.

I received the occasional scornful look from Ava, but that was nothing new, and it had been happening ever since Ava had returned from the spirit world. It would’ve been stranger if Ava *hadn’t* beengiving me dirty looks all night. Barely tolerating each other when we were in the same place was pretty much our thing.

*I wonder what our lives would’ve been like if Ava had stayed in the spirit world. Xavier and I would still be together like before, and I wouldn’t have to feel like I’m competing with her all the time. If only she’d just stayed dead.*

I instantly admonished myself for having such a dark thought. Whether I liked it or not—NOT—Xavier seemed happy with Ava. And, as much as I disliked her, I didn’t actually wish death on her.

“Should we start a game of beer pong, or are you afraid to get your asses handed to you?” Lola shouted at Ravi and Milo.

“I don’t think you realize that you’re talking to the beer pong master,” Milo shot back.

The three of them made their way over to the table, Lola grabbing Violet to act as her teammate.

It was nice to see everyone letting their hair down. It reminded me of old times, especially when I saw Jay and Xavier laughing it up, just like they used to. I was glad that their friendship had weathered the storm. I’d seen how much it hurt Xavier to not have Jay on his side.

It was finally starting to feel like things were slowly getting back to normal—or the new normal, anyway. Especially now that we’d defeated Chessa. We were all still a little off because of Chessa’s lingering influence, but at least none of our lives were in immediate danger.

“Should I go outside yet?” Greyson asked me.

I was confused. “Who said anything about going outside? I’m just observing. Taking everything in.”

Greyson smirked. “Remember that one barbecue when you fell out of a window? Or did you jump? I can’t quite recall…”

I gave him a playful swat on the arm. “I have no plans for a repeat performance. But I do remember that day—how could I forget it?”

It was the day we’d met, after all. I’d been simultaneously terrified of him and drawn to him. It seemed like a lifetime ago, the days before I’d discovered how sweet and thoughtful Greyson really was. I recalled how intimidated I’d been by his strength and good looks. His chiseled jaw and perfect blond hair still took my breath away every time I looked at him, but that was nothing compared to how I used to react to him before I’d become as comfortable with him as I was now.

Greyson pulled me close and kissed me. “I suppose I should remind you that I’m still a very dangerous Alpha werewolf.”

“And I should warn you that I’m still a very powerful Fae,” I retorted.

“Half-Fae,” Greyson corrected.

“Half or full, doesn’t matter,” I said matter-of-factly. “I can still blast you.”

“Point taken,” Greyson said with a faux serious look.

I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly. “This barbecue was such a good idea, Greyson. Everyone’s having a good time. We needed this—a chance to unwind and hang out together. We’re always in such serious, dangerous situations that times like these are so rare. No drama, no stress, just food and drinks and fun. I’m not taking it for granted.”

Lilac’s scream suddenly rose from the yard, and Greyson and I immediately raced outside to see what was going on.

“What the hell?” I burst out, taking in the sight of flames erupting from the grill like a volcano.

Greyson groaned. “I never should’ve left Lilac in charge of the grill. I have to go deal with this.”

I watched him go, then turned to go back into the house—only to run smack into Xavier, who was carrying a couple of charred hot dogs. One had to be for Ava. I felt a pang in the pit of my stomach, but I quickly pushed it away.

But then Xavier held out both hot dogs. “I can’t remember if you prefer ketchup or mustard, so I got you both.”

I was surprised. “Oh, I like both!”

I was torn between the two hot dogs, but also trying to figure out why Xavier had brought them for me in the first place.

“I’ll take this one,” I said, plucking the one with ketchup from his hand. “Thanks.”

There was an awkward silence before Xavier cleared his throat. “You want something to drink? I’m happy to go grab you something.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “What’s going on, here?”

Xavier shrugged. “No big deal. Just thought I’d get you a drink since I was going to get a drink, too. Two birds with one stone.”

I stopped him. “You know what I mean, Xavier. Why all the sudden attention?”

“Can’t I just do something nice without you being suspicious?”

“I’m not suspicious, and I’m not accusing you of anything,” I said. “I just don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

Xavier sighed. “I guess I’m just hoping I can win your trust back.”

I was thrown. “With a hot dog?”

Xavier winced. “Well, I didn’t have much to work with. I’m trying. And hot dogs are a start, I guess.”

“I get that, but maybe trust isn’t something you try for? Maybe it’s something you earn. Thanks for this,” I said, holding up the hot dog. “I can get my own drink.”

I started back inside, then stopped myself.

*He’s trying. I know that. I don’t have to make it harder for him. It’s not like he’s entirely in the wrong for the way things have turned out. Adéluce’s influence is what started all of this, after all.*

I turned back to see Xavier staring at me. I smiled at him.

“A hot dog is a good start,” I conceded. “Thanks again.” I took a bite. “And it’s really good.”

Xavier smiled then, too. “I will do whatever it takes to earn your trust back.”

I couldn’t help this warm feeling that was bubbling up inside of me. Finally, he was apologizing. I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe things between us were finally starting to heal. Our relationship certainly couldn’t get any worse—I hoped. There was still a lot of history between us, and I knew that with time, we might at least be able to get rid of some of the awkwardness that always seemed to follow us these days.

I was wiping a glob of ketchup from my mouth when Lola came walking over. “Did you see that? I crushed Ravi, just like I said I would. He and Milo never had a chance.”

*Hmm. Lola seems a little tipsy….*

Lola reached out and yanked my hot dog right out of my hands. “I’m starving!”

She took a huge bite, then held it out for me.

“Keep it,” I said dryly, then my gaze shifted to Rishika and Cresta, who were huddled together on the porch.

Lola gestured to them. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

I forced myself to look away from Rishika, refocusing on my bestie. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s pretty obvious, don’t you think?” Lola asked, eyebrow raised. “Artemis is gone and left Rishika’s broken heart behind. Rishika seems to be trying to get over it… and under Cresta.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop it, Lola. Besides, aren’t they just talking—”

Rishika put a hand on Cresta’s arm. It wasn’t exactly damning evidence, but there was something about the way she did it—and the way her hand lingered. Then Rishika leaned close and said something to Cresta that caused her to throw back her head and laugh like it was the funniest thing she’d ever heard.

I turned away, not wanting to be caught staring. I was also dealing with a wealth of conflicting feelings about what I’d witnessed. Artemis was the one who’d left Rishika behind—so why was it so hard to see Rishika warming up to someone else? Hadn’t we talked about this?

“As far as I know, Rishika is free to do whatever she wants,” I said evenly.

“Then why are you frowning?” Lola asked. “Doesn’t *seem* like you think it’s okay.”

I was about to answer when Milo pulled Cresta away, leaving Rishika alone.

“Excuse me,” I said to Lola, then I headed straight for Rishika.

Lola’s voice rang out behind me. “Cali? What the hell are you doing?”

**Episode 5009**

**Xavier**

My headache was still pounding away, but I didn’t care. I was hopeful. Maybe, just maybe, Cali and I had just had a breakthrough. I would deal with a lifetime of headaches if that was the price for fixing things between us.

I looked down at the hot dog in my hand and shook my head. Maybe I could’ve come up with a better offering than hot dogs, but I’d needed an excuse to get the ball rolling. And, in a rare display of fortitude, I hadn’t screwed things up by kissing her.

Though a big part of me had wanted to.

It was rare for me to see Cali without wanting her, without feeling the overwhelming need to pull her close and taste her lips. My wolf had been pushing me to take the chance, to do it. Cali looked so good tonight, and her scent was driving me mad. But I’d tapped into my willpower and kept things under control. For once.

Thinking about the harsh, cruel way I’d treated Cali to keep her safe from Adéluce made me sick to my stomach. I hated that I’d been forced to treat her that way, but I’d had no choice—if I hadn’t done it, I’d have put Cali squarely in Adéluce’s crosshairs. Cali could’ve died if I hadn’t done the right thing, the hard thing, and pushed her away.

*I feel god-awful about what I did to her, but it was the only way. Maybe she’ll fully understand that one day. Hopefully, deep down, she already knows that I only did what I had to do.*

But the thing I shouldn’t have done—and what I believed was the central cause of Cali’s reluctance to trust me—was repeatedly give in to my desire for her. Over and over, I’d lost all control and done the wrong thing. So many times, I’d been weak when I should’ve been strong, and my constant mixed signals had left her angry and suspicious—and rightfully so.

And I hadn’t just hurt Cali all those times when I’d lost control. I’d gotten Ava all tangled up in it, too. How could I blame Ava for being uncomfortable with my relationship with Cali when I crossed the line almost every time I was alone with her?

But I knew that I could do better—that I could restore Cali’s faith in me and keep Ava happy, all at the same time. I also knew that it was going to take more than a hot dog.

I returned to Ava and offered her the remaining hot dog.

She scowled at me and pushed my hand away. “Ew. I don’t want Cali’s rejects.”

I sighed. “It’s not like that—”

But Ava had already turned away. Restoring Cali’s trust without hurting Ava would be difficult, but not impossible. I hoped. I had a lot of work to do to rebuild Ava’s trust in me, too—at least when it came to Cali.

And then there was still the matter of the agonizing migraines I experienced whenever I was around both women at once. I had to do something about that as soon as I could, or things were going to get even more complicated.

Greyson came up and handed me a beer. “Everyone seems to be getting along.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the beer. “And yeah, it seems so.”

Ava went off to chat with Marissa and Donovan without giving me a second glance. I hoped that this wasn’t going to be yet another point of contention between us. I was having a good streak of luck right now; I didn’t need it to come crashing down.

“The Loneclaws are fitting in nicely, as far as I can tell,” Greyson noted. “Are you thinking of inviting them to join the Samaras?”

I glanced at Milo and Cresta, who were chatting nearby.

“They pulled their weight when things got tough,” I said. “And other than Knox, everybody does seem to like them.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “I think it could be a smart move—and it would only increase the Samara pack’s standing in the alliance.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling a little strange about talking to Greyson like this. It was one of the rare times where we weren’t arguing about Cali, or some stupid thing that Greyson had been critical of.

I eyed my brother. “Are we having an Alpha-to-Alpha talk right now?”

Greyson smirked. “I guess we are. And I’ll admit, it’s a little awkward.”

We both went silent as we surveyed the assembled packs.

“Have you given any more thought to the camping trip?” Greyson asked.

I snorted. “No.”

“I still think that we should do it,” he pressed. “I think it would be a great opportunity for the Evers brothers to connect, get to know each other.”

“I know Colton already,” I replied. “And too much Colton is never a good thing.”

Greyson’s expression grew serious. “You may know Colton, but I barely know him at all. And Colton probably still thinks of me as some mysterious Rogue with a bad reputation—if he ever thinks of me at all. I’d like to change the narrative, if I could. Let Colton get to know the real me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What is this? If you have issues to work out with Colton, have at it. He’s your brother, after all. You don’t need me tagging along to get your relationship with him on track.”

“This isn’t just about Colton,” Greyson said simply. “You and I barely know each other, Xavier.” His gaze drifted to Cali, across the way. “And we’ve had our share of obstacles.”

I said nothing, just stayed silent and took that in. I wasn’t into squishy feely talk as a rule, especially with Greyson, and especially when I had so many other things on my mind—like how to make peace with my mate while keeping the peace with my Luna.

“Come on, Xavier,” Greyson pressed. “It’ll only be for a couple of days. No distractions. How about it?”

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. Anything to get Greyson off my back. I could always change my mind about it later if I really wasn’t feeling it. “I’ll talk to Colton about it.”

Greyson smiled. “Thanks.”

Without another word, I left my brother and made a beeline for Ava. I didn’t want her anger to fester just because I’d happened to bring Cali a hot dog before bringing her one.

Marissa glared at me as I approached. I sighed.

*Now I’m going to have to deal with another round of Marissa’s attitude? I’m tired of everybody painting me as the bad guy. I’m trying my best, but no one seems to notice. Or maybe they just don’t care.*

Without even acknowledging Marissa, I grabbed Ava and pulled her aside.

“I wasn’t offering you Cali’s rejects, Ava,” I said bluntly. “You know me better than that. All I did was provide her with a peace offering. With ketchup.”

Ava cracked a smile, but I could tell that she still wanted to be mad at me.

“Listen, Ava,” I said, “I’m just doing my best to find a balance. A way to keep everyone happy.”

“Oh, and you think a hot dog is going to do that?”

I moved closer to Ava, my wolf starting to stir. In the flickering firelight, Ava looked so good, it hurt. For a moment, I was lost in the dark shine of her long hair, the shape of her lips, the slant of her beautiful eyes… I hadn’t even let my gaze drop lower to drink in the rest of her, yet.

“I’ll do whatever you want to make you happy, Ava. Within reason,” I added quickly.

Ava sighed. “When have I ever asked for anything unreasonable?”

I thought about how, only hours ago, she’d wanted to kill Cali… But I kept that to myself. Bringing it up right now wouldn’t help matters.

I wanted to kiss her, but something was holding me back. That bothered me. I should’ve been able to kiss my mate—my Luna—without reservation. Without fear that I was hurting someone or pissing someone off. If this was ever going to work, Cali, Greyson, and the Redwoods would have to accept that Ava and I were together—which meant they’d have to witness the occasional public display of affection.

“You hungry? I’ll bring you a whole tray of hot dogs if you want,” I said, only half joking.

“I think not,” Ava said. “I saw what Lilac did with the grill. I like my meat charred, not carbonized.”

I laughed, relaxing a little. Ava’s humor was coming back, which meant that the hot dog incident wasn’t about to turn into yet another obstacle for us.

I put an arm around her waist and pulled her close. “What do you think about making it official with the Loneclaws? Asking them to join the pack?”

“That’s exactly what Marissa and I were just talking about. Actually, everyone’s talking about it. I think it would be a great move. We need the bodies—more than that, we need skilled fighters. They’ve proven themselves to be that. And they seem to get along well with everyone… Even the Redwoods, and you know how they are.”

I nodded in satisfaction. “Good. Let’s do it.”

Ava looked me in the eye. “What if they turn you down?”

**Episode 5010**

Ignoring Lola’s calls for me to come back, I kept walking toward Rishika. I couldn’t help myself. If I didn’t say something, I was pretty sure I’d explode. I knew on a certain level that Rishika and Artemis were officially on a break, but it was one thing to know it and quite another to see it playing out in real time.

It was kind of like how I knew that Xavier was with Ava, but still hated seeing the two of them together. I knew that Xavier had moved on and that Ava was his Luna-slash-girlfriend now, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to have it shoved in my face.

As far as I was concerned, Rishika should’ve had a little more tact. It was wrong of her to make a spectacle of moving on from Artemis.

*Why is everything changing? Rishika and Artemis are meant to be together. Rishika’s not supposed to be with someone else. My sister loves her, and I thought Rishika loved Artemis, too!* *How can she even think of being interested in someone else when Artemis could come back at any time?*

Rishika smiled as I approached. “Hey, Cali. The barbecue was such a great idea—I’m having a really good time. Maybe we should hold them more often. Seems like the pack doesn’t get nearly enough opportunities to just hang out and have fun. Nights like this are important reminders of what we’re protecting when we’re risking out lives in battle.”

“Agreed.” I paused for a moment. “This is a perfect way to chill with friends… And maybe make some new ones? Like Cresta?”

Rishika’s gaze drifted across the yard to Cresta. “Yeah, she’s pretty cool. Easy to talk to. Smart.”

“And pretty, too,” I added, watching Rishika closely.

“I guess so.” Rishika was obviously flustered. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Have you even thought about Artemis in any of this?”

Rishika looked away from Cresta and stared at me in disbelief.

“Are you seriously asking me that?” she demanded. “Do you think there’s been a single *minute* since Artemis left when I haven’t thought about her? Do you think this is easy for me? That I *want* to move on?”

*Abort! Abort!* “You’re right. I-I’m sorry. I just saw you with Cresta and thought—”

“So what?” Rishika snapped. “I like Cresta, and we were talking. Is that a crime? Artemis left *me*—or don’t you remember that? It wasn’t my choice, and it *hurts*. So who I talk to and how I choose to deal with such a crushing loss is none of your business!”

I felt terrible. “Rishika… I’m sorry. It’s just that I miss Artemis, and it kind of felt like you were betraying her, somehow. But I know that was wrong.”

Rishika glared at me. “I need a drink.”

She shoulder-checked me as she headed off. I stumbled back and watched her go, feeling like I’d just ruined her night—and I hadn’t done myself any favors, either.

*Okay, that did* not *go the way I wanted it to. I probably should’ve listened to Lola and pumped the brakes on confronting Rishika. Especially since she’s right. Her situation with Artemis isn’t the same as when Xavier left me for Ava and the Samaras. Especially because Adéluce forced Xavier to leave, and Artemis left all on her own. Rishika probably feels abandoned, and here I am, blaming her for trying to move on.*

And when Xavier had left me, should I have planned to spend the rest of my life hoping that he would someday come back to me while keeping Greyson waiting in frustrating limbo? Should I have resigned myself to spending the rest of my life alone, devoted to the person who’d hurt me? I should’ve known better than to judge Rishika when my own situation was so complicated.

Besides, Rishika was a crucial member of the pack. She’d gotten us out of all kinds of binds and was always happy to pick up the slack when Greyson was busy. I should’ve shown her more respect. I definitely shouldn’t have had the audacity to give her a hard time for doing what was best for her.

*Wow. I really blew that one. Let’s hope she doesn’t hold a grudge…*

Greyson appeared at my side. “Cali! Good news. Xavier finally agreed to go on the camping trip! I can’t believe—wait, what’s wrong?”

“I just pissed Rishika off,” I said. “I mean, I really, *really* pissed her off.”

I snuck a glance at her, where she was standing alone by the keg, looking pissed as she chugged her beer.

“What?” Greyson asked. “How?”

I sighed and rubbed my face, trying to find the least embarrassing way to admit that I’d just royally screwed up. “I saw her talking with Cresta and… and I thought they were flirting, so I kind of confronted her about it. It didn’t go well.”

Greyson nodded. “I know you’re in a tough position—Artemis is your sister, and you feel like you have to defend her. But Artemis is the one who chose to leave, and Rishika needs to be able to cope with that however she wants. She doesn’t need our judgment. And it’s none of our business, really.”

I grimaced. “That’s kind of what Rishika told me. She was a lot blunter about it, though—not that I can blame her.”

Greyson winced. “Yeah, that’s a rough one, but I think you’ll be okay. You and Rishika have a good relationship—you’ll be able to talk to her and straighten things out. But you might want to give it a little time. I think the whole Artemis leaving thing is still an open wound for her, and you just poured salt on it.”

“Give it to me straight, why don’t you?” I grumbled.

“Just telling it like it is,” Greyson said with a smirk. He gave me a peck on the lips. “Just try to ease up. It’s hard enough for Rishika right now.”

I opened my mouth to respond just as Xavier whistled to get everyone’s attention.

“I have an announcement to make!” he said. “These Rogues are receiving a formal invitation to join the Samara pack!”

The packs erupted into cheers, none louder than the Samaras. The looks on their faces told me how excited they were to be expanding their pack. The Samaras had been through so much, and I was sure this was a sign that they were on the way to regaining their former glory.

“I encouraged Xavier to take that step,” Greyson told me quietly. “It’s good for my brother, good for the packs. Don’t you think?”

“I guess so,” I said, joining in the cheering, but my enthusiasm was on the low side. Xavier was standing with Ava—of course they were doing this together. This was Samara business, and Ava was the Samara Luna. But all logic was pushed aside as my feelings for Xavier came roaring back full force. He’d reached out to me with hot dogs only minutes ago—a somewhat charming but also clumsy attempt to build a bridge between us, to regain my trust. And for once, we hadn’t argued, or kissed, and the interaction wasn’t nearly as awkward as it could’ve been.

But seeing him and Ava standing there together like that, side by side, sharing their excitement and looking at each other like they were the only two people in the world… It was almost too much to take.

“I have mixed feelings,” I finally said to Greyson. “It’s good for the pack, and for Xavier’s standing as Alpha. And it will elevate the Samaras and stabilize them even more…”

Greyson frowned. “But it’s hard for you to accept that he’s doing this as a Samara and not a Redwood, right?”

I didn’t answer him right away—mainly because this wasn’t all that different from what he’d said about Rishika and Artemis. Sooner or later, I was going to have to accept this new reality. And honestly, I had to be realistic enough to accept facts—even if Xavier werestill with the Redwoods, he wouldn’t have been the one making announcements like these. That was Greyson’s right and responsibility.

*It’s a little selfish that I can’t be happy for Xavier. This is such a big deal for him… But all I can think about is how amazing it was when Xavier and I were together—under the same roof, in the same pack, making decisions together. But I have to get over that and realize that this is the way things are, now. For better or worse.*

And if Xavier was sincere about wanting to make things right with me, then maybe everything would be alright. If he could work at this, then so could I. And my first step was going to be heartfelt happiness for Xavier—he’d brought new wolves to his pack, and that was worth celebrating. It would be my first real attempt to let go of the way things used to be and lean into this new reality.

Even if it was one of the hardest things I’d ever have to do.

**Episode 5011**

**Xavier**

I wondered if this was too risky, calling the Loneclaws together so publicly, especially when Ava wasn’t sure if they’d actually accept my offer.

The Loneclaws were little more than a band of Rogues, used to being on the move and not answering to anyone. Joining the Samara pack would be a huge change for them, and I wondered if they were ready for it.

I knew that Milo was on the fence—mostly because of Knox—but there seemed to be a lot of camaraderie going on, now that Chessa was dead. And I had to admit that as far as I’d seen—and I’d been watching closely—the Loneclaws fit in well with the rest of the Samaras, Knox’s concerns about Milo aside.

*I don’t give a damn about some petty squabble over a human girl. No, that doesn’t matter in the least. I have to think about what will be good for the pack, moving forward. I have to think about our future.*

Cresta, Milo, Grace, and Carmen had all proven that they were reliable, brave, and able to get along with our pack as well as the Redwoods.

Still, as everyone gathered around, I couldn’t help the sliver of doubt that began to creep up inside me. They could all back out if they wanted to. There were no guarantees, here. And what would I do if even one of them refused? How would I look my pack members in the eye after that?

As everyone began to gather in the center of the yard, my gaze fell on Greyson and Cali, and I remembered seeing the two of them together, earlier in the evening. To be humiliated in front of my brother was the last thing I wanted. What would that say about me as an Alpha? As a leader?

*Greyson would probably feel vindicated. He’d probably take the Loneclaws’ refusal as proof of the fact that I’m not really cut out to be Alpha of my own pack.*

I shook those thoughts away. There was no point doubting myself right now. Second guessing myself wasn’t going to get me very far. And as far as I knew, the Loneclaws were excited about the prospect of having a pack to rely on. Everything they’d said and done up to this point proved that they wanted to be a part of the Samara pack.

*But how will they respond when it’s time to make the decision? I guess I’m about to find out…*

I looked at the others gathered in front of me. Someone had turned the music down, and a hush had fallen. I looked around before gesturing for the four Loneclaws to step forward. Everyone stepped back to give them space.

I cleared my throat and took in a big, silent breath.

*Here goes nothing…*

“I’m truly grateful for all the excitement you all have shown today. This is an important moment for the Samara pack—a chance for us to grow with the help of truly worthy werewolves who will bring strength to the Samara name. That’s why I’m happy to accept the pledge of loyalty from the former members of the Loneclaw pack.” I paused for a moment, eyeing them all one by one. I still didn’t know how this was going to play out. “I invite each of you to step forward one by one and kneel to me, show everyone—the Samaras, even the Redwoods—your intention. To show your devotion to the Samara pack, now and forever. And your loyalty to your Alpha.”

Ava’s chin went up at that. A warm feeling flooded through me as I thought about how she always had my back, had always supported my desire to be Alpha—even back when I hadn’t been all that kind to her. So much had changed, and I realized abruptly that I was genuinely happy in this new version of my life.

Cresta was the first to step forward.

“I’ve been a Rogue for a long time,” she said. “But you’re the first Alpha I’ve met in a long while who I want to follow.”

Cresta knelt before me, and a surge of power raced through me. To have this happen so publicly, in front of the Redwoods—in front of *Greyson*… It was a mixed bag of emotions, some good, some questionable.

Cresta bowed her head. “I pledge myself to the Samara pack and to you, Xavier, as my Alpha.”

The other three Loneclaws followed suit, kneeling before me and making their pledge official, sealing our bond as pack members. As family.

Once all the pledges had been made, everyone erupted into cheers, the Samaras the loudest of all.

Ava took my hand and squeezed it, a gorgeous smile on her beautiful face.

I looked around at the Samaras, noting that Knox was the only one who seemed to have a problem with this. Too bad. Like everyone else, Knox was just going to have to accept his new reality. He didn’t have any say in issues of pack membership, and he never would. This was my decision to make, and I’d made it.

Deciding not to let a single sour face in the crowd ruin this moment for me, I allowed myself to see this for the good thing it was—good for Ava, good for the pack, and good for the alliance. I was riding high. Despite Ava’s reservations, this very public pledge had gone off without a hitch.

*All my new recruits swore their allegiance to me. To the Samara pack. They’ve sworn to obey their Alpha. I trust them, and they trust me. They’re part of what I’m building, and I couldn’t be happier.*

I almost wanted to gloat and hit Ava with a little “I told you so,” but I could see that she was possibly even more pleased with the way things had turned out than I was.

I took that as a win. *Our* win.

Once the new Samaras were back on their feet, the party kicked into high gear. There was more drinking and dancing and mingling between the packs. I sat back and watched, Ava by my side, aware that this was the happiest I’d been in a while—despite the enduring pain in my head.

*This is what it feels like to be a true leader. To build something from scratch and feel pride in all the effort and work you put in. I was meant for this.*

“We’ll head home soon, to have our own celebration,” I told the closest Samaras, who nodded and rushed off to tell the rest.

I was sure that Greyson would understand my desire to leave, but I also knew that this kind of move could be a touch tricky—another one of those all too jarring reminders that I wasn’t a Redwood anymore.

“Do you want to take the long way back to the pack house? Spend some time alone and enjoy the run?” I asked Ava.

We’d loved doing that, back when we’d first been getting to know each other all those years ago. It had been an opportunity to enjoy our wolf forms without having to fight, hunt, or defend our territory. It had been a carefree, straightforward way for us to bond.

“Let’s do it,” Ava said, her eyes shining. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“It has,” I said, certain that she was thinking about old times, too.

After saying our goodbyes, Ava and I took off with the rest of the Samaras, and then veered off on our own. Without even needing to discuss it, we made our way toward a spot that overlooked the lake. I felt invigorated once the lake came into view, shimmering in the moonlight.

Ava and I stopped and stared out over the dark water, standing close and enjoying the view.

*You must be proud*, Ava mind linked.

*Oh, I definitely am*, I said. *I won’t deny it. Not only did all the recruits choose to join us, but now we’ve shown for certain that the Samaras aren’t just some second-class pack. We’re the phoenix pack risen from the ashes. We’re a force to be reckoned with, and soon all the other packs in the alliance will know that, too.*

*You’re right*, Ava said. *Today marked a turning point for this new incarnation of the Samara pack, and I couldn’t be happier. And I couldn’t be prouder of you, Xavier.*

Hearing that somehow made me feel even better. Not only had I stepped in as Alpha and led the Samaras through tough battles, all while dealing with the challenge of gaining acceptance from a new pack, but I was actively expanding our power. It felt amazing to succeed in such a real, quantifiable way.

*Now that we’ve taken this step, we’re stronger than ever. It’s only up from here.*

Ava looked off into the distance. *You’re right, X. I think my brother would be pleased to see how resilient the pack has been, and what you’ve done to help it.*

I nuzzled Ava. She had to miss Nolan a lot—though admittedly, I liked Nolan a lot better now that he was dead and gone. After all, he *had* tried to kill me, and to kidnap Cali.

*I can’t spend any more of my days in sorrow, Xavier*, Ava said, looking at me. *Not anymore. Not when we have such a bright future ahead of us.*

**Episode 5012**

Even after the Samaras left the barbecue to celebrate privately, the drinks kept flowing. The Redwoods were all in high spirits, seeming to have taken on the energy from the pledging ceremony. Things like that didn’t happen every day, and despite the rift that had formed between Xavier and the Redwood pack—a rift which was quickly closing, if tonight was any indication—the Redwood pack was rooting for Xavier and the Samaras.

I stared into the bottom of my own cup. There’d been something about seeing Xavier commanding attention like that… It had given me butterflies, made my heart beat fast. I remembered all the times I’d seen Greyson do the same thing. It was sexy. There was nothing quite like seeing an Alpha in his element like that.

*If anyone had any doubts about Xavier as an Alpha, I bet all those doubts are erased, now.*

I thought about how hard Xavier was trying to mend things, and I began to wonder if maybe I should do the same with Ava. If Xavier and I were really going to establish some kind of… *friendship*, then I was going to have to *not* be an active nemesis of his Luna.

*Xavier and I are in for an interesting friendship, considering our history and how sexy I think he is. How can I be friends with Ava when I can’t stop myself from wanting her mate? Though he* is *my mate, too…*

Just the thought of being friends with Ava felt like something out of a prank—like it was upside down day. I’d never imagined myself becoming friends with Ava, or even forming the kind of begrudging friendship I’d developed with Maya (the begrudging part being on Maya’s end, since I just thought Maya was a badass).

Either way, if Xavier and I were going to form some kind of… something, then Ava and I were going to have to do a better job of getting along—or at least not constantly wanting to kill each other.

*Maybe I can reach out to her tomorrow and congratulate her personally on the new recruits. That’s a good diplomatic thing to do, right? Maybe she’ll see that I’m trying to mend fences and meet me halfway.*

At least that way, I’d be able to say that I’d reached out first. It would prove what she and I both already knew—namely that I was the bigger person.

I downed the rest of my drink as Lola came walking over.

“Shots?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Ugh. No way.”

Lola was clearly riding high on an excellent afternoon, in no small part because she’d gotten her hands on Jay—she had Chessa’s creepy sexy rabies bites to thank for that—but I wasn’t looking to get completely trashed on shots. Everyone was still having a good time, but I was ready to wind down.

“Oh… I just thought you might need one or two after the pledge,” Lola said with a shrug. “I know I would, in your shoes.”

“I thought about it,” I admitted. “But I’m not going to drink anything else—I think I’m done for the night.”

Lola nodded, looping her arm through mine. “But how are you, though? Really?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Lola rolled her eyes. Hard. “Cut the bullshit, Cali. That whole thing was kind of an Ava-Xavier power moment, was it not? It was a *choice* to make that group of werewolves pledge themselves right in front of the Redwoods. A statement, if I ever saw one.”

I wasn’t sure if I saw it that way, but I could kind of see where Lola was coming from. Ava and Xavier standing together and accepting the former Loneclaws’ pledge had been a huge moment, I could admit that. But I didn’t think it had been a statement, per se.

“It’s not really like that,” I said. “You’re just saying that because you’re still mad at Xavier.”

Lola scoffed. “Yeah, no shit! I mean, aren’t you? Don’t tell me you’ve just forgiven him for all the shit he pulled.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “I mean… Yes and no.”

Lola narrowed her eyes at me.

“Lola, I need you to stop being judgmental for a second.”

Lola scoffed again.

“Really, Lola! It’s not helping. We have to live with Xavier—and I think it’s best if we just let things be. Forgive him. Hold him accountable for the shitty stuff he did of his own free will, give him a pass for the stuff that Adéluce forced him to do, and just try to see him as himself again.” I sighed. “Kind of like himself, at least.”

Lola was quiet.

“Don’t you miss him?” I pressed. “He was your friend, too.”

Lola sighed. “I do miss him. He was part of our pack. He was like a brother to me… And that’s why all of this hurt so bad. To see him hurting the entire pack, but also my BFF? It was just a lot. It was easier to be angry.”

I reached for my friend’s hand. “I totally get that. And I’m not trying to slap a Band-Aid over the whole thing or anything, but I’m just so tired of being angry. And I think I miss him, too, but being mad at him doesn’t make me miss him any less. It’s probably the same for you.”

Lola sighed again, a bigger one this time. “No, being mad doesn’t help.” Still, I could tell that she was really struggling with letting this go. “But I guess if you can get over this and give him the benefit of the doubt, I should be able to do that, too. So I’ll try. For you.”

We hugged and I leaned into it, happy to have my friend on my side. I loved that she was so protective over me, but I was confident that she didn’t need to protect me from Xavier. Not anymore.

A few seconds later, Greyson jogged over.

“Sorry to interrupt, but can I steal Cali away?” he asked Lola.

“She’s all yours,” Lola said. “Now, where’s my Jay? *He’ll* do a shot with me!”

She gave me a pointed look before she ran off to look for her mate.

I turned to Greyson and smiled. “What’s up?”

He smiled back. “I’m just glad that things are getting back to normal after Chessa. It’s such a relief to just relax and spend time with everyone without having to worry about some ancient vampire bursting out of the bushes to pick us off one by one.”

I nodded. “Yes, but we still do have Macauley locked in the basement. We should probably try to do something about that.”

Greyson frowned. “Has Lola been able to ask Emmett to come back and take Macauley to that vampire school?”

I shrugged. “Not sure—I’ll have to ask Lola. I forgot to bring it up earlier… But I guess there’s nothing we can do about it tonight, anyway. Let’s just deal with that tomorrow. We deserve to have a little fun tonight.”

Greyson nodded. “Agreed. And I’ve been thinking a lot about that camping trip with Xavier and Colton. I hope that Xavier can get Colton to agree. He’s the wildcard in all this. And he’s got two new babies, so there’s probably a chance that he won’t be able to get away again.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that hard to convince him,” I said dryly. “Not as long as Xavier comes across as sincere. And knowing Maya, I’m sure she’ll be happy for a little break from Colton.”

All this talk of brotherly relationships made me think about how Artemis and I hadn’t known each other at all in the beginning, and yet we’d still managed to grow so close… Not that said closeness had stopped Artemis from leaving. Still, I wanted that for Greyson—a chance for him to form a tight relationship with his brothers. I knew that Colton would probably be hesitant to commit to the camping trip, but I truly believed that the brothers needed a little quality time together, just the three of them.

“I’m not sure how sincere Xavier will be when he asks Colton to come,” Greyson said, a little ruefully. “I had to twist Xavier’s arm plenty just to get him to consider coming. But I’m going to keep after him until I wear him down and convince him of how much fun it will be.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “You and I both know that Xavier’s a big softie, deep down. I’m sure he’ll start to come around—and maybe even get excited enough to convince Colton, if it comes to that.”

“I hope you’re right,” Greyson said.

As we picked up and made our way inside, Greyson said, “It definitely seems like something’s changed in Xavier—and that’s a good thing.”

I pondered that, doing a mental comparison between the Xavier I’d first met and the Xavier I knew now.

“I can’t argue with that,” I finally said.

*Still, I’m not about to bring up any of the conversations I’ve had with Xavier about us turning over a new leaf. Not when it’s probably a sensitive subject for Greyson, what with all the kisses and close calls that Xavier and I have had in the process of trying to figure out our new relationship.*

Greyson stopped me as I made to walk past the stairs to the kitchen.

“I’m thinking that the others can finish cleaning up.” He pulled me into a slow, sexy kiss, then pulled back, his eyes twinkling. “You and I have some unfinished business to attend to.”

**Episode 5013**

**Xavier**

After spending a bit more time at the lake, Ava and I headed back toward the pack house. The rest of the Samaras were probably already there, but Ava and I were content to continue our run. We weren’t mind linking, and were just enjoying each other’s company—Luna and Alpha, enjoying the earth beneath our feet and the wind in our fur.

It was nice, being with Ava like this. We knew each other well, and had reached that point in our relationship where we didn’t have to talk to communicate. I could tell she was having a good time by the way she ran, the lightness in her step. I knew she could tell that I was content by how close I was to her, and how I nudged her with my snout every once in a while, just to let her know that I was happy to be with her.

And I couldn’t help but think about Ava’s earlier remark, about the bright future that lay ahead.

*Dare I be hopeful? Hell yeah. Things have finally turned around, and it’s about time. I’ve been through a lot—I never actually thought I’d be this happy again.*

I could finally put the past behind me and make the Samaras into one of the strongest packs in the region. Respected and feared. The envy of all. It was exciting to think that all of this was only the beginning—that I’d only just begun to tap into the Samaras’ potential.

But that little fantasy hit a wall as the pack house came into view, and I spotted one pack member skulking around outside.

Knox.

He’d made no secret of how he felt about Milo joining the pack, and had shown his distaste by grumbling audibly when I’d announced it. I’d ignored his reaction—and him, in general—at the time, but I knew I was going to have to defuse his antagonism if I was ever going to get any peace. He’d been coming around, and I’d been coming around to him too. I didn’t want to lose that progress and go through all that shit again.

*I see him*, Ava mind linked. *Do you actually want to talk to him right now? I can get rid of him if you don’t. This is your night—you shouldn’t have to deal with his shit.*

*No, it’s fine*, I said. *I can handle another one of the little shrimp’s temper tantrums. I’ve come to expect them.*

Ava shifted back to human just before we reached the porch.

*Good luck*, she mind linked as she headed for the door.

I shifted back too and, ignoring Knox for the moment, ran past him to catch up with Ava.

“Wait!” I called.

I grabbed her around the waist and spun her around, then pulled her into a deep kiss. I loved the way Ava always responded to me, as if my touch ignited every nerve ending in her body.

“You know I couldn’t have done any of this without you, right?” I said quietly.

“Oh, I know.”

Ava grabbed the back of my head and pulled me back into the kiss, but I was the one who took the lead. I walked her back until I had her pressed against the house, my tongue plunging and swirling against hers, my entire body responding to the soft press of her nakedness against my own.

I had to stop myself from going any further, from taking her right then and there, out in the cool night air. And this time, it wasn’t Chessa making me feel so desperate. I really just wanted her. But there was Knox to consider.

Ava pulled away, her beautiful eyes heavy-lidded as she looked at me. “You can thank me properly later.”

My wolf stirred as I watched her head inside. Ava might’ve been small, but her hold on me was massive. I had to wonder if she had any idea how into her I really was. Though maybe it was better that she didn’t.

With a sigh, I turned and headed back to Knox, who’d wandered a little farther away during our make out session. I wasn’t looking forward to speaking with him—even more so now that I knew what was waiting for me inside.

“You got a problem?” I said.

Knox glared at me. “You know exactly what my problem is. I told you that Milo isn’t to be trusted, and you went ahead and let him join the pack anyway. Do you think that’s right?”

I let my head fall back, exasperated. I was so tired of this. It was like we were having the same fucking conversation over and over again.

“Knox, why do you have to fight me on every single fucking thing I do?” I demanded. “Every single decision I make? I’m over it. You can’t have it both ways. What’s good for the pack is good for every member, yourself included. And bringing in new recruits, making the pack larger? That’s objectively good for everyone.”

“But Milo’s only out for himself!” Knox insisted. “It worries me that you can’t see that. You should’ve asked if I was okay with it before you let him in!”

I was barely able to hold back my anger, and had to work hard to keep my fists at my sides instead of using them to pummel Knox into the ground. No matter how annoying he was, he was still a member of my pack. And that meant I was obligated to hear him out and work through his problems, if for no other reason than to keep the pack working in harmony.

“Since when is an Alpha expected to ask permission to make decisions?” I asked flatly. “Alphas give orders and expect them to be carried out, to be obeyed. Do I need to remind you that you pledged yourself to me as your Alpha, too?”

“Yes, but—”

“There are no buts, Knox,” I snapped. “You really have to make up your mind about this once and for all, because I’m sick to death of all this back and forth with you. Either you’re with the Samara pack, or you’re not. Which is it? If you want to go off and find a pack that better fits your sensibilities, then be my guest.”

Knox started to say something, but stopped himself. Finally, he said, “I’m a Samara. There’s no other pack for me.”

“Good,” I said tersely. “If that’s true, then I don’t want to hear another word about this.”

Knox grumbled, but headed inside.

I wasn’t stupid. We’d had what amounted to this exact conversation so many times, and I was already wondering how long it would be before Knox got a bug up his ass and started causing problems again.

I was about to go inside too, but then I realized that my headache was gone.

*And here I was, thinking about how this night couldn’t possibly get any better… Now I’m not in pain and I can actually think straight?*

And then I thought about Ava, probably waiting for me inside, dressed in something lacy and barely there…

I made my way inside, not wanting to keep her waiting a moment longer than I had to. I was ready to drown myself in her and forget about everything else. But as I went in, I hesitated. As much as I wanted to have sex with Ava, I knew she wasn’t going to let up about the stupid Carlson Greene bullshit. If I wanted to put my situation with the two mates to rest, I’d have to deal with it sometime… Fuck.

And there was the other bullshit I had to deal with with my brothers. The fucking camping trip. I sighed and dialed Colton as I made my way upstairs.

Just as I was about to hang up, Colton answered with a harsh whisper. “Do you have any fucking idea how late it is?”

I winced. “Sorry, man. I lost track of time.”

“Obviously. Hold on. I don’t want to wake the babies. We only just got them to sleep.”

I heard shuffling, then the click of a door opening and closing.

“Okay, I’m out of the bedroom now,” he said. “What’s so important that you’re calling me after midnight?”

“Okay, so I have good news and bad news,” I said. “The good news is that another vampire has joined all the other vampires who’ve tried to fuck with the Evers brothers.”

Colton chuckled. “Okay, excellent. And what’s the bad news?”

“Greyson is still pushing for this camping trip,” I said. “You know how I feel about that shit, but he really wants to do it, and I said I’d ask you.”

There was a long silence and I wondered if Colton had hung up.

“I’ll do it,” Colton finally said. “When?”

“No idea. We haven’t figured out any of the details yet, but I get the impression that Greyson is hoping for sooner rather than later—though I would rather not at all.”

“I know, it’s not your style,” Colton said. “It’s barely mine, but I suppose if Greyson wants to go that badly…”

“Yeah, but I don’t know… Things aren’t great between me and Greyson, even after all this time. He still drives me up the wall sometimes. Don’t know if I like the idea of being stuck out in the woods with him.”

“Yeah, but at least out there, no one will hear him scream.” Colton said, laughing.

I chuckled. “Yeah, you have a point there.”

“So, what’s it going to be, man?” Colton asked. “If you agree to go, then I’m on board too. So what do you say?”

**Episode 5014**

**Ava**

I was in the bathroom when I heard Xavier walk into our bedroom. Then I heard him laugh and say, “I don’t think any of us are thrilled about it. I don’t even think Greyson is, really. But there might be something in it. I guess it could be good for us.”

My sharp hearing picked up the deep timbre of Colton’s voice on the other end of the call, and I went stiff. I wrapped my robe tightly around myself and walked out into the bedroom, where Xavier was sitting on the bed.

He nodded at me, but continued his conversation.

“And it would be just us, right?” Colton said, on the other end.

There was a certain tone to his question, and I immediately understood its meaning.

*He wants to make sure I won’t be there.*

He’d made his feelings about me very clear the last time he’d been here. Maybe it was just my deeply-ingrained anxieties at work, but I just didn’t like the idea of Xavier and Colton being alone together—even if Greyson was going to be there, too. It wasn’t like Xavier’s other brother liked me very much, either.

“It’ll just be the three Evers brothers, if this thing even happens,” Xavier told Colton.

“Okay,” Colton said. “But I’m going to have to figure out what to do about Maya and the babies. I can’t just ditch her with them again—I need to know the dates in advance so I can do some planning.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I know more, okay?”

“Good,” he said. “Now don’t call me this late again, asshole. I’m a dad now.”

With that, they ended the call.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Colton,” Xavier said. “Greyson wants the three of us to go on some stupid camping trip. I’m not really into it, but if they both want to do it, I feel like I should just suck it up and go.”

*I love that he doesn’t even want to go. I might actually have a fighting chance.*

“You can decide later,” I said. “It’s been a long night, but everyone’s still hanging around downstairs. It’s really nice to see more people in the pack.”

“I know,” Xavier said. “It feels really, really good. Maybe we should go join them? Since we’re their Alpha and Luna and all—”

I rested a hand on his chest before he could get up. “You can go downstairs soon.”

He raised an eyebrow, and I felt my heart rate quicken.

“I just want some time alone with you,” I said. “I’m so proud of what you’ve done for the pack.”

“What *we* did for the pack,” he insisted.

I smiled and slid onto his lap, letting my robe fall open to reveal just a hint of the lacy red lingerie I was wearing underneath it.

I watched his gaze move from my face down to my body.

“You want that thank-you now?” he asked. “Is that it?”

I bit my lip and flipped my hair over my shoulder. “Maybe.”

Grinning lazily, he slowly began to slip my robe off my shoulders and down my arms. My breath caught in my throat and I closed my eyes so I could just focus on the sensation of his strong hands against my skin.

“When did you get this?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and looked down at myself. “What, this old thing?”

Xavier finally got my robe off and I reached out to touch him, but he grabbed my hands and held them behind my back.

“I don’t recognize it,” he said.

“What does it matter? You’re going to rip it off, anyway.” I arched my back so that my breasts were heaving close to his face. “You *are* going to rip it off, aren’t you?”

That got a rise out of him. He released my hands and licked his lips as he ran a fingertip along the hem of the fabric, tracing a line along the tops of my breasts.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said, looking up at me. “From head to toe.”

He reached up and threaded his fingers through my hair, pulling my head back so that my neck was exposed. I held my breath, waiting to feel his lips, but instead I felt his teeth.

I moaned as he nibbled on my neck, biting me gently at first, and then, much harder. “That’s going to leave a mark.”

“Only for a few minutes,” he said, then he nibbled hard and pulled a cry from my lips. “You’ll heal in no time, and no one will ever be the wiser.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the tickle of his breath against my skin, gasping when his hands found my ass and squeezed hard. He pulled me close, so that I could feel his erection against my stomach.

“You feel that?” he asked, his lips taking over from his teeth. “You feel how hard you make me?”

“I feel it,” I breathed.

He planted soft kisses up and down my neck, then trailed down to press a wet kiss right between my breasts. His tongue came next, and I smiled when I felt the warm tip dancing along the fullest past of my breasts.

And then his hands left my ass and he tore my top right off me with a satisfying rip that sent a chill down my spine.

“That’s better,” he groaned as my breasts bounced free.

Using his teeth again, he worked on one nipple and then the other, all while pressing me against his cock, which seemed to be growing harder by the second.

He stood up, holding me in his strong arms, and then immediately turned and tossed me back onto the bed. I landed with a giggle, and he was instantly on top of me.

His hand slid down to cup my sex, and he let me feel his full weight, pressing me into the bed as his lips found mine again.

“Don’t need these, either,” he said. With one fluid movement, he ripped my panties off. A second later, his fingers were pressing inside me, swirling and pumping and stoking the heat that was gathering between my legs.

I reached up and ran my hands through his hair, looking up to see that his beautiful blue eyes were drinking me in, admiring me. I loved the adoration I saw there. I wanted to look into those eyes for the rest of our lives.

Xavier suddenly flipped over onto his back and grabbed me by the hips, easily lifting me up to straddle his face.

“Sit, now,” he ordered. “I want to taste you.”

I felt weak as I slowly lowered myself down—like my limbs were barely functioning. I gasped when I felt the tip of his tongue flick against my clit, and then he circled it around until I’d mounted his face. At the same time, he sent his tongue deep into me.

I nearly collapsed from the pleasure, but I managed to stay put, looking down at him as he thrust his tongue in and out, his nose pressing into my folds, moans vibrating from his mouth and surging through my body.

It wasn’t long before I began to shake, bucking my hips against his face, right on the cusp of coming. But before I could, Xavier grabbed my hips, lifted me up, and slid me down…slowly…onto his cock.

“Fuck Ava. You feel so good.”

“X,” I whined, unable to say anything else, my mind a total blank—except for one thing.

One fact was ringing through my mind as Xavier jerked his hips up from the bed, driving himself in deep. I was never going to give him up. I wanted to make love to him every day for the rest of my life, and I would do anything to make that happen. I loved him. I loved the way he knew my body, the way he made love to me, the way he looked at me—even when he didn’t know I was watching.

Even the way he was looking at me now, as he held my hips flush against his and rocked my body against his… It took my breath away.

“I love you,” I moaned as I came. My climax came as a surprise to Xavier, but I wasn’t surprised at all. All it had taken was looking too deeply in his eyes, thinking about my powerful Alpha bringing those new recruits into the pack. Thinking about the way he’d held my hand as they’d pledged themselves to him—to *us*.

And now that same sense of power was surging inside me, claiming me, bringing me the kind of pleasure I’d never known from anyone but him.

“Fuck!” Xavier hissed as his own orgasm made his body go rigid. He reached up and pulled me down so that I was lying against him. His hips bucked and jerked until he was spent, and even then, he didn’t let go.

“You’re not going downstairs,” I joked when we were finished. “I know I’m not. I don’t think I can even walk right now.”

Xavier chuckled. “No, I think I’ll stay here too. We’ll have plenty of opportunities to celebrate the newcomers.”

“Just what I was thinking,” I said as I snuggled up against him.

As I began to drift off to sleep, there was only one thought in my mind: I had to make absolutely sure that Colton didn’t try to take Xavier away from me.

**Episode 5015**

**Greyson**

I wasted no time pulling Cali into the shower. I’d done my part in making sure the pack was taken care of, that they could celebrate their victory—now, all I wanted was more time with my mate.

Once our clothes had been peeled away and the hot, steaming water was pelting down on us, I took my time with her. I’d take all the time we needed, all the time we *could*, until my responsibilities pulled me away again.

My sudsy hands moved over her skin, and she practically melted against me. My palms slipped off her shoulders and slid down her back, then around to her front. She sighed as my slippery palms brushed against her nipples. I kissed a gentle trail down the side of her neck. This time, I wanted to savor her. As hot as the urgency had been before, I wanted this to last.

Cali turned in my arms and pulled me into a kiss, her mouth urgent against mine. I kissed her back, cupping her face between my hands, purposely slowing the kiss. Her hands slipped down my chest, then lower. I caught her wrists with a little growl against her mouth. I loved it when she touched me, loved how much she wanted me, but I wanted to control the pace, too.

And right now, I wanted to keep her wanting. The same way I had kept wanting her since earlier. With one more kiss, I broke away and spun her around to rinse her hair. When that was done, I boxed her in against the shower wall.

“I’m going to take my time with you,” I whispered. “See how many times I can make you come before you’ve forgotten everything but my name.”

Cali’s face got even redder. “Greyson…”

I lifted her into my arms, and her legs automatically wrapped around my waist.

“And that, my little Fae, is a promise.”

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Morning came too early, and I had to tear myself from Cali’s side to get some coffee going. Last night had been amazing. More than anything, I wished I could just spend the whole day in bed with her… But I still had a pack to run, so I forced myself out of bed with all the self-control I possessed. As I pulled on some clothes, Cali rolled over and blinked up at me sleepily.

I leaned over to kiss her forehead. “Sorry for waking you. Go back to sleep.”

“Mmm… You should join me,” she mumbled, her voice rough with sleep, her hair tousled and spread across her pillow.

God, she was so damn sexy. I couldn’t stop myself from dropping a line of kisses down the side of her face until I met her lips. The kiss was a little clumsy—she was still half asleep—but it was enough to bring me *very* close to climbing back into bed and seeing where things might go. But I mustered up the last of my self-control and pulled back.

“How does breakfast in bed sound?” I asked.

“Sounds great. Thank you.”

“Anything for you, love.”

I headed downstairs, part of me still wishing I was free of all the responsibilities that had pulled me out of bed this morning. But that was my lot, wasn’t it?

*Heavy is the head that has to govern this goddamn pack*,I thought ruefully. In all honesty, I wouldn’t have had it any other way, but some days were easier than others. Especially when my responsibilities took me away from Cali. *But hey, at least we’ll get breakfast in bed.*

I smiled at the thought and picked up the pace, thinking about what I could make for her. Coffee, obviously. Maybe some pancakes and eggs?

I stepped into the kitchen, and my smile faded when I found Kendall there, digging through the drawers.

“Can I help you find something?” I asked. My voice came out a little sharper than I’d intended, and Kendall whipped around.

She pressed a hand to her chest when she saw me. “You really know how to sneak up on a girl.”

*Umm… Thanks?*

“I wasn’t being that quiet.” I looked her over. It was probably no surprise that she hadn’t heard me—she looked more than a little hungover. I eased past her and started making coffee, if only to give me something to do with my hands. “I’m surprised you stayed the night.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, well. It was late and your packmates gave me quite a few shots. Plus, I have the day off. I figured I might as well take my time.”

Still, I was surprised she hadn’t wanted to hurry back home to nurse her hangover. She didn’t exactly seem the type to hang around for the morning after a big party. Or to attend parties in general.

I still couldn’t shake the weird feeling I got every time I was around her—it was like we’d met somewhere before or something. Except we obviously hadn’t. I’d have remembered those eyes, at minimum. Also, I liked to think I’d have remembered meeting someone who was both unpleasant and omnipresent. She just kept showing up in my life—in Cali’s life. And now, she was in my house, standing in the kitchen with me as the coffee percolated so painfully slowly, it was making me grind my teeth.

I cleared my throat as the silence lengthened between us and began to turn awkward. “So, um… Nice weather we’re having, huh?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back. *Nice weather we’re having? What am I? A bank teller?* This chick was in my house, drinking my coffee and interrupting what had been a fantastic morning. Why was I the one bending over backward to play polite? And why the hell couldn’t I ever seem to get comfortable around her?

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and I nearly sagged with relief when Mikah walked into the kitchen. The vampire’s gaze lingered on Kendall for a few beats before he looked at me. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” I grumbled.

“I’m surprised you two are up,” Mikah said. “It seems like everyone partied pretty hard last night.”

Kendall didn’t even bother to look his way. “Not everyone.”

“Are you staying long?” he asked her, an edge to his voice that hadn’t been there before.

She shrugged. “I just want a cup of coffee. Is that a problem?”

She  sounded edgy too, all of a sudden. Well, edgier than usual. *What the…*

“What’s going on between you two?” I demanded.

Kendall and Mikah exchanged a long look, which pretty much confirmed to me that *something* was going on, even if they decided not to admit it.

“On second thought, I really should get going,” Kendall said.

I frowned. “The coffee’s almost ready.”

We’d stood in awkward silence together waiting for it, and now she wanted to bail?

But it was too late—she’d scooped up her bag and was heading for the door. “I’ll just stop at Starbucks.”

And with that, she walked out the door, leaving me completely nonplussed.

I turned to Mikah. “What the fuck was that about?”

He shrugged. “I guess she’s particular about her coffee.”

He turned to leave.

“Hold on,” I said. “Did something happen between you two that I should know about?”

He hesitated. Then he slowly turned around. “You probably won’t have to worry about Kendall anymore, now that Chessa is dead. She’ll go back to her job, and you can go back to running the Redwood pack.”

I frowned. *What the hell is* that *supposed to mean?*

“I’m not worried about Kendall,” I said. “She’s just an irritating Rogue who seems to think she has an open invitation to show up—”

But Mikah was already walking out of the kitchen.

“Whenever she wants,” I finished, then sighed.

By my count, that was two people who’d walked out on me in a single morning. Luckily for them, they weren’t Redwoods, or they’d have had hell to pay. I couldn’t make any sense of this. Clearly, Mikah knew something about Kendall. Something he was keeping close to his chest.

I shook my head as I poured myself a cup of coffee. *Maybe Mikah’s right. I don’t have to worry about Kendall anymore. Isn’t that the silver lining here?*

I stepped out on the porch, coffee in hand, just in time to see Kendall adjust her bag over her shoulder, glance back at me, and then shift and disappear into the woods. For some stupid reason, I felt the urge to follow her. I just wished I knew why.

I was heading back inside to get started on Cali’s breakfast when my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was Xavier.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I deadpanned.

“Morning.” My brother didn’t sound any happier to be speaking to me than he usually did, but at least he was calling. “I talked to Colton—though I just want it on the record that I’m not thrilled about the idea of this trip.”

“Noted,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And Colton?”

Xavier sighed. “Colton wants to do it, so we’re in. He’s looking into getting someone to help Maya with the twins while he’s gone.”

“Great,” I said, genuinely shocked this was happening. “So, when do we want to go?”

**Episode 5016**

**Xavier**

I headed back toward the Samara pack house. I’d just finished a long run through the woods, which was something I usually found soothing. Today, though, being out in the woods had just reminded me of the impending camping trip—and more or less sucked all the joy out of the run.

*I should’ve told Colton what a terrible idea it was instead of just passing Greyson’s offer along.*

Because it was definitely a terrible idea. Like, potentially catastrophic. Greyson and I had finally reached a point where we could tolerate being around each other, but that only applied for a very limited time. And even that distinctly uncomfortable truce had taken months to build. Years, even. We could make it through a barbecue, sure. But an entire weekend with nothing to do but talk to each other? I felt nauseous just thinking about it.

*Can we honestly make it through forty-eight hours of nonstop contact without killing each other?*

I wasn’t sure.

By the time I walked into the house, I’d already made up my mind. I was going to come up with an excuse to get out of the trip. Something that wouldn’t hurt Greyson’s feelings—not that his feelings really mattered all that much to me—but would keep us from embarking on this god-awful bond-fest that was bound to end in violence.

The idea of brotherly bonding was good in theory, but so were a lot of truly awful things. So, for now, the trip would have to wait. What was the rush, anyway? Things were just starting to settle down. I, for one, wanted to take a little time to enjoy this rare opportunity to breathe.

I headed up to my room, desperately in need of a shower. On my way to the stairs, I passed the living room, where Ava, Marissa, and Josephine were sitting together, cradling steaming mugs. It looked like they were having a good time together.

Ava caught my eye and smiled. As I smiled back, my skull lit up with a jolt of pain, and I did my best to hide my grimace as I turned away and headed back up the stairs. Apparently, some things hadn’t changed—and that fucking migraine that flared up sometimes when I so much as smiled at Ava was one of them.

I showered, trying to wash away the dark thoughts that were looming in my head. But then, when I got out of the shower, I saw a text message on my phone—it was a reminder of today’s appointment with Carlson Greene. It was supposed to start in an hour.

*Fuck. I really should’ve tried harder to cancel that.*

Was I still having some trouble with this whole double mate thing? Yeah, obviously. I couldn’t be around Ava or Cali without getting a fucking migraine. The situation was far from ideal, but I’d been so preoccupied with pack stuff lately that I’d pretty much forgotten about my looming therapy appointment.

Seriously, what the hell had I been thinking when I’d set that whole thing up? Therapy? I wasn’t that kind of guy, and the very idea of “taking some me time” made me want to call Greyson and suggest we go camping right that fucking instant.

But things were quiet now. We had breathing room. And that meant there was nothing to distract me from the headaches and the constant stress of knowing that I’d eventually have to choose between Ava and Cali. So maybe this really *was* a good time to try out this therapy thing. At the minimum, I’d promised Ava that I’d take care of this problem, and I could tell her patience with my bullshit was wearing thin.

I sighed. *Would talking to this Carlson guy for an hour really be that hard? Hell, I just helped kill a crazed vampire. How hard can therapy be?*

With dread tightening in my stomach, I opened up the appointment reminder and sent a reply.

*CONFIRM*.

After that, there wasn’t much else for me to do but get dressed and ready to head out. I grabbed my keys and headed downstairs. Ava stepped out into the hallway when I was on my way to the door.

“Where are you off to?” she asked.

I glanced over her shoulder, where Marissa and Josephine were pretending not to be eavesdropping, though they obviously were. It was one thing for Ava to know where I was going and to possibly come herself at some point, but I didn’t want it getting around the pack that the Alpha was going to therapy. I could only imagine how Knox and Blaine would react if they found out.

“I’m going out,” I said aloud. If I just mind linked, they’d probably figure I was hiding something. “I have some stuff to take care of.”

Her eyes narrowed. *What stuff?*

I sighed. *You know.* Stuff*.*

If I’d expected Ava to catch my drift, I was disappointed when her frown only deepened. *Care to elaborate?*

I cleared my throat. This was what I hadn’t wanted to happen with the others listening. *I’m going to see that fucking so-called therapist, Carlson Greene.*

Ava’s brows rose, and her mouth made an “O” shape.

*Oh. That’s great, Xavier*, she said. It sounded like she meant it, and the worry and frustration had already vanished from her face. *Do you want me to go with you?*

Absolutely not. If I wanted to sort all of this out, the last thing I needed was to know that Ava was watching my every move.

I softened my response when I actually spoke. *Thank you, but no. I said I’d take care of it myself, and I’m doing exactly that. Just… Please don’t tell the others. This needs to stay between the two of us, okay?*

Ava smiled and kissed me. *It’s our little secret.*

I headed out, annoyed all over again that I’d talked myself into doing this at all. I shouldn’t have *needed* to do it. I mean, how many Alphas needed *therapy*? Admittedly, I could think of a few who could’ve benefited from it—Lucian and Greyson came to mind—but none of them would ever have admitted to needing it, much less sought it out.

A few minutes later, I was on the road to Bend. Thankfully, I knew I could trust Ava not to say anything about what I was doing today. Fortunately, nobody else had questioned me on my way out. It’d be a cold day in hell before I told them the truth, but I didn’t want to have to keep up with a bunch of lies, either.

With every mile that brought me closer to my destination, I felt that unease growing in my gut. I had no fucking clue what to expect from this meeting—all I really knew was that it felt a little bit like I was going against my will. But I had to do something, right? The migraines weren’t getting worse, but they sure as shit weren’t getting better. And, more than that, they were a problem. A problem I didn’t think I could simply learn to live with.

For a brief moment, I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to spend time with Ava or Cali and not be in agony.

*Is that really possible? Can this Carlson Greene guy really help?*

By the time I reached Greene’s office, I was consumed with misgivings. This was a huge mistake. It had to be. Just like the camping trip.

But I’d made the appointment, and Ava had looked so pleased when I’d told her I was going. I might as well not blow this guy off. I’d go in there, keep my appointment, and try to make it as short as possible. Then I could honestly say I’d attended, and I’d be able to move on with my life with impunity.

I forced myself to walk into the office and approach the receptionist.

“Um, hi,” I said. “I’m here for my appointment. Xavier Evers.” I felt more self-conscious with every choked-out word.

The receptionist smiled warmly. “Welcome, Xavier. Dr. Greene is ready for you.”

She gestured to a door adjacent to her desk, but my feet remained rooted to the floor.

She frowned. “Are you okay?”

I wanted to scream. *Of course I’m not okay! Would I be here if I* was?

Instead of screaming, though, I ignored her and strode into Greene’s office. The scent of patchouli oil smacked into me as Greene stood up, smiling as he walked around his desk. He held out his hand for me to shake.

“Mr. Evers,” he said. “How wonderful that you’ve decided to better yourself.”

And just like that, I knew I was gonna fucking hate this guy.

Greene gestured to a chair and a couch near his desk. “Whichever you prefer.”

I plopped down on the chair, and Greene took a seat in his own chair, across from me.

“So,” he said, “what brings you here?”

“I get headaches,” I said, forcing each syllable from my mouth.

He raised a brow. “You do realize I’m a counselor, not a medical doctor.”

God, I wanted to punch him. “I know. I get the headaches whenever I’m around either of my mates.”

“Oh.” Greene was looking intrigued, now, which only made me want to punch him more. I wasn’t some sideshow for him to gawk at. “You have more than one mate?”

“The situation’s very complicated,” I said tightly. “But yes.”

He wrote something down in a little notepad on his desk. He seemed to weigh his words carefully before he asked his next question.

“You’re an Alpha?”

I nodded.

“When did you become aware of the problem?”

“I think it started after Adéluce died—she was this vampire-witch who cursed me and forced me to reject one mate so I could fall in love with the other one. Now the curse is gone, but I’m left with these headaches.”

“Well, that certainly does sound complicated,” Greene said sympathetically. “But I have heard of similar cases—minus the vampire-witch, of course.” He smiled. “There have actually been numerous documented cases featuring werewolves being pulled between two different mates and suffering for it.” He leaned forward. “Mr. Evers, before we proceed, I need to know something. If you had to choose between your mates, which one would you choose?”

**Episode 5017**

I breathed in the fresh air, a smile tugging at my lips as I strolled through the woods. There was no better way to start the day than with a quiet, reflective walk.

I heard footsteps on the path behind me and stopped walking, twisting around to see. It was Greyson’s wolf, looking even bigger and more powerful than usual. The sight took my breath away.

*He’s just so… magnificent.*

Then he shifted back to human. Very naked human. My mouth went dry as I drank in the sinuous lines of his muscular body. Suddenly, I felt like I needed to pinch myself. Was this ridiculously handsome man seriously my mate?

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going out?” he demanded, frowning.

I was so caught up in just *looking* at him that it took me a moment to respond. “Sorry, what?”

“You just left,” he said flatly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving? Or where you were going?”

My smile disappeared, and confusion rushed in. “I… I thought I did. Didn’t I tell you I was going for a walk after we finished breakfast in bed?”

*Maybe I forgot.*

“Where are you going?” he snapped.

“Nowhere!” I retorted, suddenly feeling defensive. “I’m just enjoying a walk. I’m not actually going anywhere in particular.”

“Maybe that’s your problem,” Greyson said, his expression darkening.

“Excuse me? What problem?”

“You’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t figure out where you’re going,” he said. “If you don’t figure out where you *want* to go.”

It was impossible to miss the implication in his words, but I wasn’t about to take the bait. Where did he get off, ambushing me like this?

“You’re being a little harsh and a lot judgmental, don’t you think?” I demanded. “I’m not talking about my life. All I did was go for a walk. Since when do I need permission for that? And why do I need to know where I’m going to end up? What if I don’t? What if I’m just enjoying my time and not worrying about the destination? Is that a crime?”

Greyson’s expression darkened even more, turning absolutely thunderous. But before he could reply, there was movement in the nearby foliage, and Xavier came running up in his wolf form. Dread knotted in my stomach. Greyson and I were on the verge of a fight, and Xavier showing up definitely wouldn’t help things.

Xavier growled and shifted as well, and suddenly I was flanked on either side by my ridiculously sexy, naked mates.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Xavier growled. “Why didn’t you show up for breakfast?”

I didn’t think any combination of words could’ve surprised me more. “What breakfast?”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you forgot. This is so typical.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I insisted. “We didn’t have breakfast plans. You live at the Samara pack house—I’m at the Redwood house. Why would I come over to have breakfast with the Samaras?”

The thought of it was enough to scramble my brain. It just didn’t compute. Not to mention the fact that Ava would’ve sooner slit my throat than let me take her place at Xavier’s side with the Samara pack, even over breakfast.

“That’s exactly the problem,” Xavier pressed. “You’re with the wrong pack.”

I blew out a breath and turned to Greyson, hoping for backup, but he’d shifted back into his wolf form. He let out a deep growl that reverberated through my body before he turned around and disappeared into the woods.

*Seriously? First he gets all bent out of shape because I didn’t tell him where I was going, and now he’s the one running off without so much as a goodbye?*

I turned back to Xavier. “I’m sorry, I—”

Only he’d shifted too, and I only caught a glimpse of him before he disappeared into the trees as well.

“*Caliana!*”

I looked around. “Who’s there?”

“*Caliana!* Wake up!”

I jolted awake, and panic turned to gut-wrenching horror when I realized I was in one of my college classes, and the person who’d been calling my name was my professor.

*Maybe this is a nightmare. too?*

I pinched myself, then winced. Nope, this part was real.

I looked around the classroom, which was empty. “Where is everyone?”

“Class ended several minutes ago,” the professor said stiffly. “Did you have a good nap?”

I shook my head. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sure you are.” The professor pulled the quiz from under my hand. The quiz that I’d used as a pillow for my nap. The quiz in which I hadn’t filled in a single answer. “Might I offer some advice? Napping isn’t the best way to ace a surprise quiz.”

“Again, I’m just so, so sorry.”

I gathered up my things and rushed out of the classroom as quickly as I could—as if the more physical distance I put between myself and the source of my abject humiliation, the less I’d feel it.

It didn’t work, and I stopped at the first bench I saw to try to collect myself. As if sleeping through my class and getting caught by the professor in the worst way possible wasn’t bad enough, my dream had left me feeling off kilter and uneasy, too.

It had just been so intense… I tried to remember exactly what had happened. Something about Greyson accusing me of wasting my life, and Xavier showing up angry because I’d blown off breakfast plans with him?

It had been a bizarre dream, and, like most dreams, it didn’t make sense. So why was it sticking with me?

I thought about something Greyson had once told me. *Sometimes, a dream is just a dream.* But as I headed for my next class, the dream was still hanging over me like a dark cloud.

On the way, I crossed paths with Lola.

“Hey. I hope your day is going better than mine,” she said. “I forgot to study for a test in my next class… I meant to study after the barbecue, but you saw how crazy things got…” She frowned. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “I’m just a little shaken, I guess. I fell asleep in class and had the weirdest dream.”

Lola slowly shook her head. “No, I think it’s more than that. You look pale—like something is physically wrong with you. Maybe you should go to the campus doctor? I’ll take you.”

I shook my head again. “No, that’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Well, text me if you change your mind,” she said. “I could use the excuse to get out of this test.”

She winked at me, then headed off to her next class. I kept walking toward mine, but when I reached the building’s front doors, I paused.

“Hey, watch out. You’re blocking the door,” a student griped as they pushed past me.

I stepped away from the doors and leaned against the building, pulling in one slow breath after another.

*What’s wrong with me? Maybe Chessa’s death is affecting me more than I expected? It* was *pretty gruesome…*

I sighed. Chessa’s death was irrelevant. It was over now—and I still had a life to live. I forced myself to walk into my next class, determined to get through the day.

I was feeling more like myself by the time my last class ended I was heading back to my car. I’d managed to make it through without any more weird nightmare-slash-daydreams, so that was a win.

I checked my phone, and my brows rose when I saw a text from Xavier.

*Call me when you get the chance.*

Why would Xavier want to talk to me? Things had been better between us lately, but we were still living more or less separate lives. I thought about my dream, and how angry he’d seemed that I’d missed our breakfast date. And then I remembered the way he’d smiled at me at the barbecue. How he’d promised to do whatever it took to earn back my trust. That had been real. The dream wasn’t.

By the time I reached my car, I’d mustered up enough courage to call Xavier back.

“Hey,” he said. “Thanks for calling.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the sound of his voice. It was so strange to think that a long time ago, his voice had made me tremble with fear.

Silence settled between us for a moment before Xavier spoke again. “I had a good time at the party.”

There was another awkward pause. I wasn’t trying to make things hard for him; I just didn’t know why he’d called me.

I decided to throw him a bone. “You asked me to call you?”

“Right,” he said, sounding relieved. “So, the thing is, I meant what I said at the barbecue. You know, about earning back your trust? To that end, I’d like to do a little more than give you a hot dog.”

I laughed. “It wasn’t lame. Maybe a little overcooked, but it was a nice gesture.”

“Still, would you be willing to give me that chance?” he asked.

“Um…” I hesitated for a moment. “What do you have in mind?”

*He’s being so weird!*

“How about dinner?” he asked.

I stared down at my phone in shock. *Did he just ask me out to dinner? Just the two of us?*

“I can pick you up at seven,” he added. “What do you say? Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

**Episode 5018**

The memory of just how fucking hot Xavier had looked in my daydream-slash-nightmare flashed through my mind as his question hung between us.

Did I want to go to dinner with him tonight? Where was this coming from? I had to be careful here. Xavier and I both had other mates who loved us, other mates who would be hurt to know we were going out to dinner (though admittedly, I couldn’t pretend I was worried about Ava).

Plus, Xavier and I had our own complicated history, even though things had changed dramatically since we’d first hooked up way back when. I didn’t know what to make of this, what his intentions were, what this meant to him. Because going out to dinner… It would certainly mean something to me.

“Are you…” I tried to figure out a way to ask delicately, but then I just decided to blurt it out. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“I know it sounds weird,” he said. “But in the name of making things right between us, and of working out my own issues, I’d really like to have dinner with you so we can talk, just the two of us. No packmates or homicidal vampires or anything else interrupting.”

*Anything else, like our other mates*, I thought dryly.

But there was too much wrapped up in that confession for me to ignore. So he *wasn’t* asking me on a date? He literally just wanted to talk things over in private? I didn’t know whether to feel disappointed or relieved about that. And also—what the ever-loving *hell*? Xavier wanted to talk? About *feelings*?

*Maybe Lola was right. Maybe I* am *sick. So sick that I’m hallucinating.*

“If you don’t want to have dinner tonight, maybe we can try some other time?” Xavier added, his voice soft and vulnerable in a way I’d only ever heard on rare occasions, even when it was just the two of us. I didn’t know what to make of any of this—but I was very sure that there were a lot of ways for this to blow up in our faces.

I cleared my throat. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I just…”

“Just what?”

“Have you run this by Ava?”

He barked out a laugh. “Easier said than done. If Ava isn’t cool with this, it’ll only make things worse, which is saying a lot.”

*And, you know, she’ll probably try to murder me or something.*

“Ava will be fine,” he added. “I promise.”

I almost laughed again. Xavier was making a promise he didn’t have the power to keep, and he had to know that. He might’ve been in love with her, but I didn’t think that could’ve blinded him to the reality we were all dealing with.

“Besides, all I’m asking for is dinner and a conversation,” he said.

*Okay, so he* is *going with the denial route.* I couldn’t help but notice that he hadn’t asked how Greyson might feel about this dinner date. Probably because he knew the answer as well as I did. Or maybe he just didn’t care. Either way, this was still a terrible idea.

But if he was being truthful… If this really *was* nothing more than dinner and conversation, then what was the harm? Xavier and I had a lot of history—and even more baggage—between us. Some private time together to talk things out might do us some good.

“Dinner sounds good, I guess,” I finally said. “But maybe it’d be better if I met you at the restaurant?”

Crossing into each other’s respective pack territories to meet up for dinner would probably cause more drama than it was worth.

I half-expected him to argue, but he didn’t.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’ll text you the details. I look forward to our date.”

“You said it’s not supposed to be a date,” I reminded him.

“Right,” he said quickly. “Our non-date. You know what I mean. I’ll talk to you soon”

He ended the call without another word.

I climbed into my car, my stomach churning with nerves and excitement. I felt like a girl who’d just been asked to the prom, which was crazy, because this dinner wasn’t going to be anything like that. It was just dinner.

With Xavier.

My mate.

*Yeah, this is definitely a bad idea…*

When I got back to the pack house, I found Greyson in his study. He set down what he was working on and smiled at me when I came in.

“How was class?” he asked.

“It was fine,” I lied. I didn’t want to get into the dream with him—I had bigger news to share. “Xavier called.” I told Greyson about our dinner plans. “He’s saying it isn’t a date, but…” I shrugged. “I just thought you should know.”

Greyson didn’t speak for a long string of seconds. His smile had disappeared sometime around the words “Xavier called.”

“Are you okay?” I finally asked. I knew I didn’t have to ask his permission to go, but I didn’t feel great about going without his blessing, either.

He got up and went to the window. “I mean, I’m not thrilled that you have dinner plans with my brother. I know I don’t have a right to be upset. I know that you’re technically still mates, and you’re still a *due destini*, but I also can’t help feeling what I feel. I hope you understand that.”

“I do,” I said quickly. “I know things with Xavier have been up and down for a long time, but maybe this is a way to actually talk to him. I think it’s worth giving it a try, even if the idea makes you a little uncomfortable… Or, you know, a little jealous.”

He threw me a look at that last bit, then shook his head. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. I know why my brother did some of the things he did, but the explanation doesn’t excuse everything.”

I closed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around him. I could see that he was getting worked up over my plans with Xavier, and I didn’t want that.

“I love you,” I said firmly. “And I don’t want to do anything to hurt you. But if this works, if Xavier and I can resolve some of our issues, then wouldn’t that be good for all of us? And think how much easier things will be between the two of you during the camping trip if I’m not the elephant in the room. Or the tent, or whatever.” I gave him a small, rueful smile. “I’m tired of being the elephant.”

Finally, he cracked a smile and kissed me. “Okay, maybe I *am* a little bit jealous. But how can I not be? I love you, and I hate to see you spending your time with another man—even if that man is my brother.”

“*Especially* if that man is your brother,” I deadpanned. “I’ll try not to make you more jealous.”

Right on cue, my phone buzzed with a text from Xavier.

“It’s the restaurant info,” I told Greyson as I glanced down at the text.

“So I guess you’re really going, then,” he said.

I nodded.

“What brought this on, anyway?” he asked. “Why the sudden olive branch from Xavier after all the silence?”

“It was hot dogs.”

He raised a brow, and I told him about the hot dog incident. “I think he’s taking steps to work out his issues with having two mates. Maybe Ava is pushing him to do something about it. Regardless, I think it’s a positive thing.” I glanced down at my phone again. “I’d better go get ready.”

I turned to leave, but Greyson caught my hand.

“Cali.”

“Yeah?”

“Just be careful, okay?”

I smiled. “I will.”

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As I sat in my car, parked in front of the restaurant, I was having serious jitters. I’d arrived about ten minutes earlier, but I’d spent the whole time sitting in my car, trying to psych myself up to go inside. Before the barbecue, the last few times I’d been alone with Xavier had really messed with my head.

He’d kissed me, or maybe I’d kissed him—I couldn’t remember the specific details, only the desire. Guilt nagged at my stomach. I hadn’t been totally honest with Greyson when I’d tried to play down the importance of the dinner. I liked to think I was finally coming to accept the fact that Xavier was never going to slide back into his old role in my life, but deep down inside, there was a part of me that still wished I had him back.

I still loved Xavier—and not just as a friend. Maybe this dinner would be a true test of my feelings for him. I wanted him to be happy, even if that meant he’d stay with Ava.

I took a deep breath, got out of my car, and headed inside.

“Hey,” called a deep voice, somewhere behind me.

I turned to see Xavier and let out a gasp. He was wearing a suit jacket with tight fitting jeans, and that cocky smile combined with those *eyes* made me weak in the knees. Suddenly, I remembered all the reasons why I’d fallen in love with him.

And then I remembered what had happened to that love. How twisted it had become, and the role he’d played in that.

My anger started to simmer again, but I pushed it down. I had to give him a chance.

Xavier’s gaze lingered on me, drinking me in, and I was nearly swept away by my chaotic storm of emotions.

“You look great,” he said with a smile, offering his arm.

I took it with a smile of my own, acutely aware of the heat that radiated through his jacket as he ushered me into the restaurant.

This dinner was going to be more difficult than I’d anticipated.

**Episode 5019**

**Greyson**

I’d been lying to Cali earlier.

Not when I’d said I was uncomfortable with the idea of her having dinner with Xavier. That was true, in a way.

No, I’d lied by omission when I’d failed to tell her that the thought of her and Xavier together at dinner made my blood boil. Made me want to punch something. But I couldn’t tell her any of that, obviously. I wasn’t her keeper. I didn’t own her. And she had her own loyalties, where Xavier was concerned. This wasn’t just about me.

But the angry green monster wouldn’t listen to any of that logic, so once Cali had left for her *date*, I’d rounded up Jay and headed to the basement to blow off steam. My victim? The punching bag hanging in the gym downstairs.

I lashed out at it with every ounce of fury and jealousy and disappointment that was boiling over inside me, pouring all the things I couldn’t say to Cali, all the things she could never know I felt, into my blows. The bag and the chains attached to it rattled with every punch.

“Woah, there,” Jay said, trying to steady the bag so it couldn’t swing back and take me out. “Ease up a little, or you’re gonna break the bag.”

“So?” I demanded callously, hitting the bag even harder.

“*So*, I’m not signing up to be your whipping boy once you bust through the actual punching bag.”

“Fine.” I took a step back, sweat dripping from my skin. I needed a water break, anyway.

I took a long pull from my water bottle. The water felt good, cooling. If only it had the ability to cool the fury that still boiled inside me.

“Are you okay?” Jay asked.

I was hesitant to open up to Jay. He was a good guy and all, but he and Xavier were still friends. In fact, before Xavier had gone AWOL while under Adéluce’s control, Jay had been closer—and more loyal—to Xavier than to me. I didn’t begrudge him that, but it did make it complicated to open up to him about the difficulties I was experiencing. Plus, I was honestly ashamed that I felt this way. I trusted Cali, of course. But Xavier? Not so much—especially after the way he’d been so hot and cold with her. He’d willingly—*deliberately*—broken her heart into pieces in the cruelest ways possible. The thought of Cali making herself vulnerable to that kind of pain again made me want to vomit.

But the thing was, Cali was right. If this dinner could help ease the tension between the three of us, then her going was the right call. I couldn’t be upset. Even if I *did* feel like ripping someone’s head off.

“Did you know that Xavier invited Cali to dinner?” I asked, trying to sound casual, even though I was anything but—and Jay had to know that by now, considering the fact that he’d just spent the better part of an hour protecting a punching bag from my wrath.

Jay grimaced. “You know Lola can’t keep anything to herself. She told me. I had a feeling that was why you were in Mike Tyson mode.”

I nodded. “It just sucks.”

“Yeah, man,” he said. “But if it really bothers you so much, then why didn’t you try to stop Cali from going?”

I laughed, and the sound took me by surprise. It was nice to know I could still feel amusement, even when I was this upset. “Have you *met* Cali? She wouldn’t have listened.”

Jay smiled. “Fair point. But Lola’s even worse, you know.”

I wasn’t about to argue with that. “And anyway, it’s not my call. Cali has a right to see Xavier; they’re mates.”

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” Jay said. “You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself.”

“Yeah, no shit.” I set my water bottle down and took another swing at the bag.

*Maybe Jay’s right. Maybe I* am *trying to convince myself. Do I wish Cali hadn’t gone? Yes. Absolutely. Her being there with Xavier makes me jealous. Makes me a version of myself I don’t like. And that’s why I’m beating the shit out of this bag.*

I went at the bag until just lifting my arms up sent burning pain across my shoulders. Jay, good man that he was, spotted me in silence the whole time. Afterward, I showered and dressed and was heading to my study for a neat whiskey—something to take the edge off—when I ran into Mikah in the hallway.

“Hey, how about you join me for a drink?” I offered. “It’s the least I can do, after everything you’ve done to help us.”

“Sure,” Mikah said. “Why not.”

He took a seat in one of the comfy armchairs in the study while I poured him a couple fingers of whiskey, then handed over the glass.

He took a sip. “Now that the Chessa thing is over, I’ll probably be heading out tomorrow. Gabriel’s gotten himself into something, as usual. Also as usual, he’s going to need my help getting out of it.”

I laughed. “I get it. That sounds just like Cali.”

Mikah nodded, smiling. “She and Gabriel certainly have plenty in common.”

“Before you go,” I said, “there’s something that’s been bothering me. I’m hoping you could help me sort it out. When we first learned that Codsworth and the others couldn’t remember what happened to them, you were just as skeptical as I was. But then, you did a one-eighty. You changed your mind and convinced us that you believed them—and you asked me to trust you. And I did. But I still want answers. Why did you change your mind?”

His smile turned wry as he looked down at his glass. “So, this is more than just a celebratory drink.”

“I just want to understand what’s going on.”

“Do you still trust me?” Mikah asked.

“I think so… Unless you’ve given me a reason not to?”

“Have I?”

All this talking in circles was giving me a headache, but I could see what he was getting at. I shook my head. “Fine. I still trust you.”

“Then I’m asking you to drop it.”

My brows rose. “I’m going to need a better answer than that. And the only thing I can think of that ties all these questions together is Kendall.”

Mikah’s head snapped up at that. “Kendall? The program coordinator? What does she have to do with this?”

“You were skeptical until you talked to her. Whatever you talked about, whatever happened between you, it must have convinced you that Codsworth and the others were telling the truth, that they couldn’t remember anything. So what did she tell you?”

He was quiet for a moment, sipping his whiskey. “You seem to have a lot of hostility toward Kendall.”

“And? Why do you care about that?”

“Just making an observation.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s hardly a secret that I never trusted her.”

“She helped you kill Chessa. Isn’t that enough?”

“Not really,” I said. “And if you know something about all of this, about her, then I’m asking you to tell me.”

Mikah stood, set down his empty glass, and clapped me on the shoulder. “I would if I could, but I can’t. And trust me—it’s better for everyone if you just let it go.”

I studied Mikah’s face for a moment, trying to decide how far I truly wanted to push this. Mikah was a friend, a trusted and valued ally, and it seemed like he wasn’t going to budge on this. But on the other hand, I was clearly onto something. I just wished I knew *what*. For that matter, I wished Mikah would tell me. But I couldn’t read him, and I wasn’t about to try to force the truth out of him, whatever that truth was.

“You can head back to Gabriel, go wherever you like,” I said. “But I’m not about to drop this.”

“I know I can’t stop you, and I wouldn’t even try,” Mikah said evenly. “What you do or don’t do is up to you. But if you meant what you said about trusting me, then you should trust me on this—if you go down this path, you could put other people’s lives in danger. The vampire who posed a threat to you is dead. That should be good enough.”

And with that, Mikah slipped out of the study and closed the door behind him. I stared at the closed door for a beat before my grip on my whiskey glass tightened so convulsively, it shattered in my hand.

Lola burst into the study, brandishing her phone in hand. “Where the hell were you—” She stopped short when she saw the glass embedded in my bloody palm. “Wow! What happened?”

I brushed the glass off my palm and into the garbage bin. Already, my skin was healing. “Nothing. What is it?”

She grabbed my arm and started to pull me toward the door. “Cali needs us!”

I dug in my heels. “Why? What happened? Is she okay?”

“That’s exactly why we need to go!”

“Go where?” I asked, still very confused.

She started tugging on my arm again. “I spoke to Jay. He told me how upset you are about Cali being with Xavier—and I don’t blame you one bit. I’ve seen what Xavier’s done to Cali, how he hurt her. Who’s to say he’s not about to do it all over again?”

Suddenly, I remembered that Lola had burst into the study waving her phone. “Did Cali call you?”

I started to follow Lola outside, but then she shook her head. “No, I was looking up directions to the restaurant so we can spy on Cali and Xavier.”

I froze. “*What?*”

**Episode 5020**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s words swam through my head. *Adair abandoned the Dark Fae court, but now that I’m here, they don’t need him anymore?*

I couldn’t make sense of what she was saying, and part of me was dying to ask her to elaborate. But another part of me—the part that housed my instinct for self-preservation—kept my lips sealed up tight. I shouldn’t—couldn’t—engage. Not if I wanted to avoid being trapped here, subject to the court’s whims. I hadn’t come all this way to abandon my search for my father and become a pawn-slash-poster child for the Dark Fae court.

So, instead of asking what the hell kind of intentions Celeste had for me, I asked, “What do you mean, I can’t leave?”

Celeste raised an eyebrow. “You’re the heir to the Dark Fae crown. It should be very obvious that you’re far too valuable to disappear for another twenty years. We can’t wait that long to find you again.”

This brought me up short. “So you’re going to imprison me here after all?” I scoffed. “It makes no difference who I am—you’re just going to stick to the same plan you’ve always had.”

“That’s a touch harsh,” she said. “And make no mistake: as the heir, you will be treated with considerably more deference than you would’ve been afforded otherwise.” Her tone held an implied threat—a reminder that she’d had the power to imprison me forever before she’d discovered my identity, and just because Kadmos was my father, that didn’t necessarily mean she still didn’t have the inclination to make my life hell. The next time she spoke, her voice was softer. “How about instead of all that ugliness, you decide to think of yourself as my special guest? After all, we are family.”

*She might be Adair’s wife, but she’s not my family. My family would never do this to me.*

“Maybe you’re right,” Marius cut in, probably because he could tell I was about to say something that would piss Celeste off. I shot him a grateful look. “Maybe it would be best for Artemis to remain here.”

My gratitude withered up in a heartbeat, and I glared daggers at him. *Seriously? Whose side are you on?*

Before I’d agreed to accompany him to the Dark Fae court, I might’ve expected this kind of behavior. But now, stupidly, I’d hoped I meant more to him than that. Had I been wrong?

And yet, there was a mischievous gleam in his eyes that I recognized. A subtle message, for my eyes only.

Marius was scheming. *What* he was scheming, I didn’t know—but it was probably too early in the game to assume he was stabbing me in the back. I just hoped his latest scheme wasn’t about to get us both killed. Then again, would Celeste actually be *willing* to kill me, now that she knew who I was? If I was too valuable to release, then surely I was too valuable to kill?

“And why do you say that?” Celeste asked Marius flatly. She’d sized him up faster than most—she wasn’t going to trust a word he said, even when he agreed with her.

Marius gave me a subtle nod, and I glanced in the direction he’d indicated—and saw my dagger, resting on the table. I began to slowly inch my way toward it.

“It’s clear the Dark Fae are hungry for a true leader,” Marius said. “A leader who can turn the tide in the war, a leader whose blood right to the kingdom is above reproach. Artemis is perfect for that role. She was born for it.”

I stifled a grimace. *He’s certainly laying it on thick.* But it seemed to be doing what he’d been hoping it would: distracting both Celeste and the guard. As he continued with his speech, I managed to slip the dagger into my hand—and then I pounced.

Shoving the guard out of the way, I pressed the tip of the dagger to Celeste’s throat. Marius took advantage of the commotion and disarmed the guard. He knocked the Fae to the floor, pressing a foot into his chest and brandishing the guard’s own sword.

“I’d stay there if I were you,” he advised the man.

Celeste growled in my grip. “You’re making a grave mistake. You think I won’t have you killed? Need I remind you that the Dark Fae survived well enough before anyone became aware of your existence? We will continue to survive long after you perish.”

“I don’t care,” I snapped. “I’m leaving, and Marius is coming with me. You can stay here and spend the rest of your days wondering what might’ve been.”

I was done listening to her lies, her threats. She’d already shown her hand—I knew she’d say anything to keep me under her control. And maybe she’d intended to keep me alive while I was trapped here in the Dark Fae court, but I wouldn’t have been *living*. The best thing I could do was get the hell out of here and never look back.

Celeste laughed, and the sound hollowed out my stomach. “Do you really think you’re going to find your father? He was killed long ago—ask anyone. This is a fool’s errand.”

Celeste wasn’t the first person to insist my father was dead, and she wouldn’t be the last. And, as with everyone else, I refused to believe her. “People keep saying that, but nobody has a shred of proof—the only thing they’ve got is stories.”

I marched Celeste toward the door, Marius following close behind. I reached for the door handle, but the door burst open before I made contact. To my shock and horror, a swarm of guards rushed into the room, their weapons already aimed at Marius and me. In the chaos, I lost my grip on Celeste and she rushed to safety behind the wall of fighters.

I swallowed roughly. *How did I lose control so quickly?*

“I think we’re outnumbered,” Marius muttered. “Perhaps we should save this fight for another day.”

As the realization sank in—we were trapped and at Celeste’s mercy, *again*—I began to shake with barely suppressed rage. We’d come so close to getting out of here! But Marius was right—if we tried to fight our way out, we’d be dead in under a minute. And as confident as I’d managed to seem around Celeste, I wasn’t about to test my theory about being indispensable.

I dropped my dagger and held up my hands.

“Lock them up while I decide how best to present the newest member of our family to the court,” Celeste said.

“Wait!” I called, struggling against the guards as they dragged me to the door. “If you want me to cooperate, you have to let Marius go.”

Celeste blinked. “I’ll decide his fate when it pleases me. You have no power here.”

And that was how Marius and I ended up in a small, plain bedroom, tucked safely behind a locked door. A locked door that I’d been trying to open with every bit of skill I possessed.

I blew out a frustrated breath and began pounding the door with my fists. No matter what I tried, it stayed shut. The lock wouldn’t give, and by now my knuckles were bleeding.

“Artemis, stop.” Marius caught my arm. “There’s no point in fighting. You’re just hurting yourself and wasting your energy.”

“I don’t care,” I snapped. “I can’t just sit here and do nothing.”

He guided me to sit down on the edge of the bed, then tore a strip of fabric from the bedsheet to wrap my knuckles. “It wouldn’t be good for the new queen to show up with bloodied, bruised hands.”

“I’m not the queen!”

His brows rose. “Of course not. But then again, there’s a lot about you that I didn’t know until quite recently. Like who you truly are. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had my reasons,” I said evasively. “I guess we’re even now. Can’t we just leave it at that? Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here.”

Marius shrugged and threw himself down onto the thin mattress. “It’s not so bad in here. It’s not like we’re in a dungeon. Dungeons are the worst. At least in here, we’ve got a comfy bed, a window—granted, one with bars on it—and a bath. What more do we need?”

“*Freedom*,” I snapped, seething.

He waved off my fury. “And I’m all for that, but I doubt Celeste is going to cooperate.”

I leapt to my feet as an idea took hold. “I’m not talking about *my* freedom—I’m talking about yours.” I pounded on the door again. “I want to see Celeste! Bring her to me right now!”

Marius grabbed my arm. “What are you doing?”

“You have to trust me,” I said. “Can you do that?”

He frowned. “But—”

The door unlocked with a *clank*, and Celeste stepped into our cell.

“You called?” she asked dryly.

I straightened. “I’m willing to make a deal. I’ll stay and take my place in court, do whatever you want me to—but only if you release Marius. And that means he walks out of here a free man, with no bounties on his head. If you can guarantee that, then I’ll do whatever you want.”

Marius inhaled sharply. “Artemis, don’t—”

I shook my head, my eyes still on Celeste. “It’s the only way.”

**Episode 5021**

When we walked in, the restaurant was dim and quiet, filled with the sound of soft jazz and the clinking of silverware on plates. It looked full, but Xavier had apparently made reservations because when he said his name to the woman behind the hostess stand, she nodded and waved for us to follow her.

This restaurant was *totally* a date place… I wasn’t sure how to feel. I gulped, not knowing where to look.

We followed her as she threaded through the small restaurant, leading us to a small table in the back, near the fireplace, where a fire was blazing. I was relieved to see that, because I hadn’t dressed warmly enough and was freezing, so I scooted my chair close to the warmth.

“Cold?” Xavier asked.

“I’m fine,” I said automatically.

He nodded and accepted the menus from the hostess.

“Our specials tonight are a pan-roasted steelhead trout with white beans and escarole; a duck meatloaf with cheddar grits, collard greens and crispy shallots; a buttermilk fried chicken with cheddar waffles and a cabbage slaw; and a grilled flat-iron steak with crispy fingerling potatoes and charred broccolini.”

“Thanks,” Xavier said, not taking his eyes off me.

I smiled up at the hostess, but my stomach was sinking. I didn’t feel right. *This* didn’t feel right. I shouldn’t be here. I should be with Greyson. What was Xavier thinking coming to a place like this?

But—I reminded myself—this was a necessary step if we were all going to get along. We couldn’t keep going the way we’d been going. We had to start talking again, and this was the first step. Maybe he’d taken me to a place like this to show me he was serious…?

“So,” Xavier said, clearing his throat nervously, “how have you been?”

I stared at him for a moment. It was an awkward question, and I wondered if he was joking, but after a moment I realized he wasn’t.

“Well, we just killed a vampire,” I reminded him, “so…”

“Right…”

There was a beat of strained silence.

I looked into the fire, then back at Xavier. If he was willing to try, then I should as well. “How are things with the Samaras?”

“I think it’s going to start snowing—”

We had spoken at the same time, and we both flinched. Then we caught each other’s eyes and—after a moment—laughed.

“This is what we’ve come to?” he asked. “Talking about the weather?”

“Making meaningless small talk?” I added. Laughing had cut some of the tension, and I relaxed a little into my chair.

“Hello there, I’m Jeff, and I’ll be your server tonight. Can I get you two started with some drinks?”

I looked up into the smiling face of the server and felt relief wash over me. *Yes*, a drink might help me relax. I didn’t always drink, but if there were ever an exception, tonight seemed like it.

“Red wine sounds good,” I said, shivering a little. The fire was warm, but I was still nervous, which always made me feel cold and tense. Red wine sounded just right to help my shoulders to relax.

“Yeah, that sounds good to me, too. Maybe we’ll have a bottle,” Xavier said. “What do you recommend?”

As Xavier spoke to the server, I stole a glance at him, and when he smiled at something Jeff said, it occurred to me that I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen him laugh, or even smile. My throat felt suddenly tight, like I was about to cry. God, I missed him. And suddenly I wanted to tell him how *much* I missed him, but I wasn’t sure how. I wasn’t even sure if I should. But—he *had* invited me to dinner. He must have something he wanted to say to me.

“You folks know what you want, or do you need more time with your menus?” Jeff asked, pulling out his order pad.

“Oh, I’ll have the chicken,” I said distractedly. Food wasn’t exactly the first thing on my mind.

“The steak is fine,” Xavier said, similarly vaguely.

“Okay, great choices,” Jeff said with a smile, collecting the menus before he strode away. “I’ll be right back with that wine.”

Alone again, Xavier looked over at me. “Thanks for coming, Cali. I know it was kind of short notice.

I nodded. “It’s fine. It’s a good chance to…” I was trying to say that it was a good chance for us to start over, but the words didn’t quite make it out of my mouth. Even in my head they sounded so strange and stilted. So I pivoted. “You must be pleased the Samaras have some new recruits. How are you all doing?”

“It hasn’t been easy,” he admitted, pushing a hand through his dark hair in a gesture that was heartbreakingly familiar. “Building the pack from nothing is hard as hell. But Ava’s really been the one doing the heavy lifting. Nothing stops her. She really loves that pack.”

His words hit me like a ten-pound weight. Of course he was going to talk about Ava. He was *with* Ava.

I cast a glance around, looking for Jeff, wondering if that bottle of wine was on its way. I could really use a glass of it right now. Downing a whole glass would help wash away the bitter taste of Ava’s name.

Xavier gave me a look, like he could guess what I was thinking. “Does it bother you when I talk about Ava?”

*Of course it does.*

I forced myself to smile. “I know I can’t expect you not to talk about her. She’s your mate. Your Luna. It’s fine.” He kept looking at me, so I shrugged. “I guess it makes me a little sad to think about, but it’s fine.”

*Maybe I said “fine” too many times…*

“Are you sure? I didn’t invite you to dinner to upset you.”

I tipped my head. “Why did you invite me?”

His face darkened. “I can’t keep going, the way things are. I know we still have stuff to work out, but… Do you think we can find a way to be friends?”

I blew out a breath. If he was talking about us all being friends—like Ava and me being friends—I wasn’t so sure about that. I had tried to mend fences with Ava before and it had never been successful. But when I looked at Xavier to respond, I caught the pensive look in his eye, and I realized he wasn’t asking about Ava and me being friends—he was talking about me and him being friends.

It was like being punched in the gut. He wanted to be friends with me. *Friends.*

How could I possibly even think of being friends with this man—a man who had been so much more to me than a friend?

“Is that what you want?” I asked, my voice small.

“You and I never really had a chance to be friends,” he said. “Our relationship kind of skipped that phase. Maybe it would be good, and maybe we can use this as an opportunity to get to know each other as friends, in a way we haven’t yet.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” I admitted, smiling, as my stomach tightened painfully. He was right, though it saddened me, that he hadn’t thought of us as friends in addition to being mates. But hadn’t we been both? “So, what prompted all of this?” I wondered. “It all seems so… insightful. Not that you’re *not* usually insightful,” I finished lamely.

Xavier chuckled. “You know me too well. It was actually something Carlson Greene suggested.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “I didn’t know you actually went to see the therapist.”

“I had to do something,” he said. “And I’m glad I did. It was…good.” He paused. “Carlson thinks it would be good if you could come to one of our next sessions.”

I stared at him, stunned. “You want *me* to come to therapy with *you*?”

He nodded. “Carlson thinks it might be helpful, to give him some insight into both sides of the situation.”

I hesitated, not sure what to do. This was not what I had expected when Xavier had asked me to dinner. I supposed I hadn’t known what to expect, but being asked to attend therapy wasn’t it.

“What does Ava think about this idea?” I wondered.

Xavier had been looking at me, waiting for my answer, but he looked away. “Um, well, things have been so hectic recently, I really haven’t had a chance to talk to her about it yet.”

“You haven’t told her?”

He shook his head. “No, but she’s been supportive of my going to therapy. She’s actually the reason I went in the first place.”

I nodded, though I hated to hear it. I used to be the person who supported Xavier.

I hadn’t answered Xavier’s question, and he leaned forward.

“Listen, Cali, I know this is a big ask, and it’s okay if you don’t want to go. I’d understand. But it would be a big help if you could. So, will you come with me to therapy?”

**Episode 5022**

**Xavier**

I held my breath. My mouth felt dry, and my whole body was tense as I waited for Cali’s answer to my question. I’d just finished telling her what Carlson had been telling *me*—that I needed to learn to be friends with Cali as part of my healing process. That I needed to do this as a way of rebuilding trust between us. That was what I wanted, so I was willing to do it.

But friends? I *loved* her, just as I always had. That part had been strangely hard to say, like the words had gotten stuck in my throat.

Cali looked away, her eyes on the fire.

As I waited, I looked at the way the flames danced in her eyes, thinking about how much I wanted to kiss her. About how much I wanted to tear her clothes off and throw her across the table—ignoring everyone else in this restaurant—and take her right here, right now. It would be so easy to reach across and wrap my hands around her shoulders, feel her skin beneath my palms. And my wolf was pushing me, begging me to do just that.

But I couldn’t. Even thinking about it made my head ache.

I knew the old Xavier would have given in. Would have let his wolf decide. Would have taken Cali’s hand and led her to the car, pressed her against it, and kissed her long and deep.

But that’s what had created this gap between us. This tension between the old me and the me I was trying to be. I had confused her and hurt her, over and over again. I hadn’t meant to, but in trying to figure myself out, I had made mistakes. And in this moment, that gap seemed wider and more insurmountable than ever. My fucking feelings for her always got in the way and made things worse.

And there was Ava to think about. There was no way in hell I was going to hurt Ava again by succumbing to those urges. I had seen the pain I’d caused on her face more than enough, and I wasn’t going to see it again.

So I was going to suck it up and give Carlson’s way a chance. Even if I did still think he was mostly full of shit.

“What do you say?” I asked.

Cali looked down at the table, and her plate of food, which was untouched. “Okay,” she said. She looked up at me. “Okay. Yeah. Just let me know when. I can come as long as it doesn’t interfere with my class schedule or crew practice.”

“Oh, okay. Great,” I said. I had wanted her to say yes, of course, but now that she had, I was both relieved and terrified. She was coming. So now what? What if she came and it didn’t work? What if we didn’t get anywhere at all? Or—worse—what if she came and it just made things between us worse?

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw that it was a text from Ava.

*Where are you?*

I frowned, confused by the question. She should know where I was. I’d left her a voicemail, explaining that I was following Carlson’s advice and inviting Cali to dinner—just to talk. Irritation edged into my chest. Hadn’t she listened to my voicemail?

“Excuse me,” I murmured to Cali as I messaged back. *Out to dinner with Cali.*

My stomach felt tight as I looked at the floating bubbles as Ava typed a response. Maybe this whole dinner had been a bad idea after all. Carlson had suggested it, but the last thing I wanted to do was upset Ava, and she wasn’t likely to be excited by this whole setup. I was feeling guilty about the feelings for Cali I was fighting, but the truth was, I was fighting them. I was doing what I was supposed to do. Couldn’t Ava understand that?

*What the FUCK Xavier?!* came Ava’s response.

Okay, apparently Ava *didn’t* understand that.

“Is something wrong, Xavier?” Cali asked.

I looked up. “No.”

“You look worried about something,” she said, eyeing me keenly.

“No, I mean—there’s a little problem with the new recruits,” I said, trying to cover. I slipped my phone into my pocket and threw my napkin onto the table, next to the steak I hadn’t even tasted. My stomach was tense with anxiety and roiled at the thought of food. “I should probably go back to the house and straighten things out. I’m really sorry to cut things short.”

“That’s okay. Don’t worry about it. It was…nice seeing you,” she said tentatively.

I got to my feet. “I’ll make it up to you. But I really should go.” I pulled a couple of hundred-dollar bills from my wallet and tossed them onto the table. “Stay and finish your dinner. Please.”

“Sure,” she said. She got to her feet and stepped toward me, putting her arms around me. But the hug was kind of a half-hearted attempt and ended up feeling awkward as hell. She took a step back, blushing furiously. “I hope everything’s okay with the new recruits.”

The contact had been about as lame as it could get, but it was enough to get my wolf raging. My head pulsed with pain powerful enough it felt like my skull was about to explode. I took a deep breath, drawing in her scent, then nodded and took a step back. “Goodnight, Cali,” I said, then I turned and strode out of the restaurant.

The night air felt bitter cold after the warmth of the restaurant, but I liked it. It helped me clear my head, which felt muddled and confused, as well as painful. As I slid into my car and started the engine, I ground my teeth, cursing Carlson for his dumbass plan. This whole doomed night had been his fucking idea, and now it was all blowing up in my face.

I peeled out of the parking lot, gravel spraying behind me, and headed back toward the pack house.

This was a stupid idea to begin with. I’d tried to mitigate the damage by telling Ava that it was Carlson’s idea, but of course she was pissed about it. What the hell was I thinking? What had I been expecting? That Ava was going to tell me—*Sure, take your other mate out to a romantic dinner. That’s cool with me! Why not pick up some flowers on your way?*

My head ached, and I pressed my finger to my temple as I paused at a red light. Why was it still hurting so badly? Shouldn’t it be better by now? Wasn’t that the point of all this? Of trying to fix things with Cali?

I accelerated as the light turned green, driving faster and faster. I needed to take care of this. Now.

Then I slammed on the brakes.

The Redwood pack house had just come into view.

Why the hell had I driven *here*?

“Fuck it all,” I grumbled to myself, flipping the car around. I needed to get the hell out of here. The last thing I needed was to run into Greyson. Not after dinner with Cali. If Ava’s ire about the night was any indication, I doubted Greyson was any happier.

Pain pulsed in the base of my skull as I drove. I was desperate to distract myself, so I cast my mind around, trying to think of something—anything else.

Unfortunately, the only thing that came to mind was Carlson’s question: if I had to choose between my mates—Ava or Cali—which would I choose?

I ground my teeth until my jaw ached along with my head. I had wanted to punch Carlson in the face when he’d asked me that question, and the thought still made me crave violence. What the fuck kind of question was that. It was deranged. Didn’t he understand that I couldn’t answer it? Didn’t he understand that I was in love with both my mates?

He had tried to push me, tried to force me to answer, to pick one, but I had refused. I couldn’t. I couldn’t even wrap my mind around the idea, and it had begun to hurt so badly I’d thought I was going to throw up.

I finally reached the Samara pack house—taking longer than planned because of my Redwood pack house detour—and I pulled to a hasty stop on the driveway. I threw the car into park and sprinted up the porch steps.

Bursting into the house, I looked around, but the house was oddly quiet. Finally I spied Marissa in the living room. She was crouched in front of the hearth, laying a fire in the fireplace.

“Marissa,” I called, hurrying toward her. “Where’s Ava?”

She looked up, her gaze even, betraying nothing. “She’s gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“She shifted and took off in the direction of the Redwood pack house.”

**Episode 5023**

**Greyson**

I *really* wished Lola hadn’t suggested that we spy on Cali. I’d told her no, of course. That would be a huge violation of trust, and—as complex as our relationship was—if Cali and I didn’t have trust, we didn’t have anything.

But the suggestion had planted a seed in my head, and ever since she’d said it, I’d checked the time on my phone every thirty seconds. I’d kept finding a reason to walk by the front windows, looking out at the driveway to see if she was pulling in, and now I was standing on the porch, waiting to see if I could see her car on the road, coming back from dinner with Xavier.

I was trying not to show it, but the whole situation was driving me crazy. I felt like I was crawling out of my skin, so I finally gave up, shed my clothes, shifted, and jumped off the porch onto the lawn. I raced across the lawn and ran into the woods, letting myself stretch into a full sprint, the only thing that could calm my racing thoughts.

I took a deep breath as I ran—and as I did, I realized it was the first one I’d taken since Cali drove away to meet Xavier. I probably should have just gone running the moment she left. It had taken all my willpower not to jump in the car and gun it all the way to the restaurant after her.

Though the thought of how she would have reacted if I had shown up had given me pause as well. I hadn’t wanted her to think that I was so insecure about our relationship that I didn’t trust her.

I leapt over a fallen tree, and when I landed on the other side, I increased my speed. It felt good to sprint like this, running as fast as I could. The running and the cold, clean air cleared my head better than anything else could. And now that I could think straight, I could admit to myself that I was glad that Xavier was doing something about the situation. Things had been hard for too long, and Cali was suffering. But—did it have to be with Cali over dinner? Was there something wrong with having a cup of coffee or something? Or a freaking phone call?

I shook my head. I was feeling better, but I did want to be at the house when Cali got back, so I was just turning to head back when I picked up a fresh scent—a werewolf scent.

Hang on—I sniffed again. Was that *Ava*?

What the hell was she doing around here?

Whatever the reason, it couldn’t be a good thing.

I turned and followed her scent, slowing my pace so I could be quiet and not give myself away. After a half a mile I caught sight of her up ahead. She was standing still, her attention focused on the Redwood pack house.

I shifted to my human form. “You looking for someone, Ava?”

She started in surprise and turned. When she saw it was me, she shifted as well. “You’re telling me you’re okay with this?”

I assumed she was talking about Xavier’s dinner with Cali. “What are you planning?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t answer my question. Were you *really* okay with letting your mate go?”

I sighed. “I guess I wasn’t thrilled about the idea, but I trust Cali. Don’t you trust Xavier?”

She didn’t answer my question, but I saw a muscle in her jaw twitch as she ground her teeth. “I’m sick of the games the two of them play. Maybe you’re cool sitting by while your brother and your mate share a little alone time, but I’m sure as hell not,” she spat, angrier than I’d ever seen her, which was saying something.

“So you came here to do… what?” I wondered.

“Haven’t you figured that out yet?” she snarled.

I frowned. “I hope you realize that I’m not going to let you near Cali,” I told her “Not like this. You need to cool off. This is between you and Xavier. And he was the one who reached out to Cali, not the other way around.”

“Does it matter?” Ava demanded. “At the end of the day, it’s always the same bullshit, and I’m fucking sick of it.”

I sighed, wondering why it was that I was always finding myself in the strange position of having to defend my brother. “I think Xavier is just trying to make things right between him and Cali. And me and the Redwoods. I’m not making excuses for him—and maybe he is going about it the wrong way—but I do think he’s trying. Maybe we should show a little patience where he’s concerned.”

Ava eyed me, her blue eyes icy. “Patience? Understanding? Why, Greyson? So they can *kiss* again? Is that what you want?”

My hackles went up, which I assume was her intention. “I don’t like to be reminded of that, which I’m sure you know, but I think that’s the point of their meeting like this—to make sure stuff like that doesn’t happen again.”

Ava’s eyes were assessing, like she was looking right through me. “Right. You sound pretty sure. Tell me, if you’re so confident, what are you doing out here?”

I didn’t answer the question. I wasn’t about to admit that I had been driven out of my own house by the same crazed sense of jealousy she was clearly possessed by. Though mine had been exercised by a run, and hers seemed to be consuming her from the inside out. I had my own very mixed feelings about the dinner happening between Xavier and Cali, but I kept that to myself.

“I think the important thing to remember is that Cali and Xavier aren’t hiding anything,” I pointed out. “They told us what was going on, and why. And I’m sure Xavier is going to finish up and come home to you. Just like Cali’s going to come home to me. They always choose us, right? That’s what’s important. Now go home, Ava.”

She gave me a long look. “Fine.” She turned to leave, but she turned back after a few steps. “But we shouldn’t be a *choice*, should we?”

I set my jaw but didn’t answer.

She raised an eyebrow, like my silence was all the answer she needed. Then she sifted and started into the woods. I waited until she disappeared into the darkness before I turned back to the house. I didn’t shift, but walked in my human form, and as I did, I wondered to myself if I could ever really trust Ava.

When I got to the house, I saw that there was an envelope on the doorstep. Even from a distance I could tell from the look of it—heavy, cream-colored stationary and a thick wax seal—that it was from Lucian. I picked up the envelope and broke the crimson seal. I slid the card out—heart-shaped confetti fluttered to the ground at my feet as I opened the card.

“A Valentine’s Day party?” I muttered to myself, reading the invitation. “Shit.” I hadn’t even *thought* about Valentine’s Day. It had just snuck up on me. What the hell was I going to get Cali?

Great. One more thing to stress about.

I opened the door and headed inside, my mind racing with gift ideas, though none of them were inspiring—chocolates, flowers, bath salts? But I turned when I heard a car pull into the driveway.

It was Cali returning from dinner, and I headed down the steps to greet her as she stepped out of her car.

“Hi!” she said with a smile, wrapping her arms around me.

“How was dinner?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Lola must have texted me a million times.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe she didn’t trust me to handle things with Xavier on my own.”

I hesitated, not sure if I should say it.

“What?” Cali asked. “Just say it.”

“Lola wanted me to come with her to spy on you,” I admitted.

Cali’s eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed with anger. “That figures. But you didn’t?”

“I’ll admit I was tempted, but no, I didn’t. I didn’t need to. I love you, and I trust you.”

Cali smiled up at me, then rose up on tiptoe to press a kiss to my lips. “I love you, too. And there was nothing to be jealous about because Xavier ended the dinner before we even ate a bite.”

“So you didn’t eat?” I asked.

“I could have,” she admitted, “but I didn’t feel like eating alone, so no. And now I’m *starving*.”

“Then let’s get you some food,” I said, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward the door.

As we headed inside, Cali filled me in on everything she and Xavier spoke about, but all I was hearing was the last thing Ava had said to me in the woods—that our mates shouldn’t have to make a choice about who they return to.

As we walked into the kitchen, I turned to Cali, stopping her mid-sentence.

“Cali, even if you make up with Xavier, you’re still with me, right?”

**Episode 5024**

I stopped in my tracks and turned to stare up at Greyson, completely thrown by the question. “What? Of course,” I said, confused. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Cali, I just wanted to know—”

“Didn’t you *just* say that you trusted me?” I asked him. “Didn’t you *just* say that you loved me? I love you, Greyson. You know I do. Of course I’m with you, I’m with you now, aren’t I?” I shook my head. “Where is this coming from?”

Greyson hesitated a moment, then shook his own head. “Nowhere. Nothing. Forget I said anything.” He stepped into the laundry room and grabbed a pair of pants and a shirt.

“What?”

“It was a stupid question. I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have even put it out there,” he said, pulling the clothes on as he stepped back into the kitchen with me.

I narrowed my eyes, not fully convinced he hadn’t meant what he’d asked. “But you did, didn’t you? Why are you questioning me, Greyson?”

He shrugged. “It was nothing, just something Ava said.”

“*Ava?*” I repeated, shocked.

“I should never have let her get into my head. It was stupid—”

“You spoke to Ava?” I asked, cutting him off. “About me? About me and Xavier? Why? When?”

“I ran into her a few minutes ago,” Greyson said.

“A few minutes ago?!” I asked. Shock had reduced me to repeating what Greyson was telling me in an ever-increasingly stunned tone. “How? What was she doing here?”

“Cali,” Greyson said, taking me by the shoulders, “it’s okay. Don’t freak out. I was out for a run, and I ran into Ava in the woods. She was upset about Xavier, but we talked about it. I talked her down and sent her back to her own pack. It’s fine. Everything is fine. I’m sorry I brought this up at all. It’s been a weird night, and I didn’t intend to make things worse.”

My mind raced as I looked up into Greyson’s grey eyes. I was trying to make sense of what he was telling me. “Wait, you talked her *down*? Down from what? What was she going to do?”

Greyson sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t even think she knew. She was just angry, frustrated as hell from the looks of it. But it’s okay. She’s gone.”

“What did she say to you? That you’re still thinking about?”

Greyson’s eyes darkened. “Ava is insecure, and those insecurities are like an infectious disease. It’s hard to be around her without picking up on something, though I’m sorry I let her get to me.” He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. “Let’s not fight. I don’t want to talk about Ava or Xavier anymore, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. I stood on tiptoe and kissed him again. He responded, and this kiss was a lot less gentle. This one was deep and searching and scorching hot. His tongue pushed past my lips and slid against mine, and as his hands grasped my back, I felt his fear and the anxiety he’d been feeling in the strength of his grip on me.

I could understand why the dinner tonight had made everyone feel so uneasy—it had all been so rushed and unexpected. No one had time to mentally prepare for it. Xavier had just called me out of the blue, and we’d headed off. And I felt badly that what had happened had fed into Greyson’s insecurities about our relationship. The fact that he’d even acknowledged it really said a lot about how deeply he had felt it. And I couldn’t help but feel responsible for that.

I had to make it up to him.

I pulled away from the kiss and looked up at him. His eyes were dark, and his breathing was heavy as he looked down at me in the dim light of the kitchen.

“Greyson,” I started.

“Yeah?” he breathed.

I smiled. “Let me *show* you how much I love you.”

He pulled back, startled. “Cali, you don’t have to prove anything to me. I swear you don’t. I shouldn’t have said anything. I was wrong, I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “No, I know. I’m not proving anything to you, but I want to show you how much I love you. I want this, if you do.”

“What about dinner?” he asked, though I could see a fire igniting behind his eyes.

I grinned at him. “I’m suddenly hungry for something else right now.” And I took his hand in mine. I led him out of the kitchen and up the stairs. I pulled him down the hallway and into his room, where I shut the door behind us.

Inside, I gave him a gentle shove, pushing him onto his bed, then crawled after him. I kissed him as I pulled his joggers down over his hips and he kicked them away. I broke away long enough to pull his shirt over his head, then tossed it after his pants. I straddled him and sat up, pulling off my own shirt.

Greyson moaned and reached up, cupping my breasts in his hands. “I’ve been thinking of you all night, love. Just *aching* for you—"

Then I kissed him, and the rest of his words were lost against my mouth. He kissed me, but the kiss was too soft, too gentle, and it wasn’t gentleness I wanted. Not now, not after the night I’d had. It wasn’t gentleness I was hungry for. So I slid my hands into his hair and grabbed, digging my nails into his scalp, and deepened the kiss.

He groaned softly, low in his throat, then his arms encircled me, pulling me against him, and he rolled me under him on the bed.

Still kissing me, he pulled my jeans off, then my panties, throwing them into the darkness of the room. I reached down, putting my hand around the shaft of his cock, and he groaned. The deep, rumbling moan that climbed its way from his chest to his throat vibrated through the room and into my body, feeling downright sinful. I stroked him up and down, slowly at first, then faster, then slowly, then faster. I wanted to hear him moan again. I wanted my touch to be the only one that could elicit that sound from him.

“*Fuck*, Cali,” he breathed, his weight suspended on top of me.

I was burning up. I needed him, now, so I opened my legs and guided him into me. He drove in deep, and I gasped with the pain and the pleasure of it. He was in charge, and I liked it. He grabbed both my wrists in one hand and pushed them up, holding them over my head, then kissed me. All the while, Greyson’s hips bucked wildly as he drove in and out of me, over and over, deeper and deeper. He dragged his kisses down my throat, then down to my tits, where he flicked his tongue over one nipple, then the other.

I went mad at this, arching against him. He pushed into me harder.

“Oh god, Greyson,” I gasped.

“Go ahead, love,” he urged, “I’ve got you.”

That was all I needed to hear, and I came apart. I climaxed hard and fast. I clenched around him, and he came quickly, his whole body tightening like a spring.

“Oh god. *Fuck*, Cali.”

His body shook as he finished, and I held him tight.

He rolled off me and pulled me into his arms, humming with contentment. “Cali, you’re amazing. Do you know that?”

I looked into his eyes. “So are you. I hope you know how much I love you.”

“I do,” he said quietly, brushing a strand of hair out of my face. He tucked it behind my ear. “And we don’t have to have sex to prove it.”

I shook my head. “This wasn’t just sex.”

“I know that,” he breathed.

It hadn’t been. It had been *great* sex, but it had been more than that. It had been a reaffirmation of our connection as mates.

He shook his head. “Please don’t worry about what I said before, Love. It was a mistake, and I was wrong to even bring it up.”

I nodded. I wanted—more than anything—to take Greyson at his word. He certainly did *look* sincere in the dim light of his bedroom, with the afterglow of great sex shining over us. And the way he had responded to me a few moments ago certainly seemed to make the point that those insecurities were behind us.

For the moment, at least.

But there was still the issue of the therapy session. I hadn’t yet mentioned that I had agreed to accompany Xavier to a session with his therapist.

I propped myself up on my elbow and took a deep breath. He wasn’t going to be happy to hear it, but there was no time like the present. “Listen, Greyson, I need to tell you something—”

Then the bedroom door flew open, and Lola burst into the room.

“Lola!” I screeched, yanking up the sheet to cover both Greyson and myself. “What is wrong with you?! Don’t you ever knock?”

“Cali, we have bigger fish to fry than your prudishness,” Lola said in a rush. “We have a serious problem.”

“What?”

“It’s Macauley,” she said.

“What about him?” I snapped, still irritated about being interrupted, and so rudely.

Lola looked stricken. “He’s gone!”

**Episode 5025**

**Xavier**

Racing through the woods, I kept my head down, following Ava’s scent along the wooded ground. I was just hoping I could find her before she made it to the Redwood house. I had no idea what she had planned, but whatever it was, I knew it wasn’t going to be good. Judging from the tone of the text messages she’d sent while I was at dinner, she was going to be gunning for Cali.

Damn it all to hell.

I got that Ava was pissed, but I was pissed too. I had told her about the dinner. It wasn’t my fault she hadn’t listened to the voicemail I’d left. If anyone should be pissed, it was me.

I slowed my pace and looked at the dark woods all around me. They were quiet and still—winter woods. The birds and animals were asleep—or maybe they were just hiding. The ground itself seemed to be asleep and I thought for a moment, concentrating on her scent.

Then, in the distance, I heard the crack of a stick, and I knew she was coming. Finally. I could only hope she had come to her senses and changed her mind about going to the Redwood pack house.

I shifted to my human form and walked forward. “Ava!”

She appeared on the path in front of me, her light coat illuminated by the bright moonlight. She looked beautiful and majestic, and the sharpest points of my irritation drained away.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” I told her, walking toward her. “Where have you been? And why the hell did you run off?”

She didn’t move, and for a moment the silence felt suspended in amber. Ava—along with everything else in the woods—was completely still.

And then she lunged.

She came for me in an instant, snarling and snapping. She slammed into me, driving us both to the cold, frozen ground.

“Ava! What are you doing?! STOP! *AVA*!”

But she didn’t stop. She was on top of me, her powerful claws digging into my chest.

“If this is about the dinner—”

But she wasn’t listening. Her jaws were open, and she was snapping, trying to bite me. And they weren’t playful nips either. She was aiming for my head and throat. She was aiming to kill, and it was everything I could do to hold her back.

Shit. This wasn’t good. I was at a real disadvantage here. I might be an Alpha, but I was in my human form, and Ava was strong as hell. But I didn’t shift—I shouldn’t have to in order to defend myself from my own mate. Besides, that would only escalate an already tense situation.

My thoughts were racing, but I had a feeling that the best course of action would be to stay in my human form—to stay less threatening.

I grabbed her by the scruff of the neck as she snapped again, barely keeping her jaws from clamping down around my throat. “Nothing happened at dinner!”

Ava snarled. *Oh, you mean the dinner date you told me about over voicemail?! What’s next? You going to break up with me through Instagram?*

“Ava, stop! I tried to get in touch with you, but I couldn’t. And if you would just fucking listen to your messages, you would’ve known what was going on—”

*Don’t you dare try to blame me for this shitshow, Xavier!* Ava hissed.

“What was I supposed to do?” I demanded. “I *called.* You didn’t pick up! I left a message.”

She glowered at me, her eyes glittered with savage anger. *You were supposed to tell me to my face! God, Xavier, are you really that much of a coward?! Do I really need to remind you that I’m not only your mate, but your Luna too? Don’t you owe me that much? We are supposed to work together, to discuss things as a fucking team! You are supposed to respect me!*

“It was *just dinner*!” I yelled, though the words sounded weird as they echoed back against the trees. “And I would have told you in person, but I didn’t have time.”

*You didn’t have time?!* Ava repeated, making the word sound preposterous. *What was the fucking rush, Xavier? Did you miss your precious Cali so much that you just had to see her?*

“This wasn’t my fault. I was only doing what you wanted in the first place—”

*Bullshit!* Ava spat. *That’s bullshit, and you fucking know it.* *I wanted you to take care of yourself. I wanted you to stop torturing yourself. I wanted you to stop ripping yourself apart. Did I ever tell you to take Cali out for a dinner date? I wanted you to go to therapy, Xavier, not go on a date with some other woman!*

I grabbed her shoulders. “Hey! Watch your fucking mouth. I am your Alpha.”

Ava shifted back to her human form, her body transforming under my hands. But her dark blue eyes still looked livid with fury as she glared down at me. “Then fucking act like it,” she snarled.

I held her gaze as she hovered over me. She was breathing hard, her breath visible in the cold winter air. I was achingly aware of her naked body, inches away from mine, burning hot beneath my hands. My wolf was as well, and he was howling with desire. He wanted her—now. He loved her like this—powerful, angry, dominant. Hell, my wolf liked Ava in any iteration.

Her eyes glittered with anger, and she tightened her grip on my arms that were pinned to my sides. I could easily have pushed her off. I didn’t. We stayed like that for a strange, weighted moment.

Then—like the moment when she had attacked—she lunged forward again. This time to kiss me. The kiss was rough as hell, and she bit down on my lip hard enough I tasted my own blood. I felt her nails cutting into my wrists, and when she pushed her hips against mine—writhing against me—her moan sounded more like a growl.

As her body moved against mine, the anger coursing through me transformed in an instant, turning into a burning desire to *take her*—right here, right now. She was setting the pace, but that was over. I grabbed her around the waist and flipped her over, slamming her to the ground and straddling her. She was right—I was not just her mate—I was her Alpha, and I was going to prove that to her now.

“Take that cock you love so much in your hand,” I commanded.

Her eyes widened, but she did as she was told, grasping it gently at first, then firming her grip and sweeping two of her fingers over my balls. I was so hard already.

“I’m going fuck you, and you’re going to scream my name and remember who the fuck your Alpha is. Is that clear?”

Her eyes narrowed, but I felt her heartbeat start racing. “I’m not screaming anything.”

If she wanted to play this little game, I wouldn’t play fair.

I bent forward and kissed her, hard, biting her lips the way she had bitten mine. I put my hand to her sex, pushing my fingers inside. I felt her core, which was slick and hot with arousal. “You are going to scream it,” I growled against her mouth.

“I won’t,” she hissed back, even as she rolled her hips looking for more from my hand.

“Several times, in fact,” I side, flicking my finger against her clit.

She shivered as she moaned. “Never.”

I pulled back and pushed her legs open, then drove my cock into her. Her moan echoed through the trees. She gasped as she reached out and gripped the ground, digging her nails into the decaying leaves, ripping up the frozen soil.

“I am going to split you in two if I have to, but you are going to scream my name, Ava,” I snarled.

She wrapped her legs around my waist and drove me in. “You’re going to have to fuck me harder than that, then,” she panted.

I growled, grabbed both her tits in my hands and squeezed her nipples until she gasped.

“*Oh god!*” she whimpered, tossing her head back. “Yes, keep doing that.”

“That’s not my name,” I warned.

Her hips bucked. She was hungry as fuck. She wanted more. “Oh *fuck*!”

I pounded into her, driving into her harder and harder. Pressure was building inside of me, but I was going to make her come. I was going to watch the pleasure spread over her face. I was going to make her call my name.

“You’re getting closer,” I ground out.

She pressed her lips together, stubborn as fuck. As always.

A smile twisted my own lips, and I bent, kissing her hard and long, driving my tongue into her mouth. She was my mate, my Luna, and I knew her inside and out.

“Come for me,” I whispered against her lips.

“Oh god! Oh fuck!” She began to shake, her whole body quivering with waves of pleasure. “Oh god—”

“Say it, Ava!” I commanded. “Fucking say it!”

“*Xavier!*” she screamed as she climaxed. Her screams echoed through the woods as she yelled my name again and again.

**Episode 5026**

**Greyson**

I walked into the pack house and pushed the door closed, then leaned against it with a sigh. I felt exhausted and—worse than that—frustrated. The sun was coming up over the tree line, and I had nothing to show for it. I had spent most of the night searching the woods for Macauley, but I hadn’t found him. I hadn’t even found a trace of him. I pushed a hand through my hair and allowed myself one more moment for the kind of useless anger I was feeling, then stood straight and walked down the hall. I needed to find Rishika. I needed her to organize a bigger search party to look for him. We had a lot of ground to cover, but we had a lot of wolves, too. And how far could the guy have gone? Mikah had left blood bags for him, so what would have possessed him to wander off like that?

As I neared the kitchen I heard voices, and I frowned when I recognized one of them. What the hell was Xavier doing here? Had dinner not been enough? Had he come to take Cali to brunch, too?

Then I walked into the kitchen and realized that it wasn’t Xavier’s voice I had heard, but Colton’s.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, surprised.

Colton turned to look at me but didn’t answer. He looked over my shoulder as Maya walked up behind me, a baby in each arm.

“Hey, I couldn’t bring in the babies and the luggage,” she said waspishly. “Thanks for the help, by the way.”

“I’m just washing off the baby barf,” Colton said, sponging his shirt. “I’ll grab the stuff as soon as I’m done. Don’t bring anything in.”

“Well, I’m still not sure what you all are doing here, but it’s nice to see you.” I turned to Maya and the twins. “It’s great to see you, Maya. It’s been a while.”

“We’re here for the camping trip,” Colton supplied. “Remember?”

I stared at him, shocked. “I didn’t realize we’d actually agreed on that.”

Maya handed me a baby. “Here you go, Greyson. Be a good uncle, will you? I have to go change a diaper.”

As Maya hurried away, I took one look at the baby in my arms, then at the stain on Colton’s shirt, wondering if I was about to be covered in barf too. I held the tiny baby a little uneasily, a little fearful of how freaking small it was. It was looking up at me curiously, like it was similarly weirded out by how big I was.

“Um, have you ever held a baby before?”  
 I looked up to find Colton eyeing me. “Yeah, of course I have,” I said. Then I thought for a moment. “I mean, probably. Maybe not *recently*.”

“Just support her head a bit more,” he said. He stepped toward me and adjusted my arm, so the baby’s head was settled right in the crook of my elbow.

“Her?” I asked. “I thought I was holding Orion.”

“Nope, this is Lyra. It’s easy to get them mixed up,” Colton said, looking back down at his shirt. “They smell different too. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Cali walked into the kitchen. “Greyson, there you are. I’ve been looking for you. I wanted to ask about Macauley. Did you have any—Colton?!” Her eyes went wide as she spied the baby in my arms. “Lyra!”

The look of surprise was quickly overtaken by total adoration, and she strode to my side, her eyes on the baby.

“*Ohhh*,” she cooed. “She’s beautiful, Colton.”

“Of course she is. Look at her parents,” Colton said.

I rolled my eyes. Colton had always been cocky, and clearly fatherhood hadn’t changed him.

I heard the crunch of gravel on the driveway from an approaching car, so I handed the baby to Cali. “Excuse me for a minute,” I told her, and headed outside.

When I stepped out onto the porch, the car was unfamiliar. I felt myself tense as it stopped, but relaxed when the car door opened and Emmett—the professor from the vampire school, Tottenville—stepped out.

“Emmett,” I called, walking down the porch steps. “What are you doing here?”

“Lola called me,” Emmett said. “About Macauley escaping last night. And as I was heading up here, I was listening to the police scanner. There’s a report of an attack at a secluded cabin on the north side of the mountain.”

Privately I wondered why Emmett had a police scanner that he regularly listened to, but I didn’t press the issue. The guy was just weird.

“I think we should go there now,” he went on, “but I want to speak to you first.”

“Yeah, we should go,” I agreed.

“Hey, I’ll come along,” Colton said, who’d overheard the conversation as he’d been walking down the porch steps. “I can bring in the luggage later. I need to stretch my legs after driving for so long. I’ll just text Maya and let her know where we’re going.”

“Okay,” Emmett said, opening up his car door again. “Hop in.”

We made good time, and twenty minutes later, we pulled up in front of the small cabin that was the site of the attack.

“Uh, should we just be parking right out in front?” Colton asked warily.

“Don’t worry about it,” Emmett said. “I’ve got this.”

He stepped out of the car and strode confidently toward a knot of uniformed officers who were gathered by a police car.

“I’m Dr. Emmett Worthington, the forensic pathologist.”

“The forensic—what?” one of the officers asked, looking confused.

“The pathologist. The superintendent sent me. Now what’s the report?” Emmett went on, sounding so terse and aggrieved the officers all started looking a little nervous.

“Well, some crazy dude broke into this cabin and tore the place up. He was probably high on something. He even pounced on the dad like he was going to bite him, but then freaked out and jumped out the window. Witnesses say he raced into the forest. A few injuries,” he went on, pointing to the ambulance parked a few yards away, where medics were patching up a middle-aged man.

“How is he?” I asked.

The cop looked at me warily. “Just a couple of scrapes and bruises, but the whole family’s okay.”

I nodded and caught Colton’s eye. He and I stepped away from the cops.

“If this guy is a vamp, wouldn’t he have guzzled the blood?” Colton asked.

Before I could answer, Emmett joined us, looking tense.

“I suspected something like this might happen.”

“What?” I asked.

“Macauley went vampire insane because of whatever mind control he was under from Chessa,” Emmett said, his expression dark.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “What exactly does that mean?”

Emmett shook his head. “I can’t be completely sure until I can examine Macauley, but any newborn vampire would be bound to be disoriented and starving.”

I frowned at Emmett. “Why would Macauley be starving? Mikah left blood for him.”

“He’s probably too disoriented to know what to do. You have to remember that this is all new to him. And with Chessa’s death, things can go off the rails for him. He’s lost his sire, so there’s nobody to guide him.”

“It sounds like the quicker we catch him, the better,” I said grimly. “We got lucky here,” I said, nodding toward the cabin, “but we need to hunt him down before he actually hurts someone.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Colton said confidently. “We know how to hunt and kill—”

“Hang on,” I said, holding up my hand. “We’re not killing anyone. Macauley was an innocent victim of Chessa, and we need to give him a chance.”

Colton glared at me. “A *chance*? Why? So he can have a chance to fang my babies? No fucking way, man. I’m not going to let anyone hurt them.”

“Your babies are surrounded by the whole of the Redwood pack,” I reminded Colton. “Macaulay isn’t going to get anywhere near them.”

Colton didn’t look appeased by this. “I wonder if you’d be quite so cool about this if we were talking about the safety of *your* babies, Greyson.”

“I still wouldn’t be cool with killing an innocent—”

“He’s a fucking vampire, man—”

“How about we stop bickering and just find the guy,” Emmett said, holding up his hands to silence both of us.

“Fine,” I said.

Colton shook his head. “Whatever.” He turned and started away. “I should have stayed with Xavier and the Samaras. Hell of a lot less drama."

I bit my lip, holding back all I could say about everything Xavier had going on at the moment, and led the way toward the woods.

Macauley had definitely been here, and I picked up on his scent as soon as we walked into the trees.

“I’ve got it,” I said, turning east.

“You both need to avoid shifting for as long as you can,” Emmett warned. “You shifting will only drive him crazier. All of his senses are already heightened.”

“Fine,” I agreed. I was reluctant, but at least if I stayed in my human form I could keep talking to Emmett, who was the expert here. Besides, it was just one newbie fangbanger running around. How hard was it going to be to find him?

As we walked into the woods, I couldn’t help but shake my head. I couldn’t believe we were actually hunting another vampire.

We walked for about a mile, going east. But as the trail started to veer south, Macauley’s distinctive scent began to mix with another scent I recognized.

“There he is,” Colton snarled. He was about to move forward when I grabbed his shoulder, holding him back.

“That’s not Macauley,” I said.

“Then who is it?” Colton demanded.

I stared at the figure up ahead. “Kendall,” I said, stunned. “Why the hell is she back?”

**Episode 5027**

Finished with his diaper change, Maya had handed me Orion, so now I had both babies—one in each arm.

“I love them so much,” I gushed, looking down at them. “Twice as much love as one baby!”

Maya eyed me from the chair next to the fire where she’d collapsed after she’d handed the baby off. “Yeah, twice as much work, too.” She sighed. “Leave it to Colton to find an excuse to run off.”

I smiled but didn’t take Maya’s dig at Colton too seriously. Maya was just like that, and I was pretty sure Colton doted on all of them when he wasn’t trying to pass himself off as one of the bros.

Maya took a deep breath and heaved herself out of the chair. “As long as you’ve got them for a sec, I’m going to be right back. I haven’t had a chance to brush my teeth yet. Haven’t had a chance to shower yet, either, but maybe I can dream that dream after Colton gets back…”

She walked out of the room just as Lola walked in.

Lola looked at her in surprise, then stepped into the room, avoiding making eye contact with me.

“Hey, when did Maya get here? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Maybe you would’ve known if you weren’t so busy spying on me,” I said shortly.

Lola looked at me with a sigh. “I’m sorry about that, Cali. I was just worried. And I didn’t actually *do* anything, you know.” She put out her arms. “Can I hold the babies?”

I pulled them closer to my chest. “No you cannot. Not until you explain to me what you were doing. I thought we were best friends, Lola, and best friends do *not* spy on each other.”

“I didn’t spy—”

“But you were going to,” I pointed out. “If Greyson hadn’t stopped you, you would have.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” she said with a defeated sigh. “But… It’s just that I’ve seen what Xavier’s actions have done to you. How he’s hurt you. I know you must trust him, but I’m not ready to.”

Orion cooed, and when I looked down at him, some of the hostility I was feeling toward Lola melted away. How could I feel angry when I was staring into such an angelic smile?

I looked back up at my friend. “I know you were just being protective, Lola, but you have to trust me on this. I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m sorry,” Lola said. “I will try. It might take me a while, but I’m going to do my best, I promise.” She dropped down next to me on the couch. “Now, tell me about dinner.”

I shrugged. “There really isn’t much to tell. I didn’t even eat.”

“You went to that fancy new place that opened last month, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but I was so tense the whole time, I didn’t have an appetite.”

“What did you talk about?”

“What do you think? Xavier and I are going to try to be friends—at least, I think that’s what we’re going to try to do. It was pretty weird.”

“I’ll bet,” Lola said, looking skeptical.

“Lola…” I said warningly.

She held up her hands. “Okay, okay, I’ll try to keep an open mind.”

Lyra began to fuss, squirming in my arms. “Oh no.” I handed Orion to Lola and focused on Lyra, bouncing her in my arms and trying to comfort her. But it didn’t seem to work, and she only cried louder.

Upset by his sister’s cries, Orion began to cry as well.

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Oh god, what am I supposed to do?”

I handed Lyra to Lola.

“How is this supposed to help?!” Lola asked, looking at both babies with mounting panic.

“Hang on, I’m just going to go find Maya.”

I headed out of the kitchen and started looking around. Maya wasn’t in the bathroom, and she wasn’t in the kitchen. I finally found her in the den, where she had passed out on the couch, her toothbrush still sticking out of her mouth. She must be exhausted with two newborns—even as a werewolf, let alone an Alpha. Plus, Colton was nowhere to be seen.

I shook her shoulder, and she jerked awake.

“What? What’s wrong? Where are the babies?” She gasped, looking blearily around.

“Go take a nap upstairs,” I said quietly. “Lola and I can watch the babies for a while.”

“Thanks,” Maya slurred, then fell back onto the couch, asleep in about half a second.

When I got back to the living room, Lola looked like she was about to cry too. She looked completely overwhelmed.

“Where’s Maya? They’re both still crying! What are we supposed to do?!”

I thought for a moment. “I’ve heard that taking babies for a walk can calm them down. I think there’s a stroller by the door.”

“Then get it!” Lola said desperately.

I grabbed the travel stroller Maya and Colton had brought and looked at it in wonder. There were about a thousand straps and buckles. It took a while, but I finally managed to get it set up, then grabbed coats for Lola and me, blankets for the babies, and lugged the stroller down the porch steps.

Lola carried the babies and looked around. “Okay, I think we should probably keep to the road, right?”

I frowned. “I don’t know, maybe not the middle of the road. Too many cars, right? There’s a little walking path that goes around the house.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever,” Lola said, shouting to be heard over the babies.

We strapped them in, which they didn’t seem to like, but as soon as we started to walk, then began to calm down. The path was rocky and uneven, but the babies seemed to like the motion, and Lola and I had just begun to relax a bit when I heard a noise from deep within the woods.

I looked quickly at Lola, hoping I had just imagined the noise.

But Lola’s eyes were wide with fear, and I knew she had heard it too.

“You don’t think that could be Macauley, do you?”

Lola’s face looked a little pale. “No,” she said quickly. “No, I don’t think so. But, let me just go see. To be sure.”

“Lola—” I started, but it was too late. She had already taken off into the woods.

I grabbed the stroller and looked around. Immediately I wished she hadn’t gone, because now I was alone.

There was another sound, closer now. My heart thudded in my chest.

Then another—the crack of a stick breaking.

“Shit shit shit,” I muttered.

I heard the movement of the leaves as something emerged from the woods close by, and I screamed and raised my hands to blast whatever it was when Xavier’s wolf emerged from the trees.

“Don’t blast me!” he shouted, shifting to his human form and holding up his hands.

Gasping with fright, I reigned my magic back in. “What are you doing here?” I managed, grasping onto the handle of the stroller for support.

He nodded toward the twins, who were now content as could be. “Colton texted me that he was here. I didn’t even know he was headed to the area, so I came right over. I wanted to see him and Maya and the babies.” He looked down at the stroller and smiled. “And how are my little niece and nephew?”

He walked toward me, standing so close all I could think about was how close he was. I had to force myself to look at the stroller and *not* at Xavier’s naked body.

“They’re good, but, uh, Macauley is loose.”

Xavier looked up at me, alarmed. “*What?* Are you serious? Then what the hell are you doing out here alone?”

“I’m not alone,” I said quickly. “Lola came with me, but we heard something in woods, and she went to check it out—”

“You should go back to the house,” he said, cutting me off. “When she gets back, I’ll walk you both back there—”

“Can you just put some clothes on?” I asked, nodding toward the bag he had slung over his back.

“What? Oh, yeah, sure.” He pulled the bag around and pulled out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. “Sorry again about cutting dinner short,” he said as he pulled the clothes on.

“Right,” I said, reminded again of how awkward the night before had been. “It was probably for the best anyway. Greyson wasn’t super happy about it.”

“Yeah, Ava wasn’t either. I sort of dropped the ball on fully informing her before it happened.”

“Yeah, why did it need to happen in such a rush?” I asked curiously.

Xavier looked pensive as he tugged his shirt over his head. He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could get a word out, there was a sound behind him in the woods.

We both looked over to see Macauley sprinting toward us, fangs out and eyes wild.

**Episode 5028**

**Artemis**

I pushed Marius back and turned to Celeste. “You heard my offer. If you free Marius, I’ll stay.”

Celeste gave me an icy look. “I will take some time to consider it,” she said ambiguously. “Until then, you will *both* stay here.”

And with that, she turned and strode away. The door slammed shut behind her, leaving Marius and me alone once again.

He rounded on me, his eyes flashing with anger. “What the hell have you done, Ari?”

“What?” I snapped back.

“Tell me you have some angle to this,” he said, a plea in his voice. “Tell me that shit you just pulled was some kind of a ploy, and that you have a plan to get yourself out of here. Tell me!”

I opened my mouth to answer, but he wasn’t listening, and he wasn’t letting me get a word in edgewise.

He started pacing, running his hands through his thick hair so it stood up at odd angles. “Do you have any idea what you’re talking about here? What it would be like to be stuck here in the place with that woman? She would lord over you night and day. You’d be under lock and key! She’d have guards tracking your every move. Or what if that psycho changes her mind and decides you’re more trouble than you’re worth and that you’re too dangerous to keep alive after all? What about that, huh?” He stopped and turned to me, his eyes wide. “Please, Ari, just think about this.”

“Marius, *stop*,” I said, grabbing him by the shoulders so he would stand still for a second. “Just stop, please. It’s going to be okay. I *do* have a plan.”

“A *plan*?” Marius laughed. “A plan? Did you hear that?!” he shouted to an unseen observer. “Artemis has a plan! Fantastic!”

“*Shhhh!*” I hissed, covering his mouth. “What are you doing?! The guards will hear you!”

“What does it matter?” he mumbled beneath my palm. “You have a plan, remember?!”

I rolled my eyes. “Will you just shut up?”

But he still wasn’t listening. He had pulled away from my grip and was shaking his head and had started muttering to himself. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I was a fool—a fool to think we could work together. Thinking I could trust you, after all this time. I mean, do you really expect me to just walk away…” His eyes narrowed, and he looked suspiciously at me. “Hang on—was this your plan all along?”

“Was what my plan?”

He gestured around. “This? Was this your plan to get rid of me?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I said. “You’re not making any sense—”

“This has been Artemis’s grand plan all along, apparently,” Marius was shouting again. “Get caught by the Fae court, pretend to do something valiant, and sell Marius up the river as quick as possible! I don’t know why I didn’t see this coming sooner. I should have kept my frigging eyes open. Too busy looking other places, and I dropped my guard. That’s what I get. Fuck me, right?”

It wasn’t going to be long before a guard came in to check on us, so I grabbed him by the shirt and shut him up the only way I knew how, the way that always worked—

I kissed him.

Marius was still for a moment. He pulled back, started to say something, then apparently thought better of it, and grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me in again, kissing me back.

The kiss he returned was more heated than the one I had started with. That one was a stop-gap measure, but the kiss he gave me back was long and heated. It was searching and scorching and set my blood on fire. I had only kissed him to shut him up, but his kiss was evolving into something I didn’t think either of us had planned on.

It was hard to pinpoint what exactly was the catalyst for it—maybe it had something to do with the dire situation we were in, or the fact that we had traveled so long together and built up so much tension. Maybe it was that there was so much between us that had gone unsaid. Whatever it was, I didn’t care. Not now.

All I knew was that our bodies suddenly fit together like melting candles. Hands were everywhere, grabbing and pulling. We stumbled backward—both of us unwilling to break away from the kiss—until we hit the bed, where we crashed like an ocean wave. Marius tore at my clothes, and I tore at his. Clothes were flying as I kissed his lips and his jaw and his neck—every part of his body I’d been surreptitiously staring at whenever I thought he wasn’t watching.

Every inch of him was muscle, scars dancing along his chest like freckles. I ran a hand up it, savoring the feel of him underneath my fingertips. Once most of my clothes were gone, his hands were grabbing at my hips; his long fingers dug into my skin, securing me to him. One of his strong thighs parted my legs, and the pressure on my core was enough to make me whimper.

In one swift motion, he took my thighs and pushed them back toward my shoulders as he sank into me. His lips found my hardened nipples, lazily rolling his tongue over them. Greedily, I reached between us and brought his mouth back to mine. He let go of my legs, reaching to palm my breasts. Then one hand traveled lower down my body, slipping down to enter me.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” he said, groaning as he pushed a second finger inside.

I gasped, kissing him again and biting down on his lip. He groaned as he fucked me with his hand, curling his fingers to make my toes curl. My hands dug into his hair, pulling hard, and I enjoyed how hard I felt he was between my legs.

“All I’ve thought about is this,” he said, breaking the kiss and looking down at the mess of me coming apart at his hand, “of you, of you like this. Gods, you have no fucking idea, Ari.”

“Marius,” I gasped, rolling my hips to match his movements. “I need more.”

With that, he took his fingers out. My body shook, needing to be filled again. I watched as he brought his fingers to my mouth.

“Open.”

I obliged, licking the taste of me off of his fingers, but as I did, I reached between us to grab his cock. Marius moaned, and my entire body flushed, pulsing. I squeezed his cock, loving how it was making him immediately fall apart. Then his hand found mine, and he took control; slowly, he dragged his cock along my center, swirling around my clit.

“Do you want this?” he asked, voice rugged with desire.

“I need it,” I said, and with that I guided him in.

We both gasped, and I wriggled underneath Marius as I adjusted to the size of him. It’d been so long since I’d taken him like this—literal years. After a moment, we caught a perfect rhythm fast and rode hard, our bodies working in perfect synchrony. It wasn’t long before I felt the pressure of my climax mounting.

Quickly, I rolled him over so I was on top of him. I braced myself on his chest, basking in the look on his face with me above him. He grabbed my hips, pulling me down even harder on top of him, driving more of himself into me.

Pleasure was washing over me, and I was trying to give myself over to the moment, but I had this creeping feeling that there was something final about this—that whatever this was, it might actually be goodbye. I looked down at his face, which was as roguish and handsome as ever. He was sweaty and seemed to glow golden as he smiled up at me. I had always assumed that Marius and I would part ways one of these days. I knew that we would say goodbye, of course—I just never figured that goodbye would be difficult.

I never thought I would miss him.

His grip on my hips tightened.

“Oh fuck, Ari,” he said, and his hips bucked harder. He reached between us, his fingers circling around my clit. “Come for me. Gods, I need to fucking see you come for me.”

That sent me over the edge. “*Marius.*”

He didn’t stop his movements. My thighs shook as I came apart. Pleasure washed through me, and Marius didn’t stop his movements, coaxing every bit out of my orgasm that he could. Then he came, shaking and gripping my flesh as he breathed my name.

He slowed and then stopped, then rolled me off him and into his arms. His lips found mine, a lazy kiss shared between us. Then he pulled away, pushing my hair behind my cheeks. We lay there for just a moment before the realization of what we’d just done hit me. Then I sat up and looked around.

“Where are my clothes?”

“Kind of everywhere,” Marius admitted, gesturing around. He sat up as well and looked at me keenly. “I hope that cleared your head, and you’ve come to your senses.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, looking around for my shirt.

“I’m talking about trying to make a deal with Celeste. You’re not going to try that, right?”

I sighed. “Just let me worry about that—”

“You do realize that she won’t let you leave, right? And even if she agrees to this batshit plan of yours, the second she lets me out of this place, she’s just going to have me hunted down and killed.”

I pulled on my shirt. The truth was that I was glad he was talking about my offer to Celeste. As much as I didn’t want to discuss it, at least it prevented him from talking about what the hell had just happened between us.

“What do you think the alternative is?” I asked, rounding on him. “Seriously, what? The only leverage I have is refusing to cooperate with Celeste.”

Marius thought about it for a moment. “You rushed it. You should have waited. At least then—”

“We couldn’t wait, and you know it. She’s going to use me, no matter what. She’s not going to wait around, twiddling her thumbs.”

“There has to be some other way,” he muttered, frowning.

I pulled on my pants. “Listen, I appreciate that you’re so concerned about me, I really do, but you need to think about yourself. Whatever Celeste’s plans are for me, you mean nothing to her.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and that’s breaking my heart. I don’t give a shit about her either, but what about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, suddenly nervous.

He eyed me. “Are you really going to make me walk away? Do you really expect me to just leave you here to whatever fate holds for you?”

I took a deep breath. “No. I don’t.”

“Wait—what?” he asked, his expression now a mask of confusion. “Ari, you’re not making a lot of sense.”

“I am, if you had listened to me before.”

“Before—”

I have a plan to escape.”

This stopped him. “How?”

I stepped toward the bed and leaned close. “With my sister’s help.”

He pulled back in shock. “*What?* Your sister? What are you talking about?”

“Okay, just listen—and don’t freak out.” I sat down and scooted close to him so I could speak quietly. “Once Celeste agrees to release you, you get out of here. You get through the Fae world and find the portal to the mortal world. Get through, find my sister, and bring her back here.”

**Episode 5029**

**Xavier**

Macauley was coming straight for us, and I moved on instinct, stepping in front of Cali and the babies. He looked out of his mind, and though I knew Cali could defend herself, I didn’t want to take any chances she or the babies might be harmed by this crazed vampire.

“Cali, run,” I said, my voice low and tense.

“Don’t kill him, Xavier,” Cali pleaded with me. “Try to subdue him. He’s a newborn vampire; he’s not himself. He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Just get out of here,” I told her. “Get the babies out of here. Get yourself and the kids safe, I’ll do what I can to keep from killing this guy, but I’m not making any promises.”

“Xavier—” Cali started, but I wasn’t listening anymore.

I shifted and lunged, charging toward Macauley in an instant.

I didn’t imagine the newbie fangster was going to be too difficult to take care of, but when I reached the kid, he dodged out of the way of my attack with such blinding speed it took my breath away. For a second there, my mind spun, trying to remember *what* the guy was. I’d thought he was a vampire, but it seemed like he had just blipped away like a fucking witch. But no, he wasn’t a witch, he was a vampire, and *I* couldn’t stop my forward momentum.

I slammed into a pine tree hard enough that my teeth rattled in my head. Pine needles showered down on me, and I shook my head, trying to clear the stars. But I heard Macauley moving off to my left, so I rallied and recovered just as the kid leaped onto my back.

Shit. He was stronger than I’d expected, too. He was like some kind of supercharged vampire. What the hell was going on with him? It shouldn’t be this way. New vampires were often disoriented and unpredictable, which made them more dangerous, but they weren’t necessarily stronger.

And then it hit me like a ton of bricks—Macauley had been turned by Chessa. Chessa—the same ancient vamp who had been able to control dead animals and humans with her mind. Who had possessed advanced and superior powers. Who knew what kind of freakish powers she had passed along to Macauley?

Terrific.

I bucked like a bull, throwing Macauley into the air, and when he landed, I pounced on him. I was trying to attack while still defending, doing all I could to avoid getting bitten. Using my claws, I cut a mean, bloody gash across the vamp’s chest. I had told Cali I would try not to kill him, but seriously wounding him should do the trick.

Macauley hissed as his skin ripped open, but even that didn’t seem to slow him down.

He arched, and I tried to scramble away, but he slashed at me with his nails, hitting my shoulder.

Shit. The cuts were deep and immediately stung like fire.

Blood began to drip, and Macauley’s eyes narrowed. I could see the hunger in them, and he bared his fangs.

I braced for whatever was going to come next, but suddenly Macauley stopped himself. He stood still, and for a moment he looked dazed, like he had no idea who he was or why he was there. He paused, then—out of nowhere—screamed at the top of his lungs, the sound bouncing around the quiet woods. It was more of a shriek and seemed to be ripped from his chest.

I didn’t see any explanation for this extremely odd behavior, but I *did* see an opportunity, so I lunged at the guy. I chomped down on his arm, locking my jaws, and flung him across the small clearing. He hit a tree with a huge amount of force and slid down to the ground, where he lay, motionless.

I watched him warily. I couldn’t tell how wounded he was, or whether he was going to bounce back and get up and attack again. I hated to leave him without knowing for sure, but I needed to check on Cali and the babies. I needed to make sure they were okay. I had told her to head back to the house, and I had to make sure she’d made it safely.

Taking one more look at Macauley’s still form, I backed out of the clearing and started toward the Redwood pack house. I followed Cali’s scent until it veered off, leading away from the pack house.

Shit. She had taken the wrong path at a fork. I turned, following her scent as it led deeper into the woods. I knew where it was heading, and I found the small structure that had once been Aysel’s love shed, which now sat abandoned.

I shifted to my human form again. “Cali!” I called out, not wanting to get blasted by her magic. “It’s Xavier. Are you here?”

“I’m here!” came her voice from inside the little cottage.

I banged on the door. “Let me in.”

She opened the door, her eyes wide with fear, and I walked in, closing the door behind me. I went to the window and looked out, making sure Macauley hadn’t followed me. Then I walked to the stroller. Orion was still chilling, though Cali had picked up Lyra and was rocking her in her arms.

“What happened?” Cali asked. “You didn’t kill him?”

“No, he was alive when I left. But I’m worried that Macauley’s gained some of the same abilities that Chessa had.”

I stepped back to the window and looked out again. A flock of birds took off from just in front of the cabin, and I narrowed my eyes, wondering if that was normal for birds or if they were being mind-controlled.

“Since we have the babies with us, I think we should just stay here for now,” I said. “Where it’s safe.”

Cali nodded and pulled out her phone. “I’ll just let Lola know where we are.” She paused as she typed, then shook her head, looking frustrated. “I sent it, but the service here isn’t good. I don’t know if the text went through.”

I shrugged. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Cali looked me over. “Xavier, you’re bleeding. Were you bitten?”

“No, I’m okay,” I told her, dabbing at my shoulder. “It’s just a scratch, and I’m already healing.” My shoulder did feel better, but my head had started to ache. It had started when I’d walked into the cabin with Cali.

I walked around the small place, checking the windows to make sure all the windows were locked, but the space was cluttered, and I tripped over an ugly vase, knocking it over. It smashed and the loud noise upset the babies. They both began to cry.

“Oh no,” Cali said. “Shoot. They’re probably hungry,” she said, rocking Lyra in her arms. “And they probably miss their mom.”

Already holding Lyra, she picked up Orion and tried to rock them both as I kept checking windows. But the babies kept crying, unimpressed by her attempts to soothe them, and she was getting overwhelmed.

“Here, let me try,” I said, holding out my arms.

She looked up at me, her eyebrows raised. “Really?”

“Just let me try,” I said.

Both babies were screeching and waving their tiny fists, red-faced and furious, but I took one in each arm, moving my whole body so they were gently rocking. They didn’t respond immediately, but slowly—*slowly*—they began to quiet down. The screeching became regular crying, then the crying became fussing, then the fussing became quiet hiccups. Then nothing at all. Just tiny baby sighs.

Cali stared at me like I’d just made an elephant disappear.

“Xavier Evers, *where* did you learn to do that?”

I shrugged. “I’ve seen enough babies in the pack over the years when I was growing up. I just watched people do it,” I said. “Plus, they’re my brother’s kids. Why wouldn’t I make the effort?”

“Still,” she said, awed. “You’re like a baby whisperer.”

I grinned at her. “It’s not that hard. You just have to kind of relax into it. You should give it a try,” I said, offering her Lyra.

Cali took the baby. Lyra snuffled a bit, like she was going to start crying, but Cali looked quickly at me, and—watching what I did—started to sway on her feet. Lyra relaxed and calmed quickly.

“It seems so easy when you do it. So natural,” she said quietly, looking up at me with a smile. Then the smile faded from her face, and her eyes filled with tears. She looked quickly away.

“Cali, what is it?” I asked, worried.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

“It’s not nothing,” I said, watching a tear stream down her face. “What happened? Did I do something wrong? Did I say something?” I asked, wondering what I could have possibly done.

She shook her head again. For a moment she looked too overwhelmed to speak. Finally, she took a shaking breath and looked over at me. “I just always thought that you and I would have babies together someday. And seeing you like this just reminds me of that old dream, you know? But that’s never going to happen, is it?”

**Episode 5030**

**Greyson**

Colton shook me off. “Who? Who the fuck is Kendall? Does that matter right now? We have to find Macauley.”

“It matters,” I growled. I got what Colton was saying—it was more important to find Macauley, but I just found it a little *too* coincidental to ignore that we had just run into Kendall—again—while we were out hunting vampires.

“Kendall!” I called, waving her over. “What are you doing here? Why are you back?”

She strode over to me, a curious look on her face. “Greyson, I thought you understood me—I don’t like vampires who pose a threat. Speaking of which…” she said, looking up at Emmett, a question in her eyes.

“This is Emmett, and I can assure you he is on our side,” I told her.

Kendall took that in, then nodded, taking me at my word, albeit reluctantly. “Fine. I understand that Chessa left a newborn after all.”

“And how did you happen to find out about that?” I wondered. I glanced up at Emmett, but he shook his head.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” he assured me.

“Is it really a problem that I know, Greyson?” Kendall wondered. “The supernatural world is a small one, as I’m sure you know. Word gets around. Let’s leave it at that.”

I swallowed down my frustration, though it left a bitter taste in the back of my throat. I recalled how Mikah had also told me to leave it alone when I wondered about Kendall’s involvement in the sudden amnesia of Codsworth and the rest of the humans. There seemed to be a lot I wasn’t allowed to know, which I didn’t like at all.

Some of that must have shown on my face because Kendall crossed her arms over her chest, looking annoyed.

“Do you want my help or not, Greyson? Clearly you haven’t found Macauley yet, so you seem to need it.”

Colton shrugged. “Come on, I don’t see any harm in her helping out, Greyson. She did help with Chessa.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “Let’s just find this guy.”

“Great,” Colton said, slapping his hands together.

“Sounds fine to me,” Kendall said. She started to shift, but I put my hand out, stopping her.

“What are you doing? We can’t do that?”

She paused and eyed me, her purple eyes distractingly wolfish, like those were the first to shift. “And why not?”

“You can’t be serious. Come on. The intense scent you’ll give off is going to throw Macauley into some kind of a fit if you get near him.”

Kendall rolled her eyes. “Um, and why is that?”

“Because of how he is.”

She frowned. “And how is he?”

“He’s not like other vampires. He’s…” I paused. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

Kendall snatched her arm away from my grasp. “I’m not going to listen to this, and I’m not going to head into the woods in my human form and let this guy just ambush me—”

“Perhaps I could be of assistance,” Emmett said, stepping up to Kendall.

“Okay,” she said, eyeing Emmett warily.

“I’ve studied this vampire’s blood, and it seems as though he has heightened senses from having both an ancient sire *and* from being mind-controlled. Both elements in his creation make him a fascinating—but dangerous—vampire. It is probably best to sneak up on him in your human form, for now at least. This will make him less suspicious. Maybe it will even induce him to let his guard down. It is our best chance to overtake him.”

Kendall had listened to Emmett, and now she paused, taking in his words. Finally she nodded. “Okay.”

*Okay?* Did she really just say okay? That was *it*? She hadn’t even argued with Emmett, who she didn’t even know. Was she nicer to people she didn’t know? Because when I had said practically the same thing to her, she’d rolled her eyes and basically told me to fuck off.

I ground my teeth. I was starting to really resent this woman.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, and we moved ahead into the woods. I was careful to take the lead. If we did come across Macauley out here, I wanted to be first in line to encounter him.

After a few yards, Colton caught up with me.

“Emmett and that girl Kendall are like two science geek peas in a science geek pod. Look at them,” he said, nodding over his shoulder.

I looked back and saw them walking next to each other, their heads bent together. Emmett was speaking, and Kendall was listening closely.

“—and that’s when I discovered there was a redundancy in the vampire blood study. So it was back to the drawing board! But it gave me time to revise my hypothesis and come up with a completely new methodology!”

I grunted and looked forward again, scanning the trees for any movement.

“So,” Colton went on. “What’s the deal with you and purple eyes back there?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do *you* mean?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. We just don’t get along. We don’t get along, *and* she’s a pain in my ass.”

Colton grinned. “Maybe you’re a pain in *her* ass. Ever think about that?”

Before I could respond to that bit of insight, Kendall sprinted up to us.

“I picked up his scent. He’s just up ahead.”

I looked down the dim pathway and saw that she was right—Macauley was just off the path, partially obscured in the shadows.

“Holy shit, the kid looks deranged,” Colton muttered.

He was right. Macauley was watching us like an animal caught in a cage. His hair was sticking up at every angle, and his skin was pale and waxy. His eyes were wide and fearful, and they followed our every movement.

I took a slow—closely watched—step toward him “Hey, kid, it’s me, Greyson. Remember me? Listen, no one needs to get hurt today, okay? Just calm down. We’re here to help you, but you have to help us,” I said, trying to keep my voice even and non-threatening.

Behind me, Emmett took a step forward and raised his arm. There was a bang—he had shot a tranquilizer dart at Macauley. It hit him in the chest, and Macauley stumbled back a step, but he didn’t go down.

“Okay, that should have worked,” Emmett said, and I could hear the tension in his voice.

Macauley looked down at the dart in his chest and then let out an angry roar. An instant later I was hit with what felt like a battering ram. I hadn’t even seen him move, but Macauley had slammed into me in the blink of an eye. He drove me against a tree, his jaws were wide and his fangs out, trying to bite my neck. I fought back, but his grip was insanely strong.

Reaching up, I grabbed a low branch and tore it from the pine. I was going to stake this sucker if it came down to it.

“Don’t kill him!” Emmett bellowed.

“Too late for that! He’s attacking my brother!” Colton yelled back as he charged toward us. But he had barely reached us before he was tossed back by Macauley with unnerving ease.

I was working with all my might to keep Macauley’s fangs away from my neck, pushing his teeth away with one hand while clutching my makeshift stake in the other.

It suddenly occurred to me that I had no other choice—I was going to have to stake the kid, though it was *not* what I wanted to do.

Dammit.

I raised the branch, then hesitated. I looked at the kid. Beyond the fangs, I could see how young Macauley was. He was still a teenager. *Maybe* twenty—at most. I really didn’t want to kill him.

“Greyson! Catch!”

I looked over just in time to see Kendall tossing me a length of rope. I dropped the stake and caught it in midair, then wrapped it around Macauley like I was hog-tying a pig. Kendall hurried over as Macauley lost his balance and fell to the ground. She helped tighten the knots, subduing Macauley as we worked in perfect synchronization.

Emmett joined us and shot another dart into the now bound Macauley. He hissed but then grew limp. His eyes finally closed, and I breathed a sigh of relief and sat back on my heels.

“Okay, *that* was pretty badass,” Colton said with a grin.

I looked at Kendall. “You’re a good fighter, but you’re a good strategist too. You knew exactly what I needed in the moment.”

She nodded. “Glad it worked out.”

I pushed a hand through my hair and got to my feet. “I should let the pack know we caught him.” When I pulled my phone from my pocket, I saw my notification screen was filled with missed messages. Then one came in from Lola—

*Cali’s lost in the woods with the babies!*

“Shit.” I grabbed Colton’s shoulder. “We gotta go find Cali.”

“Why?” Colton asked.

“Greyson! Behind you!” Kendall screamed.

I spun around, but it was too late. Macauley was on my back and sinking his teeth into my neck.

**Episode 5031**

Xavier’s smile was wistful as he said, “Never say never.” He took my hand in his. “I’ll never rule anything out. I know things have been weird between us for a while now, but our future has never been far from my thoughts, Cali, and I don’t think it ever will be. You have to know that.”

I pulled my hand away, suddenly angry. “You can’t say stuff like that to me.”

*Why is he doing this? He claims to want to be friends, and now he’s saying things that make me wish we were more than that. What is he thinking?*

“I’m sorry, Cali. I don’t mean to upset you, but I was just being honest,” he explained. “We don’t know what lies ahead for us. And I thought we were trying to be friends. Friends talk about everything, don’t they?”

“Friends don’t say things to each other like, ‘Oh, maybe we can have a family someday.’ Really? Xavier, how could you think that would be something I want to hear? After everything we’ve been through? After all the work I’ve done to be okay with the way things are now.”

I turned away from him, not trusting myself to remain calm. I wanted to cry, wanted to scream, wanted to shake him and ask him why things had to change so damn much. But instead, I just wrapped my arms around myself and tried to keep my composure.

Xavier looked away. “I’m sorry. You’re right. Sometimes it’s hard—” But then he stopped himself. He cursed under his breath and dropped his head.

I looked away from him, wiping away my tears.

“Sorry I reacted that way,” I said. “I just got overwhelmed, I guess. You’re right. It is hard, trying to begin a new relationship when we’re still dealing with putting the old one to bed. Maybe we need to figure out where to draw the line, what boundaries to establish if we’re going to be friends.”

“Maybe so. And you’re right. Talking about having children together isn’t something that friends—normal friends—would ever discuss. I need to be better about minding those boundaries for both our sakes. For Ava and Greyson’s, too.”

“Yes, I think that’s for the best. It pains me to admit it, but I know that ultimately, this is for the best. We need to lean into this new way of interacting, this new way of being if either of us are ever going to be happy with the way things are now.”

Xavier gently laid the baby in the stroller. “Agreed. Is it okay for friends to hug?” he asked me.

“Yeah, but there’s probably like a ten-second rule or something,” I joked.

I smiled as Xavier wrapped his arms around me. Immediately, I thought about all the times we’d hugged each other and how this was supposed to feel different somehow. It didn’t. Hugging my *friend* Xavier felt suspiciously the same as hugging my love and mate Xavier.

Then an intense thought flooded my mind. It was practically invasive, the way it came out of nowhere. I sucked in a breath.

*I wish I could stay like this forever.*

Xavier pulled back. “Maybe that’s enough for now?” He released me awkwardly. “Wait a second.” He lifted a finger to wipe away a stray tear just as the door burst open and Greyson, Colton, and Lola came walking in.

The noise woke the sleeping babies, and they immediately started crying. Xavier and I both jumped apart like we were live wires.

*Way to not look guilty…*

“What took you so long?” Xavier quipped coolly.

Greyson looked between us both, his face a storm of mixed emotions. I saw an unmistakable flash of hurt in his eyes and immediately felt bad that I’d caused it. It didn’t help that I’d seen the look so many times before, and all those other times I’d promised to never let it happen again.

It was a promise I obviously couldn’t keep.

I started to say that it wasn’t what it looked like, but I decided that sometimes, it was better to say nothing. I knew as well as anyone how quickly that phrase suggested that there was, in fact, something inappropriate going on.

“We captured Macauley,” Greyson said tersely.

I was filled with relief until I noticed the wounds on Greyson’s neck.

Seeing where my eyes had landed, Greyson said, “Macauley got a piece of me in the process.”

“So we need some of your Fae blood to heal him,” Lola cut in.

I was immediately worried.

*What if Greyson ends up like Macauley? Who knows what that ancient vampire passed on when she turned Macauley? Why is Greyson so calm when he was just bitten by a vampire that might have taken on the same powers as Chessa?*

I wanted to ask all those questions and more, but I held back, not wanting to panic Greyson if he was managing to deal with all this without too much stress. I just wanted Greyson to be okay and didn’t want any surprises, but no one else seemed to be all that concerned.

Colton was busy calming down his crying babies and making sure that they were okay. “My poor babies, what did these crazy Redwoods get you into?”

“They were never in any danger,” Xavier assured him. “Cali and I protected them with our lives. We would never let anything happen to them under our care.”

Colton cut his eyes between his brothers as he cradled a baby in each arm. “I hope that’s true, because if even a hair on either of their heads was disturbed, a crazy vampire would be the least of your worries once Maya got her hands on you.”

“Noted,” Greyson said tightly.

“I promise, they’re fine,” I said, shuddering at the thought of Maya taking her revenge on me and Xavier for daring to let anything happen to her babies—and I wouldn’t even blame her for it.

Lola was busy cutting my finger with a knife, and then she hovered my dripping finger over Greyson’s wound. As the blood flowed, we locked eyes.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded, looking down to check and make sure the blood was doing what it was supposed to. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw that his wound seemed to be healing normally.

“I’m fine, really. I’m glad you’re okay, too,” I said.

Colton was placing the babies back into the stroller and gingerly tucking them in. It was so strange to see Colton showing such tenderness.

“I’m going back with Xavier to check out the Samaras now. Can I trust you to get the babies back to Maya safely?” Colton asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “What, are we nannies now?”

“Of course we can,” I said quickly, nudging Lola hard in the shoulder. “We’ll get them back safe and sound. Promise.”

Xavier glanced at me. “See you later.”

I nodded my goodbye, following Xavier with my eyes as he left, wondering if what happened between us had only made things more complicated. Maybe it was a lot to hope that we could be friends with everything that happened between us, but what other option was there? It wasn’t like we’d be able to avoid each other. Our packs were too intertwined for that.

Lola grabbed the stroller. “Let’s get out of here. It smells.”

Greyson and I both watched Lola go, and then he took my hand and gently pushed it away. “I’m healing already. No need for more blood.”

I nodded at him, and we followed Lola outside, lost in an awkward silence.

“So, Macauley… Where is he now?” I asked when I couldn’t take the quiet anymore.

“Emmett and Kendall are taking him back to the pack house,” Greyson explained.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that we have him back in custody. But I have to say I’m surprised to hear that Kendall is involved.”

Greyson nodded. “I know. But she does have a way of showing up at the most convenient times.”

There was another awkward pause.

*God, I hate this! Nothing even happened between me and Xavier, but now it’s like I have no choice but to explain myself. Will this ever get any easier?*

“Xavier and I… We were just talking. We were in survival mode. Just trying to protect the babies from Macauley,” I said. “We rushed inside Aysel’s love shack and were just trying to—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Greyson replied.

“I think I do. I saw the look on your face when you came in and saw us together—you were upset, and I understand why. I don’t blame you… I know this is hard and that it’s always hard for you to see us together…alone. Especially because of what’s happened in the past.”

Greyson said nothing, just kept walking.

“But I want you to know that we were just talking about trying to be friends, how things have changed between us… It’s weird, you know? To go from how things were before to this strange friendly place. And then with us having Colton’s babies, it got us to talking, and—”

Greyson stopped walking and faced me. “I said you don’t need to explain, so just stop, will you?”

**Episode 5032**

**Xavier**

I knew it was only a matter of time before Colton brought up Cali—and we hadn’t been out of Aysel’s shed for even thirty seconds when Colton said, “So, what’s the deal with you and Cali? Seemed like we might have… walked in on something.” He smirked. “Or the beginnings of something, anyway.”

Realizing that my headache had finally eased up, I started thinking about Cali’s question, about how she’d always envisioned the two of us having children of our own one day… and how I’d always had the same vision. But there was no way I was going to get into that with Colton. He would have a field day with me if I did.

“Nothing’s up. We were just trapped together and talking. Watching the babies. Waiting to make sure it was safe to leave. Luckily you three came and let us know the coast was clear.”

Colton chuckled. “Well, just talking or not, I could tell that Greyson wasn’t happy about it. I wouldn’t be, either, if when I walked in my girl jumped away from her ex like they’d been about to, you know, take things to the next level.”

“So what? I’m not responsible for what my brother feels. I have nothing to be ashamed of. And Cali and I weren’t about to take anything to any level.”

“Hmm. I wonder if Ava would see it that way.”

I whirled on my brother. “Don’t you dare try to stir things up between me and Ava. I’m warning you.”

Colton threw up his hands. “Whoa, touchy, touchy, Xavier. I won’t, wouldn’t even think of it. Besides, you seem to do enough stirring as it is. Don’t think you need me.”

“Lay off, will you?” I spat.

I pressed a hand to my head, but the motion actually made me realize that my headache was finally gone. It was still disheartening that the only time I got any relief from the pain was when I was far away from Ava or Cali.

“Why are you here, anyway? With Maya and the babies?” I asked.

“What, you want me to go back home? Maya would be thrilled to. I’m sure you can imagine she wasn’t all that gung-ho about coming to stay in the Redwood pack house. We’d be happy to pack up and get back to our… much calmer and crazy-vampire-free lives.”

I gave him a punch on the arm. “No, I’m glad to see you and all. Just wondering why you’re here.”

“Um…does a camping trip ring any bells?”

I looked at my brother, confused. “Yeah… but we never set a date for that, unless I missed something.”

“We didn’t set a date, no, but the only time I can do it is now. With Maya as Alpha and us busy taking care of the twins, we don’t have a lot of free time to just up and do things like you and Greyson. We have actual responsibilities other than running around basking in the drama of a love triangle… or is it a square now that Ava’s involved? Anyway, the point is, time is of the essence for us, so that means we’re doing the camping thing tomorrow.”

I groaned. “Shit. I hoped this whole camping trip idea would be one of those things that never actually happened.”

“I admit I’m not thrilled about hanging out in the woods with Greyson, but I’m here now, and it took a lot for me to convince Maya to come, so you better not flake out.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I’ll go.”

Maybe taking some time away with my brothers out in the wilderness would help me forget about what happened between me and Cali in the shed. Maybe it would help me come to terms with the new nature of my relationship with Cali and allow me to let go of the idea of us ever having a family.

After Ava killed my mother and I in turn killed her, I never even thought for a second that I’d want to start a family.

And what good was having a family, anyway?

My only experiences with family were traumatic. My father had lived out his entire life down to his last days as a murderous psycho, my mother had been murdered—by my mate of all people—and my older half-brother was the third prong in my love triangle—or love square as Colton put it.

In my case, family wasn’t at all what it was cut out to be.

But after I’d fallen in love with Cali, for the first time I dreamed about having a family. With her. I’d fantasized about having loads of babies that shared her smile and sparkling eyes. And it had seemed attainable, once. And then it all unraveled.

I’d meant what I said to Cali—that there was no certainty with what the future might bring. And who would’ve thought that Ava would return from the spirit world? That we would fall in love all over again? That I would make her my Luna and run a pack side by side with her?

“You okay?” Colton asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Before the babies, did you ever imagine starting a family one day?” I asked him.

Colton chuckled. “Hell no. But the truth is, having the twins is literally the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me.” He turned serious. “Wait a minute, are you and Ava thinking of—”

“No,” I cut him off. “Just asking. That’s all.”

Colton side-eyed me. “Funny you should bring that up after being locked in that funky love shack with Cali.”

“Correction. Locked in that funky shack with Cali and your babies. That’s what made me think about a family. Not being alone with Cali. Cali and I aren’t together, or have you forgotten?”

Colton rolled his eyes. “Sure, whatever you say.”

I was glad when we finally reached the Samara pack house. Colton was grilling me too hard and forcing me to really consider the reality of things between me and Cali… and me and Ava, for that matter.

Thinking about Cali, the babies, it only reminded me of all that I’d lost, not what I stood to gain. I wondered if that would ever change or if I would forever be lost in the what-ifs of our past.

Ava was watching us from the porch as we approached, and I could tell by her body language that she wasn’t about to welcome Colton with open arms. And now that she’d had even more time to think, I was sure she was probably even madder than before about my dinner with Cali.

She stood blocking the door and gave Colton an appraising look. “What’s he doing here?”

“Nice to see you, too, Ava,” Colton said easily.

My head was starting to hurt again. “Ava, I need to talk to you.”

Colton looked between us and cleared his throat. “I could use some coffee. See ya.”

“You could have given me a heads-up, you know,” Ava said as soon as we were alone.

I shrugged. “A heads-up? Why? He’s my brother.”

“Xavier, don’t act clueless. Colton hates me, and you know it.”

“That’s not true, Ava.”

“It is,” Ava snapped. She took a deep breath. I could see that she was trying to calm herself down. “I wonder if these little sessions with Carlson Greene are making you less aware. Ever since you’ve been seeing him, it’s like you don’t consider my feelings at all. Is Carlson telling you to treat me like an afterthought as part of your therapy, or is that just something you’re doing all on your own?”

I sighed. “Listen, Ava, I’m sorry about my miscommunication with you about the dinner with Cali. But can you admit that maybe we both overreacted? I’ll take half the blame if you do.”

I wrapped Ava in my arms and kissed her cheek.

Ava stiffened. “Don’t try to sweet talk your way out of this. And I’m trying to figure out what part of the blame I’m supposed to carry when *you’re* the one who went on a dinner date with an ex you can’t seem to keep your lips off of.”

I nuzzled her again in reply, and finally, she softened.

“Fine. It’s obvious you’re not going to play fair. Neither of us did earlier, so okay. I forgive you. Mostly.” She sighed and relaxed her head against my chest. “Guess I’m just wondering what else Carlson, therapist extraordinaire, has in store for you.”

I hesitated. Ava had thawed a bit, and I didn’t want to lose any ground with her.

“I know you floated this before, but…would you like to go to a session with me? That way you can see for yourself what Carlson’s methods are.”

I was purposely leaving out the invitation I’d extended to Cali, knowing that if I told Ava, it would kick off World War III right here on the porch. If Ava got even an inkling that Cali was going to come to a session, too, she would never agree to it. Would probably even go to extreme lengths to stop it from happening.

Ava lit up. “Of course, I’ll come. That sounds like a great idea.”

“Oh, and there’s one more thing that Carlson wants.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “Yes?”

“He thinks that going on the camping trip with my brothers is a good idea. That’s why Colton is here.”

Ava pulled back hard, her eyes flashing. “Over my dead body.”

**Episode 5033**

**Greyson**

Cali was just staring at me, and I could tell that I’d been a bit too sharp. She looked like I’d wounded her, and I hated to see her hurting.

I sighed and tried again, attempting to soften the blow. “Listen, Cali, all I know is that while you and Xavier are trying to sort things out, you don’t need to confess every moment of doubt and confusion.”

“I-I’m sorry, Greyson. Really,” Cali said. “I was just trying to be transparent—”

“I get it, and I’m sorry about how I reacted just now, but I saw how close you and Xavier were when we walked into that shed. I can’t just erase that from my mind, nor can I deny the way I felt when I saw it.”

No matter how much they’d tried to play it down, when we walked in, they reacted like we’d interrupted something. I couldn’t ignore that. How many times was I going to have to talk myself down after they crossed the line? I was tired of it.

“Greyson, just let me finish, please? I’m sorry that you were hurt and that I was the one who hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me—”

“Greyson, please. I know I’ve had a hard time dealing with the *due destini*, and I must admit that sometimes, I forget how much it affects you. I will try to be more attuned to that going forward, okay? I promise.”

“It’s fine. I was just a little taken aback. I can handle it. I don’t want you to have to tiptoe around me, and I don’t want you to be afraid to tell me things. Just maybe not…everything?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Cali said.

I pulled her into a hug. “The important thing is that in the end, I’m the one you come home to.”

At least that was what I kept telling myself.

Pushing all my uncertain feelings aside, I kissed her. And in that moment, it was like there was never anything wrong between us. It felt like this was the way it should be and things would never change.

“Hello?” Lola said, shattering our intimate moment. “Don’t know if you two lovebirds noticed, but the twins are crying. Orion and Lyra, not Xavier and Colton. What am I supposed to do to, you know, shut them up?”

Lola was practically shaking the stroller, and Cali rushed over to calm them, picking one of the tiny infants up and rocking them in her arms before doing the same with the other. I watched as Cali lovingly soothed both baby’s cries into sweet coos of happiness.

“See, you have to be gentle with them, Lola,” Cali said. “And patient. They’ve been away from their mom for a while now. They might be hungry. Ready for a nap. Whatever it is, you just have to be calm for them. Let them know that everything’s okay.”

*Look at her. She’s a natural. She would be such an amazing mother to our kids.*

I’d had plenty of my own fantasies about having children with Cali. All this talk about babies and families was making me more confident that we would, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to take that step with someone you loved—if that person wasn’t part of a *due destini*, that is.

“Why are you just standing there, Greyson?” Lola asked. “Don’t you want to help?”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

Slowly, I approached the stroller, saw the smiling babies looking up at me. “Looks like Cali’s got them all calmed down. I shouldn’t try to fix what isn’t broken.”

Lola nodded as she looked in on the babies and smiled. “Maybe you’re right. Cali must have the magic touch.”

“Maybe we should hurry up and take the babiesinside? Maya’s probably wondering where they are,” Cali said.

We crossed the yard to the house, and I carried the stroller up onto the porch, which immediately unsettled the babies enough that they began to whimper. Thankfully, they weren’t going into full-blown crying mode just yet.

Jay greeted Lola at the door. “Where’ve you been?”

“Where does it look like? Out playing nanny with Cali,” Lola shot back.

“Well, you could have told me that! I was worried sick!” Jay replied. “I went looking for you, and no one knew where the hell you were.”

“Worried about me for what, Jay? I’m obviously fine and am more than capable of taking care of myself. Hello! I am a vampire and werewolf mixed into one. How much more badass can I get?”

While they continued arguing, I tried to calm the babies, but it wasn’t working. I wasn’t sure what to do. When I first met Fenrir, I’d had the same uncertainty as I was feeling now. What did I know about kids, anyway?

In the end, though, Fenrir had been easy. He could talk and respond to things. Maya and Colton’s twins were a little too young for that, and I was at a loss.

And as I tried my hardest to calm the babies, I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to have children with Cali—something I hadn’t even considered when I was still a Rogue. Living life on the road and not knowing the simplest things like where you were going to sleep that night kind of made the idea of starting a family moot.

“I was a young werewolf once,” I said to the babies. “It was confusing and fun and scary all at the same time. I don’t remember exactly how I was when I was your age, but I’m sure I cried a lot, too. But don’t worry, I’m about to get you back to your mama. She’s an Alpha. Maybe one—or both—of you will be an Alpha someday, too.”

I had no idea how the whole Alpha thing would work with twins, but I knew that anything could happen. And what I was saying seemed to be working. They were starting to quiet down and staring at me with interest, their little fists and feet waving in the air. They were truly adorable, and I had another pang of longing for a family of my own…with Cali.

Cali smiled at me. “Look at them, they’re calming down. They must like the sound of your voice.”

The screen door flew open, and Maya bent down to check on the twins, then turned accusingly to Cali.

“Where in the hell have you been?”

“I—um—we—Lola and I took the twins for a walk to help them fall asleep. And then we had to run from Macauley, but everything’s okay now. We brought them back safe and sound.”

I was frozen to the spot, watching a range of emotions pass across Maya’s face—none of them good. I wondered how I could feel so frightened of Maya after all the badass enemies we’d faced down, but I was.

“I just spoke to that Tottenville vampire guy. You’re telling me that Macauley attacked my babies?!” Maya said. “How could you?!”

“This wasn’t Cali’s fault,” I interrupted, finally finding my voice. “The babies weren’t harmed.”

“And if they had been, you both would be smears of blood and bone on the lawn right now. And where was Colton in all of this?”

“Um, Colton went back to the Samara house to hang with Xavier. He’ll be back soon,” Cali explained.

Maya was livid.

Cali and I both took a step back from Maya—out of arm’s reach.

“Sounds just like Colton. Always finding some excuse to sneak away. And look what happened when he did. Cali and her sidekick took my children on one of the Redwood pack’s deadly yet zany adventures.” Maya closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Maya, honestly, I think you’re blowing this all out of proportion,” I said tentatively. “The babies are fine, and I was the only one wounded. And Macauley is no longer a threat—”

Maya turned a searing hot gaze right on me. “Tell me, Greyson, do you have children?”

“No… you know I don’t.”

“Exactly. And that means you are in no position to tell me that I’m blowing anything out of proportion when it comes to my kids. Got it?”

Maya took the stroller and wheeled the babies into the house. “I never thought this was a good idea to begin with. Everyone here is always involved in some brand of bullshit or another. I should have known that nothing’s changed.”

Cali and I rushed after her, and I couldn’t stop myself from trying to defuse things, even though I knew it might get me pummeled. “Maya, you should really think about calming down—”

Cali put a hand on my arm and mouthed, “Don’t!”

“Tell me, Greyson, how do the Evers brothers ever expect to survive a camping trip together? You’ll probably pitch your tent on an ancient burial ground and get stabbed through the heart by pissed-off ghouls in the middle of the night, knowing your luck!” Maya shouted.

“Now, Maya, I think you’re going overboard. I’m pretty sure it’ll be okay. The babies will be here with the pack,” I said.

“No, they won’t be. As soon as Colton gets back, me, Colton, and my twins are going home.”

**Episode 5034**

“Maya, don’t do this, please. You have to reconsider! The guys are really excited about the camping trip,” I said. “Besides, they need it! And how many times do we have to tell you that the babies are fine? Xavier and I would *never* have let anything happen to them!”

Except that right now they were crying their heads off because we were raising our voices.

Maya went right to comforting them—and insulting us—at the same time.

“It’s okay, my sweet darlings. These doofuses wouldn’t know how to take care of a baby if their lives depended on it. I know, they suck, don’t they, Orion? We should kick the crap out of them, shouldn’t we, Lyra? Well, we know one thing, don’t we? We’re going right home as soon as your daddy gets back. They can shove their stupid little camping trip up their you-know-wheres!”

Greyson and I exchanged a look.

I knew how much Greyson wanted to make the camping thing happen to bring the oft-feuding Evers brothers together—something that wasn’t easily doable because of all the different paths they’d been forced to follow. But they really needed this. It could heal a lot of the bad blood that remained between them—including Xavier’s issues with headaches—it had to be tied together.

*I’m not about to let Maya prevent this from happening. I have to do something to convince her that ruining the camping trip isn’t the right move.*

“The camping trip is necessary, Maya. I’m sorry about what happened with Lyra and Orion, but they’re safe and sound! And if you stay, at least that way you won’t be stuck at home trying to balance managing your pack and the babies while Colton is out having…fun. There’s a whole pack here who will help you watch them.”

“And what about the vampire that came after you and my children, Cali? If I’m not mistaken, he’s locked up HERE in the basement as we speak, right? Save it. I don’t trust the Redwoods to keep a newborn puppy prisoner without it escaping, so forgive me if I’m not confident that this vampire isn’t going to break out and cause all kinds of havoc at any time, now. I mean, he already escaped once, didn’t he?”

*Shoot. She has a point. But I can’t let that get in the way of this camping trip. Greyson is so looking forward to it, and I know that if I can just get Maya to calm down…*

Emmett appeared behind Maya. “Sorry, didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I thought I should let you all know that I’m taking Macauley back with me to Tottenville. I think we can help him there.”

“Emmett, that’s great! I was worried that Macauley was just going to end up as another one of Chessa’s victims.” I turned to Maya. “See? There’s nothing to worry about. Macauley will be gone. So, will you let Colton go?”

Maya started to object but then let out a sigh and shook her head. “Fine. But if anything vampirish happens to my babies…” She stared right into my eyes. “I’m holding you personally responsible, Cali.”

“I have enough confidence that your babies will be safe that I fully accept that responsibility!” I said, relieved.

*This is great. And it’ll be fun to have babies around. Maybe even like practice for when I’m ready to start my own family.*

Kendall appeared by the basement stairs. “Hey, Emmett, you ready to get this show on the road? We’re ready to load Macauley.”

“Oh, certainly,” Emmett said, rushing off to get his vehicle ready.

Kendall turned to go downstairs, but Greyson rushed over to join her. “I’ll help you with Macauley,” he said.

I was surprised to see Greyson so eager to jump in. As far as I’d seen, he and Kendall weren’t all that cooperative.

Kendall shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’m just going to go pack up my stuff. Meet me downstairs in five?”

“Sounds good,” Greyson said.

Once Kendall was gone, I got Greyson’s attention. “So, when did you two make up?”

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean? I’m just helping get rid of a vampire.”

“Yes, but you were being helpful to Kendall. Last I knew, you didn’t trust her.”

Greyson shrugged. “Still don’t. What’s that got to do with helping her load a vampire in a car? I’m just helping to make sure it goes off without a hitch.”

“Oh… Did something happen that made you two less… prickly?” I pressed.

“Well, I guess she proved herself as helpful on the hunt for Macauley. We honestly might not have captured him alive without her help.”

I was thinking about what that meant. Captured him alive?

*Wow. Was Greyson planning to kill Macauley? Maybe he would have if he didn’t have a choice, and obviously Kendall helped make it so that he could get the vampire into custody without hurting him.*

Greyson went downstairs, and I was left with Maya, who shot me a look that said, *Don’t talk to me right now.*

I was more than happy to oblige. I’d just made the case for the camping trip, but I still had my reservations after seeing how upset Greyson had been about catching me with Xavier in Aysel’s shed.

A few moments later, Greyson and Kendall emerged from the basement with Macauley. He wasn’t fighting them—but that was probably because he was tied up with a strange rope. He almost looked like a normal guy… except for the fangs and the dazed, unfocused look in his eyes.

I followed Kendall, Greyson, and Macauley to Emmett’s car. I stood back and watched Kendall and Greyson work together to wrangle the subdued vampire into the back seat. Once they had him secure, Greyson leaned in to fasten his seat belt.

“You good?” Greyson asked the vampire once he was all strapped in.

“I’m sure the only way he’d be good is if he had a fang in each of our throats, but that’s sweet of you to ask,” Kendall said.

I was surprised when Greyson laughed. Maybe he was more appreciative of Kendall than he was letting on.

“Thanks for taking him on like this,” Kendall said to Emmett. “I’m sure the Redwoods appreciate it, and I’m happy knowing that he’s not out in the world causing havoc. He deserves a second chance. It’s not his fault that Chessa victimized him,” Kendall said as she snapped the door closed.

“I’ll do my best to turn him into a functioning, empathetic, humane member of society,” Emmett said. “And if I don’t, well, I have ways to deal with that, too.”

“I bet you do,” Kendall said. “But if things don’t work out, let me know.”

I found that part curious and wondered why Emmett would need to let Kendall know anything. She was only a program coordinator, after all.

“Okay, I’d better get going. I’ll let you all know how the newbie progresses,” Emmett said as he got into the car.

We all waved as he drove off, and I felt like a load had been taken off my shoulders. With Macauley gone, the pack house was officially back to normal. Not only that, but there was nothing for Maya to fear when it came to her babies. We were in the clear now.

“Alright all, I’m heading out,” Kendall said. Without another word, she slung her pack over her shoulder and disappeared into the woods.

“Well, that’s that, I guess,” Greyson said as we walked back into the pack house and made our way up to Greyson’s room.

“All’s well that ends well,” I said with a chuckle.

“Case closed,” Greyson said.

We went quiet as I helped him out of his bloody shirt. I winced at the fang marks in his neck but was pleased to see that they were almost healed.

I pulled back and realized that Greyson was staring at me. I was immediately self-conscious.

“What?”

Greyson pulled me to him, smoothing one hand down the side of my body until it came to rest at the dip above my waist. I let out a breath, relishing how close we were, liking how I could feel his heartbeat.

“This,” he said as he pulled me into a kiss.

I went slack in his arms as the kiss intensified, and I giggled with pleasure when he threw me on the bed and climbed on top of me.

“Greyson, what do you think you’re doing?” I asked when he began to tug my pants off.

“Oh, just want to check you over, make sure that you didn’t suffer any injuries.”

He feigned deep concentration as he peeled me out of my panties and then pulled off my shirt. He made a show of running his hands over every inch of my body, tweaking my nipples between his fingers and sliding his hands down my thighs until they came to rest on my hot, fluttering center.

“So, how am I? A clean bill of health?” I asked, my entire body flooded with heat as I looked in Greyson’s eyes.

“Not sure,” he said, lowering his head down between my legs. “There’s one more thing I need to check…”

**Episode 5035**

**Xavier**

The next morning, I was up way before the sun had even begun to rise. I hated the idea of getting out of bed. Ava was so warm and soft next to me. I planted a gentle kiss on her cheek, and she stirred, her eyes fluttering open as she smiled up at me. Her expression quickly turned puzzled.

“What are you doing up?”

“I’m going camping, remember?”

Ava’s smile faded.

“Ava, please don’t start. I’ll only be gone a few days. Can you keep the pack together in my absence?”

She’d already complained about it, but I was sick of hearing about it. These were my brothers—albeit, I didn’t have the best relationship with one of them… But Colton was my twin brother. I wanted to spend time with him, and it wasn’t Ava’s right to tell me I couldn’t.

“What kind of question is that? I kept it together fine before you joined, didn’t I? Of course I can handle a few days. But that doesn’t mean I won’t miss you,” she said.

“You have a wonderful way of showing it.” I moved my jaw around and rubbed the side of my face as Ava twisted her body around to face mine.

“I have a little something for you to take with you,” she said. She pulled me into a hot, steamy kiss, making me even more reluctant to leave. By the time she pulled away, we were both breathing hard. “Make sure you come back to me, okay?”

“Of course. I don’t need your kisses to convince me to come back, but I’m not about to turn them down,” I said.

With much difficulty, I untangled myself from Ava and slid out of bed. I tried to stay positive about this camping trip thing as I got busy gathering up my gear.

“Make sure to keep an eye on that cousin of yours,” I said. “The shrimp is still cagey around Milo. I wouldn’t want them to come to blows while I’m gone.”

Ava waved me off. “I think I can handle my cousin with less trouble than you’re going to have with those crazy brothers of yours.”

I gave her one final peck on the lips and then headed out, thinking that she was probably right about that.

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A short while later, I pulled up outside the Redwood pack house. Greyson was already outside loading stuff into one of the SUVs. We both grunted a “good morning” as I got out of my car and began throwing my stuff in the back with the rest.

“Wonder if Colton’s up,” I said. “Mornings and Colton tend to be mutually exclusive.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Colton said from the porch. He was struggling to carry several enormous duffel bags down the porch stairs.

Greyson looked at the bags and then glanced at me with a raised brow.

“Brother, may I remind you that we’re only going to be on this trip for a few days? Why do you have so much shit?” I asked.

Maya appeared behind him, carrying a large bag of her own. Colton motioned to her.

“Blame Maya. She insisted that we have everything for anything. I wasn’t going to argue,” Colton said, giving me and Greyson a frightened look.

Maya threw the bag into the trunk and then easily grabbed the ones Colton was holding and tossed those in, too.

“Come here,” Maya demanded, grabbing Colton by the shirt and pulling him into a hug that quickly turned into a kiss so intense that Greyson and I looked away. “You better come back with all your limbs intact,” Maya warned Colton once they broke apart. Then she turned to me and Greyson, her expression serious.

“Let me guess, if he doesn’t, it’ll be our asses,” Greyson said to Maya in a bored voice.

“Right. Who says you aren’t a fast learner?” Maya quipped before turning and going back in the house.

Cali appeared a few moments later. “Morning!” she sang as she bounded into Greyson’s arms and hugged him tightly.

I busied myself with situating all the gear, uninterested in watching their exchange.

After they’d said their goodbyes, Greyson got in the car, and Cali came over to me. “Hope you all have a good time out there. Be careful and bond like crazy.”

She moved in as if she were about to hug me, but I hesitated and left her hanging. It was beyond awkward.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” I said, deciding that I would close the gap and go in for the hug. But by then, her hands were back down at her sides and she’d taken a few steps back.

We both laughed nervously.

*Wow. Awkward.*

I forced a smile and patted her a little too hard on the back. “See you in a few days, I guess. Have fun holding down the fort, and don’t let Maya take the place over while we’re gone.”

A cloud passed across Cali’s face. “Do you think she’ll do that?”

I wanted to reassure her that she wouldn’t, but I couldn’t make that guarantee, so I said nothing.

I climbed back into the SUV, cursing under my breath the entire way.

*Did I really just do that? Pat Cali on the back like she was a good dog? Was that whole interaction as fucked up and lame as it seemed? Is this our new normal? Not even knowing how to act around each other even in normal situations?*

Greyson honked the horn as we pulled out, and then we were on the road racing into the darkness that was just starting to be tinged with coming daylight.

“Where are we going, anyway?” I asked.

“Up north,” Colton said.

“I thought this was all your idea?” I said to Greyson. “Why aren’t you the one planning the location?”

“Since I showed up and sped up the trip, I took the liberty of finding the campground,” Colton said.

“It would have been faster for us to shift and travel as wolves,” I groused. “This all feels suspiciously like glamping.”

“Well, it isn’t, and I think we should remain human for a true camping experience, otherwise what’s the difference from all the other times we’ve had to bed down in the woods for the night?” Colton said.

“But you have to admit it would be so much easier if we camped as wolves. There’d be a lot less chitchat about feelings, babies, mates…”

“Oh, stop complaining, X. Besides, there’s a good chance we’ll come across humans while camping or hiking, and we don’t want that kind of headache,” Colton said.

“I thought we were going off the beaten path to get away from everyone else so we can enjoy each other’s company undisturbed,” I grumbled.

I saw Colton roll his eyes at me in the rearview mirror. “Being a wolf has certain advantages, sure, but it holds absolutely no advantages when you want to, say, set up a tent or light a fire. All the stuff that camping is supposed to be about.”

“Exactly,” Greyson pitched in, which annoyed me to no end.

I closed my eyes and laid my head back on the seat. “Whatever. Just wake me when we get there.”

“If you’re going to be complaining the whole time, maybe it’s best if we leave your ass asleep,” Colton grumbled.

“I heard that,” I said.

“Good, I meant for you to,” Colton snapped.

“Wow, and I thought *I’d* be the one fighting with you two,” Greyson said.

“There’s still plenty of time for that,” I quipped before I drifted off to sleep.

The next time I opened my eyes, we were parked in a remote area of the woods adjacent to a stream.

Colton was already out of the car. “I’m going to get started on a fire,” he said.

I stepped out, stretched. “Great. Let the fun begin.”

“Why don’t you two make yourselves useful and go gather some wood,” Colton said as he began clearing a space for the fire.

Greyson and I got to work finding dry wood that would work for the fire. By the time we’d gathered enough, Colton had cleared an area, built a circle out of stone, and gathered a bunch of dry brush that he spread around the bottom of the fire pit.

Greyson and I piled the wood according to Colton’s directions, and then I pulled a lighter out of my pocket.

Colton looked at me like I’d just kicked a kitten. “What the hell is that? No cheating, Xavier!”

“Cheating? I call it using modern tools to make our lives easier,” I said.

But Colton wasn’t listening. He was too busy trying to start the fire by rubbing two sticks together. He tried and tried, but after twenty minutes had passed, nothing was happening.

“Maybe we should try this as a compromise,” Greyson said, holding out a bit of flint that Maya must have packed.

Colton’s face broke into a smile. “That’s just like my mate, always thinking two steps ahead.”

He took the flint and used it to create sparks that landed on the bit of dry brush he’d gathered, but the sparks kept going out.

“This is so pointless,” I said. “Why not use a match? We could be heating up coffee by now, but no!”

“Will you stop complaining?” Greyson shouted.

“Only if you stop being a jerk,” I shot back.

“Oh, I’m not the one being a jerk, believe me. All you’ve done since we left is bitch and moan and cry and complain. Maybe you should’ve stayed home,” Greyson said.

“Maybe *you* shouldn’t have come!” I fired back angrily.

“Whoa, guys, it’s not that big of a deal, calm down,” Colton said.

“Tell *him* to calm down. He’s the one acting like an overgrown six-year-old! I’ve had it with his shit!” Greyson stormed off.

Colton and I both watched him go, then I turned to Colton, smirking. “Did our brother just ditch us in record time?”

**Episode 5036**

I was awoken by a soft knock on the door. I shot up in bed, a little disoriented and very groggy.

*I must have dozed off after Greyson left for the camping trip. What time is it? How long have I been asleep?*

I blinked a few times as I looked around and was surprised to see Artemis standing in the doorway.

“Artemis? What the heck? When did you get back?” I shouted, nearly stumbling over myself as I hopped out of bed to go hug her.

“Just got back,” Artemis said. “Decided to come back early. Missed you guys. Guess I just couldn’t stay away.”

I noticed that Artemis’s hair was mussed, and I guided her to a chair. “Let me brush your hair while you tell me all about your trip! And don’t leave out a single detail. I’ve been wondering what you’ve been up to.”

“I don’t want to discuss my trip,” Artemis said. “I just want to enjoy being back here with you, Cali, if that’s okay?”

“It’s okay by me. I’m just happy you’re back and that we get to spend time together. We never do stuff like this,” I said as I brushed her hair. “This is like prime sister stuff. Brushing hair, painting each other’s nails, that sort of thing.”

“I know. This is a first. It’s nice!” Artemis said. “Now that I’m back, we should do it more often. I didn’t think I was the type of person who would be into this sort of thing, but now I’m thinking it could be fun.”

“I’m game if you are,” I said. I finished Artemis’s hair and then stood back and looked her over.

“That’s better.”

“Thanks,” Artemis said, smiling at me as she smoothed her hand through her hair, fluffing it out a little.

“You look so beautiful. I think Rishika is going to be so excited to see you… But there’s one thing missing. Close your eyes!”

I rushed over to my closet and pulled out the gold crown I’d been saving and placed it on Artemis’s head. Then I turned Artemis around to face the mirror. “Open your eyes!”

Artemis’s face brightened, and her eyes went wide. “Whoa.” She got up out of the chair and moved closer to the mirror. “I look… magical.”

I went to get my phone and take a picture when I heard a gasp. When I turned around, Artemis was gone. I spun around, looking around wildly for my sister.

“Artemis? Artemis? Where are you? Where’d you go?”

I heard a muffled cry and stared in horror at the mirror. Artemis was trapped on the other side of it and was banging on the glass, trying to get out. The crown was making blood drip down the sides of her face.

“Rishika!” I screamed.

“Cali? What is it?” Rishika said as she came bounding into my room.

“Look! Do you see her? It’s Artemis! Something’s wrong! She’s trapped in there!” I screamed, horrified as the blood seemed to start pouring faster, dripping down onto Artemis’s clothes and splashing against the mirror as she pounded on it, screaming to be let out.

Rishika’s expression darkened as she watched Artemis struggle. “So what? Artemis can figure it out on her own. She wanted her space, now she’s got it.”

“But you can’t mean that, Rishika! She needs our help!”

I was stunned. I reached out for Artemis, hoping to pull her back through… and then I woke up.

I was on the couch in the living room, my heart pounding, gasping for breath.

*It was just a nightmare. Thank god.*

I looked at the soft rays of sunlight beginning to stream in through the windows.

*Or a daymare. But it was so damn real.*

I’d obviously laid down to take a nap after seeing Greyson and the others off. But I was having a hard time separating that dream from this reality since they seemed to be one and the same. I hoped it wasn’t some kind of bad omen.

I got up from the couch and took a deep breath, trying to shake off the awful dream. But I was left with a sense of dread, as if Artemis was somehow actually reaching out to me for help.

Still trying to make sense of the dream, I rushed upstairs to get ready for class and crew.

By the time I got to campus, I felt better. The strange dread was starting to fade, and I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that it had been a dream and nothing more.

I was making my way to crew practice when I ran into Codsworth.

“Codsworth! How are you?” I said cautiously. “You feeling okay?”

Codsworth shrugged. “Still not sure what to make of things, but I’ve had some really fucked-up dreams.”

I thought about my own Artemis dream, and the bad feeling came rushing back. “What did you dream about, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s a recurring dream,” Codsworth said. “And every single time, I’m being chased by some sort of monster—and the monster has fangs.”

“Fangs?” I echoed, alarmed. “Are you sure?”

Codsworth stared at me. “Am I sure? Yes, I’m sure. It was terrifying, and I’ve had the dream over and over again. It’s not something I would forget.”

“I mean, are you sure that the monster has fangs?”

Codsworth shook his head at me. “Yes. Either fangs or really sharp teeth. What does that matter? The point is the shit was freaky, and I barely want to go to sleep anymore because I’m afraid I’m going to see that monster again.”

I was trying not to panic, but I couldn’t help but wonder, was Codsworth getting his memory back?! And if he was having these dreams, did that mean that the others were getting their memories back, too?

*And how did they lose their memories in the first place? Why were we so quick to believe that they’d forgotten all that stuff, just like that?*

I needed to talk to someone, but Greyson wasn’t around, and neither was Xavier. Mikah might have an idea about what to do, but he was gone, back to his own life. Emmett was away at Tottenville with Macauley, and I didn’t know him well enough to call him out of the blue about something like this.

That left Lola.

I shot my friend a quick text, asking her if she was still on campus. Lola’s reply came quickly.

*No, not on campus. Taking a mental health day. Jay is taking me shopping!*

Great, so Lola was out, and I doubted she would know what to do about this, anyway. But then I realized that there was someone else, someone who knew as much about all this as anyone else I could’ve called.

“Shoot, I forgot my crew shirt, I’ll meet you at practice, okay?” I said to Codsworth, who stared after me as I went sprinting off toward the administration building. I hoped that Kendall was there and that she would be able to talk.

On the way, I thought about the other IDs we’d found at Kendall’s place and the way she always seemed to be evasive or give vague answers to any questions we asked. Maybe I was wrong to think I might be able to trust her, but I didn’t know who else to talk to about this.

If Codsworth and the others got their memories back, it would be one of the biggest disasters we’d faced in a long time.

I raced into the administration building and was relieved to see that Kendall was in her office with the door open. I rushed inside, shutting the door behind me before I plopped into one of the seats in front of Kendall’s desk.

“Cali? What are you doing here?” Kendall asked, not unpleasantly.

“Something’s happened. I ran into Codsworth just a minute ago.” I leaned close and lowered my voice. “And he told me he’s been having these strange dreams about monsters with *fangs* chasing him. Do you think there’s a chance he’s getting his memory back? And if he is, doesn’t that mean that the others might be, too?”

Kendall didn’t say anything right away. She seemed to be pondering what I’d told her.

Finally, she said, “Thanks, Cali, for coming to me with this. I suggest that for now, you keep an eye on Codsworth. Should be easy to do since you’re on crew together. Be a listening ear for him, look out for any signs of him believing or thinking that what he’s seeing is anything more than a dream.”

“Okay…” I said, wondering if that was going to be enough.

“In the meantime, I’ll keep an eye on the others. I’ll see if they’re having any of the same dreams, and we’ll keep each other informed, alert each other if need be.”

I was surprised by Kendall’s response. I’d thought that coming here would be a long shot and that she would be dismissive like she always was with Greyson.

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “So does this mean we’re going to work together?”

**Episode 5037**

**Artemis**

Marius burst out laughing. “What? That’s funny, Ari. Why do I not remember you being this hilarious before? Me? In the human world?” Marius doubled over and slapped his leg, then swiped a tear from his eye. “That really is rich!”

“I fail to see the humor, Marius. Are you going to go to the human world to get my sister or not?” I deadpanned.

Marius stared blankly at me. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“What? How is she going to help? And isn’t there some kind of rule about bringing humans into the Fae world? Couldn’t that, you know, expose us?”

“No. She’s family. A concept you don’t understand… something I didn’t even understand until I got to know my own family. And besides, Cali’s not just my sister, she’s half Fae and can fight as well as I can. Well, almost. She’s the one person we can trust.”

“So you say,” Marius grumbled. “Sounds like a bad idea to me.”

“Marius, you’re a loner. You have no friends. Of course you don’t think that this is a good idea.”

Marius looked offended. “I have friends! How dare you! You haven’t seen me for years, so how would you even know if I had one or a million friends?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so let’s say that you have a few friends. Are these friends of yours trustworthy? Can you enlist them to help me out of this mess?”

Marius balked. “Okay, well, when you put it that way, you have a point. But you do know this is completely crazy, right? I’ve never even stepped foot in the human world. How am I supposed to find Cali, anyway?”

“We’re close to Bend, Oregon.” I shoved my cell phone into his hands. “Take this. It will help you get in touch with Cali when you get to the human world. Find her, and she’ll take care of the rest, I’m sure of it.”

“And how am I supposed—”

Marius’s words were cut short by the sound of the door being unlocked. I quickly shoved the phone in his pocket just as Celeste came walking in.

“I’ve made up my mind!” she announced.

I was suddenly so nervous and not at all sure what I would do if Celeste decided to reject my offer.

“I agree to let Marius go,” Celeste said.

I stifled a huge sigh of relief. Marius going to the human world for help was my only hope. Otherwise, I was going to be stuck here at Celeste’s mercy, waiting for her to decide how she was going to make my and Marius’s life a living hell.

“But that’s only on one condition, Artemis. I’ll let him go *if* you make a Fae promise that you won’t try to escape the first chance you get,” Celeste said.

“Don’t do it,” Marius whispered. “You’ll be bound! It’s not worth it. We’ll figure out another way to escape, one that won’t put your life squarely in Celeste’s hands!”

Celeste zeroed in on Marius, and he jumped away from me and feigned nonchalance.

“Marius, I hope whatever advice you’re giving her works out for the both of you. It’s all the same to me if I keep you both here under my charge. Artemis doesn’t have to agree to my terms. It’s entirely up to her.”

I appreciated Marius’s warning and his concern, but I already knew the risks. I remembered all too clearly my conversations with my mother about Fae promises, about the dangers, about how they’d brought many a Fae to ruin.

But this was a life-or-death situation, the one instance where accepting the terms of a Fae promise might be my only hope. There had to be a way to give myself some wiggle room, a way to phrase it that wouldn’t leave me exposed if for any reason I was forced to break the promise.

Celeste was staring at me. “I’m not going to wait all day. It’s up to you. You can either accept my terms, or not. Which is it going to be?”

I paused, taking a moment to choose my words carefully.

*If I say this just right, I’ll have the upper hand. But I also have to do it in such a way that Celeste doesn’t realize that I’m being particular about phrasing.*

And then it came to me.

“I promise I will not try to escape on my own if you grant Marius complete freedom,” I said. “That is my Fae promise.”

Marius groaned, and Celeste gave a thin smile. “You’ve made the right choice, Artemis. Marius, you should be proud that you have a friend who cares this much about you. I can’t see why she would take such a risk for the likes of you, but I suppose that’s none of my business.”

“Could I have a few moments alone to say goodbye to Marius?” I asked. “I don’t know when I’ll see him again, after all.”

“I don’t believe in long goodbyes,” Celeste said. “And I assure you that Marius is hardly worth the effort.”

Celeste’s guards descended upon Marius, and I watched them usher him toward the door, rushing him out of the room and away from me as fast as they could. There was so much more I wanted to tell him, but I knew that the quicker he was out of here, the better the odds. I had a feeling that if he stuck around for much longer, Celeste might find the phone on him, and then we’d be screwed.

Marius suddenly broke away from the guards and hugged me close, his lips right up against my ear. “As soon as you can, seek out Aelwen, who works in the kitchen. Tell her who you are and that I sent you. She can help you. In the meantime, I promise that I’ll do what you asked of me in the human world.”

“Thanks,” I whispered back.

“And I just want you to know that you were wrong about me. I do have friends,” he added. “Lots of friends!”

Celeste cleared her throat. “Time to break up the happy couple. Guards, remove Marius this instant before I change my mind.” Celeste pinned me to the spot with her icy gaze. “And don’t think I haven’t been known to change my mind if I no longer see the benefit of something.”

“Go,” I whispered to Marius as the guards descended upon him again, all but picking him up and dragging him toward the door.

I gripped Marius’s hand as they pulled him away, holding on until his hand finally slipped free.

He took one last look at me. “See you around.” He winked and turned back as he was practically thrown out of the room.

I’d spotted the bulge of my cell phone in his pants just before he disappeared, and I hoped like hell he made it out of here intact without them seeing what he was taking with him.

“Glad all that confusion’s over,” Celeste said wearily. “Artemis, I’ll return shortly. And remember your promise to me. I wouldn’t want to have to call in that Fae promise you made so quickly, but if you cross me, I’ll do it in a second,” Celeste said.

Celeste left, and I listened to her footsteps echoing down the hall, driving home the idea that I was now completely alone, cut off from the people I loved and, of course, Marius. The jury was still out on how I really felt about him. Right now, he was my only chance of getting out of here. That didn’t fill me with a lot of confidence, though I had a feeling that Marius wouldn’t let me down.

Not if he could help it.

If he stuck to my plan, it might work. But since when did Marius stick to anything or follow anyone’s rules but his own? It was in his hands now.

Time passed, and I watched the door, wondering how long Celeste planned to keep me in this room. I wondered if I would ever be granted any kind of freedom. Would I even have a chance to find Aelwen like Marius suggested?

A short time later, I heard the echo of footsteps, and the door opened. “Come with me,” Celeste said in a clipped tone.

“Where are we going?” I asked, but Celeste said nothing. Not that I’d expected her to. Celeste still had a bunch of guards with her, so I was surprised when I was led to an ornate bedroom.

“This will be your quarters for the duration of your stay,” Celeste said.

I was surprised. “*This* is where I’m staying? I thought you were going to throw me into a dungeon or something.”

Celeste scoffed. “A dungeon? Really? Why would I do that to the heir? During your stay, you’ll have the run of the place.”

I was thrown. “What? You’re going to let me walk around anywhere I want?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t I? You made a Fae promise. If you go back on your word, if you break your promise, you do know what will happen, Artemis, don’t you?”

**Episode 5038**

**Greyson**

I was fuming. This was not at all how this trip was supposed to go. Not even an hour in and me and one of my brothers were already at each other’s throats. But if I’d stayed to listen to even one more round of bitching from Xavier, I would have punched him square in the face, and that would’ve only made things that much worse.

It was clear that neither of my brothers were enthusiastic about being here, but if Xavier was this put out by it, why come in the first place? At least Colton was trying. Nobody had forced Xavier to come.

I heard footsteps coming up behind me and immediately recognized Colton’s scent.

“Got the fire lit with the flint, no thanks to our brother,” Colton said. I could tell he was trying to keep things light. “You should have seen it. It was really a thing of beauty.”

“Who knew that you would end up being the designated peacemaker?” I said.

Colton shrugged. “The only way we’re going to make any headway in our relationship is if we all actually spend time together. I know Xavier’s being a tool, but you should come back—if for no other reason than I don’t have the slightest clue about how to pitch a tent.”

I appreciated Colton’s roundabout way of saying, *Come back so we can talk this out.*

“I’ll come back,” I said. “But Xavier better have adjusted that shitty attitude of his. I’m not in the mood for it.”

Colton laughed. “I thought you knew Xavier better than that. Maybe this trip will prove useful after all.”

We made our way back to camp to find Xavier staring into the fire.

*Great. Day one and we’ve already gotten in a fight, and Xavier’s got that dumb, brooding look all over his face.*

“Look who I found!” Colton announced.

Xavier met my eyes, but neither of us said a word. And what was there to say? We were always at each other’s throats like this. It was nothing new.

“Now, can we all at least *try* to get along?” Colton said.

I nodded and went to set up the tent. I didn’t want to play any games with Xavier. I wanted to bond. That was the only reason I’d suggested the trip in the first place. It irked me that he couldn’t see that—or that he did see and just didn’t give a shit.

I made quick work of the tent and then went back to join Colton and Xavier. I plopped down beside Colton and stared into the fire just like they were for a few moments, calmed by the rhythmic crackle of the flames.

“Maybe we should go for a hike? Get a sense of what’s around us?” I suggested.

“There’s a really nice mountain not too far from here. We can hike up it and look around. How’s that sound?” Colton asked, giving his twin a pointed look.

Xavier shrugged as he slowly got up. “That’s what we’re here for, right? I’m game.”

As we left, I hoped that Xavier would use this as a chance to warm up a bit. It felt good to be in the woods, and I knew that Xavier liked it, too, at least deep down. Though I was surprised he wasn’t still complaining about not camping as a wolf.

We were walking for a while before I realized that Xavier and Colton had fallen quite far behind. I could hear the rise of their occasional laughter on the breeze.

*Wonder if I’ll ever get the chance to become part of that. Will I ever have that kind of cool effortless dynamic that they share with either of them?*

I wasn’t going to hold my breath. I’d never had any kind of real relationship with my brothers, and the one I had with Xavier currently had been forged with the *due destini* hanging over our heads. And that meant it was beyond flawed.

“Whoo, this is getting the blood pumping!” Colton shouted as we reached the mountain and began laboring up the slope, startling a few deer along the way.

I felt a small rumble under my feet and turned to Colton. “Hey, you know the name of this mountain?”

Colton shrugged. “No, don’t think so.”

I sighed. “Well, there’s a pretty famous volcano in this area. Did you ever stop to consider that this might be it?”

Colton waved that away. “Okay, but even if it is a volcano, it’s dormant, right? We’ll be fine.”

“Yes, if you think fine is being burned to death—” I stopped myself, quickly deciding against complaining. I didn’t want to sound like Xavier. He and Colton had already passed me and were quickly scrambling up the slope, clearly unconcerned with whether we were crawling up a rumbling volcano or not.

My theory about the mountain was proven right when we arrived at the top only to realize that we were standing at the edge of what was obviously a massive volcano.

I looked down into the dark, scary looking crater. “Are you sure this is dormant?”

“It’s supposed to be,” Colton said. But he still took a few steps back from the edge, tripped, and scraped his knee on the way down to the ground. He was on his feet almost immediately, annoyed as he dusted himself off. “Okay, I’ve seen enough. I’m going back to camp. Don’t kill each other, okay? Remember, you’re brothers.”

I spotted the smirk on Xavier’s face. Like me, Xavier knew that Colton was only leaving to give the both of us a little alone time to hash things out.

I appreciated it, despite myself. “What a view,” I said, taking in a deep breath and looking out across the crater.

Xavier sighed and looked out. “You’re right. This is quite a view. Active or not, this crater is pretty cool.”

I was thrown. “Whoa, did you really just agree with me about something?”

Xavier suddenly turned in the opposite direction. “Oh, but this way is better. Way more variety, lots more sky and trees. Feel like I can see all of Oregon from here.”

“Do you have to do that?” I grumbled. “Do we have to be competitive about every little thing?”

Xavier shrugged and glanced at me before returning his gaze to the sweeping vista spread out in front of us. “What’s your problem? I was just stating facts.”

I shook my head and sighed, resisting the urge to tell him to fuck off. “Tell me, Xavier, do you plan to grow up anytime soon, or can I expect this immature shit from you for the rest of your livelong days?”

And just like that, we were arguing again. Hurling insults, throwing low blows, insulting each other up and down and in every way that we could dream up.

“You know, you really are a piece of work,” Xavier hissed at me after a particularly dark comment I made about him and Ava. “You pretend to be all diplomatic, and you run around playing sweet to win points with Cali all day, but underneath you’re nothing but a raging asshole.”

“You know, I trust you when you say that, because it fucking takes one to know one!”

My words were drowned out by a rumble under our feet. We both watched in stunned silence as a bunch of stones tumbled down the slope of the mountain, causing what looked very much like an avalanche.

With a surprised grunt, Xavier lost his footing and went tumbling over a small ledge. I rushed to the edge and looked down. Xavier was sprawled out on the ground below with a giant boulder pinning him to the ground. His face was pale and drawn in pain.

“Shit. I’m coming,” I shouted, already starting down the side to the small ledge just below the mouth of the crater.

Only a second later, I lost my footing as another rumble reverberated, and the ground pitched beneath me. Digging my partially shifted claw into the rocky surface was the only thing that stopped me from tumbling down the sloped side like a ragdoll.

“Xavier!” I shouted once I was closer.

Xavier groaned. “I can’t move the boulder! I’m stuck.”

I finally regained my footing and slid down to the ledge where Xavier was sprawled out and groaning in pain. I immediately tried pushing the boulder off Xavier’s leg, but I couldn’t move it, either. It was too heavy.

I was about to shift fully and try again when there was another rumble and a blast of hot steam and smoky air shot up from the depths of the crater, forcing me to cover my face and look away.

“What the hell is that smell?” Xavier said.

“It’s the volcano!” I said.

*Fucking hell.*

When I looked up, I saw a stream of bright red lava running over the lip of the crater and heading right for us. I stifled a shout of panic as I looked between the lava—the motherfucking *lava*—and my brother, wondering if I was going to be able to get my brother out of there before we both got burned alive.

**Episode 5039**

I was hurrying to crew, still amazed that Kendall was so open to working with me when she’d seemed resistant to doing any such thing with Greyson. Based on her relationship with my mate alone, I’d expected her to either dismiss my worries or tell me that she would take care of things herself, not to worry.

*This is good. Kendall might be mysterious and a little prickly, but she knows her stuff. And that means that she’ll keep a watchful eye on the others and take care of things if it turns out that they actually remember what happened to them that night.*

Coach’s words to me about being late to crew practice rattled through my brain as I burst into the crew room with only a second to spare.

I was quickly welcomed by the others, and for a moment, I let myself get wrapped up in the normalcy of spending time with my crew buddies. Bear pulled me into a tight hug, and I shared a bunch of high fives with everyone and gave a few updates about what had been going on since they’d last seen me. Unfortunately, most of what I told them was a huge lie, but what other choice did I have?

*It’s not like I can tell them I’ve been chasing an ancient vampire who bit our teammate Codsworth who I just recently freed from my basement.*

They’d either have me committed or call the cops, and neither of those things sounded particularly inviting. I was just going to have to play it cool for the time being.

But even as I chatted away with the others, my attention was on Codsworth. He was standing on the dock, staring listlessly at the water and looking more like a zombie than a person. I felt really bad for him. Memory or not, Chessa had done a number on him. I wondered if he would ever be the same again.

“Get the boats ready, what are you doing?” Coach shouted at Codsworth. “We don’t have time to waste.”

Codsworth looked up slowly in Coach’s general direction, as if he wasn’t even aware of what was happening around him.

“I’ll pitch in, Coach,” I said, which seemed to satisfy the man for the time being. “Hey, Codsworth, need some help?” I offered brightly. I was itching to get him alone since I needed a chance to see if he remembered anything else from his ordeal with the monster… otherwise known as Chessa.

Codsworth barely acknowledged me. “I feel so disoriented and out of it,” he said. “That dream I told you about… It’s really bothering me. It’s all I can think about.”

I thought about how Kendall advised me to get him to describe the monster in detail. Maybe I could even get him to draw it just so I could see if it resembled Chessa? At least if I knew exactly what we were dealing with, I’d be able to plan what was next.

“You know, Codsworth, when I have bad dreams, sometimes I draw them out, just to help me understand them. Deal with them better.”

I fished a paper and pen out of my bag and offered it to him. “Want to try that? Don’t worry about the boats, I’ll get them ready in the meantime.”

I pulled our boats down and quickly got them ready, then went back over to Codsworth and glanced at what he’d drawn. He wasn’t much of an artist, and while the figure he’d drawn didn’t quite resemble Chessa, it definitely looked like some kind of vampire creature.

*Shoot. This is worrying. I suppose it would be worse if he drew a blonde woman with fangs, but this isn’t much better. Deep down, he knows there’s something more to this than a dream. And I know Codsworth. He’s like a dog with a bone. He won’t rest until he figures this out.*

“Thanks for the suggestion, Cali, but I don’t feel any better after having drawn this,” Codsworth said.

I took the drawing, folded it up, and put it in my bag. “We can talk about it later. Do you think you’re going to the crypto meeting later today? We can go together.”

Codsworth shrugged. “No. I’m done with crypto.”

I was stunned. “What? Why? You were so passionate about it! You got me into it!”

“I think I’ve outgrown it. There are more important things going on in the world than sitting around talking about something that may or may not exist.”

I stared at him. I didn’t get it. How could he just up and outgrow something in a day’s time? His disinterest had to have something to do with Chessa. I supposed his lack of interest in crypto could mean he was done with all the monster hunting stuff, or, on the other hand, it could mean someone was trying to hide something from us.

“Maybe you should still go, anyway! The club needs you. I doubt they’ll stay together without your energy keeping it going,” I said.

“I said no,” Codsworth snapped. “You seem more passionate than I am about crypto, so feel free to lead the meetings from now on. But I won’t be there. I’ve got other plans.”

I waited, but he didn’t bother revealing what they were. Tentatively, I asked, “What are they?”

Codsworth gave me a bewildered look. “Honestly, that’s none of your business. Get off my back, Cali, really. I’m fine. I don’t need you badgering me on top of everything else.”

“Got it,” I said quickly. “Just wish you were going to crypto club. It’s not going to be the same without you.”

After crew practice was over, I rushed off to the rest of my classes. They were important lectures and almost every teacher mentioned upcoming tests or quizzes, but all I could think about was Codsworth.

*What’s he doing right now, I wonder? Is he going to start realizing that his dreams are actually memories? And if he does, what then? Will he tell someone what happened to him?*

He’d been so weird about the other plans that I couldn’t stop thinking about them. It could be anything, and that meant it could be anything that might expose us and all supernatural kind. It was up to me to make sure things stayed under wraps.

*I have to follow him, just to see what he’s up to. If whatever these plans are of his have nothing to do with what he saw and experienced at Chessa’s hands, then I’ll leave him be.*

There was a chance he was lying to me about the other plans, or maybe he was just so freaked out by his nightmare that he really was on edge and wanted me to leave him alone. Either way, I was determined to find out.

After class, I waited outside Codsworth’s dorm room until he appeared and then, keeping my distance, I followed him off campus toward town.

We didn’t get too far before he entered a strange looking shop that sold crystals and new age stuff. I hung back, watching him through the large plate glass window as he shopped. I wondered if maybe he was seeking some kind of spiritual guidance because of his dreams.

*I can’t fault him for that. Even if he’s forgotten what happened, those dreams are enough to disturb him, and he needs something to take the edge off the fear.*

After all the pieces and parts of the supernatural and paranormal world I’d seen, I would never discount anyone seeking out unusual therapies. I stood across the street, wondering what I should do next when I noticed a sign on the window of the shop.

“Hypnotherapy,” I read to myself.

Now I was really freaking out. Was he going to use hypnotherapy to find out what his dreams meant? Or was he using it to try that retro therapy thing where the hypnotists helped you recover past memories?

I wasn’t sure what to do. It wasn’t like I could just barge in there right in the middle of his treatment!

*But hypnotherapy could help him remember everything! And if he does that… Well, what will we do? We’ll have to pack up and run from our homes like fugitives! No supernatural would be safe!*

I sent Kendall a text.

*SOS! SOS! Codsworth is in hypnotherapy as we speak!*

I stared at the screen, waiting, but the message went unread. That meant I had to make a decision. This was way too dangerous to leave to chance. I had to stop him.

I ran across the street and went inside the store and was immediately hit by the strong smell of burning incense and herbs. Codsworth was seated at a table across from a man holding up a crystal on a string.

*Oh no, am I too late? Has this man already helped Codsworth unlock the meaning behind all his dreams?*

The man looked at me. “May I help you?”

Codsworth turned around to look at me. “Cali? What the hell are you doing here?”

**Episode 5040**

**Xavier**

The heat was increasing by the second. I could feel it radiating across my skin, singing my hair. I grunted in pain as I rose to look at the boulder resting on my leg. I was sure that between the fall and the boulder, I’d broken my leg in three places—which meant that this could be the end for me.

*A fucking volcano? Seriously?*

“I just have to try!” Greyson grunted as he put everything he had into pushing the boulder. “Can you help?” Greyson asked me. He was partially shifted and clawing ferociously at the boulder, but there was no use. It wasn’t going to budge. “Can’t you do something?”

“Stop, Greyson. There’s no sense. Even if I were at one hundred percent and uninjured, there’s no way in hell the two of us could move this. The best thing for you to do is get the hell out of here before you get vaporized by the lava.”

“Hell no. I’m not leaving you,” Greyson said, still pushing and pulling at the boulder. “I will get you out of here. I have to!”

“Save your breath,” I said. “You might need it to flee the volcano if it erupts further,” I said.

“I said no! So stop telling me to leave!” Greyson shouted through gritted teeth as he continued pulling at the boulder.

I grimaced as a fresh wave of pain ripped through my body. My lungs were burning like crazy, and I was starting to choke from the noxious gasses and smoke billowing out of the volcano. Of all the ways I’d pictured myself dying, getting killed by an erupting volcano had never crossed my mind. Not even once.

Desperate, I grabbed Greyson by the arm and yanked him away from the boulder. “Greyson, be smart about this. There’s no point in both of us dying up here. You have your whole life ahead of you. I appreciate you trying to help me, but it’s a lost cause.”

Greyson finally stopped struggling to free himself from my hold and seemed to be listening.

“Somebody has to keep the packs going. You’re a good Alpha, and despite everything you think you know, everything I’ve said about you, I don’t hate you. Never have. Yes, it sucks knowing that you are in love with my mate and she’s in love with you, but I need you to live so that you can take care of Cali. There’s no one better—you’re the one person who loves her just as much as I do.”

“Xavier, stop talking like this and shift—do something to get this boulder off of you. You’ve never given up on anything before, why start now?”

“Shifting isn’t going to fix this. Might make it worse,” I said. “Nothing can fix this, okay? Just listen to me, because I don’t know how much longer I have. You and I have often disagreed on a lot of things, but I do know that you’re good for Cali.”

The ground rumbled again, smoke adding to the tears I felt welling in my eyes. I gave Greyson a hard shove. “Now get the hell out of here while you still can.”

Greyson stumbled back and shook his head, but he stayed put. “No. I’m not leaving you. You’re my brother.”

We both looked up to see a thick glob of lava rolling toward us, a slow moving, swirling, smoldering death sentence.

I was starting to have trouble seeing Greyson through the thick smoke, ash, and heat.

I dropped my head down on the ground, picturing Ava. I wished that I could tell her goodbye. She hadn’t wanted me to come on this trip, and I wished I could tell her that she was right.

Ava was strong. Resilient. A survivor. She had the Samara pack, and hopefully that would be enough to comfort her. I knew that Cali would be devastated by my death, but at least she had Greyson by her side to get her through all the hard stuff. Ava didn’t have that. She was going to have to push forward and pick up the pieces all on her own.

I coughed and squeezed my eyes shut against the heat, which was unbearable now. And then I heard Colton’s voice.

We both looked up to see Colton standing on the ledge above us. “Hold on! I’m coming!” he shouted.

He began working his way down, using a pickaxe to keep himself steady.

“Colton, don’t come down here!” I shouted. “It’s too late! Turn around!”

But Colton ignored me and kept coming, the clang of his pickaxe hitting rock mixing with the sounds of the rumbling volcano.

Greyson rushed over to Colton to help him down the rest of the way.

“Come on, we have to move this boulder!” Greyson shouted, leading Colton over to the heavy stone.

Together, they both tried to push the boulder off my leg, but I was as right now as I had been before. There was no way they could make it budge.

“You’re both dumb as shit! I told you to go!” I shouted, unable to quell my anger that not only was I about to die, but my brothers would, too, if they didn’t get the hell out of here.

“Shut the fuck up!” Colton screamed at the top of his lungs. “You don’t want to die, and I’m not going to let you. But if you keep screaming at me, I’ll leave your annoying ass down here to get mummified by this fucking lava!”

And then without another word, Colton went to work on the boulder with the pickaxe.

I watched him as delirium started to set in. For a moment, I wondered if I were dreaming as I watched the boulder chip, sending shards of stone raining down on me.

Then I heard Greyson grunting, and suddenly, the pressure on my legs was relieved as the boulder finally rolled off.

Not missing a beat, Greyson and Colton lifted me up, and together, they carried me up the side of the ledge and out onto the side of the mountain. We were finally clear of the crater and certain death.

We hesitated for only a second, the three of us watching in silence as the lava finally spilled into the small pocket we’d just been in only moments ago.

“A couple of seconds more, and we all would’ve been toast,” Colton said, hanging the pickaxe on his belt. “Volcano zero, Evers brothers one—or at least a half point since the volcano did kind of kick Xavier’s ass.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said.

“Are you strong enough to hold on if I shift?” Greyson asked me.

“Yes,” I said, though the pain in my leg was blinding at this point. “I think I can manage it.”

“Colton, come on, get him onto my back,” Greyson said, and then he shifted and waited. Colton easily placed me on Greyson’s back, and then he shifted, too, and the three of us raced back down the mountain and back to camp.

Once we arrived, I slid off Greyson’s back and landed heavily on the ground, biting back the need to scream out in pain. My leg was already healing, but since there was so much damage, the pain was still lingering.

But more than anything, I was tired. My lungs were still burning from being exposed to the heat and gasses. It hurt to breathe.

Greyson and Colton shifted back.

“Colton, what the hell are you doing with a pickaxe?” I asked, wincing against the pain of talking through my scorched throat.

“Once again, give Maya all the credit. She literally thought of everything, as usual.” Colton got a dreamy look in his eyes. “She’s so damn smart.” Then he cast a smug glance at the both of us. “And to think, you guys looked at me funny when I brought all my bags, but now I’m sure you see why they were necessary.”

“Listen, I’m the first to say I was dead wrong for giving you a hard time,” I said. “Those overpacked bags are proving to be a lifesaver.”

Greyson was quiet, his eyes still on the volcano in the distance. “You two think we need to worry about camping right here with that thing erupting like that?”

“Yeah, maybe camping near an apparently active volcano isn’t a good idea,” Colton admitted sheepishly. He sighed. “Maya’s going to be so pissed when she sees us. We’re covered head to toe in ash, Xavier nearly died—”

“We’re not going home,” Greyson interrupted. “Hell no. We just got here.”

“What? But we nearly got taken out by an active volcano! There’s no way I’m staying in that mountain’s line of fire,” I said.

“Agreed, but I know a lodge nearby where we can spend the night, get cleaned up. We’ll start our whole camping thing from scratch tomorrow… maybe… But for now, let’s have a little reset. A near-death experience deserves a little rest and relaxation, don’t you think?” Greyson said.

“I would argue with you, but I don’t want to,” I replied.

“That’s a first,” Greyson said.

We all chuckled, and it was an easy moment that I realized we might not have shared before my brush with death.

Greyson clapped his hands and rolled up his sleeves. “Okay, so let’s get packed up so we can get going.”

As we started breaking down the tents, Greyson came over to me.

“So, Xavier… I was just wondering. Did you mean all that stuff you said back there?”

**Episode 5041**

I stood stock-still in the doorway as Codsworth and the woman—the hypnotherapist—stared at me. They were waiting for me to speak—to offer an explanation of why the heck I was there.

*Shit*. Why did I always get in these kinds of situations? I needed to think fast.

“Cali?” Codsworth asked again. “What’s going on?”

“I…” My mind spun. “I was thinking of getting some hypnotherapy myself,” I said, blurting out the first thing that sprang to mind.

*Really brain? That’s what we came up with?*

Codsworth gave me a skeptical look. “You were? Hypnotherapy?”

“Yes!” I said, too loud. Then I laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, and how weird to see you here, of all places. But I guess it’s not that weird, when you think about it, right? I mean, how many hypnotherapists can one town hold? Just this one, apparently. Anyway, I love all the crystals,” I went on, talking hard and fast. “They’re so pretty. So sparkly. I just love crystals. So magical. Do they have healing powers? What about that big one?” I asked, pointing to one on the table where Codsworth and the woman sat.

The woman gave me a suspicious look. “Young lady, this gentleman and I are about to begin a session at the moment. If you would like to see me at a later time, you can schedule a session for yourself by booking an appointment over the phone. I do not take walk-in clients.”

“Right…yes…” I wasn’t sure how else to respond to this. She was clearly trying to get me to leave, but I still couldn’t just leave Codsworth alone with her. What if the hypnosis worked and he remembered something about what happened to him? I had to do something—so I stalled. “Um, what are your rates? Do you take insurance?”

“No,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “And my rates are on a sliding scale. Given the nature of my work and its cosmic importance, I charge whatever my clients can afford.”

I nodded. “That’s great. Very noble,” I said, pretending to take that in. I looked at Codsworth. “So, why are you here?”

He flushed but opened his mouth to answer, but before he could say anything, the hypnotherapist spoke first.

“Why anyone books a session here is strictly a private matter,” she said firmly.

“Of course,” I said, feeling abashed. “I’m sorry, Codsworth—”

“I’m trying to remember what happened at the party,” he said suddenly.

I looked at him in surprise. “What?”

“It’s driving me crazy,” he said, his eyes wide and haunted. “It’s just a blank, and I hate it. I came here because she specializes in memory recall.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding and trying to pretend like I wasn’t fully *freaking out* on the inside. “That sounds… Maybe you shouldn’t do that, Codsworth. That could be dangerous, don’t you think?”

Both Codsworth and the therapist looked at me with shock.

“What?” Codsworth asked.

“Why?” the therapist added.

“The hypnosis, I mean,” I said, trying to cover. “You know, because of memory planting…stuff like that.”

The therapist looked at me—really looked at me. “Have you ever *tried* hypnosis, young lady?”

“Uh…n-no,” I stammered. “I’ve just—you know—heard things. I was curious, that’s why I came at all, you know…”

“Well, you shouldn’t judge a practice based on what you hear, girl. Especially not without any firsthand knowledge of your own.”

Codsworth frowned at me. “I don’t get it, Cali. Didn’t you just say you came here for hypnotherapy yourself? Why would you do that if you didn’t trust it? If you think it’s dangerous?”

“Well, what I meant was…” I was starting to sweat. “It can be dangerous for *some* people. It’s not dangerous for everybody. I mean…” Shit. I was just making things worse at this point. I looked at my feet. Anywhere but at Codsworth puzzled face.

“I have an idea!” the therapist said suddenly.

Codsworth and I both looked at her.

She smiled, though the expression was calculating. “Since Codsworth is looking for answers about what happened this past week—and since it appears you were involved in some way—maybe it would serve both of you to do a joint session?”

I was about to object to this idea—I didn’t want to do a joint session, I just wanted to get Codsworth the hell out of here—but his face lit up.

“Hey! Why not?” he said, jumping at the idea.

It was going to be hard to explain exactly *why not* now that he was so pumped.

The therapist gestured for me to join them at the small, round table. I was hesitant and still wracking my brain, trying to come up with an excuse to get myself and Codsworth the hell out of this place, but he grabbed my hand and pulled me into the third seat.

“Come on, Cali. Don’t you want to help me?”

I looked down at him and—seeing the plea in his eyes—had to nod. “Yeah, of course I do,” I said and took a seat. I did want to help Codsworth, of course. That was why I had followed him into this place. I just didn’t think this was the answer.

Once I was settled into the rickety chair, the therapist took my hand in hers.

“Everything is going to be okay,” she assured me.

“Great,” I muttered.

“If anything happens that is out of the ordinary, I can end the hypnosis right away. Don’t fear.”

Shit. I hadn’t been afraid before she’d said that, but now I was. Okay, whatever happened, one thing was clear—I couldn’t let myself get hypnotized. It was too risky. I had too many things swimming around in my brain that had to *stay* hidden.

The therapist held up a small, purple crystal. “Shall we begin?”

“Yes,” Codsworth said, looking determined.

“Sure,” I said, trying to stifle a resigned sigh. If only Kendall had texted me back, I never would have gotten myself into this mess.

“Keep your eyes trained on the crystal,” the therapist said, nodding toward the crystal at the center of the table. She lowered her voice, making it almost musical. “Watch it closely, see how the light refracts off of it. See the sparkles. Watch the motion.”

The crystal *was* pretty, and the way it sparkled kept catching my eye, but I was trying not to look at it. I was trying to focus my eyes on a spot past the crystal, but unfortunately that had me looking directly at Codsworth, who was across the table, and I could see the crystal reflected in his eyes.

“The light from the crystal bounces off the walls. We are approaching a tunnel,” the therapist went on. “Can you see the tunnel?”

“What kind of a tunnel?” Codsworth asked.

“Keep an open mind,” the therapist told him. “You tell me. Use your imagination. Imagine there is a door at the end of the tunnel.”

I wasn’t *trying* to picture any tunnel at all, but of course I was. I saw a narrow tunnel. It was covered with mist and had lights sparkling through it. And there was a door. A large, white door.

“I don’t see a tunnel, and I don’t see a door,” Codsworth said, sounding annoyed.

The tone of his voice pulled me from the tunnel with a sharp snap. What the hell was wrong with me?! I couldn’t believe I had let myself get pulled into that! I couldn’t let myself get drawn into the hypnosis.

“Cali, perhaps you are better able to see,” the therapist said. “Perhaps you could guide Codsworth.”

“*Guide?*” I asked, startled.

“Yes, you guide him through the vision. Describe what you see.”

I swallowed hard. She was right, I could see the tunnel, even though I was trying hard not to. I was staring right at the door, which was now covered in ivy.

I shook my head. “I don’t see anything either,” I lied.

She made a noise that sounded like an irritated sigh. “Perhaps you could both look for a path instead. Perhaps the tunnel was too advanced. Follow the path.”

Codsworth scoffed. “This isn’t working. I don’t see a tunnel, I don’t see a door, and I sure as hell don’t see any paths. None of this is working.”

“You see nothing?” the therapist asked nervously.

“All I see is the crystal,” he said. “The crystal, Cali, and this room.”

I could hear Codsworth’s petulant voice, but the sound was distant, as though I were hearing it across a great distance.

“Cali?” the therapist called my name. “Cali? Where are you?”

I was in the tunnel. A path had appeared beneath my feet, leading straight to the ivy-covered door. I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could, the ivy began to move. It snaked out from the door and reached for me. It wrapped around my legs, then tightened. I was frozen with fear as the ivy drew me toward the door, which slowly began to open.

**Episode 5042**

**Greyson**

Xavier didn’t answer for a moment. He pulled a tent stake from the ground and looked down at it.

“I said a lot of things back there. But the one thing I didn’t say was thank you.” He looked up at me. “That good?”

“That’s not necessary,” I said, shaking my head.

“Come on,” he muttered.

“Come on nothing. You’re my brother, Xavier. What was I supposed to do? Leave you up there under that boulder to turn to ash?”

He shrugged. “You could have,” he said simply, turning away again.

It was clear Xavier didn’t want to talk about this, but I wasn’t going to let it go that easily. That was what I’d been doing all my life with Xavier and Colton—just letting the hard stuff slide because no one wanted to talk about it—and look where that had gotten us. Besides, this was why we had all gone on this godforsaken camping trip anyway. To talk and work things out. Right?

“You told me that I was a good Alpha,” I pushed. “Do you really think that? Or was that just something you said in the moment because it seemed like the right thing to say when you were on the verge of death?”

Xavier eyed me warily. “What’s the story on this lodge?”

I heaved a gusty sigh. “Jesus, Xavier. Is it too much for us to just admit that we respect each other?”

“Am I the only one doing any packing up here?” Colton cut in, standing straight and glaring at both of us. “Because I’d rather not do any of it.”

Xavier tossed me the tent stake. “I’m going to help Colton before he bails completely.”

I rolled my eyes. “Admitting that you meant what you said won’t actually kill you, Xavier. And we *are* going to talk about this. We’re not going back to our pack houses until we do.”

Xavier didn’t bother to respond, just walked away from me to join Colton, who was packing up the firewood and the chairs.

I turned to the tent and pulled the rest of the stakes from the ground. I disassembled it, making quick work of it in my anger, but I turned when I heard laughter.

There they were—Xavier and Colton—standing together, working side by side, talking and laughing and looking like the brothers they were. It ate me up to watch them like that. So comfortable together. So damn close. This little unit that I wasn’t a part of—that I had never been allowed to join.

I finished with the tent and walked over to toss it into the car. Xavier and Colton got the food and the chairs and did the same. Then we climbed in and headed to the lodge.

“You know,” Colton started, “I’m thinking that when we get back, we might want to not mention the erupting volcano. You know, just kind of leave that out when we’re telling people about the trip?”

“Worried about what Maya will say?” Xavier asked, raising an eyebrow.

Colton rolled his eyes. “I’m just thinking she might give me hell if she finds out we were almost barbequed.”

I thought about that for a moment. I supposed Cali wouldn’t be thrilled if she found out about the volcano and everything that happened either, but—at the same time—I wouldn’t want to lie to her about any of it.

“Wouldn’t Maya be angrier if you didn’t tell her about it, and then she found out?” I asked, glancing in the rearview mirror at Colton in the back seat. “I know Cali would.”

“I don’t know, it kind of doesn’t matter with Maya,” Colton said with a shrug.

“Why wouldn’t you want your mate to know?” I pressed.

Colton looked at Xavier. “What about Ava? What are you going to tell her about what happened? You were the one closest to death, after all.”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know. It wouldn’t really matter either way.”

“What do you mean?” I wondered.

“I mean that Ava wouldn’t care if I went to the spirit world. As long as I came back to her,” he said, his eyes out the window.

Colton snorted. “You thinking about testing that theory, man? Taking a little trip to the spirit world? Because I’ve got a pickax in the trunk. I think I could help you get there if you’re interested.”

Xavier chuckled and turned to give him a shove.

Colton tried to dodge, then shoved back, laughing the whole time. I watched their casual camaraderie with my usual twinge of envy.

“We’re here,” I said, moments later when I pulled the car in front of the lodge.

Colton looked out the window, his expression skeptical. “We are? This is it? This is the lodge?”

I parked the car and looked at the building. “Yeah. I guess it’s not quite as big as I remember it. But if I recall correctly, they have hot showers and beds. And it’s here, so let’s go in.”

“Sounds good to me,” Xavier muttered, and we all climbed out of the car and headed inside.

We walked to the front desk, which was a large, carved, wooden half-circle in the center of an open entryway.

“We’re going to need some rooms for the night,” I said as I approached the counter.

The clerk looked up at me, then past me at Colton and Xavier. “Gentlemen, I’m so sorry to tell you this, but we’re all booked up.”

“Seriously?” Colton asked, annoyed.

The clerk eyed him coolly. “Yes, sir. *Completely* booked. There was a volcanic eruption. Perhaps you heard about it.”

“We might have heard a rumor,” Xavier growled.

“Yes, it was so wild and unexpected,” the clerk went on. “So everyone in the area is evacuating and heading this way. Unfortunately, if you had come ten minutes earlier, I might have been able to get you a room.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me—” Colton started, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the desk before he said something that was really going to piss off the clerk.

I got him outside before I turned to look at him and Xavier. “Okay, so, they’re booked.”

“So what are we going to do now?” Xavier wondered. He pushed a hand through his hair. “I mean, it’s getting hard to ignore the signs here. Maybe this just wasn’t meant to happen. It might be time to admit defeat and head home.”

I shook my head. “I think we should at least try to look for another place to stay before we give up.”

“You heard what that prick in there said,” Xavier said. “Everything is booked.”

“We should at least try—” I started, but Colton cut me off.

“You two are pathetic,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m ashamed of both of you.”

“What are you talking about?” Xavier demanded.

Colton stared at us. “Um, do I need to remind you that we’re fucking *werewolves*? We don’t need some dumbass hotel to stay the night. We can literally camp anywhere.”

I blew out a breath. “Colton’s right,” I admitted. “We can spend a night in the woods and then find a place to take showers in the morning. The important thing is not where we sleep, but that we’re spending time together. That’s why we’re doing this, right?”

I was looking at Xavier, but he didn’t meet my eyes.

He just shrugged. “Fine. I’m up for it. As long as I’m not on the hook for pitching another tent. I’m done with that.”

“Let’s go,” I said, stepping toward the parking lot. “We’ll need to drive a little ways away from here first.”

Colton snorted as we headed toward the car. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to put the tent together again, Xavier. I wouldn’t want to either if I was as bad at it as you are.”

“Whatever,” Xavier said. He rolled his eyes, but he smiled at Colton’s teasing. I could see that he had missed his twin and was enjoying having him back.

We piled back into the car, and I drove away from the lodge. I got back on the highway and kept my eyes out for a good spot to pull over. After a couple of miles, I found a likely-looking turnout.

“This is probably as good a spot as any,” I said, pulling the car off the road and onto the gravel fire road. I drove it a little deeper into the woods and pulled it behind a stand of trees, and we climbed out.

“Finally!” Colton bellowed. He looked around the clearing, his eyes bright with excitement. “I’m dying to shift and run around. Maybe we can have a race. Hell, I’ll even give you both a head start so you can have a chance,” he added with a grin.

My phone buzzed before I could respond to Colton’s taunt, and I looked down to see that it was a message from Kendall.

What the hell did she want?

I opened the message:

*I can’t get ahold of Cali. Have you heard from her?*

**Episode 5043**

The vines snaking around my ankles tightened painfully as they pulled me toward the door. They were tight around me, digging in sharply. I screamed, but no one responded. I couldn’t hear Codsworth anymore, or the hypnotherapist. Their voices had been distant, but now they had died away completely. They were nowhere near, and they weren’t coming to help me—I was on my own.

*What the hell is going on?*

I reached down and grasped the vines, trying desperately to untangle them from my feet, but it wasn’t working. If anything, their hold grew tighter as I came closer and closer to the opened door.

“*Caliana…Caliana…Caliana*…”

The voice calling my name made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was low and musical and strangely familiar.

Then a figure stepped into the doorway. It was a woman, but she was partially obscured by the creeping vines. As I drew closer, the vines retreated, and I could see that the woman in the doorway was Cassandra—the first *due destini*. It’d been so long since I’d seen her when she’d come to Marta and needed to talk to me…but there was no mistaking her. Cassandra’s was a face I would never forget.

I gasped. “Cassandra? What are you doing here?”

She gave me a small smile, her glittering eyes taking me in. “I have always been with you, Caliana. I thought you understood that.”

I stared at her, baffled. I was trying to make sense of what she said, and of what I was seeing. Was any of this real? Was I really seeing Cassandra, or was she part of my subconscious that had been released through hypnotherapy? Had I somehow been kicked to the spirit world or something?

Looking up at Cassandra again, I shook my head. “I don’t understand. If you’ve always been with me, then why are you only making yourself appear now? And how? We don’t have a medium or a bridge here.”

Cassandra smiled again, the expression knowing. “I think you know.”

*Huh?*

“Know *what*?” I asked.

She waved, gesturing for me to follow her through the door. “Come with me, Caliana.”

I hesitated. I was afraid of following her through an unknown doorway into a dark hallway beyond—and going further into the hypnosis didn’t seem like a great idea. What I really needed to be doing was figuring out how to snap out of the hypnotic state I was in, but I found myself moving after her. It wasn’t even a conscious thought; I just couldn’t seem to resist, and I wondered what it was that Cassandra thought I should know.

I was starting to understand how curiosity killed that cat.

So I followed her through the wide, white door. It led to a hallway, and Cassandra led the way as we walked down it. The farther we went, the dimmer the light became. I blinked and looked around, trying to peer through the darkness, but I was having trouble.

Finally, I realized I couldn’t see at all. It was pitch-black, and my heart started beating wildly.

“Cassandra? Are you still there?” I asked fearfully.

“I’m here,” came her voice through the darkness. “I’m right here, Caliana. Just follow my voice.”

I swallowed hard and took a tentative step. “Where are you?”

“Here,” she called. “Follow the sound of my voice.”

I was trying, but it seemed as though her voice was becoming distant, like the harder I tried to keep up, the farther away she drew. I tried to move faster, but it was so, so dark. I was feeling along in the total darkness, and when I tripped, I went down hard.

The fall knocked the wind out of me, and it took a moment to get my breath back. “Cassandra!” I called, clambering back to my feet. “Where are you?”

There was no answer.

Shit.

“Wait!” I called. “*Wait!*”

Then, as if in answer, something sparkled a few feet in front of me. It was dim at first—just the tiniest flash—but it grew, building in intensity.

“Use the light, Caliana,” Cassandra’s voice said, back again.

I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about, but—on instinct—I reached for the light. My hand closed around it, and I found that it was smooth and cool to the touch. It reminded me of the crystals from the hypnotherapist’s shop.

I stood straight and held the crystal in front of me like a lantern. Squinting, I peered through the darkness and saw the faint outline of Cassandra far ahead of me.

“Just tell me!” I called after her. “What the hell am I supposed to know?”

Cassandra paused, then turned back to look at me. I couldn’t see the expression on her face, but it must have been one of amusement because her laugh echoed against the walls, bouncing all around me.

“Such impatience,” she said in a chiding voice. “Just follow me, Caliana, and all your questions will be answered.”

Great. Clutching the crystal again, I sped up, running to catch up with her. I was going as quickly as I dared in the dark passage, but no matter how fast I moved, I couldn’t seem to get any closer to Cassandra. She stayed the same distance from me until—suddenly—she just disappeared.

“Cassandra!” I called, increasing my speed. I ran forward, barely stopping in time before I reached the lip of a sharp drop-off. “Shit!” I gasped, pulling back from the edge.

My heart was pounding with fear, when another voice came to me, scaring me almost as much as the cliff.

“Cali,” Xavier’s voice said, “it’s okay. I’m here, baby.”

I looked over as he stepped next to me, taking my hand in his.

“We’re both here, love,” Greyson said, stepping to my other side, taking my other hand.

I looked at Xavier, then at Greyson, completely confused. “What are you doing here?”

They didn’t answer. The answer I got came from Cassandra, her voice drifting in on the wind:

“I think you know why, Caliana.”

My heart thudded hard. “I do?”

“I am going to reveal who it is that you are meant to be with,” she went on.

“You want me to *choose*?” I gasped. I looked desperately around, wondering if she was nearby. But she was nowhere to be seen—it was only her voice.

“No,” she said with a small laugh. “No, you will not choose, Caliana. You will no longer have a choice.”

“What are you talking about? Why not—”

“You have waited too long. That is why I am here. I am going to help you,” she said soothingly.

I swallowed hard and looked down at the cliff’s edge. In a moment I remembered how the legend of Cassandra’s *due destini* had ended—with Cassandra ripping her heart out in agony and falling over this cliff. Then her two mates doing the same, joining her forever in death.

A chill shivered up my spine, and I looked up, between Xavier and Greyson. I didn’t want that to happen to them. I didn’t want that to happen to any of us.

“I don’t need your help!” I called out. “Just leave me alone!”

Cassandra’s laugh—hard and bitter—surrounded me. It was everywhere, though I still couldn’t see her. My whole body tensed, but Xavier and Greyson didn’t move. They didn’t seem to hear her.

“Stop!” I called out.

“No, it is you who must stop!” she snapped at me. “You have avoided this for too long! It is time you faced your destiny, Caliana! I am here to help you. The one with whom you are meant to be is—”

I yanked my hands from Xavier and Greyson’s grips and covered my ears, pressing hard, making my head ring. I didn’t want to listen. I didn’t want to hear what Cassandra had to say. I didn’t want her help!

I blinked my eyes open. The voice had stopped, and when I looked around, I realized Greyson and Xavier were gone. I was alone again, on the edge of the cliff. I looked wildly around, searching for my mates. Where had they gone?

Gripping the crystal in my hand, I held it high and peered into the darkness all around me. “Greyson?! Xavier?! Are you there? Where did you go? Greyson? Where are you? Xavier?”

There was no answer. There was nothing but silence—a close, tight silence. I turned around again, staring out across the expanse in front of me.

“Where are my mates?” I demanded, yelling to the unseen Cassandra. “What have you done with them? Tell me! Where are they?!”

“They’re not here,” came a sharp voice.

I whirled around. Ava was standing next to me now, her face in shadow.

“Ava—” I started, surprised.

“They’re not here,” she said again. “But I am.”

And without a moment’s hesitation, she put both hands on my chest and shoved, pushing me over the cliff.

**Episode 5044**

There was no oxygen left in my lungs. I tried to take a breath, but I couldn’t get even a gasp of air. I was falling fast, flailing my arms, reaching out for something to hold, something to grab onto, something to slow my descent—but there was nothing. Just the black emptiness of space all around me.

Terror coursed through me, cold as ice in my veins. But even as fear overtook me, a weird rush of memories flooded my mind, like my life was flashing before my eyes. I could see myself in the kitchen of my childhood home, making Saturday morning waffles with my dad as sunlight streamed through the windows.

I remembered when my mother first started getting sick, and what it felt like to watch her growing weaker and weaker every day. I could feel her hand in mine as it grew cold and thin. I remembered finally meeting Greyson face-to-face and what it felt like to look into those stormy grey eyes of his for the first time.

A rush of butterflies erupted in my stomach at the thought of it, as though I were reliving that moment again. I remembered the heart-stopping moment when I discovered Lola was a werewolf, the fear I’d felt when I’d been captured by the Kollector in the Fae world, and then the strange joy I’d had when I’d found out Artemis was my sister.

I remembered how close I’d held her when she’d finally let me hug her.

But then the memories twisted—they weren’t my memories anymore. At least nothing I could remember ever having experienced. I could see Artemis again, but she was dressed strangely, and she was wearing a crown. Cassandra was with her, and as I watched, Cassandra reached in and ripped Artemis’s beating heart from her chest. My stomach turned, but the next moment Artemis disappeared, and Silas was there. He was surrounded by his revenants, and then Letifier appeared from the darkness.

My heart was thudding painfully hard, when I suddenly realized that the sound of the air rushing by my ears had changed. The ground was coming closer. This was it. I could see the rocks below. I braced my body as I prepared to be crushed upon the rocks, but the fear was so overwhelming, I screamed—

“*Cali!*”

I opened my eyes. Codsworth’s face swam into focus, his expression confused and terrified.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked.

I looked down and realized I was holding his hand in a vise grip. I was holding so tightly I could see the tips of his fingers had gone white from lack of circulation. My heart was racing, and I was sweating and gasping for air.

I looked wildly around and found myself in the little back room of the magic shop. The hypnotherapist was at my side, speaking soothingly—

“It’s okay,” she was saying. “It’s okay, you’re safe here.”

My eyes widened. Shit. What had just happened? “Um, I think I might have gotten a little too into that,” I said, my face flushing. “Did I—uh—happen to say anything?”

Codsworth shrugged. “I don’t know, you were kind of mumbling, I guess.”

“That’s it?” I asked. I had to be sure.

“You said something about Cassandra,” he went on.

My heart skipped a beat. That wasn’t good. “*Cassandra?*”

“Yeah, who is she?” Codsworth asked.

“No idea,’ I said, feigning ignorance. Even if I wanted to explain—which I didn’t—where would I even begin? “What did I say?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“It didn’t make much sense,” he admitted, frowning. “Something about choosing something? I don’t know. Like I said, you were mostly mumbling.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. As long as what I said didn’t make any sense to Codsworth, I shouldn’t have anything to worry about.

Codsworth pulled his hand from mine and—massaging it—turned to the therapist. “Well, this has been a complete waste of two hours for me. I mean, *I* was the one who made the appointment. You were supposed to help *me* remember what happened to me. But all we managed to do was make Cali babble some nonsense about someone she doesn’t know, and I’m in the same position I was when I came in here—I still don’t know what happened to me last week.”

“It wasn’t completely useless,” the therapist pointed out, looking offended.

Codsworth rolled his eyes. “You’re right. I did happen to remember that my first bicycle was blue with gold sparkles. Thanks for that. But that’s not why I came in here.”

She shook her head again. “You must understand that sometimes it takes a few sessions to break through, and I think Cali helped us make some real progress today. We should explore it further. Why don’t we try again?” she said, holding out her hands for us to take.

I jumped to my feet. “I have to go,” I said hurriedly. There was *no way* I was getting roped into that again. The first time had been a mistake, and more than enough hypnosis for me. “I really shouldn’t have interrupted Codsworth’s session. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” he muttered, getting to his feet. “I’ve had enough. Hypnotherapy isn’t for me. I’ll head out with you, Cali.”

“I really think we should try again!” the woman called after us. “I feel as though we were on the cusp of some very exciting discoveries! For all of us!”

That was what I was afraid of, and I hurried toward the door. Codsworth was next to me, looking annoyed.

“What a joke,” he grumbled, pushing open the door.

“Sorry about all that,” I said, following him on the sidewalk.

He shook his head. “You know, I really had high hopes that this was going to work. *Something* has to, right?”

“Sure,” I said, not sure how else to respond.

Codsworth stopped and turned, looking back at the magic shop. “Maybe I’m being too hasty. Maybe I should give it another try.”

I bit my lip. I wasn’t sure what to do—I didn’t want to encourage him. It was bad enough that it had apparently worked at all—he said he was able to remember something from his childhood. That meant the hypnotherapist might actually know what she was talking about. Which meant that another session with her, and Codsworth might remember what happened to him and the others. And say he did? *Then* what would happen to him? If he was able to remember the details of what happened, what would Xavier, Greyson, and the others do to him?

As we walked down the street, I felt light-headed and nauseous, like I might throw up or faint at any moment. I wondered if that was the aftereffect of the hypnosis, and that was what it felt like after you let someone into your head.

“Listen,” I said, taking a deep, steadying breath, “I know you’re frustrated because you didn’t get anywhere in there, but whatever I just went through was really, really screwed up. I know you want some answers, but I wouldn’t risk going back there. And who knows? Maybe if you don’t push it—you know, just let your mind piece things back together naturally—it’ll happen all on its own. It might just take time.” I was hoping this wasn’t the case. “It was a pretty crazy party.”

Codsworth was looking down, frowning at his feet as he walked, and didn’t argue with me. I just hoped that meant he agreed.

My phone buzzed, and when I took it out of my pocket, I found that my notification screen was full. I had missed a bunch of calls and texts. But this was Greyson calling, and my heart rate immediately increased.

Was it possible he somehow knew what had just happened? Was there some kind of mate connection that allowed him to see what I had seen?

Codsworth looked over at me. “Which boyfriend is it this time?”

I shot him a dirty look, then stepped away from him to answer. “Greyson?”

“Cali, are you okay?” he asked quickly. “Where are you? Where have you been?”

I paused, wondering if I should explain what had just happened. But Codsworth was still too close, and I couldn’t say much in front of him, so I kept it vague. “I was just checking in on Codsworth. You know, seeing how he’s doing.”

“Oh, okay. And?” Greyson asked.

I looked over at Codsworth, who had stopped walking as well and was leaning against a mailbox, scrolling through his phone. “He’s okay,” I said. Then added, more quietly, “For now.” I was hoping Greyson wasn’t going to ask any more questions I couldn’t answer. “How’s the camping trip?”

“Well,” Greyson said slowly. There was a pause. “It’s a work in progress.”

“Okay.” I wondered what exactly he was saying with that long pause.

“It’s fine. I’ll tell you about it later. But I did have another question for you,” Greyson said.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“When were you going to tell me that you were working with Kendall?”

**Episode 5045**

**Xavier**

I pushed a hand through my hair and looked up at the tall trees ringing the small clearing where Greyson had parked the car. The trees looked dark and foreboding against the steel-grey sky.

“Some trip, huh?” Colton said.

I looked over at him. “I don’t know,” I said with a shrug.

“Not having the time of your life?”

“I thought this was supposed to be a weekend with just the three of us, you know,” I said, tipping my chin toward Greyson, who was pacing a few feet away, talking on the phone.

Colton chuckled. “Sure.”

“What?” I asked, annoyed that he was laughing.

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Just tell me what’s so funny.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think you’re pissed because Greyson’s on the phone. I think you’re pissed because it’s Cali, and she’s talking to Greyson and not you.”

“Whatever,” I said, rolling my eyes. I wish I hadn’t started the conversation. I didn’t like being called out by Colton.

I fell silent again, hoping to hear what Greyson was saying—was it something about Kendall? Why would he be talking to Cali about Kendall? What did she have to do with any of this?

Colton bounced on the balls of his feet. “Hey, listen, I’m not going to stand around and wait any longer. I’m going to take off, you two losers can pick up on my scent and catch up.”

And before I could say anything in response, he had stripped off his clothes, shifted, and taken off into the trees.

I shook my head at his impulsiveness, but I was glad to have a moment alone to think. And anything was better than having to talk to Greyson about the dumbass things I’d said when I’d thought I was about to die.

I still couldn’t believe I had opened up like that. Why couldn’t I just keep my stupid mouth shut? Doing that for most of my life had served me pretty damn well. Right up until the moment when I started getting hit with headaches and other weird shit whenever I was around either Ava or Cali.

I rubbed the back of my neck. I knew the answer, of course. I could practically hear Carlson Greene’s lecturing voice explaining it to me—

*Share your feelings, Xavier. It’s not healthy to keep things bottled up inside. They find their way out, one way or another…*

Blah, blah, blah.

On the surface, I thought it all sounded like bullshit, but I had to admit there had to be some truth to it. I wouldn’t admit it to Greyson, but I had meant every word I’d said to him. Greyson had done a good job as the Redwood Alpha. And he’d stuck by Cali, kept her safe when it counted. And if I had died back there, I knew Greyson would have helped Cali get through the grief.

Dammit. It was a lot easier on me when I just hated my brother.

Over in the trees, Greyson sounded like he was wrapping up his call.

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later, love… Yeah. I will. Bye.” He slipped his phone back into his pocket and walked over to where I was standing.

I was expecting Greyson to fill me in on what he was talking about with Cali—like why the hell he was discussing Kendall—but instead of saying anything about the call, he looked around with a frown.

“Where’s Colton?”

“Where the hell do you think he is?” I shot back. “It’s Colton we’re talking about.”

Greyson nodded. “Right. Run off. Well, I guess we should probably join him. I could stand to get a good run in.” And he started to walk toward the trees.

“Hey,” I said, catching up with him. “How is she?”

Greyson raised a brow. “Who?”

I ground my teeth with frustration. “You know damn well who I’m asking about,” I growled.

He sighed. “Cali’s fine.”

I waited for him to go on, which he didn’t. But that was unacceptable. It was a long call, and he’d learned more than that Cali was fine. So when he started toward the trees again, I grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

“I heard you talking about Kendall. What’s going on with her?”

Greyson eyed me warily, then looked down at my hand on his shoulder. “I said she’s fine, Xavier.”

There was a warning in his voice—I heard it loud and clear—but I didn’t release his shoulder.

Finally he shoved my hand away. “What’s with you man?” he asked. “I thought you trusted me to take care of Cali. Or was everything you told me back at the volcano just bullshit?”

“She’s still my mate,” I snarled at him.

Greyson stared at me for a moment. “You want to do this now? You want to talk about this now?”

“Maybe I do,” I snapped, rising to the bait.

“That’s interesting,” he said, his eyes flashing angrily, “because you didn’t want to say a fucking thing a few minutes ago when I was asking about it.” He shook his head, looking furious. “God, that is so typical, Xavier.”

“What’s typical?” I demanded.

“You! Everything about you. Everything has to be on your terms, doesn’t it?” he exploded. “Well I’m sick of it. I’ve tried to talk to you, man. I’ve really tried. I’ve put myself out there, but you always shut me down. So, no, you don’t get to ask me about my mate when you’re interested. I’ll take care of Cali, and you take care of Ava. And by the way,” he added, glaring, “next time you want to take my mate out for dinner, you ask *me* first!”

I stared at him, thrown by the last part. “Is that what this is about?”

“What?” Greyson snapped, his breath coming fast and angry.

“This! All this? Is this because I took Cali out to dinner to talk?”

He eyed me, searching my face. “Is that why you asked her out to dinner, man? To *talk*?”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

He made a noise that was like a laugh, but angrier. “You’re always ready to talk to Cali, aren’t you? Always ready to put your relationship with her above whatever fucked-up relationship you have with me. I mean, I get it. It’s the *due destini*. We all get caught up in how fucking messy it is. But don’t fuck around with me, Xavier. Don’t ever use it as an excuse for lying to me.”

I stared at him, stunned.

He shook his head and shoved past me. “Figure out whatever the fuck you want,” he said bitterly. Then he moved toward the trees and started stripping off his clothes, throwing them to the ground as he went.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had seen him so angry, and I went over what we had just said, trying to figure out how the fuck we’d gotten there.

“What the hell?” I asked, spinning around. “I was just asking about Cali—who is still my mate, for the record. Don’t I have a right to ask about her? To see if she’s alright? Is that a fucking crime now?”

I was yelling, and my voice echoed around the small clearing, bouncing off the trees. I knew Greyson had heard me, but he didn’t answer. He didn’t even turn around to look at me.

“Fuck, man! You’re accusing me of refusing to talk, but here you are, doing the exact same thing. You say everything has to be on my terms, but who says every other time isn’t on *your* terms.”

Still Greyson didn’t answer. I shook my head, furious. My heart was thudding, and blood was pounding through my veins, drumming in my ears, making it hard to hear anything else.

Honestly, I was tempted to just bail. Just take the car and get the hell out of this place and go back to my pack house. Just screw it all—let Colton and Greyson bond. The trip was obviously a disaster—I didn’t know what I was thinking letting myself get talked into going. I should have known it was going to turn out this way.

But as Greyson reached the edge of the clearing and shifted, I hesitated. Greyson was pissed—as angry as I’d ever seen him. That was…new. Greyson rarely showed this side of himself. He was rarely so unguarded. He was always so controlled. He’d been like that ever since he’d come back, and especially since he’d become the Alpha. So seeing him like this—was it possible that what he had just said to me was true?

I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head. Whatever. Even if it was true—and Greyson was right—I wasn’t about to admit it to him. Not after the verbal beating he’d just given me.

Fully shifted into his massive grey wolf, Greyson took one look over his shoulder at me. He crouched, about to take off into the woods, when an anguished howl broke the tense silence between us.

Fear flooded through me. That howl belonged to Colton.

**Episode 5046**

“Anyway, I should get going,” Codsworth said, walking over to me. “I’m going to head back to my dorm.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said. I was still thinking about the conversation with Greyson, but I tried to focus as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. “But, hey, if you need anything—or if you happen to remember anything about the party—let me know, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. You’ll be the first to know,” Codsworth said. “I’ll see you, Cali.”

“Bye,” I said, watching him walk away until he rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. I had tried to be careful with what I’d said, of course, but what I was really hoping was that none of the memory of what really happened returned to him. *Ever*.

As I headed for my car, I turned my thoughts to the conversation I’d just had with Greyson, and the question he’d asked me. About why I hadn’t told him about Kendall.

Even from just his voice, I could tell he’d been upset, but it was strange, because it wasn’t like he was upset with me. Something else had been bothering him.

I wondered if that meant the camping trip wasn’t going as well as Greyson had hoped.

I’d explained to him why I’d spoken to Kendall, of course. I’d reached out to her because Kendall knew about what happened to Codsworth and the others. Greyson seemed to understand that, and my explanation seemed to satisfy him, though he had warned me to be careful around her and not to fully put my trust in her.

“Why not?” I’d asked.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Greyson had admitted. “There’s just something about her. It seems like she’s hiding something.”

I understood what he was saying, and I didn’t even really disagree with him, but I figured I wasn’t risking anything by trying to work with her on the problem of Codsworth and his attempt to recover his memories. Besides, maybe working together would give me a chance to really get to know her. That way, if the UCC program director-slash-vampire-hunter *was* hiding something, I might be able to find out what it was. And I—as the unofficial Redwood Luna—had a responsibility to the pack to uncover the truth about her.

By this point, I’d made it to my car and slid into the driver’s seat. I dropped my bag on the passenger’s side and was about to start the car when I glanced into the rearview mirror.

I froze.

Then I screamed.

Kendall was visible in the mirror, sitting right behind me in the backseat. Her purple eyes almost glinted in the light. She wore a ruby red lipstick that perfectly complimented her pale skin. She was as still as a statue.

*Am I imagining her?* I was still feeling light-headed and woozy from the hypnosis, so it was a genuine possibility.

Then she raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

It was her voice that convinced me that whatever this was—it was real.

I yelped, spinning around to glare at her. “What the hell, Kendall?! How did you get in here?”

Kendall looked at me like I was a fool. “I opened the door and sat down.”

My brain was still a little foggy, but that didn’t make any sense. I was almost *sure* I’d locked my doors when I’d gotten out of my car. I always locked them. Why would I have forgotten today?

“The doors were locked,” I told her. “I always lock my doors.”

“They weren’t,” she said. “The doors were unlocked.”

I thought of Greyson’s warning about Kendall, about how I shouldn’t trust her, and that he thought she was hiding something.

“You could have just waited outside my car,” I said.

“It’s February,” she pointed out. “It’s cold out.”

“You’re a werewolf,” I countered.

She rolled her eyes. “The door was open, and I got in. Are we really going to argue about this right now, Cali? I’m here, okay? Let’s just move on.”

“Okay,” I said warily. “So why *are* you here?”

Kendall held up her phone and shook it at me. When I looked at it, I could see the string of unanswered texts I’d sent her. “*You* texted *me*, remember? You sent me an SOS. Do you know what that means?”

“You could have called,” I told her.

She snorted. “Oh come on, Cali, more of this? I *did* call, and you didn’t answer. So I got worried and came to find you.”

I glanced down at my phone. I was under hypnosis for a long time, and when I came out, I had a knot of missed calls and texts I hadn’t yet looked at. I looked back up at Kendall. “So how did you know where to find me—” I started, but she cut me off.

“What was the SOS text all about? It better have been important. I do have a job, you know. You might not understand what that means, but I’m not really supposed to wander away midday just because I feel like it.”

I gritted my teeth. I really didn’t want to get into an argument with Kendall about this, so I ignored her dig. “I was looking for Codsworth, and I saw him go into that little spiritualism shop over on Mulberry. There’s a woman there who practices hypnotherapy. She specializes in recovered memory,” I added. “I couldn’t get ahold of you—obviously—so I went in after him to drag him out.”

“And did you? Drag him out?” Kendall wanted to know.

“Eventually,” I told her, leaving out the part about falling under hypnosis myself. She didn’t need to know that part.

Kendall thought over what I had said, then nodded. “That’s good. You did the right thing. I mean, it’s good that you got ahold of me, but next time, a little context would be helpful.” She tapped her fingers on the sides of her phone and looked out the window, thinking hard. “I’ll keep my eyes on the others—keep monitoring them—and you’ll let me know if Kurt becomes a problem, right?”

“A *problem*?” I asked warily. “What does that mean?”

Kendall didn’t answer. Instead she pushed open the door and climbed out of the car. Before she shut the door, she leaned in, smiling at me. “And stay safe out there, Cali. Be sure you lock your car next time.”

She slammed the door shut, leaving me alone in the silence of my now empty car. I took a deep breath, then started the engine.

As I drove back to the pack house, I found myself irritated at Kendall but also unsettled. I kept checking the rearview mirror, as though Kendall was going to pop up in my backseat and scare the shit out of me again, or maybe be following behind me on her motorcycle.

But my backseat stayed clear, and I didn’t see her on the road.

Kendall and I both seemed to be on the same page about Codsworth and his quest to reclaim his memory, but beyond that, she and I didn’t have much in common. Kendall was sarcastic and aloof, and I found it hard to talk to her. And Greyson was right—as much as I wanted to fully trust her, there was just something about her that didn’t feel right.

When the pack house came into sight, I breathed a sigh of relief. I still felt light-headed and driving after going through that deep hypnosis was probably not the best idea, so I was relieved to be back.

As I pulled into the driveway, I saw Maya sitting on the porch, and I waved as I got out of my car.

“Hi!” I called to her. I hurried toward the house. I was glad to see Maya, and even more excited to hold the babies again. After the day I’d had, holding those little bundles of happiness would be a nice distraction from everything.

But Maya’s expression hardened as I drew near.

“Hey, Maya,” I said, stopping when I got to the top of the porch steps. “Is something wrong? Did you hear from Colton?”

Maya gave me a cold glare. “What are you doing here?”

I stared at her, baffled. “Um, this is my pack house. Where should I be?”

“Xavier’s your mate, right?” Maya asked.

I frowned. “What? Maya, come on. You know exactly who Xavier is.” She knew he was my mate. Why was she even asking? I shook my head. “I’ve had a hard day. I just want to lie down.” I had no idea why Maya was bringing any of this up, or why she was doing it now, but I really wasn’t in the mood for it.

I went to move past her into the house, but Maya got to her feet, partially shifted, and blocked my way.

“Maya!”

“Why are you letting that bitch fuck your mate?” she demanded.

I gasped. “*What?*”

I had no time to answer or even process Maya’s accusation. She growled and lunged at me. Acting on instinct, I raised my hands up, summoning my magic to protect me. I let loose a blast of magic, straight at Maya.

**Episode 5047**

**Greyson**

*Shit*. Colton’s howls echoed through the cold air. My stated goal to track down Colton had been much more about getting away from Xavier and our train wreck of a conversation, but the plan took on much more urgency when I heard my brother’s sound of distress.

*What the fuck is going wrong now?* There was no way I was going to let something happen to my younger brother. We had to find him.

Xavier must have felt the same way about his twin, because his clothes shredded from his body as he shifted to his wolf form and leapt beside me as I sprinted into the woods in the direction of the howls.

In an instant, it was as if the argument we’d just been having didn’t matter at all. No matter what our differences were, at the end of the day, Colton was a brother to both of us, and we had to find him. On that point, we were in total agreement.

Xavier was sprinting dead out, slowing only to sniff the ground, making sure we were following Colton’s scent through the woods. The woods themselves seemed quiet. Colton’s howls had stopped, so now we had only his scent trail to go on.

As I watched Xavier carefully track our brother, a bitter thought occurred to me: if it had been me who had howled like that—needing help—would Xavier be so quick to help me? Would he be as focused in his search if I were the one who needed him?

As much as I’d like to think so, it was pretty hard to imagine.

I knew the thought was petty as soon as it crossed my mind, but it was hard not to think about it, especially given how badly that conversation had gone, and Xavier’s refusal to speak to me.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the thought. I had to concentrate on Colton.

*What the hell did he get himself into?* I wondered to Xavier.

*I don’t know*, Xavier muttered, *but we need to be careful in here. Colton’s strong, and he’s not stupid, so if he was attacked, it could be a trap.*

*Yeah, that’s true. We need to keep our eyes open*, I agreed. I thought for a moment. *But I can’t imagine who would be trying to trap us. As far as I know, there aren’t any serious threats to any of the packs right now. And who—outside our packs—even knows we’re out here? It doesn’t make any sense.*

*I don’t know*, Xavier said. *But you never know.*

*That’s true*, I admitted. *I guess I never would have anticipated someone like Adéluce either, and that sure as hell happened.*

Xavier nodded. *Exactly.*

Colton’s scent grew stronger, and we slowed our pace as we neared him. He was on the ground in a small clearing, and I looked quickly around, scanning the trees for movement or anyone who might still be around, lying in wait to attack. But everything seemed quiet. The birds were singing in the trees, and a squirrel looked curiously down at the scene from the branch of a tall pine.

Colton—however—was on the forest floor, and when he saw us, he started howling again, apparently in great distress.

Xavier rushed to his side. *Colton! Colton! We’re here! What the hell happened?*

He opened his eyes and looked up at Xavier. *Thank god you’re here*, he said. He struggled to his feet, his limbs shaking. He stood for just a moment before dropping back to the ground with a whimper.

*What the hell happened?* Xavier demanded. *Were you attacked?*

*No, no—no attack. I hurt my right leg*, Colton said.

I looked him over, but he seemed more or less uninjured. No blood, anyway*. How did you hurt it?*

Colton growled as though the pain had just surged. *I tripped.*

This brought me up short. Colton tripped. I glanced at Xavier and found him looking back at me, a questioning expression in his eyes.

Then Xavier looked around. *What could you possibly trip on, man?*

Colton managed to get to his feet once again, though this time I saw that he was favoring his left leg. *I don’t know. A root or a branch or something. It came out of nowhere.*

I narrowed my eyes. *Which leg did you say you hurt again?*

*My right.* Colton looked down, then shifted his weight to his left side. *I mean my left. Both!*

*Uh-huh*, I said, suddenly deeply skeptical. *Must have been quite a root you tripped over. Just came out of nowhere?*

*That’s right*, Colton said.

*And then it disappeared again?* Xavier asked.

Colton looked at Xavier, then at me. Then he sighed and stood straight. *I had to do something.*

*What are you talking about?* Xavier asked. *You were fucking faking it? Everything? The howling and everything?*

*It really shouldn’t matter what I was doing. The point is that I brought you two assholes together, so you’re welcome.*

*We thought you hurt yourself*, I snarled, annoyed at being fooled. *Or you’d been attacked. We came sprinting through the woods to help you, so watch who you’re calling an asshole.*

*I thought the whole point of this camping trip was to bring us all closer. That’s why I came. Remember? I don’t live here. I traveled here to do this, with two screaming babies. I don’t need to be here with you two*, he went on, growing more agitated*. I’m happy spending my time with my mate and my children. But I came out here because of you two*, he said, looking between us.

*What are you—* Xavier started, but Colton cut him off.

*The problem is you two. We can plan as many brother-bonding camping trips as we want, but the only thing that seems to bring you two together is one of us finding ourselves in a life-threatening situation.*

*That was a pretty shitty move, man. Even for you*, Xavier said angrily.

*Yeah, maybe it was*, Colton admitted*. But it’s also shitty that the two of you have been like this since before I left the Redwood pack to be with Maya. And I come back and find that nothing has changed between you two.*

I growled. *Watch it, Colton.*

Colton ignored me. *What the hell is wrong with you? I came all this way with my mate—and the two screaming babies in car seats, I might have already mentioned—and find the two of you still at each other’s throats! Do you have any idea what’s been going on with the Grimcrest pack? Have either of you even asked me about it? Do you even fucking care?!*

I shot a glance at Xavier, wondering if he felt as badly as I did. Wolf faces didn’t show emotion the way human faces did, so it was hard to tell, but I guessed he was. Because Colton was right. His methods for making a point might suck, but he was right.

He shook his head. *I’m going back to the car. I’ll be there when you get back, but you’d better not even think of coming back until you settle things between you. Fucking camping*, he muttered as he headed off.

That left me and Xavier alone in the woods. We were near a stream bed, but it was dry, and there was no sound other than the silence Colton had left.

Xavier shuffled his feet in the dead leaves. *Fuck this*, he huffed, and turned to follow Colton.

But I stepped in front of him. *No, Xavier, wait. Colton is right.*

Xavier stared at me. *About what?*

*I think he’s right about everything. Everything he just said.* I shifted back to my human form.

Xavier hesitated for a moment, then did the same. I took this as a good sign. At least he was willing to have a normal conversation as the same species.

He gave me a long look, then shrugged. “What do you want from me, man? You asked me to come on this fucking camping trip, and I came. It sucks, I almost got burnt to a crisp, but I’m still here. Isn’t that good enough for you?”

I thought about that for a moment. “You know, I really wonder about you, Xavier.”

He gave a resigned sigh. “Wonder what?”

“Wonder why someone as strong and fearless as you are—an Alpha—is too afraid to admit the truth.”

Xavier didn’t answer, but a muscle in his jaw twitched.

“Just admit that you understand that being brothers isn’t just because we had the same shitty father. Being brothers goes beyond that. It means that we actually care about each other,” I said, frustration coursing through me.

“You want me to admit that?!” Xavier demanded, spitting. “Fine! We’re all brothers. We care about each other.”

“Okay?” I repeated, somewhat stunned. I honestly hadn’t expected that to happen.

“Okay,” Xavier said. He seemed to be breathing harder than normal.

“So are we doing this then?” I asked. “Are we finally fucking camping or what?”

**Episode 5048**

The reverberation from my magic strike sent me stumbling back and tripping down the porch steps. I hit the ground hard, and even though the fall knocked the wind out of me, I immediately conjured my sword and shield, trying to keep Maya from getting another strike in.

*What just happened? What did I do to provoke her? She can’t still be this mad about what happened with the twins.*

But Maya was no longer there—it was Ava, and she was pissed.

“What the hell? Ava, what are you doing here?”

Ava said nothing, just rushed me with her claws out. I thrust out my shield to block her. She collided with the shield and let out a frustrated scream.

“I’m so sick and tired of you trying to steal my mate!” Ava hissed. She reared back, opening her powerful wolf jaws. “You already have a mate! Why don’t you spend your time chasing him around and leave Xavier alone!”

Ava lunged at me again, her mouth open to reveal sharp wolf fangs even though she was still in human form. It was one of the scariest things I’d ever seen. I skittered backward to avoid her, but she just kept coming. I screamed, panting hard as I struggled to raise my sword. I didn’t want to kill Ava, but she wasn’t giving me much of a choice.

Suddenly, Maya’s voice cut through the confusion. “Cali, what the hell is happening out here? What are you doing?”

I was still staring up at Ava, who seemed to be speaking with Maya’s voice. My mind couldn’t make sense of it, and that only increased my fear.

*What is going on right now? Is this really happening…or is it all in my mind?*

I didn’t have time to ponder it since Ava wasn’t letting up. She snapped at me again, this time coming dangerously close to my throat. At the last minute, I raised my shield between us and pushed Ava off me.

I jumped up from the ground, still holding the shield out. “Ava, you have to stop this. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. Don’t make me do this! We don’t need to fight! It won’t solve anything!”

“You’ve been with a werewolf all these years and you still don’t think that fighting solves anything? If I kill you, I will finally have Xavier all to myself. I call that a solution. And if you’re so afraid of what I might do to you, maybe you should’ve thought about the consequences before you tried to steal my mate!” Ava shot back.

She leapt at me again, driving me back to the ground. I leveled my shield over myself but had to keep moving it as Ava snapped and lunged for any exposed part of my body.

“Maya!” I called out. I looked around frantically for her. “Maya, where are you? Why aren’t you helping me? Maya!”

Ava was standing over me now, her wolf eyes shining. “Nobody’s going to help you. You’re mine now. And it’s about time I put you out of your misery.”

I yelped as something yanked me back, and then it was Maya standing right in front of me and asking that same question. The one that had started all this. “Why are you letting her fuck your mate?”

I was confused.

*How can this be happening? Why is Maya saying such hurtful things? And what happened to Ava? She was just here a minute ago… Is she gone or…?*

I clutched my head as my thoughts started spinning a mile a minute.

*Am I losing it? Is that what’s happening? Am I going crazy? Is the* due destini *finally making good on its curse? Was Cassandra right? Have I taken too long and now I’m paying for it?*

Maya raised a claw. “Snap out of it, Cali!” And then she struck me on the cheek. The pain was sharp, and I touched my face, expecting to find blood. But my hand came away dry even though my cheek was stinging like crazy.

“I’ll slap you again if you don’t stop this!” Maya said. “You’re out of control!”

I looked up to see Maya hovering over me. She was in human form and had my shoulders pinned to the ground. She was raising her hand as if to slap me again.

“Wait! Stop!” I said, holding up my hands. “What are you doing? Why did you attack me?”

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “Are you serious? You attacked *me.* What’s wrong with you? And why do you have this shit?”

Maya held up a crystal. I remembered seeing one just like that at the hypnotherapist—and then again in my hypnotic dream when I used it to cast light.

I reached for it, but Maya held it just out of my reach and crushed it in her bare hand. She let the dust fall from her palm.

“What the fuck?” I snapped.

“*Me* what the fuck? *You* what the fuck! You’re lucky I didn’t tear your throat out!” Maya shouted. “What’s gotten into you? You better explain—and fast.”

“I thought you were—” I didn’t finish my sentence, knowing Maya would truly think I was crazy if I admitted that I’d hallucinated Ava in her place. It was too messed up to admit. And I still wasn’t sure about exactly what I’d seen.

“That crystal you had, why were you holding it?” Maya asked. “I’ve never seen you wear crystal jewelry before.”

“I don’t,” I said. “I must have gotten it at the hypnotherapist’s, though I don’t remember taking it… It’s so strange.”

“Hypno-what?” Maya said.

“It’s a long story.” I knew that telling Maya that I’d interrupted Codsworth’s hypnotherapy session only to get hypnotized and scrambled myself would only muddy the waters further.

“Cali, you shouldn’t let just anyone mess with your mind—and it’s pretty obvious your mind is a mess to begin with. You should be more careful.”

“That’s not fair!” I said. “It’s not like I intended to become hypnotized!”

Maya gestured to the pile of crystal dust on the ground. “Here’s some advice for you, don’t wear shit if you don’t know what it is. Haven’t you learned anything from, well, *any* of your past fuckups?”

I shoved Maya off of me, still a little shaky from the adrenaline of fighting Ava—or rather Maya as my hallucination of Ava. “I don’t need a lecture right now, Maya!”

“Obviously you do. After all, you tried to level me with your Fae magic—and don’t think I’ll ever leave you alone with the twins again. You’re obviously not in the right headspace for that. What if you have one of these little episodes, and you blast my children? Huh? They’re too young to defend themselves.”

“I’m sorry, Maya. It’s just that I thought you were Ava,” I finally admitted. “And you know how things are between me and Ava. We’re always at each other’s throats. This time I thought she was *really* at my throat—like trying to kill me! That’s why I attacked you. I don’t know why it happened, but it did.”

Maya was scowling. “Are you trying to make me more pissed at you right now? You thought I was *Ava*? How could you ever think anything like that? We’re nothing alike.”

“I know that. I think I must’ve been hallucinating. I haven’t been feeling right since I left the therapist. Maybe that’s why I was…seeing things.”

Maya arched an eyebrow. “I’m curious. What did Hallucination Me say? Anything good?”

I looked back at Maya, suddenly feeling reticent about repeating it. Maya already thought I was crazy and was convinced I was a danger to her children. How much worse would it get if I told her that I was really, truly, seeing things?

“Well? You’ve already let the cat out of the bag. Don’t stop now,” Maya said. “What did I say? Maybe it’ll help shed some light on all this craziness.”

“Well, Hallucination Maya asked me why I let Ava sleep with my mate,” I said. “And you—she—wasn’t nice about it.”

Maya nodded slowly, obviously pondering what I’d said. “And why are you? Letting Ava just steal Xavier out from under you? Doesn’t seem like something you’d stand for, but maybe I missed something while I was away. Are you, like, into sharing him these days?”

“What? No! It’s not like I decided to do this. He broke up with me. She made him do it, and we didn’t know at the time… Then we had to fight her, and then, well, it just kind of…stayed that way,” I explained. “Besides, I’m with Greyson, and Ava is Xavier’s mate, too. She has just as much claim over him.”

I hated to say it, but coming to terms with that part of it was at least moderately helpful.

Maya sighed and helped me to my feet. “I guess I don’t get it. If you want Xavier back, why haven’t you just done it already?”

**Episode 5049**

**Artemis**

I held Celeste’s gaze. I was all too aware of what happened when you broke a Fae promise. I’d only just stopped paying for it. I didn’t think there was any Fae alive who didn’t know the consequences. That was why we all were so reluctant to make them. The stakes were beyond high.

Failing to keep a Fae promise could be devastating, and I could even die if I broke my promise. Though somehow, I had a feeling that Celeste’s consequences would be a fate worse than death. I hoped I would never have to find out if I was right about that.

After all, I’d only just gotten a handle on my magic again after breaking my Fae promise to my mom. I was in no rush to deal with anything like that for a second time, and if I could help it, I wouldn’t. I was sure I’d covered my tracks in my promise to Celeste, but only time would tell.

I smiled coolly at Celeste. “Yes, I know what’s at stake. You don’t have to remind me either.”

Celeste nodded. “Good. So I can expect you to stay in line, then? I wouldn’t want to have to punish you so early in our new…relationship. And of course, there’s still much to do before you’re reintroduced to the court itself. You’ll need new clothes and a bath for one thing.”

Suddenly self-conscious, I lifted my arm to get a whiff of myself.

*I smell…fine?*

“Also, don’t go talking about your relationship with that man to anyone,” Celeste said. “I can only imagine what people will think.”

“Who? Marius?”

Celeste nodded. “He’s not one of those savory types. He’s a bounty hunter.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I was a bounty hunter. There are probably plenty of people who might recognize me and remember all too well what I used to do.”

“And for the right price, they’ll forget those things,” Celeste said. “But we don’t need any rumors going around.”

“But you hired Marius to do a job, didn’t you?”

Celeste waved that off. “Yes, and? I hire gardeners to trim my hedges, but I don’t go out on the town with them. I needed Marius to do a job, and he did it. Sometimes we must stoop into the gutter to take care of dirty business. Marius Raistlin was good enough to use but certainly not good enough to associate with in public. In time, you’ll come to learn lessons like these.”

*No wonder she had no qualms about disposing of Marius like he was yesterday’s trash. She thinks she’s better than him. She has a lot of nerve.*

“He’s a good person,” I said. “Which is more than I can say for some people.”

“Your crush is cute, but it’s not going to continue.” Celeste started heading for the door and then stopped. “I suggest you forget about Marius and whatever feelings you think you have for him. That’s your old life. This is the new one. You’re the heir! It’s time to start behaving like one. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Celeste reached to open the door.

“Wait!”

Rolling her eyes, Celeste turned back to me. “What? As I told you before, I have lots of other business to attend to, especially now that you’re under my roof.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment, my words failing me. I didn’t want to be the heir. I realized I had that in common with Adair, but I needed to play along and stall until Marius could hopefully find Cali. That was my only hope of coming out of this thing unscathed.

“I haven’t been to Fae court before. Are you sure it’s a good idea to just have me roaming around on my own? People might ask questions. What am I supposed to say if you don’t want me to announce who I am yet?”

I winced, realizing that I probably wasn’t doing myself any favors by asking that question. But I had to know how to handle things since I had no interest in blowing my own cover. But it definitely occurred to me that asking a question like that might cause Celeste to change her mind and lock me in this room. Then how would I find a way out of here?

Celeste seemed to consider this. “You have a fair point. You can move around freely, but if asked, just say that you’re my guest. I doubt anyone will ask any questions beyond that.”

“But the court things? I was never in court. I was an orphan and then a bounty hunter. I’m not exactly proper.” I felt so strange about this whole Fae court thing that I would do almost anything to get out of it…but I could tell by the look on Celeste’s face that being unprepared wasn’t going to be enough.

Celeste sighed. “I won’t argue with you there. You are rather…rough around the edges.”

I bristled as Celeste began to circle me.

She took a strand of my hair in her fingers. “But you have potential. I’ll give you that. Under all that grime is a pretty face. Kadmos was very handsome himself, after all. And I suppose the Light Fae was considered beautiful.”

I stood there staring at Celeste, working overboard to hold my tongue despite her comment about my mother.

Celeste suddenly clapped her hands together, startling me. “It’s decided. I’ll teach you! It’s my duty as Adair’s wife, and no one else will help you.” She smiled. “Besides, what is family for? And if you present badly to the court, it reflects badly on me, so getting you up to speed is in my best interest.”

I tried not to take offense to Celeste’s words. “Fine,” I said stiffly. “If you’re going to be the one to prepare me for court, so be it.”

“Wonderful. We’ll begin tomorrow. In the meantime, I’ll send someone to draw you a bath.”

With that, Celeste left; in the resulting silence I felt more alone than ever. I missed home. Missed the pack house. My sister. My mom and Tom. Rishika. Hopefully Marius was doing what I needed him to. If everything worked out, I’d be seeing Cali in no time.

I took a quick lap around the room. I ran my hands down the heavy drapes covering the massive windows and along with the expensive wood paneling on the walls. I went to my bedside table where one of the servants had left me a glass of water and picked it up, sniffing it to make sure it wasn’t poisoned before I gulped it down.

I liked the room, and it sure beat a cell. It was rather proper, well appointed, like a five-star hotel for people with old money. It was easily one of the fanciest places I’d ever stayed.

And then a thought hit me.

*You’re not just staying here. You live here, now. You can’t go anywhere on your own or you’ll break your promise. You’re trapped.*

I gulped. Unless Marius succeeded in finding Cali, I was going to be here a while.

I quickly shook that thought away and reminded myself of Aelwen. I wasn’t going to waste any time finding her. I needed as many allies as I could get in here.

I went to the door and opened it slowly and then stuck my head out into the hallway. Celeste had assured me that I was to take free run of the place, but there was something about not being able to leave a place that still made you behave like exactly what you were—a prisoner. Even if I had a little more rope to work with than the average prisoner.

When I was sure Celeste was nowhere around, I left, shutting the door softly behind me. I started down the stairs, figuring the kitchen had to be on the lower level somewhere.

I was hurrying down a mostly empty corridor, but then I took a turn and walked into a huge room with lots of people bustling about. My heart rate picked up, and I quickly ducked behind a wall.

Even if I were under Celeste’s protection, there was no telling who could be out there and who might want to defy Celeste’s commands if they knew me from before and I’d wronged them in the past.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw someone with a tray of bread in their hands come up a staircase from a lower level. There it was. That was the way down.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I turned to see who it was and nearly collapsed in shock.

“Rishika? What are you doing here?” I choked out. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“I had to see you, Artemis,” Rishika said. “I just had to.”

Before I could respond, she pulled me into her arms, and her lips crashed against mine.

**Episode 5050**

**Xavier**

Greyson and I were running back to the car, and I couldn’t help but wonder if we’d actually made any progress since the trip began. The deep conversations we’d had up to this point could have very well just been a bunch of words, a way to prevent the entire camping trip from falling apart.

But I understood that Greyson was right about one thing—I did bear a lot of the responsibility for the constant friction between us. It was hard to stay on good terms with someone when they were actively sleeping with the woman you loved.

Even though I understood and had long ago accepted the *due destini’s* influence and knew Greyson was good for Cali, them being together definitely didn’t improve the issues we’d always had.

Especially now that I wasn’t with Cali at all.

*On the plus side, I haven’t had a single headache since we left the pack house behind. It’s nice to be able to focus on other things besides the pain. But I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that I’m feeling better since the headaches only seem to happen when I’m around Cali or Ava…which is why it’s such a problem.*

Still, I was enjoying the extended respite from the headaches. It was surprising to me how normal it felt to not worry about what might happen the next time I saw Ava or Cali. Being out here in the woods was the perfect opportunity to clear my head and the first step, I hoped, in resetting my life. And it had felt so right to run through the woods in wolf form, leaving all of my worries in the wind.

I made a quick vow to myself that from here on out, I would do all that I could to make this trip a success. Despite a few hiccups and the whole volcano debacle, it hadn’t been such a bad trip so far.

*I’ll try harder. I have to. I owe it to my brothers and my mates to get the most out of this trip. This is a rare chance for me to spend time with my brothers without other people or pack issues getting in the way. I have to take advantage of it.*

“What do you say we beat the crap out of Colton for faking his injury?” I said.

Greyson chuckled. “He deserves it—though I must admit that his ridiculous scheme worked. You and I haven’t argued for a full five minutes, and that feels good.”

“You’re right. Guess he was on to something after all.”

As we approached the car, Greyson and I stopped short when we saw Colton facing off with a large bear.

Colton was in wolf form and standing his ground, baring his teeth at the bear who was busy rummaging around in the backseat of our car.

Colton spotted us out of the corner of his eye, and his frantic mind link came through only a second later. *Where the hell have you been? This bear is making minced meat out of the car. Don’t just stand there, do something!*

The bear’s massive body was almost entirely inside the car, and it only stopped what it was doing to turn and growl at us, showing us all its sharp teeth and daring us to come closer.

I quickly shifted and returned the growl; I needed to show this bear who was king of the forest. Greyson shifted, and we sprinted over to join Colton. We’d dealt with things far worse than a hungry, nosy bear.

Greyson circled around to flank Colton’s left side, and together, the three of us formed a barrier, all of us moving as one without the need to talk. We knew exactly what to do. In my experience, a lot of what bears did was bluster. We just needed to stand our ground and show that we weren’t about to be bullied.

The bear backed out of the car, rose on its hind legs, and let out an angry growl. We didn’t flinch and kept closing in on it. Our growls easily eclipsed the bear’s, and I could see that he realized he was outnumbered. If he was smart, he’d get the hell out of here before we proved how deadly werewolves could be when provoked.

The bear finally dropped back to all fours, turned and grabbed something from the car, and then took off into the woods.

Colton started after it, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

*No, let him go*. *It’s not worth it. This is supposed to be a chill trip from here on out, remember?*

Colton shifted back and cursed as he stared into the ruined backseat. “But that fucker took my lunch box!” he whined.

Greyson shifted and leaned close to examine the damage. “Forget about the lunch box, Colton. Look what it did to our gear!”

We all took a moment to examine our stuff, which the bear had torn apart and thrown all over the place. It was a sad sight to see and seemed like yet another bad omen for this camping trip.

“So pissed!” Colton said, slamming a hand on the top of the car. “There was good stuff in there. Tasty sandwiches and crispy pickles and lemonade, the works. That bear doesn’t deserve all that fine fare!”

Greyson held up a shredded piece of canvas. “I get that you’re bummed about the lunch, but look at this! The bear destroyed all but one tent.”

Colton sighed and held up a shredded sleeping bag. “We still might be able to use this one.”

“And I guess we can share the tent,” Greyson suggested.

I eyed the one remaining tent and the other sleeping bags. “Sorry, but I’m not about to spend the night cramped in a small tent with you two. Sounds like a nightmare.”

Greyson looked concerned. “Don’t tell me you’re throwing in the towel—especially after your big speech back there.”

I cocked my head to the side. “I won’t lie and say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind on more than one occasion since we came out here. But I’m not going back to the pack house just yet. I told you, Greyson, that we would work things out. We came here to camp. We’re werewolves. We can spend the night out under the open sky. We’ve done that hundreds of times before, why stop now?”

Greyson smiled and nodded. “That’s the spirit.”

“And before you get all misty-eyed, this isn’t about the fact that we’re brothers who need to hold hands and sing. It’s because first and foremost, we’re werewolves. This is our world, it’s where we belong. We can’t let an overzealous asshole bear ruin our plans.”

“We sure can’t. That bear fucking sucks!” Colton said loudly, as if he hoped the bear would hear.

“He better not show his face around here again,” Greyson grumbled. “Can’t believe he ruined all our stuff.”

The three of us fell silent as we went to work salvaging what we could and cleaning up the rest. Then we left the car and made our way back into the woods. It didn’t take long to find a good spot, and Colton began building a fire.

We all sat and stared into the flames, not saying much, and before we knew it, the silence had gone from comfortable to awkward.

*I knew this was going to happen. We have so little in common, at least when it comes to me and Greyson. What the hell are we supposed to talk about? If we’re not fighting, we don’t really have much to say to each other.*

I was relieved when Greyson broke the silence.

“I remember the first time I saw my twin brothers. I was about two, and Silas was holding you both and standing next to a fire just like this. I didn’t even realize we were related until sometime later, but I always remembered seeing the two of you and wondering who you were.”

Colton nodded slightly and poked a stick into the fire, sending up a cloud of bright orange sparks. I watched him do that for a few seconds, trying to ignore the fact that the awkward silence had returned.

Colton was way easier to talk to, so I leaned into that. “So…Colton. Are you, like, Maya’s Lunae now?”

“Very funny,” Colton said, tossing his stick at me.

“What? It’s an honest question.”

Colton shrugged. “No, I’m not, but I wouldn’t have a problem being Maya’s Lunae. Not when my mate is in charge. In fact, I like it when a woman is in charge, if you know what I mean.”

Greyson and I groaned.

“We know what you mean,” I said tightly. “Change the subject, please. Sorry I brought it up.”

Colton shrugged. “I’m not. I’m actually glad you asked. And, since we’re on the discussion of mates, there’s something I just don’t understand. Why the fuck are you still with Ava?”

**Episode 5051**

I was feeling uneasy. I wasn’t in the mood to talk about the Xavier situation at all—and I *definitely* wasn’t in the mood to talk about it with Maya. She and I were still caught in our weird not-exactly-friends zone—and then there was the fact that she’d been giving me a hard time about being around the babies since our brush with Macauley.

“Look, I’m not trying to overstep or anything,” Maya said. “I just think it’s majorly screwed up that Xavier would run back to Ava at the first possible opportunity. And Colton’s furious about it. He’ll never forgive Ava for what she did, and he’s having a hard time understanding why Xavier would want to. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I get that,” I said tentatively. I was happy that Colton and Maya seemed to be on my side in this whole thing, though I did know that the situation was a tad more complicated than they were making it out to be.

“If Xavier had any sense, he’d leave Ava in the dust and come back to you,” Maya said. “Isn’t that what you want?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. More than anything, I wished that Xavier had never left. I’d spent what was probably an unhealthy amount of time wishing that we were still together, and that I’d never been forced to watch him gallivant around with Ava. But as far as I could tell, it was far too late to do anything about that. He and Ava had formed a bond while Adéluce had been pulling his strings, and that bond was real—no matter how badly I wished that weren’t the case.

“Right now, Xavier and I are just trying to be friends,” I said. “It’s not ideal, and it’s a little strange for us both, but that’s where we are right now, and I’ve accepted it.”

For several seconds, Maya stared at me with one eyebrow raised. And then she burst out laughing.

“Friends?” She guffawed some more. “*Friends?* That’s rich, Cali—even coming from you. For a second there, I almost believed you.”

“It’s the truth, I swear. We’re just trying to find a new way to coexist, now that we aren’t…in a romantic relationship any longer. It hasn’t been easy, but we’re doing the best we can. I’m even trying to make peace with Ava.”

Maya stopped laughing. “Wait, you’re being serious? Are you sure this isn’t still the hypnotism or whatever fucking up your thoughts? I mean, you *do* know that you never should’ve allowed this to happen, right?”

“It’s not like it was intentional!” I retorted. “I didn’t give Ava a call one day and ask her to take my mate off my hands. It just…happened. And I’m doing my best to get over it so that I can be present with Greyson.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Well, even if that’s true, you still have to be careful. Hypnosis has a tendency to uncover the things you’ve tried to hide away. Hidden desires. Things you don’t want to think about, or talk about.”

“I don’t want to talk about *this*,” I said moodily.

“Too late—it’s out in the open now,” she said. “And I have to say, I don’t get why you’re being so…accepting of all these changes. There has to be a reason why this *due destini* shit is all coming up now. I’m guessing that your feelings about your new normal are more mixed up than you realize, and you need to sort them out.”

I understood where Maya was coming from, but her sudden interest in the situation wasn’t actually helpful.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” I snapped, my temper flaring. “Run over to the Samara pack house and drag Xavier back here, kicking and screaming? He’s exactly where he wants to be. That’s not something I can fight, Maya.”

“Well, for you, the first step will clearly be admitting that there’s a problem—or rather, that things aren’t as they should be. I mean, there are some really obvious issues that need to be dealt with. Seriously, Cali—can’t you see how weird it is that you *still* haven’t chosen between Xavier and Greyson? Since I’ve been gone, the only thing that’s really changed about that whole mess is the fact that Xavier, for whatever reason, has chosen to be with Ava. And that means the *due destini* conundrum has been resolved.”

“I don’t know that—”

“Seriously, what’s the hold up?” Maya challenged. “*Xavier* was able to make a choice—and he chose someone else. And that means you have two options. You either go drag Xavier back to the life he should be living—and presumably restart the whole ‘oh no I couldn’t possibly choose’ love triangle drama that I know and loathe—or you close the book on Xavier and officially choose Greyson.”

I was starting to feel frustrated. Maya seemed to think she was helping, but I found her form of “help” highly agitating . I *really* didn’t want to debate the finer points of my love life with Maya—especially not right now, when I was fresh off an encounter with Cassandra that had suggested that the *due destini* was still very much alive and well.

“It’s not that simple, Maya,” I said curtly. “Xavier took my choice away, and that messed everything up.”

Maya laughed. “And it wasn’t messed up before? I’m sorry to inform you that your little love triangle is just as ridiculous as it’s always been—maybe even more so, considering the fact that you’ve lost your man to *Ava*, of all people. The only way you’ll actually be able to put this whole thing to rest is if you accept it. Either you’re committed to Greyson, or you’re not. We’re past the point where you’ve got the liberty to indulge in indecision. You can’t have both men, Cali. So which one do you want?”

I was stunned. “Are you seriously trying to push me into making a choice? When you have no idea how complicated the situation actually is?”

Maya groaned. “What I want to know is why you haven’tchosen already. Xavier’s sleeping with the enemy now, and from the looks of it, you’ve given them both your blessing. You need to wise up. If I were you, I’d remove the competition from the equation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded. “Are you actually suggesting that I do something to Ava?”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Maya said flatly. “I’m *telling* you to stop pretending that everything is okay. You can’t be platonic friends with your mate, Cali. It doesn’t work that way. Especially when it’s clear that you still have feelings for him.”

I turned away from her, suddenly wishing I were anywhere else. “You don’t understand. Do you love one of your twins more than the other?”

Maya snorted. “Wow. Nice analogy.” She pushed past me. “My bad. I thought you’d finally grown some balls and were ready to do the right thing and make a choice. Guess I was wrong about you.” She stopped at the door and looked back at me. “Be sure to let me know how the whole ‘just friends’ thing works out.”

I watched Maya go, realizing in that moment that my head was throbbing. I was bone tired, and arguing with Maya had only made things worse. Why *was* she giving me such a hard time, anyway? I really did think that Xavier and I could be friends, and that it was possible for us to move past this quagmire we’d been mired in.

Though perhaps I wasn’t *quite* as certain as I’d been five minutes ago.

*Thanks a lot Maya, NOT!*

I was starting to feel a little light-headed, so I made my way inside, hoping that a good night’s sleep would bring me the clarity I so desperately needed.

Lola stopped me in the foyer. “Hey, what was all that about? What did Maya want?”

I shook my head. “I really don’t want to talk about it—I’m exhausted.”

The concern on Lola’s face intensified. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I will be.”

I gave Lola a weak smile, then turned and headed upstairs. I trudged into my room and collapsed on the bed. I wished that Greyson could’ve been there. Right now, he was about the only person in the world who would’ve been able to make me feel better.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a text. *Hope you three are having a good time! Miss you xoxo*

I sighed, threw the phone onto my bedside table, and buried my face in my pillow. I probably wouldn’t get a reply anytime soon. Greyson was probably somewhere deep in the woods, sitting in front of a campfire working things out. With Xavier.

I groaned and rolled over onto my back.

*I can’t be thinking about him. Not now. Not when Maya’s been messing with my head. It’s Greyson I miss, not Xavier.*

But when I closed my eyes, I couldn’t help but picture the three Evers brothers, sitting around a campfire… And, of course, that image only reminded me of the fact that it *wasn’t* just Greyson I was missing.

I pulled a pillow over my face, growling in frustration. Would this torture ever end? Was I doomed to feel torn between Xavier and Greyson forever, despite the fact that Xavier wasn’t technically even an option anymore?

Gritting my teeth, I tried to think about anything besides Xavier. But the more I tried to get him out of my head, the clearer my mental image of him became.

A noise in my room drew my attention, and I sat bolt upright in bed. My room was pitch-black, but I could definitely see something moving in the corner.

“Who’s there?” I demanded, readying my magic as a twisting shape emerged from the shadows.

It was Ava. She was right in the middle of shifting, snarling savagely as she moved toward me.

**Episode 5052**

**Artemis**

“Rishika! I’m so glad to see you… But you shouldn’t be here! It’s far too dangerous—if they realize you’re not Fae, they’ll attack you.”

I was having a hard time thinking straight. There was no logical reason for Rishika to be here. How had she even found me? This didn’t make any sense.

But despite all my questions and misgivings, the feel of Rishika’s lips on mine and the strength of her arms around me were making me feel like I’d do anything to keep her right here with me. My need for an explanation quickly melted away. Nothing else mattered.

Rishika slammed me against the wall and kissed me again, her tongue warm and insistent in my mouth. *Fuck.* I missed this so much. The feel of her soft skin was like magic underneath my fingertips.

“I missed you so much,” she whispered against my lips.

“I missed you too, but—”

Rishika silenced me with another passionate kiss, and I was officially a goner. I lost myself in the feel of it, realizing in that moment just how much I’d missed her.

Finally, I pulled away and looked her in the eye. “How did you find me? How the hell did you know I was here?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Rishika said. “We’re together again, and that’s the only thing I care about.”

My head was spinning, and I was lost in an overwhelming wave of emotions. I’d missed Rishika so much that I’d gone to pains to avoid thinking about her, just so that I’d be able to focus on my mission to find Kadmos.

But now that she was standing right in front of me…

*This is dangerous. What will Celeste do if she finds Rishika here? She’s so concerned about me upholding a certain image… What would she do if she knew I was in love with a werewolf??*

“This isn’t safe, Rishika,” I said. “You have to go. You’re a werewolf in a Fae—”

“I don’t care, Artemis. I had to find you.”

“How *did* you find me, by the way?” I asked. Then a thought hit me.

*Did Marius find Rishika and tell her where I am? But how could that have happened? I sent Marius to find my sister, not my ex-girlfriend! Although considering the way we’re interacting right now, she doesn’t really* feel *all that much like an ex…*

In a matter of seconds, Rishika and I had reconnected. It was like we’d never broken up at all. And how long had we even been apart?

Rishika pulled back. “Who’s Marius?”

“He’s—uh… Who?” I hadn’t even realized I’d said his name out loud. “I just, he’s a friend. Who I might’ve hooked up with. In my defense, he’s brought up a lot of weird, old feelings, and we’re…still, um, broken up…”

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” Marius interjected. “Or are you too busy sucking face to remember who I am?”

I gasped. “Marius? What are you doing here? I told you to leave!”

Marius smiled. “Since when have I ever listened to you?”

He approached and offered his hand to Rishika. “Rishika, I presume? I’ve heard next to nothing about you—but I’m sure you could say the same thing about me.” He shot me a sly look. “Looks like our dear Artemis has been keeping secrets.”

I was starting to freak out.

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “You shouldn’t be here—either of you! If Celeste finds you, she’ll lock you up and throw away the key, or worse. I don’t understand why you’re putting yourselves in danger like this!”

“Don’t you get it? We’re here for you,” Marius and Rishika said in unison.

Marius moved close. “We’re here to please you.”

He leaned in and kissed me, and I pushed him back.

“Sorry, Rishika,” I said, cringing. “I didn’t know he was going to do that—”

And then Rishika’s lips were on mine again, and I gave in completely, to the point where I didn’t even flinch when I felt Marius’s hand on the small of my back and then, seconds later, the press of his lips against the nape of my neck.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected—maybe for Rishika to tell Marius to get lost—but it wasn’t *this*. And then Marius was turning my face away from Rishika and kissing me like we were the only two people in the room.

My heart started racing as I felt Rishika’s hand slide up the swell of my breast.

“Don’t fight this,” she whispered in my ear. “It’s what you want. What you need. We’re here for you.”

And then Marius was lifting my shirt over my head, and Rishika’s deft hands were busy exploring my chest. I moaned as she kneaded my breasts, then sucked in a breath when I felt Marius’s tongue on my nipples while Rishika tugged my leggings down.

I collapsed against the wall, overcome by the sensation of soft caresses coming at me from every direction. Rishika’s gentle hands slid up my thighs as I stepped out of my leggings and underwear then kicked them away.

“I’ve missed this,” Rishika said, her hands plotting a slow course across my fluttering center, one finger dipping slowly inside as Marius kneaded my breasts in his strong hands.

And then Rishika was spreading my legs wider and her tongue was on me, and then her moist lips and warm breath. Marius’s lips found mine, and he kissed me slowly, taking his time exploring my mouth while his hands began to travel down my stomach.

“Oh my gods,” I breathed when Marius’s fingers slid down and opened me up so that Rishika could dive deeper, her tongue swirling. She gently lifted one leg to rest on her shoulder so that she could plunge farther into my depths.

I felt like I was drowning. Every part of my body was on fire, pulsing and vibrating with pleasure. But I couldn’t say a word, couldn’t make a sound because Marius’s mouth was on mine, stifling everything.

And then I heard Cali’s voice.

“Artemis, snap out of it!” she said. “You were looking for something, weren’t you?”

She was right, but Marius was sliding his pants down his hips, and Rishika was backing away as he situated himself between my legs.

“Remember, Artemis! Remember what you have to do! Get to the kitchen! Now!”

A loud crashing sound jolted me back to reality. Suddenly, I was back in the hallway with Fae hustling past me. Someone had dropped a huge tray of something on the ground and was rushing to clean it up.

My vision was blurry, but I was starting to remember why I’d left my room in the first place.

*The kitchen. That’s right. Just like Cali said. I have to get to the kitchen.*

I started to move across the room, but I was still dipping in and out of the fantasy, the hallucination—whatever it was. I kept blinking back and forth between walking to the kitchen and being pressed up against the wall with Marius lifting my legs and pressing his erection against my center, which was still hot and slick from Rishika’s mouth and tongue. I moaned, wanting this so badly.

And then, all at once, I was back in the hallway and making a beeline for the kitchen. Seconds later, I bumped into someone and was thrown right back into my moment of ecstasy with Rishika and Marius.

“I can’t wait to be inside you,” Marius whispered against my lips.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Please.”

Rishika was running her tongue along the sensitive outer shell of my ear, and I was holding my breath, waiting for Marius’s cock, wanting it. Needing it.

Then I heard Cali’s voice again. “Artemis, go! The kitchen!”

I mumbled an apology to the Fae I’d run into, and realized I’d almost reached the staircase I’d spotted earlier. I had to find Aelwen—that was it. That’s why I was out here in the first place. That was what Cali was trying to make me remember.

I lingered at the top of the staircase, wavering, my vision blurring then clearing then blurring again, and then I was falling, rolling down the stairs, unable to catch myself, pain exploding in my head.

And then I felt Marius’s hard, muscular chest pressed against my breasts.

I gasped out as he finally slid inside. And then, while Rishika’s tongue swirled against mine and her hands caressed my clit, Marius rocked his hips against me, tunneling deeper with every thrust and tugging moan after moan from my mouth.

Marius felt so good inside me, and so did the smooth motions of Rishika’s hand—it was no surprise that I reached climax quickly, throwing my head back and begging for more.

And then it was all over, and I was lying at the foot of the stairs, looking up at the ceiling. I was confused and scared and reeling from the strange phantom orgasm I could still feel tickling between my legs. My head was swimming, my vision blurry.

What was going on? How had I ended up on the floor like this? Had I been poisoned?

**Episode 5053**

**Xavier**

Colton’s question caught me off guard, and for a few moments, all I could do was stare at him, stunned. I couldn’t even begin to think about how to answer him. Nor was I keen on having to defend myself and my relationship, which was exactly what Colton wanted me to do.

I knew that my brother wasn’t Ava’s biggest fan, but I’d thought we’d reached a truce of sorts—at least for the time being. Besides, as far as I was concerned, our mates should’ve been off limits.

*I should’ve said I’d only come on this stupid camping trip if they both promised not to talk shit about Ava. I am not in the mood to defend myself over something that’s none of their business.*

“Be careful what you say next, brother,” I said, unable to keep a certain level of intensity out of my voice. “I might start to take offense.”

Colton looked unfazed by my tone, which wasn’t a surprise. It took a lot to rattle Colton, especially when I was the one trying to do the rattling. And I could tell by the look on his face that he was far from done.

“I’m just trying to understand Ava’s appeal, because I genuinely don’t know what it could possibly be,” Colton said with a shrug. “I refuse to think that you’re so blinded by her looks that you’d ignore…everything else about her. But if it’s not that, then what is it?”

“Well, for starters, she’s my mate. That means something—or had you forgotten?”

“Duh, I know she’s your mate, but I challenge you to give me a reason why you’re with her that *doesn’t* involve sex. I’ll wait.”

I glared daggers at my brother, my frustration building. “I don’t know what your angle is here, but you should stop while you’re ahead. I’m starting to run out of patience.”

Greyson stood up and planted himself between us. “This isn’t quite what I had in mind for our chill evening under the stars. I thought we were done with all the fighting and bickering.”

“We are, but I should still be able to ask Xavier what the fuck is going on while that snake *isn’t* breathing down his neck!” Colton hissed. “What better time to get to the bottom of this mystery than right now?”

I was officially pissed. I hadn’t expected this from Colton, and I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with my twin yet again. I had zero interest in repeatedly defending my choice to be with Ava. I’d always respected Colton’s decisions when it came to love and his choice of mate—why couldn’t he try to do the same for me?

“She’s my mate, Colton,” I said evenly. “I’ve told you that I love her, which means there’s nothing more for you to understand. What don’t you get?”

“I can’t fucking *count* the number of things I don’t get about this situation you’ve got going with her. I mean, shit, Xavier—you actually made her your goddamn Luna!” Colton shook his head bitterly. “There’s got to be an angle to this, right? Is there another vampire-witch riding your ass in secret and forcing you to stay with Ava? Because otherwise, I don’t get it. Just tell me that you’re playing some long con or whatever and you’re actually smarter than this, I *beg* you. And as far as the mate excuse goes, I know better than anyone how that works. I’ve had enough hate sex with Maya to know that you don’t need to add love to that equation.”

“Ava’s not Maya, and you’re not me,” I snapped. “Whether you *get it* or not is totally irrelevant. I thought I’d made that clear.”

“Well, you haven’t, which is why I’m still asking—because I’m still confused. How can you love Ava? Especially when you haveanother mate! I mean, Cali can be a bit…Cali…but she’s still leaps and bounds better than the wolf in sheep’s clothing you’re going to bed with every night.”

I shot to my feet, and Greyson thrust out a hand to stop me from advancing on Colton. Then he turned an annoyed glance on our brother. “Watch it, Colton. You’re taking this a little too far, now.”

*Wow. Never thought I’d be happy to have Greyson defending me from Colton.*

But Colton wasn’t letting up.

“Chill out and step aside, Greyson,” he said. “I mentioned Cali to remind Xavier how freaking wide the gulf is between her and Ava, but otherwise, what I’m telling Xavier has nothing to do with her. At this point, it looks like you three are basically going to always be wrapped up in this *due destini* shit, and I wouldn’t even dream of trying to unwind *that* web.” He turned his attention back to me. “This is about the woman who killed my mother, and the fact that Xavier’s fucking her!”

Now, I was taken aback *and* angry. I couldn’t believe Colton was bringing this up again. But despite my anger, I couldn’t help but feel a dark corner of my being agreeing with him. It was like Colton’s words were tearing open an old scar, and the guilt I’d tried to forget was trickling out. But no matter what, it was too late for regret now. I’d made my decision.

*That may be so*, whispered a little voice in my head. *But, like Colton, you’ll never be okay with the fact that Ava killed your mother.*

But had I already made my bed? I loved Ava again, so the issue wasn’t nearly as clean-cut as Colton wanted to make it.

My anger was still building. “Colton, you’re talking about my Luna. If you say one more fucked-up thing about her, you and I are going to have a real problem.”

“Come on, guys,” Greyson said. “Take it easy.”

I shoved his arm away. “Get him to chill, and I will.”

“No, I won’t chill. We can’t keep ignoring this.” Colton turned to Greyson. “You wanted to have this trip so the three of us could try and get through our shit? Well, this is our shit.” Colton started to pace, obviously dealing with some pent-up anger of his own. “We’re not going to sit around and make s’mores—”

“The bear ate the s’mores,” Greyson reminded him.

“You know what I mean!” Colton said. “We’re not going to sit around making figurative s’mores, and we’re not going to resolve the *due destini*, but I do intend to get some damn insight into why my twin brother has entangled himself with the woman who killed our mother.”

Greyson winced and shook his head. “Yes, but Colton—”

“How would you feel if Cali killed Mrs. Smith?” Colton demanded bluntly.

“That’s enough!” I shouted, stepping around Greyson to get in Colton’s face. “If you say one more thing about Ava, I’m putting you in your place.”

Colton barked out a harsh laugh. “What, you gonna kill me? You’d really choose her over me? Your fucking twin brother?”

Greyson shoved himself between us. “I won’t say it again! Both of you, back the fuck up!”

Colton shook his head. “I will never accept Ava as your mate, Xavier. Never.”

“What are you saying?” I demanded. “Are you really doing this, Colton? Asking me to choose between the two of you?”

Colton’s lip curled. “If our mother were alive, she’d be *so* ashamed of you.”

That did it.

I shifted and lunged for my brother, my teeth bared, my vision tinted red.

Colton shifted too, and we collided in midair and started wrestling, tumbling across the ground, neither of us holding back and both of us trying to draw blood while Greyson roared at us to stop.

I was furious for so many reasons. I didn’t want to lose Colton. He wasn’t just my brother—he was my twin, the one person I’d always been able to count on no matter what, one of the people I cared about most in the world. We’d had each other our entire lives, and I’d never even considered the possibility that I might cut ties with him one day—especially over something like this.

But I loved Ava. It was a horrible feeling, knowing that Colton hated her, but it was becoming clear to me that there was nothing I’d ever be able to do about that. Fighting him certainly wasn’t going to change anything.

And why *were* we fighting, anyway? Maybe it was a form of catharsis—an outlet for all the fear and guilt I was feeling, a perfect distraction from dealing with the pain I felt around Ava and Cali, and the unsettling implications of that pain.

Or maybe it was just plain guilt.

And deep down, I understood exactly where Colton was coming from. I loved Ava, and that gave me the motivation to look past the mistakes she’d made. But Colton didn’t love Ava like I did, so the way he saw it, she was nothing but our mother’s murderer.

Colton got the upper hand and pinned me down, but I quickly wriggled free, snapping at Colton but not making contact.

Suddenly, I found myself ripped off my twin and hurled across the ground.

I looked up to see Greyson in wolf form, growling, stalking back and forth between us and looking really goddamn intimidating.

*This is* over!he mind linked. *We’re here to bond, not fight like wild animals. End this bullshit and shake hands, right now, or I’ll end it for you.*

**Episode 5054**

**Artemis**

I could hear someone talking to me, but I couldn’t bring myself to open my eyes. I was still trying to ground myself, to figure out what was real and what wasn’t. My body was still dizzyingly torn between heated moments with Rishika and Marius and the pain of having just fallen down the stairs.

*But that voice… Who is it? It doesn’t sound like Marius or Rishika. Where did they go? Were they ever really here? And where’s Cali?*

My head was pounding, and I felt a slow warm blood running down my neck. I had no idea where I was. Then, suddenly, I was being lifted up, my feet barely moving to help support my weight as I struggled to free myself.

“It’s all right, you’re all right,” someone said soothingly. “You just had a little fall.”

The voice sounded far away, but it was pleasant, so I allowed whoever it was to take charge. After a while, I finally cracked my eyes open and saw that I was being led into the kitchen.

The person helping me was speaking in soft, comforting tones. I finally began to relax as they helped me into a chair.

“There you go,” they said. “All good now. Relax. We’ll get you taken care of.”

I blinked a few times, trying to focus on their face.

“What’s your name?” the stranger asked. “Are you okay?”

I could barely form a coherent reply—it was like my tongue was too big for my mouth or something.

“Hey, do you have any healing patches handy?” the stranger called across the room. Then she pressed something soft to my head. “You’re going to be fine, I think. You just bumped your head. Do you know if you ate anything strange recently? Something that would’ve made you lose your balance and fall?”

My throat was dry and scratchy when I replied. “The water in my room…”

“Ah,” the woman said knowingly. Then she turned away to address someone else again. “Bad reaction to the valerian root, I reckon.” She turned her attention back to me, a soft smile on her lips. “You’re just having a bad reaction to the valerian root in your water—it’s a sleeping aid. But don’t worry, the effects will fade soon. And we’ll get you some fresh water. I’m sure your mouth is so dry.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a little more grounded, but still quite out of sorts.

“No problem,” the woman said. “I’m just glad you’re all right. What were you doing coming down this way, anyway? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around here before. Are you new?”

I was slowly growing more aware of myself and my surroundings, and I could tell that my head was bleeding, though the woman was doing her best to stem the flow.

“I’m looking for Aelwen,” I said. “Is there an Aelwen down here?”

I was surprised when she said, “Yes, she is. I’ll go get her. Can you hold this?” She brought my hand up to hold the cloth in place. “There you go. Hold it there to stop the bleeding, all right?”

“Got it,” I rasped, wincing when the pain in my head flared. I couldn’t believe I’d fallen down the stairs—or that I’d done it while fantasizing about having sex with Rishika and Marius *at the same time.* If that was what valerian root did, I never wanted to take it again.

“You stay put—I’ll be right back with Aelwen,” the woman said, then she hurried off.

I had enough control over my faculties to hold the towel in place, but my head was still swimming. I watched the woman go talk to someone else, and after a few seconds, they seemed to start arguing. I closed my eyes when the pain got to be too much, focusing on trying to force my throbbing head to calm the hell down.

The woman returned quickly, a glass of water in her hand.

I started to reach for it, but then I hesitated. I didn’t even want to know what would happen if I took another dose of the valerian. Would I have another threesome fantasy and embarrass myself in a kitchen full of Fae? I shuddered to think about what I’d looked like earlier, going through the motions of the fantasy in the real world.

“It’s fine, I promise—nothing but fresh water, with no additives,” the woman assured me. “Aelwen’s on her way, so just drink this and relax. Everything’s fine.”

There was something inherently trustworthy about the woman, so I took the water with a shaking hand and started to drink it. It tasted normal. But so had the first glass.

I was starting to feel better, though I did my best to keep my head still as the woman examined the wound.

“It’s not a major cut, but I’ll bandage and disinfect it anyway—just to be on the safe side.”

“Thanks,” I rasped, taking another gulp of water. I was finally starting to feel like myself again. “I’m Artemis, by the way.”

“Glad to meet you, Artemis.” The woman looked up as someone approached. “And Artemis, this is Aelwen.”

I looked up to see a petite Fae with dark purple skin and dark hair eyeing me curiously.

“Artemis here was looking for you, Aelwen,” the woman said. “She asked for you right after taking a tumble down the stairs.”

Aelwen smiled at me. “Oh, it’s good to see you! I’ll take it from here, Faylen.”

The woman—Faylen, apparently—nodded at us both before she went and rejoined the rest of the bustling kitchen staff.

As soon as she was gone, Aelwen took my wrist in a vise grip, pulled me to my feet, and dragged me into a large, well-stocked pantry. She slammed the door, then threw me up against it.

Pain bloomed through my head, and my usual quick reflexes were nowhere to be found.

“Do I owe you money?” Aelwen hissed.

I groaned and rubbed the back of my head. For a small Fae, she certainly packed a punch.

“Speak!” Aelwen said, slamming her hand into the door. “How do you know my name? Why did you ask for me? I don’t know you! Who sent you? You shouldn’t even have been able to get to me. They don’t let collectors in here! Celeste would never allow it.”

The woman was pelting me with question after question, to the point where I could barely process what she was saying.

“You’d better talk, or I’ll take you to Celeste and—”

“Marius sent me your way,” I finally managed to say. “Said you might be able to help me.”

Aelwen’s eyes went wide, and her grip on my shirt loosened, just a little. “Fuck. Marius? Seriously? Why would he send you to me?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I was hoping you might be able to tell me that.”

But Aelwen was already shaking her head. “Nope. I’m not going to help him. Marius has a unique talent for attracting trouble, so whatever it is that he wants, tell him no. What a nerve! I haven’t seen him in *months*, and he has the audacity to send some stranger to me for help? Nope. Not going to happen.”

I was still struggling to keep up. Aelwen was talking so fast… Or maybe it was just the head wound, making me a little slow on the uptake. But even with the head wound, I was sure I was picking up on a trace of passion and anger in her voice. This told me that there was something between her and Marius—or at least there *had* been.

*What the hell? Did Marius seriously send me to one of his scorned lovers? I’m going to kill him!*

“The nerve,” Aelwen spat, shaking her head. “The absolute nerve! He thinks he can just snap his fingers and summon me to clean up his mess? Fuck no! Not on his life. He can send as many injured Fae my way as he wants, and I’ll say the same thing to every one of you—NO!”

“Wait—have you fucked Marius or something?” I asked, gingerly probing at my wound.

Aelwen glared at me. “Did *you*?”

“Gods, I’m going to kill him.” I pushed off the door and turned to leave. “Sorry for wasting your time. I thought you’d be happy to help me—at least, that’s what Marius implied. But this isn’t turning out the way I thought it would. I never would’ve thought he’d send me to an ex, especially with our history. But then again, this *is* Marius we’re talking about, so I really should’ve known.”

I opened the door, but Aelwen immediately slammed it shut.

*Wow. She really is a lot stronger than she looks…*

“There are only two reasons why Marius would’ve sent you to me,” she said. “One, to figure out if you’re trustworthy, or two, because he already trusts you and you really do need help, like you said. Cut to the chase—which one is it? Why are you here?”

“Um, I think I already *did* cut to the chase,” I said. “I need help.”

“I get that part,” she snapped. “But help with *what*?A job application? Your exercise routine? What?”

I hesitated. I couldn’t say why I was actually here, of course, so I decided to go with what Celeste had told me.

“I’m a…a *guest* of Celeste’s.”

That didn’t really answer Aelwen’s question, but hopefully it would be enough.

Aelwen’s eyes went wide. And then, out of nowhere, she yanked a carving knife from the shelf right next to my head. “You can forget it! I absolutely will *not* be helping you!”

**Episode 5055**

**Greyson**

I made the threat using my firmest, most threatening voice, though I honestly wasn’t sure if I’d actually be able to follow through on it. I had no interest in fighting with either one of my brothers—that was kind of the exact opposite of what I’d been hoping to do on this camping trip.

But watching my brothers try to kill each other had also failed to make it onto my camping to do list. Same went for allowing them to take things too far and do some real damage—either to their relationship or to each other’s skins. And right now, their hackles were raised and they were growling at each other, clearly ready to slam into each other and go another round. If I didn’t do something, things could get very ugly very fast.

I knew that Ava having murdered Colton and Xavier’s mom was a sore spot—duh—but it was an issue I’d always stayed well clear of. At the end of the day, Xavier was the one who’d decided to be with Ava. He was the one who was mated to her—the one who’d chosen her to be his Luna. Xavier had chosen to lean into all those things, and if he was making those choices, I’d sort of assumed that he and Ava must have mended fences. In either case, it was none of my business.

Still, I did have to admit that Colton had a point. And just because Xavier had managed to make his peace with their mother’s murder, that didn’t mean Colton had—or was required to. Far be it from me to tell Colton he was wrong to still be angry about Ava murdering their mother. Marlene’s death had been such a senseless, awful tragedy. It was the kind of betrayal that I really doubted I’d have been able to get over. And, on some level, Xavier had to understand that too. Deep down, maybe he even still felt the same anger as Colton. He had to, didn’t he? Ava’s actions had prompted him to murder her in revenge, after all—another act I was honestly shocked the couple had recovered from.

And when Ava had initially come back to life, Xavier had done everything in his power to push her away. Not that Ava had given him any reason to be conflicted about that—she hadn’t come back any less nefarious than she’d been in her first life. That spell Demeter had put on her to make her look like Cali had caused all kinds of issues for Xavier and me. And the pack, too.

Honestly, I didn’t think I’d ever be able to forgive Ava for the trick she’d played on us. Played on me. But Ava was nothing if not persistent, and in the time since, she’d poured almost all her energy into repenting for her sins—and she’d come through for us, time and time again. She and I would never be friends—of that, I was very damn sure—but I liked to think that she and I had finally reached a kind of understanding. At the very least, I felt like we’d formed a sort of mutual respect, as fellow pack leaders.

But Ava wasn’t just a useful if slightly distasteful ally to Xavier. She was his mate. And, despite the long history of ugliness between them, he’d struggled with his feelings for her for a long, long time. Not that he’d ever unburdened himself to me on that particular issue. But it was obvious to anyone with eyes that Xavier was drawn to Ava.

And, to her credit, it did seem like Ava was a good match for Xavier. Probably. At least now, they’d worked out some of their baggage, and she’d given him a place to belong. He was finally the pack Alpha he’d always wanted to be, and he was doing a damn good job. He was stronger now than he’d ever been. He had a home. People who followed him. In the end, Xavier had everything he’d ever wanted—even if those things probably hadn’t taken the forms he’d expected.

Right?

*Or maybe I’m just being influenced by my need for him to pair up with Ava so he’ll stay away from Cali. So he’ll stick to the Samara pack and stay out of the picture and leave me to have Cali all to myself.*

I couldn’t exactly argue that my view of Xavier and Ava’s relationship was shaped by my own desires. *Due destini* or not, I wasn’t going to stop Xavier from his crusade to keep shooting himself in the foot when it came to Cali. It was all the better for me—just as long as Cali didn’t get caught in the crossfire.

I grimaced at the thought. It sure as hell didn’t reflect favorably on me, but I wasn’t blind enough to pretend I didn’t think it constantly.

*This is bullshit!* Colton growled, his voice booming across the common mind link. *Think about the real reason why you’re angry! Being with Ava is wrong, and you fucking know it!*

Xavier’s wolf growled, his body tensed and ready to lunge. Colton was toeing one hell of a fine line right now. Any second now, he was going to cross that line, and I wasn’t entirely convinced that Xavier wouldn’t go for our brother’s throat. I was ready to step in if I saw things headed in that direction, but I was *really* hoping that we didn’t reach that point.

But Colton wasn’t afraid. Maybe he was too pissed off to realize he was seconds away from a serious fight with his brother. Or maybe he just didn’t care.

*The truth is, Ava always has an excuse for her shitty behavior, and you’re a fucking idiot if you believe her!*

Xavier growled again and lunged.

I stepped between them again, shoving him away from Colton. *Guys, enough—*

But Colton wasn’t done. *Ava always says the right things to you, but when are you going to wake up and realize she’s full of shit? Everything’s always been a game to her, and you’ve always been the prize.*

Xavier lunged again, and once again, I shoved him back. It was harder this time, though, and I could tell he was about to snap.

*Come on, Xavier!* Colton pressed. *Be fucking honest for once and answer this question: are you only with Ava because you’re afraid Cali wouldn’t take you back?*

A ripple of tension slipped down Xavier’s spine before he went stock-still.

*Fuck.*

Colton had gone too far.

I moved to block Xavier again, but this time he sailed right over my head, snarling as he tackled Colton. The two went tumbling in a frenetic tangle of violence, all snarling, snapping mouths and scratching claws.

If I didn’t intervene, there would be blood. Hell, maybe I’d have to be the one to draw it in order to to bring this shit show to an end. Clearly, they weren’t going to shake on it and drop the issue, like I’d suggested. But I couldn’t just let them kill each other. We were brothers, and at the end of the day, nobody should’ve been able to come between us.

So I launched myself into the melee.

*Greyson, get the fuck out!* Xavier snarled as I dragged him back.

*This is between Xavier and me*, Colton added. *I’ll beat some sense into him if that’s what it takes.*

It didn’t escape me for a second that these two were finally in agreement—but I wasn’t going anywhere. As Xavier launched himself at Colton again, I followed suit, slamming into them both, trying to break them apart.

Colton slammed into me with a growl, sending me skidding to the side. Moments later, Xavier jumped onto my back and sank his teeth into my shoulder, deep enough to draw blood. I bucked him off with a yelp of pain. Colton tackled him the second he was off me, and the two kept rolling, Colton’s teeth snapping at any part of Xavier he could reach, and Xavier’s razor-sharp claws digging into Colton’s skin.

*Guys, stop!* I shouted.

I tried to break them apart again, but they simply pulled me into the fight, and for a minute, it turned into a free-for-all. All I could do was give as good as I got. If beating the shit out of them was what it took to end this, then that was a price I was willing to pay—just as long as things didn’t go too far.

*Greyson! Stay the fuck out of this!* Colton snarled, refocusing all his attacks on Xavier. His teeth sank into Xavier’s leg, and I heard a crunch, followed by a pained yelp.

I couldn’t believe what a hot mess my brothers were right now. I never would’ve guessed that they were capable of hurting each other like this. Me? Absolutely. Things were better than they used to be, but in the back of my mind, I never forgot how easy it would be for them to fight me—to the death, if they thought it was necessary. But to fight *each other?* And so fucking brutally? What the hell?

*Was this why Colton agreed to come?* I wondered grimly. *So he could air his grievances about Ava?*

Then a new possibility occurred to me. Was it going to put even more strain on my relationships with my brothers if I didn’t pick a side? Did I *have* to pick a side? I certainly didn’t want to.

I launched myself between them again, and this time, they backed up, panting.

*This is between me and Xavier*, Colton said. *Back off, Greyson.*

*No*,I said. *I’ve had enough. If you want to murder each other, you’ll have to go through me.*

Xavier huffed out a breath. *If that’s the way you want it, then fine. It’ll be my goddamn pleasure.*

**Episode 5056**

**Xavier**

If Greyson thought I’d hold back just because he was inserting himself between Colton and me, then he was in for a rude fucking awakening. I had no problem with the idea of plowing into him or making him into collateral damage before I knocked some sense into Colton. If Greyson was determined to stick his nose where it didn’t fucking belong, then that was on him.

And honestly, it would feel really fucking good to beat the shit out of Greyson. Colton was disrespecting my mate—my Luna—and he needed a lesson in what was acceptable and what wasn’t. He and Maya had up and left to build a new life in Montana. Colton hadn’t been around for ninety-nine percent of the crazy shit that had happened with Adéluce. He didn’t get to judge my choices. He didn’t get a fucking say, and if it took literally beating the information into his thick skull to make him understand that, then so be it.

But I didn’t take any pleasure in beating the shit out of my twin—and that was the difference between Colton and Greyson. Greyson always acted so damn righteous and about everything, like he was a fucking saint and the rest of us were mere mortals failing to live up to his ideals. It was fucking *exhausting*.

Sure, he was my brother. I got that on a fundamental level. And part of me did care about him—not that I’d tell him. But it was moments like this that I remembered why I sometimes couldn’t fucking stand him. And right now I didn’t have it in me to get along with Greyson for Cali. I didn’t need to tolerate his bullshit. Right now, I didn’t have to do any of that shit.

I launched myself at Greyson and tackled him.

*Take that, you sanctimonious—*

Something solid slammed into me, knocking the air out of my lungs and sending me skidding across the ground.

*Colton? What the fuck? Is my twin seriously defending Greyson?*

Colton didn’t give me a chance to regain my bearings. He was on me in a split second, snarling and snapping his teeth. Fury roiled in my stomach. As if coming out here to question my life choices and insult my mate wasn’t enough, now he was siding with *Greyson*?

This was just getting better and better.

I snapped at him, determined to defend myself. I wasn’t just going to roll over and let him beat the shit out of me. I didn’t want to fight Colton, didn’t want to hurt him, but here we were. And I’d come too far and done too much for my authority and my logic to be questioned the way they were being questioned right now. Colton hadn’t been around. He hadn’t seen all the shit I’d seen. And, ultimately, he could believe whatever the hell he wanted—this was still my life. These were my choices. And this disrespect had to end.

I knocked Colton off and slammed him to the ground.

*You’ve gone too far!* I snapped. *You need to knock this shit off. Right fucking now.*

My twin’s eyes blazed with fury. *Like hell I’m gonna—*

*Have I ever said such horrible shit about Maya?* I interrupted. *Huh?*

Colton reared up and snapped at my shoulder, drawing blood. The little shit.

*What’s the worst thing you could even say about Maya?* he demanded. *Unlike Ava*—he said her name with pure malice—*Maya didn’t kill our mother. And not only is she a great Alpha, she’s a damn good mother too. Can you honestly say* any *of that about Ava?*

Anger turned my vision a hazy shade of red, but before I could rip out his fucking throat, Greyson slammed into us again. The three of us rolled across the ground, snapping and snarling at one another.

A memory flashed through my mind: my loss to Greyson at the Lupo Finale. So much time had passed, but it still left a bitter taste in my mouth—along with a desperate urge to put Greyson back in his place, to redeem myself, to claim the victory that should’ve been mine.

But as much as I cherished any excuse to beat the living shit out of Greyson, this fight wasn’t actually about him. Colton was the one who’d started this. He’d put us on this path to bloodshed by spewing mouthful after mouthful of ugly, resentful words about Ava. And as such, *Colton* was the one who needed to be put in his place.

A sense of righteous self-justification guided my movements as I shifted the majority of my attacks toward Colton. He deserved it. He’d *asked* for it, even.

It only took a few seconds for my movements to slow. As angry as I was, this didn’t feel right. Fighting with my twin wasn’t the reason why I’d agreed to come on this stupid camping trip. Hell, if anyone deserved to have the shit beaten out of them, it was Greyson. We were only out here because of him, after all.

But Colton was the one going after Ava. I had to defend her. Maybe if the tables were turned, if Maya were the one who’d killed our mother, I’d have felt the same way Colton did about Ava. But that was all hypothetical—a fantasy. And the reality was that Colton was attacking my mate. There was no world in which any real Alpha would let that fly, and Colton had to know that on some level.

He had to know that this was a fight he couldn’t win.

He could physically tear me apart, but Ava would still be my mate. My Luna. I’d never stop defending her.

Colton could insult *me* all he wanted. That was literally how we’d passed the time growing up, just teasing each other constantly. But this… This was crossing a line. I’d had to live through so much shit—losing my pack, giving Cali up and being forced to push her away… Colton should’ve been supportive. He should’ve had some goddamn sympathy for what I’d gone through. And once upon a time, he would’ve given that to me without hesitation.

But right now, that time seemed like ancient history. Maybe Colton just wasn’t capable of understanding. He’d never aspired to be a pack Alpha like Greyson and me. But now, I had my honor to defend. My mate’s honor, too.

I knocked Colton onto his back and reared up for a brutal attack. One he wouldn’t bounce back from so easily.

I never saw Greyson coming. I was so focused on lunging at Colton, my teeth bared, that I was wholly unprepared when Greyson went for my hind leg. His teeth sank into my calf, and then I was being swung me through the air. For a split second, I registered a tree rushing toward me, and then a sickening crack echoed through my bones and the world went dark.

The sounds of our fight faded away.

“Get up, Xavier,” Ava’s soft voice whispered in my ear.

I frowned in confusion. What was she doing here?She was supposed to be back at the pack house, keeping an eye on things. Also, I didn’t want her anywhere near Colton while he was like this.

Then, before I could form a full sentence, my vision rushed back—and it brought a splitting pain in my skull along for the ride. I stared up at the pine needles in the tree above me, aware of hot blood slipping down the side of my face, cooling against my skin. I was in my human form again. I didn’t remember shifting back.

With a groan of effort, I sat up and looked around blearily. Colton was leaning against a nearby tree. He was back in human form, too. He was also bruised and bloody, and shaking his head dazedly. Had Greyson slammed him into a tree, too?

My older brother stood between us. “Sorry, but I’m not going to let the two of you kill each other.” He turned to me. “Listen, I know things are…tense—”

“Understatement of the fucking year,” I rasped.

Greyson continued like I hadn’t spoken. “—but you and me? We share a *mate*. So if we can find a way to coexist, then there’s nothing in the world that should keep you two from finding a way to mend fences.”

Colton snorted, and Greyson rounded on him, his eyes narrowed.

“You have three options—try to move past this, agree to disagree, or just try to kill each other again. I will not be allowing option number three. So, since you’re both determined to be assholes, I’ll let you fight this out—but this time, you’re fighting with your fists, not your teeth.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“You want to beat the shit out of each other? Fine,” Greyson said. “But there will be rules. No shifting. No dirty shots. And I’m going to referee.”

“What is this? Greyson’s Fight Club rules?” Colton huffed. “Screw that.”

He pushed away from the tree with a groan, and I snorted.

“What?” I demanded. “You afraid?”

He glared. “Of what? You? Ha.”

I stumbled to my feet, ignoring the throbbing in my skull. I balled my hands into fists. “Let’s do this.”

**Episode 5057**

“*Ava?*” I burst out. “What are you doing here?”

More like, *“What the fuck are you doing in my bedroom? In the dark! At night! WITHOUT KNOCKING OR ANNOUNCING YOUR PRESENCE?”*

To say this was a boundary violation would’ve been a massive understatement.

*How did she even get in here? Why didn’t the patrol team stop her? Or any of the people downstairs? Did she climb in through my window like a freaking serial killer?*

She didn’t answer. She just stalked toward me, her fingernails shifted into razor-sharp claws that gleamed in the moonlight that streamed in through the window.

My mouth went dry, and something very close to fear twisted in my stomach. “Ava—”

“I’m here because it’s high time to make one thing extremely fucking clear,” she growled. “Xavier is *mine*. He’s made it clear that he doesn’t want you, but you just won’t stop throwing yourself at him. I’d ask if you have any self-respect, but I already know the answer to that question.”

I frowned. “What—”

“*Shut up!*” she snarled. “No matter how many dirty little thoughts you have about Xavier, he’s *mine*. I’m the one he fucks. I’m the one he makes love to, comes home to. And that’s never going to change. So back the fuck off.”

I stared at her blankly. I didn’t have the first idea how to respond to any of this. Where the hell was all this coming from, anyway? I was keeping my distance from Xavier, more or less. Besides, he was the one who’d asked me on that date. He was the one who’d brought me the hot dog and had decided to figure out how to be my friend. If Ava had a problem with his choices, then she needed to take it up with him, *not* break into my house and come into my room in the middle of the night in an attempt to scare the shit out of me.

*Maybe she’s desperate*, I realized. If she’d already told Xavier to stay away from me, then that clearly hadn’t worked—maybe now, she was trying to scare me off as some kind of nuclear option?

My fear hardened into resolve. Who the hell did she think she was, coming over here to mess with me? Ava and I had never been on the best of terms, but I liked to think—maybe naïvely—that things between us weren’t so bad that she was cool with breaking and entering and threatening me in the middle of the night.

Clearly, I was wrong.

“Ava,” I said, trying to sound stronger than I felt. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, or where this is coming from. Is this about the dinner? We can talk about this if you want, but you need to back off.”

Ava scoffed. “And if I don’t?”

My eyes narrowed. “Then I’m going to have to use my magic to escort you out of the Redwood pack house.”

She threw her head back and let out a cruel laugh. “As if your magic is any match for me. You’re not a werewolf, and you never will be. You’re just a pathetic, weak little half-Fae. You can use all the magic you want on me—hell, you can use it on Xavier—but he’s still coming home to me. And seeing the look on your face while you watch him fuck me is the only thing I want more than your death.”

My jaw dropped.

I launched myself out of bed, readying my magic for an attack.

“Say that again,” I said darkly. “I fucking dare you.”

Ava’s lips twisted into a snarl. “Fuck. *You*.”

Then she lunged toward me, claws outstretched, and I blasted her with all my strength, screaming a battle cry.

It was the battle cry that woke me up—and good thing too, because seconds after I jolted upright, my legs tangled in my bedding, one of the beams in my bedroom ceiling cracked. I screamed again, much less defiantly this time, and covered my head as splinters rained down on me.

*What the heck is going on? Where’s Ava?*

I peered through my fingers, looking around the dark room. There was nobody there. Definitely not the sharp-clawed Luna of the Samara pack, ready to rip my throat out.

*Was that really just a dream?* It had felt so *real*.The fear. The anger. The horror and confusion and determination. I could remember every vicious word Ava had said with perfect clarity. But… I’d just dreamed the whole thing up?

The ceiling beam let out another groan followed by a sharp crack, and another wave of splinters rained down on me.

That, at least, was a hundred percent real. I’d had such a terrible nightmare that I’d blasted a hole in the ceiling.

*Goddamn it, Cali. What have you done?*

The door swung open, and Rishika rushed into my bedroom, followed closely by Lola. Across the house, Maya’s babies were crying.

*Oh shit…*

Suddenly, the threat that dream-Ava presented didn’t mean anything at all. She was made up. She couldn’t hurt me. Maya, however, was very real—and I’d just woken up her babies. How did the saying go? “Hell hath no fury like a sleep-deprived new mom whose babies have just been rudely awakened”?

“What’s going on in here?” Rishika asked, scanning my room for a threat. “Cali, are you okay?”

I looked up at the damaged beam in the ceiling and grimaced. I didn’t *totally* know what was going on, but I sure felt like shit for waking everyone up.

“I had a nightmare,” I confessed. “I…I don’t know why I reacted like that.”

Lola sat on the edge of the mattress and wrapped her arms around me. “It’s okay. It was just a dream. Whatever scary thing happened, it’s over now.”

I wished I had her confidence. My dream had felt like one of the weird hypnosis hallucinations—it had seemed so real, so *plausible*. Until I’d woken up, I’d had absolutely no idea that I was dreaming.

*When is that crap going to get out of my head?*

In retrospect, I deeply regretted bursting into Codsworth’s hypnotherapy session—not that I’d ever really meant to. At the very least, I’d never intended for things to play out the way they had. I’d definitely never planned to undergo hypnotherapy myself.

*What if this keeps happening? What if I stop being able to tell the difference between dreams and reality, and I keep blowing shit up?*

Lola squeezed my hand. “Cali? You in there?”

I straightened, tugging my hand out of her grasp. “Sorry. I…I’m okay.” I looked from Lola to Rishika. “And I’m sorry I scared you guys.”

“Do you want me to stay in here with you?” Lola asked. “Just in case? Jay can sleep alone for a night. He’ll survive.”

I shook my head. “No, that won’t be necessary. But thank you.”

“Are you sure?” She cocked her head to the side, watching me closely. “What did you dream about, anyway?”

I didn’t want to tell her. It wasn’t like it was a dream about a bogeyman, or even one of the many real-life monsters we’d actually faced. No, I’d dreamed about Ava trying to kill me. And that… That hit way too close to home. Telling Lola about the dream would just open up a huge can of worms I wasn’t sure I was ready for. I was still processing the whole thing myself.

How could I even try to put what had happened into words? And then, aside from all that, there was the fact that Lola had been ridiculously vocal lately about her desire for me to kick Xavier to the curb—I just knew she’d add the dream to her “reasons why Cali should become an Xavier-free zone” arsenal.

I was still trying to figure out how to respond when Maya stormed in, a crying baby on each hip, and gave me the death glare of a lifetime. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Lola, good friend that she was, immediately stepped up to defend me. “She’s kind of having a hard night. Can you dial it down, please?”

Maya’s brows rose. “Oh, I’m *so* sorry, but she just woke my children who, up until now, were sleeping soundly. Did I mention how hard it is to get twin babies to fall asleep and stay asleep?” She treated me to another glare. “You’re so goddamn blast happy right now.”

I grimaced. “I’m really sorry. I had a nightmare.”

She snorted and gave me a knocking look. “I hate to say I told you so, but I definitely told you so. You shouldn’t have fucked with hypnosis.”

Suddenly, Rishika and Lola had matching intrigued expressions.

“Hypnosis?” Lola asked.

Red-faced, I quickly explained what had happened when I’d followed Codsworth to the hypnotherapist. “I was the one who ended up getting hypnotized… It’s kind of been messing with my head ever since.”

Lola frowned. “Shit, that sucks. Of course it’s weighing on you—you’re so open and empathetic.”

Rishika eyed the ceiling. “Obviously we have to get this repaired—Cali, I don’t think you should stay in this room tonight. Maybe you should go sleep in Greyson’s room?”

“Or you can bunk with me,” Lola offered. “Jay won’t mind getting kicked out.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I’ll be able to fall asleep right now, anyway… That nightmare was kind of intense.”

“Well, none of us will be getting much sleep with all this crying,” Maya said.

Lola gasped. “Wait! I have the perfect idea—I know exactly what we all need!”

**Episode 5058**

**Greyson**

*I can’t believe this is actually happening. My brothers are about to beat the shit out of each other, and I’m going to referee.*

It was like the punchline to a terrible joke, except none of us were laughing. Dread was gripping my stomach. I didn’t like this. Didn’t want this to happen. Didn’t want to be involved. But none of this was up to me. Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t stop them, and my presence was likely the only thing keeping them from inflicting the kinds of injuries that wouldn’t heal in half a second.

All I could do was stand there while Xavier got ready to fight, shaking out his limbs and flexing his hands in and out of fists.

Colton laughed. “Seriously, bro?”

Xavier didn’t say anything. He simply stalked forward and took a swing at his twin. Colton only just managed to dodge it.

I sucked in a breath. *Jesus. Xavier really is out for blood.*

But Colton wasn’t about to let himself be outdone, especially not by his twin, and he counted with a punch that clipped the side of Xavier’s jaw. Within seconds, they were going at it. Moving in a blur of punches and dodges, tackling each other whenever they could. They were both landing hits, and neither of them showed any signs that the pain was slowing them down.

When Xavier caught Colton in a headlock, I stepped in.

“Easy!” I said, helping Colton break Xavier’s grip on his throat. “Fight it out if you need to, but let’s not escalate into asphyxiation, okay?”

“Fuck off,” Xavier grunted, already in motion again.

“Has he always been such a busybody?” Colton chimed in, dodging and weaving like the headlock had never happened.

“Dude, you have no fucking clue,” Xavier said, panting a little.

I stepped back, rolling my eyes. “You’re welcome, Colton.”

“If I need help, I’ll ask,” he retorted, still locked into the fight.

I sighed. I still wasn’t sure if this was the best solution to the tension between Colton and Xavier, but I didn’t know what else to do. It was pretty obvious that they both needed the catharsis of the fight, but I really didn’t want them to actually tear each other apart.

Colton took a swing, and it landed squarely on Xavier’s jaw. He grunted and tried to return the hit, but he swung wide, and his fist clipped my shoulder.

“Hey! Watch it!” I snapped. “Eyes on your opponent.”

“You’re not my fucking coach,” Xavier snapped, then he took another swing at Colton.

“Well, well you *need* a coach,” Colton told him. “A fucking life coach. Maybe then, you’d wake the fuck up.”

Xavier snarled and threw himself into the fight with new energy. “Why can’t you just be on my side? Why can’t you just realize that I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, either?”

Xavier jabbed at Colton, who ducked and sucker punched Xavier in the gut. Xavier curled forward with a groan, and Colton patted his back.

“No one *ever* knows what they’re doing, Xavier,” he said. “But you don’t see the rest of us shacking up with the goddamn enemy.”

“This shit with Ava is complicated, man,” Xavier said, straightening. “Would it kill you to try to understand that and cut me a fucking break for once?”

“How the hell am I supposed to understand why you’d do something so pigheaded and stupid? I’m your brother, Xavier. What the hell kind of brother would I be if I let you walk directly into the sun? Cutting you a break isn’t going to help you—not if it means allowing you to keep ruining your life.”

Colton threw another punch, a weaker-looking one, and Xavier caught it in his fist.

“You have to let me make my own mistakes, Colton. I let you do that with Maya, didn’t I? And that worked out. You guys are getting your happily ever after.”

“Don’t you dare put Maya and Ava on the same level,” Colton snapped. “They’re nothing alike. You’re talking about the mother of my children.”

Colton balled up his free hand and threw another punch. Xavier caught that one too. They were locked together, and neither twin took the advantage as they pushed against each other.

It was good that they were talking, but I could still see the barely repressed violence simmering beneath the surface. They weren’t done. Not even close.

“Hey.” I whistled to catch their attention. “No talking. Focus on the fight.”

I half expected them to respond with a pair of smartass remarks—if nothing else, they seemed to have found some common ground in their anger toward me—but instead, they actually listened to me. They stopped talking and focused on fighting. I stood back and let them, ready to break things up if things got too intense.

The fight dragged on and on, and slowly but surely Colton and Xavier seemed to be tipping toward exhaustion.

*This might actually help after all.*

Working things out man-to-man and letting their aggression drain out was certainly a hell of a lot better than letting them tear each other apart. As their punches began to lose power and their moves began to slow, I decided to start egging them on.

“Really, guys? That’s all you’ve got? Don’t you two have Alpha blood? What the hell is this pathetic excuse for a fight?”

Both of my brothers threw me dirty looks, but they threw themselves into the fight with renewed vigor, pouring what was left of their rage into the next few sets of punches. My best fights had always happened when I was angry about something—I just hoped they’d run into the usual adrenaline crash sometime soon.

Eventually, Colton and Xavier ended up in another deadlock, sweat pouring from their bodies. After just a few seconds, they pushed away from each other and held up their hands.

“I’m done with this,” Xavier said, wiping sweat from his forehead and breathing heavily.

Colton nodded. “Same.”

They could probably have kept fighting if they needed to—werewolves had a shit ton of stamina, after all—but I was hoping that their choice to stop meant they were letting go of their anger.

I approached them carefully. “Feeling better?”

“Fuck off,” Xavier said with a groan.

“Such a damn busybody,” Colton grumbled.

If that didn’t answer my question, nothing would. Pride glowed in my chest. I’d gotten them to calm down, and for now, it seemed they’d lost interest in killing each other.

“Let’s call it a night,” I said.

The twins nodded.

“For the record,” Colton said, “I haven’t changed my mind.”

Xavier crossed his arms. “Neither have I.”

“That wasn’t the point,” I said. “The point was to get the anger out, and that’s what you did. For now, let’s put this behind us and get some rest.”

And, thank god, my brothers agreed.

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I woke up cold. I’d slept in my wolf form to stay warm through the night, but a rainstorm had come in at some point, and I was soaking wet. It was still chilly and foggy out, and I squinted through the mist until I spotted Colton and Xavier, still asleep in their wolf forms. They’d settled down to sleep with a lot of distance between them—they were both closer to me than to each other—but at least neither one of them had bailed in the middle of the night.

*Maybe all isn’t lost.*

Colton stirred and looked around. *I really need a shower.*

*Finally, we agree on something*, Xavier’s voice echoed through our minds. *You stink.*

*Right back atcha, bro*, Colton retorted.

*I think I saw an inn a mile or two back*, I said*. We could check that out?*

*A mile?* Colton demanded. *For fuck’s sake! You seriously made us sleep outside when there are beds and hot showers a mile away?*

I shrugged, and we all shifted back to human, pulled on our wet clothes, and headed for the car. The ride down to the inn was silent.

As it turned out, “motel” was a better descriptor than “inn”—it was definitely a run-down, shabby-looking place—but it would do for now. We all wanted to get cleaned up, and I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel and go home just yet.

We walked inside, and I headed for the front desk. The inside of the place was…eclectic. Or, you know, whatever the broad term was for “floor-to-ceiling crushed velvet.”

“Welcome,” said a woman who was holding a tray of cigars. “Can I offer you a smoke?”

She held out her tray, and I shook my head, trying to smother my grimace.

*It’s seven in the freaking morning…*

“This place has five stars on Yelp,” Colton said, looking down at his phone. “Looks good.”

“Who’s giving it five stars?” Xavier asked quietly, voicing my own question.

Suddenly, both Colton and Xavier perked up, sniffing the air.

“I smell a vampire,” Xavier said.

I took a whiff and nodded. “I do too. And something else. A witch? Or… Wait, is that a werewolf?”

I’d never smelled so many different supernaturals in one place.

“We love werewolves here,” the front desk attendant said, and we all looked at one another.

Wait, what? What was this place? Had we stumbled across some kind of…supernatural lodge?

**Episode 5059**

I woke up with a dry mouth and a relentless pounding in my skull.

“Guh,” I groaned as I lifted my head, looking around blearily.

*What the hell happened last night?* I blinked, taking in my surroundings with a frown. *And why am I not in my bed?*

I lurched upright, and my headache crescendoed to a sharp pulse that beat in time with my heart.

*Okay, too fast*, I thought, grimacing*.*

A moment later, I realized where I was. I was in the living room—specifically, on the couch. Lola and Jay were sprawled out on the floor next to me. Jay’s eyepatch was on the wrong side, and Lola was…wearing a sequined dress? I couldn’t remember with total certainty what she’d been wearing last night, but I was fairly certain it had been a little more casual.

Then I realized Lola wasn’t the only one dressed oddly. I had a bright pink feather boa around my neck, and there was glitter all over my hands and arms. In fact, as I looked around the room, I realized that there seemed to be glitter…everywhere.

*What the hell happened last night? And why don’t I remember any of it?*

As I looked around the living room, trying to gather enough clues to figure out what had happened, I saw the rest of the pack strewn around the living room, fast asleep. Empty moonshine bottles were scattered across the furniture and on the floor.

*Well, that explains the headache and the gaps in my memory.*

I leaned back against the couch with a groan. Of *course* this had happened when Greyson was away.

Slowly, bits and pieces of last night came back to me. I remembered my horrible dream about Ava. I remembered waking up the babies and almost blowing a hole in the ceiling. Then, after Maya had ripped my head off for waking up the kids, Lola had suggested we all have a slumber party, since the boys were “having their own fun time away.”

We’d gotten the whole pack in on it since, between my assault of the poor ceiling and Maya’s crying babies, nobody had been likely to get back to sleep right away. After a while, someone had broken out the snacks and… Had we sung karaoke?

Yes, that was how the night had started. Popcorn and candy and soda. No liquor, as far as I could remember. But then… Well, at some point, things had clearly taken a turn.

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Ravi and Zainab crooned together into the karaoke machine, serenading everyone in the living room with “All by Myself.”

I laughed. They actually weren’t bad. Who knew they could harmonize like that?

It was well past midnight, but the pack wasn’t letting that slow them down. In the kitchen, Torin was making another round of popcorn while, across the room, Charlie, Violet, and Lilac were competing to see who could throw the last batch into each other’s mouths, and who could catch it. They were all horrible at it, and there was popcorn everywhere.

“We need to sign those two up for *The Voice*,” Lola said, sidling up to stand next to me.

“No joke.”

I smiled, but that smile disappeared when I saw what Lola had in her hands.

“What’s that you’re holding?” I demanded, feeling a familiar kind of dread.

She held up the bottles with a grin and sashayed her hips in a little dance. “I thought we could liven things up a bit—and nothing’s better for boosting a party than Big Mac’s moonshine.”

“Absolutely not.” I shook my head. “We’re not starting this again. This is supposed to be a fun, innocent slumber party, remember?”

Lola’s brows rose. “When did I say anything about this party being innocent?”

I looked over at Maya, who was sitting on the couch with a video monitor on her lap so she could keep an eye on the babies. Despite her fury, it really hadn’t taken long to get the babies back to sleep. Fortunately, though they couldn’t seem to sleep through magic blasts, they apparently had no problem sleeping through loud-ass karaoke power ballads.

“Maya, back me up here?” I asked.

The look she gave me wasn’t exactly friendly, but she did shake her head at Lola. “I’m drawing a line here too. No moonshine tonight.”

“Oh, come on, you guys!” Lola whined. “The babies are asleep, and the night is still pretty young!”

She procured a sleeve of plastic cups from out of nowhere and started pouring drinks. I sighed in defeat as Lola pressed a cup into my hand.

“It’ll help you forget all about your bad dream,” she promised.

“I guess it might help me sleep later,” I conceded.

I took a tiny sip of moonshine, having learned from the mistakes of my past. I still gagged.

*Why is it always moonshine?* I thought mournfully. *Why can’t we party with some yummy wine coolers or cocktails or beers or literally* anything *else?*

Over on the couch, Maya accepted a cup from Lola and tossed it back like a shot.

“Should you be drinking?” I asked unthinkingly, eyes wide.

She shot me a dirty look that was powerful enough to rival even Ava’s glares. “Are you trying to tell me what to do, Cali?”

“Nope!” I said quickly. “Not at all. Enjoy!”

Lola made her way through the room, foisting drinks on everyone, and in a shockingly small amount of time, the vibe of the party began to shift. What seemed like *minutes* after Lola had produced the bottles, we’d left innocent amusement far behind and were well on our way to loosey-goosey drunken fun.

“Now that we’ve got our drinks,” Lola shouted, “let’s play a game!”

I took another sip of moonshine. I had a feeling I’d need it for whatever Lola was planning. “What game?”

“How about hypotheticals?” she suggested.

Everyone crowded around to play. I wasn’t totally thrilled, but I decided to play along. My only other option was going back to bed, and my bad dream was still fresh enough in my mind that curling up alone in Greyson’s bed sounded worse than whatever horrors Lola’s game had to offer.

Charlie started things up. “Would you rather…have arms that could stretch super far, or have a theme song play every time you shift?”

Lola glared at him. “What’s wrong with you? You’re playing it wrong.”

Jay grinned. “If my theme song could be ‘Macho Man,’ I’d take that over stretchy arms any day.”

Everyone went around and shared their preferences, and then Violet took charge.

“Would you rather…eat the same thing for every meal for the rest of your life, or have your pick of protein shakes for every meal?”

We went around the group until Maya suddenly stood. “I have one.”

Everyone was quiet, waiting to hear her hypothetical.

“Would you rather…be best friends with your ex’s new partner who hates you, or be friends with someone you’ve seen naked?”

Maya met my eyes, and my face heated. For the first time that night, it had nothing to do with the moonshine.

*Oh, fuck me. Of course Maya would instigate something like this.*

I’d sort of hoped that since Colton and Greyson were making amends, then maybe, just maybe, Maya would decide to play nice with me. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Haven’t we all seen everyone here naked?” I joked.

“Fair enough,” Maya said. “Someone you’ve had sex with then?” She tilted her head. “Cali? What do you think?”

“I…” I didn’t have the first clue how to respond to that—especially when everyone in the room could tell she was talking about Ava and Xavier. And that was kind of impressive, considering how much moonshine some of them had already thrown back.

“Hey, watch it, Maya,” Lola snapped.

I was still stuck on the hypothetical, though. And with the moonshine warming my belly, I couldn’t seem to stop myself from thinking about Xavier’s naked body.

*Focus, Caliana!*

I shook myself and tried to come up with a diplomatic response. “Of course you can be friends with both of them. We’re not animals. I mean, I’m not. I…I don’t know.” I winced.

*It started out so strong, too…*

Maya snorted. “Right. I’d like to see that friendship work out.”

I gulped down the rest of my moonshine while the group continued the game. My heart wasn’t in it, though, and my mind was miles away.

*Is Maya right? Is it impossible for me to be friends with Xavier?*

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I rubbed my face, trying to swallow past the dryness in my mouth. I needed coffee. And, like, a gallon of water.

I also needed to figure out what the hell to do about Xavier. In the cold light of day, Maya’s infuriatingly logical points were hanging over me like a cloud, and I had no idea what to do about any of the issues she’d raised. But that didn’t mean I was able to get them out of my head.

Fortunately for me, even though I hadn’t been totally into the party last night, the moonshine had definitely helped me sleep. If I’d dreamed about anything, I didn’t remember it.

I started at the sound of someone banging around in the kitchen. Every slammed cupboard door echoed through my pounding head. Wincing, I padded into the kitchen to see what the hell was going on.

When I came in, Maya looked up from a can of coffee grounds.

*How can someone be so loud about making coffee?*

“Oh good. You’re awake,” she said. “I need more diapers. I’m taking your car.”

“I’ll go with you,” I blurted out. There weren’t many things I wanted to do less than go on a diaper run with Maya first thing in the morning—while nursing a hangover, no less—but I didn’t trust her with my car.

“Fine,” she said. “Just hurry up.”

She headed for the front door, and I followed after her.

“Where are the babies?” I asked.

“Why?” she demanded. “Want to wake them up again?”

That shut me up, and I followed her silently to the car. Maya got in the driver’s seat before I could even think about insisting on driving. She slammed the door shut, and I winced when the pain in my head flared.

“Don’t forget to adjust the rearview mirror,” I said.

“I know how to drive!”

“Do you?” I muttered.

Maya had already started backing up when I saw movement in the side mirror. “Maya, stop!”

**Episode 5060**

**Xavier**

I eyed the lobby of the shitty motel we’d ended up in, half expecting a horde of supernaturals to jump out from behind the gaudy velvet curtains at any moment. To be fair, that was actually possible, based on the stench of this place.

*Did my idiot brother just walk us into some kind of trap?* If so, it would be the perfect icing for the shit cake that was this entire camping trip. After the hell I’d endured from the moment we’d piled into the car together, I really wasn’t in any mood to fight vampires.

The desk clerk flashed us a smile. “All supers are welcome here.”

I glanced at Greyson. “What fresh hell have you gotten us into?”

Greyson ignored me—fucking typical—and leaned over the counter. “My brothers and I need a room.”

The clerk’s brow rose, and her lips curled into what looked like a pleasantly surprised smile. I didn’t like it.

*What the fuck is she smiling about?*

“You’re brothers?” she asked, looking us all up and down, one after the other. “Interesting.”

I didn’t know why she was so surprised. Greyson and I didn’t look much alike, but Colton and I were literal twins.

Colton smirked and nodded at the woman. “As you can see, I’m the hot one.”

She laughed, but she still had that look on her face that made my stomach clench. “So, you’re brothers and you want one room. That’s just…interesting.”

I frowned. That was the second time she’d used that word, with that bizarre emphasis. “Is it?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said, waving me off. “We don’t judge. Now, which room would you like? We do have several themed rooms available—”

I put a hand up to stop her. I didn’t want to learn anything else about this place. I already knew too much. “The only thing I’m interested in is a hot shower and a clean bed.”

The clerk studied the three of us for a moment. “For you three, I think I’d recommend the Everest room.”

Greyson frowned, looking wary. “Why?”

“Well, our rooms are all named after different mountains,” she said, “and from the looks of the three of you—and since there *are* three of you—the world’s largest mountain seems like the perfect match. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the snowy peaks.”

*Is that a euphemism?* For what, I wasn’t sure. But there was just something *weird* about this place—something that told me there was a hell of a lot more going on than what I could see on the surface level.

I couldn’t help myself. “Why do you think we’ll enjoy that room in particular?”

She shrugged. “I can just tell. I’m clairvoyant, you know. Now, gentleman, will the Everest room be satisfactory?”

For my part, I was ready to get the hell out of here. I’d been ready to bail on this trip from the moment I’d first sat down in the car—and I would’ve been much better off if I’d flung that car door open and bolted. The trip had been nothing but one epic fail after another: almost dying in a volcano, a bear stealing our food and destroying our camp, fighting it out with Colton, who was still barely able to look at me… And now I was supposed to share a shitty motel room with both of my brothers when I’d have preferred not to share with either?

But before I could protest—or just bolt for the exit and make a break for home—Greyson was slapping his credit card down on the counter. “We’ll take it.”

I grabbed his arm. “Hold on a second. We need to discuss this.”

Colton shrugged. “What’s there to discuss? It’s got hot water. What more do we need? You said it yourself—you need a shower.”

“I said *you* needed a shower,” I muttered.

“Let’s at least get the room,” Greyson said in that annoying tone he only used when he thought someone was being unreasonable. “We can take advantage of the shower, have something to eat, and then decide what to do from there. How’s that sound?”

I gritted my teeth as I turned back to the clerk. “Please tell me it at least has separate beds.”

She shrugged again. “We can provide whatever sleeping arrangements you prefer—singles, doubles, queens, even kings. Whatever rocks your boat.”

I blinked. *What the actual fuck?*

My eyes narrowed. “I don’t appreciate the innuendo.”

The clerk winked. “Sure, you don’t. Oh, I’m just teasing. Here, gentlemen, let me show you something.”

She flipped her screen around to reveal a layout map. As it turned out, the Everest room was actually a suite of adjoining bedrooms, with a large common room between them. Still, I wasn’t convinced this was the kind of place in which we wanted to stick around.

*How the hell does a mountain-themed motel attract a supernatural clientele—supers of all kinds, it seems?*

“Guys,” I began, ready to fully voice my concerns now despite the grinning desk clerk hovering over us. “I don’t—”

Greyson’s phone rang, and he walked off to take the call. Colton made himself busy asking the clerk more about the place and its amenities, and I focused on pretending not to listen to Greyson’s call, even as I slowly made my way closer to him. I could tell he was talking to a woman. A woman who wasn’t Cali. And he was whispering.

My hackles rose. *What the fuck has my brother gotten into now?*

Colton suddenly sidled up to me and handed me a key. “Let’s go climb Mount Everest.”

Across the lobby, Greyson was ending his call.

“Hold on,” I said. I shoved the key back into Colton’s hand and stormed over to Greyson, who was stowing his phone in his pocket. “Who were you talking to?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It’s my business if you’re making secret calls to another woman and breaking Cali’s heart,” I snapped.

Greyson’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “It’s not like that, but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

I wasn’t about to let him guilt me into letting this go. I was still pissed off about my fight with Colton, pissed off that I’d agreed to waste my time and risk my life this weekend. I was *done* playing nice. “Who—”

“*Xavier*.” Greyson shook his head. “I was talking to Kendall.”

That brought me up short. “Kendall? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I want to know.”

Greyson sighed. “Has Mikah spoken to you about her, by any chance?”

I shook my head. “No. Why?”

“Well, he implied that he knew something about her when I last saw him, but he didn’t say much more. And I just don’t trust her—especially now that she and Cali seem to be working together to keep an eye on Codsworth and the other survivors.”

Just like that, my curiosity turned to fury. “She’s—what the fuck, Greyson? Why is this the first I’m hearing of any of this?”

“Because it’s none of your business? Besides, I’m telling you now, okay?” Greyson turned to the clerk as we approached the desk again. “Now, can we see the room?”

I held my tongue as the woman directed us to take the main staircase to the second floor. Once we reached the room, Greyson was going to have to answer for keeping me out of the loop. Cali was still *our* mate. I still deserved to know when she was getting herself involved in supernatural affairs.

*Why didn’t she tell me herself?* Admittedly, our date the other night had been cut short. Very short. Maybe she’d been planning to tell me then, but had missed her chance? Or maybe… Well, maybe she didn’t think it was any of my business.

My fingers curled into tight fists as we headed off. We passed through a large sitting room, and several women watched us go, flashing smiles. I could tell at a glance that they were all supernaturals—a few werewolves, a couple vampires, and even a witch or two.

With each person we passed, I slowly came to a realization that made me frown. *Wait. Why aren’t there any guys here?* The only other men I’d seen since we’d walked through the door were my idiot brothers.

We reached the top of the stairs, and Colton looked out from the second-floor landing. “Oh look, the mountain lounge is adjacent to the lobby,” he pointed out. “I wonder what they’ve got on the menu here. I hope they have a buffet. I love buffets.”

He patted his stomach, and I rolled my eyes.

A minute later, we found our suite and headed inside. I did a double take at the decor. Based on the lobby downstairs, I’d been expecting another velvet horror show. Instead, the Everest suite was filled with what looked like authentic Nepalese decor, and there were huge framed photos of mountain slopes on the walls. In the middle of the huge sunken living room was a sofa, and a gurgling, kidney bean–shaped hot tub.

Oh, and yes—there was more velvet on the couch. The room also boasted a fireplace and a wet bar.

Colton immediately rushed over to a tall metal pole that had been mounted near a wall of mirrors.  “Check this out!”

He grabbed the pole and started twirling around, sending himself flying onto the couch in the sitting area. He scooped up the remote and fired up the huge TV.

“You should scare up some room service while I find a movie on pay per view.”

“Check the news,” I told him. “I want to see if there’s any coverage about the volcano.”

He scoffed. “Hell no. I didn’t come on this trip to watch the news.”

I stalked over and tried to grab the remote out of his hand. Within seconds, we were rolling across the sunken living room, wrestling for control of the television. My hand mashed the remote as I yanked it out of Colton’s grasp, and the lights dimmed. The TV switched to a soaring view of Mount Everest, and a seductive voice emerged from the speakers.

“Welcome to the Everest room. For only $500 per voyager, we can help you reach the top of the mountain. Please select one of our stunning guides—or all of them.”

The mountain image gave way to a montage of gorgeous, barely dressed women, all staring into the camera.

“We’ll make this a night you’ll never forget,” one of the women promised.

Colton snorted. “This place is great. I should bring Maya here.”

“You must have a death wish,” I muttered.

“I’m gonna take a shower,” he said, standing. Then he waved a cautioning finger at me. “Don’t order any guides while I’m away.”

He disappeared into one of the bedrooms, and I rounded on Greyson.

“You’ve booked us a room at a paranormal brothel. Nice move.”

Before he could respond, there was a knock on the door.

I stalked over and whipped it open. “What?”

The desk clerk was waiting on the other side. “I have a message for you—from beyond the grave.”

**Episode 5061**

Maya slammed on the brakes, and I braced myself as the car lurched to a sudden stop.

“What the hell, Cali?” Maya snapped at me. “What is your problem?! Don’t do that!”

“What’s my problem—” I started. Then I pointed to Ava, who was standing right in front of the car.

Or was she?

I stared at the figure of Ava and blinked hard. Was she *really* there, or was this just another manifestation of hallucination?

Why would Ava be at the pack house, of all places?

But then Maya squinted out the window. “Who the hell is that?”

I let out a relieved breath. Okay, if Maya saw her too, then that meant I wasn’t seeing things.

“It’s Ava,” I said.

Maya’s confused expression darkened. “*Ava?* Shit. It’s been a while. Maybe I shouldn’t have stopped the car.”

She threw the car into park and pushed open her door, looking angry. I scrambled out my own door, anxious to intercept her before things got ugly. I knew Maya didn’t know the “new” Ava—they’d never actually met again since she’d come back from the dead—but I also knew that Maya sure had an opinion about her former Alpha’s sister, for better or worse.

“What the hell is your problem?” Maya bellowed at Ava. “Why are you standing there like that? You got some kind of a death wish?”

Ava gave Maya a cool look, then, ignoring her completely, turned to me. “Have you heard from them?”

There was something about her question that made my heart rate shoot up. “What? Why? What happened?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “That’s the point. I have no idea what’s happening because I haven’t heard from Xavier.”

“And what makes you think anything’s wrong?” Maya asked sharply.

Ava looked her over. “Maya. It’s been a while. What have you been up to?”

“Oh, just becoming the Grimcrest *Alpha*,” Maya said. “And a mother.”

Ava grimaced. “Yeah, heard about that. And that you’re mated to *Colton*… Sorry to hear that.”

Maya disparaged Colton every chance she got, but it was clear she didn’t want to hear anyone else do it, and she snarled in response.

I stepped toward them, trying to position myself between the two women. “Sorry, I thought Xavier would’ve mentioned that Maya and Colton were here—”

“So what? I would’ve called her so we could braid each other’s hair?” Maya snapped. “We’re not pack members anymore, and I know who Ava is now. I’ve heard a lot about her since she came back, none of it particularly good.”

Ava raised an eyebrow at Maya and looked ready to leap.

*Shit.*

I took another step between them. “Why are you here, Ava?”

Ava shifted her blue gaze back to me. “Exactly what I just said. I’ve been trying to get ahold of Xavier to find out where he is and what’s been going on, but I haven’t heard from him. I came over to ask if you’ve heard anything from Greyson since they left?”

Maya snorted a laugh. “Yeah, well, that’s no surprise. They’re all off finding themselves in the wilderness or some bullshit like that. There’s probably no signal—”

“I wasn’t asking you,” Ava snapped.

“Hey, everyone just relax, okay?” I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice. “Each of us is a mate to one of them… I mean, um, I’m mated to two…”

Ava stared daggers at me.

“But the point I’m trying to make is that I’m sure they’re fine,” I said quickly. “Wouldn’t we feel something through our mate bonds if something was wrong? At least one of us? And, Ava, I *did* hear from Greyson yesterday.”

A look of surprise flickered across Ava’s angry expression, but it was gone a moment later and her eyes seemed to darken. “What did he say?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug, remembering how tense Greyson sounded about the trip, leaving me wondering if things were okay between the brothers. “He said things were going…okay.”

“They better be,” Ava growled.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Maya asked Ava. “Why are you getting so pissed at Cali? She’s not in charge of Wi-Fi signals in the forest. And this camping trip wasn’t her idea.”

I shot a glance at Maya over my shoulder. I was surprised—but pleased—that she was stepping up to defend me.

“Anyway, if Xavier had any reason to contact you, wouldn’t he find a way?” Maya added. “Or maybe you’re just not as close as you think.” She turned and headed back to the car. “Anyway, it was great talking to you, but we have to go.”

Ava’s eyes flashed dangerously, and—seeing them—I felt my anxiety rise.

“They’ve only been gone a day,” I said quickly, trying to diffuse the situation and some of Ava’s obvious anger. “But listen, if I hear from Greyson again, I’ll tell him to tell Xavier that you were wondering and to give you a call.”

Behind me, Maya had climbed back into the car and honked the horn, making me jump.

“Let’s go!” Maya called, rolling down the window to shout at me. “Shake a leg!”

I looked back at the car, then at Ava. I was a little worried Maya was going to try to run Ava over, but Ava didn’t wait around. She shifted to her wolf form in an instant and leaped away, disappearing into the woods in the blink of an eye.

I turned and hurried back to the car.

“She’s lucky I didn’t flatten her ass,” Maya was grumbling as I climbed into the passenger seat. “I mean, how insecure can a Luna be? I could practically smell it on her.”

Insecure? Ava? It seemed more to me like she was territorial—shocker there.

Maya kept muttering to herself as she navigated the car down the driveway and onto the street, but I wasn’t listening to her. I was thinking about Ava showing up at the pack house, and I wasn’t convinced it was because she was insecure. Her showing up seemed…significant. Like she wouldn’t have done it if she had felt like she’d had any other choice. And something about that freaked me out.

I knew nothing was wrong with Greyson and the others, but…I hadn’t heard from Greyson since the day before.

“Maybe I should try to check in with the boys,” I said aloud.

Maya looked over at me and rolled her eyes. “Well, I’ll tell you right now, if anything happened to Colton, I’m going to kick his ass.”

I smiled, grateful to have Maya’s sass to ground me, and I pulled out my phone. I thought about texting, but my stomach was clenching in a nervous way, and I found I really wanted to just hear Greyson’s voice, so I called instead.

“Cali?” he asked, answering on the second ring. “Is everything okay?”

I let out a breath. “Greyson, hi. I was calling to ask you the same thing. How are you doing? How’s the trip?”

“Um, we’re making some progress,” he said, though I thought I caught an edge to his voice. He sounded stressed, as he had the day before when we’d spoken.

“Progress? That’s good, right?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “We’re working on it. Working some issues out. But…you know how it is. And you know how my brothers can be.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said quietly. “I hope everything’s going okay. Hey, would you tell Xavier to give Ava a call?”

“What? Ava?” Greyson asked, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, she just paid us a surprise visit. I guess she hasn’t heard from him, and she’s worried about him.”  
 “Oh, yeah, sure. I’ll let him know. But right now he’s busy talking to a hotel desk clerk.”

“Wait, what? A hotel?” I frowned, confused. “Why are you at a hotel? I thought you guys were out camping. I thought that was the whole point of this trip.”

Greyson heaved a gusty sigh. “Well, it was, but the camping thing isn’t working out exactly the way I planned it.”

“What happened?” I wondered.

“Ugh, a lot. I’ll tell you about it later. The short version is that Colton demanded a shower, so we stopped at this place, but it’s a little weird.”

“Weird how?” I asked warily. There was weird in the human world, and then there was *weird* in the supernatural world, and I suddenly wondered which it was.

“It’s kind of a brothel for paranormals,” Greyson admitted.

“What?!” I gasped. Okay, so it was *weird*.

Maya shot me a sideways look as she drove. “What? What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said, waving an airy hand.

No surprise, this didn’t work.

“You just gasped, Cali,” Maya said, narrowing her eyes. “What’s going on?”

I didn’t find it funny, but I knew I wasn’t going to get out of telling her, so I forced myself to laugh. “It’s actually kind of funny—Greyson was just telling me that he and the boys checked into a hotel, and it turned out to be a paranormal brothel—*Maya!*”

She had just slammed on the brakes again, causing the car to spin with a loud screech before it shuddered to a stop. “I’m going to kill him.”

**Episode 5062**

**Colton**

I was irritated as hell. All I wanted to do was chill out, stuff my face with some food, and maybe watch some TV. So why the hell was Xavier at the door, chatting it up with the desk clerk?

I wondered if maybe Greyson’s credit card had been declined.

I went to the door and looked between them. “Is there a problem?”

Xavier looked over at me. “I don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

Xavier tipped his head toward the woman. “She claims she has a message for us from beyond the grave.”

I stared at the woman for a moment, then laughed. “Okay. That’s a good one.” But I saw the desk clerk wasn’t laughing along. So—it wasn’t a joke? “Okay, what’s the message?”

She shook her head. “No, not here.”

“Not here?” Xavier repeated. “Where then?”

She glanced around. “You need to come with me.”

“I really don’t think we’re interested in any messages from beyond—” Xavier started, but I put my hand on his arm.

“Hey, it might be fun,” I said lowly. “Let’s go see what she has to say. I want to hear this so-called message.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, but then he nodded. “Fine. Whatever.” He pulled the door shut behind us and we followed the clerk as she led the way down the hallway.

I pulled my phone out and saw that I had a text from Maya. It was from a little while ago, but I somehow hadn’t noticed when it came:

*Met Ava. She’s a piece of work.*

I smirked. I typed out a response: *Do your best to make friends.* Then followed the message with a string of emoji kiss faces.

“Everything okay?” Xavier asked, giving me a sideways look.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket. I didn’t want to get Xavier all riled up talking about Ava, so I shrugged. “It was Maya. She misses me. Who can blame her, right?”

Xavier groaned.

We had reached a door, and the clerk stopped in front of it. She opened it and led us inside, but Xavier and I both stopped in the doorway, looking inside.

The room was dim and bathed in a weird, red light. There was a silver pole mounted in the middle of the room, like the one in our room, as well as a table and chairs. There were long, low couches and a giant bed.

Xavier shot a look at me. “You order a lap dance or something while I wasn’t looking?”

“No,” I said. Then—because Xavier didn’t look like he believed me—I added, “I *really* didn’t. What is this place?” I asked, looking at the clerk.

She waved, motioning for us to come in, and pointed to the table around which spindly chairs were clustered. “Have a seat. Listen, we haven’t even been introduced—I’m Brandi—”

I dropped into a chair. “Yeah, it’s great to meet you, Brandi, but what the hell is this place?” I asked again.

“It’s a private room,” she explained. “We can talk in here with no distractions.”

“Okay, fine. We’re here. What’s this dire message you have to give us?”

She shook her head. “I’m not a medium, so how would I know?”

Xavier frowned. He looked at me, then at Brandi. “If you’re not a medium, then why are we—”

He stopped talking when the door behind us slammed shut. We both spun around to look as music filled the air.

“What the hell?” I muttered, looking around.

Just then, someone slid down the pole in a whirl of color and motion.

Xavier turned to me. “You *swear* you didn’t order a lap dance?”

“I didn’t order anything!” I insisted.

“This is Wycliff,” Brandi said, motioning toward the figure at the base of the pole. “He’s our house medium.”

Wycliff stood at his full height and took a step toward us, extending his hand to shake mine, then Xavier’s in turn. “Very nice to meet you both,” he said in a low, musical voice.

“Yeah, same here,” Xavier said, looking stunned at his sudden appearance.

I had gotten to my feet again, and Wycliff gestured toward the table. “Why don’t we all have a seat.”

Xavier was reluctant, but he finally sat down. I sat next to him.

Wycliff smiled at us both. “Shall we begin?”

I leaned back in my chair with a shrug. “Sure. Go for it, man.”

He smiled again and reached out, taking each of our hands in his. He took a deep breath, and his eyes went slightly crossed, as though they’d lost focus. He hummed quietly to himself for a moment, then took another breath. “This message is from your mother,” he announced. “Marlene is speaking to me now.”

I sat up straight, my heart thudding in my chest, feeling suddenly very, very alert. “Our mother?” I asked incredulously. I would normally brush off this kind of bullshit, but how could the medium have known that our mother was dead? And how had he known her name?

I glanced over at Xavier, whose eyes were fixed on Wycliff’s face.

“What’s the message?” he asked, his voice tense.

Wycliff’s face twisted for a moment, like he was really concentrating, or perhaps trying to hear something very far away. “Marlene is very disappointed in both of you.”

“*What?*” I asked breathlessly.

“She says that you shouldn’t be fighting with each other.”

I squirmed in my chair. I could almost picture my mother admonishing Xavier and me for one of our stupid arguments. She always hated to see us fight.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of sadness wash over me. I guess I hadn’t let myself think about how much I really missed her. I thought of the twins, and how much she would have loved them and how much I wished they could meet their grandmother.

I swallowed hard. “What does she want us to do?” I asked.

Wycliff didn’t answer right away. “You need to work it out. Whatever your differences are, at the end of the day, you are still brothers.”

“Did she say anything about Ava?” Xavier asked, leaning forward.

Wycliff shook his head. “No. All she spoke of was the two of you.”

We were both quiet for a long moment. Brandi was right about the room being private—there wasn’t another sound.

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

Wycliff strained for just one more moment, then let go of our hands and got to his feet. “No. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” Xavier repeated.

“There will be a charge on your final bill for my service,” Wycliff said. Then—without another word—he walked out through the door.

I stared after him, shocked, and a little disappointed. After delivering a message from our dead mother, I guess I expected a more mysterious exit.

“You can further enhance your stay here with our other amenities,” Brandi said in her best sales voice, stepping toward us. “Be sure to check out our gallery.”

Xavier looked up at her, as though he was just coming out of a daze. “Yeah, we won’t be doing any of that.” He stood. “Let’s go, Colton.”

I nodded and followed him out the door. We were quiet as we headed back to our room. I didn’t think either of us had been expecting that when Brandi showed up at our door, and it was clear we were both trying to process it.

“So,” Xavier said, looking over at me, “what did you think?”

I shook my head. “Uh, it was pretty intense.”

Xavier nodded. “You got that right.”

We were quiet again.

“Do you miss Mom?” I asked.

“Of course I do,” he said, his voice tight. “How could I not? I think about her all the time.”

I gritted my teeth. I wanted to grab my brother—slam him against the wall and shout at him, *Then why the hell are you with Ava?!*

But I didn’t. I took a deep breath and tried to remember what Wycliff had said. Whether I totally believed he had been communicating with my mother or not, I knew fighting with Xavier wasn’t what she wanted.

“Do you think Mom really is ashamed of us?” I asked.

Xavier was quiet for a moment. “We’ve been acting pretty bad lately.”

I thought of Ava, and how much I hated her. And now—after I had heard from my mom—it felt like that hatred had somehow grown hotter than ever. I didn’t get how Xavier could miss our mother, but somehow still love Ava.

But she had been clear when she spoke through Wycliff—I needed to figure it out. I needed to find a way to get past this.

I didn’t think that was ever going to be possible, but maybe there was another way. Maybe I could just try to keep my animosity toward Ava to myself.

But I had another worry, and I stopped Xavier just before we reached our room.

“Hey,” I said, reaching out a hand to stop him.

He turned. “What’s up?”

“If it came down to it, would you choose Ava over me?”

**Episode 5063**

I gripped the edges of my seat as panic coursed through me. Maya was speeding down the road—driving way too fast—all the while cursing Colton under her breath.

“Why the *hell* is he thinking?!” she hissed. “He’s not thinking, that’s the problem. When has he *ever* thought? I swear there isn’t one coherent thought in that stupid fucking head of his. What the actual fuck?! Why would he want to stay at a freaking *brothel*?”

“Cali? Are you there? What’s going on?” Greyson asked through the phone. “Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah, fine,” I said, hoping desperately that was the truth. “But you might want to tell Colton to give Maya a call. She doesn’t seem super on board with the whole brothel thing—Maya!” I gasped as she violently swerved the car when a squirrel raced across the road. I grasped the seat with both hands, dropping my phone in the process.

“Hang on tighter,” she snapped.

I reached down and grabbed the phone from the floor. “God, Maya. Slow down, will you?”

But Maya only glared at me.

“Hey, I’m going to have to call you back,” I told Greyson.

“Okay,” Greyson said, sounding worried. “Stay safe. And tell Maya to slow down.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll tell her right now—she always listens to me. And don’t forget to tell Xavier to call Ava,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, I will. Talk soon.”  
 I ended the call and looked over at Maya, thinking hard about what I could say to placate her. “Listen, I know this brothel thing sounds bad, but come on. You and I both know none of the boys would ever do anything. They’re our mates. You were just saying how insecure Ava is, and now…”

Maya glowered at me again. “I just don’t want my kids to know their father spent the night in a brothel. Not while he was mated to their mother, at least.”

“I know, I know,” I said, trying to talk her down. “But you know Colton would never do anything to hurt you.”

She shook her head. “We both know Colton, Cali. So we both know that he’s not really a thinker. He’s got a way of making pretty stupid mistakes.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“So why should I give him the chance to screw things up?” she went on.

I thought about this for a moment. “You know, I wonder if your reaction is maybe more about our run-in with Ava.”

“What are you talking about?” Maya snapped.

I sighed. “I just think you should take a minute and remember that Colton loves you. And that your babies need diapers. That’s why we’re out here, remember?”

Maya slammed on the brakes again, but this time I was more prepared. I braced my feet against the floor and managed not to fly forward.

“You’re more annoying than Teddy, I forgot,” Maya grumbled. But then she glanced into the rearview mirror, turned the car around on the empty road, and started back the way we had come.

I breathed out a sigh of relief as she headed toward the store once again, now driving at a more responsible speed.

I leaned back in my seat. “Hey, thanks for your help with Ava back there.”

She gave me a withering look. “Just because I came to your defense doesn’t mean I like you any more than before.”

I smiled to myself. “Yeah, but you still came to my defense.”

We were both quiet for a moment as Maya drove.

“I just don’t get it,” she finally said, breaking the silence in the car.

“Don’t get what?” I asked, looking over at her.

“I don’t get what Xavier sees in Ava. I mean, yeah, okay, she’s hot or whatever, but she’s rude, dismissive, annoying as fuck, and damn lucky I didn’t run her over when I had the chance.”

I thought about what I knew about Ava. I knew she was strong, and a good fighter. I knew she and Xavier had a long history together—they had grown up together. I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve asked myself that same question a million times, but—as much as it hurts me to acknowledge it—Xavier does love her. Warts and all.”

Maya laughed nastily. “Mostly warts.”

We made it to the store and headed inside. Maya went straight for the baby section, but I got distracted by the snack display up front. They had some imported candy that looked interesting, and I thought I might pick something up for Torin. He loved to try new things, which was fairly easy, as everything in the human world was pretty new to him. But he loved candy, and I saw some brands I didn’t think he had tried.

I was looking through them, trying to make my selection, when the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. There was something—or someone—behind me, staring at me. I could sense it.

I turned and gasped. “Kendall! What are you doing here?”’

Kendall raised an elegant eyebrow. “Well, Cali, what does one usually do at a store?” And she held up a basket of groceries.

“Right—yeah—yes, I know. Shopping. Of course,” I stammered, feeling like an idiot. “But it’s kind of strange that we keep running into each other, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know about that. Coincidences happen all the time,” Kendall said evenly.

“Sure,” I agreed. I glanced over her shoulder and saw Maya a little way back, watching us, a curious look on her face. I lowered my voice. “Is everything okay? Any problems with any of Chessa’s victims?”

“No,” Kendall said, her voice a normal volume. She didn’t seem concerned about being overheard. “So far so good. But I hope you’re still checking on Codsworth.”

“I am,” I said. “And I’ll keep checking.”

She nodded and glanced around. “Where’s Greyson?”

I frowned, slightly thrown by the question, and I wondered why Kendall was asking. “Um, he’s not here.”

“I can see that. Where is he?” she asked.

“Camping,” I said. “He went with his brothers.”

Kendall looked astonished. “Really?”

“That shocks you?” I asked. “That he has brothers?”

“No, that he went camping. I guess I’m surprised that you would go for that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked, confused.

Kendall shrugged. “I just thought Greyson wouldn’t run off to go camping so soon after he was injured.”

That hadn’t been the answer I’d been expecting. “I didn’t know you were so concerned about Greyson.”

Kendall looked at me for a moment, then took the snack pie from my hand and replaced it on the shelf behind me. “You don’t want that. It’s terrible. Way too sweet. No balance. Trust me.”

*Trust me.*

*Trust me.*

*Trust me.*

I thought of how Greyson had just told me—specifically—*not* to trust Kendall. We knew almost nothing about her—except that she was a Rogue.

Kendall looked for a moment, then handed me another package, this one a bag of crisp rice chips. “These are much better.”

I took the bag automatically, though I was no longer thinking of snacks. “Why are you so worried about my mate, Kendall?”

She shrugged casually. “He’s the Redwood Alpha, and he proved himself to be helpful when it came to Macauley.” She gave me a small smile. “You never know when something like that might pop up again, do you?”

“I guess not,” I muttered. My cheeks felt hot, and I turned back to the snacks, trying to busy myself with making a selection. But I wasn’t thinking about what Torin would like—I was trying to figure out what Kendall’s interest in Greyson was really about. There was more to it than what had happened with Chessa and Macauley, because Greyson hadn’t been the only person who helped defeat Chessa or who helped to capture Macauley. But even still, Greyson was all Kendall ever asked about. “I didn’t know you thought of Greyson that way.”

Kendall tipped her head to the side, giving me a searching look. “And what way would that be, Cali?”

My palms were starting to sweat. Kendall just had a way of making me feel deeply uncomfortable. “You know,” I said, fighting to sound casual. “Like a friend.”

“A *friend*,” she repeated back to me. It sounded strange the way she said it.

“Are you and Greyson friends?” I asked, my voice sounding strangely small.

“Why would you think that?” she asked.

“I—I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I guess I wondered if there was another reason you’re sticking around here. I mean, Chessa’s dead, Macauley’s been caught. What more is there to do, right?”

Kendall didn’t answer. She just stared at me.

I shifted my weight between my feet. I felt unnerved by her purple eyes. “I just wondered…” I cleared my throat.

“Wondered what?” she asked.

I plucked up the very last of my courage. “I was just wondering if there was some other reason you seem to care so much about Greyson.”

**Episode 5064**

**Xavier**

I laughed as I looked up at Colton. “Uh, sorry man, but if it comes down to you or Ava, I’m going to choose my hot mate every time.”

I started for the door of our room, but Colton stepped in front of me, blocking me. His expression was uncharacteristically grave.

“I’m being serious, Xavier,” he said.

“Serious about what? What are you talking about?” I asked.

“All that stuff Mom said about us working things out. It made me realize that I needed to figure this shit out,” he said, looking tense.

“Okay,” I said slowly.

Colton shook his head. “I’m not going to lie to you, Xavier. I’m not going to tell you that I don’t have any more problems with Ava now—nothing Mom could say would change that—but I’m willing to accept the situation. As long as it doesn’t cost me my relationship with you.”

“Colton—” I started, but he didn’t let me finish.

“Look, I get it,” he said. “I know how strong the mate bond is. I mean, look at me. I fought like hell to stay away from Maya, and look where I am now. I love her, and I have two beautiful babies to show for it. And I want you to be part of their lives, man. I want them to know their uncle. But if Ava tears you away from that—”

I’d had enough. I pushed Colton against the wall, pinning my arm against his neck. “*Stop.* Just stop, Colton. You’re being a fucking idiot, man. You say you don’t want to lose me, but you’re the one who’s giving ultimatums. You’re the one who’s making it impossible. Why can’t I have both you *and* Ava in my life? Just because she’s my mate—and she *is* my mate—doesn’t mean that you’re not my brother anymore.”

Colton’s eyes were wide with surprise, but after a moment he nodded. “Yeah, I guess that’s good to hear.”

“But—I’m telling you right now—you’re going to have to back off Ava. You hear me? I’m not going to listen to you bitch about her to my face. Even if you’re pretending like you’re talking under your breath. I’m warning you now, man, I’m not going to put up with that. You wouldn’t let someone talk shit about Maya, and I won’t let you do that to Ava. You have to be cool.” I gave him a long look. “Can you do that?”

Colton nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I’ll try. How’s that for a starter?”

I took my arm away from his throat and took a step back. “I guess it’s a start. And I’ll take it—for now.”

I knew that Colton was never going to like Ava—and Ava was never going to like Colton, either—but I was hoping that maybe we could reach a peace agreement. I was hoping they could learn to tolerate each other.

“All right,” I said as a feeling of relief settled over me. “Well, I’m glad we worked that out.”

“Yeah, man. I am, too.”

I grinned at my brother. “And I have to say—you have a surprisingly good left hook. You must have been working on that.”

Colton smiled back. “Yeah, yours isn’t so bad either. Maybe that’s the one useful thing we learned from Silas.”

I rolled my eyes and gave Colton a shove, pushing him back into the room. When I stepped in after him, I saw that Greyson was inside, and he was holding a towel, drying his light hair.

“Hey,” he said, looking at us curiously.

Colton nodded, then dove into the seating pit in the center of the room. “So, what are we ordering?”

Greyson stopped drying his hair and fixed Colton with a stern gaze. “We’re not ordering any guides, Colton.”

Colton snorted a laugh. “I know that.”

“Then what did you—”

“I was thinking about ordering a pizza, man,” Colton chuckled. “Maybe some wings. A couple of six-packs. What were you thinking about, Greyson?”

“So does that mean we’re actually staying here?” I asked. “For the night?”

“Come on, bro,” Colton wheedled. “Are you telling me this is worse than the alternative? Being out in the woods with one tent, no food, no lights, no hot water? I mean—come on. The choice is obvious.”

I glanced over at Greyson, who just shrugged.

“Fine, whatever. It’s fine with me,” I muttered. This wasn’t my first choice, but Colton was right—it was probably better than freezing our asses off in the woods without anything to eat. Besides, at least this place had separate bedrooms.

“Great,” Colton said, pulling up the onscreen menu. He started flipping through it, pointing out the things that looked good to him. “Hey, how about we order some apps. This artichoke dip sounds good to me. And I could murder some egg rolls.”

Greyson stepped over to me. “So, what happened?”

“What?” I asked.

He frowned. “Where were you?”

I hesitated. I was still thinking about what Wycliff had told us and trying to come to terms with the meaning of my mother’s message to me. I felt really guilty that things with Colton had gotten so bad that my mother felt like she had to reach out to us from beyond the spirit world to admonish us, just like when we were kids.

“Um, there’s a medium here, at the hotel. And he had a message from our mom.”

“*What?*” Greyson asked, floored.

“Yeah, I know. It was wild, but it felt real.”

“What did she say?” Greyson asked.

“She told us that she was disappointed that Colton and I were fighting,” I told him. “Told us to knock it off.”

“Wow, really?”

I nodded. “Yeah, so we agreed to a truce. With some conditions.”

Greyson looked pleased to hear this. “That’s great. If I had known that was going to work, I would have brought you two to a medium right away, instead of a paranormal bordello. Well, maybe the Evers brother can still spend some time together and actually work on our issues. Right?”

I snorted a laugh. “Don’t get your hopes up, man. You still suck.”

Greyson chuckled. He flipped the towel over his shoulder and started toward the bedroom, but then stopped and turned back, like he’d remembered something.

“Hey, by the way, you should call Ava.”

I frowned at him, baffled. “What?”

“Cali said that you should call Ava.”

That didn’t make anything clearer for me. “Why is Cali telling me to call Ava? Shouldn’t Ava just call me?”

“Hey, what about *her*?” Colton called out.

I looked over to see that he had moved away from the food menu and was now back to browsing the profiles of the various guides offered by the hotel.

“Come on, Colton!” I objected. I grabbed a pillow from one of the couches and lobbed it at him. “Turn that shit off, will you?”

Greyson shrugged. “I’m just passing on a message. Telling you to call Ava is the end of the information I have.” He turned and walked toward the bedroom.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, and when I looked down at it, I saw that the notification screen was full. Ava had been trying to reach me, and I’d somehow missed her calls and texts. She was going to be pissed—but the thought made me smile a little. Ava was like a stick of dynamite—exciting but dangerous as hell. I’d probably be more worried if she *wasn’t* pissed. I’d think that there was something wrong.

I walked into my own room and dropped down onto the bed, but as I laid back, I caught my reflection in the mirror over the bed and grimaced. I really needed a shower.

I dialed Ava’s number, and she answered on the first ring.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“I’m doing great, thanks for asking. What’s up?” I asked.

“Where *are* you?” she demanded.

I heaved a sigh. “Would you believe me if I told you that I’m at a paranormal bordello?”

Ava paused for a moment. “Was it Colton’s idea? Because if so, then yes.”

I chuckled. “Actually, none of us knew what it was until after we got here.”

“What happened to camping?” she asked.

“Uh, it was kind of a washout,” I admitted.

“So why haven’t you been answering your phone?” she asked, sounding angry again.

“Sorry, I’m not avoiding you or anything. We didn’t have service for a while, and Colton and I just had a few things to… iron out.”

I was really hoping she wasn’t going to press me for details on what exactly Colton and I were working out. I had already gone through this with my brother, and I wasn’t that interested in going through it with Ava too. I was about to change the subject to something slightly less charged when I heard Ava sigh.

“Ironing things out, huh? Let me guess. It was about me, wasn’t it?”

**Episode 5065**

Kendall’s eyes—their strange purple shade nearly hypnotic—narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“What?”

She tipped her head. “Cali, are you worried that there is some *other* reason that I care about Greyson?”

Dammit. I really wished Kendall’s eyes were less intense. I felt like they were boring into me. Her gaze felt nearly physical, and even *I* felt myself being drawn in by them.

I cleared my throat, trying to clear my head along with it. “I guess I just don’t understand why you’re interested in Greyson at all.”

“If you’re worried that I’m going after him, don’t be,” Kendall said. “I would have to be pretty stupid to try to pursue Greyson. After all, he is your mate.”

Relieved, I nodded. At least Kendall seemed to understand that.

“And, I am working with *you*, Cali. Greyson’s Luna. I’m just trying to be nice.”

I frowned, confused, as a strange thought occurred to me. “Are you trying to be… *friends*?” I asked, though it sounded insane.

Kendall shrugged. “Let’s just say that I’m just trying to get along. I’m a Rogue, after all. So I’m not used to building relationships beyond what’s absolutely necessary to get by.”

I wondered what Kendall meant by that, but before I had a chance to ask her, she went on—

“I appreciate that the Redwoods have worked so hard to take on Chessa. That wasn’t an easy feat, and your pack didn’t hold back. And since I’m working at the college you go to, and that happens to be near the Redwood territory, it makes sense that we’re all going to run into each other from time to time, just like this. After all, there are only so many grocery stores. So, we should probably get to know each other, don’t you think?”

I considered the logic of Kendall’s argument and nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Hey, Cali.” Maya stepped next to me. She was holding two boxes of diapers and a package of wipes. “I got what I needed. We need to go.”

Kendall looked at Maya, taking her in quickly. She gave a quick, fleeting smile and held out her hand to shake. “I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure. I’m Kendall.”

Maya grabbed her hand, almost dropping the boxes, but catching them just before they hit the floor. “Maya. We’ll never see each other again.” She turned to me. “We have to hit the road.”

“Yeah, okay, let’s go. Bye, Kendall. We’ll… be in touch soon, I guess,” I said as Maya grabbed my arm and dragged me to the register.

“Don’t forget to reach out to Codsworth,” Kendall reminded me. “And let me know how he’s doing.”

“Sure, I will.” I promised. I turned to Maya. “Would you let go of me? I wanted to get a few things for Torin.”

“He can get them for himself,” Maya snapped, pushing the diapers across the self-scanner. “He’s not a child. But my babies *are* children, and they need diapers so let’s go.”

“Maya—” I started, but she wasn’t listening.

She pushed a box of diapers into my arms, grabbed the rest of her stuff, and shoved me out the door.

“Get in,” she said, throwing the diapers into the trunk.

“What is the hurry, Maya?” I wondered as I got into the car. She hadn’t been in such a big hurry when she had turned the car around and was speeding toward wherever she thought Colton might be cheating on her in a paranormal brothel a half-hour before.

Maya started the car and pulled out, shaking her head as she merged into traffic. “God, Cali, are you really that clueless?”

I shifted in the passenger seat, suddenly very self-conscious. “Clueless about what? Diapers?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Oh my god. Clueless about Kendall.”

I frowned. “What does Kendall have to do with this?”

“I couldn’t help but overhear what you and that Rogue were talking about back there.”

I shot Maya a sideways look. “Oh? You couldn’t help it?”

She shrugged, looking unbothered about being caught eavesdropping. “Okay, so I was actively listening really closely, and it’s a good thing I was.”

“Why?”

“*Why?* Come on, Cali. Someone has to set you straight.”

“About what?” I asked. I couldn’t help feeling like I was two steps behind the conversation.

She shook her head. “You can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, but even so, I feel a sense of loyalty to you. After all, you are mated to my mate’s brothers.” She paused for a moment, her eyes on the road. “Honestly, I don’t know how you do it.”

My brain was starting to hurt as I tried desperately to follow along. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Are you for real!” Maya exploded. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Yes! Apparently!”

She shot me a frustrated look. “Do you think I would just stand by if someone was moving in on Colton?”

Privately, I pitied the person who would ever dare make a move on Colton. For as much as she complained about him, I had no doubt Maya would kill whoever tried. “Okay, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Kendall!”

“Kendall?!”

She gave me a withering look. “Are you telling me you haven’t thought the same thing?”

“Oh, about Greyson?”

Maya nodded.

“Well…” I hesitated. “I guess I was a little suspicious at first. She seemed a little too interested in him, you know. But after I talked to her, and she told me that wasn’t what was going on—”

“Stop right there,” Maya said, putting up her hand. “Come on, Cali. Open your eyes. Kendall’s not going to admit she’s hot for your mate. At least not to your face. But give me a break. The signs are all there if you’re looking. You said you sensed it yourself.”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” I said, feeling uncertain. “So what are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything,” Maya said firmly. “And I’m not telling you what to do. I don’t get involved in other people’s drama. Whatever you do is between you and Greyson. But I’m just telling you that I wouldn’t be so gullible. She doesn’t want to be your friend. And a purple-eyed snake is still a snake.”

“But she said—” I started.

Maya fixed me with a hard stare. “Don’t let that girl steal your mate. Don’t trust her.”

I shifted in my seat, feeling more uneasy than ever, and didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to say. I had let myself believe what Kendall was telling me because I wanted to believe it. But everything Maya was telling me now were things that I had thought of myself. And—more than that—Maya wasn’t the first to tell me not to trust Kendall.

Greyson had told me the same thing.

Maybe they were both right—though I hated to admit it. I wanted to believe the best in people, and that included Kendall.

“Thanks, Maya,” I finally said quietly.

Maya shrugged. “I’m just calling it like I see it. Just be careful.”

We were quiet the rest of the ride back to the pack house, and when Maya pulled the car into the driveway, I was relieved to climb out. I did appreciate that Maya was looking out for me, but the conversation was way too uncomfortable, and I needed a little space.

It wasn’t that I was worried. Greyson was my mate, and I knew he loved me. I knew he would never even look at anyone else. After all, I hadn’t even blinked when I’d heard he was staying the night at some bordello, even though Maya had freaked out. I hadn’t been worried. I trusted him completely. But the thought of Kendall going after him was still unsettling.

Lola was waiting by the door as we walked inside.

“It’s about time!” she said, looking frazzled.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, kicking off my shoes.

“Sage is practically in tears!” she exclaimed.

“Why?” I wondered.

“The babies! They haven’t stopped crying since you left,” she said, looking at Maya.

Maya rolled her eyes. “Amateurs. It’s nice to know I can count on some help around here,” she muttered under her breath. She dropped a box of diapers and took another one with her as she walked down the hall toward the sound of the crying babies.

Lola took a relieved breath as the twins grew quiet and turned to me. “So, how did the shopping trip with Little Miss Sunshine go?”

“Oh, it was actually a little awkward.”

“Yeah? Because of Maya’s bad attitude or something else?” Lola asked as we walked into the living room.

“I ran into Kendall,” I told her.

Lola turned to me, her eyes wide. “Whoa. Kendall? Again?”

“Yeah. She was asking about Greyson.” I thought about what to tell Lola. I wanted to tell her what had happened, but also play it down. Lola tended to get riled up. “Maya was listening in and told me Kendall’s trying to go after him. I’m not sure if she’s right, but she told me not to trust her. It’s something to think about—”

“Cali, you know what we have to do, right?”

“What? No. What do we have to do?” I asked.

Lola’s eyes flashed. “Take her out.”

**Episode 5066**

**Xavier**

*Let me guess. It was about me, wasn’t it?*

I had to think fast. Of course Colton and I had been fighting about her, but I wasn’t about to tell Ava how Colton felt about her. She probably already knew—and it’s not like she had a lot of love for him either—but I didn’t want to bring it up. It would only upset Ava more than she already was. Besides, it might upset the fragile truce Colton and I had just established.

“Not everything is about you, Ava,” I said.

“That is very likely true,” Ava said, “but it doesn’t answer the very specific question I just posed to you—were you and your brother fighting about me? Come on, I know Colton hates me—”

“Hate is a strong word,” I said. “Listen, we were fighting for a lot of reasons. I don’t understand why he and Maya have to live so far away. I was asking him why they couldn’t move closer to the Samaras. We could spend more time together, I could be a more active part of my niece’s and nephew’s life.”

“Isn’t Maya the Alpha of the Grimcrest pack?” Ava asked. “She can’t just up and move because you miss hanging out with your brother.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what Colton said,” I told her.

“Uh-huh,” Ava said, sounding skeptical. “And that’s what you and Colton got into a fight about?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. Lying to Ava was a skill—she was very good at spotting bullshit. “Yeah, well, you know how Colton is. He can be very sensitive about stuff like that. He got pretty defensive. But it doesn’t matter now.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Nah. We slugged it out and all is well.”

“You…slugged…it out?” Ava repeated.

“Sure. That was Greyson’s idea, actually, and—as much as I hate to give him credit for anything—it was actually a pretty good one.”

Ava paused for a moment. “Well, I hope whatever you did didn’t mess up Colton’s beautiful face too badly. I know how much he loves to gaze at his own reflection.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Ava sounded normal again, so whatever had been eating at her appeared to have passed. “Hey, come on, I’m just as handsome as Colton. Maybe more, now that I’ve gone camping.”

She snorted. “You’re at a brothel.”

I winced. “It’s just for the showers, I swear.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Well, you better not ignore my calls again, or I might stop being so understanding about your need for showers,” she warned.

I chuckled. “I’ll keep my phone with me,” I promised. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Okay. Talk to you soon.”

Colton opened the door and stuck his head into the room. “Hey, you better come out here.”

“What’s up?” I asked, slipping my phone into my pocket.

“You have to talk to Greyson. He’s out of control.”

Frowning, I got to my feet, wondering what the hell our older brother could possibly be up to now.

“What’s going on?” I asked, walking into the main room.

“There you are, Xavier,” Greyson said, turning to me. “Good. Listen, we’re going to go on another hike.”

I groaned. “Are you kidding me?”

“Of course not.”

“Does this one involve volcanoes, too? Because I’ll tell you, I’ve had my fill of fiery pits.”

Greyson chuckled. “No volcanoes. This is just a regular hike, I swear. Nothing too arduous. No lava fields.”

“Sure, that’s what you always say,” Colton muttered.

Greyson gave each of us a stern look. “And no fighting. Can we do that?”

I heaved a sigh. “I guess I’d rather be out in the woods than in here, spending the day at a paranormal bordello. Who the hell knows what people get up to in here?”

Colton cast a glance at the menu that was still up on the big screen. “Can we order some wings first, before we go?”

“Come on, we’ll eat after we get back. That’ll be better. We can work up a really big appetite while we’re out,” Greyson said.

“Fine,” Colton said begrudgingly.

Greyson clapped his hands together. “Let’s get ready to go then.”

I pulled out my phone. I had just promised Ava I’d stay in touch, and I’d meant what I said, so I sent her a message. *We’re heading out on a hike. Might be out of cell range for a while. Don’t worry. I’ll be in touch when I get back.*

Ava wrote back right away: *Break a leg.*

I smiled down at the message. She must be in a better mood.

When I looked up, I saw that both my brothers had followed my lead and also pulled out their phones. They were texting too, probably sending similar messages to their mates. That made me smile, too. It felt good to have someone like Ava at home, wondering about where I was. Someone watching out just for me.

Greyson finished his message and shoved his phone back into his pocket. He grinned with enthusiasm. “Let’s do this, boys!”

Colton shot a look at me, and I shook my head.

“Mental,” I muttered, but I followed Greyson as he headed out the door.

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Twenty minutes later the three of us were trudging through a dense section of woods. We’d been quiet, focused more on bushwhacking through the thick underbrush than talking, so when Greyson finally spoke, his voice seemed strangely loud in the cold air.

“This must be working.”

I looked up, confused. “What’s working?”

He glanced back at me. “This. We’ve been at this a while, and you and Colton haven’t tried to kill each other once.”

I shook my head. “That’s true,” I admitted. Though, in my head, I wondered how long this fragile truce with Colton could last.

We got through the thickest section of brush and came to a rise where the mountain tipped steeply upward. We glanced at it, taking it in, then started up the incline.

“Your idea was a good one,” Colton said.

Greyson looked back at him. “What?”

“Your idea. To fight it out. Me and Xavier. It sounded stupid on paper, but it actually kind of worked.” He shrugged. “Then again, it’s always good to throw a fist or two at Xavier. He just has the kind of face you want to punch, you know?”’

I turned and shoved him playfully. “I do know,” I told him. “Because your face begs to be beaten on a regular basis.”

Greyson chuckled. “Well, if it helps at all, I know what both of you mean.” He broke off the branch of a pine that reached across our path. “I’m glad it all worked out. And anytime you two want to beat the crap out of each other, just let me know. I’m more than willing to referee.”

That made Colton and me laugh, and Greyson joined in. This felt… strange. To be out in nature with my brothers, teasing each other and sharing a laugh. It just wasn’t how I’d expected this camping trip to go. It wasn’t bad, it was just strange.

The trail was almost non-existent, but we kept going, pushing our way through the underbrush until we reached the top of the ridge.

“Holy shit,” Colton breathed, looking out at the valley that lay below us.

The winter wind had blown the clouds away, and the sky was a bright, brilliant blue. The pine trees were dark against it, and the valley stretched out for miles and miles. It was beautiful. More than beautiful, really. It was breathtaking.

My thoughts went to Ava. I would really like to bring her here. I knew she’d like to see it.

Then I thought of Cali. I would also love to stand here with an arm around her shoulders.

I shot a glance at Greyson and felt a twinge of jealousy. No doubt he was probably thinking the same thing. The only difference was he *could* bring Cali here. Where as I…

“Hey, I’m really glad we’re all here together,” Colton said, looking at both Greyson and me.

“Yeah, me too,” Greyson said with a smile.

“And while we’re all here, I have something I want to show you two.”

“What is it?” I wondered.

Colton reached into his pocket. His smile faded and he frantically searched the other pocket. His expression cleared as he pulled out a small box.

“What is that?” I asked.

Colton rolled his eyes. “What do you think it is, Einstein?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t ask, asshole,” I shot back. I shook my head. Colton could be so fucking annoying.

Greyson was eyeing the small black box. “Is that an engagement ring?”

Colton grinned. “I picked it out myself. Do you think Maya will like it?”

I didn’t think Maya liked anything—including Colton—but I kept that to myself. Out loud I said, “I don’t know, it’s kind of hard to tell when it’s a closed box, man.”

“Oh, right,” Colton laughed. He popped the box open.

I got a fleeting look at a sparkling ring with a dark blue-green stone before Colton fumbled the box in his hands and the ring went flying, sailing out of the box. It seemed to hover in the air for just a moment, then it disappeared over the edge of the ridge.

**Episode 5067**

**Artemis**

When I opened my eyes, I took a deep breath. The aroma of freshly baked bread filled my senses, and I popped up, looking around. The bread smell reminded me of my run-in with Aelwen.

Luckily, the angry Fae baker had allowed me to back off after she had refused to help me.

I shook my head as I passed a hand through my sleep-rumpled hair. I was going to kill Marius for telling me to seek out Aelwen. I should have known it would work out exactly like most of Marius’s plans—badly.

My clothes were thrown over the foot of the bed, and I grabbed for them and slipped them on. When I looked around, I realized the bread smell was coming from a tray of food across the room, and, dressed now, I got up to investigate it. I looked at it warily, circling it before making a decision.

My stomach growled as I looked at the soft rolls and pat of butter. I was hungry as hell, but after my issues with the Fae water, I was hesitant. I didn’t want to end up hallucinating again. And—more than that—I couldn’t afford to lose control of my senses. Not while Celeste had me trapped here inside the palace.

But the gnawing hunger in my belly proved to be too much, and I reached for a roll. I bit the end and nearly moaned with pleasure. The bread was light and slightly sweet. How the hell did it taste so damn good?

I wondered if Aelwen had baked the rolls.

I jumped when there was a sharp knock at the door, and before I could respond, the door opened and Celeste swept into the room.

“Artemis, are we ready for your first lesson? I trust you slept well. Sonorous root always helps me gets a good night’s sleep.”

Well, fuck me. I swallowed a mouthful of bread as well as a groan. Did we have to do this today? I’d been hoping that Celeste would be too busy doing whatever it is that she does—probably overseeing the executions of innocent citizens or something—to mess with me. But it seemed I was wrong to hope.

Celeste gave me a sharp look and snapped her fingers. “Artemis? Why aren’t you dressed?”

I looked down at myself. “Um, I *am* dressed.”

Celeste looked horrified. “I don’t think so.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She waved a disparaging hand up and down the length of me. “This will never do.”

“Why not?”

Celeste rolled her eyes. “As the heir, you simply can’t dress as a commoner.”

“Well, I’m very sorry about that,” I started, my voice thick with sarcasm, “but I think I must have forgotten to pack my coronation clothes when I set out to look for my father.”

Celeste shot me an angry look. “Your attitude is not appreciated, young lady. And you will do well to remember that I am not one to be trifled with. I will send the court seamstress in to see you and address your very obvious needs.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered under my breath.

Celeste narrowed her eyes dangerously. “In the meantime, here is lesson number one for you—if you are hungry, request food be brought to you. Do not go groveling for scraps in the kitchen like a lowly floor maid. And do not deny you were in the kitchens,” she added quickly.

I shut my mouth tightly, wondering if Aelwen had been the one to give me away.

“That sort of behavior is far beneath someone of your position,” she went on. “We have servants to cater to your every whim.”

“I was just…curious,” I said. Then I added. “And it smelled so good—”

“And what did curiosity ever do to the cat?” Celeste snapped angrily.

It killed the cat, but if I recalled correctly, satisfaction brought her back. Before I had a chance to say this—or anything else—Celeste spun on her heel and waved me forward.

“Follow me to the library, Artemis. You have much to learn.”

I stared at Celeste as she started through the door. “The *library*? How is reading a bunch of books going to help me be a better heir?” I figured I’d need to learn to curtsy or something. Maybe learn a waltz or two. Maybe one of those quadrilles.

Celeste had stopped in the doorway, and now she was fixing me with a hard stare, as though she could hear my thoughts and found them unconscionably stupid. “What you need to learn is where your roots spread, Artemis. Now *come*.”

Her voice was so imperious I nearly jumped into action. I followed her out the door and down a passageway. The castle was still somewhat of a mystery to me, so I looked around as we walked, trying to figure out where we had been and where we were going. I was trying to build a map in my head.

We walked through an arched doorway and out onto an outdoor passageway. The walkway was covered to shield a walker from any weather, but it was open to a courtyard with a stunning garden in the middle of it.

Celeste stopped and pointed to the garden’s main attraction—a dazzling tree at the center, and it was from this tree that everything else flowed. “There.”

I looked at the tree, then at Celeste, then back at the tree. “What is that?”

“*That* is your family tree.”

I stared at the tree. “Um, that’s just a literal tree. A real tree.”

Celeste made an irritated noise and grabbed my hand. She continued down the walkway. “That is indeed a tree. Thank you for that astute observation. And that very tree was planted thousands of years ago by one of your ancestors.”

I looked at the tree again, stunned. “Wow. That’s amazing. Who was the ancestor?” The whole idea of actually *having* ancestors was still very foreign to me. Hell, even having a mother and a sister was something I was still getting used to. I’d been raised as an orphan and had only recently even learned about Orla and Kadmos, so the idea of an ancestor of mine doing something thousands of years ago was a pretty hard thing to wrap my mind around.

As we walked into the library, I drew in a shocked breath. The place was massive. I’d gone with Torin to the town library once or twice when he’d wanted to check out cookbooks, so that was what I’d had in mind when Celeste had said library, but that was not what this was. The ceilings were soaring and row after row of books laddered their way up to the top.

Celeste moved into the huge space and walked directly to a shelf. She removed a large, leather-bound book and heaved it onto a wooden table. She opened the book and looked up at me. “You need to memorize this.”

I looked down at the book and saw row after row of names and dates. “What is this?”

“Your family tree,” Celeste said. “Study it. Learn about your ancestors—every last one of them. Knowing where you are in the family is a requirement of being the heir. It will help reveal to you the power that you represent.”

I looked at the words and numbers swimming across the page, then at the size of the massive book, and shook my head. “I can’t imagine memorizing even a quarter of this thing. It goes on for pages and pages.”

“Yes, it does,” Celeste said simply. “And after you are done with this, I will teach you the who’s who of the Fae court. You need to know who everyone is and who will align themselves with you. And—of course—those who won’t.”

I gaped up at Celeste, shocked at the massive amount of work she expected from me.

Celeste gave me a cool smile. “Well, I’ll leave you to your studies,” she said, then turned on her heel and marched toward the door.

I shook my head, then looked down at the book in front of me. Kadmos’s name jumped out at me. Just next to his name was my mother’s, Orla. There was an X through her name. I felt myself tense when I saw it. I knew what it meant—that she was either dead or as good as dead. It meant that she no longer mattered, and it made me angry to see it.

I followed their entries down to another entry that read, simply, *DOB*.

“Hey!” I called.

Celeste stopped in the doorway. “Yes?”

“What is this?” I asked. “DOB? What does that mean? It’s just below Kadmos and my mother.”

Celeste walked back to me and glanced at where I was pointing. “That’s you.’

I whipped my head up at her. “What?!”

“We thought you had died on birth. Thus DOB.”

I clamped my jaw together, growing angrier and angrier. I looked down at the entry, feeling fury rising in my chest. I hated how my life had been stolen, and the chance to have a real family had been taken from me. I didn’t think I was ever going to get over that.

I traced my finger down the connecting line between Kadmos and me, then looked up at Celeste. “What can you tell me about my father?”

**Episode 5068**

I stared at Lola in shock. “Are you kidding me, Lola? What are you talking about? You can’t just *kill* Kendall!”

Lola stared back at me. “What?! Who said anything about *killing* anyone?”

“But—you said—taking her out,” I stammered, baffled.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, Cali. I meant take her out—like out on the town. Get her drunk and pump her for information. Loose lips sink ships and all that. We should have done that at the barbeque, but I didn’t think of it then, so why not do it now? We can interrogate her and find out everything we can.”

“Um…” I said, hesitating. “I don’t know…”

“Listen, Cali, for whatever reason, Kendall seems more than just casually interested in Greyson. Your mate. And it’s not like it’s a *due destini* situation here, so there has to be some reason, and we are going to find out what exactly that reason is. And if it’s just because she thinks Greyson is hot—who could blame her for that?”

“Lola!” I exclaimed, shocked.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s not like Greyson is my type, but I’ve got eyes, so I can see the appeal.”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly.

“Why not?” Lola asked.

“Well, for one thing, this sounds like one of your schemes, and those don’t always work out,” I pointed out.

Lola looked hurt. “Hey, I thought you liked my schemes.”

I sighed. “I do, but they sometimes have unintended consequences.”

She considered this for a moment. “Well, I’ll tell you this—if we don’t do something, this lone Rogue with the purple eyes is going to make friends somewhere else. And that could mean Ava. Do we really want her to go off and befriend that snake?”

I thought about that. “Okay, that would suck.”

“So are we asking her to join us so we can pump her for information or what?” Lola asked, her smile gleeful.

And then, before I could answer, Lola grabbed my phone from my hand.

“Invite her!”

“What do I tell her?” I asked, taking the phone.

Lola thought for a moment. “Well, you said she was hinting that she wanted to be friends, right?”

“Yeah, kind of,” I said.

“Well, play that angle. Play up her being new to the area, and wouldn’t it be nice to just hang out, meet some new people, that kind of stuff. Just lie, Cali.”

I groaned. “You know I hate lying.” I took a deep breath and started the text, but a moment later Lola grabbed the phone from my hand again.

“I’ll do it.” She typed furiously and then pressed send. “Done.”

I grabbed my phone back and looked down at the sent message.

*Hey, K. Bunch of my friends are meeting up at the Bellhouse at 6pm tonight. Come join us.*

I stared at the message, wishing I could delete it. I couldn’t imagine what Kendall was going to make of it, but then—to my surprise—Kendall responded with a thumbs-up emoji.

Lola leaned over to see it, then grinned. “See? Easy-peasy. Now all we have to do is get her drunk and start asking questions.”

I nodded, but I had a bad feeling about this. But—then again—I usually had a bad feeling when Lola started to scheme.

I looked down as my phone buzzed with a call and was surprised to see Aysel’s name on the caller ID.

“Why in the world would Aysel be calling me?” I wondered.

“Well, you’re not going to find out by staring at your phone. Answer it and see what she wants,” Lola said.

“Hello?” I said, accepting the call. “Aysel?”

“Caliana,” Lucian’s voice jarred my senses. “Why haven’t you responded to my invitation?”

“Excuse me? Lucian?”

“Yes, of course it’s me. I invited the entire Redwood pack to my annual Valentine’s party and not one of you has had the decency to RSVP, despite the invitation’s request to do exactly that.”

I paused to think for a moment. “Didn’t we *just* get the invitation?”

“So, shall I pencil you in for a yes?” Lucian asked briskly. “I need to inform the caterer.”

“Um, y-yes? Maybe?” I sputtered. “I don’t know.”

“Wonderful,” Lucian gushed. “I’m looking forward to seeing you all, and you should be looking forward to the party, where you will all get a chance to see me demonstrate my love for Arielle to the world.”

“Uh-huh,” I muttered, only half-listening as Lucian droned on. I was suddenly realizing—with dread—that I hadn’t spent Valentine’s Day with anyone. It was fast approaching—only about a week away. What the hell was I going to get Greyson?!

“Cali?” Elle’s voice came over the line.

“Elle?” I asked, startled out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, hi.”

“Hey, how are the wedding plans coming along?” I asked.

“Don’t forget that we have the cake tasting appointment coming up,” Elle reminded me.

“Right, yes. Of course,” I said, although I had completely forgotten until she reminded me.

“I can’t wait to eat lots of cake with you!” she said.

“Me too,” I told her.

Lucian took the phone back. “Caliana, we look forward to seeing you at the party.”

“Yeah, same here,” I said vaguely as I ended the call.

Lola was staring at me. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Uh, I think I just RSVPed for the entire pack to Lucian’s Valentine’s Day party,” I admitted.

“Oh,” Lola said with a casual shrug. “That’s no big deal. I’m sure everyone will want to go. Lucian and Aysel know how to throw a party. I remember that Jay and I had a really good time at that sex party they threw. They had this tomato caprese skewer thing that was *so* good. And then the sex rooms were—”

“Ahh! Enough!” I yelled, holding up my hand to stop her. “That’s way too much information, Lola! I don’t want to hear it!”

I looked down as my phone buzzed again. It was a message from Codsworth.

*Can you meet me on campus?*

\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into the CCU parking lot and climbed out. The whole drive over I’d been wondering what Codsworth wanted. Kendall had asked me to check in on him, and I’d told her I would, so I didn’t feel like I could turn him down when he texted.

I stopped walking and looked around, suddenly realizing that Codsworth never told me where to meet him.

*Hey, I’m on campus. Where are you?*

Codsworth texted back right away. *Meet me in the boathouse.*

The boathouse?

I frowned down at the text but started toward the boathouse. Why would he want to meet down there on a weekend when we didn’t have any practice and there was no regatta? The place was going to be empty.

Weird.

Campus was quiet as I walked across it. It was too cold for many people to be out, though I saw a couple of students crossing to the library. But even those few people disappeared completely as I neared the boathouse, and when I walked in, it was completely silent. I knew it—the place was empty.

It was dim inside, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust after the winter sunshine outside. But when they did, I saw a figure step out from behind a crew boat, and I barely stifled a scream.

“Oh my god! Codsworth!” I gasped. I put a hand to my heart, which was beating about a thousand miles an hour. “You scared the hell out of me. What were you doing behind that boat?”

“Thanks for coming,” he said quietly, avoiding my question.

“Yeah, sure. What’s going on? Why’d you want to meet today? What’s so important?”

Even in the dim light I could see the expression on Codsworth’s face was uneasy as he stepped toward me. “I knew I could count on you, Cali.”

“Um, sure,” I said, though my stomach tightened nervously. “Why did you want to meet like this?”

He scratched his shoulder as he took another step toward me. “Cali, I want you to know that I think of you as more than just a friend. I really think of you as someone I can trust.”

*More* than a friend? What the hell did that mean? The tightness in my stomach turned into an anxious ache. Did that mean that Codsworth was crushing on me? This wasn’t good.

I had a sudden flash of Alex, from back home, and his eventual fate.

Suddenly I wished I hadn’t come. I wished I had told Codsworth to just tell me whatever he had to say over the phone, or over text.

“Codsworth, listen,” I started, as he took another step toward me.

“Cali, I have something to show you,” he said, moving closer still, until he was only inches from me.

I was starting to sweat. “I really don’t think—”

And then he whipped off his shirt.

**Episode 5069**

**Greyson**

I saw the dark blue-green stone of the ring glint one last time before it disappeared over the edge of the rocky cliff. We all stared after it, stunned, and then Colton lunged, arm outstretched, like he was going to try to catch it.

Xavier grabbed him and pulled him back. “What the fuck, Colton?! You want to break your neck? What’s wrong with you?!”

“I spent a fortune on that ring!” Colton bellowed. “I had it custom made! I picked out the stone to match Maya’s eyes!”

Xavier kept a tight hold on Colton, and we all took a half-step forward, peering over the edge of the ridge.

Looking down, I thought I saw something catch the light on the rocky ledge below us. “Wait, is that it?” I asked, pointing.

“I think so!” Colton said. “I’m going to go down and get it.”

“How?!” Xavier demanded. “Come on, man. That’s a sheer drop.”

Colton looked down, thinking hard. “I could shift and jump. Four feet to hang on instead of just two.”

“Hang on,” I said. “There might be a better way.”

“How?” Colton demanded.

“Let’s think of one, because if you just jump down there, the chances are high that you’re going to break a leg. Or worse.”

Colton snorted. “It’ll be worth it. I’m planning on asking Maya to marry me when we get back, and I need that ring!”

I felt a twinge of jealousy at Colton’s words. The idea of Colton asking his mate to marry him so easily seemed so agonizingly simple, yet so far away for me. I’d ask Cali to marry me in a heartbeat, if I thought she would give me a straight answer.

Xavier was looking curiously at his twin. “Wow. Okay. I mean, I know you have the twins and all, but it wasn’t that long ago that you wanted to kill Maya.”

Colton waved that away. “Come on. You’re exaggerating. I never wanted to *kill* her. We had some issues, but that’s all in the past.”  
 “Okay, whatever,” Xavier said. He turned to me. “Okay, what’s your better idea?”

I looked down at the ring. “Have you ever made a chain of paper clips?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Xavier asked.

I pointed to a scraggly tree growing from the rock. “There’s a tree right there. I can hold onto the trunk, Xavier can hold onto me, and then Colton can hold onto Xavier.” I looked at Colton. “That way you can drop down safely, grab the ring, and then Xavier and I can help you back up.”

Both my brothers were quiet as they thought this over.

“So, what are we waiting for?!” Colton demanded. “Let’s do this!”

Xavier nodded, and I felt a wave of pride. Both my brothers seemed on board with my idea, and neither had even argued, which had to be some kind of miracle. Maybe I really was making some progress with them. Maybe this camping trip wasn’t going to be a complete disaster after all.

I stepped to the tree and wrapped my arm around the scaly trunk. Then I extended my arm over the rocky edge of the ridge. “Okay, it’s now or never.”

Xavier stepped into place and grabbed my hand. “Don’t start getting all sweaty,” he warned as he slipped over the edge.

I looked over at Colton. “Okay, now you grab onto Xavier’s hand.”

Colton nodded and edged his way over the edge. I didn’t see him take Xavier’s hand, but I felt the increase of pressure as Colton dropped down, and I braced myself against the tree as their combined weight strained the muscles of my arms.

“Okay! I’m letting go!” Colton called.

I heard his feet hit the ground. “Did he make it?” I asked Xavier.

“Well, I can’t totally tell, but if he didn’t, you and I might as well jump, too, because Maya will kill us if Colton doesn’t make it back.”

There was a beat of tense silence, then Colton’s voice broke through the frosty air.

“I’ve got it!”

“Thank god,” I muttered.

“I’m coming back up!” he called.

I heard him scrabbling up the rocks. I couldn’t see what was happening as it was all taking place out of my eyeline over the edge of the ridge, but Xavier narrated as Colton unsuccessfully tried to jump and catch onto Xavier’s hand.

I was starting to get really worried, when, finally—on the third attempt—I felt the shuddering impact of Colton’s weight and I knew he had been successful.

Using all my strength, I pulled Xavier and Colton up over the edge of the ridge. They were both beet-red and straining with effort when they got to the top, and we all collapsed on the ground, breath heaving.

Colton victoriously held up the ring. “There it is,” he gasped, still breathless.

The ring caught the sunlight and sparkled, casting little bursts of light in every direction.

“What do you think?” he asked.

It was a good-looking ring, and I admired it, though the feeling of jealousy was back, growing larger in my chest as I looked at the circle of gold. Looking at it also reminded me that I still hadn’t gotten Cali anything for Valentine’s Day.

For a moment I was tempted to ask Xavier what he had gotten Ava, but I kept my mouth shut. We might have bridged some of our differences, but I knew there were a few places we weren’t ready to go. And anything that involved our respective mates fell squarely into that “do not enter” category.

“It’s great,” Xavier said, clapping his twin on the shoulder. “It’s a great ring. Maya’s going to love it. You actually made a good choice, man.”

Colton beamed. Then he—very carefully—placed the ring back into the small black box. When it was safely back in his pocket, he got to his feet. “I need a fucking drink.”

No one argued with that, and we turned and headed back down the mountain. As we headed in the direction of the mountain lodge, Colton took the lead. He was clearly feeling great about retrieving the ring and—maybe even more clearly—really wanting that drink.

Xavier stepped to my side as we followed after him. “Hey, do you think the engagement ring taking a nosedive was a sign?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. That really isn’t for us to decide. I mean, we got it back, right? And I’m pretty sure Maya’s not going to hate it.”

Colton glanced back at us over his shoulder. “Hey, just don’t mention this to Maya, okay?”

“How about this—if you buy the drinks, I’m sworn to secrecy,” Xavier said.

Colton laughed. “Deal.”

When we got to the lodge, we passed through the beaded curtain entrance.

“Could this place get any tackier?” Xavier muttered under his breath.

Inside there was a neon shag rug on the floor and velvet-covered stools along the bar. The guides Colton had been checking out earlier were seated at a table in the corner, and they all watched us as we walked into the dimly lit room.

We ignored them as we headed to the bar and took seats.

“What’ll it be, fellas?” The bartender—a short guy wearing a green shirt and a black vest walked over to us, wiping his hands with a towel.

“Whatever sells best,” Colton said. “But if the drink doesn’t come with an umbrella, I’m sending it back.”

The bartender gave Colton a hearty wink. “I’ll give you two.”

Colton grinned. “I love this place.”

“Why?” I asked warily. There was nothing at this paranormal brothel that seemed to recommend itself to me, so I wondered what the appeal was for Colton.

Colton glanced around the poorly lit bar. “What’s not to like?”

“I don’t know, pretty much everything?” Xavier said incredulously. “This place is a dump. A tacky dump at that. Are we really planning on staying here tonight?”

“Come on—” Colton started.

“Come on, nothing. We got our showers, and we’re getting our drinks. We can eat, and then that’s it. I think we’ve all gotten everything out of this weekend that we’re going to get. Why don’t we just head home?”

I pushed a hand through my hair, which still felt sweaty after the mountaintop ring rescue. “I don’t know about that,” I started slowly. I wasn’t too keen on the idea of bailing so quickly. “It’s only Saturday.”

“God, Xavier, you’re such a party-pooper,” Colton complained. “We’re already here. Why would we leave? I mean, come on. Is one night in a comfortable bed asking too much? It’s not like we didn’t do the camping stuff.”

Xavier heaved a sigh. “Okay, I want to head back, and Colton wants to stay and enjoy the amenities of this place. We’re split.” He looked over at me. “You have the deciding vote, man. What do you think we should do?”

I looked between my brothers, who were both watching me carefully. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could get a word out, half a dozen figures burst through the beaded curtain into the bar.

We all swiveled to look at them, and I was shocked to see they were all armed to the teeth. But I only had an instant to take that in before they began shouting.

“Everyone on the floor!”

“Get down!”

“Shut up and hit the deck!”

The mirror over the bar exploded as a bullet shattered it, and everyone in the bar dove for cover.

**Episode 5070**

I took a stumbling step back as Codsworth stepped forward. He was shirtless, and it wasn’t like I hadn’t seen him shirtless before, but never exactly…in this context. Shirtless and alone. My heart was racing, and all I could think was that it was happening *again*. Everything that had happened with Alex was happening again. That was the last thing I needed right now.

Why couldn’t girls just be nice to people without sparking a misunderstanding, dammit?!

Codsworth was staring at me, his shirt in his hands. “Cali? Are you okay?”

I swallowed hard. “You do know I have a boyfriend, right?”

Codsworth frowned. “Well, you kind of have two, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“What?”

“*What?*” he repeated. Then he turned his back to me and pointed to his shoulder. “What do you make of this?”

I stared at him for a moment more, then slid my gaze to his shoulder. “What am I looking at?” I asked. I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. “Are you showing me your muscle?” If he was, I could tell him that his shoulder muscles were fine…for a human. But how could I fairly judge him after seeing Greyson and Xavier in such close proximity?

“No, not my muscle. Look right here,” he said, pointing to a small mark on the skin of his shoulder.

I leaned closer and saw that there was a strange red mark. “Is that a bug bite?”  
 “I think it’s a lot more serious than a mosquito bite,” he said in a low, serious voice. “Would I have asked you to come here to show you a bug bite. In February?”

“Well, what do you think it is?” I wondered.

“What do *you* think it is?” he asked, turning the question back on me.

“I have no idea,” I answered honestly. “Do you have any others?”

He shrugged as he turned back to me. “I don’t know. I haven’t noticed any other spots, but maybe you could take a look.” He started to unfasten his pants.

“Oh, good god no! Codsworth! Stop!” I said, holding up my hands and closing my eyes. “That really isn’t necessary.”

“Okay, listen, Cali. You have to promise to keep what I’m about to tell you completely to yourself, okay?”

“What?” I asked him.

“What I’m about to tell you is going to blow your mind,” he said, leaning close again.

“Okay,” I said slowly. Anxiety was coursing through me as I wondered what it was he was about to tell me. And if it had anything to do with Chessa.

“You’re the only one I really trust, Cali,” Codsworth went on. “I feel like we’ve really become good friends.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way,” I said. “So what is it?”

Codsworth fixed me with an intense stare. “I think I’ve been the victim of an alien abduction.”

I gasped, thunderstruck. Whatever I’d been expecting Codsworth to say, it wasn’t alien abduction.

“I know, I know, it sounds crazy. But hear me out. I can’t remember anything about this party you tell me I was at. Which means that my memory has been completely wiped out. A classic sign of alien abduction—”

“Also a classic sign of drinking too much,” I added, feeling nervous.

“No way. I never drink that much. Besides, how else do you explain this strange mark on my shoulder?” he said, gesturing to his back.

“I don’t know, maybe your dorm room has bed bugs,” I suggested, but Codsworth shook his head.

“Not a chance. I googled common bug bites, and not one of them looked like this. Not bed bugs, not mosquitos, not ticks—nothing. No, I’ve really given it some thought, and I am firmly convinced that I was abducted by aliens,” Codsworth said firmly.

Guilt washed over me. Codsworth was clearly grasping at straws, and I felt awful about my role in all of this. “Why do you think the aliens would have picked you, though?”

“Because they know about the crypto club,” Codsworth said promptly. “And they wanted the information.”

“They did?” I asked warily.

He nodded. “They probably scanned my brain to learn all they could about paranormals.”

“Hmm,” I said vaguely. I wasn’t sure what I should say.

Codsworth gave me a tense look. “Don’t you believe me?”

I sighed. “I want to, Codsworth, but I really do think it could just be a bug bite.”

Codsworth seemed to deflate, like my words had let the air out of him. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed.

He rubbed his head. “Dammit. I’ve been thinking about this for a while. I really hoped I could convince you of this, but maybe you’re right.” He shook his head. “Sometimes my imagination gets the best of me. And I’ve just been trying so hard to make some sense of what’s happened to me. And then when I found this weird bite, I just…”  
 He trailed off, looking lost.

“Maybe you should put your shirt back on,” I suggested.

“Right,” he muttered and slipped his shirt back over his head. “Sorry I made you come all the way down here.”

“No, don’t apologize,” I said quickly. “I’m glad you told me. Thank you for calling me, and thank you for confiding in me. And if anything else comes up, make sure you let me know, okay? I want to be the first person you get in touch with.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure.” He gave me a quick hug. “Thanks, Cali.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m going to get going.”

He nodded, and I stepped outside the boathouse, taking a deep, grateful breath. I headed quickly to my car and got back on the road. A few minutes later I was heading to the Bellhouse Tavern to meet Lola, Maya, and Kendall, but I was still thinking of Codsworth as I drove.

On the one hand, I felt incredibly guilty about Codsworth’s situation. But, on the other hand—as crazy as it was to believe he was the victim of an alien abduction—it was still better than remembering what actually happened to him. Though I supposed neither scenario was ideal.

I wished he would just believe my story about him getting drunk at the party and leave it at that, but so far, he was proving to be very hard to convince.

Well, at least I’d been wrong about him coming onto me. As unsettling as the alien abduction theory was, it was still better than having to spurn Codsworth’s awkward advances.

One way or the other, I was going to have to tell Kendall about the weird conversation Codsworth and I had just had. She’d asked me to keep her updated on any news, and him thinking he was a victim of an alien abduction was definitely news.

I parked my car and headed into the tavern. Inside, I looked around the dimly lit bar. I was looking for Lola, but when I didn’t see her, I started to wonder if I was the first one to arrive.

Pulling out my phone, I was about to text Lola to ask where she was when I heard someone call my name. I turned around to see Kendall walking toward me.

“Kendall!” I said with a smile.

Kendall stepped toward me and hugged me—which turned out to be every bit as awkward as I would have imagined it would be.

“Are we the first ones here?” she asked when the hug was over. She glanced around.

“I think we might be. Though that might be a good thing.”

Kendall raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And why is that?”

I glanced quickly around to make sure no one was listening in, but everyone in the tavern seemed pretty wrapped up in their own conversations and happy hour drinks.

Even so, I leaned close to Kendall to speak. “I just had a very weird conversation with Codsworth.”

“Weird how?”

“He’s now convinced he was abducted by aliens.”

Kendall’s brows shot up in surprise. “Why does he think that?”

“He showed me a weird mark on his shoulder,” I whispered to her. “I thought it was a bug bite, but…”

“But?” Kendall prompted when I didn’t go on.

“But the more I think about it, the more I wonder if it was something else.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“I honestly have no idea,” I admitted. “But I was thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to check the others to see if they have—”

“No,” Kendall said quickly.

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Don’t bother. And don’t waste your time.”

That stopped me, and I stared at Kendall for a moment, taken aback by her sudden reaction. I hadn’t even gotten to finish my sentence before she blew me off.

I opened my mouth to say something about it when I heard someone shout my name. I turned to see Lola charging for me, a grin on her face. I smiled and waved, but even as I greeted my friends, I began to wonder if Kendall was hiding something.

**Episode 5071**

**Xavier**

I turned to face the three intruders, quickly sizing them up. There were four of them, all big, all their faces covered by black knit caps.

Pieces of the broken mirror were scattered all around the bar, and some of the customers were screaming. Music was still playing through the overhead speakers, giving the scene a surreal vibe that was making me uneasy.

“Everyone, shut the hell up and keep your hands where we can see them!” one of the intruders shouted. “There’s no need for all the screaming if you plan to cooperate! And we really, truly hope you all know what’s at stake here, and we very much suggest cooperating.”

Another one aimed his gun right at me, Colton, and Greyson. “Eyes on the floor you three! And don’t get any funny ideas about trying to be a hero, it won’t work out very well for you—these are silver bullets.”

*That could be a lie. I can easily take out one or two of them, but if the bullets really are silver, I’d be screwed. It’s not like I have Torin or Cali here to heal me…but if I move fast enough, maybe I can chance it.*

As if reading my thoughts, Greyson whispered, “Don’t risk it. Not yet. We’ll get our chance.”

“Just a quick warning. If any of you wolves try to shift, you’ll get a silver bullet right between the eyes before your claws even appear. But if everyone behaves, nobody will get hurt, we’ll get what we came for, and then be on our way,” one of the men said as he paced around, eyeing everyone down.

“And what is it that you came for?” the bartender asked.

The one with the gun who seemed to be the leader said, “We’re here for the safe. What else?”

“Common thieves,” I snorted. “No imagination and thinking small. It’s always the safe. And they always fail.”

The leader spun around to look at me. “Don’t get lippy, my friend. We’re the ones in control here. Not you.”

I took a step toward him, quickly closing the distance between us but keeping my hands high.

“You’re not my friend.”

The leader snorted, “Just stay where you are—”

I lunged, grabbed the hand with the gun, and we both went crashing into a nearby table. We struggled, my hands busy trying to wrestle the gun from his hands. If I could just get ahold of it, I would be able to load him and the others up with the silver bullets before they even knew what hit them—but the man wasn’t making it easy.

I was about to grab the guy by the throat and slam him to the ground when I was blasted by a bolt of magic. I stumbled back, suddenly feeling very sleepy and barely able to remain on my feet.

“What the hell just happened?” I said, my words slow and sluggish. “Who the hell blasted me?”

Greyson and Colton quickly rushed to my side to catch me before I hit the floor.

One of the intruders took a step toward me, both of his hands still raised and remnants of magic charge crackling at his fingertips. “Should I blast him again?” He smirked. “In fact, PLEASE, let me blast him again. And next time I’ll make it count.”

I shook my head clear, realizing that the guy was either Fae or a witch. Greyson stepped between us and faced the leader.

“Take it easy, friend. You can’t blame him for trying,” Greyson said easily. “You come in here waving guns and magic around, you’re bound to have someone try to stop you. It’s in our nature to try and protect ourselves.”

The leader leveled his gun at us. “Fuck your nature! I told him not to do anything stupid and surprise, surprise, he didn’t listen. And if he does it again, *friend*, you’re all dead.”

My head was finally starting to clear, and I heard Greyson’s mind link come through.

*I told you to wait, Xavier. Just until we know for sure that we can take them. Right now, we have to play it slow. They’ve got the upper hand.*

As much as I wanted to argue with my brother, he was right. We were outnumbered and outgunned. If we were going to take them, it would have to be at the perfect time—and that time wasn’t now.

The leader cocked his head toward his crew. “Keep an eye on them. There are always a few dummies in the bunch, and I think we found them.”

The men laughed and closed in tighter around us.

The leader broke apart from the rest and moved toward the door. He held it open and shouted out into the lobby. “Come on!” he called out, and seconds later two more intruders came running in.

While the group huddled around to talk, I cursed to myself and then mind linked my brothers.

*Shit. Our opportunity to overtake them just took a hit. There are a lot of them. Only a miracle would help us get the jump on them at this point.*

Colton spoke up. *I think I can take out at least two of them if you two can handle the others.*

*We could do that, but we’ll have to be quick and take out the one with the magic, first*, Greyson replied.

*Yeah, but what if another one of them has magic? Then what?* I replied. *I was all gung-ho to take our chances until I realized they have a little more firepower than I predicted.*

*Is there any way for us to know who’s magic and who’s not?* Colton asked.

*Shit. No*, I replied. *For all we know, all of them might have the capability.*

“Yo, I can tell you three are talking. Shut up!” one of the intruders shouted at us. “We’re robbing a supernatural establishment; you really think we don’t know what we’re dealing with? Don’t make us kill you.”

Greyson, Colton, and I exchanged a look just as the leader returned.

“My associates and I are going to go check out the safe,” he said. “But in the meantime, I want everyone to empty out their pockets! I can tell by the look of you that you all have some good stuff to offer, and we want it. All of it.”

“No fucking way,” Colton cursed under his breath. “There’s no way I’m letting this asshole get his hands on Maya’s engagement ring.”

“Be quiet!” I hissed at him. “Just give him a fucking inventory of what you’ve got while you’re at it!”

I looked around as everyone began emptying their pockets. Cell phones, wallets, money clips, keys, and everything in between began to appear.

The leader nodded with pleasure as he took in the scene. Then he turned to look at us. “What are you three waiting for? Empty out your pockets.” He raised his gun. “Now. I won’t ask again.”

*These are nothing but a bunch of small-time crooks. It’s best to play along for now until we can find an in*, I thought to myself, knowing that my brothers were most likely thinking the same thing.

I started emptying my pockets, followed by Greyson. Colton looked at us both like we were betraying him and hesitated, slightly shaking his head in disbelief. “This is bullshit,” he said, his voice low.

The leader gestured at Colton with his gun. “Hey, man, you got a problem? Empty. Your. Fucking. Pockets. Now.”

Colton plunged a hand into his pocket and slammed the ring box onto a table. “You’ll all be lucky if you make it to the door after this is all said and done.”

The leader chuckled. “Well, too bad for you because this is my lucky day.” He quickly pocketed the ring.

One of the other intruders gestured. “Check that out.”

They all turned to look at a customer who was sitting at the edge of the bar, still sipping from his drink like none of this was happening. I’d hardly paid attention to the guy, and he was wearing an obviously expensive watch.

Another intruder approached the werewolf. “That’s a nice watch. Hand it over.”

The guy looked down at his watch and then took another swig from his drink before saying, “Rather not. It was a gift. Has sentimental value.”

The intruder laughed and looked around at his friends. “You hear that? It was a gift, he says.”

Then his smile faded. “You’re right. And you’re going to gift it to me. Now.”

He grabbed the werewolf’s wrist, and the two men struggled before the leader jumped in.

“Stop!” he shouted. He stepped up to the werewolf. “Tell me. Is that watch worth your life?”

The werewolf seemed to ponder that. “Okay. Fine. Here you go.” He started to remove the watch, and then he suddenly shoved the leader into the bar and partially shifted as he made a break for the door.

A gunshot rang out, and the werewolf crumpled to the floor, the watch still shining on his wrist.

**Episode 5072**

I was still trying to figure out why Kendall had shut down the conversation about Codsworth’s mysterious mark. It was yet another thing that made me question Kendall’s trustworthiness. I had no way of knowing for sure, but this seemed like another one of those times where she knew a lot more than she was letting on.

*But I know she’s not going to elaborate. She never does. She’s one of the most mysterious people I’ve ever met—and that’s saying a lot, considering the circles I run in these days.*

Lola came barging over. “I’m glad everyone could make it for this last-minute girls’ night! How about some shots to kick things off?”

I knew the plan was to loosen Kendall up by loading her with alcohol, but the idea of doing shots wasn’t very appealing. I didn’t want to get smashed while trying to get Kendall smashed. Didn’t seem like a good idea.

But Lola was already marching to the bar. “Shots for me and my friends! Something girlie and tasty!” she said to the bartender.

“Coming right up!” the bartender said, getting to work.

“Your friend is very…energetic,” Kendall remarked. “Is she always like this?”

I smiled at her. “Yup. That’s Lola. Always the life of the party.”

We found a table, and Lola came walking over with a crowded tray of shots. It was clear that Lola was serious about her plan to get Kendall drunk—and wanted to get us drunk right along with her.

*Damn. How many shots did she get? Why would the bartender let someone order that many? There must be some kind of law against this.*

Lola picked up a shot and raised it in the air. “Here’s to a fun girls’ night out!” Lola downed her shot, and everyone else followed and then slammed their glasses to the table.

I tried to sip mine, but despite it being a “girlie” shot, the alcohol burned my mouth and throat. I sputtered a little and tried to cover my disgust. I didn’t want to be the odd one out.

*Ugh. It literally tastes like gasoline with a little bit of lemony sugar thrown in. Why would anyone drink this willingly?*

I hadn’t even finished the first one when Lola raised another shot. “To having fun and closing the place down!”

Again, everyone downed their shots.

I was trying to catch up when Lola turned to Kendall. “So, how do you like the area?”

Kendall shrugged. “It’s certainly more exciting than I thought it would be. Not a whole hell of a lot to do, but there are other…charms.”

I was about to ask her what those other charms might be when Maya jumped in.

“Do you have a mate?” Maya asked. “Or someone special?”

Kendall put down her glass. “Keeping my options open.” Then she glanced at me. “I’m not ready to be tied down by one person, you know what I mean?”

I gulped.

*Why did she direct that at me? Is it a* due destini *dig? And if it is, how would she even know about that?*

Figuring that I was reading too much into it, I forced myself to down the rest of my shot. It burned all the way down, and I coughed, then tried to cover it with a loud, “Whoop!”

Maya gave me a knowing look and smirked.

“What’s it like to be out there on the prowl?” Lola asked. “All of us are mated, so we have to live vicariously through you. Have you met anyone interesting? Gone on any good dates—or any crappy ones?” Lola laughed.

Kendall shrugged. “I don’t know. Some are more interesting than others. I’ve had a few good dates, a few bad ones, though I suppose they weren’t all that bad. I tend to cut through bullshit quickly, so the dates either fall in line or go running for the hills.” She plucked another of the shots from the tray and downed it without a flinch.

*Whoa. She can drink. Hope Lola’s plan works.*

A moment later, we were interrupted by a bunch of frat boys. “Hey, ladies! How about buying us a round? That’s all it’ll take to win the pleasure of our company for the rest of the night.”

Maya turned to look at them, her face already screwed into a mask of disgust. “And why the hell would we do that? Get lost.”

The frat boys lingered, looking wounded.

“Um, but we’re hot, and you’re hot… Doesn’t that mean anything anymore?” one of them sputtered.

“Hey look, that girl over there just smiled at you,” Lola said, pointing in a vague direction. “You better hurry over before someone else catches her attention!”

“Really?” one of them said. Without another word and with a weak wave, they turned and walked away.

Lola laughed. “Boys.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Makes me glad that I’m not dating anymore. There’s nothing out here but dumbasses and the chronically immature.” She looked at Kendall. “I don’t envy you, personally.”

I turned to Kendall, who had watched the whole scene with a bored look on her face. “So, Kendall, how is it adjusting to life around here?”

“What do you mean?” Kendall deadpanned.

“Um, I mean…it’s kind of a small town. It can take some getting used to. And where did you say you were from?”

“I didn’t,” Kendall said breezily.

I choked on my drink, surprised by her terse response. I’d thought that bringing her out in a social situation might loosen her up a bit more…and though she did seem more at ease than usual, she was still kind of being her normal cagey self.

Kendall eyed me. “What about you? Was it difficult for you and Lola to adjust after living in Minnesota?”

“Wait, how’d you know we’re from Minnesota?” Lola asked before looking at me. “Did you tell her that, Cali?”

Kendall laughed. “No, she didn’t. I can tell by your accent.”

Lola looked a tad embarrassed. “Do I have an accent? I didn’t think I had one!”

“You do. And anyway, your mate told me during the barbeque,” Kendall added. “Said you and Cali are fresh out of the Midwest. And it makes sense when I really think about it.”

*Is that another dig? I can’t tell if she’s being nice or not.*

“You talked to Jay?” Lola asked.

Kendall looked past us. “Hey, have you guys ever tried riding a mechanical bull?”

She didn’t wait for an answer and headed over to the large contraption, pushing past the group of frat boys who were busy plying a group of giggling girls with pickup lines, trying their hardest to win them over.

Lola, Maya, and I got up and approached the bull.

“I’ve always wanted to try one of these things,” Lola admitted. “I didn’t even notice it tucked in this corner here until she pointed it out, though.”

“Who’s going first?” Maya asked. “I haven’t ridden one of these things in years.”

“I will,” I said, wanting to prove that I was just as strong as the werewolves. I was also feeling the effects of the two shots I’d taken.

Lola whipped out her phone and started recording as I climbed up onto the bull. I tried to get myself situated, but something was wrong.

“Where’s its head?” I asked.

Maya burst out laughing before saying, “You’re on it backward!”

But it was too late. The bull jerked to life, and I immediately went flying through the air, hitting the cushioned floor with a thud.

Lola hurried over to help me up, barely containing her laughter. I was embarrassed and sore.

“I guess I’m not built for bull riding,” I said sheepishly, my head still spinning.

Maya climbed on next and crushed it, drawing lots of cheers from the frat boys who were now hovering around the bull and watching us like a bunch of hungry dogs.

Lola was up next. She wasn’t as good as Maya was but managed to hang on, her body slithering and sliding back and forth as she rode the jerky machine’s waves, earning a round of cheers from the boys.

“You girls certainly know how to ride that thing!” one of them said to Maya.

“Get away from me before I shove your head so far up your ass you’ll see the future,” Maya hissed.

The frat boy raised his hands and quickly scuttled back into the protection of his group.

I was glad that Lola had crushed it, but I was still wishing that I’d done just a little better.

*I can’t believe I got on backward. I never even had a chance.*

It was Kendall’s turn, and she shoved her purse at me. “Hold this.”

She mounted the bull and sat side saddle, drawing “oohs” and “aahs” from the crowd. The machine jerked to life, and Kendall barely broke a sweat as she rode it, her expression as calm and cool and unbothered as ever.

I watched as something flew out of Kendall’s pocket and hit the floor. It was her cell phone. I went to get it when I realized that she had another phone in her bag. I was thrown.

*Why in the world does Kendall have two phones?*

**Episode 5073**

**Artemis**

I wasn’t sure if Celeste was even going to say anything. She hadn’t taken any pains since I arrived to make sure I was informed, just seemed hell-bent on parading me around as the heir without much concern or consideration for how I felt about all of this. She seemed content to simply shoehorn me into this position and force me to come to terms with it while keeping me in line with threats.

Even now, she had one foot out the door, eager to rush off to perform all her pressing duties she was always so quick to remind me about. But then, to my surprise, she paused and said, “Kadmos was very loyal. He was smart. He was also kind of funny, though he wasn’t really the type to smile all that much—he was warm, too. Above all else he was a strong warrior, but he had a surprisingly peaceful nature to him. It’s ultimately why the marriage between him and…your mother happened.”

*She’s mentioning my mother, which I suppose counts for something. I’m surprised. Judging by how she’s spoken about her before and the way Mom is presented in the family tree, I didn’t expect Celeste to even breathe her name, which, technically, she hasn’t. A Light Fae marrying a Dark Fae was still pretty unheard of.*

My heart started beating rapidly. Hearing about my father from someone who knew him, had interacted with him, always felt surreal. It was strange to go from knowing absolutely nothing about my father to learning all these things about his character. It made me want to find him more than ever so I could finally prove to everyone that he shouldn’t be spoken of in past tense.

My mother and Adair had opened up a bit about Kadmos, but I’d always craved more. That was why I was on this mission to find him here in the Fae world in the first place. I needed to know who Kadmos was to his very core. I deserved to learn all these things that Celeste was telling me about my father for myself.

“And what happened with…the marriage? What can you tell me?” I asked. I knew I was pushing it and wouldn’t be surprised if Celeste dismissed me and didn’t say anymore. She surprised me again when she turned back to address me—for once wearing an expression that was a tad softer than her usual look of mild disinterest mixed with annoyance.

Celeste sighed. “He did what had to be done. But that’s how Kadmos did everything. The war was at a breaking point…and it was heavily advised that he refrain from entering into the marriage at all, but it was the opinion of many that a marriage and a child could signify unity between the Light and Dark Fae.” Celeste shook her head. “And we see how that worked out. Kadmos was killed for it—in battle, of course, but that was just a convenient excuse.”

I couldn’t necessarily disagree. People had gone to great lengths to make sure that the Fae world thought I was dead—but I still believed that Kadmos was very much alive. I was ready to prove that to the rest of the world, too, especially his murderers. But I wanted more.

“Thanks, but I knew all of that. I want to know what he was like before all of that. Before he made the choice that doomed him. Surely there was more to him than his strength or his role in trying to bring the Light and Dark Fae together.”

Celeste sighed. “What more can I say?”

“Anything!” I said. “I’m hungry for more information about my father, anything else that you can reveal. He’s all I can think about!”

The last part slipped out, but it was true. I’d left everything I’d come to love in the human world behind just so I could track down my father and learn who and what I’d come from. I was close to getting just that, I could feel it.

“One thing I can tell you is that if Kadmos had lived, the war would be over and that would have made him so happy. Overjoyed, even. Kadmos loved life, believed in the goodness of people. He would have made a loving father, I have no doubt.”

I was overwhelmed by that. Mom had told me that Kadmos would be proud of me. It was almost too much to hear that from someone else—especially someone like Celeste. My mother had reason to try to encourage me and make me feel good about myself. Celeste did not—so I believed her.

“But the war cut his life short like it did so many others,” Celeste continued. “And I can sense shadows of Kadmos in you, Artemis. It’s in your blood—you are meant to fulfill what he started, and I know you won’t disappoint him. That’s why I’m being so hard on you. I can’t allow you to fall short. And I know that you won’t.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was taken aback that Celeste was speaking to me so gently, saying such nice things. I’d never have thought her capable of it. I searched my mind for a motive for why she was being so forthcoming all of a sudden, but I couldn’t come up with one. She obviously just wanted me to know all this, and though I had no plan to tell her, I really appreciated it.

“Continue studying,” she said. “It’ll do you some good.” Then she was gone.

I thought about Kadmos, tried to picture him as a living, breathing man—a warrior, a father. I was putting the little pieces together, trying my best to form a complete picture of a father I never knew. In my heart, I knew that I would find him. I just couldn’t give up and wasn’t about to let anything get in my way.

I turned back to the family tree book. There were names and titles that went back centuries, generations, making me realize that our family was tied to the history of the Fae world in ways I never would have imagined. I finally settled down and began reading.

Hours passed before I finally clapped the book closed, my eyes bleary from reading the small text. There was so much to learn, so much to memorize. I knew I could do it, but it was a hell of a lot to retain. Although memorizing a family tree was the last thing I’d pictured myself doing, I suddenly felt kind of good about the undertaking—even though it was still kind of a pain in the ass.

I leaned back in my chair, wondering when Celeste was going to return. It was jarring to realize that I wouldn’t mind seeing her again, talking to her again. She’d shown herself to be way more layered than I’d first thought. I was used to being misunderstood, so I was sure that I could have easily misunderstood Celeste, too, though Celeste had gone out of her way at first to make sure she came across like a raging bitch.

Then I remembered that I had free rein to explore. I didn’t have to wait for Celeste’s permission. And this way, I’d be able to find out exactly what Aelwen’s deal was.

I started toward the door, then stopped and returned to my bedside table, grabbing a knife from a tray that had been brought to me. It wasn’t much more than a dull butter knife, but I’d killed with far less at my disposal, and there was no way I was going to face Aelwen again unarmed.

I left my room and headed down to the kitchen, doing my best to blend in as I searched for Aelwen. I had the knife gripped tight in my hand, at the ready, feeling like I was living my old life as a bounty hunter again.

*This feels way more natural than being an heir. Living on the edge, keeping my head on a swivel, preparing myself for any unexpected attack, readying myself to fight to the death. I feel right at home.*

I supposed all of that was behind me now…though it was nice to have a little taste of it now and then. Even though I was sure most people would disagree, there was something simple about the bounty hunter life, and I’d always found it easy to lose myself in it—even though at the height of it I’d been under the Kollector’s thumb. But hunting prey still came second nature to me, and I was ready to show Aelwen just who she’d threatened before.

I slipped into the kitchen, and Aelwen’s eyes grew wide as I approached. She dropped the tray she was holding on a counter and waited, her eyes darting around as if she were plotting her escape.

“You again. What are you doing here?” she said when her eyes finally came back to rest on me.

I grabbed her as discreetly as I could and ushered her into an alcove, then pressed the knife into her throat and leaned in close. “This is how it’s going to go. You’re going to help me, and you’re going to start now!”

**Episode 5074**

**Colton**

I watched the werewolf hit the ground, the acrid smell of gunpowder mixing with the unmistakable smell of death. The leader stood over the downed werewolf and kicked his limp body with his shoe before turning to look at the rest of us.

“Let that be a reminder to not be a hero. I swear it won’t work out the way you think it will…as you can see.” Then he bent down to snatch the expensive watch off the corpse’s wrist and pocketed it, looking very pleased with himself.

*That’s the same pocket my ring’s in.* *There’s no way in hell I’m going to lose it a second time, especially to a piece of shit like him. I just have to be smart about getting it back. And if I die trying, Maya will kill me, so I’m dead either way, I guess. I can’t leave her to raise the twins without me. But I’m not leaving here without her ring, either.*

Xavier and Greyson and I stood shoulder to shoulder looking at the downed werewolf as the telltale signs of silver poisoning appeared on his body—the dark veins spreading rapidly across his skin. There was nothing we could do for him now. It was too late. It pained me to think that he’d died over a watch, and it made me even angrier that someone would kill another person over nothing more than a trinket.

I looked at the man who’d blasted Xavier. He was possibly Fae and had enough blood to heal everyone in this room from silver poisoning, but it wasn’t likely that he was going to volunteer.

“That was a nice watch, but definitely not worth dying over,” Greyson remarked. Then he glared at the leader. “But obviously it was worth killing someone over? I suppose you don’t have enough money to buy your own nice things, so you have to rip them off the dead bodies of innocent people.”

I nudged Greyson in the arm, wanting him to tread lightly. It wasn’t that I was afraid of any of these people—far from it—but it was clear that these guys weren’t afraid to kill for the smallest reason. Greyson got on my nerves most of the time, but I still wasn’t interested in seeing him gunned down for mouthing off.

The leader glared at Greyson. “Shut up!” he spat. “I warned the guy, he didn’t listen and paid the price.” He turned to consider everyone else in the room. “Does anyone else want to try me?” He held up his smoking gun. “I’ve got plenty of bullets where that one came from. Go ahead and test me and see how fast I blast you to bits.”

I tore my eyes from the guy’s pocket. “The only thing I want is for all of you to get the fuck out of here.”

The leader smiled. “I think we can all agree on that. And if all goes according to plan, it’ll happen sooner rather than later. Emphasis on sooner,” the leader grumbled before turning to a few of his associates. “Why are you all still here? The safe is in the back office!” He snapped his fingers. “Get to it. We don’t have all day, and this place is starting to cramp my style!”

Two of the intruders jumped to follow the leader’s orders while the other three continued walking around, shaking down the rest of the customers. They’d brought out burlap sacks and were tossing everything the people gave them into the bags and cinching each of them tightly once they were full.

“What a shame,” Greyson muttered as he and Xavier moved in closer to me so that we could talk without being noticed. “These bunch of amateurs robbing people of their prized possessions. It’s hard to watch.”

“We’re going to have to do something,” Xavier whispered. “This is going from bad to worse.”

“Agreed. Now that they’ve killed someone, it means they won’t think twice about killing again—and I doubt they’re the types to leave witnesses. For all we know, they don’t plan on leaving a person in here alive.”

“All I care about is getting my ring back,” I whispered. “There are only three of them in here right now. Maybe we should make our move while the others are busy with the safe?”

“That could work*,*”Xavier replied. “Three on three. I like those odds.”

“But be cautious. We need to work together if we want to avoid getting shot and setting off a killing spree. We aren’t the only hostages here,” Greyson said. “I don’t want to put anyone else’s life in danger.”

“But we’re not the only supernaturals here, either,” I pointed out. “Maybe we should talk to some of the others, see if they’re down to help us. All we really need is one vamp, werewolf, witch, or hell, I’ll take that clairvoyant from before to help tilt things back in our favor. These guys aren’t that smart, and I think we can overwhelm them if we play things right.”

“Shut up!” the leader shouted at us. “Say another word and you’ll be as dead as your friend over there.”

The three of us exchanged a look, and I could feel the anger seething between us. At this point, I was fantasizing about wringing his neck and ripping his friends limb from limb. I was confident that would come to fruition soon, we just had to bide our time.

“We’re just trying to calm each other down,” Xavier said. “After all, this is all taking so damn long. How else are we supposed to pass the time?”

*I’m starting to think that my brothers have death wishes. Why are they prodding these maniacs?*

“It’s fine,” I said quickly. “We’ll be quiet. We don’t want to, um, disturb your crime flow or whatever.”

“Listen to this one. He might keep you three assholes alive,” the leader said before turning toward the open door of the back office. “What’s the holdup? I’m over this place! Get the damn thing open, get the money, and let’s get the hell out of here!”

One of the intruders appeared from the back room. “We’re working on it, but it’s not as easy as we thought.”

*That leader is a demon for sure*, Xavier mind linked. *I saw enough of them in the demon world to know one when I see one. We’re dealing with a damn cocktail of supernatural crooks in here.*

The leader jumped in. “What the fuck do you mean it’s not as easy as you thought? That’s why I brought you and the witch here in the first place—so she could work her magic and help you crack the damn thing! Fuck!” He pounded his fist on the bar top in anger. “I gave you one fucking job, and we literally went over this before we came here! Are you fucking joking?”

“Sorry, boss, I wish I had better news,” the intruder said.

“Supernaturals or not, these guys are hacks,” Xavier whispered. “They have no idea what they’re doing. And for what?” Xavier looked around. “This place is niche. Doesn’t draw that much of a crowd, so that means they’re doing all of this over a handful of cash at most. Pathetic.”

“I don’t get it, either, but I feel like I’ve seen people do worse things for less. I just want Maya’s ring back,” I said, keeping my eyes on them.

I thought about Maya and what she would’ve done if she were here. I had a feeling that she would kick my ass if she knew that I was having this much trouble getting out of a basic hostage situation run by a bunch of hacks. But I didn’t want to make a deadly mistake. Death by silver wasn’t on my bucket list.

Keeping my eyes on the intruders who now had their backs to us as they argued about what they were going to do next, I sidled up to a nearby werewolf.

“You willing to throw in with us when we make a move?” I said in a low voice, barely moving my lips. I wasn’t about to get us killed for talking too loudly.

The werewolf was equally quiet with his reply, nodding as he said, “I’m in. I’m just passing through, and these fucks took my passport. I have to be in London next week, and I’m not about to be stuck here because of them. I’m ready to tear them apart. Just say the word.”

“Perfect. Watch for the signal, okay?” I said before going back to stand with my brothers. “That werewolf over there is with us,” I told them. “So the numbers are in our favor.”

“Good,” Xavier and Greyson said in unison.

“So… what are we waiting for? We have the element of surprise on our side—we need to use it. Sooner rather than later.”

Greyson let out a big breath and nodded. “Okay, don’t get shot, you guys.”

Xavier nodded, and then silently, he mouthed, “Three, two, one…”

**Episode 5075**

I was majorly confused and blinked for a moment, wondering if I was just seeing things. It wasn’t like Kendall had an old iPod in there—it was literally a phone. As far as I was concerned, the only reason a person had two phones was if they were hiding something big. Otherwise, what was the point?

I quickly looked away as Kendall came to grab her bag. “Wow, that was fun, right? Should we go again? Maybe give you a chance to redeem yourself?” She laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone get on the thing backward before.” She pointed at the now stationary bull. “The head is clear as day right there. How did you miss it?”

I flashed a weak smile and shook my head. “Yeah, don’t know how I missed it, either. Probably had one too many shots. Anyway, not getting up there again—next time I might puke, and that would be way more embarrassing than mounting the wrong way. I’m good on riding the bull for the night, I think.”

“Agreed,” Lola said. “It was a close call last time. I say we get a pitcher of margs and kick this night into high gear.”

“I vote for fries,” Maya said.

“Ooh, fries and margs does sound good…and maybe a burger,” Kendall said.

We all started heading back to our table when I grabbed Lola and hissed in her ear, “Kendall has two phones!”

Lola stopped. “What? How do you know? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said! She has two phones! One flew out of her pocket on the bull, but she has one in her purse, too. Why would she have two phones other than to do shady things?”

Lola shook her head, eyeing Kendall. “Well, what do you know? That sneaky, sexy, purple-eyed minx! You know what we have to do, right?” Lola’s eyes were sparkling with excitement, and I knew that look all too well.

I knew, alright, but was nervous to say it aloud. This kind of thing was Lola’s MO, but that didn’t make it right…even though I knew what we had to do. What we came here to do. If we were going to get to the bottom of who Kendall was, we were going to have to do some things that probably weren’t technically aboveboard. I knew that, and I also knew that Lola would be the one to push things if it came to that. Now was that time.

“We have to get the second phone,” I said in a small voice. “By any means necessary.”

Lola wiped a fake tear from her eye. “I’ve taught you so well, Cali. The only problem is, how are we going to do that? It’s in her purse, you know, the one she has by her side at all times.”

“Shoot. If there was a time to do it, it was literally just now when I was holding it for her. I missed my chance,” I said forlornly. “Now what are we going to do?”

“Hmmm. We could just ask her *why* she has two phones, but she’s been so ambiguous about everything that I doubt we’d get a straight answer. Let’s not forget about the fake IDs. She’s hiding something for sure. We just have to find out what—and those phones have to be the key.”

“Not to mention that if we ask her, she’ll know we’re on to her…or at least that we’re suspicious,” I said. “And she’s the type that might make herself scarce if she thinks someone’s snooping around.”

“I couldn’t agree more. So what we need is a plan,” Lola said. “A way to distract her and take the phone without tipping her off.”

“You mean you want to *steal* her phone?” I said. “I don’t know about that.”

“We won’t be stealing it, just borrowing it. We can check it out and put it back before she even knows it’s gone. Piece of cake,” Lola said, waving me off.

“You make it sound so easy,” I grumbled, feeling uncertain about all of this. I didn’t even want to imagine what might happen if we got found out. Kendall didn’t seem the type to be all that forgiving about that sort of thing—and honestly, who would be?

“How are we supposed to distract her, anyway?” I asked. “Like you said, like most people who carry purses, she’s got it nearby or her eye on it at all times.”

Kendall suddenly caught my attention and gestured across the room. “Hey, Cali, isn’t that one of your packmates over there?”

I turned and saw Rishika in a corner booth lip-locked with Cresta. Immediately, I thought of Artemis but quickly reminded myself that Rishika had every right to see other people. She’d made that clear, and I wasn’t about to push the issue again after what happened last time. It was something I had to get over for now.

“Hmm, maybe Rishika can help us,” I said to Lola. “I’m going to go over and say hello.”

I rushed over to Rishika and Cresta, who both looked more than a little annoyed at the interruption.

“Cali, great to see you again,” Cresta said in a dry voice. “And here of all places.” She looked at Rishika. “I thought we’d ventured far enough out of the neighborhood to, you know, enjoy some privacy.”

“The Redwoods are everywhere,” Rishika joked with a wink.

“Hey,” I said. “Cool seeing you two out tonight.”

“Yeah, cool,” Rishika replied, watching me closely.

I stood there, rocking back on my heels and feeling awkward before I glanced back at Kendall, Lola, and Maya. “Were either of you able to hear what we were talking about over there?”

Rishika arched her eyebrows at me as if I’d asked the dumbest question she’d ever heard. “Um…no. It’s pretty noisy in here. Why?”

“Well, I need your help. We’re out with Kendall trying to, um, learn a little bit more about her. I recently discovered that Kendall has two phones, and me and Lola want to get one of them and find out why. I could use your expertise.”

Rishika nodded slowly, her eyes on Kendall. “I’m in. I’ve never trusted her.”

“Great!” I said.

“Is this the kind of stuff your pack does? Steal phones and meddle in other people’s business?” Cresta said to Rishika.

Rishika shrugged. “Yeah, from time to time,” Rishika said. “You want to learn how we do it?”

Cresta shrugged. “I guess.”

I led the way back over to the others. As we passed by a dartboard, Rishika smiled and said, “And I have just the thing that’ll get us what we need.”

“Hey all! Nice to see you, Kendall,” Rishika said brightly as we rejoined the others. “Anybody down for a game of darts?”

Maya snorted. “Darts? Really? Waste of time.”

“I’ve played a couple of times, but I’m not very good,” Kendall said.

“I used to play in high school. I was on the dart team,” Cresta said.

I was surprised. “Your school had a dart team?”

“Yes. That’s what I just said,” Cresta said.

“I guess I was just surprised to hear that.”

“Clearly,” Cresta replied. “So, are we going to do this? Can’t wait to play darts!”

*I guess she’s trying to help?*

We quickly paired up: Rishika and Cresta versus me and Kendall versus a very over-it Maya and Lola.

“You can throw on my behalf,” Maya said to her teammate. “Darts aren’t my thing.”

As we gathered around the dartboard, I eyed Kendall’s purse.

“Maybe we should all throw our stuff in that booth over there?” I said.

Everyone tossed their things in the booth, and then Rishika quickly explained the rules. I wasn’t really listening—I was too nervous. Stealing wasn’t really my thing—nor was borrowing—as Lola had put it. I wanted to find out what Kendall was up to, but I hoped we weren’t going a little too far over the line to do it.

*Really, what will I do if Kendall catches me? What possible explanation will I be able to give? “Oh, my hand accidentally fell in your bag, my bad”? “Oh, I thought your very distinct, brightly colored bag was mine”?*

I eyed my simple black bag sitting near Kendall’s and knew that explanation would never work. Kendall was much too sharp for that.

“Cali, what the hell, it’s your turn!” Lola said, pointing to Kendall, who was holding out my darts.

I took them and threw them—and only one of them hit the board. Then, as Kendall took aim, I stepped back and reached behind me, searching until my hand landed inside Kendall’s bag.

I was rummaging around for the phone when Kendall turned back to look at me. “Now, watch how it’s done!”

I froze and forced a smile, my hand still hovering behind me. “Can’t wait to see you help out our score!” I said lamely.

Kendall nodded and then turned around and threw her dart as I frantically searched, holding my breath.

Kendall scored a bullseye, and everyone cheered.

I was about to give up when I finally felt the phone. Gleeful, I wrapped my fingers tightly around it. I felt a rush of adrenaline. I had the phone, but now what?!

**Episode 5076**

**Xavier**

As soon as the word “one” left my lips, we burst into action. We did end up having the element of surprise on our side—and it worked.

Colton charged the closest intruder, the one we’d pegged as Fae, and slammed into him, knocking him hard against the bar. He let out a loud, almost comical “oof” as Colton began laying into him, pummeling him with punches to the gut.

Greyson tackled the leader, driving him into a table and shattering it into a million pieces of sharp glass. Greyson didn’t let up, picking up one of the glass shards and slashing it out at the leader, who dodged the strikes, taking huge leaps backward until Greyson had him cornered against the wall. The leader held up his hands in surrender—only to quickly pull a blade from his back pocket and start jabbing it at Greyson, who easily dodged his attacks.

I was partially shifted, and so was my opponent, a werewolf, who bared his sharp teeth and tried to counter my attacks with a few claw strikes of his own—but he wasn’t as good of a fighter as I was and obviously wasn’t an Alpha. I overcame him quickly, slashing him across the face with my claws and drawing blood, then using my forearm to pin him against the wall by the neck.

The wolf surprised me by pushing me backward and leaping on top of me, his partially shifted face growling and snarling as he tried to get to my neck. I quickly vaulted up, throwing him off me and sending him off balance. Pushing my advantage, I fully shifted and took a bite out of his side, causing him to let out a yowl that mixed in nicely with the sounds of general bedlam unfolding around us.

I shifted back, breathing hard, and took a quick survey of the room. Colton and Greyson were holding their own, and that made me proud.

It felt good to finally get a chance to take care of the lowlifes who were doing nothing more than terrorizing a bunch of people and wasting everyone’s time. It wasn’t that I wanted to keep up this god-awful brother’s “camping” trip with them, though I was happy that I’d made some leeway with Colton on the Ava thing.

At this point, I was just looking forward to clearing these assholes out and sitting and having a drink and, dare I say, shooting the shit for once—at least for a bit—before getting the hell out of here and going back home.

*This is certainly one way to spend an evening…*

A gun fired, shattering a chandelier overhead, adding to the confusion. I looked around, searching for the source. The werewolf I’d just been fighting—who, when I looked back at him, was healing right before my eyes—took my partially distracted state as an opportunity to attack and was lunging right for me.

*I hate fighting supernaturals. So hard to get a good advantage when they’re always healing so quickly.*

The werewolf Colton recruited jumped into the fray, fully shifting as he leapt onto the werewolf attacking me, tackling him in midair and knocking him to the floor.

“Thanks, man!” I said just as I finally spotted the one who’d shot the gun—the Fae.

Almost immediately, the Fae dropped the firearm and blasted Colton with a bolt of bright white magic, sending him flying into a pole.

Colton’s guy was keeping the werewolf intruder busy, so I scrambled for the gun that was still spinning across the floor.

Colton was on his feet instantly and moved to duck behind the pole he’d collided with just as the Fae hurled a chair at him. The chair stopped me from reaching the gun, but I quickly intercepted the chair, smashing it to pieces with my hands as Colton took hold of the pole, swung himself around it, and kicked the Fae in the face.

“That was a lot harder than it looks on TV. Mad respect to action heroes,” Colton said as he landed, panting hard and slightly off balance.

Greyson was going after the gun now, but then he was blasted back by fire magic—and I recognized that magic all too well—the leader was definitely a demon.

Flames licked at Greyson, stopping him from getting the gun. I leapt across the table and kicked the demon in the stomach and then used a partially shifted claw to rake at him.

“Fuck you!” the leader screamed as he dodged another one of my attacks and slid across the floor and grabbed the gun.

“Fuck you!” I screamed back, rushing him and knocking him to the floor. We grappled, rolling across the floor, kicking and clawing and punching until I realized he was trying his damnedest to aim the gun. Shifting my tactics, I tried to pin his arms to the ground with my elbows while simultaneously trying to strongarm the gun away from him as the demon struggled to point it right at my chin.

Then Greyson shifted, latched onto the leader’s arm, and tugged, and the gun went flying.

“Thanks, bro!” I said breathlessly. I was about to go for the gun again when an odd sensation passed through me. I suddenly felt like I was moving through Jell-O.

*Come on, Xavier! It’s time for the picnic!*

“What the fuck, is that Cali’s voice?” I said slowly, the words sounding strange and warped to my own ears. But I would know that voice anywhere; it *was* Cali, but how?

I closed my eyes, and the second I did I was with Cali in the Redwood pack house kitchen while she quickly packed things into a basket.

“We don’t want to be late,” Cali said, smiling at me.

I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up onto the counter and then leaned into her, her sweet scent saturating my nose and filling me with pleasure and contentment.

Cali playfully pushed me back. “Come on, Xavier. We don’t want to be late, do we?”

“We can be a few minutes late, can’t we?” I traced a hand across her cheek, down into the dip of her neck and down over the curve of her breasts where they rose, soft and perfect, just above the plunging neckline of her lacy white shirt. “You shouldn’t have worn this shirt if you wanted me to keep my hands off of you.”

“Xavier,” Cali moaned, throwing her head back as I trailed my hands the rest of the way down, grabbed her ass, and pulled her tightly against me. “Maybe I wore it on purpose…”

“You know you’re the one I want, right? The one I love. I’m so happy with you right here, right now.” I kissed her hard, my tongue tasting her sweet mouth, wanting more as my pulse quickened. “Fuck the picnic,” I growled against her mouth. “I’ll eat right here at home.”

My lips started drifting down, down, down, and then suddenly I felt like I’d just been hit by a car, and everything sped up.

I wasn’t in the kitchen anymore. I was back in the bar, and Colton had just slammed into one of the Fae.

“Stop it, you fucking bastard! Leave my brother the fuck alone! Keep your weird magic to yourself!” Colton screamed, swiping his claws at the Fae who started lobbing balls of magic energy at him, trying to back him off.

My head was spinning, and I was still trying to regain my sense of what was real and what wasn’t.

*That moment with Cali—that was obviously not the real thing, but it sure the hell felt like it. What the fuck was that?*

I did my best to shake it off, trying to get my head back in the game. I bounced up and down on the balls on my feet and attempted to focus on something tangible.

*Where’s the gun?*

I didn’t have time to look for it, barely had time to think. A werewolf, fully shifted, was heading right for me. I grunted as we collided, narrowly avoiding its chomping jaws and dropping low to ram a shoulder into the wolf’s side. His momentum worked against him, and he lost his footing and went sprawling across the ground.

“I’ve got your back!” said the werewolf Colton had recruited as he ran up to join me. “I’m Levan, by the way.”

“Thanks, Levan,” I said, partially shifting a claw as the werewolf intruder gained his footing, shook his head to clear it, and came running at the both of us again. “Let’s fuck this guy up! You go right, I’ll go left,” I shouted.

Levan and I both broke in opposite directions at the last minute, just as the werewolf lunged. He landed, empty-handed and frustrated, letting out a howl of anger.

Just as he circled around to attack again, Levan and I both shifted and tore into the werewolf from opposite sides.

We took him down quickly, but before I could go in for the kill, Colton’s voice grabbed my attention.

“I’ve almost fucking got it!” he shouted as he broke free from his fight with the Fae and jumped to grab the gun. But just as he reached for it, the gun slid across the floor and right into the hands of one of the intruders who’d come from the back room.

“That fucking witch!” Colton screamed. “Using her fucking magic to toy with us! I hate witches…not all witches, but fucking most of them!” Colton shouted.

The witch wrapped her fingers around the gun and fired.

At the very last moment, Colton shoved me out of the line of fire. The bullet tore into the intruder werewolf who had just started to get to his feet and shift back. He slid across the floor as he screamed out in agony, clawing at his skin as black veins began to spread.

“Why the fuck did you shoot him?” the leader screamed. “He’s the fucking safecracker!”

“I didn’t mean to! You know I’ve never been good with guns!” the witch screamed, and then she leveled the gun right at Colton. I froze, Greyson froze, and all three of us shared frantic looks.

For the first time tonight, I saw real fear in my brothers’ eyes.

Colton backed up, his hands in the air, uneasy as he kept his eyes on the witch’s trigger finger. “Don’t shoot! I didn’t mean what I said about hating witches. I’m sure you’re very nice when you’re not trying to rob and kill a bunch of people!”

“Shut up!” the leader screamed. “Kill him, and you better not miss!”

Greyson jumped up. “No,” he said, voice laced with determination. “There’s no need for any of that. We’ll help you open the safe.”

**Episode 5077**

My heart was pounding a mile a minute, and I could feel sweat breaking out across my brow. It was obvious that I could never be a professional thief. I didn’t have the stomach for it. All I could think about was how awkward and horrifying it would be if Kendall caught me with her phone.

But I couldn’t think about that right now. I had to keep my head in the game. Now that I had the phone, I needed to show Lola—but I couldn’t do it in front of everyone else.

“I need to go to the bathroom!” I said a little too loudly.

Lola stared at me with a puzzled look. “So go to the bathroom. No one’s stopping you.”

“WE need to go to the bathroom. Don’t you need to go, too, Lola? I know your bladder is tiny, and it makes you have to go all the time.”

Lola gave me a crazy look. “What the hell? I don’t need to go, and I don’t have a small bladder.” She looked at everyone. “I don’t. It’s normal sized.”

Sighing, I caught Lola’s attention again and used my eyes to stare toward Kendall’s bag and then widened my gaze as I looked back at Lola, nodding slowly.

“What is wrong with you?” Lola said, her face marred in confusion. “You’re being weird.”

Frustrated, I reached out and grabbed her by the arm. “Just come with me!” I yanked Lola away. “We’ll be right back! Kendall, you can take my turn.”

“But Cali, what the fuck? I’m doing so well and kicking everyone’s ass!” Lola complained. “Why are you acting so strange? You didn’t even drink that much! You’re such a lightweight.”

“Lola, I got the phone!” I hissed.

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Oh. Where? Let me see it!”

I slid the phone into Lola’s hand, relieved to no longer have the stolen item in my possession. Somehow it seemed like all stolen things were right at home in Lola’s hands.

Lola looked down at the device with excitement and then picked up the pace, leading the way to the bathroom. We burst in, and Lola led me into a small stall and shut the door.

“God, it smells in here!” I said.

“It’s a dive bar bathroom. Of course it smells,” Lola said distractedly, her attention on the phone. “Shit, it’s locked.”

I groaned. “This was nothing but a big, risky waste of time! I guess we better just hurry up and sneak it back into Kendall’s bag. Let’s just pretend this never happened. It was a bad idea from the beginning.”

Lola eyed me. “What? Have you really lost faith in me?” She pulled a small device from her pocket and plugged it into the phone.

“What is that thing?”

“Shush, you never saw this!” Lola said.

A few seconds later, Lola swiped open the phone. “We’re in.”

*Okay, I’m really feeling guilty about invading her privacy like this, but we have to do it. Kendall is too secretive and mysterious. She’s left us no choice. If she would’ve just been a little more forthcoming, we wouldn’t be breaking into her phone right now.*

Lola’s eyes went wide. “You won’t believe this.” She showed me the screen.

“What’s so shocking about that? It’s just a dating app,” I said. “Though that’s not what I expected. Shit. Now I really feel bad. We’re snooping into Kendall’s private life! This is messed up! We shouldn’t be doing this!”

I reached for the phone, but Lola pulled it away and accidentally swiped right. “Oops!” Lola hissed.

The screen flashed, *You have a match!*

“Oh no! Did we just hook Kendall up with some rando guy?” I covered my face with my hands. “What if he’s an asshole or something? We’ll be responsible for her getting treated badly.”

“Cali, please calm down.”

“I can’t! We just literally swiped right on someone else’s phone! That’s just…not right!”

Lola shrugged. “At least it’s a hot rando guy. Hmm. I wonder who else she’s matched with. It might give us a little insight.” Lola began snooping through the app, looking through Kendall’s profile and matches.

“Lola, now this isn’t cool. We’ve gone too far.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected to find on Kendall’s second phone, but a dating app wasn’t it. It was a lot less scandalous than I’d hoped. She probably just used this phone for all her dating stuff so she didn’t have to give out her real number, or something.

A text came in from Greyson. *I’d love to meet at Bellhouse! I’m on my way.*

I freaked out and grabbed the phone from Lola. “What? *My* Greyson?” But then upon closer inspection, I saw that the name was spelled with an “a” and not an “e.” I felt stupid and relieved…but that was still a weird coincidence.

“I think we’ve snooped enough, Lola,” I said.

“But remember, we wouldn’t be snooping at all if she didn’t have two phones and if our Alpha trusted her.” Lola took the phone back from me and scrolled through a little bit more. She sighed. “Okay, now this is actually kind of boring. There’s nothing useful here. Just a typical burner Tinder phone.”

We exited the stall, taking a moment to collect ourselves before we walked back out into the bar.

“Just act natural, okay?” Lola whispered.

“I wish you hadn’t said that!” I hissed. All of a sudden, I felt like everyone was watching me. It was as if they all knew just how horrible I was.

Lola slipped me the phone. “Put it back in her purse while I distract her, okay?”

Lola headed right for Kendall, who was throwing back a beer and waiting her turn at the dartboard.

I reached the booth and was alarmed to see that everything had shifted around. Kendall’s bag was missing.

*Shit.*

Frantically, I rifled through the pile of coats and bags, but it wasn’t there. I turned back to alert Lola, trying my damnedest not to freak out, when to my absolute horror I saw that Kendall now had the bag slung over her shoulder.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

*Oh no! What if she already knows that we stole her phone? What will she do to us? We did all that snooping, and we still don’t know the first thing about her. What if she’s a killer and attacks us or something? Or worse yet, calls the police on us? What excuse could we even give? I don’t want to go to jail!*

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I’d been in stickier situations than this. I just had to keep calm and make sure that I didn’t get caught, no matter what.

I took a few steps toward where Lola and Kendall were talking. I could see Lola watching me out of the corner of her eye, probably wondering what the hell I was doing.

*Okay, Kendall’s bag is kind of open. All I have to do is go up to her and slip the phone back inside. I can do this.*

I hid the phone behind my back and affected a drunken air as I stumbled toward Kendall. I pretended to trip and latched onto her, causing her to throw a dart wide, almost nailing one of the frat boys in the face. Luckily, he was too drunk to notice.

I dropped the phone in Kendall’s bag and let out a loud burp. Kendall gave me a disgusted look but then reached out to steady me. “Wow. You’re wasted. And if you don’t mind, aim your burps that way,” she said, jerking a thumb toward Lola.

“Hey!” Lola said. “Don’t burp on me, either!”

“Sorry, Kendall, just one too many shots!” I stumbled over to Lola and whispered, “I did it!”

Lola gave me a proud look. “That’s my girl.” She gave me a light punch in the arm.

Kendall hitched her bag up on her shoulder and downed the last swig of her beer before slamming the bottle on the counter and saying, “Well, this has been fun and all, but my date’s here.” She waved, and I turned to see a tall, hot blond guy—Greyson but not quite Greyson.

“Lola, make sure to get Cali home safe—she didn’t drink responsibly,” Kendall threw over her shoulder as she sauntered away.

“I will,” Lola said.

I gave Lola a swat. “Stop! I’m not even drunk. And I’m very responsible!”

“I know, I know. But we have to keep up the ruse, don’t we?” Lola turned her attention back to Kendall’s date, who looked absolutely stoked to see her. “So this is Grayson with an ‘a,’ huh? Nice.”

Rishika came up to us. “Well?”

“We didn’t find much of anything,” I admitted. “Just a phone that she uses for all her dating apps and stuff.”

“Real cool, so you invaded someone’s privacy for nothing,” Maya said, suddenly entering the conversation—Lola must have filled her in on our failed plan while I was returning Kendall’s phone to her purse. It was obvious that she didn’t care as much about Kendall’s privacy as giving us a hard time, but that was Maya. “So. Now what?”

Lola pulled me toward the door. “Now, we follow her!”

**Episode 5078**

**Artemis**

Aelwen’s alarm quickly gave way to a questioning look. “Wait, is that a butter knife?” She smirked at me, relaxing even more. “Did you really come all the way down here to threaten me with a *butter* knife?” She leaned forward to examine the knife’s edge. “And it’s not even the kind with any ridges on it!”

“I’m not here to debate cutlery! I want answers!” I shot back. “Tell me what I want to know!”

“And why the hell should I help some spoiled brat?” Aelwen countered. “If you want help, I’m sure there are any number of people waiting to do whatever you ask. People like you are never in short supply of help! Leave me out of it!”

I pulled back, shocked. “What? Why would you think that? People like me? What do you mean by that?”

“You’re a guest of Celeste’s. So I assume you’re just another privileged Dark Fae. Just go and find one of your servants and make them do your bidding. I’m sure you have plenty. Just leave me the hell alone—I have work to do.”

I scoffed. “I don’t have servants, and I’m not privileged. I’m a bounty hunter, and I’ve been forced to stay here.”

By no means was I a typical prisoner…I was being treated pretty well, considering, and had free range of the grounds. But I couldn’t leave, and that was all that mattered. And I didn’t need to explain all of that to Aelwen, anyway.

Aelwen looked wary. “A bounty hunter armed with a butter knife? Nice story. Try again.”

“A butter knife isn’t just for slicing butter,” I hissed as I pressed the blade harder against Aelwen’s neck. “Shall I demonstrate?”

Aelwen gulped. “No. What do you want to know?”

I relaxed a little, hoping that I’d made my point. “I want to know why Marius told me to seek you out. It’s obvious you don’t want to help me, but he said you would. I want an explanation.”

“Let me get this straight, you want me to tell you why *Marius* told you to do something? Do I *look* like Marius to you? How the hell should I know?” Aelwen shook her head in disbelief.

*She has a point, but she must know something. There’s no way Marius would send me her way if he didn’t think she’d be useful. But she’s certainly not making this easy for me.*

“Don’t make me ask again,” I said, my voice icy. “Why did Marius tell me to seek you out? He’s not always the most straightforward person, but he usually has an inkling of a method to his madness.”

Aelwen sighed and finally replied, her jaw tense. “He may have sent you to me to help, but I have my reasons for being cautious. There’s a lot of tension in the court, and I have to be careful who I talk to and what I say. You’re a stranger. Why the hell would I just start blabbing to you, helping you? I have to protect myself.”

“But I’m not part of the court,” I assured her, which was technically true for the time being. “Is there somewhere else we can talk?” I looked around. We were alone for now, but I knew that could change at any moment.

“The grain room just down the hall should work. I’m usually the only one who uses it.”

I pulled the knife away. “Just remember, I won’t hesitate to use this if you try anything.”

“I believe you. I wouldn’t put anything past one of Celeste’s Dark Fae. I’m only a lowly kitchen staff member, after all. I’m used to this kind of treatment,” Aelwen grumbled as she shuffled out of the kitchen.

I hated being lumped in with Celeste’s people, but if that was what it took for Aelwen to fall in line, so be it.

Aelwen led the way down the hall to the grain room. We slipped inside, and Aelwen quickly shut the door behind her. “You know, I could get locked up in the dungeon if I get caught with you. Servants around here have been jailed for much less.”

I sneezed from the grain dust. “Then I guess we better be quick about it. Let’s get right to it. How do you know Marius?”

Aelwen suddenly got a sad, faraway look in her eyes. “We grew up together. Both raised in an orphanage.”

“Oh… I’ve always known that Marius was raised in an orphanage, but he never mentioned you before. And I know what that’s like, by the way. I was orphaned, too.”

I hated thinking about those times, but it was a part of what made me who I was, and I assumed it had a lot to do with how Marius and Aelwen had ended up as well. We were all fighters who’d found ourselves in places we didn’t quite belong. I figured that was probably what it was like for orphans everywhere.

I wasn’t quite sure why I’d revealed such a personal detail to Aelwen, but it seemed like the right thing to do…and maybe it would go a long way in creating some common ground between us.

Aelwen seemed to look at me with new eyes. “So, you know how hard it was. Marius and I survived because we looked out for each other, no matter what. We did our best to make sure we stayed fed and out of trouble. It wasn’t always easy, especially when it came to Marius, but we survived.” Aelwen let out a shuddering sigh.  “That’s how I know him.”

I suspected that there was something else. “Did you sleep with him?”

Aelwen’s brow furrowed. “Did you?”

“I asked first.”

Aelwen shrugged. Sighed. “It was a long time ago. It didn’t work out. He wanted to seek his fortune. I thought I had found mine, but I was wrong.”

I was trying to control my anger. I’d had my suspicions, but to have it confirmed outright like this was something else altogether.

*Did Marius really send me to get help from one of his former lovers? How screwed up is that? What was he thinking? For all he knows, Aelwen is a scorned lover ready to betray me at her first opportunity! I should have known he would screw up something as simple as sending me to a “contact” for help!*

But try as I might, I couldn’t hate Aelwen, and she didn’t seem scorned in the least. She was nothing more than part of Marius’s collateral damage. Besides, timing wise, I assumed that she’d been with him before Marius and I even knew about each other, though with Marius I couldn’t be sure.

*I’ll kill him if I ever see him again. I swear!*

“Anyway, Marius and I fell out of touch a long time ago. But he’s loyal, that much I know for sure. If he sent you my way, it must be because he trusts me.”

I took that in, trying to process it all.

“The only thing I still don’t understand is how Marius knew you were here if you two have fallen out of touch.”

“Because he and I saw each other briefly when Celeste hired Marius. We only shared a few words in passing. Marius wasn’t one of Celeste’s honored guests like you are, and I’m a servant.” Aelwen paused. “How do you know Marius?”

I hesitated. “Um, we crossed paths a few times as bounty hunters.”

“And you slept with him, too, right?”

I thought about all our heated moments, our hookups, even the small bit of tenderness that had somehow crept up between us during those times. “It was a mistake,” I covered. “Will never happen again.”

Aelwen sighed, that faraway look back in her eyes. “I wish I’d had such conviction when I was younger. It might have saved me a lot of heartache.”

I softened toward the Fae even more. Something about her was growing on me. I almost reached out to hug her but held back. Besides, I wasn’t sure how receptive Aelwen would be. I’d threatened her with a butter knife only minutes ago.

“I have no idea what kind of help Marius thought I could offer. I’m just a baker. But if you need someone to talk to, I’m here.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I should get back.” I turned and started toward the door.

“So, if you’re not one of Celeste’s awful Dark Fae guests and you’re not part of the Dark Fae court, why are you here with Celeste?”

I turned to look at her, holding back another sneeze from the grain dust. “The less you know, the safer it’ll be for all of us.”

I left Aelwen and made my way to the library. As I resigned myself to learning more about my family tree, I noticed something sticking out of the book. I didn’t remember seeing it before. I pulled it out, revealing a handwritten note:

*Meet me at the north tower at midnight. I know a way to get you out of this.*

*–M*

**Episode 5079**

**Greyson**

I saw the questioning looks on my brothers’ faces, but I kept my expression neutral and my eyes on the leader. This could go wrong at any second, but the only thing I knew was I wasn’t about to watch Colton be shot and killed right in front of me.

Besides, Maya would flay me if I let anything happen to her mate.

“Hold on,” the leader told the witch before training his eyes on me. “What the hell do you know about safecracking?”

*I don’t know shit about breaking into a safe, and I can bet my brothers know I don’t know, but at least it stopped Colton from getting shot. That’s all that matters. I can get us out of this. I just need a little more time.*

Stalling, I said, “I’m not saying a damn thing until she stops pointing that gun at him.”

The leader gestured and the witch slowly lowered the gun, though she was still sending a pretty gnarly scowl our way.

I immediately saw the relief in Colton’s eyes, and that filled me with enough confidence to think that this might actually work—as long as I played it just right.

“I used to work for a mob out of Portland,” I said. “Was with them for a while and did a lot of jobs with them, and I learned a thing or two about safecracking.”

The witch scoffed. “Please, are you believing this? He’s an amateur. I can smell it on him. And what are the fucking odds that he just randomly *knows* how to crack a safe? Ridiculous!”

The leader snarled at the witch, “And you’re supposed to be a fucking professional! I bet you can’t open a book, let alone a safe. And you just shot our own guy down, so you should keep your mouth shut before I run out of the little bit of patience and grace I have left for you.”

The witch snapped her mouth shut and the leader trained his gaze back on me. “We’re going to give the amateur a chance. Go with her to the safe room. Show us why we shouldn’t kill you right here and now.”

“No,” I said.

“What do you mean no?” the demon snarled.

“I can’t go without my brothers. I need their help.”

There was a tense moment as the leader mulled that over. I was starting to worry that I might have pushed things too far.

“Watch the hostages,” the leader barked at the witch. Then he came over and rounded up the three of us and shoved us toward the back office.

I wasn’t sure what I expected to find when we entered the tiny, dark room. I just figured I needed to look like I knew what I was doing and buy enough time to make a move and take these murderous assholes out. It wouldn’t be that hard now that there were only the two of them in here with us, but I had to wait for the right moment.

We stopped before a large metal door built into the wall.

Colton eyed me as his mind link came through clear and urgent in my mind.

*The mob, Greyson? Really? You couldn’t have come up with something better than that? Like that you worked at a safe factory or something? And are there even mobs in Portland?*

*Shut up!* I replied, glaring at him. *Do you have a better idea? Because the way I remember it you were standing there shaking in your boots and ready to get shot before I spoke up.*

*Okay, okay, calm down. I was just saying*,Colton backpedaled.

“Let’s see what you got, werewolf. Hope the Portland mob taught you well,” the leader said as he pushed me toward the safe door.

“Yes, I’d like to see that, too,” Xavier said. “I mean, I really like seeing my brother work. It’s a thing of beauty.”

*Colton’s giving me shit, and Xavier’s laying it on too thick. I wish they would both just shut their mouths and let me handle this.*

I studied the door for a few seconds like I knew what I was looking at. Then I leaned forward and pressed my ear against the cold metal, then hit it with my fist, glancing back to see if the leader was buying any of this.

Colton turned to the leader. “Why couldn’t the witch just open it with her magic? I mean, otherwise why did you even bring a witch along in the first place?”

The leader looked like he was ready to snarl *shut up*, but then, instead, he cocked his head to the side and said, “Actually, I don’t know. That’s a good question.”

“This isn’t one of those easy mechanical safes!” the witch said quickly. “It’s complicated. I might have been able to assist our…friend…if he weren’t dead. But magic alone can’t blow this kind of safe, and if it could, I would have done it already, trust me,” the witch said defensively.

I turned back and noticed something reflective out of the corner of my eye. I looked around and saw that it was a series of small mirrors, all of them directed at the safe at various angles. I remembered seeing something like this once while collecting winnings after a fight. The fight promoter had a mirror system set up that would open the safe if a light source was placed at just the right spot.

“Hey, I need a phone,” I said to the leader.

The leader scoffed. “Do you think I’m stupid? The moment I hand you a phone, you’ll call 911—which would be a very stupid thing to do since humans can’t help you.”

I stared at the demon, wanting so badly to tear the asshole’s throat out, but that would happen in due time. I just had to bide my time.

“Do you want me to open it or not?” I said stonily. “Because I thought that was why you brought me back here, to open this stupid fucking safe so you can get your stupid money and the rest of us can get on with our lives.”

I knew I was pushing it, but I was angry and tired, and I missed Cali and wanted nothing more than to get back to her as soon as I could. I was upset that our camping trip had gone so horribly wrong, and at this point, I just wanted to forget it had ever happened.

This trip had been cursed from the very beginning. It was time to admit that to myself. What else could explain going from nearly falling into a volcano to being wrapped up in an armed robbery in a brothel of all places?

The leader looked like he wanted to do a few unmentionable things to me, too, but he held my eyes for a few long moments before turning his attention back to the witch. “Watch them.”

And then he left and went back out to the bar.

*I hope you know what you’re doing*, Xavier mind linked.

*I want my ring back. Now!* Colton said.

*What do you think I’m trying to do?* I scolded. *I’m improvising, for shit’s sake. And if either of you have a better idea, you’re more than welcome to try it!*

The witch was eyeing us suspiciously as if she could sense that we were talking. She was just about to say something when the leader came walking back in with the haul they’d stolen from all the customers and spilled the contents on the desk.

“Here you go, phones, phones, and more phones. Which one is yours?” he grunted.

I grabbed mine and turned on the flashlight. Then I knelt down and quietly studied the different angles, trying to figure out which one was the right one.

“Why don’t you just try every angle until you find the one that works?” the witch suggested.

“Because if I pick the wrong one, the damn thing can’t open for twenty-four hours. You plan on sticking around that long?”

“Just get on with it!” the leader hissed.

I looked at the different angles and then finally zeroed in on the one that seemed right. I hesitated, waiting, holding my breath and wondering whether I was about to make the wrong move and get us all killed.

*Should I do it? If I don’t open it, the leader and his people will probably kill us right on the spot. And if I do open it, who’s to say we’ll fare any better? He might still kill us all since he won’t have any more use for us.*

I jumped when I felt the cold, hard press of a barrel against the back of my head.

“What are you waiting for?” the demon said. “I want what I came for, so open the safe so we can, as you put it, get on with our lives.”

I gulped, took a deep breath, and aimed the light at the mirror. There was a low vibration, a whirring sound, and then…nothing.

I heard the leader cock the hammer on the gun as he pressed the barrel harder against my skull. “You blew it.”

I stood up slowly, my hands in the air. “No, I didn’t.”

I pushed the door, and it creaked open, revealing an empty vault. I stared at it in shock.

*What the hell?*

**Episode 5080**

I planted my feet, resisting Lola’s efforts to pull me out of the bar. “You want to follow Kendall? On her date with Grayson?”

“Yes. And hurry before they get too far ahead and we lose them!” She tried again to yank me toward the door.

Rishika stepped in. “Wait a minute, Lola, this is Cali’s call.”

“What? Why? Of course she doesn’t want to do it right now, but that’s just because she doesn’t realize how useful it will be!”

“I don’t care,” Rishika replied. “Cali is Greyson’s mate and therefore sort of our Luna, so what do you want to do, Cali? It’s up to you.”

“What the fuck? This isn’t the time to pull the Luna card, Rishika! If we follow Kendall, we can just spy on her for a bit and see what she’s really up to!”

Maya rolled her eyes. “What do you mean ‘see what she’s up to’? It’s obvious. She’s hooking up with Greyson-lite.”

I felt like I really needed to make the right call here. Part of me was dying to know what was up with Kendall. But snooping on her phone was one thing, and following her on a date? That seemed like it was crossing some kind of moral line.

“No, we’re not following her, Lola. That’s way too much,” I finally said.

“Are you for real? But think about all the valuable information we’re letting slip right through our fingers!” Lola argued.

Maya gave Lola a look. “Seems to me like someone has a voyeur kink.” She smirked at Lola. “Is that it, Lola, do you like to watch?”

Lola’s cheeks reddened. “No. I—no, that’s not it! Tell her, Cali! We’re just trying to protect the pack.”

“Yes, *protect the pack.* I get it,” Maya teased. “Just make sure I don’t find you spying through a crack in my and Colton’s door in service of *protecting the pack*.”

Lola was sputtering and looked like she wanted to lay into Maya, but I knew she wouldn’t. Maya was scary.

“Anyway, I didn’t intend to waste one of my rare free nights away from my mate and my babies worrying about Kendall. We came here to have fun, didn’t we? So, let’s have fun. I’ll go get us some more drinks.”

I watched Maya go, feeling bad about how she razzed Lola but glad that we were doing the right thing.

“You know Maya didn’t mean it. She likes to joke around,” I said to Lola, who was almost pouting.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

I felt so much better about leaving Kendall to have her date in peace. She was a mystery, that much was for certain, but her dating life wasn’t going to do us any favors in uncovering who she really was—and it was a surefire way to get caught and look like a bunch of weirdos in the process.

Maya came back with the drinks and started handing them out, giving Lola a good-natured wink as she passed her one.

“Have you heard anything from Colton?” I asked Maya.

Maya checked her phone. “No, nothing. But that’s not a big deal. Colton’s prone to forgetting to check in.”

I wasn’t about to text Ava and ask if she’d heard anything yet. Not after she’d jumped in front of our car like that. I decided that I would rather check in with Greyson instead.

I sent him a text.

*How are you guys doing?*

I watched the text show as delivered but not read. I put my phone down, refusing to worry. They were at a hotel, or rather a paranormal bordello, but how much trouble could they possibly get into there? And this weekend trip was supposed to be all about them—I needed to give the guys room to work out their issues.

I was just about to slide my phone into my purse when it buzzed. I quickly checked the screen. I was disappointed to see that it wasn’t Greyson, but I grew anxious when I realized it was a message from Codsworth.

*Oh no. What does he want? I hope he doesn’t have another mark or something. Or what if his memory’s back and he’s freaking out and on his way to the cops to tell them what happened?!*

I quickly opened the text and read it, then let out a sigh of relief. He was just inviting me to a party at Eddie’s—his welcome back party.

My excitement quickly reverted back to nervousness as I thought about Codsworth’s mysterious mark again and Kendall’s strange reluctance to talk about it. This could be a chance to check in with Eddie and see if he had a similar mark.

“Hey, Cali, why are you so quiet?” Lola asked, leaning over to read my text. She immediately turned to the others. “Hey, everyone! We’ve been invited to a party!”

“Lola, wait—”

“Ooh, I’m down for a house party! I haven’t been to one of those in a while!” Maya said. “Wait, is this Eddie person human?”

I nodded.

“Even better!” Maya shouted excitedly.

I sighed, annoyed that Lola had hijacked this when I wasn’t even sure how I felt about going. But that was classic Lola. And besides, maybe it would be fun, and it would be a perfect opportunity to make sure nothing else had happened on Codsworth’s end.

*Great!* I replied to Codsworth’s text. *Okay if I bring some new friends along?*

*Sure*, Codsworth replied before sending me the address.

Maya groaned. “Wait a second, this is a college guy, right? I really hope this isn’t a frat party. I live with Colton, remember? I’ve had my fill of frat shit.”

“They’re cool, I promise,” I assured her.

“And if they’re not, I’ll have no problem telling them how much they suck,” Maya grumbled. “Let me go close out my tab. Be right back.”

“Cresta and I are going to stay here,” Rishika said. I couldn’t keep from looking at how comfortable Rishika already looked with Cresta by her side.

I forced a smile, reminding myself that Rishika deserved to move on. I couldn’t very well fault her for doing what made her happy.

Lola, Maya, and I left the tavern, and only a few minutes later, we arrived at Eddie’s. The party was raging with people on the lawn playing beer pong, loud music blasting, and colored party lights flashing.

Lola was first out of the back of the Uber. “I wonder if they’re doing belly shots!” she shouted, racing through the yard to the house.

Codsworth was out on the porch and waved when he saw me coming. “Cali! So glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it!” I said.

Some of the other crew members were around, too—Bear, Schmiddy, Gael, Rodrigo, and Johnny—and they all crowded around, happy to see me.

“Whoa, you’ve got a LOT of crew groupies. Does Greyson know about this?” Maya asked.

“Crew groupies?” I repeated, my cheeks going warm. “What do you mean?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “It was a joke. Sheesh. You and Lola are way too sensitive. I’m going inside to get a drink and to make sure Lola isn’t getting herself into trouble.”

Maya went inside, and I chatted with a few people, talking about the upcoming regattas and practice and everything in between. It was a relief to just relax and hang out and spend the night feeling like a normal college kid.

Codsworth, to my relief, looked healthy and happy and not the least bit freaked out. It was obvious that I’d worried for nothing. Hopefully he’d forgotten all about the mark—and more than that, I hoped that the mark was nothing to worry about in the first place. But I wouldn’t know that for sure until I checked on Eddie.

“So, Codsworth, where’s Eddie? It’s his party and all, so I should probably say hi,” I said.

“Oh, I think I saw him last in the living room. Come on, I’ll take you to him.”

I followed Codsworth inside where Eddie jumped up as soon as he saw me.

“Hey, Cali! Glad you made it.”

“Hi, Eddie,” I said, eyeing his shirt and wondering if he had a mark like Codsworth’s on his shoulder. But it wasn’t like I could just ask him to take it off. “What are you all up to in here?”

Eddie shrugged. “Just practicing some card tricks. You want to draw one?” Eddie held out the cards in a fan in front of me.

I picked one, and then Eddie shuffled the deck and asked me to put it back in. Then he turned around and dealt a few cards onto the coffee table. “Is this your card?!” he asked, presenting me with the three of clubs.

There was a raucous round of cheers as I said, “It is!” I was impressed.

Thinking fast, I said, “I was hoping that you might be down to do something a little more daring.”

Eddie arched an eyebrow at me, a smirk playing on his lips. “Like what?”

“How about a little game of strip poker?”

**Episode 5081**

*How about strip poker?*

Eddie’s eyes went wide with shock.

Shit. What the hell had made me say that? *Why* had I said it? Had I made a mistake?

“You want to play… *strip* poker?” Eddie asked, like he couldn’t believe his ears. “With *me*?”

I felt my face heat up. I really hoped I hadn’t just implied that I wanted to see Eddie naked. I’d just opened my mouth to answer—and to backpedal like my life depended on it—when Gael’s voice rang out behind me.

“Did someone just say strip poker? Because I am *down*!”

I whipped around to see some of my crewmates heading toward me. A few girls were with them, and everyone was laughing.

“Let’s do this!” Schmiddy hollered, pulling off his shirt.

Kaden shoved him into the wall, laughing. “Come on, man. You actually have to play before you get naked.”

Schmiddy dragged a round table from the corner into the center of the room, and everyone pulled up chairs, giggling as they settled into them. I looked around nervously. Sitting around the table was Eddie—of course—Schmiddy, Kaden, Gael, and two girls whose names I didn’t know. And myself.

Eddie shuffled the cards, then dealt them out. “Five card draw, standard rules. Aces wild, no buy in because the only buy in here is your shorts.”

He grinned at the group, but I felt my stomach clench. Nothing he’d just said made any sense to me. What the hell had I been *thinking*? I didn’t even know how to play poker. Why had I suggested this? And how the hell was I going to make sure that Eddie lost? I needed him to take his shirt off so I could get a look at his shoulder and see if there were any suspicious marks, like the ones I’d seen on Codsworth.

“No buy in?” I asked. “That’s money, right?”

Eddie nodded. “That’s right. But we’re not playing for money. If you lose here, you just lose your clothes.”

Kaden looked over at Schmiddy—who was still shirtless—and gave him a shove. “Come on, man. No one needs to see that. Put your shirt back on. And your jacket, too. A scarf, if you’ve got one. Anything to make it less likely that any of us will have to see you naked.”

Schmiddy just laughed. “I don’t even want to play poker, man. I’m just here to take my shirt off.”

Gael rolled his eyes. “Get the hell out of here, then,” he said, reaching over and giving Schmitty’s chair a shove. “This game is for serious poker players only.”

That should’ve excluded me, but I was the one who’d suggested the game, so I didn’t feel like I could go anywhere.

My hands were trembling slightly as I looked down at my cards. I had a pair of fives and a pair of threes.

If that meant anything in poker terms, I certainly didn’t know it.

Cards dealt, Eddie glanced down at his own hand, then looked around the table, grinning. He put five cards down on the table, one at a time, all face down.

Gael groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s it for me. I’m folding.”

“Same here,” Kaden said, shaking his head.

I bit my lip nervously. I’d never learned to play poker, but I felt like I’d heard somewhere that pairs were good. Maybe? Hoping I was right, I decided to stay in and see what happened.

Eddie turned over the first card.

One of the girls who’d joined us at the table—a tall brunette with bouncy curls and perfect dark skin—was looking down at her cards, a quizzical expression on her face.

“You know what you’re going to do, Claudette?” Kaden asked.

The girl—Claudette, apparently—looked up at him, then shook her head. “Well, I don’t actually know how to play poker, so no.”

She put her cards down on the table and moved like she was going to get up.

But Kaden must *really* have been hoping to see her naked, because he spoke quickly.

“I don’t know how to play poker either,” he said with a laugh.

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Does *anyone*?”

“Um…” Gael said guiltily.

“I do,” the other girl—a redhead—said confidently.

“Okay, so two of us. That’s probably not great odds for everyone else.” Eddie thought for a moment. “Why don’t we play strip blackjack? That game’s a lot easier—it’s just counting.”

I let out a sigh of relief. Thank god. I could do that. I knew how to count, and I’d played blackjack before.

“Yeah, okay,” Claudette said, taking her seat again.

Kaden grinned, passing his cards back to Eddie.

“Cards,” Eddie said, holding his hands out for everyone else’s. “I need to re-shuffle and re-deal.”

He flipped the cards expertly in his hands, shuffling them so quickly they blurred together. Then he dealt them out, sending cards flying across the table at each of us.

“Okay, two cards each, one faces up, keep the other card facing down,” Eddie said quickly, reminding me a little of a race caller. “Leave it face down, or you lose your shirt automatically for trying to cheat.”

I secretly looked at my cards and saw that I had an eight of hearts facing up. I lifted up the corner of my bottom card to get a look at it and saw that it was a ten of clubs. Okay, eighteen. That was pretty close to twenty-one. It would be risky to take more cards.

“Okay,” Eddie said, tapping the rest of the deck against the table as he looked around at everyone. “Winner of this round decides who strips. Anyone just want to fold right now?”  
 “Nope,” Gael said, looking at his cards.

Claudette shook her head and Kaden grinned at her, then at Eddie.

“No way. I’m in,” Kaden said.

“Okay, okay, so who wants a card?” Eddie asked. He looked at all of us in turn. “Kaden?”

“I’m good,” Kaden said with a shake of his head.

“Gael?”

Gael tapped the top of his overturned card and Eddie dealt him one. It was a five of diamonds. I didn’t know how Gael felt about that card, because his expression was unreadable.

I was next.

“Cali?” Eddie asked.

I had to decide. I was close to twenty-one, but I could be closer. Eighteen wasn’t a lock, but it was a risk. There were only a few cards that wouldn’t put me over twenty-one, but I decided to go for it. I had to try.

Taking a cue from Gael, I tapped the top of my card and Eddie turned one over for me.

The two of clubs.

I fought to keep the grin off my face. I was at twenty! That was incredible! There was a good chance that I’d actually win this round—and one round might be all I needed. I’d get Eddie to strip off his shirt, check for anything weird, and be on my way. Unless the mark wasn’t in the same place as Codsworth’s…in which case I was going to be here for a while.

“Schmiddy?” Eddie asked.

Schmiddy shook his head, as did the red-headed girl.

“I’ll hold,” she said.

“Claudette?”

Kaden glanced at her hopefully, but Claudette shook her head. “No card for me.”

“Okay, and the dealer takes a card,” Eddie said, turning a card over for himself. He looked at it for a moment, then up again. “Okay, everyone ready?”

We all nodded.

“Let’s flip our cards and see what everyone has,” Eddie said. “On three—one, two, three!”

Everyone flipped their face-down cards. I looked quickly around the table. I had twenty, which easily beat Gael, who’d busted at twenty-two. It also beat Kaden—who only had sixteen—along with both of the girls. As I scanned every pair of cards, I felt myself getting more and more excited.

This was going to be so much easier than I’d thought! If I won this round, I’d just get Eddie to take his shirt off and then stop playing—all without having to run the risk of taking anything off myself.

But then I saw Schmiddy’s cards.

Dammit.

He had a ten of diamonds and an ace of spades. A perfect twenty-one.

When I looked up at him, he was grinning, looking deeply pleased with himself.

Dammit.

Kaden hooted with excitement, and Eddie laughed. The girls rolled their eyes, but they were smiling.

“Okay, okay,” Eddie said. “Cali almost made it over the line with a very competitive twenty, but Schmiddy takes it with a perfect blackjack! He gets to decide who strips first!”

“YES!” Schmiddy shouted, pumping his fist in the air.

My heart sank. What the hell was wrong with me? I couldn’t believeI’d gotten *myself* into this situation. I’d suggested this game so I could get a look at Eddie’s shoulder—miraculously, it hadn’t occurred to me that by initiating a strip card game, I’d increased the possibility that I’d have to strip at this party from zero percent to… Well, it definitely wasn’t zero anymore.

“So, Schmiddy, who’s it going to be?” Eddie asked.

Schmiddy took his time looking around the table, and when his gaze landed on me, I knew exactly what he was going to say before he said it.

“I pick Cali!”

**Episode 5082**

**Colton**

I was so furious, it was making my chest feel tight. A wave of anger was rising up through my body, making my neck and face burn. I couldn’t believe this mess. All I wanted was to get Maya’s fucking engagement ring back, and now these assholes with guns had us standing in front of an empty vault.

This whole thing had been such a colossal waste of time. And I was furious about the ring. I really cared about that thing. I’d had it specially made for Maya, and I definitely hadn’t gone to all that effort so that these fuckers could sell it to fund their demon-criminal operations. I’d bought it to put on Maya’s finger, and I had no intention of leaving this supernatural brothel without it.

“Bunch of fucking clowns,” Xavier muttered, standing next to me. He shook his head, looking disgusted.

I had to agree with him. Xavier and I had been in the bounty hunting business for years, so we’d met plenty of criminals—and when it came to IQ level, these guys didn’t even break the top fifty. I had a feeling that they weren’t big on the “organized” part of organized crime.

The witch rounded on the leader, looking pissed. “What the hell is this?”

“*What the hell is this?*” the demon in charge repeated incredulously. “Why are you asking me what the hell this is? You tell me what the hell it is!”

The demon looked livid. He still had his gun pressed to the back of Greyson’s head, but his anger was clearly distracting him.

“What the fuck am I looking at here?” he yelled, gesturing to the empty vault as he glared at the witch and the other demon.

“Hell if I know!” the witch said.

This didn’t seem to satisfy the demon.

“How the hell did this happen?” he demanded. “Did someone tip the owners off? Who was it? And how did they have time to hide all the gold?”

I watched the guy carefully, feeling more nervous with every passing second. He wasn’t focused on Greyson, but I didn’t like that he was getting this agitated while his finger was still on the trigger of the gun. This whole situation was a bomb ready to explode, and we needed to get the hell out of here.

Xavier must have felt the same way because, he leaned a little closer.

“They’re not focused on us,” he whispered. “This is our chance.”

“You think?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’ll go after the big demon, you deal with the witch. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Count of three.”

I didn’t love the plan, but I didn’t see any other options, so I nodded again. “Okay.”

I sized up the witch. The main thing I had going for me was the fact that I was pissed, and extremely ready to hit something. *Anything.* The trick was going to be taking the witch down before she could react and hex me or something.

“Okay,” Xavier whispered. “One…two…*three!*”

I lunged forward, fists first. I slammed one into the witch’s head before she could even look at me. I made vicious contact, and she crumpled to the ground.

Finished with my part, I looked over to see Xavier struggling with the demon. It looked like he was trying to wrestle the gun from his hand, but without much luck. Suddenly, the gun fired. The bullet just missed Greyson, who was already moving toward the second demon. Apparently unfazed by the passing bullet, Greyson shifted as he lunged—by the time he reached the demon, he was already in wolf form. The demon was too stunned to react, and an instant later, Greyson had his jaws around the guy’s throat.

Xavier was still tussling with his demon, so I rushed over to help, slamming into the leader’s soft midsection as hard as I could.

The leader let out a groan of pain as my skull made contact with his internal organs, then a shout of surprise when Xavier finally ripped the gun from his hands.

Then—to add to the general chaos—the door behind us flew open, and the Fae rushed into the cramped space.

“What on earth is going on in here?” he demanded, looking around in shock.

I shook my head. I was too far away to even begin to deal with the Fae, and besides, I was busy. The demon leader was still struggling underneath me, though I had him securely pinned down to the floor.

A strange smell reached my nose. I sniffed, trying to identify it. It smelled bad—like rotten eggs. No, it wasn’t eggs… It was sulfur. Where the hell was that coming from?

Then, a moment later, the demon reached up and pressed his hand to my face, and a wave of nearly unbearable heat washed over me.

*Fuck!* My skin was burning!

I lashed out, swatting at the demon’s hand with a snarl. Then the gun went off.

“NO!” the demon shouted.

He shoved at me, trying to push me off, but I gritted my teeth and held on. I wasn’t going to let him get away.

He was trying to get his hands on me, and my face was stinging with pain, but I wrapped my hands around his neck and squeezed, digging in with my thumbs until the guy stopped fighting and then—*finally*—closed his eyes, unconscious.

Panting, I got to my feet and looked around. The Fae was on the ground, groaning in pain. Xavier was standing over him, holding the still-smoking gun.

A few feet beyond them, Greyson—still in his massive wolf form—was standing over the other demon’s body. That demon was still, though it looked like he was still breathing.

I rolled my eyes with a groan. What a frigging shit show this was turning out to be. I should’ve known that any Evers brothers vacation was doomed to end up like this. I didn’t know why I was even surprised.

I looked at the demon leader’s body, crumpled at my feet—he was my most solid option for getting the ring back. I crouched down and started searching through the pockets of his jacket, then his pants. I found money—both American currency and a bunch of thick gold coins I’d never even seen before—and then, finally, the ring box.

“*Yes*,” I breathed when I had it back in my hand. I was epically relieved… But I was also *really* pissed off. I looked at the demon leader’s unconscious body and hesitated for just an instant before I pulled my arm back and socked the guy in the face.

Xavier snorted. “Colton.”

“That’s for taking my shit,” I hissed, shaking my hand out.

Greyson shifted back to human and stepped toward Xavier and me. “Are you two okay?”

“Fine,” Xavier said.

I just held up the ring box. That was answer enough.

“Okay,” Xavier said, rubbing his face, “I think it’s official: this is the camping trip from hell. And please remember that I’ve actually been to hell, so I know what I’m talking about, fellas.”

Greyson sighed. “Come on—”

“Come on *what*?” Xavier snapped. “Nothing’s gone right! This whole trip has been a fucking disaster.”

Greyson didn’t say anything to that. What could he have said?

I didn’t say anything either, but after a beat of silence, I snorted. Then I just laughed out loud. Everyone was pissed, there were demons on the ground at our feet, and it was very clearly the wrong time to be laughing… But I just couldn’t help it.

Greyson looked at me, seemingly more confused than annoyed. “What’s so funny?”

I was laughing so hard now that tears were streaming down my face. I bent over for a moment, then straightened, trying to get ahold of myself.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped out. “I’m sorry! I just really missed you guys.”

Xavier shot me a dirty look. “I don’t see what’s so fucking funny, Colton.”

I let out a fresh burst of laughter, just for him. “No, you wouldn’t.”

Xavier shook his head. “Whatever. I’m tired as hell and what I need right now is a fucking drink—”

“We can help with that!”

We all looked around to find the owner of the voice that had just piped up, interrupting Xavier. My gaze went to the floor, of course, but the witch, the demons, and the Fae were still unconscious and unmoving. So I looked toward the doorway of the vault and found the owner of the brothel leaning against the doorframe. It was the clairvoyant, and she was smiling at us as we stood in the wreckage.

“What?” I asked her, baffled.

She eyed all three of us for a moment, then she straightened. “In fact, why don’t you let us thank you for your service?”

“Thank us?” Greyson said cautiously.

“Yes,” the woman said with a smile. “We’d very much like to show our appreciation—in our own special way, of course.”

**Episode 5083**

My stomach dropped. I had to *strip?* Oh no. What the actual hell had I been thinking when I proposed this? That I would somehow, magically, be so good at cards that I wouldn’t have to strip? I couldn’t take my clothes off here, in the middle of a party, in front of all my college friends—and a few strangers. I didn’t even go around braless around the pack. This was a nightmare—a literal nightmare. I’d had bad dreams that went exactly like this.

*Strip poker*. I’d definitely failed to think things through when I’d suggested this game to Eddie. I’d been so focused on getting him to take off his shirt so I could see his back, I hadn’t even considered the possibility that *I* might have to take my clothes off too. I really should’ve worn more layers.

The party had gone oddly quiet, and when I looked around, I saw that everyone at the table was staring at me expectantly. They were waiting. Oh god.

I could do this. What was a little nudity among friends? The pack had certainly made me used to it. I could handle this…

I flushed so intensely, my face felt like it was on fire. “Um,” I said, swallowing hard. “Do I have to take off something big or—”

Schmiddy started laughing. I stared at him, baffled.

“What?” I asked.

“Come on, Cali, I was just kidding!” he said. “I’d never start with you! That would be so mean! I wouldn’t do that to you, Lil’ Hart. Besides, I wouldn’t want to piss off your dudes.”

“Yeah—next time, you should bring them with you,” Gael added quickly.

I laughed. Partly at Gael’s shamelessness, but mostly out of sheer relief.

“Okay, thanks, Schmiddy. So, who do you want to see strip?” I asked.

Schmiddy looked around the table again. “Well, in honor of his return to the fold, I think I’m going to choose our illustrious dealer—*Eddie!*”

A grin spread across my face. Okay, this was perfect. I hadn’t won the hand, but this was exactly the outcome I’d been hoping for.

Eddie groaned and rolled his eyes, but he didn’t say no.

“Fine,” he grumbled, getting to his feet.

I leaned forward in anticipation, anxious to see Eddie’s back. I needed to see if he had the same kind of mark I’d seen on Codsworth’s shoulder.

Eddie heaved a dramatic sigh, then reached for the hem of his shirt.

My breath caught, but then he seemed to change his mind. He put his hand to his belt. Then he shook his head again. Finally, he put his foot up on the chair, provocatively thrusting his hips. He grinned around at the group, which made everyone cheer.

“Come on!” Kaden hollered. “Take it off!”

“Let’s see some skin!” Claudette demanded.

“Strip! Strip! Strip!” Gael chanted, pumping his fist in the air.

Eddie laughed, reached down, and dramatically pulled off a sock.

“Come on!” Kaden burst out.

“*Boo!*” the red-haired girl chorused.

Everyone was laughing and I tried to smile too, but it was a fight to keep from sinking back into my chair in disappointment. A *sock?* How the hell long was this going to take? If we went one sock at a time, all around the table, it was going to be a very, *very* long night.

“What are you all doing?” Lola asked, striding back into the room.

“Well, we started out playing strip poker, but then we realized Heidi and Eddie were the only ones who knew how to play, so now we’re playing strip blackjack,” Gael told her.

Lola shot me a strange look. “Okay…” she said slowly. “I actually just came in to steal Cali away for a second.”

I got to my feet. “I’ll be right back,” I promised the group as I stepped toward Lola.

“Should we keep playing or wait for you?” Eddie asked, gathering the cards from the players and shuffling again.

“Go ahead without me. Play the next round. I’ll jump back in in a second,” I promised. I followed Lola to a corner of the room. “What’s up?”

Lola turned to me. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She looked over my shoulder at the blackjack game with a laugh. “What are you doing playing strip blackjack, Cali? I assume you’ve got a motive, unless you’re just doing it for the fun of it.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s obviously *not* for the fun of it. I see plenty of naked people in the course of everyday life at the pack house, thank you very much.”

“So what is it?” Lola asked curiously.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening, then leaned toward Lola. “I want to see Eddie’s back.”

Lola’s frown deepened. “His back? Why?”

“I want to see if he has a mark like the one Codsworth showed me.”

“Okay, but why?” she asked slowly.

I bit my lip as I thought about her question. “It’s hard to explain…”

“What’s hard to explain?” Lola pressed when I didn’t elaborate.

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I can’t put it into words, but I just have this gut feeling that’s telling me that we need to figure this out. I’m not saying you have to do anything, Lola, but this is something that I want to know. It’s something that I *need* to know.”

“Okay, okay,” Lola said, putting up her hands in surrender. “That’s fine. I was just asking. But if you want to see Eddie without his shirt on, I do think you’re overcomplicating this. I assume the game was your idea?”

“Yeah, it was,” I admitted. “But what do you mean, I’m overcomplicating it? What the hell else was I supposed to do?”

Lola shot me a megawatt smile. “Oh, Cali. Watch and learn.”

She waved me forward, and we headed back to the table together. I had no idea what Lola had in mind, so I took my seat again. Lola walked slowly around the circumference of the table, humming to herself as she peeked at people’s cards.

Gael looked up at her as she passed behind him.

“Lola,” he said with a laugh. “Cheaters never prosper. Didn’t anyone ever teach you that?”

Lola pretended to be offended. “*Cheat?* I would never!”

I could see that she was putting on an act—pretending to be more drunk than she actually was. The reality was that Lola never got sloppy, even when she drank. So that begged the question—what was she up to?

I looked down at my cards, desperately hoping her grand plan wasn’t just to ask Eddie to take his shirt off. That would be getting straight to the heart of the issue, but not in the way I wanted. I didn’t want to call attention to any of this.

Lola made it to Eddie’s chair, where she pretended to stumble over her own feet. Everyone looked up as she yelled and crashed into the table. She was fast, but I knew what I was looking for, so I saw when she reached out and knocked Eddie’s cup of beer off the table and onto his shirt.

“Lola!” Gael gasped out.

“Are you okay?” Claudette asked.

“Eddie, do you want some napkins?” Heidi—the redhead—asked anxiously as she watched the beer spread across his light grey T-shirt.

Eddie didn’t answer, just made an indistinct sound of agony as he pulled the drenched fabric away from his skin.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” Lola gushed. She reached for Eddie and began to pull at his soaked shirt.

“It’s okay—”

“It’s not okay! You’re soaked to the skin! Give it to me so I can rinse it out, at least!” Lola insisted, pulling up his shirt.

Eddie tried to push her hands away, but he was clearly unprepared for the full force of Lola.

“It’s really okay—” he started to say, but his voice was muffled when she pulled the shirt over his head.

She glanced at me as she raised the shirt triumphantly and Eddie continued to sputter. She’d gotten it off before he could even try to put up a fight.

I stared at Lola in shock. I had to admit that I was deeply impressed. I’d been so sure that the strip blackjack idea was the only way to make it happen, but I couldn’t believe how quickly Lola had gotten Eddie shirtless.

I met her eyes and smiled, silently thanking her for her help.

Lola winked at me, then nodded toward Eddie, who’d just turned around, looking for something to put on.

Holy shit. My eyes went wide as I scanned Eddie’s back. There it was—a small, red mark on his upper shoulder, in the exact same place as the one on Codsworth. Same place, same mark.

My stomach clenched with anxiety. Something strange was definitely going on. Now I just had to figure out what.

**Episode 5084**

**Xavier**

The clairvoyant was staring at us, and I was staring right back. What the hell did she mean, they wanted to thank us in *their* way? Theirway, as in the way of the brothel?

Greyson was the first to speak. “Uh, yeah, thanks, but that’s really unnecessary.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said with an airy wave of her hand. “I don’t think I’ve introduced myself—my name is Brandi.”

“Listen, Brandi—” Greyson started again, but the clairvoyant interrupted him.

“You boys simply *must* let me and the entire family here shower you with our gratitude,” she said with a smile.

There was a suggestive lilt to her voice that set my teeth on edge. I didn’t like it one bit, and I clearly wasn’t the only one who felt that way, because Greyson had started to look uncomfortable.

“Well, we appreciate the thought, but we all have mates,” he said awkwardly. “And we’re not looking for anything else.”

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence, during which we all stared at each other.

Colton broke it.

“Wait, are you offering us sex in exchange for taking down these idiots?” he asked incredulously. “Because I might need to make a quick phone call first—”

“Shut up, Colton,” I snapped.

He gave me a look of wide-eyed confusion. “What’d I say?”

Greyson was pinching the bridge of his nose and taking what looked like deep, cleansing breaths, like he couldn’t quite figure out how he’d ended up here.

“I’m sorry about my brother,” he said to Brandi, nodding toward Colton. “Just ignore him, if you can.”

“Hey!” Colton said.

I tugged at his shoulder. This conversation had gone from uncomfortable to tortuous, and I was extremely ready to get out of this place.

But Brandi was grinning at us. “I wasn’t offering sex, boys—you can all relax.”

Greyson frowned. “Then what were you—”

“Just some beer and pizza, plus we comp the bill for your stay.” She looked Colton up and down. “But if you’re interested in more, I think that could be arranged.”

Colton opened his mouth to answer, but I jumped in before he could.

“Pizza and beer sound great,” I said. “Thanks, Brandi—lead the way.”

I gave Colton’s shoulder a too-tight squeeze, he rolled his eyes and shrugged me off, and we all followed Brandi back to the bar area, where the hotel employees were already busy cleaning up the mess. A woman in an apron was behind the bar, carefully sweeping up the glass from the shattered mirror.

Brandi waved a large man over—probably one of the bouncers.

“What’s up?” the guy asked.

She nodded back the way we’d come. “There’s more mess back there to deal with.” She raised her eyebrows. “If you can handle it.”

The guy was gigantic, with broad shoulders and virtually no neck. He nodded once.

“I can handle it,” he said, then he disappeared down the hallway, heading for the vault.

Brandi looked at us. “There’s another bar over there,” she said, nodding across the way.

As we followed her toward it, Colton stepped up to walk next to me.

“What was up with that?” he asked.

I shot him a confused look. “What’s up with what?”

“Come on, you totally cockblocked me back there.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, baffled.

He rolled his eyes. “You shouldn’t pre-emptively ruin my fun before I can even ask Maya about it, man.”

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. “She’s home with your two kids, man. Get a grip.”

Brandi led us through yet another beaded curtain, and when we stepped into the new bar, my jaw dropped. The rest of the bordello was tacky, in a cheap motel kind of way, but this room was different. Completely different. It was possibly the most decadent, opulent room I’d ever been in—and I’d been in Lucian’s palace.

Brandi smirked at me. “This is our baroque bar.”

It certainly was. There was gold detailing everywhere, glinting dully on the carved ceiling and walls. There were faux carved marble plinths holding faux carved marble busts. The bar stools were covered with thick red velvet, and had gold fringe hanging around the edges.

“Do you like it?” Brandi asked.

The question echoed through my head. Did I *like* it? I hated it. It had to be the ugliest, tackiest place I’d ever seen. From the horrified looks on their faces, I figured my brothers felt similarly.

After a moment, Colton shrugged. “Well, free beer is free beer.”

Figuring he had a point, I stepped into the room and pulled myself onto one of the ugly-ass red velvet stools. Greyson and Colton did the same, sitting on either side of me.

Brandi walked behind the bar and pulled out three bottles, setting them in front of us. “That’ll get you started.”

“How about that pizza?” Colton asked, knocking the cap off his bottle with the edge of the faux marble bar.

She smiled. “I’ll go get that started for you in the restaurant. Pepperoni good for you boys?”’

“Fine,” I muttered, opening my own beer.

“Great. I’ll be back in a few,” she said, then headed back out through the curtain.

The moment she left, Colton took a deep swig of his beer, chugging half of it in one go. He slammed it down on the bar and looked over at Greyson and me. “Well, even after that, I still want to stay the night tonight.”

“Are you serious, Colton?” I asked. “Even after everything that’s happened?”

“Yeah, I’m serious,” he said, an edge to his voice. “I want to sleep in a bed tonight, and that girl said it would be free, so why the hell not?”  
 “Why not?” I repeated incredulously. I shook my head. “I don’t know, maybe because we just had to fight a bunch of demons, and Greyson had a gun pressed to his head. Come on, man, I just want to go home.”

Colton snorted. “What? Back to Ava?”

I tensed and he shot me a regretful look, like he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. I stared at him in surprise. Colton and I had gone through this already, and he’d promised to stop bitching about Ava in front of me. I’d thought we were on the same page, finally.

Greyson cleared his throat as he got to his feet. “Listen, I’m going to go make a phone call. I don’t want to come back here and find you two fighting, okay?”

My mind was still spinning from Colton’s dig, so I wasn’t able to come up with a snide response to Greyson’s mothering comment before he walked away, leaving Colton and me alone.

Colton took another long drink of his beer, finishing it off. He wasn’t looking at me, just staring determinedly at the hideous cherubs painted on the far side of the bar.

But I wasn’t having it. I wasn’t going to just let this shit go—not anymore. We’d talked about this already, and I didn’t want to keep having the same conversation.

“I don’t get it, Colton,” I said flatly. “I don’t want to keep fighting with you, but I thought I’d gotten through to you about Ava. You said you’d keep your mouth shut, and yet here we are again.”

Colton sighed. “I just don’t get it, Xavier. I mean, I want to get it. You’re my brother—I want to understand where you’re coming from. But I just can’t wrap my mind around this.”

I heaved a gusty sigh and rubbed my head. This day just kept getting longer and longer. “I don’t know what to tell you, Colton.”

“I mean, I get that it’s probably hard because you and Ava grew up together and you have that long history,” he said. “She was your first mate, and I get loving someone because you were together for so long—”

“Hold up,” I said, holding up a hand to stop him. “Listen, Ava and I do have a long history, but that’s not what’s going on here.”

Colton frowned. “It’s not?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. I’m not with Ava now because we were together when we were younger. I spent a long time hating her after what happened—”

“You mean after she murdered our mother,” Colton said, his voice edged with anger.

I suppressed a frustrated growl, shaking my head. I didn’t want to get back into this with him. Not again.

I continued, “But then I started talking to her, started listening to her, and I let myself really *hear* her version of things. And I started to understand. And then I fell in love with her again. It’s not history, man, it’s love.”

Colton’s grip tightened on his empty beer bottle. “That sounds nice and all, but it means nothing to me. I mean, ‘her version of things’? Seriously? Honestly, what I want to know is how the fuck you can justify falling in love with the woman who murdered our mom.”

**Episode 5085**

**Artemis**

*Meet me at the north tower at midnight. I know how to get you out of this.*

*–M*

I looked down at the note in my hand, reading it again and again. It had been a few hours since I’d found it, and I’d probably read it a thousand times, but I still hadn’t found the answers I was looking for. My main question? Who the hell was M?

I had no idea if it was from Marius, or someone else with the same initial. If it was Marius, I was going to be pissed. He was supposed to be gone.

“Is there something you’d like to share, Artemis?”

The voice jolted me from my thoughts, and my head snapped up. Immediately, I saw a tall, stately Fae standing in front of me. It was Zardonin, my tutor for the afternoon, and she was staring down at me with ill-disguised irritation in her dark eyes.

She lifted an eyebrow as she nodded at the note in my hand. “Given the attention you’re giving that piece of paper, I have to wonder if it’s something you’d care to read aloud.”

I curled my hand into a fist, concealing the paper, and shook my head. “No.”

The Fae looked at me for another long moment, then nodded curtly. “Fine. Now let’s get back to what we were doing, shall we?”

I didn’t even bother trying to stifle my sigh.

Zardonin didn’t acknowledge it. “Now, in the event of being served a cold soup dish, which spoon would you reach for?”

I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to groan out loud. I could not have cared less about soup spoons if I’d actively tried. Before this latest torture had begun, I’d been in the library, reading, when a servant had appeared to tell me that my presence was required in the dining room. I’d been surprised—surprised enough that I’d followed her.

When I’d arrived, she’d directed me to sit down at the long table, which had been fully set for a large dinner party. I’d been baffled, but then Zardonin had appeared and informed me that I’d just arrived for the first of what she’d promised would be many etiquette lessons.

It had been too late to escape.

That had been two excruciating hours ago. I’d been through some shit in my life—held captive, forced to go on the run more times than I could count, given no choice but to hide out for days on end—but I couldn’t think of a more agonizing ordeal than being forced to learn which glass went with which wine. It was mind-numbing, and it was *still going* *on*. I didn’t know how much more I could take. If I had to learn the name of one more piece of cutlery, I was going to fucking scream.

Zardonin cleared her throat. It was a small noise, but she somehow managed to make it sound threatening. “I await your answer, Artemis.”

I looked up and gave her a sickeningly sweet smile. Then—without looking down—I picked up one of the six spoons at random and held it up. “This one.”

Zardonin frowned. “Tell me, Artemis, do you consider this a joke?”

“No,” I said with a sigh.

“Don’t you?” Zardonin asked, her eyes flashing dangerously. “I wonder if you even realize what the Lady has done for you. This is not just a regular primer, my girl. This is a *Zardonin* etiquette class.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “Wait, is that like a franchise or something? I thought your name was Zardonin—”

“Zardonin *is* my name!” she snapped, color rising in her pale face. “And that name means something here—a fact that you would do well to remember.”

“Okay, okay,” I muttered.

I didn’t really think it was crucial for me to remember that Zardonin’s name meant something around here, but I wasn’t about to start a fight about it. What seemed most important in this moment was that I continued to play along. I had my own agenda here, and that was what was guiding me—I wanted to know more about Kadmos, and I’d made a Fae promise. That was a big sticking point. There was no way I could get through the loophole of my promise all on my own, so I had no choice now but to see this through.

I tightened my grip on the note, balled up in my hand. If Marius *had* sent it, then what was his plan? And why hadn’t he left the Fae world for the human world? I’d asked him to go find Cali. Why hadn’t he left? If he was trying to help me, then why wasn’t he *trying to help me?* What the hell could he still be doing here?

Thoughts were racing through my head at high speed. I had to admit, it was entirely possible that Marius hadn’t written the note. That it was some kind of a trap. I hadn’t just fallen off the back of the turnip truck—I’d been around long enough and seen enough shit to know not to trust a note I’d found shoved into the pages of a book given to me by Celeste. I wasn’t a complete idiot.

On the other hand, I still had to ask myself the question—was it worth risking going if it wasn’t Marius?

A hand slammed down on the table in front of me, making the china, the crystal, the silver, and me jump.

Heart racing, I looked up to see Zardonin glaring down at me, her angry face inches from my own.

“Yes?” I asked, feigning innocence.

She wasn’t fooled.

“Artemis, you must pay attention to my instruction!” she hissed.

“Sorry,” I lied, slipping the note beneath my leg so I could attempt to concentrate on forks.

Zardonin took a deep breath. “Fine. We will be moving on to the salad course. When a salad is served, you will reach for which fork?”

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It was hours before I was finally released from my etiquette lesson, though it wasn’t because Zardonin was satisfied with my progress. The end of the lesson had been just as awful as the beginning. Its only redeeming quality was the fact that, with Zardonin breathing down my neck, it was impossible for me to focus on any of the thorny thoughts swarming through my brain about Marius and the author of the note and what the hell I was going to do.

That aspect of things had almost been a relief.

The only decision I’d made regarding the note was that I couldn’t decide anything until I had more information. Which meant that I needed to get to the tower before midnight, to scope things out.

It was late now, and the castle was dark. Cold, too. But that was good, because it meant the halls were empty as I made my way to the tower. As I walked, I went over my situation in my head, silently cursing myself for making that Fae promise to Celeste. What the hell had I been thinking? If I’d mustered a little restraint, I would’ve been able to leave. It would’ve been so easy for me to get away right now. I was alone, in a quiet castle. No one was with me, no one was paying attention to me. My absence probably wouldn’t have been noticed until morning, which meant I would’ve had a massive head start.

But that wasn’t an option, and I needed to remember that. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t risk breaking a Fae promise. I’d done it before, and it had almost broken me. I wouldn’t put myself through that again.

So I put all thoughts of escape out of my head and focused on my search.

I looked around the dark hallway. Where the hell was that damn tower?

I felt sure that if I could scope out the space before midnight, I’d be able to put up my own defenses before the mysterious M made an appearance. If it turned out to be Marius, then it would serve him right for not doing what I’d asked him to do and screwing with my plans.

And if it was someone else…

Well, I didn’t want some anonymous note writer thinking they could just tell me where to be and when to be there without any consequences.

I rounded a corner and immediately stopped, then carefully backtracked. I was shocked to see three castle guards standing before what looked like an unassuming wooden door.

That was weird.

I narrowed my eyes as I looked at the guards, then the door. What were they doing there? And what was in that room? What could be important enough to require the attention of three standing guards?

My mind reeled as I considered the possibilities.

Well, there was only one way to find out.

I took a step forward but stopped moving when Celeste’s voice rang out through the stone passageway, echoing in my ears.

“And *where* do you think you’re going?”

**Episode 5086**

I knew it. I just *knew* it. I was feeling pretty freaked out, but also weirdly vindicated. And if Codsworth knew, he’d feel the same way. The mark on Eddie’s shoulder meant that my hunch had been right—if both Codsworth and Eddie had this weird mark on their shoulder, I was willing to bet they weren’t the only ones. I was willing to bet that Charlotte had it as well.

But I needed to find out for sure.

I needed to figure out where Charlotte was, and how to get a look at her back. I bit my lip, thinking hard. It was probably too much to hope that I’d be able to convince her to play a game of strip blackjack, or get her into a situation that allowed Lola to spill a drink on her. Maybe I could invite her to go shopping, and we could share a changing room. Or we could go swimming at the crew gym…

One way or another, I was done with this game. I had to find Charlotte, and I hadn’t even begun to think about what any of this meant in the grander scheme. One thing at a time. And right now, I didn’t want to hang around and risk having to take my own clothes off, so I pushed back from the table.

Gael looked at me, confused. “Cali? What’s going on? Where are you going?”

“Oh, I just don’t really feel like playing cards anymore,” I said with a casual shrug.

“Come on!” he started, but I shook my head.

“I’m going to go help Lola try to get the beer out of Eddie’s shirt. She’s going to need the help—Lola’s a disaster when it comes to cleaning. Besides, it wouldn’t be any fun to make me strip. I’m wearing my long underwear tonight,” I said with a wink.

My teammates’ laughter followed me as I headed out of the room, looking for Lola. I spied her and Eddie in the kitchen, huddled over the sink, washing out his shirt. I was about to join them when my phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and was glad to see Greyson’s name on the caller ID.

I’d been so distracted with my plan to get Eddie out of his shirt, I hadn’t realized that Greyson hadn’t texted me back.

“Hey,” I said, accepting the call. It felt so good to talk to him. “I’m glad you called.”

“Me too,” Greyson said. “You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice, love.”

Something in his voice gave me pause.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Is anything wrong?”

“No,” Greyson said quickly, but when he sighed, he sounded exhausted.

“What’s going on?” I asked, not convinced by his quick denial.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess it just hasn’t been the trip I hoped it was going to be.”

“Why not? What’s going on?” I asked.

“A lot,” he said. “I’ll fill you in when I get back tomorrow. But I didn’t call you to complain, love. How are you doing? I feel like it’s been forever since I last saw you. I was just thinking how much I wanted to hear your voice, so I decided to give you a call.”

I chuckled. “I’m glad you did, but you’ve only been gone a day.”

“I know,” Greyson said, laughing too. “It just feels like it’s been a lot longer than that. It’s amazing how much action we’ve been able to pack into a short amount of time.”

“Is it nice there?” I asked.

“It is,” he said. “We went for a hike, and the view was really great. I want to bring you here sometime. I was just thinking how much I wish I could take a break from everything that’s going on here and be with you. Just to reset from all the bullshit we’ve been through,” he said, his voice tensing up again.

My stomach knotted up with worry.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he said. “Maybe I’m just a little tired.”

“Is that really it? You sound a little down,” I told him.

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine here,” he assured me. “What about you? How’s your day going?”

I laughed. “God, I don’t even know where to start. It’s been a pretty weird day here, too.”

“Weird bad, or weird good?” he asked. “Or just weird weird?”

“Definitely weird weird,” I told him.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked.

I felt tired just considering the idea of condensing everything that had happened into a single conversation. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow, too. We’ll grab some food and talk everything through. It’s nothing we need to spend time on right now.”

Greyson chuckled. “I have to admit, I’m going to want to spend time on something else when I see you tomorrow, love.”

His voice was low and suggestive, and it curled through me like smoke, warming me from the inside out. I felt heat rushing to my cheeks as I blushed furiously.

“Well, we’ll probably be able to find time for that too,” I said quietly.

Behind me, in the room I’d just left, someone screamed and then laughed. I suspected someone had just lost some clothes, though it was hard to say who.

“It sounds pretty loud over there,” Greyson said. “Where are you? Is that the pack house?”

“No, it’s not the pack house,” I said. “Lola, Maya, and I are at a party with the crew team.”

“Ah,” Greyson said. “Okay, so you’re in a room full of people?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, not sure where he was going with the question. “Why do you ask?”

“Because that means you wouldn’t want me to tell you all the things I’m going to do to you when I get you alone tomorrow.”

“Um…” Heat flooded my body as I spun around, scanning the immediate area. People were still playing blackjack in one room, then Lola and Eddie were standing over the sink in the other. Everyone else from the party was scattered around, laughing and talking and drinking from red cups. No one was paying any attention to me, and there was no possible way anyone could’ve heard what Greyson had just said, but that didn’t keep my cheeks from burning.

But the heat was also rushing lower, pooling just below my belly, and I had to admit that I was curious.

“Tell me,” I whispered, turning toward the wall.

Greyson’s husky chuckle only fanned the flames of my desire.

“Oh, love. You’re just going to have to wait to find out,” he said teasingly.

“That’s not fair!” I cried.

“No, it’s not—but I’ll definitely see you tomorrow. Have fun at your party,” he said, then he ended the call.

Hot, bothered, and slightly frustrated, I stared down at my blank phone screen in total disbelief. Desire was coursing through me. How could Greyson get me all worked up and then just leave me hanging like this? I had stuff going on, but how the hell was I supposed to concentrate on literally *anything* else when all I could think about was sliding into bed with my mate?

“Hey, Cali.”

I spun around to see Maya walking over. She was carrying two beers, one of which she held out to me.

“Want one?” she asked.

“Thanks,” I said, taking it.

She nodded at my phone, which I was still clutching. “Was that Greyson?”

“Yeah… How’d you know?” I asked, surprised.

Maya gave me a long look, then she shrugged. “Let’s just say you’re not that hard to read, Cali.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, opening my beer. I gave Maya a careful look. There was something strange about the way she was acting, but it was hard to put my finger on it.

Maya took a long drink. “Did Greyson say anything about what the guys are doing?”

“No,” said, shaking beer foam off my hand. “He was just calling to check in with me. But he did sound pretty tired. I asked him what was going on, but he said he’d tell me when he got back. I think something might’ve happened, but he was pretty tight-lipped.”

Maya clutched her beer with a frown.

“Is there something wrong?” I asked her warily.

She shook her head. “I don’t know… I’m not sure.”

“Not sure about what?” I asked, confused.

“Are you sure Greyson didn’t say anything about what they’re doing?” she asked. “Anything at all?”

“No, nothing. Like I said, he told me we’d talk about it later—”

“Or about Colton? Did he say anything about Colton?” she asked. She was holding the beer can so tightly, I could see dents appearing in the aluminum.

“No,” I told her. “He didn’t say anything about Colton. Why do you ask? Are you worried about something?”

She hesitated for a moment, then she looked up at me, her green eyes wide. “Yes.”

“What?”

“I think Colton’s going to ruin everything.”

**Episode 5087**

**Xavier**

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair.

“You’re not listening to me, man,” I told Colton. “It’s just… Ava’s not the same person as the girl who killed our mom. That person is gone. She’s dead.”

Colton frowned at me, but he looked more confused than hostile. “It really doesn’t look that way to me. I’ve seen her, and Ava seems to be walking and talking just fine.”

“Look, I used to see her the same way as you do,” I said. “And you have to know that this wasn’t an easy decision for me—and it *was* a decision. It wasn’t like I just woke up and realized I was in love with Ava again. When she first came back from the spirit world, I hated her. I didn’t want to be in the same room as her—hell, I couldn’t even stand to look at her.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about!” Colton said. “So what changed? How did she worm her way back into your good graces?”

I shoved him, making him slip off the stool. “Knock it off, man,” I growled. “I told you to stop talking about her like that. You don’t even *need* to fucking talk about her like that. It wasn’t like that.”

“So what was it like?” Colton asked, climbing back onto the stool.

“Ava’s gone through a lot of bad shit,” I said, looking down at my beer. “Not just dying—not just being killed,” I corrected, and my chest felt heavy with the memory of it. “I’m talking about all of it—the pack wars, the manipulation from her brother, dying, coming back, not being in control of her own life. That was something I could sure as hell understand. That’s where it started, I guess. Understanding. Listening. Just…getting each other. I was so pissed when Adéluce forced me to leave Cali and the rest of the Redwood pack. I thought my life was fucking over, but I ended up finding a new group of people who were willing to have my back, and help me get rid of that bitch once and for all. I didn’t see it coming, but that whole mess ended with me having my own pack. It ended with me being the Alpha of that pack, with a Luna I love by my side.”

“But before that, you had me,” Colton said. “And Greyson. And the Redwoods. And Cali.”

I looked at him and thought back on the fight we’d just had—how the Fae had made me hallucinate about being with Cali again. A part of me still wanted that, but I didn’t know if I deserved it.

I kept that to myself, though. I wasn’t going to say anything about that—not to Colton, anyway. I still loved Cali, but I also loved Ava. And my being with Ava was better for everyone. It made sense. There was symmetry in it. And I didn’t want to give Colton any kind of false hope that things might go back to the way they’d been before. Mainly because I just didn’t think that was possible. How could it be? I couldn’t envision a single path that might take me back that way. Anyway, I wasn’t even sure if I was capable of being that person again—playing second fiddle to Greyson’s Alpha. Not now, when I’d had the experience of leading my own pack. Being the Alpha of the Samara pack was where I was meant to be—not kneeling in front of Greyson.

Colton drummed his fingers against the faux marble bar top. He was quiet, but Colton had always had a hard time sitting still, and it was clear he was thinking hard about what I’d just said.

I drank my beer and waited it out.

Finally, Colton’s fingers stilled, and he turned to me. “If you’re telling me that Ava’s a new person, then that’s how I’m going to treat her.”

I stared at him in shock. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m going to give her a chance to be who you say she is. But she’s going to have to show me. I’m going to do her any favors, Xavier. I’m not going to go looking for the new her. But if I see that person, then I’ll be okay with it.”

“Well, I don’t know if she’s going to do you any favors either,” I said with a chuckle.

He shrugged. “Yeah, maybe.”

I raised my eyebrows, wondering how committed Colton actually was to this attitude shift. He’d promised to stop talking shit about Ava before, and he hadn’t managed to keep that up for long, so I was definitely skeptical. “And in the meantime?”

He took a deep breath. “And in the meantime, I’m not going to pick fights with her, and I won’t be an asshole.”

“You won’t be?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. “Not unless she’s an asshole first.”

I considered this, then clinked my beer bottle against his. “Okay. That’s fair.”

Colton grinned. “Okay. How about another drink?” he asked, nodding toward my empty bottle.

“Yeah, fine. Where’s Brandi?” I asked, looking around.

Colton snorted. “We don’t need Brandi.”

He leaned across the bar and rummaged around for a moment, then reappeared holding four more bottles of beer. He opened two and handed one to me, just as Greyson walked back into the bar.

He slid his phone back into his pocket as he sat down. He didn’t mention who he’d been talking to, and I didn’t ask. I wasn’t in the mood for any more confrontation.

I drank my second beer, then another. After the third, I started to feel pleasantly buzzed. I felt pretty good about my conversation with Colton, and the resolution we’d reached. It wasn’t the extent of what I wanted from my brother, but it was something. In the future, I didn’t want any lingering animosity between my Luna and my brother, and I was glad we’d finally addressed it head-on. Hopefully it meant things would get better as time went on.

Thanks to the little buzz I’d acquired, I was feeling *so* good about it that I reached for my own phone. I wanted to call Ava and let her know I’d fixed the Colton problem. I knew it had been bothering her, and figured she’d be glad to hear that it had been smoothed out.

“I’m going to make a call,” I told Greyson and Colton, sliding off my bar stool. “I’m heading back to the room,” I added, grabbing a fresh beer for the road.

“What about the pizza?” Colton called, but I ignored him as I headed out of the bar.

Though I possibly should’ve stayed for some food, because as I walked down the hallway, my legs were strangely unsteady. I hadn’t recognized the beer Brandi had given us, but the fact that I was feeling like this was testament to the fact that this place really did cater to the supernatural world—it usually took a lot more than three beers to make me feel even close to drunk.

When I opened the door to the room, I stopped for a moment, assaulted once again by the aggressive mountain climber theme.

“Godawful,” I muttered to myself as I walked in and shut the door behind me. I put my beer on the table by the door and pulled out my phone to call Ava.

It rang a few times, then went to voicemail.

I liked hearing her voice, but I was disappointed that she hadn’t picked up, so I tried again. It went to voicemail again. Dammit.

“Ava, it’s me,” I started, hoping my words weren’t too slurred. “Just calling to check in. I fixed my brother. Colton. I mean, I fixed you and my brother. I mean—you know what, forget it. Never mind. We’re good. We’re all good. I love you, Ava.”

I ended the call and dropped my phone onto the table, thinking about what I’d just said. I’d meant every word, and not just because I was drunk. I did love Ava. Then I thought about how I couldn’t be with Cali right now. And I wondered if that meant I’d never be with her again.

Kissing her on the counter had felt so right—even if it hadn’t technically been real.

I shook my head, trying to shake off these strange thoughts. This was crazy. I wasn’t going to get anywhere doing this—going around in circles with questions that had no answers. I had to stop thinking this way.

I had a future with Ava. A future with the Samaras. I’d meant what I said to Colton—I really didn’t see a way back to where I’d been. This wasn’t the future I’d had in mind, but that was just how life was.

The life I had with Ava—the future I had with her—wasn’t the future I’d thought I’d get. But maybe it was the future I actually deserved.

**Episode 5088**

I woke up bright and early in my bed at the Redwood pack house, feeling pleasantly loose, and warm and tingly all over.

Apparently, Greyson’s phone call the night before had been an excellent source of inspiration for my dreams. The only thing that would’ve felt nicer than waking up this satisfied and refreshed was waking up next to Greyson. I couldn’t wait for him to get home from his camping trip. We had so much to talk about.

That thought reminded me of the party at Eddie’s, and I frowned. Maya had dropped that bomb on me about Colton “ruining everything,” but she’d never explained what she meant by it. She’d just kept drinking and complaining about Colton all night, without actually offering any more details about what had prompted her to talk like that about her mate.

“He doesn’t know how to talk about his feelings!” she’d complained. “And he leaves his wet towel on the bed like, every single day! And why does he even need all those abs? What does he plan to do with them? I like looking at them, sure, but why does he feel the need to be so…*hot?*”

By the end of the night, she’d been pretty toasted, and her words had soon become little more than an unintelligible stream of angry sounds.

*Maybe Maya meant something else altogether when she said that Colton had ruined everything. But what? Why would she say that out of the blue? Is she unhappy with him? Did he do something on the camping trip that I don’t know about?*

I got up and made my way downstairs, deciding to think on it more after I’d had a cup of coffee. But when I got to the kitchen, Maya was already there, hunched over the table and nursing her own mug of coffee. The babies were asleep in twin rockers on the table next to her.

I grinned as I took in the scene. It was so nice, having the little ones in the pack house. It gave the whole place a new energy that I hadn’t even realized it needed. I ran my fingers lightly along one of the babies’ arms as I passed.

“Good morning, Maya,” I whispered, not wanting to wake them.

Maya grunted in response but held up her mug in greeting.

Once I’d poured my own cup, I sat down next to her. I leaned over my mug, letting the aroma energize me. We’d had a long night, and I was surprised that I wasn’t feeling a lot more tired and beat down. Maya was obviously having a rough morning—though I’d never dare say that to her face.

“So… What did you mean last night when you said that Colton ruined everything?” I asked tentatively, not wanting to get on Maya’s bad side this early in the morning, but really wanting to know what she’d meant.

“Do you have to yell?” Maya rasped. “Sheesh. Read the room.”

“Oh, I wasn’t aware I was yelling, I’m sorry.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “But really, what did you mean by that? You said that Colton ruined everything. What did he ruin?”

“Well now I can’t hear you at all,” Maya grunted. “Speak up, why don’t you?”

I frowned. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

It wouldn’t have been the first time. My relationship with Maya had definitely improved, but she still seemed to take pleasure in razzing me. I supposed that would never change.

Maya laughed, then cringed in pain. “I might be, just a little, but it’s early and you *are* loud.” She rubbed her temples. “And if you haven’t noticed, I’m a little worse for wear this morning.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I lied. “But I think you’re just trying to avoid the conversation.”

Maya arched an eyebrow at me. “Really? What gave you that idea?”

I gave her a dry look. “It’s fine. If you don’t want to talk about it, we won’t, but that seemed like a pretty significant thing to say, so I think that maybe you should talk to *someone* about it.”

Maya put her head down on the table and mumbled something into her arms.

I leaned close to her. “Didn’t quite catch that.”

“I think Colton’s going to propose to me,” Maya said miserably.

I felt a flash of something. Was it hurt? Jealousy? I couldn’t be sure. Still, I knew that the *due destini* was my own damn fault…kind of…so I tried my best to shake off the weird feeling.

*It just sucks that Maya and Colton can like…move on with their lives. Well, not that they* can*, but that I* can’t*. They can reach all the normal milestones that happen in relationships without worrying about any consequences. They’re not in love with two people, just with each other. It’s so much less complicated.*

“And that’s a bad thing?” I asked.

Maya sat up and cradled her chin in her hands. “I don’t know—it’s not bad, but it’s not good either. It’s more that I’m finding it hard to handle so many huge life changes, one after the other. I just want a second to catch my fucking breath.”

I was surprised. “I guess having the babies and becoming Alpha of the Grimcrest pack are such big events that a marriage proposal doesn’t seem like all that big of a shift to me. You and Colton already have kids, and isn’t Colton technically the Grimcrest Luna or something?”

“And your point is?” Maya deadpanned.

“I don’t know… It’s just that you two have already reached so many huge milestones in your lives and relationship—marriage just seems like the natural next step. And you two love each other so much, and you’re committed to each other, so what’s the big deal about getting married? It’s not like you’re at each other’s throats like you used to be…at least not all the time.”

Maya went quiet, but her gaze was contemplative. Finally, she pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. She grabbed the two rockers, hoisted the babies off the table, and started for the door.

“Wait, where are you going?” I asked. “Is it something I said? I was only trying to help.”

Maya stopped and sighed. “I guess it kind of pisses me off that you’re not entirely wrong. And it’s hard for me to look at your smug face while you’re telling me all this stuff that’s unfortunately true. It’s really… How should I put it? It’s annoying. Yeah, it’s really annoying. I mean, you’re really annoying right now because you’re right.”

“Um… You’re welcome?”

Maya left without another word, passing a tired-looking Lola as she shuffled into the kitchen. Lola had huge bags under her eyes, her hair was mussed, and she only had eyes for the coffee pot.

“Good morning,” she grumbled, heading over to pour herself a cup.

“Do I look smug?” I asked her. “Like, right now, is my expression somehow…annoying?”

Lola turned to look at me, then yawned and shrugged. “I don’t know why you’re asking me that, but no, I don’t think you look particularly smug or annoying.”

Before I could explain, Lola changed the subject.

“So, what do you think about the whole Eddie and Codsworth having the same mark thing?” she asked. “Coincidence? Not a coincidence? Do they both just need better skin care regimens, or do you think the marks actually mean something?”

“Whoa, oh yeah, I can’t believe I forgot about that!” I said. “I got so wrapped up in Maya’s drama that I forgot to think of a way to see if Charlotte has the same mark. I think if we figure that out, we’ll be able to see if it’s all a coincidence—though right now, I’m leaning toward no.”

“Me too,” Lola said, taking a huge swig of coffee. She blinked a few times and sighed, obviously feeling a little more alert after the shot of caffeine. “But I think we can easily find out. We’ll just throw another party here at the pack house and invite Charlotte. I’ll play drunk and drop my beer on her and—”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I could already see Greyson stressing out over having a bunch of humans at the pack house, yet again. I didn’t want to open us up to any more close calls or potential werewolf sightings. We’d already used up our luck in that regard.

“Maybe we could do something at the school,” I suggested. “There’s an indoor swimming pool on campus, I think. Maybe we could throw a pool party. If Charlotte’s in a swimsuit, it’ll be really easy to spot the mark—and on top of that, if we invite Eddie and Codsworth, they’ll be in swimming trunks and we’d be able to get a closer look at their marks, too. Compare them.”

My phone buzzed, and I saw Codsworth’s name pop up. I slid the phone open to accept the call, but before I could get a word in, Codsworth’s frantic voice was blaring through the earpiece.

“Cali! I’m so glad you answered. There’s something you need to see.”

**Episode 5089**

**Greyson**

A loud knock on the hotel room door startled me awake. I groaned, rubbed at my eyes, then opened them and rolled over onto my side—only to come face-to-face with a giant, fake yeti.

I shoved the thing out of my bed. “Colton! I told you not to touch this thing!”

I saw Colton’s body shaking with laughter under the covers. I ignored him and got up to answer the door, trying not to pay too much attention to the ridiculous décor around me. It was literally the ugliest hotel room I’d ever seen. Why anyone would come to a bordello in order to have their senses assaulted like this was anyone’s guess, but to each their own.

I opened the door to find a hotel employee waiting in the hallway with a room service cart.

“Free breakfast, compliments of the hotel,” the man said, pushing the cart into our room. “This is from Brandi, as an added thank-you. And you and your brothers are welcome to stay as long as you like.”

“We’ll be leaving shortly,” I said. “But thanks for the breakfast.”

“I think we should consider staying another day,” Colton called out. “I saw a sign for a spa downstairs. I could really use a massage. Maybe even some shiatsu. Sir, do you guys do shiatsu?”

The worker smiled pleasantly at Colton. “We do. I can see about scheduling that for you—”

“No,” I interrupted. “Thank you, though. My brother was just kidding.”

“I was not! If there’s an opportunity for a massage, *gratis*, then shit yeah, I want to take advantage. Only a savage would pass that up,” Colton said, giving me a pointed look.

Glaring at Colton, I turned my attention back to the staff member. “As I said, we’ll be leaving shortly. But thanks again.”

“I’ll let the front desk know,” the worker said, making his way out.

Colton was out of the bed now and stretching, his gaze dragging slowly across the room.

“Where’s Xavier?” He ducked into the bathroom to check. “Weird. Not in there, either. Where did he go?”

I took a quick look around. I hadn’t even noticed that Xavier wasn’t in bed.

“No idea,” I said. “Probably out for a run.”

Colton was barely paying attention, busy removing the cloches from the food trays to reveal an impressive breakfast spread. He yelped with excitement. “This is maybe one of the best things to ever happen to me! Why are we leaving so soon? We should just stay for a week. Maybe two. Ooh, do you think they’d let us stay for a month?”

“Colton, what the fuck? That sounds terrible. And what about your kids?”

Colton shrugged. “They can come stay here too. What’s the problem? They’d love it.”

“What? You want your kids to come live in a brothel?” I shook my head. Colton had gone through a lot of changes, but the essence of him remained the same. I supposed that was a good thing. There was something oddly refreshing about having someone around with absolutely no filter.

Colton scoffed. “Greyson, chill out. They’re babies. They have no idea what a brothel is. It’s fine. And Maya would love this place.”

I laughed. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall when you ask Maya to bring your kids here. Also, it might be good for someone else to be there so they can call the ambulance for you when she inevitably kicks your ass for even suggesting it.”

Colton was too busy shoving bacon into his mouth to answer. I sighed as I watched him tear through the food trays. I wasn’t all that hungry, but even if I were, there was a slim chance I’d be able to grab even a morsel of food without pulling back a bloody stump instead of a hand.

I plopped back down in bed, my thoughts quickly shifting to the previous night, and the way it had ended. When I’d rejoined Greyson and Colton at the bar, everything had seemed fine. I hadn’t wanted to upset the peace by asking about the state of their relationship then, so I decided to do it now.

“So… Are you and Xavier okay?” I ventured. “I know this whole trip has been kind of rough for you two, with all the fighting about Ava. Do you think you’re over it, yet? Or have you at least reached some kind of middle ground?”

Colton nodded, his mouth full of eggs. “We talked about it, we’re fine.”

“Good, glad to hear it,” I said. “So I guess that means that despite everything, this weekend worked out for you and Xavier.”

“Yeah, guess so,” Colton said, slugging down a glass of orange juice and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s good to be on the same page with him. I don’t know if it’s because we’re twins or what, but I always feel off when I’m fighting with him.”

*So, Xavier and Colton managed to close the rift between them and are closer than they were before the trip.*

I eyed Xavier’s empty bed.

*But I’m not so sure I can say the same for me and Xavier. We haven’t really had a chance to talk through our issues—not like he and Colton did. But we have so many issues, and they run deep. How are we ever supposed to get over the fact that we love the same woman, and deal with all the conflict that dynamic causes?*

I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous of the ease between Colton and Xavier. They’d fought a lot this trip—like, *really* fought—but they had such a good foundation, they’d be able to get over even the worst disagreement with a lot more ease than Xavier and me. And while Colton and I hadn’t gotten into any fights this trip, I wasn’t sure if we’d gotten any *closer.*

*As long as Cali is part of our lives, I don’t think I’ll have the brotherly relationship with Xavier that I want. No matter what we do, that always seems to trip us up in the end. How will we ever get over our conflicts related to Cali? Xavier’s not even technically with her anymore, and she’s still a point of contention between us.*

“I’m glad we were able to hash things out about Ava for real, finally,” Colton said, interrupting my thoughts. “The whole thing was eating me up inside, and it’s painfully obvious that Xavier has no intention of dropping her. I was starting to think we’d never get past it, but we did. It feels good to be back on the same page with my brother. It just doesn’t feel right when we’re fighting.”

“I’m glad, too,” I said.

Despite my lingering feeling of disconnect with my brothers and my jealousy over how easily Colton and Xavier had resolved things, I really was happy that the Ava thing wasn’t getting between them anymore.

*I’m surprised that Colton is opening up to me like this. Maybe that counts for something. There was a time when Colton wouldn’t have even told me his thoughts about the weather, let alone his deep feelings about our brother. Maybe we’ve made more progress than I thought.*

Colton’s sudden desire to confide in me quickly changed my perspective about the weekend. I was starting to feel good about it—and about finally getting to be the older brother I wanted to be. At least for one of my brothers.

“So… You’re fine with Ava?” I asked.

Colton shrugged and looked up at the ceiling, seemingly sorting through his thoughts on the matter. “I’m not sure if ‘fine’ is the right word, but I think that she and I can be civil from here on out. I won’t actively try to destroy her, like I was doing before. I trust Xavier, and if he thinks she’s changed, then she’s changed, and I’m willing to give this new Ava a chance.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “What do you mean, ‘new Ava’?”

“What, hasn’t Xavier talked to you about this?” Colton asked. “Wait, that’s a stupid question—he hates talking about any of this shit to anyone. I also have a sneaking suspicion that Xavier just hates talking in general, but that’s a conversation for another day.”

I smirked. “I have some theories about that, too, but go on.”

“Xavier told me that he fell in love with Ava, but that this isn’t the same Ava who killed our mom,” Colton said. “According to him, she isn’t even the same Ava he was with before everything happened with that vampire-witch. This is an entirely new Ava—one Xavier actively chose to keep alive.”

That shocked me. “Really? I guess I’ve always thought of Xavier’s relationship with Ava as a forced choice that just grew into something more.”

“Nope. He’s with her because he wants to be,” Colton said. “At least that’s what it seems like to me.”

This new information had me thrown. Ever since I’d learned about the hold Adéluce had maintained over Xavier, I’d thought that the vampire-witch had forced Xavier to be with Ava—and that he would eventually be able to untangle himself from her. But if what Colton was saying was true, that meant Xavier had made a choice.

And if Xavier had made a choice, then that meant Cali was free to make one too.

**Episode 5090**

I grabbed my car keys and headed for the front door. I needed to go see Codsworth. He hadn’t wanted to explain himself over the phone, and had claimed that it was something I needed to see in person. That had given me pause, and panic had hit me swift and hard. I only hoped that whatever it was he wanted to show me, it wasn’t something supernatural that I’d have to bend over backward to explain away. No matter what, though if it *was* something supernatural, I definitely needed to get to Codsworth before he took it upon himself to dig any deeper.

I opened the front door and was greeted by the sight of Greyson standing on the porch, his hand primed to grab the doorknob. Over his shoulder, I spotted Colton on the porch behind him. And beyond him, I saw Xavier shift and go running into the woods without looking back.

I didn’t have a chance to really wonder why Xavier hadn’t stayed behind, because Greyson was already grabbing me by the waist and swinging me around, his lips finding mine mid turn.

Laughing, I kissed him back before he settled me back down on the ground.

“I’m so glad to see you! I wasn’t sure when to expect you.” I leaned forward and kissed him again.

“Not to interrupt the love fest, but where’s Maya?” Colton asked. “Hopefully you guys didn’t annoy her enough to send her running back to Grimcrest territory.”

I gestured upstairs, my eyes on Greyson, not really even paying any attention to Colton. After my call with Greyson last night and all the dreams I’d had afterward, all I wanted was to focus on Greyson, and nothing else. It felt like we were the only two people in the world.

I pulled his face toward mine and kissed him again, moaning and pressing against him while I wrapped my arms around his neck. I felt like I wanted to swallow him whole, and I couldn’t wait to get him alone.

“Okay, you guys are gross. I’m standing right here! Get a room. Actually, *I’m*…going to get a room,” Colton said as he brushed past us and disappeared into the house.

Greyson was laughing again, kissing me back before pulling away and looking down at me with obvious fondness. “Colton might say that, but he has a tendency not to knock, so we’d better lock our door.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “I don’t want *any* interruptions.”

“Not one,” Greyson replied.

He scooped me up in his arms, bridal style. I dropped my keys in surprise, then remembered why I’d opened the front door in the first place.

“Oh, I’m supposed to go see Codsworth!” I said. “He wants to show me something. It sounded urgent.”

Greyson kissed me. “Later. Please go later. If it were life or death, he would’ve said as much, right? Stay here with me.”

Filled with emotion and longing, I kissed him back, cradling the back of his head. Then I pulled away and looked him in the eyes, feeling love drunk and giddy all at the same time. “That sounds like a good idea.”

Greyson carried me up to my room, kicked the door shut behind him, and tossed me onto the bed. I watched as he turned to lock the door, shivering in anticipation.

He turned back to me, smiling. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what you sounded like on the phone yesterday. I kept picturing you blushing. It didn’t help that I was at that damn brothel, surrounded by people who were doing what I wanted to be doing with you.”

“So you had a weekend away with your brothers, but you spent the entire time thinking about me?” I teased, poking his chest with my toe.

He grabbed my foot and kissed it before kneading the arches of my feet.

“Hell yeah. You and not much else.” He leaned over to kiss me hard, his tongue darting between my lips.

I sighed into the kiss, wrapping my arms around him and letting him plunder my mouth, his lips hot against mine. Then he pulled away.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “I’m always thinking about you.”

I smiled up at him. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

I tightened my hold around Greyson’s neck and pulled him down on top of me, our lips melding together. Nothing mattered but this—being here with him, all alone, our bodies entwined and moving in perfect sync.

He started to pull off my clothes, his gaze drinking me in as he snapped off my bra and freed my breasts. He planted kisses across my breasts, his tongue dancing across my nipples before he suckled them, kneading the soft globes in his hands.

“You’re so beautiful, Cali,” he whispered against my goose pimpled flesh.

He finished undressing me, pulling off my pants before using his teeth to slide my panties down my legs. He dipped his head between my legs to taste me, but I pushed him back.

“No, let me,” I said. “I want to. I’ve been fantasizing about doing this ever since you left.”

I pushed him back onto the bed and yanked off his pants. He dropped his head back, moaning as I maneuvered him out of his boxers and slowly ran my tongue along the tip of his shaft, giving him a taste of what was to come.

Then I got up to pull off his boxers and stood over him, taking a moment to admire his body. It was always a shock, seeing Greyson’s in all his hot glory. He looked so strong, so massive lying on my bed, his handsome face soft with desire and anticipation, his intense grey eyes watching my every move.

I crawled on top of him and trailed a finger down the jagged scar on his torso, leftover from his fight with Maren all that time ago—it was a reminder of the history between them, and proof that Greyson was powerful enough to survive a Dark Fae attack. He was so strong, so resilient. There was something undeniably sexy about knowing that my mate was damn near invincible.

Finally, my gaze drifted down to take in his erection, lying in wait against his thigh. I licked my lips as I dropped to my knees, took him into my palm, and stroked him a few times, pulling groans of pleasure from his lips.

Then I sucked him into my mouth, swirling my tongue up and down his length, going slowly at first and then speeding up when I felt him tense underneath me. I loved pleasuring him this way, and I wanted to show him just how much I’d missed him while he was away.

“Love, that feels so good,” he said through clenched teeth, lifting his head to watch me.

I tightened my fist around the base of his cock and squeezed, my lips and tongue worshiping his pulsing length. His hand tangled into my hair, guiding me up and down his cock. I hummed as I worked him with my mouth and my hands.

“If you keep doing that, I’m going to come,” he said, growling.

*Maybe that’s the point,* I mind linked.

I pulled away smiling to pump both hands up and down his shaft, and then a second later he was hauling me into his lap, his hands on my hips, positioning me above his cock.

“I want to fuck you so bad,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Reaching between us, I mounted him and slowly pressed his rigid length deep inside me. I gasped as his cock easily slid inside me. Greyson grabbed my ass, squeezing it as he thrust up into me.

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I never want to be away from you again.”

“Then don’t be,” I said.

I lifted his hands up and placed them on my breasts as I rocked my hips against his. Waves of pleasure seized my every nerve ending, and I threw my head back, biting my bottom lip as I rocked against him.

Greyson’s strong hands squeezed my breasts gently before traveling down to rest on my hips. He started guiding me up and down on his shaft, lifting his hips up to meet me, his eyes closed, a sheen of sweat breaking out across his body.

Then, Greyson picked me up and laid me down on the bed, his lips pressed against mine as he took the lead, thrusting and surging against me, his solid body fitting perfectly against mine.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” I said, the words catching me by surprise.

I arched against Greyson and spread my knees wide as red-hot pleasure pooled between my legs. I looked down at the point where our bodies were coming together over and over again and cried out, my mind blown from the delight of seeing him pulse in and out of me, pushing me through my release.

After Greyson came for the second time, he collapsed on top of me, a satisfied smile on his lips. “I really just can’t get enough of you.”

I stroked a hand through his hair. “Me neither. I’m so happy you’re back.”

My phone lit up on the bed, and I reached for it. Greyson kissed my shoulder and snuggled against me as I brought the phone up to check the screen. When I saw the waiting notification, my eyes went wide and I shot up in bed.

I had a text from Codsworth.

*Open the door. I’m downstairs.*

**Episode 5091**

I bounded out of bed, rushing to get my clothes on and nearly tripping over myself. Shit, why was he here? What was I going to do? My brain was all blissed out on sex that I was barely thinking straight.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked, sitting up. “Did something happen? Are you okay?”

“Yes? No? I don’t know?” I said, but I couldn’t get the words fully out. My mind was racing. All I could think was that I had to get downstairs and talk to Codsworth before something went wrong.

*Why is Codsworth here? Has it finally happened? Does he remember what Chessa did to him, and now he’s here at one of the scenes of the crime trying to piece the details together? No, it can’t be that. I think we’re out of the woods on that front…hopefully. But I was supposed to meet him, so why did he come here instead?*

Greyson got out of bed and put his hands on my shoulders, pausing my harried movements. “I need you to take a quick breath and tell me what the hell is going on. You look like you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

“Codsworth is here, and I’m pretty sure it has something to do with his skin mark.The same mark Eddie has. It’s weird.” I shook my head. “Lola and I thought something might be up with the marks, but… Could Codsworth have figured it out?”

Greyson looked hard at me, confused. “Skin marks? What are you talking about? Like bug bites or something? Why are you panicking about this?”

I shook my head. “I’m not explaining it well, but I’ll tell you everything as soon as I deal with this. I just don’t want Codsworth standing outside for too long, so let me go grab him and defuse what could become a situation really fast.”

Greyson still looked confused, but he nodded. “Fine, I’ll let you handle whatever you’ve got going on. I’ll find you after I check in with Rishika. Let me know if you need me, though, okay?”

“Thanks—I promise I’ll tell you everything as soon as I touch base with Codsworth.” I got up on my tiptoes and kissed him. I went to pull away, but Greyson wrapped his arms around me, keeping me in place and taking the opportunity to deepen the kiss.

And of course, I was swept up in the sensation of it. Greyson’s warmth, the smell of me on his lips, the urgency of his tongue—it was all making me weak in the knees, making my thoughts fuzzy and unfocused. What I wouldn’t give to get back into bed and go for another round… Then my phone buzzed again, and I pulled away.

“You’re distracting me—stop it!” I admonished him. “I have important things to do!”

*Like keeping a human college student from blowing our entire world apart.*

Greyson laughed. “Sorry, but I’m not going to apologize for that. I couldn’t help myself.”

I gave him a playful shove in the shoulder and then quickly finished getting dressed. Then I burst out of my room and rushed downstairs, hoping no one else had gotten to Codsworth first—and that no one decided to bolt outside for a wolfy run before I got to him.

To my relief, I opened the door and found Codsworth standing on the porch waiting for me. But he didn’t even let me get a greeting out. He pushed past me and barreled into the house, talking a mile a minute.

“Do you know Eddie and Charlotte *both* have the same weird mark on their shoulders as I have on mine? I mean *exactly* the same, and in the same spot, too. I even measured them—and yes, you guessed it, they’re the same diameter! It’s fucking weird! But, luckily for me, I have pictures to prove it!”

I added the new Charlotte revelation to my mental list of *Weird Stuff Happening That Rubs Me the Wrong Way*. The list was getting longer by the day, and I was hoping I wouldn’t have more to add to it by the time this conversation with Codsworth was done—but I wasn’t feeling very confident about that.

I didn’t like that Codsworth had been investigating all of this on his own. Codsworth was dogged when he got something stuck in his craw, and I couldn’t just sit back and assume he wouldn’t find anything if he went looking for it.

He’d come dangerously close to finding out something he shouldn’t have before, and I wasn’t convinced he wouldn’t stumble upon something else just as serious again.

“What do you mean by *pictures*?” I asked, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. “Pictures of this strange mark?”

“Here, take a look.” Codsworth pulled out his phone and brought up a photo of a bulletin board with a bunch of stuff stuck on it. There were even red strings running between pictures, Post-it Notes, and index cards covered in Codsworth’s neat handwriting. He’d been at this for a while, and that wasn’t good. How long before he stumbled across something that I wouldn’t be able to draw him away from?

“What is this?” I asked.

“It’s my evidence board. You know, into the…” Codsworth’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Aliens,” he finished. “I’ve got all my theories plotted out on this board. It helps me organize my thoughts. It’s just like the ones cops use to solve crimes.”

I took a deep breath and then let it out.

*Aliens are better than werewolves or vampires, right? If he keeps barking up the alien tree, maybe he won’t start to wonder about the supernatural forces that might* actually *be at play.*

Codsworth zoomed into one of the photos on his board, and I took in the image of Charlotte looking over her shoulder at the camera. And right there on her shoulder, just as Codsworth claimed, was the very distinct marking in the same spot as his and Eddie’s.

I tried to keep the shock off my face at the realization that what I’d feared was true—the mark truly was identical. I took the phone from Codsworth and surreptitiously texted the photo to myself. I had no idea what all of this meant, but it couldn’t be good. Now I was going to be in a race to figure out the connection before Codsworth did.

Codsworth and the two other humans who’d been kidnapped by Chessa and inexplicably lost their memories while we were holding them prisoner in the basement (I cringed inwardly at the memory of that) all had the same mark. There was no question about it. It had to be associated with the memory loss, and I didn’t want someone out there who could just take memories away from whoever they wanted whenever they wanted.

*Who knows what they’re capable of? They could use their memory snatching abilities on us if they saw a reason to.*

Codsworth was looking at me expectantly, and my gut twisted.

“So, Cali, don’t you don’t think that’s weird? You don’t think that all of us having the same mark in the same spot means anything?”

I hesitated, knowing I had to handle this with kid gloves.

*I don’t want Codsworth involved in this. He’s been through enough. Chessa already took him and the others and terrorized them. If this person—whoever’s doing this—finds out Codsworth’s trying to investigate what happened, they might do something worse than just taking away his memories.*

For his own good, I was going to have to do whatever I could to keep him from investigating. Codsworth was smart, and I wasn’t convinced that his little evidence board wouldn’t lead him right into the path of someone who could hurt him…and that path could somehow lead back to us and what actually happened to him that night. There was no way for me to know if the marks were connected, but I had to consider worst-case scenario.

“I can agree this is weird,” I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. “But let’s think this through for a second. If this does mean something, if it’s…aliens…then what’s your plan?”

Codsworth arched a brow. “What do you mean?”

“I just want you to think long and hard about what’s next, that’s all. This could be really dangerous. I don’t know much about aliens, but they’re typically way more advanced than us, right? If you make the wrong move, you could find yourself in a big mess.”

Codsworth narrowed his eyes at me. “Cali, I think you’re pushing back on this just a little too hard. What plan would I need other than to take it to the authorities? Unless you have a problem with that?”

“What do you mean by that? Why would I have a problem?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even.

“Well, all of this happened at *your* house. So I have to ask, Cali, what are you trying to cover up?”

**Episode 5092**

For a long moment, I was at a loss for words. What was I supposed to say? Especially when I *was* trying to cover it up—but it was all for Codsworth’s sake. I had to make him understand that, but I couldn’t exactly tell him I was doing any of it either… Besides, I hadn’t been the one to do any of this to Codsworth or the others. I had no idea what was going on any more than Codsworth did—in this case anyway.

Codsworth was watching me closely, still waiting for an answer.

“What do you mean, Codsworth? I’m not trying to cover up anything.” I was trying to sound indignant. “What would I be trying to cover up, anyway? What, do you think I’m an alien?”

Codsworth glared at me. “No, not quite. I just think you’re trying a little too hard to get me to let this go. What difference should it make to you whether I have a plan or not to pursue this? Unless you have some interest in me dropping the matter. I mean, you barely even looked at the picture of Charlotte.”

“That’s not what’s happening,” I said. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. You have no idea what you’re dealing with—and I don’t either,” I added quickly. “You should tread lightly. That’s all I’m saying.”

A shift came over Codsworth’s face. He suddenly looked tired. Overwhelmed. “The fact that I can’t remember what happened to me is scary. I’ve never blacked out like that before in my life. I don’t like not knowing what happened to me. I think that’s why I’m so obsessed with this.”

Thinking about what Seluna had done to me, I said, “That’s fair. I understand that feeling better than you know. It’s nightmarish. But all I can think about is what if your theory pans out? What if you follow this lead and upset the wrong people? There’s no plan in place to keep you safe. That was all I meant.”

Codsworth paused like he was considering my words. “You might be right,” he said finally. “Maybe I should let this go. It’s probably not healthy for me to obsess over this right now.”

I nodded, feeling bad about lying to my friend, but I was glad to hear him say this. “I think that’s the right call. Once you invite the interest of dangerous forces, sometimes it’s hard to get off their radar.”

“Thanks, Cali. I think maybe I’ll take a break for a while. Maybe focus on the upcoming regatta like I should be doing. Get back to some semblance of normalcy in my life.”

I grinned. “That’s the spirit. I’ll be doing the same. Besides, regattas are a lot more fun than chasing aliens, anyway.”

“I don’t know about that, but I can agree it’s a lot less dangerous,” Codsworth replied.

After I said my final goodbyes to Codsworth and watched him leave, I let out a sigh of relief. That was one piece of this whole thing I wouldn’t have to deal with right away. If I could keep Codsworth focused on more normal, human things, maybe over time I would stop being so paranoid about him getting his memory back.

Now I just had to figure out what had actually happened to Codsworth, Charlotte, and Eddie to leave them with those strange marks.

I walked into the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee and found Greyson and Rishika there wrapping up their conversation. Greyson nodded as I came in and passed me one of the mugs he was holding—it was fresh coffee.

“Nice talk. How about you go and fill in the others about the new patrol schedule?” Greyson said to Rishika. “They’ll be excited about things being a little calmer around here. I know I am.”

Rishika nodded. “Same here. Patrols are patrols but they do feel a little different when you’re not actively dodging a threat.”

I took a sip of the coffee and hummed in appreciation. I needed a pick-me-up after all the energy I’d expended redirecting Codsworth.

After Rishika was gone, Greyson leaned against the counter and sipped from his mug of tea, watching me over the rim. “So, are you going to tell me what’s going on now? What did Codsworth want?”

“Where should I start?”

“From the beginning,” Greyson replied.

I took a deep breath and told him everything—about the pictures Codsworth had taken of the strange, bug bite–like marks that Eddie, Codsworth, and Charlotte all shared, to the strange vibes I was getting about the whole thing.

“I managed to turn Codsworth off from investigating it all himself, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t something going on here. Not that I have the slightest idea what it is,” I said.

Greyson nodded thoughtfully. “The marks do concern me. It’s definitely weird. But have they remembered anything? That’s the real question.”

I shook my head. “Nope. As far as I can tell, they don’t. And with how overzealous Codsworth is, I’m sure he would run over here to tell me if he remembered even an inkling of what actually happened.”

Greyson nodded. “That’s good. Honestly, that’s the most important thing. As long as their memories don’t come back, we don’t have to worry about exposure to humans…even though if we did get exposed, it’s all Chessa’s fault.”

Greyson put his mug down and took my hand in his. “But just know that I’ll help you however I can.”

I smiled up at him, feeling all warm and fuzzy. It was nice to know I could always count on him.

“Thanks. I’d love to drop this whole thing, but if I don’t help Codsworth and the others, who will? I can’t let Codsworth dig into this on his own but that doesn’t mean he isn’t on to something. Me helping get to the bottom of this will help protect them all.”

Greyson smiled. “You have such a big heart. And I meant what I said. Whatever you need, I’ll help. However you need me to.”

“Actually, do you think we could go see Big Mac? She might be able to tell us something about the pictures.”

“Sure, but I think we should call first. My mother mentioned something about Big Mac considering cloaking her house to stop people from showing up unannounced,” Greyson said.

“Good idea. Anything to help put her in a better mood before we visit her.”

We called Big Mac but got no answer. I left a message mentioning the marks and promised to send a few photos her way.

When I hung up, I asked Greyson, “Do you think it makes sense to just stop by? I mean, she doesn’t always keep her phone close. She might just have missed our calls. And the quicker we find out what’s going on, the quicker we can do whatever it takes to protect Codsworth.”

Greyson shook his head. “I understand your urgency Cali, really—but no. We need to respect Big Mac’s boundaries and let her get back to us first. I promised my mom we would take it easy from here on out when it comes to Big Mac.”

“Got it,” I said, completely understanding but still eager to figure out what was going on as soon as possible.

Greyson gave me a peck on the lips. “I’m going to go shower, but try not to worry too much about this. We’ll figure it out. And as long as Codsworth and the others aren’t in any immediate danger, and it doesn’t seem like they are, we can take our time getting to the bottom of things.”

“You’re right. And for all I know, it could really be a coincidence,” I said.

After Greyson left, I looked at the picture I’d taken of Codsworth’s evidence board again, zooming in on the various things he’d posted. He had pictures of all the marks along with a few other things that didn’t seem relevant—photos of UFOs or redacted memos he found on the internet.

Lola’s voice interrupted my concentration. “Hey, Cali, whatcha looking at?”

I held up my phone. “Just Codsworth’s evidence board thing. It’s official. Charlotte has the same mark as Codsworth and Eddie.”

Lola took my phone and examined the image. “Weird, right? But what do you want to do about it?”

“I’m thinking that maybe we should talk to Kendall. She didn’t seem alarmed by Codsworth’s mark, but maybe she’ll feel differently once we show her that Charlotte and Eddie have the same one.”

“Okay, but why *Kendall?* We don’t trust her, remember? Not to mention we barely know her.”

“We have an understanding,” I admitted. “She was helping me with this and with making sure my friends are safe. That, and I think there’s a good chance she knows a lot more than she’s telling us. There’s something going on. She has two phones, and she tried to shut me down on this really hard when I brought it up, and that’s just weird, too. I want to know more.”

“Okay, so what are you going to do?” Lola asked.

Determined, I said, “Simple. I’m going to go talk to Kendall.”

**Episode 5093**

**Xavier**

I made my way back into the Samara pack house, happy as hell to be home. It was quiet, though I’d run into some of the former Loneclaws and a few Samaras outside in the front yard. Zipper and Carmen were heading out to patrol the woods, and Zipper had said he was eager to show Carmen the ropes.

Carmen seemed eager to learn, and that was a good sign—especially since Zipper was, for all intents and purposes, being cooperative for once.

I was glad to see that the former Loneclaws were starting to integrate well into our ranks, and smoothly, too. I’d left so soon after they joined that I was happy to come back home and see things were working out even though I’d been away for a few days. Not only did that mean my choice to bring them into the fold was a good one, but that Ava was more than capable of keeping the pack functioning while I was gone.

And I was so eager to see Ava. She was all I’d been able to think about on our way back from the camping trip. I couldn’t wait to smell her, wrap her in my arms and kiss her, do other things to her. But my one-track mind was shattered when, on my way upstairs to find her, I spotted Knox sitting alone in the den.

Knox had been one of the few voices of dissent for the Loneclaws joining the Samaras, mostly because of his beef with Milo. While it was obvious Knox and Milo hadn’t killed each other while I was gone, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to check in with the young wolf to make sure things were as peaceful as they seemed.

I quickly pivoted into the den to join him. If nothing else, I wanted to get a temp check on how he was adjusting. If something was festering, I wanted to nip it in the bud.

“Hey, Knox, you good?” I asked as I entered the den and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Yeah, all good. Welcome back. How was the trip? Did you and your brothers strengthen your bond or whatever?”

“It went well,” I said, pausing before asking, “How’s the pack house gotten on since I’ve been away?”

“It was fine,” Knox remarked. “Nothing to report.”

I quirked an eyebrow up before adding, “And the Loneclaws? How’s that going?”

Knox sighed. “What is it you’re asking?”

“I think we both know what I’m asking. How is it going with Milo? Are you guys all right? No more blowups? Fights?”

Knox shrugged. “I still hate the guy, so there’s that. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to do anything to screw up pack dynamics. I know how important it is to bring new blood into the pack. I know more than anyone how important it is for the pack to grow. If the Loneclaws help us do it, so be it. I’m not going to stand in the way.”

“I appreciate that, but I want to get to the point where you can trust the new members,” I said. “I want you to do more than tolerate them. I want you to like them.”

“I mean, I do for the most part. I don’t have a problem with Cresta, Carmen, Grace… It’s just Milo.”

“I get it,” I admitted around a sigh. “I know it’s not easy to just up and trust someone you don’t even like, someone you have an issue with. But you two are going to have to figure out how to work together.”

I stopped and thought about that for a second.

*Isn’t that what Colton thinks about Ava? That he doesn’t like her much but has to figure out a way to get along for my sake? Obviously, the rift between Ava and Colton is on a more serious note since Milo didn’t kill anyone, just stole a date from Knox.*

It was an encouraging thought, though. If my brother could learn to forgive Ava for the greater good, then maybe Milo and Knox could do the same. And honestly, they were going to *have* to do the same.

For instance, I couldn’t go confidently into battle with both men hating each other, unable to defend each other, and worst-case scenario, setting each other up for failure. Discord like that during a fight could hurt the entire pack.

“Would you be willing to work with Milo and show him what it means to be part of the Samara pack?”  I asked.

Knox looked like he was about to lose his shit.

“Just to be clear, I’m not assigning Milo to you or anything formal like that. I’m asking if it’s something you’d want to do because I don’t want it to feel like an obligation.”

While I knew it was completely within my rights to order Knox to partner with Milo, when it came to Ava’s hothead of a cousin, demanding things was almost always the wrong approach. I was willing to be a little more accommodating for the sake of peace and continuing to build a good relationship with Knox.

“Not only that,” I continued, “you should know that I consider your role within the Samara pack to be an important one. I’m asking you to extend an olive branch to Milo, but if you really can’t do that, I want you to know I get it and we can figure something else out.”

Knox was nodding along and had been the entire time. After a big sigh, he said, “I appreciate that, and I’m willing to try this out with Milo. But I think you should talk to Milo first, make it clear I’m the one in charge in this arrangement. I don’t want to have to fight Milo on anything. That’s when shit will hit the fan.”

*I don’t doubt it. I’m probably playing with fire in trying to force these two together, but I have to try. I need to make sure the pack is strong, and that means fortifying the weakest links.*

“Fine, I’ll talk to Milo. I don’t mind doing that—especially if it will help you two get off on the right foot.”

A pair of arms wrapped around my chest. “That sounds good,” Ava said. Then she leaned in close to my ear. “What are all the other things my Alpha cando?” she whispered in my ear.

Knox scowled. “And that’s my cue to leave. Catch you two later.”

With a big grin stuck on my face, I twisted around to face Ava, leaning down to kiss her. It still blew my mind how much things had changed between us and how just feeling Ava’s touch made me so happy.

Ava smiled into our kiss and then pulled away. “I’m so glad you’re back. And I’m…sorry for being so intense while you were gone. I couldn’t help myself.”

I laughed and gave her a quick kiss. “Don’t worry about it. I’m used to you flipping out by now.”

Ava’s cheeks reddened. “Stop. I don’t want you to get used to something like that.”

I laughed. “I’m just kidding. And anyway, I know you only get that way because you care about me. There’s something nice about it.”

I kissed her again and walked her back toward the recently vacated couch. Even though we’d only been gone a few days, I’d missed this so much—the feeling of having her in my arms, of her soft, sweet mouth against mine.

I deepened the kiss, hungry for more, excited about where this was going. I couldn’t wait to be all alone with her up in our room, tearing at each other. I wrapped my arms around her and was about to suggest a change of location when Cali’s face flashed in my head. I pulled back, breathing hard.

“You okay?” Ava asked, concerned. “What is it?”

I just shook my head. It wasn’t like I could tell her that my ex’s face just invaded our moment and threw me off. Ava would probably fly into a rage and kill me right where I stood.

“It was nothing,” I said. I dipped down to kiss her again, determined to push Cali out of my mind. I was here with Ava, and I wanted to be. I could bet Cali wasn’t thinking about me while she was welcoming Greyson back home, so I wasn’t about to let my preoccupation with her ruin this tender moment with Ava.

Ava pushed against my shoulders so I collapsed onto the couch in a seated position. Then she crawled onto my lap, pulling up her shirt until her beautiful braless breasts dropped into view.

“Do you think we should move this to the bedroom?” I snuck a glance at the door. “Anyone could come in.”

Ava shook her head. “No, I need you right—”

The rest of Ava’s sentence was lost as the door flew open. Ava and I froze as Colton barreled into the room.

“Hey, X, did you miss— OH MY GOD MY EYES!”

**Episode 5094**

I had no intention of waiting until Monday when school was back in session, so I was already on my way to Kendall’s apartment. My plan was to show her the pictures so Kendall would have to admit there was something more going on than she’d first thought. And maybe, at the same time, I’d be able to find out why Kendall was being so cagey about it in the first place.

I parked down the block from her apartment complex. Kendall didn’t know I was coming, but I figured I’d just follow some other people into her building. I didn’t know what I would do once I got inside or what excuse I would give once I knocked on her door, but I would figure that out when the time came.

The element of surprise was necessary since I was worried that if I called Kendall ahead of time, she would’ve blown me off. But if Kendall happened to be outside already and saw me coming, I’d just tell her I was heading to a coffee shop nearby.

*Easy. No harm no foul. I need her help, and if all goes according to plan, I’ll get it without looking like I’m showing up unannounced.*

I walked purposefully toward the building, but just as I was about to turn the corner, I heard Kendall talking to someone.

I stopped in my tracks, wondering if I should show myself or if I should just wait a second and…listen.

*No, I shouldn’t do that, right? But there’s still so much we don’t know about Kendall. This could be my chance to learn something valuable. Something that’ll shed some light on who she really is.*

I stopped and turned around, looking down at my phone, not quite sure what my next move should be. Kendall’s voice was getting closer.

I glanced up from my phone and spotted Kendall walking the other way down the street in the direction of the coffee shop that I’d considered using as my cover story, so I started to follow.

If Kendall spotted me, I could simply pretend I hadn’t realized it was her. She had her headphones in anyway, obviously having a conversation with someone on the phone.

I was so curious. What was Kendall like when she wasn’t being all mysterious and dodging questions? Was she nicer and more open than she seemed with us, or was she just the same?

A gust of wind blew by, and I was thankful for it. I was standing downwind, and that meant Kendall wouldn’t be able to scent me. If that happened, I would be caught, and Kendall was smart enough to gather that I was following her.

I nearly fainted in shock when something blew out of Kendall’s bag, and she turned back in my direction to retrieve it. Yelping, I quickly ducked behind a trash can and waited, thinking that any second Kendall was going to appear and ask me why I was stalking her like some kind of creep.

I held my breath, waiting for the confrontation that would make it so I could never speak to Kendall again, but thankfully it didn’t come. I peeked out from behind the garbage can, hoping to scurry away and pretend none of this had happened, but somehow, things had taken a turn for the worst.

Kendall was now seated on a bench not even ten feet away so I was forced to stay crouched behind the trash bin or be caught dead to rights. But now I could hear Kendall’s side of the conversation clearly.

“I don’t know. This gig kind of sucks. You don’t know what it’s like over here. I don’t have a second to breathe. There’s constantly *something* going on, and I just want a break from it all. Dealing with people is exhausting—especially all the busybodies around here.”

There was a pause as whoever was on the other end said something back to Kendall. She laughed in response.

“Stop it! You’re so bad. You’re going to get us both in trouble, you know that, right?” She sighed. “But you’re right. I guess it can’t be all bad. There are some cool people I’m getting to know around here.”

I felt a stab of guilt. I shouldn’t be eavesdropping like this. Lola would be proud, but I just didn’t feel right about it. Other than being mysterious, Kendall hadn’t really done anything to deserve us intruding on her privacy like this.

*I mean, other than being a little evasive, she hasn’t done anything TO any of us. And she even helped us with the whole Chessa thing.*

I did trust Greyson’s instincts, however, and he wasn’t sold on Kendall. But even Greyson wasn’t sending me to spy on the woman and cross too many lines to count. In fact, if he knew what I was doing, he’d probably have told me not to do it. *But he always does that.*

Still, it wasn’t like I could go anywhere now without being spotted. So since I was there, I might as well learn what I could.

Kendall was quiet for a beat before saying, “That’s cool. Hopefully we get to see each other soon. Now I just need to get this Hans Tolverssin paperwork in, and then I’m definitely putting in for a break. I fucking need one.”

Kendall laughed again and then said goodbye to the person on the phone before tapping the side of her headphones and ending the call.

*Okay, hopefully now she’s going to get up and head in the other direction so I can get the hell out of here. After a close call like this, I’m just going to chalk today up as a loss.*

I waited, hoping Kendall would get up to leave at any second, but to my dismay, I heard footsteps coming closer. I closed my eyes, panic washing through me as the footsteps stopped.

*Oh no! She’s close. What am I going to—*

“Cali? What are you doing down there?”

I sprung up and immediately said, “Oh, hi! I was just…looking for…something…I dropped.” I looked down and kicked at the grass. “Still can’t find it. Shoot.”

I winced, wishing I was a better liar. Why did I have to be so obvious all the damn time? Kendall was looking at me strangely, obviously not buying it.

“I actually was coming to see you, so this must be kismet,” I added quickly. “I wanted to see if you might be up to grabbing a cup of coffee or something. Last night was so much fun! And I’m dying to hear about your date with that guy. He was handsome! He looked like fun. I mean…I’m not saying you hooked up and had *fun* in that way or anything. But also, you could’ve, and that’s great, too! I mean, hopefully it was great. Um.”

I knew I was rambling, but I couldn’t help it. The entire situation had me feeling guilty and nervous. Had I made a huge mistake by coming here? And worse yet, by following her like some kind of amateur private detective? I wasn’t Mikah, I didn’t know how to do this shit, not really. I was going based off of my instincts, and they really hadn’t gotten me very far. All I’d learned so far was that Kendall was overworked, which I could see as a reasonable explanation for why she wasn’t interested in dealing with me and all my thoughts about the Codsworth situation. That wasn’t enough, was it?

Kendall was nodding slowly with the strange look on her face that suggested she didn’t quite believe my story.

Not wanting to leave any space for her to ask me any questions I wasn’t prepared to answer, I said a little too brightly, “So, how about that coffee?”

“I guess that would be fine,” Kendall said.

“Great! So happy I ran into you! Or that you ran into me… You know what I mean!”

We walked to a nearby coffee shop together. It was a strange, awkward, mostly quiet journey because I wasn’t sure how to bring up the marks or the phone situation. Being caught hiding behind a trash can had a way of throwing the best laid plans out of whack.

*But I have to say something or all of that was for nothing. But what do I bring up first? Which thing makes the most sense to ask her about without putting her on edge?*

Kendall pulled out her phone, and I decided I needed to bite the bullet—at least for one of the issues.

“Oh, did something happen to your phone yesterday?” I blurted.

Kendall gave me a sharp look, and I contemplated, just for a moment, running off and never seeing Kendall again. But I took a deep breath and stayed put.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I gestured to the device in Kendall’s hand. “I just mean…I noticed that’s a new one. Or…one I’ve never seen before. Did the mechanical bull break your other one, or do you have two phones?”

**Episode 5095**

**Artemis**

I stared coolly at Celeste. “I’m sorry, I was under the impression that I could go anywhere I wanted.” *At least, anywhere inside the stifling boundaries of the court.*

“You’re not wrong,” Celeste conceded. “It’s certainly not as if you’re a prisoner here.”

“Not technically.” My polite smile was something closer to a grimace. It pained me to play nice with this woman who held so much control over my life, who had grand plans for me but didn’t seem to feel it necessary to include me in said plans.

I also sensed a “but” coming…

“*However*,” Celeste continued, and my smile soured even more, “now is not the time for you to learn the secrets behind this door. Once you’re the heir, there’s much you will learn, of course. But until then, I’m afraid you must live in ignorance.”

I frowned. *So there’s a secret door here with something behind it, and all I’ve gotten is the cryptic message of, “When you’re important enough, you’ll know”? That’s promising.*

But, of course, I didn’t say any of that. Not that I was afraid of Celeste’s response—she expected a certain level of sarcasm from me by now—but what was the use in fighting? It wouldn’t change anything.

I glanced back at the door, curiosity piqued. It was one thing when it was just a locked door, but now…

*What could Celeste be hiding back there?* I knew the Dark Fae had their fair share of secrets, but what were Celeste’s? Someone like her, in a position of high power in the court, had to have more than a few skeletons in her closet.

Celeste closed the space between us, linking our arms and steering me away from the door.

“So, how are your lessons going?” she asked.

“They’re fine.”

“Oh really?” She arched one elegant brow. “That’s not what I heard about your first etiquette lesson.”

I stopped short, anchoring her in place when she continued walking. “You’re spying on me?”

It wasn’t surprising that she’d keep tabs on me. What had stopped me short was the careless, plain way she’d admitted it. But then again, why wouldn’t she? She had me locked into a Fae promise that was more confining than a pair of cold, iron shackles. I wasn’t going anywhere or doing anything to meaningfully subvert her will, and we both knew it.

“It’s not spying,” she said, her tone mild. “It’s simply making sure you’re on track to becoming the heir we need you to be. And to do that, we have to wash all of the bounty hunter out of you.”

I scowled. She was talking so casually about getting rid of the part of me that had kept me alive this long, despite the odds. Life as a bounty hunter hadn’t been easy, and I’d done things I wasn’t proud of, but I’d be lying if I said I wanted to see that part of me go.

“Good luck with that.”

I twisted to look over my shoulder, back toward the tower Celeste had practically dragged me away from.

“What are you looking for?” Celeste asked, pulling me forward.

I turned to face her and sighed. “Nothing.”

Celeste led me back to my bedroom and stayed in the doorway to make sure I went inside.

“Get some rest,” she said. “You have another big day of lessons tomorrow.”

Her message couldn’t have been clearer. I might technically be able to move around the court at my leisure, but she wanted me under lock and key, learning the part of her good little heir-to-be.

Too bad for her. I couldn’t care less what she wanted, especially where my own life decisions were concerned.

I gave her my best, brightest, fakest smile. “Good idea.”

I threw myself on my bed, and, after a beat, Celeste left me alone, closing my bedroom door behind her. I rushed to the door on near-silent feet, listening intently for her footsteps to fade. I waited until I couldn’t hear her anymore, then I waited another few beats longer before cracking open the door.

The last time the bells had chimed, I’d counted eleven of them, so it must be nearly midnight by now.

I crept into the hall and slowly made my way back to the tower. I got lucky this time. There were only a few guards out. After my interruption from Celeste, I finally made it to the tower stairs.

Unease slipped down my spine as I stopped in front of the door that led to the stairs. *Damn it, Celeste. Would it have killed you to stop being a busybody so I could have scoped out this space earlier?* I hated that I had no idea what I was walking into. Where the best places were for someone to hide and then jump out at me when I was none the wiser. I was coming to this meetup blind.

I pulled in a deep breath, steeling myself before I opened the door and began my trek up the stairs. This whole secret note situation left a bad taste in my mouth, and I found myself hoping the note was from Marius and hoping it wasn’t at the same time.

If the note was from Marius, then he’d ignored my request to go find Cali. Which would be…gods. So infuriating. His finding Cali was my one chance to get out of here without breaking the Fae promise I’d made. And if he tossed all that aside, then I didn’t know that I could be responsible for my actions the next time I saw him.

I pushed open the door to the room at the top of the stairs. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest at the loud creak the door made as I gently eased it open.

*I guess they know I’m here now*. I sighed as I stepped into the room and whispered, “Hello?”

All the warning I had was a quiet whistle through the air. Fortunately, my instincts kicked in, and I ducked just in time to see an arrow whiz over my head and embed itself in the door behind me at the exact height I’d been standing at a second earlier.

*Holy shit. They’re trying to kill me!*

I sprang into action, calling my bow and arrow, which immediately manifested in my hands. I nocked an arrow with practiced ease and pulled back the string, squinting into the dim space. No more attacks came my way. The room was silent. The place seemed empty, but I knew now that couldn’t be true.

Across the room was a door that could only lead to the parapet outside. That had to be where my attacker had fled to. I stalked toward it, using my years of bounty hunting to keep my footfalls silent.

*See if you can “wash” that out, Celeste.*

I pushed open the door and waited for another arrow to fly my way. When nothing happened, I peered through the doorway left and right before stepping out. The parapet was dark, and I couldn’t see anyone or hear anything. It was quiet. Unnaturally quiet.

Another hiss sounded, and I ducked and rolled out of the way a split second before another arrow smacked into the stone wall and clattered to the ground.

“You won’t get away from us,” a voice called out.

I growled. *So it’s definitely not Marius.*

“Who the hell are you?” I yelled. “And why are you attacking me?”

The only answer I got was a heavy body tackling me, and a pair of strong, callused hands gripping my throat.

“The Order of the Winding Thorn will finally have your death.”

I struggled with my attacker, pulling at the fingers digging into my neck and trying not to panic. My attacker’s body loomed over me, but it was too dark to make out their identity. I brought a leg up and kicked them squarely in the groin.

My attacker—a male, I knew now—gasped and rolled away from me. I scrambled to my feet and stood over him. I could see his face now. He was a gaunt Fae, but I didn’t recognize him. He snarled as I pressed a boot against his sternum, keeping him pinned to the ground.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “What is the Order of the Winding Thorn?”

The Fae laughed. “So like your father. He fought to the end, too. But it didn’t help him, and it won’t help you.”

Fury turned my vision red, and I didn’t even bother to reach for my dagger. I conjured an arrow and jabbed it down, down, down, through his throat. My attacker gurgled once, then twice before going limp. A hollow quiet settled around us.

I stepped back, regret pressing in at the edges of my anger. I should have kept him alive. Should have used him for questioning.

But I couldn’t. The assassin had an order, which meant there would be more.

*Damn it, Celeste.*

I’d promised her I’d stay here in the court, and now I was a sitting duck.

**Episode 5096**

Kendall frowned at my question, and I tried to keep my expression neutral even as a wave of horror wracked my body. *Did I already overplay my hand and show her I’m suspicious of her?* If I somehow hadn’t already done that, it was a goddamn miracle.

I stayed there, a pleasant smile pasted on my face, until Kendall broke the silence that had settled between us.

“I don’t like it when people pay too much attention to me, Cali,” she said simply.

Her tone didn’t give me any indication of how she felt, but her words were condemnation enough. My stomach sank. Clearly, I hadn’t been half as sly as I’d been hoping, if she’d picked up on the fact that I was keeping tabs on her. Not surprising considering how crappy my reconnaissance had been. There had to be a way I could salvage this, right?

Kendall stared at me, no doubt waiting for an answer, but I didn’t have the first idea what to say.

“I…” I swallowed, trying to figure out what the best response for this situation would be. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to say anything. I… I didn’t mean anything by it. I just noticed you had a new phone. That’s all. I thought something might have happened. Or maybe your phone broke. We don’t really know each other very well and I’m just…trying to make conversation?” I tried to smile, but it probably looked more like a grimace. “I’m sorry.”

I half-expected her to brush me off and continue on with her day. Instead, she shook her head and held up a hand. “You know what? I’m actually the sorry one. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. You didn’t deserve it.” She sighed. “The truth is, I’m coming off a really bad breakup…and my ex used to keep tabs on me all the time. When you asked about my phone, it was the kind of question he’d ask all the time to bait me, or to prove I was doing something wrong.”

A new, deeper kind of horror slammed into me. *Oh my god. I’m a terrible person.* Here I thought getting caught was the worst thing that could happen, but Kendall had just proved me wrong. Because the truth was, I had been keeping tabs on her. I *was* trying to prove she was doing something wrong. And in lying to her about my intentions, I was gaslighting her just like her ex had.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said in a rush. “I never meant to make you uncomfortable or put you in a place that reminded you of your ex.”

“It’s okay. You couldn’t have known. I haven’t exactly been the most open person.” Her lips twitched in the ghost of a smile.

*Is she…making a joke?*

Something like relief mixed with the guilt swirling in my stomach. I hated myself for feeling relieved, especially now that I knew more about her history, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still want to find out more about Kendall—and see if she knew more about the skin marks than she’d let on.

“But you had good reason for not being open,” I said. “That kind of thing is hard to get over.”

She nodded. “You’re not wrong, but I think I also need to learn how to be friends with people again. My ex is gone now. I don’t have to be so guarded all the time.” She pulled the second phone out of her bag, and my eyes widened. “I just have two phones,” she explained. “One’s for work, and one’s for personal stuff.”

I had to stop myself from face-palming. It was such a simple, reasonable explanation. Lots of people had two phones for the same reason, now that I thought about it. Why had I been so fixated on the two phones being proof that Kendall was shady?

*Maybe I’m really not that different from her ex…*

The thought made my stomach churn.

“So…coffee?” Kendall asked.

I nodded, and we continued on our way to the shop. As difficult as it was, I tried to set my guilt aside and focus on my task. Kendall was being uncharacteristically open-book, and I still had to find out more about her and the bite marks if I could.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” I said.

She smiled. “Me too. I need more actual friends here. I don’t know anyone in Bend.”

I smiled, and for the first time in this whole interaction, it felt real. “I’d be honored to be your first real friend in Oregon. But that means you have to tell me everything about your date.”

Kendall laughed. “I promise I’ll fill you in as soon as we get a table.”

We made it to the shop, and after ordering our drinks, we settled into our new seats at a table in the corner. I took a sip of my coffee, then set down the mug. “Now, spill.”

“Well, his name is Grayson.” Kendall grinned. “He’s stupid hot and *very*, very good in bed.”

I was mid-sip, and I nearly spat my drink all over her. It was strange to hear her being so frank after all this time of keeping things close to her chest. And then there was the whole unsettling, surreal aspect of hearing Greyson’s name out of Kendall’s mouth in this kind of context.

I couldn’t help thinking back to what Maya had said when we were getting diapers. I tried to shake off the thought. Maya was confrontational and suspicious to a fault. And she was always coming up with some BS or another, trying to stir the pot. Just because she saw threats to her happiness everywhere she turned didn’t mean I had to do the same. Plus, she loved to see me squirm. And despite all of that, I still loved her. But I could leave her paranoia behind and laugh the feeling off.

“Sorry,” Kendall said, her cheeks flushing a bit. “I don’t always have a filter when it comes to this stuff. I just figure, why not be honest?”

I grinned. “It’s fine. It’s just funny to hear you say ‘Greyson’ is hot.”

“Oh, right. I didn’t even think about how your boyfriend is named Greyson. That’s hilarious.”

“It is… Isn’t it?” I laughed.

As awkward as this meetup started out, I was glad it had happened. Kendall seemed nice and down to earth.

*Am I barking up the wrong tree? Have I been spending too much time in conspiracy land?* Maybe there was nothing to find after all.

Since Kendall seemed to be in a good mood and was being more open with me than she’d probably ever been, I decided to shoot my shot. Maybe now she’d be more receptive to discuss what was going on with Codsworth.

I tapped my fingers nervously on the edge of my mug. “In the spirit of honesty, I did want to talk to you about this Codsworth stuff. That’s actually part of the reason why I came to see you.”

I searched her face for any indication of frustration or anger or even disappointment. But she just nodded for me to keep talking.

I told her about the photos. “It took some time to collect them, but all the marks match. It…kind of seems like a big deal, doesn’t it? I just… I was wondering why you didn’t think it was meaningful, especially now that there’s one more picture.”

Kendall sighed. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I didn’t mean to be that way with you. You clearly put in the work to get those photos and look into these marks, but I blew you off. You actually caught me at a bad moment that day, not that that’s your fault at all. You couldn’t have known. It’s just that I’m working on this really annoying project for work, and my supervisor yelled at me about it. I was just really tired, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about Chessa’s victims. I just wanted to escape from all of my responsibilities for a little while, you know?” A small smile tugged at her lips. “Anyway, you invited me out at the perfect time, and I’m sorry I didn’t explain that to you earlier.”

I nodded. This explanation checked out too. It was pretty much what I’d thought was going on after I’d overheard Kendall’s phone call. “Do you want to talk about work? I’m a good listener.”

Kendall laughed and shook her head. “That’s sweet of you, but it’s okay. I had a good venting session with my coworker earlier.” She nodded at my phone, which was on the table next to my mug. “So, what do you think about these pictures now?”

I grabbed my phone and pulled up the evidence board, but then the screen shifted to an incoming call. It was Big Mac.

“Funny you should ask,” I said to Kendall. “We might get an answer to all of this right now.”

**Episode 5097**

Kendall looked intrigued as I slid the phone to take the call.

“Hey, Big Mac. Thanks for returning my call. I know you’re b—”

“You know you guys shouldn’t be calling me for every little thing,” the witch said, cutting me off.

I winced. *We’re really starting off on the right foot, aren’t we?* I didn’t know why I ever thought things with Big Mac would be easy like they used to be. Well, *easy* wasn’t the right word, but there used to be a time when Big Mac would help out with a fairly minimal number of complaints. There were complaints, certainly. And sometimes very hefty fees. But she always helped if she could.

I was still getting used to this version of Big Mac. The one with these shiny new boundaries who might actually refuse to help me.

I winced. “Yeah, sorry about that. It’s just that this felt important, you know? I wouldn’t have called if I didn’t feel it was necessary.”

“Sure you wouldn’t have,” she deadpanned. “Tell me this: did you think about talking to a dermatologist *before* you called a witch?”

My face heated. This already uncomfortable conversation was even worse with Kendall watching. She probably couldn’t hear *everything* the witch was saying, but she could hear enough.

I cleared my throat. “Don’t you think the similarities are weird, though? They all have matching marks. That’s got to mean something, right?”

“Not necessarily.”

“But—”

She cut me off again. “Is it weird? Yes. But I’ve seen weirder.” A moment of silence passed through the line before she added, “Is that all?”

“I… I guess so. If you don’t think there’s anything we should know about the pictures?”

“Nope.”

And with that, she ended the call. I stared at my phone for a beat, then let out a breathy laugh and shook my head.

“I’d say she’s unbelievable, but…”

Kendall nodded sympathetically. “That sounded…terse.”

I sighed. “That’s just how Big Mac is.”

*For better or worse. Right now…it’s definitely for worse.* I knew I should be more supportive of her boundaries and her desire to build a quiet life for herself with Mrs. Smith away from the permanent chaos and demands of the Redwood pack. And I *was* supportive of it, even if it wasn’t what I would have chosen if I were in her shoes. And I wasn’t trying to suck her back into all our problems. I just wanted her advice on this. But even that was apparently too much.

*I guess I’m on my own.*

Kendall frowned, looking confused. “Big…Mac? Like the—”

“It’s short for MacKenzie,” I explained. “She’s a witch the Redwood pack can call on sometimes. Well, if she’s in the mood to help us, I guess. I’m not sure how exactly she got the nickname ‘Big Mac,’ but it seems like maybe she gave it to herself? But that seems weird; she’s not exactly the kind of person to give herself her own nickname… Anyway, she’s more bark than bite.”

Kendall raised a brow. “Is that the most apt way to talk about a witch?”

I just laughed. “Probably not.”

She still looked confused, but there was clear interest in her expression too. She leaned forward. “So…you sent the pictures to her? What did she say? Is there something we should be worried about?”

I shook my head. “Big Mac said just the opposite. She said there’s nothing to worry about. She’s probably right… We don’t really know what Chessa did, and it’s awful, but…everyone she hurt does seem okay now?” I looked down at my half-drunk mug of coffee, suddenly embarrassed. “Maybe I was just letting Codsworth’s conspiracy theories get to me.”

Kendall snorted. “He is a pretty persuasive guy. I’ll give him that. I’m glad it seems like everything’s all right. And sorry again for making you feel weird about talking to me about all of this.”

“It’s fine.” I waved her off. “I’m glad we got the chance to really talk.” I checked my phone for the time. “I should probably head back home.”

“I hope we can talk soon.”

After Kendall and I went our separate ways, I headed back to the Redwood pack house. Despite not getting much more information on the marks Cogsworth and the others had, I felt really good about my conversation with Kendall. It had actually been nice to spend time with her. I’d enjoyed it way more than I thought I would anyway, especially once I dropped all the espionage stuff.

Thinking about it all now, I felt silly for ever having those suspicions about Kendall. Admittedly, she was a private person, but that didn’t mean she was doing something bad. *I really need to stop letting Codsworth rile me up.*

It was just that, after Adéluce, I found myself questioning everyone’s motives. I couldn’t take things at face value anymore, not after Xavier had spent so long lying to us. Sure, it was out of necessity, and I recognized (if not appreciated) that his lies had kept me alive. But he’d still lied. He’d still broken my trust. He’d still changed our lives in ways that couldn’t be undone. I still had to work through layers and layers of untruths all because of one person’s actions.

I hated to think all of that might’ve made me less trusting, but it was probably the case. If nothing else, the way I’d treated Kendall proved that. She hadn’t done anything to deserve the suspicion I’d been harboring toward her. I’d have to be more careful from now on. It was good to keep my eyes open, but I could probably stand to be a little more trusting, especially with people who had done nothing bad to me.

I pulled up the driveway and parked in front of the Redwood pack house before jogging up the porch stairs. As I opened the door, Rishika stepped outside—right into my path.

“Oh, hi, Cali.” She stepped to the side right as I did, staying in my path.

“Hey, Rishika. Sorry. Oops.” We did a little dance, back and forth, stepping into one another’s paths until I finally took a step backward and laughed. “Actually, I’m glad I ran into you. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh? What’s up?”

“I just… I’m realizing that I’ve been judging people lately, and part of all that judgment was thinking poorly of you for talking to other people while Artemis is gone. And that’s not fair. You don’t deserve my judgment. You’re not doing anything wrong. I was wrong to judge you, and I’m sorry.”

For a moment, she gave me an appraising look. Then she smiled. “I appreciate you saying that. Can I ask what brought this on?” Then, before I could respond, her expression shifted. “Did you talk to Artemis?”

My brows rose. “No, of course not. I haven’t heard anything from Artemis since she left for the Fae world. I just had a strange morning, and it has me thinking about my own actions lately. So I just wanted to apologize, and I hope you feel like you can do whatever you need to do to be happy.”

“Oh.” Was that disappointment on Rishika’s face? “Um, thanks, Cali. I have to go. Good talking to you.”

She carefully brushed past me, and I found myself relieved. Things had been so awkward with her lately—and not just on my side of things. And it didn’t seem like the tension had resolved after my apology.

*I’m not sure I handled that the best…* But I wasn’t sure how I could have done it better. And what was that expression when she’d asked me about Artemis? Did she *want* to get back together with Artemis? Or…was Rishka moving on?

I shook the thoughts from my head. It wasn’t my business—we’d discussed this. I’d just told Rishika that I wanted her to be happy. I could start by acting like it.

I headed back inside and found Greyson in the living room.

“There you are,” he said, smiling when he saw me. “Where did you go off to?”

“I met Kendall for coffee.”

His eyes widened. “Really? Already?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I didn’t want to wait.”

“How did it go?”

“It was actually…kind of nice.” I smiled. “Big Mac called back while we were at the coffee shop. That was less nice. She doesn’t think any of this is worth worrying about.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good.” He looked relieved. “So this is probably over, right? There’s nothing else to look into?”

“I don’t think so.” I sat next to him and let out a laugh. “I can’t believe how silly I was acting about Kendall. I overheard her on the phone with someone, and it sounded like she’s just really overworked. She was complaining about how much her boss has her doing. And she has some paperwork to fill out about some Hans guy, plus—”

Greyson lurched upright, his eyes wide and intense, almost bordering on angry. “What did you just say?”

**Episode 5098**

**Greyson**

Cali was looking at me like I’d just grown a second head. I knew I probably looked crazy, probably sounded crazy, but I had to make sure I’d heard her correctly.

“Greyson, is something wrong?” she asked.

“Just… What was the name you heard Kendall say? Say it again.”

She frowned. “Um…Hans Tolverssin, I think.”

“You *think*? Or you know? Do you remember for sure?”

“No…yes…I mean…” She pulled in a deep breath. “Yes, I remember for sure. She said Hans Tolverssin.”

*Shit.* That was a name I hadn’t heard in a long, long time. Cali’s expression was worried, and guilt gnawed at my stomach for the harsh way I’d spoken to her. I should’ve been gentler. But that name…there was a history there. A bad one. Bad enough that it evoked a visceral response that overrode all my other feelings.

“Greyson, what is it?” she asked anxiously. “Who is Hans?”

I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to get her involved in this if she didn’t have to be. There were too many undefined variables at this point. For all I knew, this might not be anything at all. Kendall’s paperwork, or whatever the hell she was doing, might not be pulling on a dangerous thread I’d thought I’d left behind years ago.

“I’ll tell you,” I said. “But not yet. I need to do some digging first. Can you let me do that?”

Her brows drew together. “You’re serious? You’re not going to tell me what’s going on?”

“No, I will. But this guy…he has nothing to do with you—”

“If he has something to do with you, then I’m in this too,” she said. “We’re mates, remember?”

As if I could ever forget. I took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “And because you’re my mate, I want to scope this out a bit more before you come anywhere near it. It might be nothing.”

She pulled her hand out of my grasp and stepped back. “The way you’re acting isn’t nothing. The look on your face. Your voice. It’s not nothing.”

“Hey.” I gently took her by the arms, stepping close to her. “I’m sorry I reacted that way. I never meant to scare you. Just…please, love. Let me do this. Let me take care of this. You have enough on your plate right now.”

“But—”

“Do you trust me?” I asked softly. “Do you trust me to look into this before I involve you?”

She hesitated. “I do. Just…promise you’ll tell me when you can, okay? And that if anything really does come up, you’ll come straight to me and tell me.”

I nodded. “Cross my heart.”

Cali seemed satisfied, and I tried not to slump in relief. A subject change was in order—pronto.

“So, you said you had a good time with Kendall?”

She nodded. “I did. She’s actually kind of cool.”

My brows nearly disappeared into my hairline. The word “cool” had never once popped up when I thought of Kendall. Mysterious, collected, annoyingly guarded? She had those qualities in spades. But *cool*?

And the thought of Cali getting close to Kendall was unnerving as hell. I couldn’t quite explain why. I definitely still didn’t trust her though, and long as I didn’t trust her, I didn’t know for sure if Cali was safe with her.

“You should be careful around her,” I said. “And whatever you do, don’t ask Kendall about Hans, okay? I gave you a promise, and now I need you to give me this one.”

Cali grinned, but the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’ll listen to you.”

It wasn’t a promise, but I knew it could become dicey for her as a Fae. Besides, I didn't want to get her into some bind down the line about this, I just needed her not to bring it up. It could be dangerous. This felt just as good as a promise though—it was all I wanted, and I trusted Cali to honor her word.

I leaned in and kissed her. “Thank you, love.”

“I want to fill Lola in on how everything went with Kendall. I’ll see you later, okay?” She kissed me again and headed upstairs.

With Cali gone, I didn’t have to put on a strong face anymore. I slumped back on the couch with a long, deep sigh.

*Hans Tolverssin.*

That was a name I hadn’t thought of in a long, long time. It hearkened back to a part of my life I’d long since left behind.

Hans was a crucial member of the Dark Fae mafia, he always had been. When I was spending my nights at the fight club, back when Maren and I were together, Hans was the one who’d come in asking me to throw fights. And we all knew how that request had turned out.

I ground my teeth as that old, dormant hatred roared to life. Hans’s sins didn’t end there. This wasn’t just about my history with him. That asshole was the one who’d kidnapped Fenrir. That face-off hadn’t exactly made Hans and me the best of friends either. I’d taken away Maren and the kid, threatening him if he ever tried it again too.

*Why the fuck would Kendall have anything to do with this guy? What the hell kind of paperwork would she be writing about the scum of the Fae world?*

Nothing about this made sense, but it sent up red flags left and right. I already didn’t trust Kendall. Something about her story had never quite checked out. The odds of a Rogue wolf showing up in our territory without an ulterior motive? Low. Real fucking low. And then there was how quickly she’d won over Cali. The more I thought about it, the more Cali’s account of her coffee date with Kendall left a sour taste in my mouth. What the hell had Kendall done to sway Cali to her side? Cali had gone into that interaction suspicious and determined to pry the truth out of Kendall, and now she thought Kendall was cool?

That part I could sort of glue the pieces together. Cali was kind to a fault. She always, *always* tried to find the good in people. Kendall must’ve said or done something to trigger Cali’s empathy.

I rubbed my face, my mind whirring a mile a minute. Everything about this was suspect, and none of it boded well. All I had ever wanted was to leave this shit in the past. Those days at the fight club with Maren—they were so long ago they might as well have been in another lifetime. I wasn’t that person anymore. I hadn’t been that person for a long, long time. I had the Redwood pack now. I had Cali. My mother. I was even mending fences with my asshat half-brothers. I’d spent all this time building a new life for myself. Why couldn’t I just move forward?

I pulled in another slow, deep breath. Right now, I felt raw as an exposed wound, and that was not the mind space to face this thing. Cali had already promised she’d be careful around Kendall, and since the marks on Chessa’s victims had ended up being a dead end, Cali didn’t have a reason to seek Kendall out again, so that was more or less taken care of for now.

What I really needed to do was figure out my next steps with this Hans thing. Figure out what fresh hell he was into these days, and if he was sticking his nose around here again. And there was only one person I could think of who might know that information.

Maren.

My stomach clenched as I pulled out my phone and found her contact. Then I took a deep breath before hitting the dial button. Maren had way more reason to hate Hans than I did. This was not going to be a pleasant phone call.

It rang twice before Maren answered.

“Greyson?” she sounded pleasantly surprised. My stomach soured even more. It was great to hear from her, even more great that she seemed happy to hear from me. And that made it all the worse that I was about to bring up Hans of all fucking people.

“Hey, Maren.”

“How are you?” she asked.

I was tempted to draw out the pleasantries, but it was probably best to cut to the chase. “I’ve just heard something really unsettling, and I wanted to check in with you. Are you safe?”

“Safe? What are you talking about? Of course I’m safe. Is…everything okay on your end? You sound stressed.”

I let out a dark laugh. *If that’s not the understatement of the fucking century.*

“I heard an old name today, and it surprised me.”

“Who?”

“Hans Tolverssin.”

Maren inhaled sharply, and my heart plummeted. “Maren? What is it? What do you know?”

“I… I don’t know much.” She sounded faint. “It’s just strange. I hadn’t thought of him in months, but this is the second time in a day that someone’s brought him up to me…”

“What?” I frowned. “Why?”

“You haven’t heard? Hans is dead.”

**Episode 5099**

**Xavier**

Colton, Maya, Ava, and I were seated around the coffee table in the den. Four cups of steaming tea sat in front of us, but none of us touched them. Not even to give our hands something to do, since our mouths seemed incapable of speaking.

I glanced at Ava, who gave me a pained smile. Then I looked at Colton. He hadn’t looked our way since he’d walked in on us earlier. Unsurprisingly, Maya didn’t seem to struggle looking at anyone. Her eyes locked with mine, a challenge clear in her gaze.

*Some things never change.*

Still, I think I’d prefer being held at gunpoint again to sitting on this couch in awkward silence any longer. It had been painfully quiet for several long minutes now, and the tension thickened more with each passing moment.

*Is it possible to pass out from awkwardness? It feels like it's possible.*

Hell, I felt like I was on the verge of it.

After Colton had interrupted us, screamed his head off, and smacked into the doorway hard enough to crack the wood because he was covering his eyes like he’d just stared straight into the sun, Ava and I had quickly made ourselves decent. Then she’d invited Colton and Maya to join us for tea, amazing and diplomatic Luna that she was.

Unfortunately, once we were all in the room together, it seemed no tea in the world was capable of easing the horror my idiot brother felt.

*I don’t know what the hell he’s so shocked about. It’s not like he didn’t walk in on me and Cali messing around a thousand times. He didn’t need to act like a dick about it.*

I tried not to pull on that thread, though. I had a feeling I knew where it would lead, and I didn’t want to get into that right now. Not when I’d worked so hard to get him to even try to understand why I was with Ava again.

Maya was the one to break the silence, and thank god for that.

“This is really fucking stupid,” she declared. “I don’t think anyone should be shocked that you’re having sex. You’re mated and all. Why else would you show up at the Redwood house pissed at Cali, not knowing where Xavier was? Dick does that to people. Either way, this is stupid.”

Ava, who had been lifting her teacup to her lips, coughed. Her cheeks went red, and I glared at Colton. This really was all his fault in the first place. If he hadn’t barged in, or, better yet, if he hadn’t run out screaming like a fucking banshee, Ava and I never would’ve ended up hosting the world’s worst tea party. I didn’t even fucking like tea.

“Yeah, I guess.” Colton nodded, looking uncomfortable. “Not like it isn’t weird at all.”

Maya threw him a dirty look, and I rolled my eyes and resisted the urge to throw something at my brother.

Ava glanced at me, then turned back to Colton and Maya. “So…how long are you guys going to be staying?”

I bit back a groan. This wasn’t going well at all. It was an innocent enough question, awkwardly delivered as it was. But I couldn’t help noticing the tension in Ava’s tone, and judging by the way Maya’s eyes narrowed, she hadn’t missed it either.

Colton, however, seemed oblivious to it. “We’re going to head back to our pack to drop the kids off, and then we’ll be back for the party so Maya can meet some of the other Alphas around here.”

Ava nodded. “That’s a good plan. *Most* of the alliance is great, and if history is any indicator, it’ll be a party you won’t forget.”

Maya bristled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I’d picked up on what Ava was getting at, and I snorted. “It means *Lucian*.”

If anything, this only made Maya seem even more annoyed. “Who the hell is Lucian?”

“Lucian is the Alpha of the Vanguard pack,” Ava explained. “He’s…well, you’ll see.”

“Huh.” Maya clicked her tongue. “I’ll just ask Cali about him, thanks.”

Colton cleared his throat and squeezed her hand. A message for her to keep her mouth shut if I’d ever seen one. Maya glared at him.

*Are they mind linking? What are they saying? What was Maya* *going to say? Does she have a problem with Ava too?* It was no secret that Maya was no fan of Nolan, but she didn’t really know Ava well, even before the pack war. I’d barely known her either. She’d just been this broken pup that had wandered in with even more bite than she had now. She and Ava had never been friendly outside of larger group settings—whatever that really was for either of them. Still, this was pretty icy for two former pack members.

Maybe she was just backing Colton. And if it had been that hard to convince Colton, my twin brother who loved me, to give Ava even the smallest sliver of a second chance, Maya was going to be impossible to sway.

*What a fucking nightmare.*

Colton turned back to me and Ava with a smile that looked more like a grimace. “Maya will for sure share her opinions at the right time.”

I raised a brow. *And just what the hell is that supposed to mean?*

Maya shoved him, and Colton stood. “We should probably get going,” he said.

I frowned. “You practically just arrived.”

Ava stood too, her voice brisk. “I’m glad you stopped by.” She looked back at me, and her expression warmed a bit. “I’m also glad you two got to spend the weekend together. It sounds like you guys made some memories.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said. Still, I was surprised to hear her say this. She certainly hadn’t been thrilled about the trip when I left. Was this for Colton’s benefit, or had she come around to me spending time with my brothers?

I turned my attention back to Colton and Maya. “You’re always welcome here. Day or night. You don’t have to call ahead—feel free to show up whenever. If you need us, just let us know.”

Ava slipped her hand into mine. Was this her way of agreeing with me?

Colton hadn’t missed the small touch, and he still seemed surprised by the show of affection, despite the scene he’d walked in on earlier. As Ava and I walked Maya and Colton to the door, Colton hung back a bit, just out of earshot of our mates.

“Hey,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “I can tell how hard Ava was trying back there, but that’s just it…it seems like pulling teeth. I appreciate your offer, but I don’t know.”

My heart sank. So he wasn’t going to give Ava a chance after all? I wanted to argue, to reiterate the many reasons I’d gotten him to agree to giving Ava a chance in the first place, but it wasn’t the right time for that. Not in the Samara pack house with both our mates standing just a few feet away.

Colton cleared his throat. “And next time, please put a sock on the door handle.”

I smiled, recognizing the attempt to defuse the situation, and punched him in the arm. “Like that’d stop you.”

He chuckled. “Fair enough.”

We caught up to Ava and Maya in the driveway, and I stopped short when I saw them. Ava had one of the babies in her arms. Maya was holding the other while she tried to organize something in the car.

The sight of Ava with a baby in her arms did something to me. It made my heart trip over itself. It suddenly gave my brain all sorts of ammunition to imagine what she’d look like with *our* baby…

The mere suggestion of the thought made pain twinge behind my eyes. I screwed them shut, and when I opened them again, Ava had handed the baby to Colton, and the pain was gone. The image remained though, seared into my brain. I gave Ava a soft smile, and she looked at me with a question in her eyes.

I shook my head and moved to stand beside her.

Maya and Colton said their goodbyes. “We’ll be back soon,” Colton said.

“I can’t wait,” I said.

The minute the car pulled away, I swept Ava into my arms and carried her back inside, making for the stairs.

Ava clutched at my shoulders, laughing. “What are you doing?”

“I think I want to finish what we started before my brother so rudely interrupted us.”

We made it to our bedroom in record time, and I was devouring her mouth before the door was even fully closed behind us. Ava tugged my shirt over my head, and then I reached for the button on her jeans.

My mouth found hers again, and she hummed in appreciation.

Lost in the feel of her, a realization struck me anew. This was my life, and not just for right now. It could be my future if I really tried to embrace it. I could turn that image in my head of Ava holding our baby into a reality. We could be happily together. For the long haul.

But the real question was… Should I pursue that and forget about Cali?

**Episode 5100**

I fell back onto my bed with a sigh. I’d found Lola and filled her in on my coffee date with Kendall, but before I could even begin to tell her about all the weirdness with Greyson, Jay had needed her for something and had whisked her away.

So there I was, alone with my thoughts and my millions of questions about just what the heck was going on with Greyson. I’d never seen him react like that before. Like it was a knee-jerk response, all shock and defensiveness. He was just… so intense. And that reaction combined with the fact that he clearly wanted to keep me out of this only made me want to look into Hans Tolverssin even more, but I’d said I’d listen to him. Still, there was obviously something he wasn’t telling me there. Maybe a lot of somethings.

I snorted. *Or an ocean of omission the size of the Pacific.*

I just wished I knew what this was all about. It had to be connected to his past somehow, right? If this Hans guy had been around in the time since I’d met Greyson and Xavier, I wouldn’t be out of the loop like this.

I racked my brain, trying to remember Greyson mentioning someone named Hans when he’d told me about his past. Growing up under the shadow of Silas. Living as a Rogue. Picking up women and taking them back to that fancy apartment he had in Portland…

I grimaced. I’d thought Greyson had told me everything there was to know about those days. Everything that mattered, at least. But I was pretty sure he’d never mentioned Hans before.

I blew out a breath. My fingers itched to grab my laptop and start digging around for some intel on Hans. Even just a simple Google search. But I couldn’t, right? After everything Greyson and I had been through together, did I really want to risk breaking his trust by looking into this Hans guy like ten minutes after I’d promised I’d listen to him?

I couldn’t do that to Greyson. Especially after everything that had happened with Xavier and Adéluce. Trust had never been more important to me, and Greyson was one of the few people in the world I trusted with all my heart. And he had more than earned that trust. He could’ve lied to me earlier when Hans’s name came up. He could’ve pretended not to react; he could’ve pretended Hans’s name didn’t mean anything to him. He could’ve even come up with some dumb lie to keep me off of the trail, but he hadn’t done any of those things.

Greyson had let me see every emotion that crossed his face. And he’d promised he’d tell me when the time was right. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would keep that promise. I just had to do my part: learn to be content with sitting around and waiting.

I groaned at the thought. Waiting had never been one of my strengths, especially when it was so much easier to just rush in and try to help. I’d always been more comfortable with doing. With the flurry of activity. Sitting and waiting and trusting? It would drive me crazy.

But I’d do it for Greyson. Part of being with him and being the best unofficial Luna I could be was being able to support his decisions, just like he supported mine.

I sat up with a frown. “I need a distraction.”

Otherwise, I was going to think myself in circles and probably break my promise to Greyson by inserting myself into this mess.

Leaving my phone and laptop in my room, I headed downstairs in search of anything that could take my mind off everything going on. Clinking sounds echoed from the kitchen, and I veered down the hallway in pursuit. In the kitchen, I found Torin standing in front of a counter full of various bottles of booze. A row of glasses was set in front of Torin, featuring a colorful array of liquids inside each one.

“What are you up to?” I asked, eying the drinks. They were drinks, right? Was Torin adding “mixologist” to his ever-growing list of human-world skills?

Torin puffed out his chest with pride. “I’m getting ready for Valentine’s Day. I’ve decided on the perfect gift: I’m going to surprise him with a signature cocktail!”

My brows rose. “Wow. That’s so thoughtful.” I eyed the array of glasses. “And you have so many choices here! You could call that pink one a love potion.”

He shook his head. “No, the name is already sorted. Now I just need to pick which cocktail will be the perfect match.”

“Oh? What’s the name?”

He grinned. “I’m calling the cocktail…the Kevin.”

“Oh.” I smiled vaguely. With all the buildup, I had to admit I was expecting something more grandiose. “That’s really sweet, Torin. You’re naming a signature cocktail after him?”

Torin looked confused. “Named after *him*? No, it’s named after both of us. It’s a portmanteau. You know, Torin and Kevin?”

I blinked. So did Torin. And for a long string of seconds, all we did was stare at each other in mutual confusion, but I had to imagine, over very different things.

“Do you not like it?” Torin asked. “Or, I can explain it—”

I shook my head. “No, I get it. It’s just…you say you’re creating this portmanteau of both your names, but then the drink is just…Kevin.”

His eyes widened in realization. “Shoot. You’re right. How did I not pick up on that? Oh, you must think I’m an idiot.”

I patted his arm and tried very hard not to laugh at the look on his face. “Never. Besides, you were probably putting all your focus into making these gorgeous drinks!”

“I’ll need a new name,” he mused.

“How about…” I thought about it for exactly two seconds. “The Tovin? That’s a nice mashup, right? It represents both of you.”

Torin’s eyes lit up. “I love it! That’s what I’m going to call it!” He busied himself with mixing drinks and sipping the ones he’d whipped up to judge them against each other. “So, what are you going to do for Greyson for Valentine’s Day?”

My heart sank. It was my turn to feel like a complete idiot. *Oh my god! I totally forgot. Even when Torin mentioned the drink, I didn’t think twice about Greyson’s gift.* *What am I going to do? I’m a terrible girlfriend!* Horror mingled with panic. *This is our first Valentine’s Day together, and I haven’t spent a single second doing any planning. I’m completely unprepared! How could I forget about this? It’s like Christmas all over again.*

Torin pushed a drink in my direction. “You look like you’re panicking.”

“I’m not panicking,” I snapped, caught in a panic. “I’m just…thinking.”

He laughed. “It’s hilarious that you think I don’t know the difference between your panicking face and your thinking face. Come on, Cali. I know you a lot better than that by now.”

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “Okay, fine! I’m not even a little ready for Valentine’s Day. What am I supposed to do?”

“I saw this exact thing happen in a movie I was watching the other day. Do you want to know what the main character’s friend told her to buy for her boyfriend for Valentine’s Day?”

“Obviously!” I’d take all the ideas I could get at this point.

Torin’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Edible lingerie.”

My head snapped up, and my cheeks heated with the radiance of a thousand suns. My voice dropped low too. “I am not buying edible lingerie!”

He shrugged. “I’m just giving you ideas.”

“Well, thanks, but I’m going to look into something a bit less…risqué.”

I headed upstairs to grab my laptop, my mind totally consumed by this pressing task. First things first, I’d be hopping on Pinterest to get some ideas. Good ideas that didn’t involve clothing you could eat.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I saw Greyson’s bag from the trip sitting in the open doorway to his room. It looked like he’d dropped it and run.

A new distraction popped into my mind. *He’s clearly busy and stressed with this Hans stuff. I should help him unpack and put his stuff away.*

I dragged his duffel into his room and dumped the dirty clothes into the hamper. Then I started unpacking the rest of his bag. I was gathering up the last of his travel toiletries to put back in his bathroom when my fingertips dragged over a small box inside the main compartment.

I pulled the box out of the bag, confused. It was definitely a jewelry box. My stomach dipped and then started doing a little dance.

*What is this thing? A gift for me? For Valentine’s Day? Should I just leave it in here and pretend I didn’t see it?*

Curiosity nagged at me, whispered tempting justifications. *If I take a quick peek, I’ll know what level of gift I should get Greyson to match.*

I took a deep breath and opened the box. The air stuttered out of my lungs. Inside the box was a gorgeous ring.

An *engagement* ring.

*Oh fuck. Is Greyson going to propose?!*

**Episode 5101**

I could feel my heart thudding fast in my chest. My pulse was racing, and I could feel my palms start to sweat. I was *fully* freaking out. Was I about to get *engaged*? Could I? Wouldn’t that be me making a choice?

Why would Greyson even ask me to do that? He always told me he would never force me to make any kind of decision—and that he would wait until I was ready. Did something change? Maybe his patience with me finally ran out?

He had been extremely understanding, even when I was struggling to find out what the hell had happened to Xavier and why he left so suddenly. That had been a long road for both of us, but Greyson had stayed by my side every step of the way.

And now Xavier seemed to have really settled in with Ava and into his role as Alpha of the Samara pack. Greyson knew that his brother seemed to have made his choice.

I didn’t know what happened over the weekend when Greyson was out with his brothers. Maybe the trip had involved some kind of frank conversation about everyone’s mates—and about the future.

My throat felt dry, and I swallowed hard. I looked down at the ring, which sparkled in the light. Something sparked in my chest, and I felt a sudden itch to have it on my finger—just to see how it looked.

I pulled it from the box, slipped it on my ring finger, and held it up. The ring was a little too large and slipped to the side. I adjusted it with a shrug. I supposed that wasn’t really a problem—we could always have it resized.

Tipping my head, I gave the ring a long look. I liked the look of it, though—on my finger—the emerald in the center, surrounded by diamonds, looked a little flashy. I supposed I was a little surprised Greyson had chosen this and not gone for something a bit simpler, since he and I were both not really into flashy fashion.

I wondered where he had gotten it—and when. When had he decided that he was going to propose?

The very thought of it filled me with equal parts excitement and dread. What the hell was I going to say when he actually asked me? Where was he going to do it? Was he going to make some kind of grand, romantic gesture, or was it going to be something intimate, with just the two of us?

Letting my mind wander, I fantasized about Greyson dropping down to one knee, taking my hand, and asking me to be his wife.

There was a huge part of me that would want me to scream *YES!* while the other part of me guiltily thought of Xavier.

Then my whole proposal fantasy was interrupted when I heard Greyson say my name.

With a gasp, I spun around to face him, and as I did, I swung the ringed finger behind my back. But as I tried to hide both the ring and my shock, the ring slid off my finger.

I hurriedly cleared my throat, trying to mask the sound of the ring clattering to the floor behind me and stood stiffly so I could keep it hidden. I could barely breathe, and I didn’t dare move.

Greyson frowned at me. “Cali? Are you okay?”

I forced a laugh that came out sounding concerningly high-pitched. “What? Of course I am! Why shouldn’t I be?”

He gave me a strange look. “Okay. What are you doing in my room?”

“Oh! I thought I would just help you out. Put some of your stuff away, you know, from the trip,” I said, gesturing toward his bag. “It wasn’t like I was snooping or anything like that, of course!” I added, completely unnecessarily. I clamped my lips together, trying to get myself to shut up.

Greyson was starting to look concerned about me. He raised his eyebrows, which only made me more flustered—and more aware that the ring from his bag was currently on the floor just behind me.

“Um, you called me?” I said, fighting to sound halfway normal. “Did you need something from me?”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you if you wanted to know what I found out about Hans Tolverssin?” he said.

I swallowed hard. “Yes, of course.”

He tipped his head toward the door. “Do you mind coming down to my study? I found something pretty interesting.”

He started toward the door but stopped when I didn’t follow. He turned back and found me still standing, frozen, in the same spot. “Cali? I thought you wanted to see what I found.”

“Yeah, I did. I do!” I added. I took one step toward him to follow, then—with my other foot—back-kicked the ring, coughing again to cover the sound as it rolled under the bed.

Greyson looked at me again. “You sure you’re okay? Are you coming down with a cold or something?”

I shook my head and smiled at him, though I felt like an asshole. “No, I’m fine. I am surprised that you came back with information on Hans so soon, though.”

“Yeah, it’s interesting,” Greyson said as he headed out the door.

I followed him this time, but cast one more glance at the room, to make sure the ring was completely out of sight. I followed Greyson downstairs and into the small study near the door, where he handed me a stack of papers.

When I looked down at it, I saw that it was a printout of a news article about the mysterious death of a man who was a suspected mobster—Hans Tolverssin—up in Portland.

Finished with a quick read of the article, I looked up at Greyson, stunned. “Wait, why would Kendall write a paper about a mobster?”

Greyson looked grave. “I have no idea, but it doesn’t really add to my faith in her.”

I took this in, thinking for a moment. “Hang on, you reacted really strangely to Hans’s name when I was telling you about Kendall.” I looked down at the article. “Hans seems like he was involved in some pretty shady stuff. Why were you so interested?”

Greyson sighed. “Hans was involved in Fenrir’s kidnapping—you remember that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I remember that.” I shook my head. “And now that you mention it, I do remember Hans’s name, too. Vaguely. I hate to be reminded of all that. I thought it was behind us.”

“It was,” Greyson said firmly. “Hans was a piece of work. He deserved to die.”

“I still can’t figure out why Kendall would have anything to do with him,” I said, frowning. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hans was a Dark Fae,” Greyson said. “And that raises all kinds of other questions.”

I nodded slowly. “Yes, it does.”

“Listen, I don’t mind you asking me about it, but please keep it all to yourself for now,” Greyson said. “Let me do a little more digging around. If there’s some ulterior motive Kendall’s looking into Hans, I’d like to know what it is first.”

I was concerned about this development, but if Greyson wanted to handle it, that was fine with me. For the moment, I was much more concerned with the engagement ring currently on the floor of his bedroom, so I nodded. “You got it. I meant what I said, Greyson. I won’t say anything. Consider my lips sealed.”

Greyson smiled. He stepped forward and kissed me. “I hope not,” he said teasingly. “Honestly, it’s probably nothing, but I’m going to keep looking for the moment.” He stepped behind his desk and sat, pulling his laptop out.

He didn’t ask for the article back, so I folded it and tucked it into my pocket. “I’m going to head out,” I said, backing out the door.

As soon as I was in the hall, I sprinted up the stairs and back into Greyson’s room, where I dropped to my knees and threw myself under the bed. I grabbed the ring and was just putting it back in the box when there was a voice behind me—

“What’s that?”

I whipped around to see Lola standing in the doorway. “*SHHHHHH!*” I hissed.

“What is that?” she asked.

“Lower your voice!” I whisper-shouted at her, then waved her in.

“*Whoa!*” she gasped when I opened the box to show her.

“I know,” I said, just as startled by the ring the second time as I had been the first. “I found it by accident. I think Greyson’s going to propose to me.”

“Wow,” Lola said, looking closely at the ring. “This is *wild*. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know,” I said, panic rising up in my chest. “I have no idea. I mean, what the hell, right? I can’t just *marry* him!”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Even before I turned, I knew it. I could feel it. Sense it, somehow.

So when I turned, I wasn’t surprised to see Greyson standing in the doorway, having heard every word.

**Episode 5102**

**Xavier**

I’d really thought that trying to fully commit to Ava would help me. Granted, I still had a million private reservations about completely turning my back on Cali and the rest of the Redwoods, but it just made sense to commit, one way or the other.

But I wasn’t so sure. Ever since I’d had the thought of letting Cali go and only pursuing Ava, I’d started getting yet *another* headache. It didn’t seem possible to do either option.

This weekend had been kind of a mess in some ways, but successful in others, and I thought I’d been able to work some stuff out with my brothers. Not that everything was perfect between all of us now, but—hell—we had survived that fucked-up camping trip without tearing one another’s limbs off. That was something. And we’d still managed to kick some demon ass.

Pushing my hand through my hair, I smiled a little to myself. I sort of hated to admit it, but looking back at it now, the weekend had been kind of fun—in a weird, twisted way.

I rubbed my temples, though I tried to keep it subtle. I wanted to hide my headache from Ava. She always noticed, and I didn’t want to worry her.

But—honestly—I was a little worried myself. Why was I still having headaches?! I had done what I was supposed to do. I’d gone to counseling—against my better judgment—I’d joined my brothers for a weekend away to work out our tension, and now I was with Ava—by *choice*, not circumstance. So, the headaches should have been history. And that they weren’t was really starting to piss me off. It was becoming increasingly clear that all this feel-good bullshit was just a waste of my time.

I leaned over and kissed Ava’s already kiss-swollen lips. “Want anything to drink?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I’m good.”

I slipped out of bed and had just started toward the bathroom when she reached over and grabbed my hand.

“Xavier? What’s wrong?”

When I looked back at her, I could see her smile was gone and she looked worried.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “I’m just thirsty.”

She didn’t look convinced. “You’re having headaches again, aren’t you?”

My instinct was to deny—to pretend everything was okay—but I remembered what I had just committed to. That I was going to make my life with Ava real—that I was going to make it work. And that started with being honest with her in all things.

“Yeah, a bit,” I admitted. “But it’s not as bad as before.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I could tell.” She let go of my hand and leaned back. “So, the question is, what are you going to do about it?”

I snorted a laugh. “Take some painkillers?”

“Xavier—”

“I’m pretty sick of the rest of the bullshit,” I told her.

“I don’t think it’s bullshit,” she shot back. “I think you should make another appointment with Carlson Greene.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, sure. Maybe later.”

I stepped toward the bathroom, half-wishing I had just lied about the headaches after all.

Behind me, Ava got out of bed and followed. “You told me you were going to take care of this. That you would go to counseling—”

“And I *did* go to counseling,” I said, cutting her off sharply. “And I’m no better off now than I was before.”

She took a surprised step back from me, and my head gave a painful throb.

The shocked look on her face sent a wave of guilt washing over me. “I’m sorry I snapped,” I told her. “I just need an ibuprofen. Then I’ll be okay.”

She stepped up to me again and put her hands on my face, holding it so she could look directly into my eyes. “Let me help you, Xavier.”

I sighed. “I appreciate it, Ava, but I don’t see how you can. The fucked-up truth of it is that when I’m around you, I still get headaches.”

Pain flashed across her blue eyes, and I knew—too late—that I shouldn’t have admitted that to her.

*Fuck*.

Her hands fell away from me but before she could take a step away, I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close to me.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured into her dark hair. “I didn’t mean that.”

She hesitated for only a moment before she hugged me back, her body warm against mine. “Take a painkiller, or that stuff from Big Mac, and then we can talk.”

I groaned. “I’m tired of talking about this shit all the time. I’ve got Alpha stuff to do.”

Ava lifted up on tiptoe, pressed a kiss to my lips, then spun me around and pushed me into the bathroom.

I took the cue and walked in. I found the ibuprofen—extra strength—in the medicine cabinet over the sink and swallowed two dry. Then I flipped on the faucet and splashed my face. That helped a little—the cool water eased the pain. I wondered if just being a few feet farther away from Ava was helping too, though that was a disquieting thought. How the hell was I going to build a life with her if it killed me to be near her?

*Fuck*.

I dried my face on a towel and walked back into the room where Ava was perched on the edge of the bed with her phone to her ear.

She glanced up at me. “Okay, that’ll work. Thanks,” she said, and quickly ended the call.

I was about to ask who she was talking to, but she spoke before I could—

“I just made us a date for later this week.”

I frowned, confused. “A date for what?”

She smiled. “It’s a surprise, X,” was all she said before she brushed past me on her way to the bathroom.

I stood still for a moment, wondering what Ava was up to. There had been something a little nervous about the smile on her face, and it made me question what was really going on. But before I could wonder any more, she called to me from the bathroom—

“What are we doing for Valentine’s Day? Are we really going to Lucian’s?”

I groaned again. The idea of going to Lucian’s place always sucked, and it sounded especially bad for Valentine’s Day, when Lucian was bound to be at his most insufferable. But I’d been so tied up with that stupid weekend with my brothers that I actually didn’t have any other plans. And I also didn’t have a gift for Ava.

*Shit*.

“How do you feel about going to Lucian’s?” I called back.

“I don’t know,” Ava called over the sound of running water. “He’s Lucian, but it is kind of tempting. He does know how to throw a party. And it might look bad if the Samaras don’t show up. Besides, it might be a good way to show off our new pack members.”

“That’s true,” I said. Leave it to Ava to think of that angle. But my mind wasn’t on the party—I was trying to think of what I could get for a gift. I didn’t have much time before Valentine’s Day, and if I really wanted to show my commitment to Ava, I really needed this present to be great.

I grabbed a pair of black joggers from the dresser and pulled them on, followed by a black T-shirt. I wondered if I should talk to Marissa. She might have a good idea for a gift.

As I pulled my head through my T-shirt, it hit me—was this date Ava planned related to Valentine’s Day? Was she already making plans?

I felt guilty again, like I should have been focusing on her, instead of my brothers and the camping trip and this stupid headache.

She walked out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her, her dark hair twisted up into a messy bun, but she stopped when she saw me. “X, is something wrong?”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, nothing. I was just thinking. I think you’re right about showing off the new members at the party. We should go to Lucian’s thing.”

Accepting this explanation, she nodded and walked to her dresser. She pulled out jeans and a sweater and started to get dressed.

“So,” I started, trying to sound casual, “what is it you’ve got planned for us? Do I need to get my suit cleaned?”

Ava eyed me. “Why would you need a suit?”

I frowned. “You just told me you made a surprise date. I think I should probably know what I need to wear.”

Ava had just pulled her jeans up but stopped before she buttoned them. She looked straight at me. “Okay, listen, I didn’t want to tell you because I know what you’re going to say, but it’s too late. It’s already been confirmed.”

“What’s been confirmed. What are you talking about?” I asked. “What did you do?”

“What did I do?” Ava repeated. “I stopped waiting for you to act, that’s what I did. I made us an appointment to see Carlson Greene together.”

**Episode 5103**

**Greyson**

I was pretty sure I’d just heard Cali correctly, but even when I replayed the words in my head, I couldn’t get them to make any sense to me. “What exactly do you mean you can’t get *married*?” I asked, wanting more clarification. “Who can’t you marry?”

Cali stared up at me, a blank, shocked look on her face. Honestly, she looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“G-Greyson—I didn’t know you were there,” she stammered. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” I said. “Who can’t you marry?” I asked again, wondering who the hell had asked her.

“We were just playing a round of fuck, marry, kill,” Lola said getting to her feet.

Cali shifted her eyes over to her friend. She still looked shocked, but she managed to nod. “Right.”

“Obviously,” Lola said with a grin.

I narrowed my eyes. There didn’t seem to be anything at all obvious about it, except the fact that they were rambling. “What the hell is fuck, marry, kill?” I asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “God, Greyson, sometimes I forget you’re such an old man. How are you twenty-six? Get with the times already. How have you never heard of that game?”

“What is it?” I asked, starting to get annoyed.

“It’s just a stupid party game,” Cali said. “You’re given three names, and you have to decide who you would fuck, who you would marry, and who you would kill. You get the names of celebrities or friends or whatever.” She laughed nervously.

I gave them a close look. They were acting very strangely.

“We used to play it all the time at school,” Lola added.

“And obviously we aren’t talking about anyone we know,” Cali added, unprompted, “like you, for example.” She laughed again.

Lola looked at Cali, then back at me. “Is there something you needed, Greyson?”

“Um, yeah, there is,” I said. What with the strange conversation, I’d nearly forgotten. I looked at Cali. “I still have research to do on Hans, but I’ll let you know what I find. I don’t want you to worry about it, okay?”

She nodded, and I turned, but as I headed downstairs, I started to worry. Clearly Cali and Lola had been lying about whatever they were talking about and trying to cover. Were they talking about Cali and *me* getting married?

And if so, why would Cali say she couldn’t possibly marry me?

I forced myself to take a deep breath. Maybe I was just overreacting. I had marriage on the brain with Colton about to propose to Maya. In fact, now that I was thinking about them, I needed to get in touch with my brother—he had given me the engagement ring for safekeeping during the rest of our trip back. He’d thought it was for the best, since he’d already lost it twice. But then when we’d parted, Colton had forgotten to take it back.

Anyway, with all that going on, it made sense that I was thinking about marriage.

And Valentine’s Day was just around the corner. Speaking of which—I still needed to get something for Cali.

Besides, I was being ridiculous—I couldn’t imagine that Cali wouldn’t be willing to marry me. She might not be ready to say it or to make that choice—but I knew that she loved me.

I shook my head. I was just being paranoid.

I headed downstairs deep in thought. One thing the weird conversation with Cali and Lola had done was trigger some thoughts I usually tried to push away—thoughts about the future. There was usually so much going on with the pack, it was enough work just to think about the present, but plans for the future always lurked somewhere in the back of my head.

Would it be so wrong to propose to the woman I loved?

I’d certainly thought about it more than once. Having Cali be my fiancée had always been a far-off dream—more like a fantasy. But things were different now, and with Xavier with Ava now, did it have to be nothing more than a fantasy?

But maybe I was getting ahead of myself. This was what happened when I started thinking about the future.

Back in my study, I settled into my chair and opened up my laptop again. I needed to keep digging for more information about Hans and his shady dealings, but somehow my mind kept wandering, and I found myself again and again looking at engagement rings.

I laughed at myself but clicked through the Tiffany website to look at the selection. The ring Colton had chosen was nice, but I knew it wouldn’t do for Cali. Her tastes tended to be more classic and discreet.

I looked through the site, amazed at the selection—there were different cuts of rings, different colors of diamonds—and that wasn’t even starting on the other stones. How could I possibly pick one? One that Cali would love. One that she would proudly wear on her finger all her life.

I wanted to talk to someone about it, someone who wouldn’t judge me, someone who knew what it was like to be engaged, and someone who would also keep it to themselves. In the packhouse—where gossip flowed like water—that was a tall order.

My thoughts went to my mom. I thought about calling her, but when I glanced up at the door, I paused. I was alone in my office, but it sometimes felt like the packhouse had ears, so I decided it was time to pay my mother a surprise visit.

I rose from my desk and strode outside, heading toward the woods. I shifted and broke into a run.

A few moments later, I slowed, then stopped in front of Big Mac’s house.

I shifted back to my human form, put on the clothes I’d stored in a bag across my shoulders, walked up the front steps, and knocked.

When Big Mac answered the door, she didn’t look happy. “What now?” Then, without waiting for an answer, she started to close the door in my face. “You know what—whatever trouble Caliana’s in now, I don’t want to know—”

I looked at the ring on her finger for a moment, then stopped the door. “I’m here to see my mother. And you can relax—there’s no emergency or need for a spell.”

Big Mac stopped pushing on the door, and a look of relief washed over her face. “So, you don’t need something? That’s a first. Come in if you have to, then.”

I walked in and found my mother just beyond the door.

“Greyson!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around my neck. “I’m so happy to see you. Tell me all about your camping trip. Did you and your brothers make some progress?”

She pulled me into the living room as she peppered me with questions and pushed me down onto the couch.

I smiled. “Yeah, actually, we did—strangely enough. Though there were some bumps here and there. But I didn’t come to talk about that.”

“What did you come to talk about?” my mom asked, clasping her hands around her knees.

“Jewelry. Maybe a ring.”

My mom looked shocked. “*What?* A ring? Greyson!” She paused, then asked, “Are you going to ask Cali to marry you?”

I hesitated for a moment, almost afraid to admit my thoughts aloud.

“Why now?” Mom pressed. “Has something changed? Did Cali make a choice? Though,” she went on, answering her own questions, “I suppose with Xavier and Ava now officially together, that might make it easier and more natural for Cali to choose.”

That made me wince. I would obviously prefer Cali to choose me regardless of Xavier’s situation. I shook my head at my mother. “She hasn’t made a choice yet,” I told her. “And I’m not asking her to.”

My mom gave me a curious look. “Well, proposing to her is kind of forcing her to, isn’t it?”

“I’m only thinking of proposing,” I said. “I think we could get engaged and just not choose a date. Or I could just get her a promise ring or something. That would keep Cali from feeling like she’s made a real choice.” I paused for a moment. “Does that make any sense?”

My mom smiled. “I think that it does. Sort of a non-committed commitment. So, what do you want to know about the rings?”

“I’m not sure if I have any questions—mostly I think I just need some guidance about how to pick something that feels special,” I explained. “I just want to be able to show her how much she means to me, how much I want her in my life. Forever. It feels like a ring shows that, no?”

My mom looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, I can’t tell you what Cali would like, but I think you should think about all the reasons you love her and want to marry her, and that should guide your choice.”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

Her smile was gentle now. “Ultimately, no matter what you do, you want to find something that is meaningful to both of you.” She reached over to take my hand. “Asking Cali to marry you or even promise herself to you is a very big step, Greyson. Are you really sure you’re doing this for the right reasons?”

**Episode 5104**

I *hated* lying. Hated it. And—worse than that—I was bad at it. And I’d just lied to Greyson.

“It really wasn’t that bad,” Lola was saying. “I’m pretty sure Greyson fell for it.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He didn’t look convinced. I think he heard more than he let on. What if he heard everything I said, and he thinks I wouldn’t marry him?” I wailed.

Lola raised her eyebrows. “Well? Would you?”

I blinked at her. “Would I marry Greyson?”  
 She shrugged. “Yeah. If he proposed to you right now—had that ring and got down on bended knee and asked you to be his wife—what would you say to him?”

“But—I—come on. That’s crazy!” I stammered. “How can I decide that? That’s a purely hypothetical—”

“It’s *what*?” Lola asked. “Do I need to point out that you just found a ring in his bag, and, unless Greyson either has someone on the side that none of us know about or very strange taste in personal jewelry, it seems pretty clear there’s nothing hypothetical about it. The man is going to propose,” she said bluntly.

“Oh god.” I peeked again at the ring in the small black box. The dark blue-green stone winked up at me. I snapped the box shut and looked at Lola. “Is it possible that it’s more of a friendship ring?”

She gave me a flat look. “Seriously? Cali. Does that *look* like a friendship ring to you?”

“No,” I had to admit, “but he has gotten me a ring before. The one with my family’s crest for Christmas.”

“So?” Lola said. “That’s obviously not the same.”

I swallowed hard. Lola was right, and I hated it. “I feel like you’re putting a lot of pressure on me right now.”

“I’m just trying to get you to face some facts, girl,” she said. “This is going to happen, and you are going to have to decide what to say when it does.”

“Oh god,” I wailed.

Lola grabbed my shoulders. “Okay, listen, we can practice.”

“Practice—?” I asked, bewildered.

She grabbed the ring from my hand and dropped to her knee. “Caliana Hart,” she said in a gruff voice, “will you marry me?”

I sputtered for a moment, but the picture of Lola on one knee, holding up a ring made me laugh, breaking my tension.

Lola started to laugh too. “I’m trying to help, Cali. I’m not actually proposing—though you could do a lot worse.”

That made me laugh harder. “Maybe I *should* marry you. That would solve all my problems.”

“Yeah, but it might start some problems for Jay,” Lola said, getting to her feet.

My laugh faded and turned into a sigh. The reality was that if Lola was right, and Greyson was going to propose, I didn’t know what I was going to do.

I took the ring back from her, closed the box, and put it back into Greyson’s bag.

“Cali, I really think you’re making too big a deal about—” Lola started, but she was interrupted when my phone rang.

I pulled it out and looked down at the caller ID in confusion. Why the hell was Carlson Greene calling me?

“Hello?” I asked tentatively, accepting the call.

“Hello, this is the office of Dr. Greene. I am calling to confirm the couple’s session with Xavier Evers.”

“What?” I asked, baffled. Then it came back to me—Xavier had asked me to attend one of his sessions, although I was surprised that he had already made the appointment without talking to me first.

“Is that a yes or a no,” the woman said, sounding bored.

I swallowed hard. “I guess a yes,” I said. I was nervous about it, but if it was going to help Xavier overcome whatever it was he was dealing with, then sure.

“Great,” the woman said. “See you soon.”

I ended the call, and when I looked up, I saw Lola was looking at the copy of the article on Hans I’d taken from Greyson’s office. It must have fallen out of my pocket and Lola had picked it up.

She looked up at me. “Is this the same Hans Kendall was talking about?”

“Greyson found that,” I told her. “He’s going to keep digging.”

Lola frowned. “If he’s looking for information on this guy, why didn’t he come to me? We all know I’m the expert when it comes to poking around on the internet. Didn’t I find out all that useful stuff about Kendall?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know if this is the same—”

Lola wasn’t listening to me and pushed right past me. “I’m going to find out all there is to know about this Hans guy,” she announced.

I stared after her as she disappeared down the hall, not really sure what to do. Greyson had asked me to let him do more research on Hans, but Lola was right—she was really good at internet sleuthing. Maybe she would be able to find something that could help.

I looked down at my phone as it buzzed with a text from Codsworth.

*You’re coming to crew practice tonight, right? I know it’s Sunday, but we got the regatta coming up, and we gotta make sure we don’t have a repeat of the last one. Train wreck.*

I flinched. Shit. I’d completely forgotten about practice. I hurried to my room and grabbed my crew pack, then swung by Lola’s room as I headed out.

“Find anything?” I asked, sticking my head in her door.

Lola looked up from her laptop. “This Hans sounds like a bad dude,” she said darkly. “I’m finding a lot of stuff, and it’s painting a pretty nasty picture of him. Blackmail, drug dealing, grand larceny—and that’s just the fun stuff. No wonder the cops were looking for him. Why would a school coordinator be interested in him?”

Before I could even start to answer that question, Lola turned back to her computer—

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” she said firmly.

I bit my lip. If Kendall were to somehow find out that Lola was looking into her, it could put everyone in a tough situation. “You know, you should just leave it,” I said. “Greyson said he would handle this stuff with Hans. I think you should drop it for now,” I advised.

But Lola just shrugged, clearly blowing me off. “It’s fine,” she said breezily.

“No, seriously, stop digging, okay?” I asked. “Promise me.”

Lola looked up at me, and seeing the seriousness in my eyes, she nodded, although reluctantly. “Okay.”

She had agreed, but I wondered if I had just made Lola want to dig even more. I wished I could make Lola make me a Fae promise.

I glanced at my watch and—hitching my bag up on my shoulder—headed out. I needed to get going if I wanted to make it to practice on time. “See you!” I called to Lola and headed downstairs.

As I got into my car, I was hoping that a good, hard crew practice would help me forget about the ring, about Hans, about Lola, and about Valentine’s Day. The other things on my mind were higher stakes, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Valentine’s Day—and the fact that I still hadn’t figured out what to get for Greyson.

I thought about it as I drove—a tie seemed boring. He always bought his own clothes. I couldn’t possibly take up Torin’s suggestion and get him edible anything—the thought alone made me blush. So, what could I get Greyson? What did he really like?

I was driving through the small downtown area when I passed the liquor store—Town Suds. That’s when it hit me—Greyson liked whiskey. I could get him a nice bottle of expensive whiskey.

I pulled into a spot right in front of the store and climbed out. Once inside I was feeling good—more confident that I had finally come up with a good idea. But when I turned into the whiskey section, my confidence plummeted. I was immediately overwhelmed. There had to have been hundreds of bottles, and I had no idea where to even begin. I never knew there were so many types of whiskey.

Without any real idea of what I was looking for, I started reading labels.

“Can I help you find something?”

I looked up into the kind of eyes of an older woman in a blue Town Suds polo shirt. “Yes!” I said gratefully. “I’m looking for a bottle of whiskey. A nice bottle.”

“This one is a nice one,” the woman said, picking up a bottle with a gold label. “Yamazaki, aged twelve years, single malt. Very nice.”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I said, having no idea what any of that meant. “How much is it?”

“A hundred and twenty-nine dollars,” she said smoothly.

I almost gasped but managed to stop myself. “Well, that’s a little more than I was thinking, but I think he’s worth it,” I said aloud.

“Wonderful,” she said, and carried the box to the front of the store. She smiled as she rang it up for me. “Your valentine must be a very special person.”

I returned the smile. “Yes, he is.” Then a thought struck me. Was this my first Valentine’s Day with Greyson? But what about Xavier? By not getting *him* a gift, was I somehow making the choice that I’d been trying so hard to avoid?

**Episode 5105**

**Artemis**

Shit.

What the fuck was I supposed to do about the dead Fae’s body? I knew there was no way I could simply dispose of it—there was nothing simple about that—but why should I even have to? Why was this *my* burden to bear? Somehow this assassin had gotten inside Celeste’s place and then lured me up here to try to kill me. I hadn’t done anything wrong except refused to die. I was only defending myself!

Though even I had to admit that having to explain why I was up here in the first place would raise a lot more questions than I was ready to answer.

I looked around for a moment, then stepped to the edge of the parapet and peered over. It was a long way down to the distant ground. The Fae was heavy, but I was pretty strong. I could just toss the body over the side. It wouldn’t be discovered until the morning. Sure, there would be some questions—probably a lot of questions—but by then I could be back in my room, I’d have had time to create some kind of alibi, and when asked I could feign complete ignorance about the dead Fae.

Looking down, I could see a spot of the Fae’s blood on my boot. So that wasn’t great, but I could certainly clean it up before anyone else noticed.

Okay, I had a plan. If not a good plan, then my only workable plan, and I stepped toward the body and grabbed the arm, starting to heave it toward the edge of the wall.

I wished I had glamour magic—then I could make the Fae appear to be sleeping. That might have bought me even more time. But at least I’d had the magic I needed to kill him—I’d used my magic arrow, which was lucky. A real arrow would have been easier to trace.

Once at the wall, I lifted the guy up with a groan—he was heavier than he looked—and for a moment I wished that Marius were here to help me. This was the kind of thing he was good at, and I knew he could easily lift this body over the wall.

I gave my head a firm shake. I could *not* think like that. Marius wasn’t going to just magically appear and get me out of a tight spot. If he did come back, he was going to be with Cali to help me escape. And that could take a while—it definitely wasn’t going to be soon—so I needed to deal with this myself now.

Just as I was straining to push the Fae over the wall, a door burst open behind me. I turned to see a stream of guards pouring through and rushing toward me.

*Shit*.

On instinct, I threw up my hands and the dead Fae fell to my feet, his blood squirting everywhere.

“This isn’t what it looks like!” I exclaimed.

The guards caught sight of the blood and the dead Fae and pulled to a sudden stop.

“Did you kill him?” one asked me, looking horrified.

I hesitated for a moment, thinking that Celeste should be told about an assassin breaking into her palace. But then, what if she knew? Or—worse—was somehow responsible? Although I found that hard to believe. Celeste wasn’t the cuddliest person in the world, but she had made it clear that she needed me around. It wouldn’t make sense to have me killed now. Not when she’d had so many other opportunities to do it.

But even if Celeste wasn’t responsible, I didn’t know what to say because I didn’t know who I could trust. What I did know was that I was sick of all this. I wanted answers about the Order of the Winding Thorn, and there was no way I was going to sit around this drafty palace and wait for another attempt on my life.

I wasn’t going to trust these guards—how could I? Someone from within Celeste’s inner circle—maybe another member of the court—had to have been in on this on this murder attempt, so I had to be careful.

“I asked you a question,” the guard growled.

I shook my head. “I will only answer to Celeste.”

The guard made an irritated noise. “Fine. I’ll take you to her. The rest of you, deal with this mess.”

The head guard grabbed my arm, and while the rest of his patrol dealt with the dead Fae, he escorted me down the tower’s winding stairs. I knew we were heading toward Celeste’s chambers, so when we stopped in front of a large oak door and he knocked, I wasn’t surprised to hear her voice from the other side.

“Enter!” The door opened, and she raised an eyebrow at me when the guard pushed me into a large sitting room. “Yes?”

“We found her, Your Grace, at the top of the tower, trying to throw a dead Fae over the wall.”

If this information shocked Celeste in any way, she didn’t show it. “Thank you. That will be all,” she said, dismissing the guard with a wave of her hand.

That left the two of us alone. I shifted nervously on my feet, feeling the silence of the room pressing in around me.

“Now, Artemis,” Celeste said, her voice cutting through the quiet, “I would like to hear your side of this story.”

I rolled my eyes. “My side of the story is that *I* was supposed to be the one lying dead on your tower floor, not that Fae up there.”

Celeste took this in. “And why were you up there in the first place?” she wondered. “I thought you had gone to bed.”

I thought quickly. I knew I couldn’t reveal anything about the note I’d found, and that I’d actually gone up to the tower thinking I was going to meet Marius, so I shrugged, trying to look casual. “I couldn’t sleep. I just wanted some air.”

This didn’t seem to do the trick, as Celeste didn’t look convinced, but before she could ask me any more questions, I had one for her: “What’s the Order of the Winding Thorn?”

Shock passed over Celeste’s face and left its mark behind. Whatever it was, it was bad—I could see it written all over her face.

“Why do you ask?” she said.

I suppressed a sigh. I felt like she and I were playing a game of cat and mouse. But I was sick of games. “You know, someone just tried to kill me. I think *I* should be the one asking the questions!” I snapped.

This outburst seemed to startle Celeste, and her eyes flashed with fury before she could control herself again. I saw her clench her hands tightly.

“What do you know about the order?” I demanded. “And why did they send someone here to kill me?”

Celeste looked at me a moment more, assessing. Then she cleared her throat. “The Order of the Winding Thorn is a shadowy group whose interests—and profits—lie in the continuation of war.”

I stared at her. “Okay? And what does that have to do with me? Why would they target me?”

Celeste turned and paced briskly away, her shoes clicking against the stone floor. “There are two distinct possibilities I can think of: either you happened to simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or they know who you really are.”

I ground my teeth. I knew it was the latter, of course. The would-be assassin had mentioned my father in the note. “They came for me,” I said.

Celeste looked at me keenly, then nodded. “Yes, that is the less ideal of the two possibilities. But not surprising. It’s clear that word of your return has gone far and wide and reached the ear of the wrong people. Someone out there knows you are the heir of Kadmos and your coming here could bring the end to the war. There are some who would be quite unhappy to hear of this.”

“Well, that settles it,” I said.

“Settles what?” Celeste asked.

“It’s obvious I’m not safe here anymore. I got rid of that guy,” I said, jerking my head upward, “but the Order will try again once they find out they’ve failed. So that’s it. I’m leaving the palace.”

“Artemis, wait just a moment,” Celeste said quickly.

“Wait for what?” I asked. “Another murder attempt?”

She gave me a hard look. “It seems to me you are looking for an excuse to break your promise—a Fae promise, in case you need to be reminded.”

I shook my head. I was in no mood for an argument—not when my literal life was on the line. “Either I stay here, keep my word to you, and die, or you let me go and the last living link to Kadmos survives along with me. It sounds like it’s up to you, Celeste.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “So which is it going to be?”

**Episode 5106**

**Xavier**

I glared at Ava. “You made an appointment for the *both* of us?” I was wavering somewhere between anger and frustration. Sitting in an office talking with Carlson Greene was literally the last thing I wanted to do.

“Yes, and did I have a choice? Would you have done it on your own?” Ava countered.

“Sure, I would have—”

“Just be honest. Don’t tell me what I want to hear. Would you have?” she interrupted.

I sighed. “No, of course not. It’s a waste of time, anyway.”

“More of a waste of time than walking around in pain and not doing anything about it? I don’t think so. You can’t expect this problem you’re having to just go away after a couple of tries.”

“It was more than just a ‘couple of tries.’ Didn’t I just go on that stupid fucking camping trip? Haven’t I been doing everything in my power to fix this?”

“Yes, and obviously all your efforts aren’t enough since you’re still in pain! You need to keep at it.”

Exasperated, I asked, “When will it be enough?”

Ava moved in close. “When we can fuck without you getting a headache. I refuse to live like this. It needs to be resolved. So, since I knew you weren’t planning to do anything about it, I’ve taken matters into my own hands—the way a Luna is supposed to.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

Ava rolled her eyes hard. “I know, that’s my point. You never would have asked. You’re content to walk around suffering for reasons I’m not quite sure of, so I’m going to help you solve this.”

“Ava—”

“And if I mean to you what you mean to me, then you’ll do whatever is necessary to resolve this,” she interrupted. “Unless, of course, you’d prefer to keep suffering, waffling between me and Cali?”

The mention of Cali’s name sent a jolt of pain from my head all the way down to my toes, and I winced involuntarily. She was right. This wasn’t any way to live. Unable to even hear Cali’s name without being stabbed through the head with what felt like an ice pick.

Ava eyed me. “I hope your painkillers work.” She brushed past me to leave, but I grabbed her by the arm.

I hated to give in, especially when giving in meant I was going to have to sit on a couch and tell a stranger my business, but then again, I’d agreed to go to Carlson Greene… and I *had* asked Ava if she would go with me. So I pretty much didn’t have a leg to stand on, no excuse to refuse. I’d just hoped it would never come to this.

“So, what time’s the appointment?”

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A few minutes later, I was finished getting dressed and still annoyed that I was going to have to see Carlson again. If the guy was any good, the headaches would be gone soon, but that didn’t make me any less agitated about having to see him. I’d made peace with Ava’s decision, but that didn’t mean I had to like it.

*Why me? Why do I have to be the only man in the entire world who feels physical pain when he’s around the two women he cares about? I’m not even lying to either of them like some two-timing asshole, and* I’m *the one being punished?*

Of course, I wouldn’t be in this position at all if it weren’t for Adéluce. She was the one who’d forced me into Ava’s open arms. And then the impossible happened—I fell in love with Ava all over again. Now things were so much more complicated, because if my feelings for Ava hadn’t developed so much, it would be easy to just leave her and run back into Cali’s arms. Problem solved.

I knew it would all be so much simpler if I could just be with Cali like I’d always expected to be. She was with Greyson for now, but if my gut was right back before all this *due destini* shit and before Adéluce, way back when I first knew that I’d fallen in love with Cali, then was I making a mistake to question that feeling now? Should I leave Ava and just go to Cali and wait for the feelings I’d developed for Ava to fade?

It wasn’t that simple.

Spending the rest of my life with Ava was no longer the nightmare it once seemed. If anything, it could be a good thing. It would be a relief to put all the turmoil behind me, to finally move on with my life. Focus on one woman, one relationship, one set of expectations without feeling torn all the time. I should just give in and lean into this reality.

But at what cost?

I was an Alpha, maybe not of the pack I thought I would be, but I was still an Alpha. And someone like me shouldn’t be forced into making decisions the way Adéluce had made me. But now that she was gone, I had my power back and could do whatever I wanted.

*But what do I even want? Didn’t I just decide that I can live a full, fulfilling life by committing to Ava and building our future together? She’s my Luna, and I’m her mate—we can raise a family like Alphas and Lunas are supposed to. I could leave all this* due destini *nonsense with Cali behind.*

But even as I thought that and the idea took root in my mind, it felt forced. Like trying to push a jigsaw piece into the wrong spot. Like I was trying to justify my actions—convince myself that my current situation was really what I wanted. If being with Ava was right, I wouldn’t have to coerce myself into it, would I?

And if I really was ready to commit to Ava, why was I still being wracked with these headaches? Why had the same thoughts about building a life and a family come to me about Cali? Why couldn’t I just forget about her?

I laughed bitterly. “Like that will ever happen.”

I recalled the strange hallucination that fucking Fae tried to use to distract me during the fight in the brothel. It had felt so real—being back in the Redwood pack house kitchen with Cali. It was nothing more than a hallucination, and I knew that, but the shadow of it lingered.

*It’s haunting me because of how right it felt. Like I was finally where I was supposed to be.*

And no matter what I did, ever since I’d had that hallucination, I just couldn’t shake the feeling. It had to mean something that the image of being with Cali like that—like old times—was sticking with me.

Or maybe I was just looking for an excuse?

My head was about to burst. I needed to get out, get some fresh air, maybe go for a run. And I still had to figure out what to get Ava for Valentine’s Day.

I went downstairs, hoping to avoid seeing Ava. My head was just so twisted between her and Cali and trying to come to terms with the possibility that she might be the woman I ended up with. Somehow that just didn’t ring true to me, and I was having a hard time coming to terms with the possibility that me and Cali might really be over.

As soon as I hit the landing I ran straight into Knox. Great. Just what I needed.

“Have you talked to Milo yet?” Knox asked.

I was confused. “Talked to Milo? About what?”

Knox glared at me. “About me working with him! I’m not doing anything with that guy until you talk to him. Lay the groundwork or whatever.”

“I’ll do it now. Where is he?”

Josephine overheard. “I saw him in the yard a few minutes ago,” she said.

“Okay, thanks Josephine. Knox, I’ll have this settled shortly.”

I went out to the yard, happy for the chance to get away from everyone. I found Milo exercising, doing a mix of weight training and cardio, and by the severity of his grunts and the expression on his face, he was taking his workout very seriously.

I appreciated his devotion to staying in shape. Werewolves were naturally strong and agile, but exercising provided an even better edge in battle. There was nothing I valued more than having the strongest and the best werewolves in my pack.

Milo stopped when he saw me coming. “Hey. Did Knox say something? Does he still want to kick my ass or whatever it is?” Milo smirked as if he knew that Knox couldn’t do that even if he tried.

 I sighed. “Nothing like that. Well, sort of. I just want to talk to you about the deal I made with Knox—I want you two to work together, get to know each other better. I was hoping that Knox could serve as your guide to the way things work in the Samara pack.”

Milo cocked his head to the side, considering it. “Work together? Me and Knox?” He whistled and pumped his weight up and down a few times. “Interesting.”

“Yeah, I know. You two have some bad blood, but maybe spending a bit more time together can smooth things out. So, what do you say, Milo? Are you up for it?”

**Episode 5107**

I kept eyeing the bag sitting in the passenger seat, packed with not one but two bottles of whiskey. Very expensive bottles, at that. I ended up biting the bullet and buying one for Xavier and one for Greyson. They both loved whiskey for reasons I would never understand. It always burned the hell out of my throat, but it wasn’t for me, it was for them.

Two bottles of whiskey. I sighed and shook my head.

Buying them both a gift had seemed like the right idea at the time, but now it was starting to feel wrong. Not only because it was kind of weird to buy them the exact same gift, but wrong because I shouldn’t have been buying a Valentine’s Day gift for Xavier at all. We weren’t together anymore, and Xavier had a girlfriend. Ava would probably flip her lid if she found out that I bought a gift for Xavier. Not that I really cared if she got mad—she was always mad anyway.

*It feels like I’m cheating on Greyson—which I suppose I kind of am. But this is the way it’s always been with the* due destini*. It’s hard for me to do something special for one of them without feeling compelled to do the same thing for the other.*

Something had told me that I needed to buy a gift for both of my mates. If it weren’t for Adéluce, I probably wouldn’t be faced with having my first Valentine’s Day without both of my mates. Now that it was my reality, I was having a hard time coming to terms with it.

*At least I have time to think about this whole gift thing for a while. I can always just give Greyson both bottles or give one to Lola to give to Jay. It doesn’t have to be a big deal.*

Then I groaned. Was whiskey even the right kind of gift for Valentine’s Day? There was no way in hell I would want it for myself, but it seemed like the right thing for Greyson—it wasn’t easy buying things for a man who had everything and could easily buy anything he wanted.

I checked the time. I could still make it to crew practice without pissing off the coach. He’d already given me warnings about being late and missing practice, and I didn’t want to do anything else that might put me on his bad side. Crew was a grounding activity for me, and I didn’t want to lose it. And it was also the perfect way for me to keep an eye on Codsworth.

Inevitably, my mind quickly drifted back to Greyson. I remembered asking him once if there was anything special I could get for him, and he’d just smiled, kissed me, and said that I was all he would ever need.

*But I can’t say the same about him. Even now I’m sitting here with two bottles of whiskey, one for him and the other for the other man I obviously can’t stop thinking about.*

I pulled onto campus and had a bit of trouble getting a parking space since the lot was so packed. I finally found one smack in the middle of the parking lot, not close to any of the exits, and nearly knocked both bottles over as I exited the car.

*That would serve me right, wouldn’t it?*

As I made my way to the boathouse, my eyes drift toward the administrative buildings, and I wondered if Kendall might be there.

*Greyson said to keep an eye on her, so maybe it’s best that I avoid her for a while.*

I continued on to the boathouse, hoping that practice would take my mind off Valentine’s Day, at least for a little while. I still had some time to figure out what I was going to do.

Immediately, I thought about the engagement ring. I still hadn’t decided what I was going to do about Greyson’s impending proposal. How could I possibly turn him down? And how could I possibly accept?

Bear spotted me first and hollered my name, “Lil’ Hart!” He rushed over and picked me up like I was a toy doll. The others came over to greet me.

“That’s enough. Let’s get down to business,” Coach said, coming over and breaking up our little gathering. He quickly gave us the routine for the day’s practice as Codsworth and I got to work prepping the boats.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what we talked about,” Codsworth whispered. He gestured to his shoulder. “You know, the marks and all.”

I was instantly on high alert. “What about them?”

“Maybe I should keep pursuing the idea that me and the others were the victims of an alien abduction.”

“But I thought you agreed to take a break from all that?”

“I did, but then I watched an old movie about a Martian invasion, and it got me thinking—”

I cut him off. “You shouldn’t do that.”

Codsworth gave me an incredulous look. “I shouldn’t do what? Think?”

“No,” I stammered. “But I do think you should stop obsessing over the marks.”

Codsworth’s face reddened. “I don’t get it. You really think me trying to get my memory back—the memory I lost out of nowhere—is obsessive? Tell me, Cali, if you lost your memory, you’d do nothing? Just carry on with your life like you weren’t missing a big chunk of time?”

“No, I didn’t mean that,” I said, backpedaling. “I just meant that there are reasons we discussed—have you forgotten that? About you being safe? Not drawing any dangerous attention to yourself?”

“I haven’t forgotten about any of that, but maybe I *should* piss off the wrong people. What have I got to lose? Maybe if I draw out some asshole who wants to stop me from looking into this, I’ll finally get some answers.”

“Codsworth, I understand that losing your memory the way you did is jarring, but I really don’t think it’s safe to pursue this. Do what you said—relax and just lean into your normal life for a while. Get back into your normal groove. I’m sure something will turn up when you least expect it. Hey, maybe you’ll even begin to remember what happened to you without having to stir up anything.”

Codsworth looked uncertain for a few beats before he finally sighed. “Okay. But if nothing does turn up—soon—I’m going to start stirring big time.” He made a sweeping motion with an oar to prove his point.

I gulped and nodded. “Okay, fair.”

After we’d hauled out the boats, all I could think about was Codsworth pushing this and getting into trouble. If he did something to trigger his memories about the time he spent as Chessa’s captive, what would the pack have to do to protect ourselves? How far would the pack go to keep him from exposing our secrets? How far would Greyson go to keep our supernatural natures under wraps?

And what about Kendall? What would she do?

I still had no idea how Kendall played into all this. It was nerve-wracking to think that she had knowledge that we didn’t—and that what she knew might put the pack in danger. But I was jumping to conclusions. Kendall was still so mysterious that I hadn’t the slightest idea what her angle was.

As practice wrapped up, I got a call from Lola.

“Hey, can you talk?” Lola sounded frantic.

“What? Why are you asking me that?” I was puzzled by the question and wondering what was going on to make her sound so urgent.

“Just tell me, is it safe to talk?”

I slipped away from the others. “Yes, I’m alone. What is it?”

I couldn’t tell if Lola was about to hit me with some bad news.

“Cali, you have to promise me that you won’t get upset.”

“I can’t do that. In fact, I promise I *will* get upset if you’ve done something you shouldn’t have. And besides, I can’t promise, because that would risk making a Fae promise, you know that.”

“Okay, but try not to get upset, okay?”

I was growing impatient. “Lola, just tell me whatever it is you need to tell me!”

“Okay… I found some more info on Kendall.”

I sighed. “Lola, you were supposed to leave Kendall alone and stop searching for dirt!”

“No, what I promised was that I wouldn’t look into Hans. Anyway, I found something interesting about CCU’s program coordinator. She not only knew about Hans but spent some time with him.”

I gasped. “How do you know that?” I asked, keeping my voice down.

“Check your messages,” Lola said.

My phone buzzed as a message from Lola came in. There was a picture from a paper dated a few months ago showing a caption about some groundbreaking ceremony with Hans Tolverssin and some others standing by a construction project.

“I don’t get it. What does this have to do with Kendall?”

“Look closer at the woman in the background,” Lola said.

I zoomed in on the photo. “Hmm. She does look kind of familiar.”

Lola snorted. “Cali, it’s Kendall! She’s wearing some kind of disguise—a wig and colored contacts.”

I zoomed in even more. “I guess that could be her.”

“It *is* her! Don’t you get it?” Lola shouted. “Kendall is with Hans, which means that she has to be in the mafia!”

**Episode 5108**

**Greyson**

It was nice to think that I wanted to marry Cali for all the right reasons—I personally couldn’t see the downside. She was the only woman I ever wanted to be with, and there was no question in my mind that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

“I love Cali,” I admitted to my mother. “She loves me, too, and we’re mates. I can’t imagine living my life without her. I want to start a family one day, have a taste of that traditional life—but how do I know if those are the right reasons?”

“Sounds to me like you’ve checked all the boxes, but this is something that goes deeper,” my mother said. “Something you need to think long and hard about. Me telling you what I think isn’t really going to help you when it’s something that you absolutely have to decide for yourself.” She shrugged. “That’s how love is. It’s a very personal thing.”

“I know. I guess I just want some insight. A clue that I’m not totally off base here.”

“I can’t give you that, either. Peace of mind is yours to find. Just keep things in perspective. Your relationship with Cali has many different sides to it. And deciding when and if to marry her—well, that’s a decision you have to make completely on your own, when no one else is waiting for your answer.”

I sighed and looked off in the distance, wishing that even one thing about my relationship could be easy—other than the act of loving Cali and being with her, which were the easiest things in the world. But this was one of those times where it was painfully obvious that sometimes, love wasn’t enough. If it were, Cali and I would already be married.

*But the* due destini *won’t allow that.*

“I’m sorry if that’s not what you wanted to hear,” my mom said. “And I wish I could make this easier for you, but I can’t.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Mom. Everything you told me is exactly what I *needed* to hear.”

I took a moment to think about how much it helped having my mother in my life—and how reassuring it was to have someone looking out for me selflessly. It was something I’d been deprived of for so long thanks to Silas. Even now I was still getting used to having my own mother on my side to confide in.

Even if she couldn’t exactly point me in the right direction in this matter of love and assure me that if I asked Cali to marry me, everything would fall into place, I still valued having her as a sounding board.

“Thanks,” I said, rising to my feet. “I’d better get back.”

I said my goodbyes and started back to the pack house. On the way, the wind rushing through my fur as I raced through the woods, I wrestled with all the reasons I wanted to marry Cali now. There were so many, but I had to look closely at those reasons and make sure they were right. And with that thought in mind, it didn’t take long for me to realize that my mother really had a point.

*I can’t marry Cali because of external factors. Xavier being with Ava is undoubtedly one of the factors influencing my sudden desire to take the next step with Cali. And I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m jealous of Colton. He’s got a simple, loving relationship. No one else trying to encroach on his time with his mate. Two beautiful babies. I want what he has. That’s why I’m suddenly so hell-bent on marrying Cali one day.*

It was a hard thing to wrap my head around—feeling inferior to Colton. I was the older brother, and I was supposed to be happy for my brothers when they shared good news. Instead, I felt envious.

*If Colton can marry Maya, why can’t I marry Cali? Why does he deserve to have the life that I want more than anything, while I have to sit back and watch from the sidelines?*

My situation was complicated, and I knew that. Colton wasn’t dealing with the *due destini* and all that, but still… It would be nice if Cali made a choice and we could take that step…

I quickly pushed those thoughts away. There was no use going down that road. I knew I didn’t want to pressure Cali, but was it wrong of me to let my feelings show? To let her know how much I wanted her? To want marriage and a family? Why did I have to suppress all of that because of circumstances outside of my control?

I returned to the pack house, thinking about the things my mother had said about finding the right time to ask Cali to marry me. It was tearing me up inside how much jealousy over Colton’s relationship was affecting my thoughts, influencing my view of the future with Cali.

At the rate I was going, the thought of marrying Cali and not being able to was always going to be a sore spot for me, and I didn’t want that for myself—or for Cali.

My phone rang, and I was surprised to see Colton’s name on the screen.

*That’s telling. I’m thinking about Colton, and he calls. It’s like he could feel me obsessing over him.*

“You still have it, right?” Colton asked when I answered, not even bothering to say hello.

“I assume you’re talking about Maya’s engagement ring? Of course I still have it. It’s still in my bag. Why?”

“Why? Because I can’t afford to screw this up. I’ve decided to make this proposal romantic as fuck. I’m going to pop the question during Lucian’s Valentine’s Day party. What do you think?”

“I suppose it’ll work, as long as you’re comfortable with doing it in a very public setting.”

*When I propose to Cali, it’s going to be somewhere much more intimate. Just the two of us. Candles, flowers, music, the works.*

“Why does that matter?” Colton asked.

“Because wouldn’t you feel humiliated if she turned you down in front of everybody?”

Colton huffed into the phone. “Great. You’re really making me feel a lot better about this. But I know what I’m doing—and trust that I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t sure.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay, I was just kidding, anyway. Maya adores you…I think. Of course she’ll accept.”

Colton sighed. “Thanks, yeah, I think so, too. Very funny. You had me going for a minute there.”

“That’s me, a barrel of laughs.” On the inside, though, my envious feelings about Colton and Maya’s relationship were growing. I was happy for my brother, there was no doubt about that, but I couldn’t shake how much I wished it were me planning to propose to Cali. At this point, I would be more than willing to do it in public or in private, just as long as I could do it.

“Just hold on to the ring; guard it with your life, and make sure you bring it to the party, okay?”

“Will do. Though I have to admit that I was surprised when you asked me to hold the ring for you instead of Xavier.”

“Yeah, well, I chose you because…well…Xavier…” He paused for a moment before adding, “Xavier has a lot going on right now, and to be honest, these days you’re the more responsible brother.”

“Either way, I’m honored,” I said.

“Good. Don’t fuck up, because then I’ll have to kill you—and I’m sure Maya would kill you, too, after she found out.”

“Noted. I’ll be there with the ring; you can count on me.”

“Thanks,” Colton said before we ended the call.

Afterward, I couldn’t help but smile. Hearing Colton acknowledge me in that way wasn’t at all what I expected. Maybe our camping weekend from hell wasn’t a total bust. For once, I was starting to feel like I was the big brother I was always meant to be.

I went to the bedroom to check on the ring when I spotted the Hans printout, which reminded me of the things I still had to deal with. If Kendall was still somehow involved with Hans, that made me trust her even less.

I simply couldn’t understand how—of all people—she would know Hans’s name. A dark part of me wondered if she’d had any involvement in Fenrir’s abduction. I found that hard to believe—it would be too much of a coincidence—yet at the same time, I couldn’t afford to ignore the possibility.

Stranger things had happened. I could attest to that.

When I spoke to Maren about Hans, she hadn’t been able to offer much. I knew that I couldn’t question Kendall directly. If she got even an inkling that I was interested in her past or digging into her present, there was no doubt in my mind that she would disappear just like that. So I would have to be more discreet.

And that meant that I was going to have to head to Portland and start asking some questions.

**Episode 5109**

Squinting at the picture of Hans with what looked like Kendall standing behind him, I couldn’t decide if it was really her. Lola was right, it was a dead ringer for Kendall, but there was also something about the woman in the photograph that didn’t have me convinced.

“Are you sure, Lola? I mean, it favors her, but not at the same time.” I squinted and looked closer. “I’m looking at the nose and the mouth and—”

“It’s her!” Lola insisted. “Either that or Kendall has a doppelgänger. Which is more likely?” Lola let out an audible sigh. “Here’s what we know. She’s already kind of sketchy—all the showing up unannounced stuff. And you heard her talking about Hans. What more do you need to be convinced? Trust me, I know faces, and that’s Kendall.”

“You have a point,” I admitted. “But I would feel a lot better with some definitive proof. I want to trust Kendall, I really do, but with this hanging over us it remains to be seen if she’s worth trusting. But what can I do?”

“You’re still on campus, right?” Lola asked.

“Yes, I’m still on campus, why?”

“It’s a weekend, right?”

“Um, yes. You know that as well as I do. Where is this going?” Lola was loving this—all the cloak and dagger stuff, the chaos.

“Then chances are, there’s no one around in the admin building today, so why don’t you haul ass over there and see if you can find some evidence?”

I gasped. “You want me to break into Kendall’s office? I’m not doing that!” I said before Lola could answer. “If I get caught that’ll be instant expulsion—you know that, right? Then all the scheming and scamming you did to get me into school in the first place would go to waste.”

Lola sighed. “You should at least check it out. Maybe it’s unlocked? If it is, you wouldn’t really be breaking in, would you? You’d be…stepping in.”

“Fine,” I said, feeling like this was a bad idea that was going to blow up in my face somehow. It was unsettling to think that I was about to invade Kendall’s privacy yet again. “I’ll do this for the sake of the pack, but this really feels wrong.”

“So is working with the Fae mafia,” Lola huffed. “We all have to face the consequences of our choices. Lay down with the mob, you’re going to get fleas.”

I shook my head. “Lola, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“No, but you catch my drift.”

I looked back at the picture, glancing between Hans and Kendall. “But why would a werewolf work with the Fae mafia?”

“Why would a Fae live in a werewolf pack house? There are all sorts of strange bedfellows in this world,” Lola remarked.

“Guess you have a point there.”

“Besides, Kendall is tough. Maybe she’s some kind of bodyguard…or maybe a paid assassin! She’s badass enough to be good at that. People will do almost anything if the price is right. The best thing for you to do is check out Kendall’s office. If it’s locked, we’ll come up with an alternate plan. Or…if you end up being too chicken to go through with it, I don’t mind coming to do it.”

“No!” I said, immediately shutting that down. “The last thing we need is for you to come barging in, taking risks that you shouldn’t be taking. I’m running point on this.”

I ended the call with Lola and made an excuse to Coach about not feeling well so that I could get out of practice. I felt bad for lying and for blowing off practice, but finding out who Kendall really was had to take precedent.

*Please let her door be locked. Then I can just forget about snooping and breaking laws and go home.*

I wondered if it would make more sense to just show Kendall the picture and ask her why she was pictured with a known mobster, but then Kendall would start asking valid questions, like why did I have the picture in the first place? She would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’d been checking up on her.

I entered the nearly deserted admin building, and my heart sank. Kendall’s door was open.

*Is Kendall here? Why else would her door be open? Maybe she just leaves it that way?*

The light was off, and I peered inside. The office was empty. I glanced around to make sure I was alone before I stepped inside. I felt guilty as hell. Kendall and I were supposed to be working together, and now here I was snooping around her office.

*This not only feels wrong—it* is *wrong. I’m crossing the line, no doubt about it. Shoot! I wish Lola wasn’t so convincing all the time.*

Feeling like I was going to be caught at any second, I started poking around Kendall’s desk, lifting papers, peeking in drawers. What exactly did Lola think I was going to find in here? A gun? A letter from Hans telling Kendall to assassinate someone?

Even if Lola was right and Kendall was tied to Hans, maybe that was in her past. She seemed to have turned her life around, working for the school, helping us with Chessa. Would a mobster do that?

I was looking through a stack of manila folders when I heard a voice.

*Fuck! That sounds like Kendall!*

I started toward the door and then realized that Kendall would see me skittering out of her office like the intruder I was, if I wasn’t careful. I turned back and took a frantic look around her office. There were no closets to hide in, the window was closed, and I was pretty sure that dropping out of a second story office window would be bad for my health anyway.

“*Shit shit shit*,” I hissed under my breath before dropping to my knees and crawling under Kendall’s desk. At the same moment, I realized that this was probably the worst possible hiding place.

Moments later, Kendall came in and turned on the light. She was talking to a student.

My stomach in knots, I squeezed in tighter under the desk.

“Thanks, Kendall, for coming in on a Sunday to help me change my course selection. I couldn’t sleep last night, I was so worried that I was going to have to take Intro to Quantum Physics tomorrow. I’m a Comms major!”

Kendall chuckled. “I’m happy to help fix an honest mistake. And besides, I needed to come in and finish a few things from the week, so it was no inconvenience.”

I froze when I saw Kendall’s feet coming around the side of the desk.

I swallowed, but my mouth was so dry my throat hurt. Panic was doing a number on every system in my body. What was I going to do if Kendall caught me under here? What kind of excuse would she possibly believe? She’d already caught me lurking around behind a trash can—and had graciously failed to grill me about that. I doubted she would be as gracious this time around.

Kendall paused at the side of the desk and started riffling through a bunch of papers. “Here. Sign this form, and I’ll handle everything else. And good luck in Reporting 101. That’s definitely going to be a better fit for you.”

“Thanks so much! You’re a lifesaver.”

I listened as the student’s footsteps grew farther away, and then I waited.

*Maybe I can tell her that I was looking for something under here…or that I came to find her and dropped my pen. Or…I could just tell her I got really tired and needed a nap. Who am I kidding?! If she catches me under here, there* is *no excuse!*

I held my breath as Kendall shuffled more papers around before shutting off the light and heading out. I counted to ten, hoping that Kendall would get far enough away that she wouldn’t see me emerge from under her desk.

I listened, once again wishing that I had even a fraction of the hearing ability that werewolves possessed, but after a while, the office became as quiet as it was before, and I was convinced that it was empty.

Slowly, I crept out from under the desk and peeked out into the hallway. It was vacant.

Feeling better, I hurried out and headed down to the ground floor. I took in big gulps of air as I stepped outside. I might not have found anything incriminating, but more importantly, I hadn’t gotten caught.

The more I thought about it, the more I believed that Lola’s imagination was getting the best of her. And even if not, Kendall was clearly devoted to helping her students. It was hard to believe that she could be such a genuine resource for her students and some kind of hit man at the same time.

I rounded a corner and headed toward my car and nearly jumped out of my skin when Kendall stepped out in front of me.

“What were you doing in my office?!”

**Episode 5110**

**Xavier**

I had no idea what Milo was going to say. The guy had pledged himself to me, but if he didn’t even want to try getting along with Knox, then that was going to be a major red flag to me. Not that I wouldn’t understand where he was coming from if he told me he wanted nothing to do with Knox. I’d felt the same not long ago. But pack harmony was a must—even if the shrimp was making that hard in Milo’s case.

Milo shrugged and continued his reps. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes to fit in with my new pack. If you want me to work with Knox, I’ll work with Knox.”

“Good enough for me,” I said. “Are you comfortable taking some orders from Knox?”

I knew these guys could get their undies in a twist over shit like that. It was a matter of ego, and there was no better way to get a bruised ego than by taking orders from someone you didn’t like.

I would never say it, either, but I’d obviously hated doing anything that Greyson told me even though I’d pledged my loyalty to the Redwood pack. But being in a pissing contest and dealing with a pissing contest were two different things. I wasn’t about to deal with any discord in my pack, and even though Knox could drive me over the edge, I had his back.

“Not sure if you know, but Knox is the one who has a problem with me, not the other way around,” Milo replied.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of that answer, but as long as the two of them were willing to get along without causing me any more headaches—I had enough as it was—then it wasn’t my problem. They would figure out how to get along for the good of the pack, or we would have to have a conversation about consequences.

“Thanks,” I said warily. “This will be good for both you and Knox. Especially if it leads to you being able to set aside your differences. We can’t afford to have any deep-seated rifts in our ranks.”

Milo nodded. “Agreed.”

“Great. I’ll leave you to your workout.”

Milo nodded at me as I left. I came away from the conversation feeling a little better. Knox and Milo’s collaboration was one less thing to worry about. If they could put their differences behind them, then we could get through anything. Milo seemed like a good enough guy, and Knox was willing to overcome his misgivings about him to work together, so I was going to take that as a sign that they were on the mend.

The Samara pack had really been coming into its own, and it was all because of me and Ava. The once almost lost pack had gained some members and was running strong. It felt really good to have something I could call my own. A way to prove to myself and the world that I was capable of building and maintaining a thriving pack.

*The pack is running on a high right now, a high that I hope doesn’t crash anytime soon. I won’t let it crash. I’m going to do my best to keep honing the pack, molding it into what I want it to be. With Ava’s help, the Samaras could become the most powerful pack in this region.*

As I was going to check on Donovan and Geraint about patrols, Marissa came up to me. I could tell before she opened her mouth that she had something on her mind.

*Guess I won’t be catching a break of any kind today.*

“Did you get Ava’s Valentine’s Day gift yet?” Marissa asked.

“Really? You do know that Valentine’s Day isn’t even a real holiday, right? It’s made up. The greeting card companies and stores got together and dreamed it up to make money.” I tried to get past her, but Marissa was persistent.

“Yes, a made-up holiday that Ava will be expecting a gift from you for. So, did you get her something?”

“None of your business,” I growled.

Marissa smiled, still blocking me. “She’s my friend, so yeah, it is. And you better not screw it up. You should be jumping at a chance to show Ava a little appreciation for all she does for you and the pack. She deserves something special… Or do you disagree?”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t disagree, no.”

“Great. So, what are you getting her?”

I didn’t know what to say to appease Marissa. I hadn’t been thinking about Valentine’s Day at all. It was one of the furthest things from my mind right now.

Sure, the pack was good, but I’d just gone through the whole brother’s weekend from hell, and now I was dealing with Ava forcing me to see a shrink…or whatever Greene was. I didn’t have mental real estate for anything else.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get Ava something.”

“Something good,” Marissa pressed.

“Sure. Something good. Something great, how about that?”

Marissa shook her head and gave me a skeptical look. “I’m not feeling very confident about this.”

“And I’m feeling very annoyed about this.”

“Get changed,” Marissa said almost as if she hadn’t listened to a word I’d said. “We’re going to the mall. I’m going to make sure you don’t mess this up.”

“No way,” I snorted, attempting to move past her again.

Marissa blocked my way, her gaze beyond intense. “Let’s. Go.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

*I’m not looking for this fight today. And a happy Ava is a happy pack, so let’s get this over with.*

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The last place I expected to spend the end of my day was at the mall with Marissa, but here we were.

“The sky’s the limit. Ava likes pretty things. Lingerie, jewelry, things like that. You need to find something on your own, but don’t buy anything until you run it by me first,” Marissa instructed.

“Whatever,” I grumbled.

I was pissed about getting bullied into this—I was an Alpha after all—but I had to choose my battles, and this wasn’t one worth fighting. At least this was forcing me to do something about it, and it wasn’t like I didn’t want to do something nice for Ava, I just didn’t want to be forced into it by some empty capitalistic holiday.

*I’ll just hurry up and get something so I can be done with this and get Marissa off my back.*

I walked past some of the stores, seeing lingerie, pajamas, perfume, jewelry, and everything in between. Marissa might have suggested it, but if I got Ava lingerie, I was certain I’d get punched in the dick.

*Shows how well she knows her best friend. Ava is perfectly capable of buying her own lingerie, she doesn’t need or want me involved in that.*

If I got her cute pajamas, I’d probably get punched in the dick even harder. Ava wasn’t the sentimental type. She didn’t really want things, she wanted actions, which was why this whole shopping for a Valentine’s Day gift thing was a joke. But if Marissa was insisting that I get her something, then maybe Ava had mentioned wanting a gift.

I sighed with frustration as I walked past another store that had heart-shaped candles.

*Ava’s hard to shop for, but if I were shopping for Cali, she’d like anything I got her.*

I tensed. I wasn’t getting Cali anything. Those days were done.

The pain in my head, which had quieted to a dull throb on the car ride over here, grew in intensity until it was a sharp throb.

*I have to get Cali off my mind before my head explodes. Shopping for Ava while thinking about Cali is obviously a really bad idea.*

Trying to shake off any thoughts of Cali, I stumbled into a store and walked around aimlessly for a bit before I realized it was the same store I’d hooked up with Cali in. A flash of memory left me breathless—me getting Cali off with my hand, her scent overwhelming my senses, my lips on her mouth, my tongue tasting hers after so damn long…

I lifted a finger to my temple as the pain reached a fever pitch.

“Fuck, I’m so over this.”

I practically jumped when a store clerk appeared behind me. “Looking for something special? Something that says ‘I love you’? I see guys like you in here all the time, overwhelmed by finding the perfect gift. But don’t worry, I’m happy to help.”

“Umm…”

“It’s okay. I can tell you’re in love and that there’s a special someone. That’s probably why you’re so agitated. You don’t want to disappoint them.”

The woman smiled at me, and I stared back at her, dumbfounded.

“Come on, I know a man head over heels in love when I see one. So, tell me, what’s their name?”

The headache blaring so badly between my temples and behind my eyes that I couldn’t think straight, I blurted out, “Cali.”

I heard a gasp and turned to see Marissa drop everything she had in her hands and bolt out of the store.

**Episode 5111**

*Oh shit!*

My tongue tripped over itself as I scrambled to remember the excuse I’d come up with when I’d been hiding under Kendall’s desk.

*What was it? What was it? Had I even thought of one?*

“Uh… Th-there was a thing, and I um…” I stammered. “I w-wanted to talk to you about…”

Kendall glared at me, crossing her arms over her chest. She could probably smell the bullshit coming off me, but that didn’t stop me from lying my ass off. She knew I’d been in her office, but she still had no idea why.

“I… was looking for you,” I said. “I wanted to update you on Codsworth.”

I smiled, hoping it would make my lie seem more plausible, but my fake cheer only made Kendall more suspicious. She narrowed her eyes at me, and I swallowed past the lump in my throat. Was she about to call me out? Was she seconds away from taking me out, mafia style?

“You do realize it’s Sunday, right?” she asked. “My regular office hours are Monday through Friday.”

She had me there… Or did she?

“Then what are you doing here?” I asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Kendall retorted.

“I had crew practice earlier, and I thought I’d stop by in case you were here,” I said, beginning to feel more confident. “And you are.”

“I *was*,” Kendall said. “But now I’m off to the gym. If you want to speak to me, make an appointment during my regular office hours. Or try using the phone. Text messages are nice, too.”

With one final disdainful look, she turned and started to walk away. But even though I was essentially off the hook, I still felt compelled to talk to her. We had unfinished business. I chased after her, calling her name.

“What about Codsworth?” I asked. “Shouldn’t we talk about him? Figure out what to do?”

“What’s so important that it can’t wait?” Kendall asked.

Her reaction made me forget all about being afraid of getting caught. Codsworth was my friend, and his life was in danger—again. The way she was acting was unacceptable.

“Really?” I asked, miffed. “I thought we were supposed to be working together on this.”

Kendall sighed. “We are. Okay, so what’s happening?”

I filled her in on the conversation I’d had with Codsworth during practice. He was like a dog with a bone, and I was scared he was going to find the answers he was looking for. But I was more scared that it would be the last thing he ever did. If he got too curious, it could be the end of him.

“He’s getting suspicious about the marks again,” I said.

“Okay,” Kendall said, unfazed.

“Okay?” I echoed. “That’s all?”

“I’ll make sure to keep an eye out,” Kendall promised halfheartedly.

This did nothing to make me feel better. It felt like she was just saying whatever she had to in order to get rid of me. Not that I was about to let her get away with that.

“But what if he starts to remember what really happened?” I asked.

Codsworth was a smart guy. Sure, he’d gone down the alien abduction rabbit hole, but it wouldn’t be long before he backtracked and went down another route that brought him closer to the truth. I had to keep him from that truth at all costs, and I hoped that Kendall would help me.

Unfortunately, I’d teamed up with the wrong person.

Kendall’s expression hardened. “For his sake, he’d better not. Thanks for the update.”

With that, she walked away, leaving me feeling as lost as ever—lost and a bit scared, truth be told. I had no idea what to make of our short and somewhat hostile conversation. Instead of being concerned about Codsworth, Kendall sounded ready to take matters into her own hands.

Her ominous tone of voice had the back of my neck breaking out in goosebumps. I hadn’t expected Kendall to know that I’d been in her office, but I wasn’t surprised that she’d figured it out. She was a werewolf, after all. She’d probably me scented the moment she’d walked into her office with that other student.

What I wasn’t sure about was whether or not Kendall had fallen for my excuse. Sure, I was concerned about Codsworth, but that wasn’t the only reason why I wanted to keep an eye on the mysterious counselor.

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The second I got home, Lola ambushed me, eager to hear the details of my covert operation. I wished I could’ve told her that nothing had happened, but I was still feeling a little leery about my conversation with Kendall. We made dinner, and I ate while answering every question Lola threw my way.

“So she didn’t even react? Like, she was just okay with what you said?” she asked.

“She was so…cool about it all,” I said. “Cold, even.”

“That just proves my point,” Lola said around her last bite of lasagna. “Kendall was totally threatening Codsworth. You heard it—she’s clearly planning to bump him off if he remembers anything.”

I sighed. “I really wish you’d stop making assumptions about Kendall. We have no proof that she’s a contract killer. All we know about her is that we don’t know enough about her.”

“Says you,” Lola said. “The woman gives me Patrick Bateman vibes.”

Greyson popped his head into the dining room. “Sorry to interrupt dinner, but can I talk to you, Cali?”

“It’s fine,” Lola said. “She cooked, which means I clean.”

“I cooked, you clean—and you also stop looking into Kendall,” I said sternly.

“Party pooper,” Lola muttered.

I followed Greyson to the study, wondering what was on his mind. My gaze landed on a

bottle of whiskey sitting on his shelf, and I wondered if the one I’d bought him was good enough. What if he had a favorite whiskey that he exclusively bought?

*Worse—what if he* hates *the kind I bought him?*

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m going to Portland tomorrow to see if I can dig up some leads on Kendall and Hans,” Greyson said. “I’m still on decent terms with a lot of the people I used to run with when I was a fighter. A handful of them would definitely associate with someone like Hans.”

“Is this trip going to put you in any kind of danger?” I asked.

I didn’t know much about Greyson’s past—just enough to make me worry that he was going back to it, if only briefly. He’d left it behind for a reason.

He shook his head. “I doubt it. Hans is dead. Besides, all I’m doing is asking a few questions. The more we know, the better.”

“I have to admit, I did a little investigating myself,” I said. “Thanks to Lola.”

“Oh?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah.” I showed him the picture Lola had sent me. “That’s Kendall standing next to Hans, right? I ran into her at school today, and I’m worried that she might do something to Codsworth if he keeps questioning the marks and his memory loss.”

Greyson studied the photo and frowned. “It definitely looks like Kendall. I wish the picture were clearer, so we could be sure.”

“Why do you think Kendall would go to the trouble of disguising herself?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Maybe I’ll find an explanation for that in Portland. Hopefully I’ll find a lot of explanations.”

“Should I go with you?” I asked.

The idea of Greyson putting himself in any kind of danger didn’t sit well with me. I knew he could handle himself, but backup never hurt anyone.

“No, love,” he said, then he smiled. “As much as I’d love to spend the day with you, you don’t need to see the kinds of places I’ll be visiting on this trip.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He stepped forward and kissed me. “I’m sure. But that doesn’t mean that I won’t be thinking about you the whole time. Thinking about you and missing you.”

I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him slowly. “Oh yeah? So, how *much* are you going to miss me?”

“Why don’t I show you?”

He picked me up and put me on the edge of his desk, wrapping my legs around his waist before leaning into me. Greyson grew harder by the second, and I sighed as he rubbed himself against me. Thoughts of Kendall and Codsworth flew out of my head. All I could focus on was Greyson, and how much I wanted him.

“Please do,” I said, against his lips. “But maybe what I *really* need to do is give you something to remember me by.”

“How intriguing, love,” Greyson said, kissing his way down my neck.

With a naughty smile on my lips, I brought my hands to his pants and began to lower his zipper.

He groaned as I slid one hand into his boxer briefs and began to stroke him, then his pants dropped to the floor. Greyson’s breaths filled the room as his cock throbbed in my hand. He peeled his shirt off, then yanked mine off too before he pushed me back onto his desk. Wanting to do more than just touch him, I slipped off the desk and got down on my knees.

**Episode 5112**

**Greyson**

A feeling of pure love washed over me as Cali took me to heaven with her mouth.

I stroked her cheek as she worked her lips over me, struggling to stay quiet—the last thing we needed was a group of curious Redwoods snickering on the other side of the door.

But I still chanted her name like a prayer.

She sighed too, then doubled her efforts until I reached my breaking point. As much as I would’ve loved to have experienced ecstasy in her mouth, I wanted more. I wanted all of her.

Thoughts of proposing to Cali swept into my mind as I lifted her back onto my desk. Her eyes were hazy with passion, and I could smell the lust coming off her. It only made me want her more. I wanted to make her my wife. I wanted our connection to run even deeper than the bond fate had in mind.

“Greyson!” she said, gasping.

Cali covered her mouth with her hand as I went down on her. Her taste, her smell, her sound, the very essence of her… She invaded every facet of my being. The more I had of her, the more I wanted—it was like I had this all-consuming need to possess her.

My hands held her thighs open as my tongue rendered her speechless.

“Please don’t stop. Don’t stop,” she said with a sigh, her hands sliding into my hair.

She held my mouth where she needed it most, and I relished the feeling of her coming against my face, on my tongue. The thought that we had the rest of our lives to give each other pleasure was almost intoxicating.

I kissed Cali deeply, then joined her on top of my desk. She sighed my name as our bodies came together, and then we held each other for what felt like an eternity, just basking in each other’s love.

My thighs began to move of their own volition, bringing us more pleasure with every thrust. Cali held on to me, her nails scratching my back lightly every time I hit the right spot. Her gasping breaths drove me wild, and I had to temper my need for her to keep from unleashing too much of my inner beast. The study was filled with the sounds of her moans.

“Greyson, oh my god!”

Cali convulsed in my arms as her climax took control of her body. Feeling her clench around me sent me over the edge. We fell into bliss together, then lay on the desk until the cold wood became uncomfortable. I kissed her shoulder.

“How about round two in my room?” I offered.

Cali smacked my arm, but I didn’t miss the wicked gleam in her eyes.

“How about we just try to get out of here without doing the walk of shame?” she suggested.

“Deal,” I said.

We stifled uncontrollable giggles as we picked up our scattered clothes, only putting on enough to avoid a scandal, then dashed off to my room without getting caught.

As I watched her butt wiggle in front of me, I thought about the list of reasons that my mother had mentions. I still couldn’t come up with a list that didn’t factor in my own insecurities, but I realized that I didn’t need a list of reasons to want to marry Cali. I loved her more than anything, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

*Shouldn’t that be enough?*

The moment we got to my room, we tossed our clothes aside and took off the rest before diving into bed. Cali and I kissed each other into oblivion, making up for the cuddles we hadn’t been able to have downstairs. I leaned over and kissed her until she was breathless, pressing against her so that she knew without a doubt that I always wanted her.

“I love you,” I said.

She wrapped me up in her arms. “I love you too.”

Happier than I had any right to be, I lay back and hugged her close as she rested her head on my chest. I wished that moment could last forever. I knew I’d never top it.

We lay in bed quietly as we both let our minds drift to the world that existed beyond our bed. I thought about my upcoming trip and knew that whatever I found out in Portland wouldn’t change the way I felt about Cali. It wouldn’t change the fact that I wanted to be with her forever.

Cali fell asleep before I did, and her soothing breaths finally lulled me into my own slumber.

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The next morning, I slipped out of bed and tiptoed around the room quietly to avoid waking Cali. I wanted to take advantage of what little extra time I had to take a long, invigorating run. It would be the perfect way to clear my head and come up with a plan for what I hoped to accomplish in Portland.

As I stepped out of the house and shifted, I thought about the list of contacts I still had back in Portland and decided who I’d reach out to first. Hopefully, I’d find someone who could tell me more about Kendall’s involvement with Hans.

I ran for miles, pulling the fresh air deep into my lungs and enjoying the burn in my legs. By the time I got back to the pack house, I was drenched in sweat and felt amazing. I put my clothes back on and found Cali in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee. She had that just-rolled-out-of-bed look that made me want to carry her back upstairs and pick up where we’d left off the night before.

“Good morning,” she said, giving me a quick once over. “Are you still planning on going to Portland?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, a little thrown. “Why would I have changed my mind?”

Cali reached for me. “I suppose I just hoped that you would. I’m still not crazy about the idea of this trip. Now I’m wondering if it’s too late for me to get you to change your plans.”

One part of me was instantly convinced to change my mind, and I pulled out of her grasp before my lower half’s influence spread. I knew if I let her try, she would tempt me into tossing my plans out the window.

“No can do, love,” I said. “But very nice try.”

“Fine. But promise me you’ll stay in touch,” she said. “Keep me up to date on how your investigation’s going, and tell me if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I appreciate that,” he said. “But the best thing we can do is make sure that Kendall doesn’t find out that I’m looking into her. And that means you need to stop doing poking around until I get back.”

Though she didn’t like it, Cali nodded. “All right, I won’t dig anymore. And I’ll make sure to tell Lola to stop, too.”

“Thanks, love,” I said.

I gave her a quick kiss, poured myself a cup of tea, then dashed upstairs to get ready. The tea burned a path down my throat, but I was running late. I showered as quickly as I could, indulging myself by thinking of how I would propose to Cali.

*When would I do it?*

*Where would I do it?*

*What would it be like?*

*Would she love it?*

Once I was out of the shower, I packed a bag, grabbing what I’d need if I had to stay in Portland for a few days. My plan, however, was to get all the intel I needed by the end of that same day. Spending too much time in my old haunts was liable to lead to trouble. Best if I got in and out fast.

Bag in hand, I went downstairs to speak to Rishika. While I was away, she’d be the de facto pack leader, as usual.

“I should be back in a day,” I told her, “but in case I need to delay, I just want to make sure you have everything you need.”

“Things have been quiet lately,” she said. “But is there anything I should know?”

“Things are quiet,” I conceded, “but even if they weren’t, I’d still trust you to take charge for me. You can handle it. Just call me if anything turns up that might pose a threat.”

“I can do that,” Rishika promised.

Just then, Torin rushed into the room, looking frazzled. “Oh good! I’m glad you haven’t left yet. Cali told me that you’re going to Portland, so I packed you lunch.”

He handed me a large bag that was heavy enough to contain enough food to feed an army. I thanked him, but he lingered like there was something else he wanted to say.

I raised a brow. “Is there something else?”

“Actually, yes,” he admitted. “I heard about this fancy Vietnamese cinnamon that would be great for baking, but I can’t find it here. Think you can get some for me in Portland? I’m sure they have it everywhere.”

“If I have time, I’ll bring you a batch,” I said. Then I frowned. “Or a stick, or whatever unit of measurement is the right one.”

“Great!” Torin said.

Cali was waiting for me at the door. She’d gotten dressed, but she still looked good enough to drag back to bed. She leaned up to kiss me.

“I’ll be waiting for you to come back,” she said.

“Music to my ears,” I said. “I’ll be counting the seconds until I can get back to you.”

I kissed her again, drawing in her scent. The thought of getting to come back home to her only motivated me to get this done faster.

After tearing myself away from her yet again, I walked to my car and turned back to see her waving from the porch. This was absolute perfection. The woman I loved was waiting for me, my pack was in good hands, and I had everything I could ever have hoped for.

After I blew Cali a kiss goodbye, I drove off and focused on my mission. Was I really about to find the key to solving the mystery that was Kendall?

**Episode 5113**

**Xavier**

I cursed the rays of sunlight as they started streaming in through the windows. Instead of waking up feeling refreshed and headache free, I felt like I’d spent the night drinking.

Not only had my headache kept me up, but worrying about its effects had made it even worse.

Apart from being a painful nuisance, my headaches were causing me problems that I couldn’t afford. They were interfering with my role as Alpha, my relationship with Ava, and my ability to think straight.

I remembered the incident at the mall and groaned.

It didn’t take a genius to realize that I’d fucked up royally by mentioning Cali’s name to the jeweler instead of Ava’s. That little slip of the tongue wouldn’t have mattered much if Marissa hadn’t been there to witness it. Not wanting it to turn into something major, I’d tried to convince her that it had been an honest mistake.

Marissa had given me the silent treatment.

As frustrating as it was, I knew why she’d refused to speak to me. Marissa and Ava were so tight, it would’ve taken a crowbar to pry them apart. In Marissa’s eyes, my slip was tantamount to cheating on Ava.

While I was happy that Ava had such a close friend, I was starting to wonder if maybe they were too close. Marissa had a habit of sticking her nose into my business and justified crossing the line into insubordination by saying she had Ava’s back.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Marissa was single-handedly making things worse for me. I’d made a stupid mistake, and she seemed very willing to hold it against me. My headache got even worse when I realized I was going to have to find out if she was planning to tell Ava.

When we’d gone to bed the night before, Ava had seemed fine, which meant Marissa still hadn’t dropped the news on her. But my grace period was quickly running out. Ava was out on her morning run, and I knew that it was only a matter of time before she and Marissa got to talking.

I rubbed my temple. Waiting for Marissa to tattle to Ava had me feeling like I had a gun pressed to my head. Eventually, it was going to go off.

I considered taking more painkillers, but I was convinced that they wouldn’t be able to do much for me. As much as I hated to admit it, maybe I *did* need that upcoming appointment with Carlson Greene. With my head threatening to split open, I was willing to be more open minded when it came to treatment. The sooner my head stopped trying to kill me, the better.

Unable to do much about it at the moment, I decided to focus on the other growing pain in my life: Marissa. I got dressed and made my way downstairs. I was sick of constantly watching myself around her, like she was some kind of relationship KGB agent. I was her fucking Alpha, and she was going to listen to me.

I didn’t find Marissa downstairs, and I decided to check for her outside before she could run into Ava after her run. Before I reached the door, though, I heard Milo and Knox arguing.

*What is it with these two?*

I found them snarling at each other in the living room. They looked seconds away from coming to blows, and they didn’t hear me when I first called their names.

“I said shut the fuck up! Now!” I yelled. “What the fuck is the problem?”

They both pointed at each other.

“He’s the problem!” Milo said.

“No, he is,” Knox snarled.

The jackhammer in my head pounded away until all I could hear was the sound of my blood pulsing through the veins on my forehead. Milo and Knox’s bullshit little war was making me seriously question my decision to become Alpha.

“Stop behaving like children!” I barked, then I turned to Knox. “Let’s hear it.”

Knox huffed. “I gave Milo a simple task, and he’s refusing to do it.”

“What kind of task?” I asked.

“A stupid one,” Milo interjected.

“I told him to scrub the bathroom floor,” Knox said.

“With a toothbrush!” Milo said. “Who uses a toothbrush to clean a bathroom floor? It’s stupid!”

“You just have a problem with authority!” Knox retorted.

“You *have* no authority here!” Milo fired back.

They went back to arguing, which only added to my agitation. I had a long list of things to worry about, and had no inclination to deal with their asinine problems. It was time to settle this, once and for all.

I slammed my fist into the wall. “Stop! If you don’t stop arguing like children, I’ll give you both a task that will break you. Keep testing me and find out what I have in mind.”

They simmered down, but kept glaring at each other like they were waiting to go at it again. Fuming, I grabbed Knox’s shirt and turned to Milo.

“Wait here,” I snapped.

I dragged Knox out of the house and let him go so suddenly that he nearly lost his footing. He straightened his shirt and looked at me like he was ready to argue his point some more.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

Knox looked taken aback. “What do you mean? I’m just doing what you told me to.”

“When the fuck did I tell you to make Milo scrub the bathroom floor with a toothbrush?” I asked.

“What?” He shrugged. “It needed cleaning.”

I groaned. “We have routines for cleaning the bathroom. When I asked you to help Milo adjust to the pack by working with him, I wasn’t asking you to assign him ridiculous grunt work like you’re some b-movie drill sergeant. Give him something useful to do—something that will show him how best to work within this pack. Capitalize on his strengths and shore up his weaknesses.”

“How am I even supposed to find out what they are?” Knox asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said sarcastically. “Have you thought about maybe just asking him?”

Knox’s face fell. “No.”

“Start there,” I said. I turned to leave, but then I stopped. “One more thing—stop being a dick.”

Knox glared at me but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

In an even worse mood than before, I stormed back inside and found Milo waiting for me. It wasn’t his fault that Knox was power-tripping, but that didn’t make my head hurt any less.

“Knox got a little confused about how things are meant to work here,” I said. “Things should be a lot smoother now.”

“We’ll see,” Milo said darkly.

I left the living room, questioning my decision not to take any painkillers. At that point, I was willing to settle for the placebo effect—anything to ease the horrendous pain.

*And speaking of pain…*

The pain in my ass strolled into the kitchen as I was pouring myself a large cup of coffee. Marissa glared at me, but said nothing as she reached for the coffee pot. I pulled it out of her reach, unwilling to bless her with its perfectly brewed goodness until she dropped the bratty act.

“Not until you talk to me,” I said.

“What?” she asked, exasperated as ever.

“I want to know if you’re planning to tell Ava what happened at the mall yesterday,” I said.

Marissa kept her lips sealed as she stared at the coffee. The message was obvious—she wasn’t going to speak until she had her java. With a sigh, I handed her the pot. She poured some into a mug, took a tentative sip, then looked up at me as she continued to say nothing.

My already thin patience was wearing even thinner. I clenched my teeth, then flinched as my head throbbed along with the muscle in my jaw.

“Why did you say it?” Marissa finally asked.

I’d asked myself the same question at least a thousand times.

“It was an honest mistake,” I said.

She scoffed. “That doesn’t explain it. There was nothing honest about it.”

“I don’t care what you think it was,” I said. “You—”

“There has to be a reason why you said Cali’s name instead of Ava’s,” she continued. “It makes me wonder how committed you are to her.”

I gritted my teeth. “I love Ava. That’s why I’m here. If I weren’t committed to her, I wouldn’t be.”

“Are you sure?” Marissa asked. “Or are you just telling yourself that to make yourself feel better?”

The urge to rip her throat out was edging toward being too tempting to resist. For now, I contented myself with glaring at her—and letting her know that I wasn’t going to be taking her shit for much longer. It was time for me to pull rank and remind her who was really in charge.

“I need to know what you’re planning to do,” I said. “Are you going to tell Ava or not?”

Marissa sipped her coffee. “I haven’t yet—but as her friend, I think I should. Of course, whether or not I tell Ava is entirely up to you.”

*What the hell does that mean?* I wondered.

But before I got the chance to ask her, blinding pain shot through my head. Ava walked into the kitchen, a curious look on her face.

“Tell me what?” she asked.

**Episode 5114**

With Greyson gone, I went back upstairs to get ready for the rest of my day. As I got dressed, however, all I could think about was him. I really wished he hadn’t decided to go to Portland. His whole plan to use his old contacts to get information on Kendall seemed too risky to me.

*He’ll be fine,* I told myself.

Once I was dressed. I went downstairs to grab a bite to eat. I thought of the giant lunch Torin had made for Greyson and wondered if he would eat it all at once or ration it throughout the day.

*What if he has to stay for longer than a day?*

Greyson could take care of himself. He was strong, he was smart, and he was more than capable of handling whatever came his way. I had no doubts about his ability to stay safe. But I was seriously troubled by the thought of what Hans and the mafia could do if they found out about him.

*Hans is dead.*

Greyson had told me time and again that Hans was out of the picture, but I wasn’t one hundred percent convinced. Nobody knew how Hans had died, and we hadn’t seen any proof of it. Given what the man did for a living, I doubted he’d died peacefully in his sleep. Guys like Hans rarely died of natural causes.

Not unless a hail of gunfire could be considered natural.

As I spread jam on my toast, I realized that the only thing I could do was trust Greyson to be smart and keep his wits about him while he was in Portland. He knew what he was doing and would make sure to stay out of anything that looked even remotely like trouble.

Still, Greyson would’ve been safer if he’d just taken me along. He was strong and he was smart, but he was also a lot more dangerous when I was by his side with my magic. I would’ve been able to handle one set of mafiosos while he handled another—

“Earth to Cali,” Lola called, startling me out of my thoughts. “You back? Awesome. I asked you if Greyson said anything about Kendall.”

I have myself a little shake, returning to reality. “Actually, Greyson’s going to Portland specifically to look into Kendall,” I said. “He said he used to know people who probably ran in the same circles as her.”

“The plot thickens,” Lola said thoughtfully. “I wonder if they ever crossed paths, back in the day. I can’t wait to do some more snooping.”

“Or not,” I said. “Greyson specifically told me to stop digging for now—and he made a point of asking me to tell you to stop as well.”

“Seriously?” Lola asked. “We just got started! What if we’re on the verge of something?”

“Yeah, on the verge of getting caught red handed,” I said. “Oh wait, I already was. The only reason why Kendall didn’t drag me out from under her desk was to keep that other student from getting too curious. I’m not going back there again.”

I wasn’t about to test my luck a second time. Kendall had been downright cold about Codsworth, who knew nothing about her. What would she have done to someone who was actually on to her?

“It’d be a mistake to stop now,” Lola insisted. “Maybe we can find something that will help Greyson. This is a team effort.”

It was obvious that I wasn’t getting through to her. She was on a sleuthing kick, and she wasn’t going to stop until one or both of us got in trouble.

I grabbed Lola by the shoulders.

“What part of ‘stop’ do you not understand?” I asked. “The best thing we can do for Greyson is to do nothing at all. We have to stay out of his way. Let him find out what he can, and then we can figure out what to do. Okay, Lola?”

She shook me off and rolled her eyes. “Whoa, relax. I was just, you know, speculating. No need to get all stressed out about it.”

“Yeah, well, maybe we shouldn’t speculate, either,” I said. “We don’t know enough of the facts yet, and taking wild guesses only makes me anxious.”

Lola sighed. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll do my best to drop it… For now.”

“And I’ll do my best to shake it out of you when you start up again,” I joked, pulling her in for a hug.

She laughed and hugged me back. While she clearly wasn’t completely convinced, I could at least take comfort in the fact that Lola wasn’t going to start stalking Kendall. The last thing I wanted was to get into an argument with her. I was worried enough already.

“So, do you really think that Kendall bought your bullshit explanation about why you were in her office?” Lola asked, swiping a piece of my toast.

“It wasn’t bullshit,” I retorted. “I’d like to see you come up with better after getting ambushed like I was. And you know what? I basically just told Kendall the truth. Sort of. At least about Codsworth. I really am worried about him. What if he remembers?”

“If he remembers, it’ll be lights out for him,” Lola said. “Simple.”

I frowned. “That isn’t funny.”

“Trust me, I’m not trying to be funny,” Lola said. “You might not like the reminder, but werewolves have been known to kill for less. If Codsworth starts talking about werewolves, then he’ll be putting himself in all kinds of danger.”

I let her words marinate for a minute before I thought of counterarguments. Sure, Codsworth was looking into what had happened to him, but his theories were so off the wall that even the loonies on the internet probably thought he was crazy. Maybe he wouldn’t get himself into as much danger as Lola thought he would.

“Even if he does start to look into werewolves,” I said, “who would believe him?”

Lola shrugged. “Maybe nobody. But werewolves can’t afford to be reckless about any potential threats. If Codsworth talks to enough people or causes enough of a stink, then that’s more than enough reason to take him out.”

I shuddered. Like it or not, Codsworth really was playing with fire. He was risking his life, and he had no idea. I wished his memories had stayed buried—for his sake, and for the sake of anyone who ended up listening to him.

“Damn it. Why didn’t he just drop it like he said he would?” I muttered.

“Hey, don’t sweat it too much,” Lola said. “Maybe he won’t even remember anything useful. I bet he’ll give up, then go back to hunting down Bigfoot.”

I smiled. “That would be perfect.”

“Maybe we could get him started by leaving him a clue or two,” Lola suggested.

“Wait, what?” I asked. “What kinds of clues?”

Lola was having one of her “brilliant” moments and was dragging me along with her.

“What if we leave fake Bigfoot footprints for Codsworth to find?” she said. “We can leave them around his car, or his dorm. Not too many, just enough to get him to hike through the woods. Oh! And then out in the woods, we can—”

“Lola, no. Stop,” I said. “I don’t want to screw Codsworth up for life by giving him false hope. He just needs to stop looking into werewolves. That’s it.”

Lola shrugged. “Fine. I was just putting it out there.”

“Well, you can put it right back,” I said. “Put it back, bury it, and burn the map. We’re not leading Codsworth on a wild Bigfoot chase. He’s been through enough.”

“I said okay,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “He can learn to be a normie.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“So, what have you got going on today?” she asked. “Don’t you have classes?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said, then frowned. “Oh, but first, I have to get to an appointment with Carlson Greene and Xavier.”

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “With Xavier? You’re both going? Why? You’re not the one who needs counseling. And honestly, I think Xavier’s too far gone to benefit from counseling.”

Lola’s reaction didn’t surprise me in the slightest. She still had issues with the way that Xavier had treated me, under Adéluce. She’d probably never forgive him.

“He talked to me about this a while back,” I said. “I agreed to go with him—I can’t just change my mind. Besides, this might actually help him.”

“Uh-huh…” Lola said dubiously. “And how does Greyson feel about this? Think he’d be as stoked as you are about helping Xavier?”

I bit my lip. “Actually, I didn’t tell Greyson about this.”

“And why’s that?” Lola asked.

“I forgot,” I admitted. “It wasn’t the first thing on my mind.”

*Should I have told him?*

The appointment with Xavier didn’t seem like that big a deal to me, but I also didn’t want to make it seem like I was hiding it. I considered sending Greyson a quick text about it, but immediately dismissed the idea. He was on his way to Portland—I didn’t want him to be distracted. Shoot.

Then again, if I kept it to myself, I’d feel guilty. I hated keeping any kind of secret from Greyson.

*Ugh. What should I do?*

I let Lola in on my internal conundrum, and she laid out my options with brutal simplicity.

“You have two choices,” she said. “Either go to the session and then tell Greyson about it later, or…just don’t go.”

“That easy, huh?” I asked, rolling my eyes.

“Easy? No. Simple? Yes,” Lola said. “So, what’s it gonna be?”

**Episode 5115**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s eyes narrowed slightly as my question hung in the air. She knew as well as I did that I had the upper hand. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place. and I was there to benefit from her struggle.

My eyes tracked her movement as she stood up and walked to one of the windows. She was dragging this out and testing what was left of my patience. If she wasn’t willing to play, then I’d just leave. Well, I’d find a way to leave.

“What’s it going to be?” I asked. “Force me to stay here and probably get killed, or let me leave to find Kadmos?”

Celeste sighed, clearly not used to being put in this kind of position. She turned to face me, the difficulty of the situation etched onto her face.

“I don’t want our last remaining link to Kadmos to disappear,” she admitted.

“‘Disappear’ is a funny way of putting it,” I said. “If I stay here, I’ll be killed.”

“If you leave, there’s no guarantee that you’ll survive,” Celeste said. “And I highly doubt that you’ll find your father, considering how likely it is that he’s already dead.”

I gritted my teeth. “You have no proof that he’s dead. And when it comes to my long term survival, I *highly doubt* that you can guarantee it if I stay here.”

“What if I could protect you?” Celeste asked.

I scoffed. “It’s a little late for that. I’ve already proven that I’m the one best suited to protecting myself. Besides that, it’s obvious that you have someone feeding the Order information about me.”

Celeste waved off my accusation like it was a trivial matter. What were a few death threats in the grand scheme of things?

“I have people here I know I can trust. I can tell them to keep you safe,” she said. “And I intend to find out who betrayed me. I assure you, they will pay dearly.”

She stared at me as I mulled over her words. It was time for me to consider my own less than appealing options.

“I want you to stay here,” Celeste added. “Not just because you’re the rightful heir, but because you’re also our last link to Kadmos. As such, you’re also the Dark Fae’s last hope to end this war.”

*No pressure…*

“Think about this as selflessly as you can,” Celeste added. “Think of what will happen if this war continues to drag on. This war is bigger than you, or me, or even Kadmos. It’s beyond time for it to end, and you’re our only way to make that happen.”

Her words struck a chord deep within me. I still wasn’t comfortable with the idea of being an heir, but I couldn’t ignore the reality of what the war had done—and what it would continue to do. I’d lived through it. My family had been torn apart because of it. How many more people had to suffer?

Tapping into the angel of my better nature, I nodded.

“Fine, I’ll stay,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t come to regret my decision.

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A few hours later, I was already partially regretting my decision. My ass was numb, and if I was forced to sit still for much longer, I was going to lose my mind.

I put down the book I’d been trying to read for the last hour and rubbed at my eyes. If I read any more about proper etiquette or about my long dead ancestors, I was going to tear my hair out. I was so sick of this. Why would anyone want to spend so much time sitting on their butts reading about what spoon to use and when?

I’d spent the majority of my life using my mind as well as my body. Being cooped up in a stuffy old library for hours on end was insufferable. I had to get out. I had to get some air before I forgot what the outside world felt like.

Eager to feel a good burn in my muscles, I slipped out of the library and made my way out into one of the courtyards. On the way, I stopped by the guards’ chambers and grabbed a few weapons to train with.

I snorted. These were the guards Celeste expected me to trust with my life, and they weren’t even capable of keeping their weapons secure. How would they possibly stand their ground against an enemy sent my way?

*Best to keep my guard up and my skills sharp.*

It didn’t take long for the sweat to start pouring down my back and face. I trained using both my magic and the weapons I’d stolen. It felt good to hold weapons again. The weight and the feel of them as I sliced through the air reminded me of happier times.

I smiled as I remembered all the time I’d spent training with Cali and Rishika. My heart ached. I missed them both so much. It made me wonder how long it would take for Marius to reach Cali and bring her to the Fae world.

As I reminisced, I swung my sword, attacking imaginary enemies before they could strike. The sound of clapping made me whirl around. My chest heaved as I stared at an unfamiliar face.

An older woman wearing a sharp uniform was clapping as she watched me from the arched doorway. She stepped out into the courtyard, and I cautiously lowered the sword. I wasn’t sure if she was friend or foe, and I didn’t intend to let my guard down until I had an answer.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Can I see that sword?”

I reluctantly handed it over, and noted that she handled the weapon like she’d trained with it her whole life. She smiled.

“You stole this from the guards,” she said.

It wasn’t a question.

I shrugged. “I prefer to think of it as borrowing without permission.”

The woman laughed. “Well said. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Artemis. I’m General Magan, and I’ve been assigned to protect you.”

As if to demonstrate her qualifications, General Magan swung the sword deftly through the air, blocking several unseen strikes. She flipped it around, then handed it back to me hilt first.

“Though I will say, it looks like you can take care of yourself,” she said, smiling.

I tried to take the sword back, but General Magan didn’t release it. Instead, her eyes issued a challenge that I could hardly resist.

“Perhaps you’d care to demonstrate your skills against an actual opponent?” she asked.

She’d barely finished speaking when she released my sword and drew hers. Within seconds, we were sparring—and matching each other stroke for stroke.

It had been a long time since I’d sparred with someone at her level—and it was obvious that the general hadn’t sparred with anyone like me in a long time, either. Our breathing was labored as we danced around the courtyard, steel clashing against steel as we both fought for the upper hand.

“You fight a lot like your father,” General Magan said.

I lowered my sword, surprised that she’d mentioned him. So far, my father had seemed like some kind of legendary figure who everyone knew about, but few had had the chance to meet—and even fewer were willing to discuss.

“You knew my father?” I asked.

General Magan lunged, resting the tip of her blade against my chest. If we’d been fighting for real, she’d have killed me.

“That was foolish,” General Magan admonished. “Never let your guard down in the middle of a fight. *Never*. You should know better.”

Shit, I should’ve. I parried her blade sharply, knocking it away from my torso. “Lesson learned.”

She sheathed her sword with a single fluid movement. “I was a newly enlisted guard when I was assigned to Kadmos’s guard unit.”

“I see,” I said.

“Kadmos was a courageous leader and an outstanding swordsman,” Magan continued. “It’s a shame that he never managed to end the war. Still, you should be proud. Your father was a good man. Few can claim such a noble heritage.”

I had a million questions, but I didn’t get the chance to ask a single one. Celeste stepped out into the courtyard, and it didn’t look like she was there to make idle chit chat.

“General Magan, could you please excuse us?” she asked. “There are a few things I’d like to discuss with Artemis.”

“As you wish,” General Magan said, bowing slightly.

She took her leave, and Celeste watched her go before she turned back to me with an approving look on her face.

“I’m pleased to see that you’re using your time wisely,” she said. “It’s good that you’re honing your combat skills. You’ll need them soon enough.”

“Is that so?” I asked. “I thought you’d be upset that I wasn’t hunched over a book, memorizing fork formations and the names of dead relatives.”

“That is of the utmost importance,” she said, “but there are more pressing matters at hand. Matters that require a different skill set. The books will help you prepare for court, but there are other things you must do to prove yourself as the heir the Dark Fae need—and the heir they’ll respect.”

“What things?” I asked.

“The tests are varied,” Celeste admitted. “But you will be asked to prove your strength, courage, and skills as a warrior. Each test will be more difficult than the last.”

*What else is new?* I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

“Of course, just *how* difficult will depend entirely on how much you’re willing to train beforehand,” Celeste said, not missing a beat. “So, are you up to the challenge?”

**Episode 5116**

**Xavier**

I looked from Ava’s expectant expression to Marissa’s pissed-off one. I didn’t have the first fucking clue what to say.

*Why the hell did Ava have to come in at this exact moment? Seriously, how the fuck do I keep ending up with the worst damn luck?*

It wasn’t like I could lie my way out of this, either—not with Marissa standing there, glaring daggers at me and ready to blurt out the whole ugly truth, no doubt with an even uglier spin on it. Plus, I really hated the fact that I even felt the need to lie. But I’d been backed into a corner—first by Marissa, and now by Ava. The incident at the jeweler’s had been an accident. It hadn’t even been a conscious decision—not that Marissa or Ava would ever believe that. It had been a slip of the tongue. Nothing more. Did I really have to defend that to Ava?

Hurting her was the very last thing I wanted, and I was pretty damn sure that she’d be hurt if she learned that I’d said Cali’s name in response to being asked who I was in love with. I hoped Marissa understood that, and that her desire to protect Ava extended beyond her need to screw me over every chance she got.

“Tell me what?” Ava pressed.

I glanced at Marissa, praying she’d throw me a lifeline. Of course, judging by her expression, that prayer went unanswered. *Fuck.* It was probably time to just tell the truth. Ava would be hurt and furious, no doubt, but it’d probably be better to come clean now than for her to find out the truth later through Marissa. Hearing that from someone else… That’d be much, much worse.

*Thanks for nothing, Marissa.*

I pulled in a deep breath and turned to Ava. “I was in the mall, and—”

Ava held up a hand. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

My brows shot up. “Seriously?”

This was too good to be true. I couldn’t quite believe it, even though I really, really wanted to. Was Ava really going to let me off the hook so easily? I glanced at Marissa, who was clearly fuming. Any second now, steam would start pouring out of her ears.

“Something tells me that whatever it is you want to say, it would be better to air it in Carlson Greene’s office,” Ava said.

My relief dissipated. I wasn’t getting off easy after all. She wanted me to spill the tea in therapy, of all places.

Marissa shook her head. “Ava, you should let Xavier tell—”

“Enough!” Ava snapped. “I don’t care.” She turned to me. “Isn’t that the reason why we’re going? To work things out? To help you overcome whatever it is you’ve got to overcome so that we can continue to enjoy each other and work for a future together free of discomfort?”

*What version of Ava am I talking to, here?* She was making total sense, but her calm, rational response seemed completely at odds with our earlier conversation. Still, if it meant denying Marissa the verbal ass whooping she was obviously hoping to witness, I’d take it.

I turned to Marissa, unable to hide my smug smile. “You heard her.”

Her glare bored into me, and it didn’t take a mind reader to know what she was thinking. *You’d better not screw things up, asshole.*

But that was just the thing she seemed unwilling to understand—I never *planned* to screw anything up. It just happened.

A few minutes later, Ava and I were in the car, heading toward Bend, and Carlson Greene’s office. Ava hadn’t said a single word to me since we’d left the kitchen, and the silence was becoming increasingly awkward. Clearly, Ava wasn’t feeling quite as philosophical about this as she’d seemed, earlier.

*Am I making the right decision here?* Maybe Marissa was right—not that I’d ever admit that. Maybe I should just tell Ava the truth now and get it over with. Prepare for the backlash, apologize, comfort her, and move on—no therapist required.

As uncomfortable as it would be, it sounded a hell of a lot better than opening up this can of worms in therapy. The only thing holding me back was the fucking headache I couldn’t seem to get rid of. It was a constant reminder that all was not well, no matter how much I wanted to pretend otherwise. A reminder that even if I *did* tell her about the jewelry store, we’d still be a long way from resolving everything. After all, if what had happened in the jewelry store was a simple slip of the tongue, then it was a symptom of a much bigger, much more complex issue.

Ava wasn’t wrong to want me to do something about it. She wasn’t wrong to want this issue resolved, and, if I were being honest, I knew she deserved better than to be with someone caught between mates like I was. I knew all of this. I understood it, and I did want to find a solution.

But did the solution have to be Carlson fucking Greene? And did I really have to fess up to what had happened in front of that guy? He probably meant well, but all the good will in the world couldn’t change the fact that I couldn’t fucking stand the guy.

I’d always been guarded when it came to my feelings—thank you, Silas—and Carlson Greene of all people wasn’t going to get me to open up like a broken dam.

I glanced at Ava. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Why? Are you having second thoughts?”

 I shrugged. “I’m not exactly Carlson Greene’s number one fan.”

She sighed. “Do you want to fix things or not, Xavier? Would you *like* to walk around with a headache for the rest of your life? It’s up to you.”

“Of course I want to stop the headaches,” I said with a groan.

She shrugged. “Then the solution is simple. We go to the counseling session. If you know a better way to resolve this, I’m all ears.”

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. If I’d known a better way to fix things, we damn well wouldn’t have been in this car heading to Bend.

I hesitated. “So, um… I should probably tell you what happened at the mall. Why Marissa was so upset.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Ava said. “Whatever it is, save it for the session.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

*Well, she can’t say I didn’t try.*

Unfortunately, we still had a long drive ahead of us, and I wasn’t willing to spend the whole ride in silence, so I tried to lift the mood.

“Knox and Milo are still at each other’s throats,” I said. I filled her in on the latest issue between the two of them. “It’s fucking maddening. I’m beginning to think this whole thing is a lost cause.”

She shook her head. “It’s not. We just need to keep at it until they get tired of fighting each other. Your plan is a good one. You just have to make sure Knox doesn’t get carried away.”

“Easier said than done. You remember the shit he pulled when he was trying to become Alpha?” I glanced at her meaningfully.

She raised a brow. “You think I could forget?”

“I’m just saying,” I said with a shrug. “The guy is prone to getting carried away.”

Ava laughed, and I felt some of the tension between my shoulders release. Things with Ava weren’t so terrible, if I could still get her to laugh. My head still hurt, but the edge of my headache had dulled a bit. Hopefully this upcoming session wouldn’t ruin all that progress.

How was this supposed to work, anyway? Would we be facing each other? Would Greene be our intermediary?

I remembered suddenly that when the idea of a group session had first come up, Carlson had wanted both Ava and Cali to come. I thought it was a terrible idea. Like, an epically bad idea. In fact, I’d never even told Ava that Carlson had suggested it. I’d only told her that Carlson wanted her to come do a couples session with me.

Cali had been a little reluctant when I’d brought it up to her—and understandably so. At this point, she probably didn’t want to get drawn into my problems any more than was absolutely necessary. It was definitely a good thing that I’d never followed through and set anything up for Cali and me. Dealing with Ava would be more than enough. Doing it all over again with Cali—or worse, with Cali *and* Ava—was too awful to even imagine.

After what felt like an eternity, we reached Carlson’s office. The building was located in a crowded area of town, and it took a few minutes for me to find a parking space.

Ava reached for the door handle, and I stopped her.

“Hey. Thank you for coming,” I said.

She leaned in and kissed me. “Let’s get those headaches to stop for good.”

“Deal.”

We headed inside, but with every step that brought me close to the lobby, my headache only worsened. By the time we stepped into the waiting room, I felt like a railroad spike was being driven through my skull.

And then, when my gaze landed on Cali, sitting in the waiting room, I understood why.

Ava jerked to a stop beside me. “What is *she* doing here?”

**Episode 5117**

My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when Xavier walked into Carlson Greene’s waiting room—with Ava.

I turned to Xavier, aghast. “What’s Ava doing here?”

This, as it turned out, was the wrong thing to say.

Ava rounded on Xavier with a snarl, her entire face twisted with fury. “Did you set this up? How could you invite me when you knew she was going to be here? What the fuck, Xavier?”

For once, Ava and I were in agreement. *What the fuck, indeed.*

However, for his part, Xavier looked as confused and shocked as I felt. He looked from my face to Ava’s, his eyes wide. “I didn’t have anything to do with this!” He winced, gripping his head as he turned back to look at me. “What are you doing here? How did you know about the appointment?”

It made no difference to how confused and shocked and hurt I felt to see Ava here, but I did believe Xavier. He was just as surprised by this turn of events as Ava and me.

“I… I think there’s been some kind of misunderstanding,” I said.

Ava snorted. “You think?”

I did my best to ignore her—even though a fresh rush of irritation was already lifting my blood pressure. We both looked at Xavier, expecting him to come up with a solution. He’d invited both of us to come to therapy with him, right? If I was here, and Ava was here, I could safely assume that even if he’d never intended for us to come at the same time, he still wanted to talk things through with both of us. So, what was he going to do?

Xavier winced again, looking around the waiting room like a solution would magically appear. I wished I could comfort him, but I was pretty sure that if I so much as moved an inch closer to Xavier, Ava would rip my throat out.

*Can’t she stop being a bitch long enough to realize Xavier’s hurting? She’s only thinking about herself. This isn’t just about her. Xavier needs help.*

That was why *I* was here: to help Xavier.

When it became clear that Xavier didn’t have any answers, Ava turned on her heel and stared down her nose at me. “Cali, you should leave. You’re not wanted here.”

Irritation lashed at my stomach, but before I could let out the choice words that rushed to the tip of my tongue, the door to Carlson’s office opened, and the therapist himself stepped out.

“Xavier Evers, Ava Reed, Caliana Hart,” he said. “Thank you all for coming today. I’m so glad you could make it. This should be fun.”

Ava scowled. “I don’t see what’s fun about this. Can someone please explain to me why Cali is here?”

Carlson gave Xavier a pointed look. “Didn’t you inform these ladies that this is a group session?”

“I didn’t realize that group meant the entire group,” Xavier mumbled. Then he turned to me. “How did you even know about this appointment?”

I glanced at the therapist, who was watching us with obvious interest. “Um, Carlson invited me. I thought you knew.”

“Obviously none of us knew,” Ava cut in. “So you can go—”

“Excuse me,” Carlson interrupted. “Why don’t we sort this out in my office?”

He gestured for the three of us to enter, but I stayed right where I was.

“If Xavier would rather not have me here…” I began.

“We really should take advantage of this situation, don’t you think?” Carlson said. “You’re all here, after all. Let’s try and help Xavier, shall we?”

There was no arguing with him after that, and I followed Xavier and Ava into the office, wishing more than anything that I’d fled when I’d had the chance.

*I should’ve bolted the moment Xavier and Ava walked in.*

I definitely regretted coming here. I wanted to help Xavier, but I also wanted to slap the selfishness out of Ava, and that didn’t exactly seem like the ideal headspace for a joint therapy session.

*Seriously, how can she be so rude and short-sighted and hateful and…and…so* Ava*?*

Really, I shouldn’t have expected better. Ava probably didn’t know how to be anything but an awful harpy. She probably wasn’t capable of being nice to me, even if she wanted to.

I hung back, barely standing inside the office as Carlson rearranged the furniture to accommodate all three of us. Ava clung to Xavier’s side like a barnacle, flashing angry glares at me every so often. I had no intention of going anywhere near them until the seating arrangements were sorted. I didn’t want to chance accidentally taking Ava’s intended seat and losing a limb.

In the end, Carlson arranged things so that Xavier was sandwiched in between two empty seats, clearly for Ava and me. He probably thought it was the wisest approach, but, if anything, it was only a stark reminder of that actual issue. I shot Xavier a sympathetic look as I perched on the empty seat next to him. He looked like he was in the throes of a truly awful headache.

Carlson sat in a large armchair, crossed his legs, opened a notebook, and started flipping through the pages. The silence was deafening, and the tension was so thick I felt like it was going to slip down my throat and choke me. The room felt like it was on an explosive pressure plate—one wrong move and we’d all be blown to pieces.

Carlson seemed to find what he was looking for. He cleared his throat and looked up at us with a smile. “So, why are we here?”

“Seriously?” Ava snapped. “Why the fuck do you think we’re here?”

His smile didn’t dim in the slightest. “Ava, you seem to have some anger. Do you think you can talk about that in a meaningful way?”

I gulped. *Oh boy. Famous last words…*

Ava leaned around Xavier to spear me with a fresh glare. “*She*”—Ava jabbed a finger in my direction—“shouldn’t be here.”

Carlson scribbled something down in his notebook and turned to me. “How do you respond to that, Cali?”

My magic simmered deep inside me, ready to go at the slightest provocation. *I think smacking Ava with my shield would feel really damn good right now.* I kept that to myself.

“I came here to help Xavier,” I said simply.

The therapist turned to Xavier. “And what do you say to that?”

Xavier rubbed his forehead with a wince. “I think you know why I’m here.”

I could tell from the clench of his jaw it was taking everything he had not to tear Carlson to pieces.

“Well, I’d like to hear you say it,” Carlson said. “And maybe Ava and Cali need to hear it from you too.”

Xavier sighed. “I get headaches whenever I’m near either of you.”

“Do you know why?” Carlson asked.

“Because Cali is always around!” Ava snapped. “She refuses to leave him alone.”

I sat forward in my seat. “That’s not true!”

“Then why are you here?” Ava spat. “You could’ve stayed home, but you didn’t. You just couldn’t resist, could you? Any chance to sink your claws into Xavier!”

*Bitch, I’m not the one with claws here!*

I pulled in a deep breath and turned to Carlson. “Are you just going to sit there and let her talk to me like that?”

Carlson gave me that same vague smile. “I think it’s good for us to talk freely here. Sometimes we need to vent, and sometimes we need to be vented at to truly understand what the other person is thinking.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what Ava feels,” I said. “All she’s done since she walked in the door is vent at me.”

Carlson held up his hands. “Let’s turn our thoughts to Xavier. Xavier, is there something you’d like to say to Cali?”

Xavier gave Carlson a murderous glare.

“Okay, then is there something you’d like to say to Ava?” he pressed.

All the therapist got was another murderous glare.

“Xavier, allow me to remind you that words are the key, here,” Carlson said calmly. “You need to express your feelings and emotions with words. So which words come to mind?”

“You don’t want to know,” Xavier growled.

“I disagree. I think everyone would benefit from hearing your feelings,” Carlson said.

“This is ridiculous,” Ava said. “Nobody wants to talk in front of Cali. I’m Xavier’s mate. That’s all that matters.”

I scoffed. “You seem to be forgetting that I’m *also* Xavier’s mate.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Ava snarled. “He’s here with me.”

Her eyes flashed, her pupils shifting into something lupine.

My magic surged. *Ava had better not push me. Because I’m not afraid to push back. I’m not taking any more of her shit.*

I stood. “Stop trying to start a fight, Ava.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Ava hissed.

She started to shift. I summoned my sword and shield to defend myself, moments before Ava lunged.

**Episode 5118**

**Greyson**

It was good to be back in Portland. I loved leading the Redwood pack, and being with Cali, and the life I’d built, but there was just something about Portland. It had a special place in my heart, and I wished I could’ve been here under different circumstances. I’d have far preferred a repeat of the time I’d brought Cali here. We could’ve used another romantic, sexy weekend together—that definitely would’ve been better than my coming here alone to dig around in the dark corners of the supernatural criminal underworld.

*It’s still possible that the connection between Hans and Kendall can be easily explained,* I told myself.Or, better yet, maybe there was no connection at all, and the whole thing was one big misunderstanding. God, I hoped that was the case—but something in my gut told me that was wishful thinking.

*Speaking of wishes*… *I definitely wish I had a better plan than to just show up and ask around.*

But since I didn’t really know where to begin, that was the only move I had up my sleeve. Guys like Hans had their dirty hands in just about everything. If there was a connection to be found, I’d find it. Eventually.

My first stop was the seedy dive bar I’d come to when I was a young Rogue looking for my first fight. As I pushed through the door, my brows rose in surprise. This place hadn’t changed a bit. It looked exactly the same. Some of the faces seated around the bar even looked the same. They were even taking up the same barstools, like they were pieces on display at a museum.

I looked around the dark bar, casually counting the number of patrons and sizing them up. Yeah, this was pretty much the last place I’d ever want to visit with Cali. It was a good thing she hadn’t come with me—though I honestly felt a little envious of her right now. I didn’t want to be here either.

But *here* was my best chance to get a lead on Hans. So here I was.

I slid up to the bar, and the bartender approached from the other end.

“I’ll take a beer,” I said. “Whatever you have on draft is fine.”

The bartender did a double take, then he gasped. “Evers?”

I grinned. “Hey, Tommy.”

He gave me a toothless grin. “Long time! You here to make a comeback?”

He feigned a few punches at me, and I played along, ducking out of reach with a chuckle.

I shook my head. “Actually, I’m looking for information.”

Immediately, Tommy’s demeanor changed. Became wary. Almost shrewd. “Why? You in some kind of trouble?”

I flashed him an easy smile. “Always.” I chuckled again and casually glanced around the bar. “Tommy, do you know anything about a guy named Hans?”

I was careful to be as casual as possible as I posed the question—like it was a thought that had come up in passing, and I didn’t really care what the answer would be. But there was no missing the shift in the bartender’s demeanor. It reminded me of a turtle withdrawing into its shell as a predator approached.

Tommy shook his head with a grimace. “If it’s all the same to you, Greyson, I’d rather not talk about that.”

I’d expected to encounter some resistance. I’d planned for it, at least.

I reached into my wallet and pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill. “Benjamin here would rather you do talk about it,” I said. “It’s kind of important.”

The bartender eyed the bill and shook his head. “You know you don’t need to bribe me.” He still scooped up the bill and slid it into his pocket, though. I hid my triumphant smile as he leaned in, lowering his voice. “What do you want to know?”

*Oh, everything.* I shrugged. “What can you tell me about Hans?”

“I don’t know much, only that if you wanna stay nice and healthy, you’ll drop these questions and head back where you came from.”

I frowned. “Why? The guy’s dead.”

“And that should tell you everything you need to know.”

Tommy made to retreat behind the bar, but I caught his arm, keeping him in place.

“But that’s the thing,” I said, “I need to know more than that.”

He jerked his arm out of my grip, looking more and more uncomfortable with every passing second. “The guy you’re asking about? He never came around here. He was too big for that, too important. But he liked the fights. He always brought a good-looking woman along—sometimes a blonde, sometimes a redhead, always stunning. He liked to show ’em off. But you shouldn’t be getting mixed up with him. He’s a bad dude.”

“*Was* a bad dude,” I corrected him. “Besides, I’m not looking to get mixed up in anything. I have nothing to do with him.”

“You keep asking about him and you *will* get mixed up in it, whether the guy is dead or not.”

I nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.” It was looking like I’d have to drop by some of the underground fight clubs if I wanted some better leads. “Well, thank—”

“Don’t thank me,” Tommy said, shaking his head. “The guy you want never came around here, but I do know someone who can help you.” He scribbled something on the back of a receipt and slipped it over to me. “Ask for Lonnie. And good luck—you’re gonna need it.”

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Later, I found myself standing in front of the address written on the receipt. Tommy had sent me to the plain, unmarked front door of a crumbling building. It was a door I knew well, though it had been a long time since I’d been here. Unlike the dive bar, this place had definitely changed—and not for the better. The way it looked now, I was more worried about the place collapsing on me than I was about finding anything dangerous inside.

I tried the door first. It was locked, and, to my surprise, the handle didn’t crumble when I tried to wrench it open. I tried to peer through the window, but it was so thick with grime that it might as well have been part of the wall. No luck there.

I blew out a breath, straightened, then pounded on the door. Maybe there were people inside this dilapidated shithole after all.

Moments later, the door opened to reveal the burliest, meanest-looking bouncer I’d ever seen.

He eyed me suspiciously. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to see Lonnie.”

The guy seemed to mull this over for a minute. I kept my poker face on, but inside I was wondering what the hell I was supposed to do if this guy didn’t let me in. This was the best and only lead on Hans I possessed.

*I guess if he doesn’t let me in, I can always come back later and try to break in? Or wait out here for this Lonnie guy to come out…*

Fortunately, I was spared the trouble of having to come up with a plan B. The guy stepped aside to let me in, and the moment I walked through the door, he frisked me with all the finesse of a wooden mallet. As rough as the treatment was, I’d expected it—it was standard for illegal fight clubs.

Once the bouncer had finished feeling me up, he nodded and pointed me toward the fighting ring. I headed down the narrow set of stairs that led to the small arena. The sounds of cheers, boos, and fists smacking against bare skin got louder and louder as I approached. They were the sounds of a fight club, and more memories came rushing back with every step that carried me closer to the ring.

*I can’t believe I’m back here.*

A fight was in progress in the main ring, and I sat back to watch, waiting until Lonnie— that’s the name everyone was chanting—won the match with an impressive knockout. Just the man I needed to talk to. I cut through the crowd to speak to him.

“Lonnie,” I called. “I’m Greyson Evers. That was one hell of a match up there.”

Lonnie wiped blood from his nose. “I’ve heard about you. You’ve got quite the reputation around here. I’ll see you around.” He started to push past me, and I stepped in his path.

“I’ve never heard of you,” I said. “But then again, I’ve been out of the fights for a while.”

Lonnie glared at me for a moment before he burst out laughing. He held out his hand for me to shake, and I took it.

“What can I do for you, Greyson Evers?”

“I’m looking for information about a guy who died recently. Name was Hans.” I fished out the picture of Hans and Kendall.

Lonnie eyed the picture with disinterest. “Yeah, I heard Hans was history. How’s Greta taking it?”

“Greta?”

Lonnie pointed a thick finger at the image of Kendall. “Hans’s girlfriend. Or she was. At least, one of his girlfriends.”

“Do you know Greta?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not really. She fights here sometimes, but I haven’t seen her around in a while. You should try asking for her at some of the other clubs.”

I stared down at the image of Kendall/Greta. *Who is she really?*

“Thanks, Lonnie,” I said. “It was good to meet you.”

I headed outside, my mind swirling with new information, but then a trio of burly guys stepped into my path.

The biggest one stared me down. “Why are you asking about Hans?”

**Episode 5119**

I braced myself, my sword and shield at the ready, as Ava lunged toward me. We’d always known that this fight would happen eventually, and, despite the circumstances, I was glad it was happening now. I’d never been better equipped to beat Ava’s rude ass.

Carlson jumped up from his chair and snapped his fingers. Suddenly, my magic fizzled out and my sword and shield disappeared. I stared at him, jaw agape. He’d just left me defenseless against a raging werewolf!

But then, before she could make contact with me, Ava shifted back to human. She looked just as shocked as I felt.

“What the hell?” Ava demanded.

I was wondering the same thing. I couldn’t reach the well of magic inside me anymore. It was like I’d been cut off from it. I’d only ever met one person with the ability to do something like that—Dani’s sister, Tabitha. While Dani’s abilities amplified magic, Tabitha’s negated it.

Was Carlson like Tabitha in that way?

“Do you negate magic?” I asked him. He seemed human, but maybe he wasn’t.

He nodded. “As I’m sure Ava can attest, I’m able to negate all supernatural powers, but I never reveal my trade secrets. Either way, it’s a very handy tool in my line of work, especially when emotions are running high. It levels the playing field, so to speak.” Carlson gave Ava and me pointed looks. I bit back a retort.

*He shouldn’t look at me like that. Ava was the one who started this. She was the one who attacked me. I was just protecting myself.*

Okay… Maybe that wasn’t entirely true. I’d been looking for an opportunity to kick Ava’s ass for a long, long time now. But still! I wasn’t the aggressor here! Ava constantly had it out for me, and now was no exception.

I slumped back down into my seat. Xavier grabbed his coat off the back of his chair and draped it over Ava to afford her some modesty, since she’d been stupid enough to go full wolf and tear all her clothes. I looked away, but not to give Ava privacy. I just hated seeing them doing all the little things that couples did for each other—that Xavier and Ava did for each other.

The things Xavier used to do for me.

*What the hell is wrong with you? Why the hell did I even come here? This was a bad idea from the get-go. It doesn’t matter that he’s my mate too, not right now… I should’ve just stayed home. Or brought Greyson.*

I’d come because I wanted to help Xavier, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that I didn’t belong here. Ava was right about that, at least. Tears burned at the corners of my eyes, and I held them back with all my might. All I wanted to do was cry, but I’d die before I gave Ava the satisfaction of crying in front of her. I had to stay strong for my own sake.

Carlson held out a box of tissues, and I took one without saying anything. Then he turned his attention to all three of us.

“I think that was a positive development,” he said. “It allowed you to release your anger. Don’t you feel so much better now?”

*Not even a little bit.* I eyed Ava, who still looked like she’d skin me alive, given five minutes alone and a sharp knife. Her anger was definitely nowhere near “released.” She hated me, and I was just used to it at this point.

“I think we should use the rest of our session to explore two things,” Carlson continued. “Where those emotions came from, and how we can all learn to handle them in a more constructive way. Now, are we ready to continue?”

Ava and Xavier took their seats again, and an awkward, embarrassed silence set in as we all waited for Carlson to continue with his spiel. I stole a glance at Xavier.

*How is he dealing with all of this?* It couldn’t be easy. At minimum, I had to imagine he hadn’t expected to witness a would-be death match between his two mates. As frustrated as I’d been when he’d shown up here with Ava, I believed his claim that he hadn’t known I was coming. This was a messy, ugly situation that none of us had planned for, and Xavier was caught in the middle of it in more ways than one. That couldn’t be easy.

Guilt nagged at my stomach. *Why do I always let Ava get to me? I make it so easy for her.*

I really wanted Xavier to get better—that was why I was here—but this was already torture. Seeing Ava and Xavier holding hands, seeing her wearing his coat, knowing they were living together as mates, as Alpha and Luna… It gutted me.

*Does this mean he’s chosen Ava? Is he going to spend the rest of his life with her?*

I shook myself.

*Focus on the session, Cali—and stop being so selfish. You’re here for Xavier, remember? To help him. And, by extension, to help all of us.*

Carlson slammed his notebook shut with a snap, jarring the three of us.

“How do we feel about some role-playing?” he asked.

Xavier shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. “Um, what exactly does that mean? Do you want us to pretend we’re superheroes or some shit like that?”

Carlson shook his head. “Not quite. There’s nothing wrong with that sort of role-play, but I’m suggesting something a bit more specific to our situation. Since it seems there are *layers* of miscommunication going on here, it might help if you take on each other’s roles.”

I gasped, and Ava did too. Xavier just looked confused.

“You want me to pretend I’m you?” he asked.

Carlson laughed. “I was thinking it might be more beneficial to have Cali pretend to be Xavier and talk to Ava, and then have Ava pretend to be Xavier and talk to Cali.” He eyed Ava and I in turn. “What do you say?”

All three of us shot to our feet as one.

“No!” we said in unison.

I looked over at Ava in shock. She did a double take as well. It was still weird as hell to agree with her about anything, even if we were just agreeing about how much we didn’t want to role-play.

“Relax, guys,” Carlson said. “It’s just an exercise, and I really do think it will help. Why not at least give it a try?” He turned to me. “You’re Xavier. Why don’t you explain to Ava why she should trust you?”

I gulped. “Why do I have to go first? I’d much rather just be myself.”

Ava looked equally displeased by the concept.

“This might not be the best time,” Xavier began, but Carlson shook his head.

“No, it’s the perfect time. Emotions are running high—why not jump into the fire and see what burns?”

*Well, I definitely don’t like* that *phrasing…*

“Cali, just dig deep and give it a shot,” Carlson said.

I stared out the window, wondering if I could escape through it.

“It would be better to face Ava,” Carlson said. “But try to look at her through Xavier’s eyes.”

*How do I even do that?*

I took a deep breath and forced myself to turn to Ava. On the way, I caught Xavier’s regretful expression, but I couldn’t think about that. The sooner I played my part, the sooner we could get out of here, right?

I met Ava’s cold eyes and then, in as deep a voice as I could muster, I said, “I’m Xavier, and you need to trust me.”

Ava raised a brow. “That’s the best you’ve got?” She turned to Carlson. “This isn’t going to work. What else have you got in your bag of tricks?”

“You both need to try harder,” he said. “Ava, keep an open mind, and Cali, you don’t actually have to try to sound like Xavier. But I do want you to try to think like him, to feel what he must feel.”

I took another deep breath. I knew Xavier better than just about anyone. I could do this. I just had to put all my own thoughts and prejudices about Ava to the side—just like Xavier had done. In fact, much as I hated to admit it, it really did seem like he’d forgiven her for the horrors of their past. It seemed like he was trying to build a future with her. The thought made my heart ache, but I couldn’t think about that now. I was pretending to be Xavier, right? So I had to try to see Ava through his eyes.

I met Ava’s eyes again. “Do you know what it’s like to have two mates?”

Ava rolled her eyes and started to say something, then stopped herself short. “I don’t. Why don’t you tell me?”

My eyes widened. *Is Ava actually going to play along? Could this actually work?*

**Episode 5120**

**Greyson**

*Well, shit.*

I backed away from the menacing trio of guys, just to get some space, but after three steps, I hit a wall.

*This is fan-fucking-tastic.*

I’d known this could happen when I’d started poking around about Hans, but I hadn’t expected pushback so soon… I’d been stupid enough to believe I hadn’t already earned myself an ass kicking, just for sticking my nose where it didn’t belong.

I put my hands up. “Hey, guys. I appreciate the macho act, but I’m not sure it's any of your business who I ask about. You’d be better off not making it your business, okay? So why don’t you just move along, and we can pretend this never happened?”

I wasn’t a hundred percent sure, but my instinct was that these three guys were just run-of-the-mill humans. Beefy, strong humans who probably knew how to throw a hell of a punch, but humans nonetheless. And if that were the case, I had nothing to worry about. I could take the three of them with no issue. Still, Hans had been a member of the Dark Fae mafia, and I’d run into plenty of supernaturals who had the ability to mask their scents and abilities. Still, the odds seemed in my favor.

One of the guys sneered at me. “And why the hell would we do that?”

*Don’t say I didn’t warn you*.

I didn’t even give him time to blink before I threw my full weight into a sucker punch, driving my fist into the guy’s abdomen. The breath whooshed out of his lungs, and he dropped like a sack of rocks. Just like I knew he would.

The remaining two guys looked horrified to see their companion on the ground. Clearly, they weren’t used to getting their asses handed to them. However, they recovered quickly enough.

“You shouldn’t have done that!” one of them snarled, before charging toward me.

I bent my knees and let the guy charge right into me, wrapping my arms around him when he made contact and then whipping him into the second guy like a club before releasing him and slamming him into the wall. He collapsed to the ground in a heap of limbs.

Pain flared up my shoulder, and I turned around just in time to avoid taking the next slash in my gut. Fortunately, the knife wasn’t silver, but the cut had still hurt like a bitch, even though it had healed quickly. I caught my attacker’s wrist and snapped it like a twig.

The guy screamed, and the knife clattered to the ground. But I wasn’t done yet. I kept hold of his ruined wrist and grabbed the back of his neck, slamming him headfirst into the wall. The impact either knocked him out or killed him; I wasn’t sure which, and I didn’t have time to figure it out because the guy who’d first attacked me had recovered, and his tackle caught me by surprise. I faltered just slightly before pushing back against him. We grappled on the ground for a moment before the guy was suddenly lifted off me and slammed into the wall. He dropped to the ground, unconscious, and I jumped to my feet.

*What the—*

“Kendall?” My eyes widened. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

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I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry as sandpaper. My head was pulsing with every heartbeat. It felt like someone had tried to run my skull through a rock crusher. *What the…*

It took a few attempts to get my dry eyes open. It felt like they’d been glued shut, and once I did manage to open them, the brightness made me slam them shut again. After a few minutes, I was able to keep them open long enough to see that I was sitting in the driver’s seat of my car, which was parked and turned off. I’d been slumped in the driver’s seat, my face pressed against the window, if the smear of drool on it was any indication.

I tried to sit up, and the world spun. The pounding in my head crescendoed as I fumbled for the steering wheel to steady myself. And my head wasn’t the only thing in pain.

*Fuck. What the hell happened?*

I figured I’d either been beaten to hell or drugged. Possibly both. But who…

I looked around, expecting to see the familiar woods of the Redwood territory and the pack house through the windows. Instead, I found myself on a city street—one I recognized. This street was in Portland. *I* was in Portland.

My memories came rushing back. *That’s right… I came to Portland looking for information on Hans.*

But had I found it? My recollection of reaching the city was hazy at best. With clumsy fingers, I fished around in my pocket. The picture I’d taken from Cali was still there.

*What the hell?*

I knew I was supposed to be here. But why was I waking up in my car? I checked the time and let out a curse. I should’ve arrived in Portland hours ago. What the hell had I been doing for the last few hours? This whole thing was fishy, and suspect as hell. I checked my phone again. No messages. Nothing to indicate what might’ve happened.

Maybe the best way forward was to follow the plan and see if any answers revealed themselves along the way.

It took an embarrassingly long time to unpack myself from the car. At first, I felt weak and clumsy as a newborn kitten. Once I was out of the car and standing upright, I noticed that my coat was torn.

*When the hell did that happen? Did I get mugged or something?*

No, that was really unlikely. I still had my phone, my car keys, and my wallet—complete with credit cards and cash. Plus, I was a fucking Alpha werewolf who could beat the shit out of anyone who tried to threaten me.

Though it honestly didn’t feel that way right about now.

*If I was attacked, how did I end up back in my own car?* I took a moment to get my bearings. *Maybe I should call Cali.*

But what would I even tell her? I’d come to Portland and immediately blacked out? That would just make her worry, and I’d meant it when I’d told her I didn’t want her getting involved in this.

I’d decided to start by checking out the old dive bar, right? I could still do that.

I headed down the street, a little unsteady on my feet, but the cold air helped revive me.

I bit back a smirk as I entered the dive bar. The place hadn’t changed a bit. Even the bartender was the same. It was like no time at all had passed since I’d lived in Portland and dominated the underground fighting circuit.

The bartender frowned as he saw me approach. “Evers? What the fuck are you doing here?”

I paused. That was *not* quite the warm welcome I’d been hoping for. Shit. Maybe it would be harder to get information out of Tommy than I’d thought.

“Well, hello to you too,” I said.

Tommy grabbed me and pulled me into the back room. “Why the hell did you come back here? I told you to stay away.”

I frowned and searched my memory. The last time I’d seen Tommy, all those years ago, we’d been on good terms. “I think maybe you have me confused for someone else? It’s been a long time, sure, but I thought things were pretty friendly—”

“Are you shitting me right now?” he snapped. “Don’t act like you weren’t just here a few hours ago, asking about you know who. Did you find Lonnie, like I told you to?”

I blinked. “Who’s Lonnie?”

Tommy eyed me, not with anger but with suspicion. He leaned in and gave me a sniff. “I don’t smell booze on you… You take any drugs?”

“No. Why would I?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Tommy demanded. “When you came in earlier, your clothes weren’t beaten to shit like this. Did you get rolled or something?”

Realization—along with a hefty dose of panic—was beginning to set in. “None of what you’re saying is making any sense. I haven’t been to this bar in years. And who the hell is Lonnie?”

Tommy sighed and fished around in a box before pulling out a T-shirt with the bar’s logo. “Get cleaned up in the bathroom and then we can talk. I’ll be at the bar.”

I pulled off my torn coat and noticed the blood on my shirt for the first time. One whiff told me some of it wasn’t mine. *How the hell did that get there?*

I went to the bathroom and pulled off my torn, bloody shirt, then checked myself for cuts and bruises. If I’d had any, they’d already healed. I splashed some cold water on my face and then reached for the shirt Tommy had given me. I stopped short when I caught a glimpse of my shoulder in the mirror.

*Is that a trick of the light, or do I have some kind of bug bite?*

I leaned in closer to examine it.

*What the fuck? It’s the same mark that Codsworth and the others have… But how did I end up with it? What the hell happened to me?*