**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 40**

**Episodes 5121–5200**

**Episode 5121**

**Xavier**

Ava turned to Cali. “Why don’t you tell me—what is it like having two mates?”

Cali’s eyes went wide, and I sat, tense, feeling like a coiled spring as I waited for her response. Carlson Greene’s office was always too stuffy and too warm, but now it felt especially thick, and though Ava’s voice was measured, I worried that she was going to lash out, maybe even attack Cali.

I shot a quick glance at Carlson, glad at least that he was here to prevent anyone from losing their cool and shifting or using their magic on anyone else. He had taken away everyone’s supernatural power at the start of the session, and while normally I wouldn’t be cool with anyone trying to control my inner wolf, I had decided to let Carlson give his method a try—that was the only reason I was still sitting here in his office.

That said, there was a limit to how much I was willing to take, and I could feel myself growing closer to that limit every moment.

I pushed a hand through my hair, feeling tension spiraling up the back of my neck. I wished this whole group therapy thing had never happened. I didn’t know what the actual point was supposed to be, but the only thing we’d been able to accomplish so far was to piss everyone off—and that included me. And the fact that my head still pounded was not a good sign.

Cali glanced over at me.

*You don’t have to answer that*, I told her through the mind link. *This whole thing was a big mistake.*

Then I realized I wasn’t communicating with her.

I looked over at Ava. *We don’t have to sit through this torture*, I told her, but again, there was nothing. It was like speaking to a brick wall.

I looked at Carlson—when he had blocked our supernatural powers that included the mind link. I couldn’t use it in his office.

Great. So all I could do now was wait for Cali’s response to Ava’s question, and that felt like it was taking forever.

Looking back over at Ava, I could see that her usually lithe body was tense, and her eyes were fixed on Cali. The tension in the air felt thick as fog.

“Is this really helping anyone?” I asked, trying to intervene.

Ava’s gaze slid to me. “Are you afraid of what she’s going to say?”

I ground my teeth.

“Because I want to hear what Cali has to say,” Ava went on, ignoring my reaction. “I’m sure we *all* want to hear what Cali has to say.”

“I suggest that we give Cali a chance to answer the question,” Carlson said mildly. He looked at Cali. “Cali, would you like to answer?”

Cali looked uneasily between Ava and me. I figured this wasn’t easy for her either. She shouldn’t have to do any of this—even though she was doing it for me. Ava was doing it for me, too. They were both here because of me—because they wanted to help me.

Finally, Cali cleared her throat. “It’s very difficult—to feel pulled between two mates. So yes, I know exactly what Xavier’s going through.”

The silence sat heavy in the room before Carlson spoke again. “Remember, Cali, you are to answer as Xavier, not as yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. I knew this was all bullshit, though I had to admit there was a part of me that was slightly curious to hear Cali’s version of me. She was right—if anyone understood what I was going through with her and Ava, it was Cali. Sometimes I felt like she knew me better than I knew myself.

“Sorry, right,” Cali said, shaking her head. “Okay. Um, I guess I constantly feel guilty because I can’t help how I feel, and I can’t just turn off my feelings toward one of my mates. There’s no switch I can just flip. There’s no way of controlling my emotions about them. And—if I’m being honest—there are times when I’m happy being with just one of them. But then I find myself missing the other one. And it hurts more because I know that no matter what I do—no matter who I turn to—I will always be causing pain. Either by being with one or the other. Or by making the one I am with wonder if I’m thinking of someone else. And I know that sucks, but that’s what it’s like. And it’s just hell.” Her voice cracked, and she wiped a tear from her eye.

I stared at her, shocked. I was overwhelmed. She had managed to put so much of what I was feeling into words in a way I never could. The way she talked about the constant push and pull, the impossible struggle to keep both of my mates from hurting, but knowing I was always failing someone. The knowledge that whatever I did, it was never going to be enough.

Carlson reached out and put a comforting hand on Cali’s wrist. “Thank you. That was very brave of you.” Then he turned to look at Ava. “Now that you’ve heard Xavier’s side of the situation, what do you say to that?”

Ava was quiet for a moment, then she took a deep breath, like she was about to dive into a lake. “I understand that it’s hard on you—I’ve never forgotten that. But that’s mostly because you never *let* me forget it. You say you understand what it’s like, but do you? I mean, sure, it’s a shitty hand we’ve been dealt, but have you ever considered what it’s been like for me? We spend so much time on you, and not a lot of time thinking about it from my perspective. I always feel like I’m about to lose—or like I’ve already lost, but just don’t know it yet.” Her blue eyes flashed. “One of the main differences between you and me, Xavier, is that I’ve always been certain about you. I not only accept you as my one and only mate, but I want you and *only* you. You’re all I’ve ever wanted. That’s been true for as long as I can remember. I’ve never loved anyone else.”

I could hear the pain in Ava’s voice, and the sound pierced my heart.

“But no matter how many times I tell you that, it just doesn’t seem to matter—”

“Ava,” I said quietly, reaching for her hands, “that’s not true.”

She pulled back, out of my reach, like my hands would burn her if they touched her. I curled my hands into fists. Pain was radiating off her, and I was lost. I had no idea what to do. It was bad enough I was sitting here, forced to listen to my two mates talk about me in front of each other, but to add Carlson fucking Greene to the situation made it unbearable.

I swallowed hard, wishing I could crawl out of my skin.

Carlson nodded somberly. “Thank you, Ava, for those honest words.” He turned to me. “What do you have to say to that?”

“What?” I asked him. I looked at him in confusion, like he was speaking a different language.

“Did Cali capture some of what you’re experiencing with two mates?”

I pressed my fingers to my temples as my headache throbbed, flaring up again. “Yeah, I guess,” I grunted. “She got some of it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is there *more* she didn’t touch on? Perhaps you’d like to share what you’re going through.”

Both Ava and Cali turned to look at me. I could feel their eyes on me. Cali’s wide brown ones, filled with question, and Ava’s deep blue ones, filled with pain. The sight of both of them looking at me made me deeply uneasy. The idea of trying to talk to both of them at the same time did *not* seem like the right move. It felt like the best way to compound the problems we were already talking about. If I opened up to Cali, whatever I said was bound to hurt Ava. And if I spoke openly to Ava, I was going to say something that would hurt Cali. There was no way I could please both of them.

Pain arced up my temples, and I realized I was clenching my jaw so tightly I was making the headache—already agonizing—that much worse. The pounding was relentless, making my pulse pound in my ears. I tried to take a breath, but it felt like the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. I was barely thinking as I got hurriedly to my feet. I couldn’t do this—I couldn’t bear this for one more fucking second.

“Xavier, where are you—” Carlson Greene began, but I shook my head.

“*Fuck this*,” I snapped, turning for the door. “I’m done.”

And with that I wrenched the door open and stormed out, leaving the therapy session—and my mates—behind.

**Episode 5122**

The door of Carlson Greene’s office didn’t slam—he must have had one of those safety doors installed where they slowly *whooshed* shut—but Xavier’s sudden and angry departure left a thudding vacuum of silence behind him. We all sat in it. It felt surreal, like we were all wondering whether it had really happened. Ava and I—at least—didn’t look at each other, though Carlson was looking between us curiously.

My instinct was to run after Xavier, and I had to force myself to stay still. I could see how much he’d been affected by what we had talked about, and I knew that talking about personal things like his feelings was hard for him.

I was surprised that Ava hadn’t gotten up to follow him out, but when I finally looked over at her I was even more surprised. Instead of looking angry—Ava’s default setting—she just looked disappointed. I had been expecting her to be more accusatory, maybe even blaming me for driving Xavier away, but instead she just looked really sad.

She passed a hand over her eyes, looking suddenly tired. “Has he ever talked to you about what he’s been going through?” she asked. She wasn’t looking at me, but I knew the question was directed at me.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, taken aback by the question. “I guess he’s tried, but it’s never been easy,” I admitted.

Ava smiled, but the expression looked sad. “I keep trying to get him to talk about it—about anything really—but he rarely says more than a few words before he just shuts down.” She sighed. “I just thought maybe you might have gotten something out of him.”

I stared at her for a moment, struck by how similar her story was to mine. We were the same, really—both so affected by Xavier. Both wanting to help in any way we could. And here I was, thinking all this time that Ava’s number one priority was Ava. I’d always allowed myself to believe that Ava’s pursuit of Xavier was ruthless, that it was take-no-prisoners. That she wanted him as some kind of prize. Like a trophy to pull out whenever she wanted to hurt me, to shove in my face. But I’d heard what she’d said about him, about how much she loved him. Maybe I’d been wrong about her. Was it possible that she cared for him in the same way that I did?

“Ladies?” Carlson Greene interrupted my thoughts and I turned to him.

“What?” I asked. “I’m sorry, did you ask something? I wasn’t paying attention.”

He gave me a small smile. “That’s quite all right. This turned into quite a charged session. I suspected that would be the case, but I think it might have been for the best. Sometimes it is necessary to get things out into the open, especially when they are painful. I was just asking if either of you had anything more to say?”

“Should I get Xavier?”

I looked at Ava and she looked at me. We had both spoken at the same moment, and we eyed each other in surprise.

“Do you want to get him?” Carlson question.

“Yes.”

Ava and I had spoken in unison again, and we exchanged another look, though this time Ava’s expression was much less surprised and much more threatening. Clearly her window of vulnerability was closing.

Carlson looked at his watch. “Well, there is still time in this session, and I would like to continue this discussion. I believe we were starting to make some progress. Yes, if you would both like to go out after him and speak to him, perhaps you could manage to convince him to finish the session.”

I got to my feet, but Ava stepped in front of me.

“You don’t need to go,” she said firmly.

“What?”  
 Her eyes were cold. “I think you’ve done enough. *I’ll* find Xavier.”

I looked at Ava for a moment, then over at Carlson, who was regarding us evenly. He had told us both to go after Xavier. Shouldn’t he do something—or say something? He was supposed to work as a mediator, wasn’t he?

But Carlson didn’t look inclined to do anything of the sort. In fact, he sat back in his chair, looking curious, as though he was waiting to see how this was going to play out.

I could feel myself growing irritated. I just didn’t get Ava’s sudden mood shift. A moment ago, we’d been speaking the same language—I’d started to think we had made a real breakthrough. But I guessed I’d just misjudged Ava again. As usual, Xavier was just Ava’s to possess.

Though, when I thought about it, I supposed I felt partly responsible for what had just happened. I could see how uncomfortable Xavier had been growing throughout the session, and if I hadn’t opened up about what I thought Xavier was going through—and revealed a lot about myself and how I felt as a *due destini*—Xavier might not have felt so uncomfortable and angry that he stormed out. If I had kept some of that to myself, maybe he would have stayed in the session. So the mess of this session was on my hands, too.

I started toward the door. Ava could be as mad as she wanted, but I wasn’t going to let her dictate what I did. She intimidated the hell out of me, but she wasn’t my mother, and she didn’t get to boss me around.

“I don’t want you going after him,” Ava said, reaching for the door ahead of me.

I stopped and glared up at her. “Did it ever occur to you that I’m only thinking of Xavier?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What are you implying?”

I gritted my teeth. I considered unloading on Ava—telling her all the terrible things I thought about her—but I had just said that I was thinking about Xavier, so I was going to try to keep doing that.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my temper under control. “I’m just worried about Xavier. I’m not implying anything.”

“Bullshit,” Ava snapped. She looked at Carlson who was still sitting in his chair, watching us like a tennis match. “You heard what she said, right?”

“I did,” he agreed.

“So you heard it. She’s saying I’m *not* thinking of Xavier.” Ava gave her head an angry shake as she glowered at me. “Do I need to remind you that Xavier is *my* mate? That I am his *Luna*?” She yanked her shirt off her shoulder, revealing the Luna mark, stark against her light skin. “Look at it,” she commanded, looking over at Carlson.

“Yes, Ava,” Carlson said calmly, “but you should be directing your thoughts and questions to Cali, not to me.”

Ava rounded on me. “Do you need to see it?” she asked, her voice low and icy cold now.

My heart thudded in my chest. I was angry and scared and frustrated. I shook my head. “I don’t need to be reminded.”

“I disagree,” she said dangerously. “Clearly, you do. In fact, I don’t think you know what it means to be a Luna to your mate. But *I* do.” She took a step closer to me. If she meant to intimidate me, it was working, but I managed to hold my ground. “And since this is supposed to be a therapy session and we’re all supposed to have new things to think about, here’s something for you to think about—you need to get it into your head that Xavier Evers is no longer your responsibility.”

*Xavier Evers is no longer your responsibility.*

The words echoed in my head like a ringing shot. I kept hearing them over and over. Other than the racing beat of my heart, there was no other sound than the words ricocheting in my head. Her words hit me hard, but I fought not to show it.

Reaching around her, I grabbed for the doorknob and pulled open the office door. “Thanks for that, Ava, but I really don’t need your advice on anything.”

And with that I pushed past her and out of the office. I rushed through the reception area and burst outside into the February air. The cold hit me like a slap, but I was glad for it, and I took a deep breath, trying to calm my shaking nerves.

Anger was coursing through me, and I clenched my hands, trying to calm down. I couldn’t believe I had let Ava get under my skin like that.

Then I took another breath and looked around, remembering why I had come out here in the first place—to talk to Xavier. I had to come up with a reason to convince him to return to the session. I was drawing a blank on what I could say, but I realized it might not matter, because as I looked around, I realized that he wasn’t there.

**Episode 5123**

**Greyson**

I rubbed my head, which still felt hazy, as though a massage was somehow going to help me remember what the hell had just happened to me. It didn’t help, which wasn’t a surprise. I struggled, trying hard to focus, but everything just felt so fuzzy.

Looking in the spotted mirror over the sink again, I rubbed my fingers over the marks on my shoulder. In the midst of my confusion, the one thing I knew for sure was that these marks were similar to the ones that Codsworth and the others had.

I braced my hands on the sink and leaned forward. “Fuck,” I muttered, frustration making my chest tight. My memory was cloudy as hell, but I didn’t remember having the marks before I’d come to Portland. What the hell was going on? The bartender claimed I’d been in here earlier, but how could that be? I had no memory of it. How could I forget something like that?

Maybe the bartender was wrong. It wasn’t the kind of thing that happened a lot, but maybe the guy had confused me with someone else. Except…if that was the case, then why would someone else—who might have looked like me—have been in here asking about the same guy? This Lonnie guy? Who the hell was Lonnie? Why would I have been asking about someone I didn’t know?

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I turned to look at the mark again. I didn’t know how, but the more I looked at it, the more certain I became that, somehow, it was the key to all of this.

Cali knew about the mark—she had been the one to notice it on Codsworth. Maybe she could help me figure it out.

If nothing else, just hearing her voice would help ground me when I was feeling very, very unsettled.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed her number, but the call went to voicemail after three rings.

“Hey, love, it’s me. Call me when you get this.”

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and pulled on the bar T-shirt Tommy had handed me. The blood on the shirt—whose was it? It was my only clue so far.

Maybe the clue would add up to nothing, but it was something to go on—wherever it was I was going to take it. Maybe it could provide a lead on where I had been, and who I had been with before I’d woken up in my car, bloodied and alone. Either way, it was still all I had.

I balled it up again and headed out of the bathroom. It was time to find out what that bartender had to say.

When I got to the bar, Tommy took a look at me and handed me a glass of ice water.

“What’s this?” I asked, eyeing it.

“Figured alcohol might not be the right way to go right about now,” he said, by way of explanation.

I shook my head. “I’m not here to drink, man. I want some answers.”

A man three stools down from where I stood was looking curiously at me. I could feel his eyes on me, and I turned to him, annoyed.

“Can I help you with something?”

The guy’s eyes widened in surprise for a moment, then they narrowed. “Did you used to go out with Maren?”

I looked the guy over, then gave a noncommittal shrug. “Who’s asking?”

The guy returned my shrug. “I just remember you from your fighting days. And I remember that beautiful woman you used to go around with.” His eyes glittered. “Not many like her walking around anymore. She was a classic beauty, that one. Otherworldly.”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t surprised the guy remembered Maren. He was right—there weren’t many like her.

I turned back to Tommy. “You said I was here earlier, asking about some guy?”

“Yeah, Lonnie,” he said. He was looking at me like he wasn’t quite sure I was all there. I guess I couldn’t blame him for that, if what he was saying about me was true.

“Right. So I want to know why,” I said.

Tommy gave me a long look. He took a quick glance around the bar, then leaned in closer to me. “You were asking about Hans,” he said in a whisper.

I nodded. I remembered that. “Yeah, and what did you say?”

Tommy leaned back again. “Did you talk to Lonnie?”

There was something about the way he said the words that stirred something in my memory—it sounded weirdly familiar. “I don’t know,” I muttered. “*Did* I talk to him?”  
 Tommy was back to looking suspicious. “I guess you’re the only one who can answer that.” He frowned. “You sure you’re okay, man?”

“No,” I snarled. “I am *not* okay. I can’t remember shit about what just happened and—” I yanked at the neck of my shirt to reveal the mark on my shoulder. “I want to know how I got this.”

He looked at my shoulder, then back up at me, confused as hell. “How the hell should I know, man? I’m not a fucking dermatologist.” He turned away as another guy pulled out a stool at the end of the bar.

“Hey,” I called to him. “I need to get the information on Lonnie.”’

“You’re going to have to wait,” Tommy said, glancing over his shoulder at me. “I’ve got customers to deal with.”

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. Things were not going my way.

“Hey, where’d you get those?”

I looked up to see the guy who had asked me about Maren had gotten up from his seat to move closer to me. My sense of confusion made me feel more suspicious than usual, and I gave the guy a dark look. “The mark on my shoulder? Why are you asking?”

The guy looked at me for a moment, then dropped his head and muttered something I couldn’t hear. He started to turn away, but I grabbed hold of his shoulder.

“No, tell me why you’re asking,” I said.

The guy looked shifty. “Nothing…it’s just, I’ve seen marks like that before.”

“And?” I said, waiting for the guy to go on.

But he only shook his head, saying nothing. He glanced over my shoulder at the door, like he was thinking of trying to make an escape.

I wasn’t going to let that happen. My frustration was building to a boiling point. “Listen, if you know what the hell happened to me, or how I got one of these fucking marks, I’d really like to know.”

The guy shook my hand off his shoulder. “No, I—I was wrong. I thought they were bug bites or something. I don’t know anything.” He stepped away.

I reached for him again, but the guy was fast and danced out of range.

“Just forget it,” he said. “I was wrong. Forgot my glasses at home.”

I was just about to go after him when I stopped myself. With a look back at Tommy, I remembered that I was still waiting for him to give me the information on Lonnie. I looked at the guy heading for the door and made a quick decision. I knew where Tommy could be found, and I could always come back to talk to him, but if I let this other guy get away, I might never find him again.

“Hey, I’ll be back!” I called to Tommy as I hurried after the guy, who was just disappearing through the door.

My head was spinning as I tried to make sense of him. First the guy said he knew something, and I had seen a flash of recognition when he saw my shoulder. But then he’d pretended like he didn’t know a damn thing. What the hell was that about? All that said to me was that he knew something, but maybe wished he didn’t. What it told me, too, was that that kid Codsworth hadn’t been wrong when he’d come to Cali about the mark—this was definitely something. Something above a human’s pay grade at least.

I pulled the door open and stepped out onto the street, looking quickly around. But the guy was nowhere to be seen.

“Shit,” I breathed. The guy must have sprinted as soon as he’d gotten out the door.

But he’d left behind a fresh scent trail, so I followed that, going left down the quiet street. I tracked the guy around the corner and found him just getting onto his motorcycle. His eyes widened when he saw me, and he jammed his key into the ignition, but I reached him quickly and pulled him off the bike, slamming him into the brick wall of a building.

“Okay, I’m done playing nice,” I snarled. “What the hell did you mean back there?” My hand curled into a fist, and I raised it threateningly. “You better start talking, buddy, because you’re going to tell me everything you know.”

**Episode 5124**

**Xavier**

I walked in silence for a long time. The streets of Bend were quiet, and I had no idea where I was going. But that didn’t matter. I didn’t need to go anywhere in particular, just as long as I was not in Carlson Greene’s office. I’d rather be shot off the planet in a rocket ship than have to spend another minute in the hell of that so-called therapy session. *Fuck that asshole.*

As I walked my head throbbed with every step I took. It hurt so much I could barely see, barely breathe. My vision was blurry, and I was seeing double, so I had to concentrate to not walk into street signs or people passing by.

This was fucking ridiculous. I thought therapy was supposed to be helping me. Wasn’t that supposed to be the whole point? You talk, you feel better or whatever. Either way, it didn’t seem to be working. I didn’t feel helped or better in the slightest. In fact, I felt worse than ever.

I never should have agreed to any of this. In the past I’d always managed to work out my problems the old-fashioned way—by just ignoring them. So why couldn’t that work this time?

But I knew the answer to that question already—it couldn’t work because the problems weren’t mine alone. They involved Ava and Cali, too, which made everything all the more complicated and confusing.

My thoughts went back to all the times I used to get so angry because Cali wouldn’t just choose me and drop my fucking brother from her life completely. It used to piss me off to no end, but now I had a better understanding of the impossibility of the situation she was in. Because now I was in something eerily similar.

I took a deep breath of the cold winter air. That was something to realize—it almost felt like a major breakthrough. It figured that I’d have it here by myself instead of in some fucking therapist’s office.

But my head still ached like hell and the situation with Ava and Cali was probably worse now than it was before.

Thanks for nothing, Carlson Greene.

I gave my head a shake, which made it throb. I just wished my life was simpler. It hadn’t been an easy road, but I’d accepted that I had chosen to be with Ava. At first, I’d been forced into it by Adéluce, but now I truly *wanted* to be with her. I loved Ava. There were a lot of things I wasn’t sure about, but I knew that for sure.

I also loved Cali. She knew me, too. Maybe better than anyone—after all, she’d brought me back from the brink so many times. But Ava—Ava had a deeper understanding of me. It was primal. It ran deep, maybe because she too was a werewolf.

It didn’t make one mate better than the other—just different.

But I’d made that decision. I was now part of the Samara pack. I was *Alpha* of the Samara pack, and Ava was my mate and my Luna. That made sense. That had symmetry. So why was I suffering so damn much?

A breeze kicked up, and on it I caught Cali’s scent. I looked around, wondering if I was only imagining it, but then I heard her voice call my name.

I stopped and turned—she was following me.

As she drew near the pain in my head seemed to ease. That surprised me. I figured it would only grow worse.

“Xavier,” she said, walking toward me, “there you are. I’ve been looking everywhere. Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to answer her when Ava’s voice sounded in my head:

*X, I’m following your scent, but it’s windy. It would make it easier if you just came back.*

Cali was looking at me. She had asked me a question and she was waiting for an answer.

*I’m just down the street*, I told Ava. *I just needed some air.*

Then I turned to Cali. Ava would be close, and I wanted to avoid another scene between the two of them. “You should probably go,” I told her.

Cali looked a little surprised and hesitated for a moment. “I—I didn’t mean to upset you, Xavier.”

I gave her a rueful smile. “I’m okay. I’ll be okay.”

She didn’t look convinced. “You’re sure?”

“I’ve faced a lot worse than Carlson Greene,” I assured her. “It was just getting to be a little too much in there for me.”

“Yeah,” Cali agreed. “It was pretty intense.”

“Yeah. And despite what I assume are Carlson’s best intentions, I really can’t stand the guy. He’s just so…”

“Smarmy?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Cali nodded sympathetically but didn’t move to leave. I looked past her, feeling a little anxious. If Ava was following my scent, it wasn’t going to take her long to find me. She was a good tracker, and she could show up at any second.

“Anyway, you should get going,” I said.

Cali took that in. Then she nodded and took a step back, turned, and headed toward the office building where she’d parked her car.

Just as I raised my hand to reach for her, I saw Ava turn the corner toward us. Seeing Cali and me standing together, she hesitated for a moment, her step almost faltering.

Great.

My headache throbbed back at full force.

“Thank you,” I said quietly to Cali.

She turned back to look at me. “For what?”

“For coming today. I know it sucked, but thank you anyway.”

Cali frowned. “I don’t think it *totally* sucked. And you’re welcome.” Then she turned and walked away.

There was a part of me that wanted to go after her and take her hand, pull her to me, kiss her, pretend like nothing was stopping us. But I knew that would be a lie. The world had changed—my world had changed—and I needed to change along with it.

I looked at Ava as she drew near, forcing a smile I didn’t feel as my head throbbed.

Ava’s eyes shifted past me to Cali’s retreating figure. Then she looked back at me and tipped her head. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t say anything as we got into the car and I started toward home. She was being quiet—unusually quiet.

I grimaced as I drove. Ava’s silences had teeth.

As we drove out of Bend’s city limits, I glanced over at her. She was angled away from me, staring out the window, her face set.

“Hey,” I said, trying to lighten the mood, “I’m supposed to be the brooding one here.”

She looked over at me, her blue eyes cold. “I didn’t like that, Xavier.”

“What?” I asked.

A muscle worked in her jaw. “I didn’t like being blindsided back there. Cali didn’t need to be there for that session.”

I could feel frustration building in my chest. “I already told you, Ava, it wasn’t my idea. I didn’t know she was coming today.”

“Carlson told me he asked you to invite her, though. Did you?”

I took a deep breath. “I did ask her, but I never set an actual date. That mix-up is on Carlson.”

This didn’t appear to be the explanation Ava was looking for, and her eyes flashed with anger. “So you asked Cali to go to one of your sessions, but you never bothered to think that *I* might want to know that information?”

My head throbbed. “If I did tell you, would you have come?” I asked.

“That isn’t the point,” she snapped.

I knew Ava as well as I knew anyone, and I could see that she was digging in her heels now. I didn’t want to make matters worse, but we were already in it. “I think it *is* the point. You wouldn’t have come.”

“You don’t know what I would have done, Xavier, and I guess you never will because you never bothered to tell me!” she shot back. “You clearly still don’t trust me.”

“Ava—” I started.

“But I can’t say that I’m surprised,” she went on, as though I hadn’t spoken. “I know that when it comes to Cali, there are lots of things you just don’t tell me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked, pushing back.

Ava was silent for a long moment, her eyes flashing with unspoken pain and anger. Then she turned away, looking out the window again. “Nothing. It doesn’t mean anything,” she said quietly. “Never mind.”

“No, I want to know what you mean,” I said, my voice rising.

“Stop the car,” she snapped.

My head was aching like it was about to split in two. “Forget it. I’m not stopping. We’re going home.”

“I said stop the goddamn car!” she said, angrier now.

Annoyed, I ground my teeth and stepped on the gas. The engine whined as the car sped up. “Stop acting like a child.”

Ava was fast. She’d always been fast, so before I could even react, she had her hand on the door, pushed it open, and had jumped out of the speeding car.

**Episode 5125**

**Ava**

I could hear Xavier bellowing my name behind me, but all my energy was focused on shifting before I hit the shoulder of the road. I managed to do it and hit the ground running.

Behind me, I heard Xavier’s car screech to a sudden stop. That was going to be hell on his tires, but it served him right. He should have stopped the car when I told him to.

I raced toward the woods without looking back. I just had to get away from him. I couldn’t be near him right now. I couldn’t speak to him, couldn’t listen to him. I just couldn’t hear any more of his excuses about why he acted the way he did around Cali, or I was going to fucking explode. And after having my ability to shift blocked by Carlson Greene during the session, it was an incredible relief to be back in my wolf form, running fast and free and with no other goal than to *run*. I needed to get away from the man I’d left behind—the one who made my heart race and break—all at the same time.

I’d meant what I’d said in Carlson’s office—I loved Xavier. I loved him with my whole soul. If I didn’t love him so damn much, I would have given up on him a long, long time ago.

I remembered what it was like when I’d first come back from the spirit world. I remembered how lost and alone I’d felt then. It almost felt like that again now, which was just so wrong. What had happened at group therapy probably needed to happen, though it stung that Cali had to be the one who managed to explain to me exactly what Xavier was going through.

Yes, I was jealous—who the hell wouldn’t be if they were in my place? Cali understood the tension of having two mates that Xavier felt in a way that I didn’t, but she had no fucking clue what it was like to be on the other end of that. The receiving end. What it felt like to be in my place, or—hell—even in Greyson’s. I’d tried to explain back there in Carlson’s office. I tried to find the words to describe the loneliness and the pain and the darkness, but I had no idea if any of it had gotten through to the one person I was talking to. The one person for whom it mattered.

Fuck Carlson Greene. And fuck Caliana Hart. Xavier Evers was the only one who needed to understand what I went through every time he got pulled toward Cali.

And it made everything ten times worse when—after everything that happened in that godforsaken session—I went looking for him and found him talking to *her*.

That was *it*. That was the last straw. I’d had enough. I just couldn’t take it anymore.

Tears were stinging my eyes as I ran, freezing in the cold winter air. I’d stopped listening to everything around me and was just running at a flat-out sprint, anxious to feel my body stretch to its limits. My heart raced in my chest, and it helped to ease some of the pain, but as I rounded a stand of trees and ran through the center of a winter-deserted campground, I suddenly became aware that there was noise behind me.

Something was there, but when I turned to see, I was too late, and was hit from the side and slammed to the rocky ground. I felt the breath leave my body and my head swam as I looked at the form above me.

It was Xavier, in his wolf form, his own breath visible in the freezing air, his eyes bluer than they had any right to be.

*Get the fuck off me*, I snarled.

*Where the fuck are you going?* he shot back.

I didn’t answer but struggled beneath him, trying to push him off. I kicked him in the belly, making him groan, but he hung on.

*Ava, stop—*

*Leave me the hell alone*, I snapped, swiping a paw across his face.

He withstood this too*. I’m not going anywhere until you calm down.*

*Well, then you might as well let me go, because I’m never going to calm down*, I sneered.

He looked up, and I could see one eye was running from where I’d hit him. *Where are you going to go?*

This wasn’t the moment for logic. I was going *away*, that was all I needed to know. I pushed again, trying to get him off me. I was strong and putting up a good fight, so he was having to work hard, but he was bigger and stronger than I was—qualities I had in the past found sexy—but not now. Not this time. Now it was just pissing me off.

*Ava*, he growled.

*Fuck off!*

*Ava*, he said again. *Can we just talk?*

I was so shocked by this I stopped fighting for a moment and stared up at him in disbelief. *What? You want to talk?*

There was a question in his eyes. *Yeah.*

*Now you want to talk? Isn’t that what you were supposed to do in therapy—before you ran off?*

He sighed. *Ava, please.*

I thought about this for a moment, hearing the *please* in my head. I weighed my options. I was still angry, but the sound of the *please* was causing my fury to ebb…a little. Besides, I couldn’t outrun him, and there was a part of me that did want to talk. To hear the things that should have been said back at Carlson Greene’s office if Xavier hadn’t left, and if Cali hadn’t shown up.

*Ava?* Xavier asked again.

*Fine*, I snapped. *But get off me*.

Xavier started to climb off, but before he did, I jerked forward, snapping my jaws at him and grazing his arm with my teeth as he began to shift.

This surprised him, and he stumbled backward, partially shifted, holding a scratched and slightly bleeding arm. “Ava!” he bellowed. “What the hell was that for?”

“What the hell do you think it was for?” I said, shifting to my human form. “When I tell you to stop the car, stop the fucking car.”

He growled as he examined the torn skin. “So you can risk your life and fucking jump out of it?”

“Stop crying,” I said, getting to my feet. “You’ll heal. Now, are you going to whine about it, or do you actually want to talk?”

He wiped the blood on his other arm, which was still wolf fur, then finished shifting to his human form.

Shit. Okay, so this might have been a terrible idea. Having Xavier standing in front of me all hot and sweaty and naked was *not* the best move. I was still angry, but now I was horny, too. Why did it always get like this?

I looked away, into the trees, trying not to think about how much I wanted him. I *shouldn’t* want him. I was furious. I had every right to be furious. I should push him away. I should run, now that he was still bleeding, I could get away. I could…

But I couldn’t. Didn’t want to.

My gaze went back to him, and I knew I wouldn’t go anywhere. He ignited something inside me, something I could never ignore. I could see in his eyes that he felt it too. They were blazing as he looked at me, his gaze sweeping down and then up again.

He took a step toward me, then another. Then another. I could feel the heat of his body radiating off him, even as he stopped a few steps away to gauge my reaction.

“Ava,” he murmured.

It was like an explosion. I reached for him, then he reached for me, and our bodies melded together like molten metals. I pressed my lips to his, and he drove his tongue hard into my mouth. I gasped and bit down on his bottom lip hard enough I tasted blood. His hands were in my hair now, yanking hard, and I cried out, “*Harder!*”

He grabbed a handful of my dark mane in his fist as he backed me up, kissing me hard and fast. I felt the scaly bark of an aspen against my back, then the push of Xavier’s hips against my front. He was grinding into me.

I dug my fingernails into his back, making him hiss with pleasure, then I wrapped my legs around his waist.

*Inside me*, I mind linked. This was all the invitation he needed, and he drove his cock into me.

“Fuck *yes*!” I moaned, my voice rending the cold silence of the forest. “Oh god, yes.”

We were moving in rhythm now, and I tightened my legs around him as I felt my climax building.

“Fuck,” he moaned. Dropping his head against my shoulder. “God, you feel so good. *Fuck*,” he moaned again when I tightened around him.

I arched back, screaming as we both came.

Xavier slammed me hard against the tree, and I brought him with me, stroke for stroke.

We panted as we wound down, our breaths coming short. My legs felt shaky as I put them down on the ground again, one at a time. Wildly spent, we slid down to the leafy ground, and Xavier wound me up in his arms, holding me close against his sweat-slicked chest.

After a quiet moment, he looked down at me and stroked a finger softly down my cheek. “Well?”

I looked up at him, into his familiar blue eyes. “Well what?”

He raised an eyebrow. “What now?”

**Episode 5126**

**Greyson**

I pushed the guy against the brick wall. I could see the fear flashing in his eyes as he struggled to get away, but my hold on him was tight.

“I—I—listen, I don’t want to get involved, okay?” he stammered.

“Involved in *what*?” I demanded.

“Stop choking me,” he coughed, pushing at my hands.

I eased my grip and put the guy’s feet more firmly on the ground. I waited for him to catch his breath before I asked again. “Involved in what?”

He held up his hands. “Hell if I know, okay? Whatever you’re involved in, I don’t want any part of it.”

My frustration spilled over, and I pushed the guy against the wall again, harder this time. “Tell me what you *think* I’m involved in.”

“I don’t know, but it must be serious, or you wouldn’t have one of those marks,” he said quickly.

I narrowed my eyes. “You said they were bug bites, didn’t you?” I reminded him. “But you were lying, weren’t you?”

The guy nodded a shaky head. “Yeah, maybe, but I don’t want any trouble—”

“Stop beating around the bush and stop telling lies,” I snarled. “Tell me what you know about those marks.”

The guy hesitated for just a moment, but when he looked in my face, he must have seen something that told him I wasn’t going to take no for an answer. “They mean that somebody doesn’t want you to know.”

“Know? Know what?” I snapped.

“Whatever!” the guy said. “Whatever it is you shouldn’t be knowing, you know?”

I shoved the guy, and he groaned in pain.

“I’m only telling you that I have no idea what you got yourself into, but there’s a reason you don’t know either. Someone *made* sure. They erased your memory.”

I drew back, surprised. “*What?*”

Released from my grip, the guy took a terrified step away. “I’ve said way too much—”

“You haven’t said enough,” I countered. I took a step toward the guy, who apparently had decided to risk it all and took a wild swing at me. I wasn’t expecting it, and the guy’s fist made contact, getting me right on the chin. I stumbled back, more shocked than anything else, and suddenly my mind was filled with disjointed memories of being in a fight.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, and when I looked around, I saw the guy at the curb, climbing onto his motorcycle. He started it with a roar and screeched away without looking back.

Suddenly wobbly on my feet, I leaned against the wall. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I knew I wasn’t feeling dizzy from the punch—the guy had punched hard, but I had taken a lot worse. It was something else—those weird memories that had popped up so suddenly. That was what was throwing me off so much. I wondered if it was the punch that had brought them up? Or if I was getting confused because of my former life as a fighter? Maybe being back in Portland like this was just stirring up old memories.

But none of those possibilities felt right. The memory of the fight didn’t feel old. It felt like it had just happened.

I slid down to the ground as another wave of images flashed in my mind. More scuffling in the alleyway. Then the mark on my shoulder began to burn and itch. I could hear a distant conversation—it sounded like two people in a fight club. Then I realized *I* was the one having the conversation.

What the hell was happening? *When* had this happened?

My mind strained, trying to remember. Had this happened *today*?

I was trying to remember things that felt just out of reach, but I was also thinking of what the guy had just told me and trying to make some sense of it—someone had erased my memory?!

How? Who? And why?

Thinking hard and trying to put everything in order, I remembered coming to in my car. But how had I gotten there?

I didn’t have an answer for that, but I needed to find out.

I staggered to my feet and headed back the way I had come, toward the bar. I was swerving as I walked, and I knew that I must have looked very drunk, because I was drawing looks from people who passed by me on the sidewalk. But I wasn’t paying attention to them. I was still thinking hard.

The bartender had remembered me. He said I’d been there before looking for Hans. Which meant that if I’d had my memory wiped, it must have happened after I left the bar.

But where had I gone?

For just a moment my memory jogged—*Lonnie*.

I talked to the fighter.

Frowning, I tried to remember, but nothing came to me. I couldn’t remember what we’d talked about, but I knew that I had been there, in the fight club, talking about…Hans?

Okay, so if that was true, that meant I must have had my memory erased sometime after that.

I felt a little hope rising in my chest. I hated how disoriented I felt, but I could keep doing this. I could put the pieces of my jigsaw puzzle memory back together again.

The only problem was that I didn’t know what the hell it was going to show me when it was complete, and I had no handy picture to guide me so I would know if I was even going in the right direction.

When I got back to the bar, a couple walked out just as I was about to walk in. They emerged from the bar laughing, but stopped when they saw me, surprised. Then they looked at each other, snickered, and walked past.

I supposed I must have looked like shit, so maybe that was why they were laughing…though something about them seemed familiar.

“Hey!” I called after them.

They paused for just a moment. “Yeah?” the guy asked.

“Do you know me?” I asked them.

The woman looked over her shoulder at me. “I don’t think so,” she said with a smile. The sun was behind her in the sky and it backlit her hair, which glowed purple in the golden light.

*Purple.*

I felt light-headed again, and the mark itched like crazy once more. It was like an alarm bell was going off in my body, but my mind was fighting against me, trying to keep its secrets.

I gave my head a small shake and as the couple turned away, I headed into the bar. I could probably use that glass of ice water now.

When I sat down at the bar, Tommy gave me a disdainful look.

“You again, huh?” He shook his head. “It’s like that with some guys. Like their whole lives are stuck on repeat.”

I ignored the comment. “When I came in, you said it looked like I was in a fight, right?”

He was wiping down the bar with a dirty rag, but he paused for a moment and tipped his chin, nodding at my shirt. “That’s the shirt I gave you, isn’t it? So you wouldn’t freak out the other customers? This is a respectable place.”

I managed not to roll my eyes.

He nodded at my other shirt, which I’d left balled up on a barstool. “And make sure you take that one with you on your way out.”

The shirt was right next to me, and I picked it up and shook it out. I looked at it closely. Then I drew in a sharp breath. There was a reason that woman with the purple hair had jogged something in my head. I put the shirt to my nose and took a deep breath.

“Come on, man,” Tommy complained. “What are you doing? I told you, this is a respectable place. You know we don’t do weird blood stuff here!”

I kept ignoring him. My blood was on the shirt, but there was the blood of others, too. And now that my head was slightly clearer, I realized that one of them—at least—was familiar.

I took another whiff. Could it be Kendall’s scent I was getting from the blood?

But that made no sense. My mind reeled as I turned the thought over.

Then another flash of memories hit me, making my stomach turn. I could see myself in a fight—three guys. I dropped one quick. The other two…

Then Kendall. She was there. Staring at me with her purple eyes.

I remembered the picture of Hans that Cali had—I could see it in my mind’s eye. I could see the image of Kendall disguised in the background.

*Greta.*

The name hit me like a punch to the gut, and suddenly I knew that whatever the hell had just happened to me, Kendall had been there.

I knew it, deep down in my bones. I was sure of it. It couldn’t just be a coincidence.

My hands holding the bloodied shirt curled into fists. And one way or another, I was going to find her.

**Episode 5127**

My thoughts spun as I headed back to the pack house. I hadn’t even put on any music for the drive—I’d been too distracted. I was thinking about Xavier’s parting words, about how he’d thought the therapy session sucked.

And maybe he was right about that—on the surface. I had been just as thrown to see Ava there as she was to see me. And Xavier clearly had no clue that I was going to be there.

That was the part that hurt—he hadn’t expected me to be there, even though he’d asked me to come to one of the sessions.

I wondered if his discomfort at being there had more to do with my presence than the actual content of the session.

The thought of that made me sad. There was a time when Xavier lived and breathed for me. But that was a long time ago. Before Ava had come back into his life. And now it was almost like he was fighting to keep his distance from me.

It had all begun with Adéluce, but even now that she was gone, it was like that distance had taken on a life of its own. I knew that Xavier was with Ava. He was the Alpha of the Samara pack, and she was his Luna. I knew he wasn’t coming back to me, but I had thought that maybe we could find some middle ground to occupy.

I was happy with Greyson—there was no doubt about that. I loved him. But just because I loved Greyson—loved being with him and building a life with him—that didn’t mean that I didn’t miss Xavier. When he’d left me for Ava—and the Samaras—he had left behind a hole in my heart, and I was starting to think that it would never be filled.

But Xavier was wrong in his assessment of the session. I didn’t think it sucked. I mean, it certainly wasn’t all hugs and kisses. It had been raw and very painful, but I was starting to realize that that’s what life felt like. It wasn’t possible to avoid the ups and downs. And chipping away at the tension between the three of us—Xavier, Ava, and me—was going to be a process. Maybe Xavier had expected everything to happen in that one session, and for us to finish it with everything wrapped neatly in a bow. But that wasn’t realistic. I felt like we were making progress, though. Until, that is, things with Ava exploded all over again.

I set my teeth. I refused to blame myself for what happened. I was only being honest when I said what I said—recognizing how hard it must be for Xavier to feel the way he did about two mates. I should know—it was the same fate I was cursed with under the *due destini*. The only difference was that Xavier seemed to have made his choice. He was also *allowed* to make his choice. He was probably headed home with that choice right now.

I gave my head a firm shake. I had to stop myself from continuing to wrestle with this. Whatever Xavier was dealing with, he needed to deal with it. If I could help, then fine. I was happy to do it. Otherwise, it was Xavier’s business to handle.

I pulled my car in front of the pack house and parked. When I looked around, I saw that Greyson’s car wasn’t back, and realized with a sinking feeling that he was probably still in Portland.

My heart felt heavy with this realization. It would have been nice to see him after the day I’d just had. I pulled out my phone to check my messages. I’d silenced it during the session, and I saw there was a voicemail from Greyson.

I felt guilty when I saw the notification. I had no idea that he had called. I hadn’t even thought to check my messages until now. Then guiltier still when I listened to the message and heard his deep voice asking me to call him.

Then I began to drown in guilt when I realized that he was off in Portland with no idea that I had been with Xavier and Ava at a therapy session, because I had never even mentioned it to him.

Damn it. What the hell was wrong with me?

I dialed his number, feeling like an ass, and prepared to tell him absolutely everything.

“Cali, hi,” he said, picking up after the first ring. “Thanks for calling. Is everything okay?”

There was an unsettling urgency to his voice as he asked the question, almost as though he was worried that everything *wasn’t* okay.

“Um, yeah. Is something wrong?” I asked hesitantly.

“I…I just had the weirdest experience,” Greyson said. “I’d been asking some questions about Hans, and then I got into a fight and—”

“Wait, *what*?!” I asked, cutting him off. “A *fight*?!”

“Yeah, it was no big deal,” he said, brushing off my concern. “I’m fine, and the fight isn’t the point. I knew that digging around for information about Hans would come with some risks—”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, dropping my head into my hands.

“—but remember the mark on Codsworth you’ve been looking into?”

How could I forget? He’d showed it to me, and I thought he’d been about to try to seduce me. It had looked like a bug bite, but its appearance had been weird timing… Not to mention that Codsworth hadn’t been the only one to have it.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling uneasy. “Why?”

“Because I’ve got one too.”

I gripped my phone, frozen with shock. “But—*how*? How can that be?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson said. “I’m still trying to figure that part out. But the important thing to know is that someone tried to wipe my memory.”

“Are you serious?” I gasped.

“Yeah. I’m only just starting to remember anything now,” he said.

My head was spinning as I took in this information. “But who? Who tried to erase your memory?”

“I don’t know, but I think I might know someone who will.”

“What are you talking about?” I wondered. “Who would know?”

“Kendall was there,” he said grimly. “She must know what happened.”

“Kendall?” I repeated, shocked. I gripped the steering wheel, trying to process this information. “Kendall’s there? In Portland? But why? What is she doing there?”

“I have no idea, but I’m going to find out,” he said, his voice gruff. “I’ll let you know what I find out, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, dazed.

“I’d better go. I love you. Talk soon,” he said, and ended the call.

I stared out the windshield for a long moment, completely floored by what Greyson had just said to me. The worry I’d had about not telling him about the therapy session with Xavier now seemed so trivial compared to his revelation. Now all my worries were with Greyson, especially given how Kendall was somehow tied into whatever was happening.

My thoughts flashed back to the harsh reaction she’d had about Codsworth wanting to look at the mark—the mark that Greyson said he now had. Was there some kind of connection?! Was Kendall trying to protect whoever was responsible for them?

I tapped my fingers nervously on the steering wheel. I had a million questions and no answers. I was just going to have to be patient and wait to see what Greyson uncovered.

Grabbing my purse, I climbed out of the car and headed inside. I was still thinking about everything that had happened as I walked in and literally ran into Lola.

“Hey!” Lola glared at me. “Open your eyes, girl. You need to watch where you’re going.”

“Sorry,” I said, looking up. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Do engagement rings have anything to do with what you’ve got on your mind?”

I groaned. “I’d actually managed to forget all about that. Until this moment.”

Lola crossed her arms over her chest. “So I guess that means you didn’t say anything to Greyson?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t get a chance. There’s too much going on.”

Lola rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand, then pulled me into the kitchen, which was empty of people. She pushed me into a seat at the kitchen island and sat across from me. “You know what your problem is, Cali?”

I was taken aback. “What? I don’t have a problem.”

Lola shook her head. “Um, respectfully, I disagree.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, what’s my problem?”

She templed her fingers in front of herself. “Your problem is that you are so consumed with everyone else’s problems—worrying about Greyson or Xavier, Elle, Codsworth, Violet, Ava, Lucian—honestly, I could go on all day—"

“So, I care about people,” I huffed. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you still haven’t decided on a major, Cali.”

“So?” I asked, feeling defensive. “No one from the school has said anything yet. I have time.”

“Fine, but even so,” Lola said, huffing. “My point is that you’re so busy focusing on what everyone else wants and needs, you haven’t taken the time to step back and ask yourself one simple question: *who is Caliana Hart*?”

**Episode 5128**

**Greyson**

I was still a little dazed but gaining momentum. Now that I’d managed to piece together enough of the fragments, I was growing more certain that Kendall held the key to the remaining pieces.

Too bad I had no idea where she could be.  She usually showed up when I didn’t want her or wasn’t looking for her. Now that I wanted her, I knew I was going to have to work hard to find her. But I was ready, and I wasn’t going to give up.

At least I felt a little more confident after having spoken to Cali. I knew that I’d thrown a lot at her, but that was better than lying to her. I knew better than anyone how that could be a slippery slope, and why shouldn’t I tell her the truth? Sometimes I tried to shield the whole truth from her because I didn’t want her to worry, but she was involved in this, too. She deserved to know.

*Besides, Cali has proven herself to be an asset time and time again, so there’s no use keeping her out of the loop when she’s such an amazing resource.*

Just speaking to her, hearing her voice, had filled me with enough inner strength to convince me I could do this. I had to shake off whatever had happened to me and track Kendall down.

I made my way back to the fight club, bound and determined to speak to Lonnie. The bouncer recognized me as soon as I walked inside.

*That’s a good sign.*

The bouncer gave me the mandatory frisk and let me in. It was all starting to feel like déjà vu as I started my search for Lonnie yet again. It was almost as if I were retracing steps that I could only just remember.

Luckily, it didn’t take long to reach my goal.

Lonnie’s face brightened when he saw me. “Greyson, hey! Ready to step back in the ring and show these young bucks how it’s done?” He slapped me on the back. “I would literally pay to see that.”

I gave him a small smile but shook my head. “No, that’s not why I’m here.” I held up the picture and pointed to the woman. “I’m here about her.”

Lonnie looked confused. “Maybe you should have quit fighting a little sooner than you did, man. It’s clear you’ve taken one too many to the chin. We already talked about Greta. I told you everything I knew.”

I looked at the picture and then showed it to him again. “This woman, this is Greta, right?”

Lonnie laughed. “Yup. The only Greta I know.” Then he leaned in conspiratorially. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone that Greta saved the mighty Greyson from getting his ass handed to him earlier. There’s no shame in it. I promise.”

I waited for Lonnie to stop laughing at my expense. I didn’t care about anything but finding her. “Where can I find Greta?”

Lonnie eyed me and then tapped me on the top of the head. “Are you sure your brain isn’t Jell-O? I told you before, she hasn’t been around lately, but I heard that she frequents some of the other clubs.”

I had a faint memory of that, but it was too hazy to trust. “Thanks,” I said to Lonnie. I turned and started to walk away but then turned back. “How did you know?”

Lonnie was bewildered. “How did I know what?”

“You mentioned that Greta helped me when I was attacked. How did you know?”

Lonnie shrugged. “You know how it is around here. Word gets around.”

I paused. “But do you know who told you? It would help me.”

“It was Edwin, a bouncer at Viper’s, one of the other clubs. He told me about it.”

“Thanks man, I appreciate it.” I sighed. “Maybe after I take care of some business, I will come back and do a couple of rounds—might even kick your ass a time or two.”

Lonnie dissolved into raucous laughter. “I’d like to see you try,” he said with a wink.

As I passed through the bar on my way out, I noticed a couple of guys eyeing me. One of them was in an arm cast. No one held my gaze long and they quickly shifted their eyes down to their feet.

I paused, feeling like I’d seen them somewhere before. But thinking of the picture and my mission to find Greta, I decided to let it go for the time being and was almost to my car when I remembered.

*Those were two of the guys who jumped me!*

I turned and ran back into the bar only to find their seats empty. I caught the bartender’s attention.

“Hey, those guys that were just sitting here, did you see where they went?”

The bartender gave me a bored look. “I haven’t seen shit.”

I gritted my teeth, frustrated with all the unspoken rules of a place like this. No one ever saw anything, no one knew anything, ever. “Do you know their names, at least?”

“What part of I don’t know shit do you not understand?”

“Fuck you very much,” I said before slamming out of the bar and going back to my car.

I settled in behind the wheel and took off toward Viper’s, the other fight club Lonnie had mentioned. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too difficult to find Edwin there, and hopefully he was a lot more helpful than this bartender had been. Although I was still shaking off the haze in my head, I was starting to feel a lot better about the odds of me tracking down Kendall.

A few minutes later, I found myself parked across the street from Viper’s. I slumped low in my seat, figuring that it might make sense to stake the place out a bit. See who came and went. Maybe I’d get lucky and spot Kendall. No matter what disguise she might be using, I would easily recognize her and be able to quickly confirm things with her scent.

*Come on, Kendall. Don’t make this hard for me. I want to get this over with and get back home to Cali.*

I waited. And waited. After about an hour had passed, I began to grow impatient. I hadn’t come to Portland to sit around and hope that something happened. I came here to *make* things happen.

I laid my hand on the door handle, contemplating. I knew it would be a risk to just barge into the club, and there was a good chance that Kendall didn’t want to be found—especially by me. People didn’t go to great lengths to wear disguises and change their names if they wanted to be discovered.

*And it’s obvious that she’s more insulated in this world than I am—the way I used to be. There’s a good chance the bouncer will tip her off if I show up asking questions.*

And then there was the very real possibility that I was barking up the wrong tree, and Kendall wouldn’t show at all. And that would make all of this a complete waste of time.

Deciding to bite the bullet, I got out of the car and headed to the fight club. The bouncer stopped me at the door.

“We’re not open yet. First fight isn’t until midnight.”

Rolling the dice, I said, “I’m not here for the fights. I’m looking for a woman.”

The bouncer grinned. “Aren’t we all.”

“This one is kind of special. Her name’s Greta. She’s got intense eyes that pierce right through you. Never seen anything like them.”

I could tell by the guy’s reaction that he knew exactly who I was talking about, but that he was still reluctant to say anything. That wasn’t exactly a surprise. I was a stranger, after all.

I pulled a large bill out of my wallet and dangled it. “Know where she might be?”

The guy pointed past me. “She’s probably at the yoga/meditation studio across the street.” Then he snatched the bill out of my hand before I’d even had a chance to look.

Sure enough, there was a yoga studio. “Are you sure she’d be there? She doesn’t really look like a yoga person.”

The bouncer shrugs. “There is no *look.* I take it five days a week myself.”

I backed off, thanked the bouncer, and headed across the street. I was weighing my options. Either go in and see if she was there, or stake the place out a bit and hope she entered or exited at some point.

But then the decision was made for me.

The door to the yoga studio opened, and Kendall, sporting her wig and glasses, came out with her arm around some guy. I quickly ducked behind my car and watched as they headed down the street. If she picked up my scent, she didn’t show it.

Marveling at my luck and happy that I hadn’t, in fact, wasted my time, I kept back a safe distance and started to follow her.

*Let’s find out what you’re hiding.*

**Episode 5129**

**Artemis**

A laugh escaped my lips. “A challenge. Are you serious?” I eyed Celeste, wondering where the hell she got off throwing me into a competition I’d never agreed to. It was one thing to keep me prisoner within these walls, and quite another to volunteer me for a physical challenge of some kind.

“Oh, it’s not a joke,” Celeste replied. “The court will need to know that you have what it takes to represent our best interests.” She gave me a stiff smile. “Sorry, but we’re in no position to just take your word for it.”

“But I was a bounty hunter! I’m pretty sure I’m up to the task.” I thought back to all the people I’d subdued, the distances I’d traveled on foot, the precision and power I’d had to leverage whenever I was in pursuit. I knew how to handle myself better than most.

Celeste sighed. “That may be, but the challenges the court will subject you to shouldn’t be taken lightly. They’ve proven difficult for even the strongest Fae who’ve faced them.”

“I’m not your average Fae,” I replied. I couldn’t have survived as a bounty hunter during the war if I weren’t very capable.

“I can agree that you’re not average, but that doesn’t absolve you from the trials. We have ways of doing things here and we’re not about to change them for you, it’s just the way things are, I’m afraid.”

I arched an eyebrow at her, my curiosity getting the better of me. “So, what kind of challenges are we talking about, anyway? Some kind of obstacle course? A maze? An archery contest or something?”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Celeste said. “There are three trials, and I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I called them deadly. If you fail even one of them and somehow end up escaping the gauntlet with your life, it won’t matter to the court. They will immediately rule you insufficient and unfit to take your place as the rightful heir. I can’t afford that. The Dark Fae court can’t afford that, either. We need you to lead us.”

“Lead you?” I repeated, suddenly feeling very overwhelmed.

“Yes, lead us. And to be seen as fit for such a task, you must not only survive all three trials, but prevail over them as well. I know it’s a lot, and that’s why I suggest you take a little time to think about it. I won’t force you into this, despite what you may think of me. Not until you’ve taken some time to decide if you’re ready to meet the challenge.”

“I don’t need time to—”

“Artemis, please—I must insist that you not rush into this. My advice to you is to think carefully about your place in your family tree. How do you want to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to be?”

I rolled my eyes and hissed, “Please,” under my breath.

Celeste paused by the door, her gaze suddenly taking on a seriousness that unsettled me. “When you are gone, when you have moved on from this world, what you leave behind is all this world will know of you. So, I ask again, what do you want your people to remember you by? Once you decide that, come see me.”

And then she was gone.

I tried to brush off all her talk of the Dark Fae court, their expectations, legacies, challenges. That wasn’t what I’d come here for. All I wanted was to find my father. I couldn’t lose sight of that.

I picked up the sword that I’d used to spar with the general. She’d spoken about Kadmos—about what a courageous leader he was, an excellent soldier, a great swordsman. She’d told me that I should be proud to be his daughter. I felt like I should be proud of him, too, but it was difficult when I’d never met the man.

*I hate that all I have to go on is the opinions of others when it comes to who my father really is. I want to meet him. Decide for myself.*

But Celeste’s words did make me wonder what my family would say about me long after I was gone. Was it enough to be remembered as a kick-ass bounty hunter? Or was I kidding myself? Who was going to remember that? Did I want to be remembered for something else? Something more?

Until I’d lucked out and discovered my real family—Orla and Cali—the idea of family had never mattered much to me. It was always something I just figured I didn’t need. I’d even thought that having those sorts of ties was a liability. But the way I ended up connecting with my mother and my sister made me question everything I used to take for granted about family.

The general’s words had made me question that even more—along with everything else. Maybe there was something to what Celeste was saying. Maybe what you do while you’re alive mattered way more than I ever thought. My legacy might really be something I needed to think about.

Taking the sword with me, I followed Celeste. I finally caught up with her in the hall outside the courtyard. She seemed surprised to see me again so soon.

“Artemis, what is it? I thought I left you to think long and hard about what’s next?”

“You did, but I don’t need to think about it,” I said. “Tell me more about the challenges. I want to face them.”

Celeste smiled. “I would push back, but you seem certain, and I will trust that. I’m pleased. And I will, of course, help you prepare. It’s even better that you’ve already sparred with the general and seem to have earned her respect—that’s no easy feat. I’ll assign the general to you to help further our training.”

“Thank you,” I said, becoming excited at the prospect of sharpening my skills in preparation for these challenges.

“It is vital that you succeed, Artemis, and that means I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you do.”

Strangely enough, I was beginning to feel a strange bond with this cold, often threatening woman. Not that I could explain why. I was virtually Celeste’s prisoner here, but despite that, I felt a sense of hope, or perhaps it was a sense of duty and responsibility that I didn’t even know I had.

Of course, should Marius return with Cali, all of Celeste’s grand plans for me would cease to matter. I would leave her as fast as my legs could carry me and continue my search for my father.

But since I had no idea when—or even if—Marius would return, I planned to take advantage of this opportunity to boost my fighting skills. It couldn’t hurt to become faster, stronger, deadlier.

“I won’t know which of the trials the court will decide to subject you to, but understand that they are all difficult, and each one is more challenging than the one before it.”

“I’m ready,” I replied, completely undeterred. After the life I’d lived and the bevy of hardships I’d faced, I wasn’t at all worried about a few “challenges.”

We were interrupted by the sound of a guard rushing toward us, breathing hard and his eyes jumpy with fear.

“There was another assassin,” he announced.

A chill ran down my spine. I wasn’t surprised. That was the thing about assassins. Where there was one there were probably many waiting to jump in if one failed to get the job done.

*If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again is the assassin’s motto.*

“I want answers! How are they breaking through our first lines of defense time and time again?” Celeste asked the guard.

“I wish I knew. This one was found scaling the south wall. They’ve been captured. Say the word and I’ll take you to them for questioning.”

“Stay here while I go deal with this,” Celeste said.

“I should go with you. The assassin was probably here for me, so I think I should be allowed to come face to face with the person who was trying to kill me.” I tightened my grip on my sword.

Celeste gave me a grim smile. “Very well. But let me do most of the talking.”

We followed the guard who led us toward the south wall, moving at a fast clip. Celeste was upset that the assassins kept breaking through the defenses, but at least the guards had been quick enough to catch the perpetrator before they were able to breach the walls this time.

“Tell me more about the trials,” I asked on the way.

“It’s like I already said, I won’t know much about them until the court decides which ones you’ll be facing.”

“I get that, but what you haven’t told me is what happens if I fail.”

Celeste stopped short and faced me head on, her expression suddenly darker than usual. “If you fail, you will be exiled from the Dark Fae realm and you will lose whatever link to your family you have left. Knowing that, are you still willing to proceed?”

**Episode 5130**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t really expecting an answer from Ava, and I wasn’t even sure why I’d asked her. *What now?* was pretty vague. It could mean anything from *should we go home and have something to eat?* to something far more intense and personal, like *should we stay together?*

But I didn’t know what else to say after the day we’d had. I was at a loss and more than willing to have her do the thinking as far as what was next. At least, if she decided, I couldn’t be blamed for fucking anything else up.

Ava was busy licking the blood from one of the scratches she’d inflicted on me. Once the blood was gone and the wound was healed, she looked up at me and asked the million-dollar question, “What do you mean, what now?”

“I was hoping you would somehow know,” I admitted. “In fact, I think you should be the one to decide.”

Ava scoffed. “What I know is that we can’t resort to fucking in the woods to solve all our problems.” She leaned in to lick the blood off my lips and added, “No matter how absolutely satisfying it was.”

She kissed me, and I could taste my own blood on her lips before she shoved me back and let out a frustrated groan. “First things first, we should probably get back to the car. Want to race? Whoever gets there first gets to pick where they want to be licked.”

*She’s doing everything in her power to avoid talking about anything serious. How can I blame her after that debacle in Greene’s office?*

I felt a strange mix of disappointment and relief. I hated talking—I could admit that. But I was really hoping we could talk and hash some things out. I didn’t want there to be any awkwardness between us.

“So, are we racing or not?”

“Wait,” I said.

Ava stared at me. “Why? Why wait? We’re naked in the middle of the woods in winter. I might be a werewolf, but that doesn’t mean my ass isn’t freezing off out here.”

I immediately picked up on the edge in her voice. I threw an arm around her to keep her from shivering, but her body was so warm, so inviting. She wasn’t cold at all.

“I don’t get it. You’re not cold, Ava. I can feel the heat rolling off you. So that means you’re trying to avoid talking. Why?” I asked.

Ava stopped and pushed my arm off her. “What’s the point?”

I was thrown by that. “What do you mean ‘what’s the point?’ The point is us, isn’t it? Making things better? Finding common ground so that we’re not fighting all the time?”

Ava sighed and looked away. “I’m tired, X. It’s been a long, rough day. I want to go home.”

“And we will. But not until you explain what you mean.”

Ava looked me in the eye. “I mean that we can’t keep doing this. We’re stuck in this endless cycle—we fight, fuck, rinse, and repeat. I want off this ride. It’s getting old.”

“You want off this ride—what are you saying? Do you mean we can’t keep doing this?” I asked cautiously. “It sounds like you’re ready to give up on us even before we’ve had a chance.”

“We’ve had plenty of chances, Xavier, but we ruin it every time. And before you start taking on the brunt of the blame, I’ve done my share of shit to fuck things up, too. That’s what we do to each other. We fuck things up. It’s like we’re stuck in this pattern we can never seem to break. Today, briefly, I thought we could change it. Thought we might be able to break free from our self-sabotaging hell.”

“Ava. I told you I didn’t know Cali was going to be there.”

I knew I was going to pay for Cali showing up at our session for a long time. There were a lot of things in my relationship with Ava that I’d done wrong, but I honestly hadn’t had a hand in Cali showing up, and I hated that I was being made to pay for it.

“Seeing her there sucked—I don’t think that’s a secret, but it only added to the problem. The real issue is you and your inability to open up and talk about what’s going on inside that head of yours.” She tapped me lightly on the temple. “The whole reason we went to see Carlson Greene in the first place was to help you do that. And you had the chance to do it. But instead, you got pissed off, closed down like a bank at four o’clock, and off you went.”

“But I wasn’t the only one who lost my temper today—”

“I got angry over something else,” Ava interrupted. “And I think I had every right to be as pissed off as I wanted to be. This therapy is supposed to help us by helping you—at least it would if you would only *let* it help you.”

She turned and started walking away from me. I grabbed her arm. “Where are you going? The car is back that way.”

“I know. I’m going to run home. I just need to clear my head.”

“Do you think running away is going to solve anything?”

“I’m not running away. You should know that by now. As much as you drive me fucking crazy, I’m never going to give up on you. I just want you to start fighting for us, too, because I’m getting tired of doing it for both of us.”

She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

“I’ll see you at home.”

She stepped away, shifted, and tore off into the woods without looking back. I watched her until she was out of sight. I doubted I’d ever get tired of seeing her in wolf form. There was a powerful majesty in her wolf that I’d never really seen in anyone else. It was one of the things I’d fallen in love with first back when we were younger.

*Should I run after her? Isn’t that what the guy is supposed to do? A way to show the woman that he loves her and can’t be without her.*

And if I just let her go, would she throw it back in my face later? Say that I didn’t care enough to go after her?

But I knew better and needed to give Ava a little more credit than that. She wasn’t like that. And as much as I hated to admit it, a lot of what she’d said made perfect sense.

I’d been given a chance today to talk about my feelings. To lay everything out on the table so that I could begin to make sense of the jumble of emotions and desires and guilt that had been clanging around in my head ever since Adéluce got her claws in me.

*But that’s not easy for me. It’s like speaking Greek. For me, feelings—emotions—they’re like speaking a fucking foreign language. And just like with a foreign language, I’ve grown past the age where I can learn to speak and understand how to effectively communicate my emotions.*

I knew that I *had* feelings, that wasn’t the problem. In fact, there were too many of them to count most days. But I would rather keep them hidden. It was almost as if showing them might spoil them somehow.

I started back toward the car, keenly aware of how much I already missed Ava. I couldn’t stop thinking about how I could’ve handled things better during our session.

*I wonder what mood she’ll be in when I get home. Hopefully she’ll have cooled down a little.*

Ava was upset, that much was clear, but she was also Ava, and I’d never once considered the possibility that she might be ready to leave me. I was determined to make things right between us, and that meant that I might have to go back to that useless prick Carlson Greene.

But next time, I was going alone. No surprise visitors. No feeling like I was stuck in the middle, between a rock and a hard place.

I also knew that Valentine’s Day was going to matter more this year than it ever had. I still thought the holiday was bullshit, but I was smart enough to know that it was a perfect opportunity for me to make a meaningful gesture to Ava.

And that meant that I was going to have to nail her gift. Hit the bullseye like never before.

I just hadn’t figured out what the perfect gift was yet. I was considering talking to Jay about it as I pulled up in front of the pack house. He’d bought Valentine’s Day gifts for Lola, and she was as difficult as they came. If he could please her year after year, then he would definitely be able to give me some guidance.

I stepped out of the car, still unsure about what I would say to Ava when I saw her, when I heard a loud growl.

I ducked for cover as one of the front windows exploded and Knox and Milo came crashing through it, trying their damnedest to kill each other.

**Episode 5131**

**Greyson**

I was still following Kendall, who was all decked out in her Greta disguise as she continued walking with the man she’d left the yoga studio with. They were talking and laughing, and Kendall was being more personable than I’d maybe ever seen her—laying on a level of charm that surprised me. She was either faking it or she never bothered to even try to be nice to me or anyone else.

I was on their tail, but I was working hard not to draw any attention to myself. Kendall was smart and could easily pick up my scent, and I wouldn’t be able to come up with a credible excuse for why I was following her. It wasn’t like we were back home where I could honestly pretend we’d just run into each other.

I slowed to put a bit more distance between us while straining to overhear their conversation. I couldn’t pick up much, and what I did hear didn’t sound particularly compelling.

 Nothing about the guy she was with suggested he had any involvement in the mob like Hans, but I’d learned long ago that looks could be deceiving. Whatever the nature of their relationship, they were acting more like intimate friends than business partners.

I found it a little disconcerting that Kendall was able to maintain any kind of relationship at all. She’d always been so distant. But from the way she was interacting with this guy, it was obvious she was capable of connecting with people when she wanted to.

And what was with the disguise? I thought back to my conversations with Cali about Kendall. I’d told her time and time again not to trust the woman. It was just this instinct I had that I couldn’t explain. But it seemed like it had been correct. Someone who led a double life as a college administrator while also walking around disguised as this Greta person while hanging around guys like Hans only added to that distrust.

Kendall and her friend turned a corner and were instantly out of sight, giving me pause. I was starting to feel a little guilty for following her. Cali’s and my distrust aside, as far as I knew, she hadn’t actually done anything to warrant us spying on her. How she spent her time—even if it *was* in a disguise and with a different name—wasn’t really any of my business.

*I was living my life on my own terms once upon a time, too. How would I have felt if someone was just following me around for their own interests? I would probably be creeped out and kick their ass if I found out.*

But what else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just leave it alone. She’d left so many unanswered questions in her wake that I couldn’t help but think that tailing her was the right thing to do. Once I understood what was really going on with her and confirmed she was no danger to Cali or the pack, I would happily leave her be.

Until then, all those unanswered questions needed to be answered.

I had no plan for how to find out what I wanted to know. I just hoped that by following her, she might lead me to Hans or even some of Hans’s associates—anything that would explain her presence here in Portland and her connection to Hans.

I waited just long enough to follow them around the corner, still very wary of blowing my cover. But when I turned the corner, they were nowhere to be seen.

I took a deep breath, drawing in their scents.

*They for sure came this way.*

I looked around, trying to figure out where they could’ve gone when Kendall stepped out from a doorway.

“Looking for something?”

The guy was standing just behind her. “You know this guy, Greta? Is he stalking you? Should I call the police?”

Kendall eyed me. “I don’t think that will be necessary, will it, Greyson?”

I assumed Kendall was using her alias with this guy for a reason, so I decided to keep her real identity hidden. At least until I understood what exactly was going on. It would be fucked up for me to follow her—essentially inserting myself into her life—only to blow her cover.

Slowly, I approached her, keeping my eye on the guy just in case he got it in his head to cause any trouble. “I thought I saw you earlier, was just trying to confirm.” I couldn’t help but add, “And it looks like you’ve done something to your hair.”

The guy was starting to get agitated. “Who *is* this guy? Why is he looking at you like that?”

Kendall turned to him. “It’s okay, Freddie. I’m handling it.” She turned back to me. “So now that you know it’s me, are we done here? Will you stop following me?”

“I don’t think so. What are you doing in Portland? Shouldn’t you be at work closer to Bend? This is a little out of your circle, isn’t it?”

The guy stepped forward. “What the fuck is going on here? Greta, tell me who this is! Why’s he asking you all these questions?”

I quickly sized the guy up. I’d caught his scent earlier and already knew he wasn’t a werewolf or a vampire, but he could easily be Fae or witch. Or even just a human. But chances were that if he had anything to do with Hans, the guy was probably Dark Fae, which meant I needed to be careful.

“Freddie, will you please relax? This will take only a minute.”

Freddie looked alarmed. “Wait, is this guy your boyfriend or husband?”

His nervous energy was starting to get to me, and I turned to him and asked, “Who are you?”

The guy backed up. “I’m not getting involved in whatever this is. You told me you were unattached, but it’s obvious you have some baggage.” He looked at me. “Sorry, man, I had no idea. Nothing happened, okay?” He took a few steps back and then ran away.

Kendall turned on me. “Thanks for fucking that up.”

“Was he a friend?”

Kendall flashed a fake smile. “He might have been, but thanks to you, now I’ll never know.”

I was starting to realize. “Oh…were you just hooking up with that guy?” I was beginning to feel really foolish. Had I just blown her hookup for the night?

Kendall gave me an incredulous look. “That is none of your business, Greyson. What the hell? My sex life is way out of your jurisdiction.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said, backing off. “But I still want to know what the hell is going on. Why are you pretending to be someone else? Why are you here in Portland?”

“None of your business and none of your business. What gives you the right to ask me these questions? I’m not your girlfriend, and I’m not in your pack. My life is my own to run; that means I don’t have to answer to you. You’re someone’s Alpha, yes, but not mine.”

I was starting to get frustrated, so I stepped up to her. “Well, at least tell me this—why did you help me when I was attacked?”

*For someone so pissed about me crossing the line and involving myself in her life, she certainly involved herself in my situation even though I didn’t ask for help.*

Kendall’s cool demeanor took a slight hit, but she recovered quickly. Her eyes were hard again when she answered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t buy that. I was attacked, and you helped me!”

Kendall shrugged. “Well, if that’s true, maybe you should just be grateful and leave it at that.” She sighed. “No good deed goes unpunished. Now I truly know the meaning of that phrase. So…are we done here? Sorry, but explaining myself to you is not part of today’s plans.”

“Will you just stop?!” I snapped. “Just tell me what this is all about. If you’re in some kind of trouble, maybe I can help you.”

Kendall eyed me, clearly skeptical. “You have no idea.”

“Then fill me in. If this has anything to do with Hans—”

Kendall grabbed me and pushed me into the doorway. “You have no idea what this is about. Just speaking that name aloud puts you and me both in danger, so just stick to running your little pack house and stay out of my affairs or you’ll get us both killed.”

She shoved me and walked away.

I considered going after her, but there was something about the look in her purple eyes that made me realize for the first time since I’d encountered her that she was frightened. Terrified, even.

I was turning toward my car when I heard the roar of an engine. I turned back in the direction Kendall had gone just in time to see a dark SUV pull up beside her. The passenger side door flew open, and someone leapt out and yanked her inside.

**Episode 5132**

Lola’s question threw me for a loop.

*Who is Caliana Hart?*

“You know who I am, Lola. Why are you asking me that?”

Lola sputtered a laugh. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

Honestly? I was getting pretty pissed off. “I guess I don’t since you’ve literally known me for years. If you don’t know me by now, then I think that’s a problem.”

Lola let out a frustrated sigh. “No, I’m asking *you* who you are, Cali.”

I glared at her. “I’m Caliana Hart. I’m from Minnesota; I live in the Redwood pack house; I go to CCU; my parents are Orla and Tom, and my sister is Artemis—”

Lola threw up a hand. “Stop, you sound like you’re reading from a resume or something.”

I paused. “I’m part Fae,” I added hesitantly.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Still no! What I’m asking about comes from here.” She touched my head. “And here.” She touched my chest. “I can’t tell you who you are. Only you can do that. Jay and I were discussing this the other night—how much of your life revolves around doing things for everyone else. Around trying to solve other people’s problems.”

I was taken aback. “Why were you two talking about me that way?” It was unsettling to think that my two good friends had spent their evening talking about me in what sounded like a less than positive light.

Lola sighed. “Because it hurts me to see you constantly pulled back and forth by everything that happens. I understand getting involved in other people’s affairs from time to time—you know I do the same—but when are you going to do what’s best for Cali?”

“That’s extremely unfair,” I snapped. “Sure, maybe I don’t focus on myself enough, but when can I? Seems pretty shitty to leave everyone to fend for themselves when it’s life or death, doesn’t it? ‘Oh, sorry, would love for all of you not to die, but I really need some self-care right now. Maybe a face mask.’ That’s not something I can just do, Lola. I would never put my life before someone else’s like that.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Lola said.

“Then what do you mean? I try so hard to go above and beyond for everyone—to be a good friend, to be a good pack member…” I felt tears in my eyes. “I already knew I was failing at being a good girlfriend because of the frickin’ *due destini*, but I didn’t think I was failing so much at everything else. Thanks for letting me know.”

Lola winced. “Cali, you’re not failing at everything…”

“So what is it then? When have we ever had a chance to breathe? *Ever?*”

“Okay…that’s fair,” she said slowly.

“Yeah, I think it really fucking is,” I said, feeling hot as tears rolled down my cheeks. “We’ve been through so much, Lola, and honestly, I’m really hurt right now hearing this from you. You’re supposed to be my best friend.”

“I *am* your best friend,” Lola insisted, “but it just makes me so mad!”

“What does?” I asked.

“That Xavier and Ava bullshit keeps affecting you so much,” she said. “You do try, Cali, and you’re a wonderful friend. You’re the best person I know, and it hurts me to see Xavier and Ava break you down.”

I fell quiet. “I’m fine. I’ve just been trying to help Xavier.”

Xavier and I weren’t together anymore, and I was slowly coming to grips with that. But that didn’t mean I could just cut off my feelings and concerns for him. I wanted him to get over whatever was bothering him. If he couldn’t be happy with me…I at least wanted him happy without me. Even if it meant that happiness was with Ava.

*Ugh. Maybe that’s taking it a little too far. I’m starting to think that if he wasn’t with Ava, he’d be in better shape. But it’s not like I can say that to him without making things worse. And if Ava got wind of me telling him that, we’d be at each other’s throats immediately, and next time, Carlson might not be there to keep us from killing each other.*

“That’s what I mean. I suggest you take a break from trying to help everyone around you—at least Xavier—and instead, try helping yourself for a change.” Lola hugged me. “I just love you so much, Cali. You deserve a break.”

I bit my lip, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. Maybe Lola was right, but that was a lot easier said than done…

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A short while later, I was sitting in Greyson’s study still trying to think about what Lola had said. At first, I’d thought it was overblown. Of course I knew who I was. I was…me. But the more I really thought about it, the more I understood what Lola was getting at.

*I’ve lost myself. That’s what she’s trying to tell me.*

I thought I knew who I was, but now I wasn’t so sure.

I realized I had my phone in my hand, my finger hovering over Greyson’s number. I missed him, but maybe I shouldn’t resort to calling him. This was something I had to figure out on my own.

I sighed and laid the phone down.

*I wish Artemis were here. She always seems so sure of herself. So confident. I wonder what my sister would say if I asked her who I am.*

Maybe that was part of the reason Artemis had left to search for her father. To help piece together who she was. I wasn’t going to be able to get in touch with Artemis while she was away in the Fae world, but I could speak to my mother.

I picked up my phone again and quickly dialed my mother. A comforting warmth washed over me when I heard her voice.

“Hello? Cali?”

“Hi, Mom! How are you? How’s Dad? How is—”

“Is something wrong, Cali?”

I paused, sighed. “Yeah. I think I’m a little homesick.”

“Oh no! Are you alone? Isn’t Greyson there?”

“No, he’s not. And maybe that’s for the best. Lola thinks I worry about everyone else so much that I’ve lost sight of who *I* am as a person. I kind of think she’s right. What do I do but worry about what my mates are doing? What problems they’re having? What problems the pack is having?”

“Oh, Cali, don’t tie yourself into knots over that. Who we are is often defined by those we love and how we nurture that love. The important thing is that you’re a good, caring person. To your mates and to the pack. Never doubt that.”

“You have to say all that. You’re my mom.”

She chuckled. “I would say it even if I weren’t your mother, I guarantee. But I’m sure some of the answers you’re seeking will become apparent if you don’t try too hard to find them.”

I took that in, feeling a little puzzled. I didn’t know if that would happen for me, but just having my mother’s advice to mull over had already made me feel better.

“Thanks, Mom. I hope to visit you and Dad soon.”

“You’d better, sweetie!”

Off the call, I put my phone out of sight, lest I be tempted to call Greyson, and went to get ready for crew.

On the way to campus, I had to actively keep myself from thinking about Greyson, but then, of course, my mind drifted to Xavier. I felt bad that he thought the session with Carlson sucked and hoped that he would have a chance to realize there’d been some helpful tidbits in between all the yelling and high emotions.

I wished I could talk to him some more, but given Lola’s advice and Ava’s open hostility toward me, it seemed like a bad idea to reach out to him. It was probably best for me to leave things as they were between us for a while, and hope that over time, things would cool.

As I drove onto campus, I realized something else Lola had thrown at me.

*I need to pick a major. I can’t believe I haven’t even done that yet!*

Deciding what I wanted to focus on in college was something that had absolutely nothing to do with my mates or anyone else. It would help define who I was—or at least where my interests lay.

I was making my way toward the boathouse and mentally laying out a timeline for myself for deciding my major, starting with a plan to come up with a list of my favorite subjects, when I heard a bunch of swearing up ahead.

I was shocked to see that one of the boats was upside down on the ground, and Bear and some of the others were kicking the ground around it. They seemed angry.

“Whoa, what happened here?” I asked as I ran up to join them.

“We’re screwed, that’s what,” Gael remarked.

I was confused. “Why?”

Gael and Patel lifted the boat. “Look.”

My eyes widened. The boat had been spray painted with “Kangaroo Rats suck,” “Kangrats equal Losers,” and a bunch of other trash talk in dark red paint. The boat was also covered in egg yolk and broken eggshells. I was stunned.

“Who did this?” I asked, walking around the boat and taking it all in.

Schmiddy balled up his fists. “The Fringeheads. Those assholes are the only ones who would have the audacity to pull something like this!”

I leaned in closer to take a better look at the boat. “It’s bad but nothing a little cleaning won’t solve…right?”

“You don’t understand,” Johnny said. “They did this on our turf.”

“So?” I asked, taking in the grim, angry faces all around me.

Bear held up a baseball bat. “So, we have to get even. Are you coming?”

**Episode 5133**

**Xavier**

I wiped the blood off my face without any clue who it belonged to. When I jumped in between Knox and Milo, they were already bloodied, and if I hadn’t stopped them, I was sure there would’ve been more blood spilled.

I was pissed as I turned to face them. “Can’t I go away for a couple of hours without the pack turning on itself?”

*No. It’s not the pack’s fault, and I don’t want to blame them all for what these two bozos are doing.*

“My bad, I’m not putting this on the pack. The Samaras have been working together better than ever before…for the most part.” I gave Milo and Knox a pointed look. “This is solely on you two.” I turned to Knox. “Didn’t I tell you to work with Milo?”

Knox gave me a sullen look and said nothing—which was probably smart because one wrong move, and I might slap the crap out of him.

Then I turned to Milo. “And didn’t I tell you to work with Knox?” Milo had been the more agreeable of the two, and my history with Knox told me that the shrimp was probably the reason they’d come to blows in the first place, but Milo was certainly at fault for letting Knox get to him.

“Yeah, you told me to work with him, but have you *met* the guy? Who can work with an asshole like him without wanting to punch his lights out? And besides, he’s the one who—”

A sharp glare and a growl cut Milo’s excuse short.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses. After the shitty day I had with Carlson Greene, coming home to this shit is the last thing I need! Have you both forgotten that I’m your Alpha? That when I brought up the idea of working together, I gave you the option to accept it or not? You both accepted.”

Knox huffed out, “But—”

“Knox, please shut your mouth until I’m finished.” I scowled at him and shook my head. “Once you both agreed to it, the option came off the table, and it became an order. An order from your Alpha. An order you both obviously failed with flying colors. So I have to wonder what it will take for you two to get along without killing each other.” I eyed the broken shards of glass from the window. “Or destroying the pack house.”

It was maddening that I was having to waste time dealing with this when all I wanted was to find Ava and see if we could get back on the same page. But now I was stuck dealing with two young wolves who obviously didn’t know the meaning of teamwork. I’d been stupid to think they could get past their differences—which I still didn’t really understand—and work together. I’d obviously expected too much of them.

“I’m seriously considering the idea that you two are like oil and water, never going to mix. Which means that maybe you don’t belong in the Samara pack.”

I was laying it on a little thick—I had no plans to kick them out over a fight. If that were the case, packs wouldn’t exist—but I did want to communicate as clearly as possible that I was over their shit. If that meant I had to threaten ousting them from the pack, then so be it.

Knox was on the defense immediately. “Oh, is that so? Well, if you’re even considering kicking me out, you better think again because the council says I have to be here. Milo should be the one to pack his bags.”

“He’d be crazy to keep you around, but hey, not my call to make,” Milo said tightly. “Apparently the Samaras like vertically challenged hotheads with inflated egos.”

“Take that back!” Knox screamed. “You’re the one who needs to go!” He was all but foaming at the mouth and getting in Milo’s face. “You don’t belong here, and soon he’ll see that!”

“And you do? I’ve heard people talking around here. You’ve been a troublemaker from the beginning. You said it yourself that the only reason you’re here is because the council decreed it. Sounds to me like Xavier’s keeping you in this pack out of necessity and nothing else!”

“Fuck you, Milo!” Knox shouted. “You don’t know shit! You’re lucky to even be here in the first place. Don’t think that you can’t be—”

“Enough!” I yelled, smashing a fist into the wall. One more thing for Phil to repair. “I need you both to shut the fuck up. I can barely think straight with you two yipping at each other like chihuahuas.”

They both snapped their mouths closed and exchanged sheepish looks.

What I needed was a solution—even if only a temporary one—so I could properly deal with the shit show that was my life by finally getting to Ava so we could talk and straighten things out.

I grabbed Knox, hoisting him off his chair and dragging him to one side of the living room.

Knox fought out of my hold. “Hey, what the hell are you doing?”

Ignoring him, I turned and did the same to Milo, but dragged him to the opposite side. Milo didn’t protest, just gave me a puzzled look.

“From now on, because you two can’t get along, you’re to remain on opposite sides of the house at all times,” I said.

Knox rolled his eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m tired of fooling around. If you two want to act like children, then I’m going to treat you like children. You are never to occupy the same space at the same time. Keep at least ten feet of distance between you two at all times.”

Knox’s eyes widened. “But that’s—that’s— How are we supposed to—”

“This isn’t a suggestion!” I interrupted harshly. “It is an order. And if either of you break it, I’ll hold you both responsible, and”—I directed my attention to Knox—“I’ll take it up with the council, let them decide what to do with a couple of disruptive pack members who refuse to do what they’re told.” I looked between them both. “Do I make myself clear?”

My glare defied either of them to say another word.

“And that order begins now.”

With that, I started toward the kitchen, aching for coffee. Marissa stepped in front of me, clapping her hands.

“Nicely done, Xavier.”

“I’ve reached my limit with those two.”

“I’m not being facetious at all! I think you handled that well. Knox and Milo started going at it shortly after you left with Ava.”

I slowed at hearing Ava’s name before Marissa added, “So, how’d the session go?”

“A lot of yelling,” I grunted. “But maybe it was a necessary evil. Jury’s still out on that.” I felt a little uncomfortable talking to Marissa about it. “I’m sure Ava unloaded on you about it as soon as she got back.”

“No, I was out myself for a bit. Just got back and haven’t had a chance to speak to Ava yet.” Then she paused. “Did you happen to talk to Ava about what happened at the store?”

“I tried, but Ava didn’t want to talk about it. Said it was something to discuss at the session.”

*I’m really starting to despise that word.*

“And did you?” Marissa pressed.

I grabbed the coffee, tempted to drink it straight from the pot. “Nope. It never came up.”

Before Marissa could question me, I added, “Believe it or not, we had way more important stuff to talk about.”

A tense silence fell between us, and I was happy to let Marissa break it.

“Don’t worry. I won’t say anything to Ava. That’s for the two of you to work out. I’m not going to get in the middle of it.”

I was relieved to hear Marissa say that, but I didn’t show it.

“Speaking of working things out, I want you to put someone in charge of keeping a watch on the two brats—Knox and Milo.”

Marissa gave me an annoyed look. “Are you asking me to do it?”

“Not necessarily. I’m asking for your suggestions. I was thinking Josephine or Donovan.”

“Josephine,” Marissa said. “She knows how to keep people in line.”

“Thanks. I’ll talk to Josephine about it.”

I left Marissa in the kitchen and headed upstairs to talk to Ava. I opened our bedroom door and was surprised to find it empty. I checked the bathroom, and she wasn’t there, either.

*Ava, where are you? Are you here?* I mind linked.

Nothing. But that could be because she was still upset and purposely not responding. That would be very Ava. But when I went back downstairs and searched the house, there was no sign of her there, either.

I asked around to see if anyone had seen her, but no one had. I was starting to get worried.

*She should have been home a long time ago. What happened to her?*

**Episode 5134**

**Greyson**

I sprinted toward the SUV, wishing I could shift and cover more ground. But that would be a mistake in the middle of downtown Portland in broad daylight. I could only imagine the chaos that would ensue if I shifted in plain sight of everyone on this bustling street.

The SUV door slammed shut and peeled out in a loud squeal of tires. I had no chance of catching it on foot, and my own car was several blocks away. If I went back for it, there would be no chance of me catching up with Kendall and her abductors.

I looked around. I could try and hotwire one of the parked cars, but I wasn’t crazy about getting arrested for stealing. I wouldn’t be any help to anyone then. I had to think of some other way.

A drunk biker came stumbling out of a bar and went to stand by a large motorcycle. I ran over to him.

“You’re too drunk to drive. Give me your keys,” I said with as much authority as I could muster.

The guy gave me a confused look but complied, dropping the keys in my palm. “But look, man, I only had a pitcher and a couple for the road. Almost nothing at all.” He hiccupped.

Keys in hand and in complete awe of my luck, I hopped on the bike and throttled it to life. “Then I guess you’ll thank me for saving your life. You shouldn’t drink and drive.”

The guy eyed me. “Wait, are you a cop?”

I revved the engine. “Nope, just a concerned citizen.” Then I peeled out after the SUV. I cut a sharp corner and let out a breath of relief when I spotted the SUV far ahead. My mind started racing as I accelerated.

*Who the hell are these people who just took Kendall like that? That was a ballsy move to pull in broad daylight. Anyone could’ve seen them.*

And that meant one of two things, that they were either really stupid and careless or weren’t afraid of getting caught—and if it was the latter, that meant they had power, connections, and confidence. I had to be careful. I was confident I could get Kendall back, but that didn’t mean I didn’t need to be tactful about how I did it.

And if they had as much power as I was starting to think they did, I couldn’t help but connect them to the Dark Fae mafia. Who else would pull something like that without any concern for the consequences? And if that was the case, then I needed to be doubly cautious.

Not to mention that Kendall had just warned me that she was involved in something dangerous. Maybe it was like she said—none of this was any of my business. But I couldn’t just stand by and let her get dragged away like that. Not when I knew what the Dark Fae mafia was capable of.

*Cali would totally support me going after Kendall. We may not trust her as far as we can throw her, but that doesn’t mean we want to see any harm come to her!*

I was closing in on the SUV, sticking on its tail as it sped out of the downtown area toward a more rural one. That troubled me. It would be easier for them to do whatever they wanted with Kendall where there weren’t any witnesses.

As big as this motorcycle was, there was no way I could really force the SUV off the road without getting plowed over and killed. There was a chance I could pull that off if I were able to shift, but at the speeds the SUV was going, there was no use trying that. And though we weren’t downtown anymore, I didn’t know for sure who was in the SUV, so shifting wasn’t worth the risk.

I fell in behind the SUV just as it screeched to a near stop. I had to react quickly to keep from rear-ending it. I maneuvered to the side, thinking that maybe if I went up alongside it, I could speed up to the driver’s side and maybe break the window. It was a long shot, but I needed to do something. They could be doing anything to Kendall in there.

*Shit, this is one fast SUV.*

After a few more attempts to go up alongside the car only to have the SUV swerve to try and knock me off the road, the SUV made a sharp turn off the main road and led me down a rocky, uneven path that was easy for the SUV to deal with but a nightmare for me.

“Shit!” I hissed as I struggled to keep control of the bike. My stomach was in knots as I tried to keep the handlebars steady. If I got pitched off the bike, I would get banged up and recover quickly, but the SUV would have an easy time getting away, and I might not be able to catch up.

The SUV swerved and came to a sudden stop. I jammed on the brakes and using all my strength to keep from getting tossed over the handlebars, I skidded to a stop, too.

The passenger side door flew open and a big, mean-looking guy stepped out. I slid off my bike, ready to shift.

The guy shook his head at me as if in warning.

“Let her go,” I said.

The guy smiled, shook his head again. He was reaching into his coat, and I wasn’t about to wait and see what he was going to pull out. I charged forward, taking the big guy by surprise.

We were rolling around on the ground as more guys poured out of the SUV.

*Fuck, I’m outnumbered.*

A gunshot and a scream from the SUV caused everyone to turn around and look. Kendall burst out of the truck, dragging one of her captors with her handcuffs wrapped around his throat.

I used the distraction to throw the guy off me and race toward her.

Kendall quickly tossed the choking man aside as I sprinted to join her. I pulled her toward the motorcycle.

“There are too many of them for us to fight our way out of this. We have to run,” I panted.

“I can’t shift,” Kendall said. She raised the handcuffs. “These are silver. They’re burning the shit out of me.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “Get on.” I hopped on the bike as the men charged toward us. Kendall leapt on behind me, carefully looping her cuffed hands over my head so they were around my waist and strategically placed over the fabric of my jacket so the silver didn’t touch my bare skin, and then we were off.

The bike swerved dangerously as I made a sharp U-turn. I glanced in one of the side mirrors and saw the men all scrambling back into the SUV, but they were already too late. I pushed the throttle, and we were going so fast that I knew they wouldn’t be able to catch up.

I increased our speed even more as we hit the main road, putting as much distance between us as I could. “Be still so you don’t throw our balance off!” I yelled over the roar of the engine.

“I know how to sit on a bike!” Kendall snapped. “Just drive.”

Kendall was pressed tightly against me, and true to her word, she knew how to move into the curves. After a long stretch and once we were sure we’d left the SUV in the dust, Kendall nudged me and said, “Pull over!”

I found a good spot to stop, and we coasted into a thick cover of trees before I cut the engine. Even though the road had been clear behind us, we still took a moment to listen.

Nothing.

“We must’ve lost them,” I said.

It was a little awkward as she carefully maneuvered her arms back over my head.

“I can try to break the cuffs,” I said.

“No need. I lifted the guy’s keys. They’re in my pocket.” She cocked out her hip.

I slipped my hand into her pocket, thinking about how awkward this was, but Kendall was unfazed, cool and calm as could be.

I eyed the keys. “What the hell? I’ve never seen ones like these.”

“Hurry up!” Kendall said. “They’re not the most comfortable for obvious reasons.”

I unlocked them, and she rubbed her wrists. I noted that her wig was slightly askew.

“Are you going to tell me what that was all about or is it none of my business?”

Instead of showing even a shred of gratitude, she snarled, throwing her wig on the ground.

“You want to know why I’m wearing a disguise? It’s because my ex-boyfriend knows some very dangerous people. And now, genius, thanks to your brilliant plan to track me down and stick your nose in my business, he knows about you, too!”

**Episode 5135**

My eyes were glued to the baseball bat Bear was swinging.

“What do you mean the crew team has to get even?” I asked. “It was just a stupid prank. Isn’t this taking things too far?”

“Actually, it was more than just a stupid prank,” Gael said. “This was an invasion of privacy. They trespassed on our property.”

“Trespassing?” I asked. “Isn’t that a bit much?”

I knew I was starting to sound like the team mom, but someone had to provide perspective before we all ended up committing assault and battery.

Rodrigo shook his head. “You’re new to the team, Cali. You still don’t get it.”

“Well, I’m listening,” I said. “If we’re going to do what I think we’re going to do, then I want to know why.”

“They’re trying to turn us into their little bitches,” Patel explained. “That’s why we can’t just sit back and take this.”

“We have to hit ’em, and we have to hit ’em hard,” Bear said.

“Yup,” Schmiddy said.

I nodded. “I guess I can sort of get that, but how do we even know it was the Fringeheads? Couldn’t it be any of the other teams?”

Johnny sighed, then grabbed my arm to pull me around the other side of the boat. He pointed to the giant, green F painted on the hull.

“F for Fringeheads,” he said. “And that green is *their* green. There’s no doubt this was them.”

“It’s their way of saying they don’t care if we know,” Rodrigo said. “It’s like they’re challenging us to do something about it.”

“Which means we have no choice but to do something about it,” Gael said.

“But do we have to?” I asked, hoping my cooler head would prevail. “Can’t we do better than stooping to their level? Why not just beat them on the water during the regatta?”

Not only would that buy us bigger bragging rights, but it also meant none of us would end up with a criminal record. Truly a legal win-win.

“Of course we’re going to beat them on the water,” Schmiddy said. “That goes without question. But first we’re going to get them back. We can’t just let this attack slide. They have to face the consequences.”

Bear slammed the bat into the ground. “We have to get even.”

I gulped. “Uh…we’re not going to hurt anyone, are we?”

“Just their feelings when they see what we do to their boat,” Codsworth said.

Despite my initial hesitation, I thought messing with the Fringeheads’ boat was only fair. They had trashed ours, and it seemed like we had no choice but to trash theirs. And if I tagged along with the guys, I could prevent them from getting carried away.

Ideally.

I thought of Lola and had a feeling she would say I was being reactive. Instead of taking the time to try and reason with my team, I was just hopping on the vindictive bandwagon. But I figured that riding along and raising a bit of hell was also a good way for me to bond with them. Every good coxswain would do what I was about to do.

*Right…maybe?*

Bear grabbed the bat and made more practice swings. His menacing Babe Ruth impression was doing nothing to assure me that he wouldn’t get carried away.

“Relax, Cali,” he said. “It’s going to be fun.”

*Famous last words?* I wondered.

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As soon as my last class wrapped, I hurried to meet with the team. My stomach roiled with nerves as they waved at me. I still wasn’t sure about what I was getting into, but I was diving in headfirst.

Patel and Johnny were carrying duffle bags loaded to the brim. I was afraid to ask what was in them and prayed they weren’t full of something illegal.

We piled into Schmiddy’s beat up van and drove to the Fringeheads’ boathouse. Gael and Bear had scoped the place out earlier and had a plan for us to get in, cause mayhem, and then get out.

During the long-ish drive, my stomach rebelled further. I started to breathe through my mouth, hoping to avoid breathing in the redolent stench radiating from every inch of Schmiddy’s van. I didn’t want to say anything, but it stunk like a damn barn in the back.

*Jeez, when’s the last time he cleaned this thing?* I wondered.

“Make sure to park far enough away so nobody can see us,” Gael told Schmiddy.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

My anxiety was at an all-time high, and I hoped that whatever they had in mind wasn’t about to send it through the roof.

Bear grinned as he clutched the bat. “The plan is payback.”

The other guys hooted in agreement like Bear had said the most profound, kickass catchphrase ever.

“I mean, yeah, I get that,” I said. “But what do you mean by *payback*?”

“You’ll see,” Johnny said.

“Gee, thanks,” I muttered.

Schmiddy parked the van about a block away from the boathouse. We all filed out of it and snuck around the grounds to get a better vantage point.

Kayden or maybe it was Jayden—I still couldn’t tell them apart—was looking through a pair of binoculars. He scanned left to right and back before reporting back to the rest of us.

“The boathouse looks empty,” Kayden or Jayden said. “They must be done with practice.”

“Perfect,” Gael said. “Let’s go.”

I followed the guys as we made our way to the Fringeheads’ boathouse. Codsworth was so excited that he looked ready to pee his pants.

“Look at that. They even left one of their boats in the water,” he said. “It’s like a sitting duck.”

With our target locked, we moved toward it. Just as the guys were about to get started, Gael shushed us. He gazed over our shoulders, his face tight.

“Someone’s approaching the boathouse,” he said. “Shut up and don’t move a muscle.”

We all froze, waiting with bated breath as a jogger hopped past us. She paused to check her heart rate, then took off again none the wiser. I sighed in relief as the guys grinned at each other. I had faced far more dangerous situations than pranking our rivals, but my heart was racing.

Once we reached the boat, Patel and Johnny set their duffel bags on the dock. They leaned down to unzip them, and I was smacked in the face with the overwhelming stench of…manure?

“What the hell?” I asked, struggling to suppress my gag reflex.

“If you give us shit,” Jayden or Kayden said, “we give you shit.”

“And we’re about to give them a lot of shit,” the other twin said.

They high-fived each other, and I wondered if the team had a book of hidden catchphrases I hadn’t seen. It was either that or something about getting revenge that got the lines going.

“Cali, you keep watch,” Gael said.

The guys hoisted the boat onto the dock, eager to get the mayhem started. Codsworth took out a couple cans of spray paint from his bag.

“Let’s give them shit,” he said.

Johnny and Patel dumped the contents of their duffels into the boat. The smell was so bad I had to breathe through my mouth to keep from puking.

“This smells so much worse than shit,” I said. “Where did you get it? Satan’s latrine?”

Johnny grinned. “What you smell is a special blend of cow, chicken, and pig droppings. Finest in the state. I learned about this mix from my uncle. He’s a pig farmer.”

“Wonderful,” I said, moving away from the boat.

I was so nauseous that I had a hand over my stomach and the other over my nose. It felt like the smell was following me. My head felt light, and the rolling of the dock beneath my feet wasn’t making things any better.

Codsworth followed me and waved a can in my face. “You should tag the boat since you’re the coxswain.”

The thought of going back to the stinking collection of barn shit made my stomach clench. I shook my head.

“No, that’s okay,” I said.

“You okay?” Codsworth asked, eyeing me. “You don’t look so well.”

Just as I opened my mouth to explain that my nose could only take so much, the earth beneath the water shifted. The dock rocked suddenly and violently like it was being hit by a tsunami. I stumbled as a result and eventually lost my footing. Codsworth reached out to take my hand but missed. I fell onto the dock as the world spun faster and faster. Desperate to stay on the dock, I dug my nails into the wood and gritted my teeth as I held on for dear life.

The river’s water level was rising, causing the ropes that secured the dock to the shore to stretch tight. Water poured onto the dock, and it wasn’t long before I was drenched.

I struggled to get to my feet, but I was too weak. My head started to pound, and I felt my grip loosening.

“No!” I said.

“Here!” Gael rushed over.

He reached out for me to take his hand. As I grabbed it, Gael fell off the dock and into the water. His body instantly disappeared into the murky depths.

“Gael! Gael!” I screamed.

Forgetting about my own safety, I tried to reach him. My feet slipped time and again, and I drifted closer to the edge as my hands gave way. The dock was too slippery.

I heard the other guys screaming. Holding onto the wet dock, I turned to see the Fringeheads’ boat topple and sink. It dragged a flailing Patel with it into the river.

The dock tilted and, one by one, the guys fell into the river. Once they went in, they didn’t come back up. I screamed as I lost my grip. I was seconds from falling into the water—

“Cali? Are you okay?”

Codsworth’s voice pulled me back to reality. He was standing in front of me, still offering me the can of spray paint. Behind him, the others were having the time of their lives as they spread shit all over the boat.

I looked around, not bothering to hide my confusion. The dock was fine, the water level was normal, and I wasn’t about to get swept away with the rest of my team. Everything was…fine.

*What the hell just happened to me?*

**Episode 5136**

**Artemis**

As I pondered Celeste’s question, another came to mind. Was she really asking me…or was she telling me? Considering the events up to that moment, the freedom to choose seemed like an illusion.

“Do I really have a choice whether to proceed with the trials or not?” I asked.

If it were up to me, I would have opted for something that didn’t put my life at risk unnecessarily.

“You need to consider what is at stake,” Celeste said. “If you decline the trials, you will no longer have any claim on your family. The court will not take kindly to that.”

Her words struck a chord.

“Is that a threat?” I asked.

“It depends,” Celeste said. “Are you going to proceed with the trials or not?”

*And there it is*, I thought.

If nothing else, my conundrum was at least starting to make sense. It was a “damned if I did and damned if I didn’t” kind of situation. The only way out of it was to accept the trials and overcome whatever challenges they threw at me.

Unless, of course, Marius managed to arrive with Cali before the trials began. He was my one hope…which was troubling. As much as I hoped Marius would come through for me, I couldn’t rely on him to come save the day. Marius was…Marius, after all. More often than not, he was about as reliable as a busted clock.

I had no doubt that he would try to do as I asked. He was a highly skilled fighter and possessed every other skill required of a bounty hunter. But whether or not he succeeded didn’t depend on his array of skills. It all depended on nothing more than luck.

Marius also had the tendency of letting himself get distracted. If a beautiful Fae caught his eye, I was on my own.

The thought of Marius getting entangled with a Fae caused a jealous twinge in my heart. I pushed it away and reminded myself that I had nothing to be jealous about. I had no claim on Marius, and he had none on me.

As Celeste and I reached the south wall, she turned to me. Her eagerness to know my answer was written all over her face.

“Well?” she asked. “I’m not a patient woman.”

I nodded. “I’ll proceed with the trials.”

Celeste smiled. “I knew you would make the right choice.”

*As if I had a choice*, I thought ruefully.

The guards at the wall opened the door so Celeste and I could step out. I spotted a group of guards gathered around a fierce-looking Fae.

“The assassin refused to say who sent her or why,” one of the guards said.

The assassin’s cold eyes fixed on me, and she sneered.

“No matter what the court does to me, they will get you,” she promised. “There are more of me willing to die.”

Her words were no more a revelation than her refusal to speak about who she worked for. I knew there were more assassins out there, and it was only a matter of time before another was dispatched to take me out.

Celeste approached the assassin, studying her from head to toe. She shook her head like the assassin was missing a huge piece of the puzzle.

“That isn’t much of a threat,” she said. “If there are more like you, they will be captured too.”

The assassin snorted like she was the one in control. She was either braver than we gave her credit for or a damned fool.

“I can offer you a deal. If you tell us who sent you, your death will be swift and merciful,” Celeste said. “But if you refuse to cooperate, then I promise you a slow and painful death.”

I kept a neutral expression on my face, but Celeste’s words were a disturbing reminder of the power she and others like her were capable of wielding. Having worked for the Kollector, I knew people like Celeste could take a life without so much as a second thought.

The assassin was as good as dead as soon as she was spotted on the palace grounds. And there was nothing I could do for her, namely because I was her intended target.

Though I could never be as cruel or as callous as those in power, being sympathetic to my would-be assassin’s plight was not at the top of my priorities list.

But I did want answers.

Hopefully, Celeste would not be quite as impatient with the assassin as she was with everything else. I knew that, in time, the assassin would give up her masters. And, as with all things related to war, the ends would justify the means. Celeste would put the assassin through hell before she had her killed.

“You can torture me all you please,” the assassin said. “I’ve sworn to remain silent. Your threats mean nothing to me.”

I stepped forward. “Are you working for the Order of the Winding Thorn?”

The assassin sealed her lips. She glared at me as if daring me to beat the answers out of her.

“We know she is,” Celeste said. “They’ve made it clear that they want the war to continue. They’re committed to doing all they can to ensure it does.”

It all made perfect sense to me. Celeste and the rest of the court viewed me as someone who could bring the war to an end. Even if I hadn’t committed to doing that, the threat I posed to the other side was enough to make them want to eliminate me. Truly, I was damned either way.

“Posture all you’d like,” I said. “But eventually you’ll have to speak if you want to avoid a painful end. Tell me. How many are in this order? What resources do they have? Where are they located?”

Once again, the assassin offered nothing. To her, a painful end was a better option than becoming a traitor to her cause.

I studied her for a moment before speaking again. Something about the way that she pronounced certain words sounded familiar.

“Are you from Perthia?” I asked. “You all have a certain accent that’s hard to ignore.”

My question caught the assassin off guard. Though she stayed true to her vow of silence, her eyes widened for a fraction of a second. She clearly hadn’t expected anyone to guess her origins. I stifled a smile. She had given us intel despite her refusal to do so.

“I’ve heard enough,” Celeste said, nodding to the guard.

He stepped away as Celeste leaned in close to the assassin. She brought her lips within inches of her ear.

“The war will end,” she said, her tone cold. “Just like you.”

With her ominous final message delivered, she gestured toward me. “Don’t worry, it will be dealt with quickly,” Celeste said to me.

Her words surprised me, and I didn’t bother to hide it. I cocked my head.

“I thought you wanted her to suffer,” I said.

Celeste eyed me. “I’m not as cruel as you think.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I could at least be glad the assassin would be killed quickly. There was no need to make her death any worse than it had to be. And, as morbid as it was to think, I knew her death would be the first of many. Celeste was right. The Order of the Winding Thorn was not going to stop until I was dead, or they were all gone. That seemed like a guarantee.

As Celeste and I continued our walk, she told me more about the trials. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to bolster my resolve or try to get me to change my mind.

“Each trial will be more difficult than the last,” she said. “And all of them involve physical strength, a cunning mind, and the ability to face your worst fears. Are you sure you’re still up for it?”

Whether I was or wasn’t didn’t matter since my decision had essentially been made for me. Doing a bunch of trials seemed pointless right now after someone had tried to kill me. Why did I have to prove myself? Wasn’t this enough proof? Besides, I probably wouldn’t do well in the stupid trials considering how distracted I was by everything else. If I had to do them, I would just figure it out, I guess.

Unless there was something better…

Despite Celeste’s confidence that her guards would catch any others who came after me, I preferred to take a more hands-on approach. With that in mind, I turned to Celeste.

“I have a proposal for you and the members of the court,” I said.

Celeste stared at me like she was debating whether to call me a fool or give into her curiosity. I waited as impatiently as she had waited for my answer only a short while earlier

“I’m listening,” Celeste said finally.

“In lieu of a series of trials,” I said, “how about I take down the Order of the Winding Thorn?”

**Episode 5137**

**Ava**

My back was ridiculously itchy, and I was tempted to draw my claws and rip the fabric I was wearing to shreds.

The sweatsuit Carlson’s assistant had given me to wear was driving me crazy. I had no idea what it was made of, but it made me regret acting impulsively. If I had planned, I could’ve at least had something comfortable to wear instead of coming in naked from the woods. The sweat from my run caused the sweatsuit to stick to my skin.

Carlson’s assistant smiled sympathetically at me. “We get walk-ins all the time, and it never hurts to have a few extra clothes on hand.”

“I see,” I said, wishing I had my own clothes to wear.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t thought that far ahead when I had gone into the woods with Xavier. And after I left him behind, I didn’t think to get dressed again. I just ran as fast as my legs could carry me.

*Damn it*.

I hated myself for falling into the same pattern I had criticized Xavier for: fight, fuck, fight, fuck…

As much as I regretted my impulsivity, I had to admit I enjoyed hooking up with Xavier. He knew how to please a woman, and his touch was utterly addictive.

But no matter how high I felt during our passionate encounters, I always came crashing right back down to Earth as soon as we were done. And within seconds of climaxing, I would regret it and hate myself for succumbing to temptation.

It was exhausting.

I was tired of all the self-loathing, the doubt, and the lack of progress with our relationship. We were mates, so why were things so damn hard? Why couldn’t we get past our issues?

*Cali…*

While it was easy to hate myself, I should’ve been focusing all of my loathing on her. She was the reason Xavier and I were having so many problems, though a small part of me knew that wasn’t fair.

Cali didn’t deserve to be thrown under the bus. All she had done was shown up to the session. She thought she was helping Xavier, and I didn’t blame her for that, as much as I wished I could.

I honestly didn’t think Cali had anything to do with my and Xavier’s botched therapy session. The fault lied with Carlson for inviting Cali in the first place and with Xavier for failing to tell me that he had asked Cali to come.

*Why does everything have to be so fucked up?* I wondered.

No matter what Xavier and I tried to do, it always blew up in our faces. It seemed we were destined to struggle, which was why I had run to Carlson’s office. Maybe it was foolish, but some of what Carlson was saying made sense.

And, if nothing else, I didn’t know who else to talk to.

Marissa was a good friend, but she got way too emotionally involved. Still, her over-involvement was better than Xavier’s lack of involvement. He refused to talk to me about what was going on, and I was at my wit’s end. I tried time and again to talk to him, only to end up feeling more frustrated.

He was impossible.

Trying to take my mind off the itchy fabric on my skin, I checked the time. It felt like I had been there an eternity already. How much longer were they going to make me wait?

“Excuse me, but how much longer is it going to be?” I asked.

Before the assistant could answer, Carlson’s door opened, and he stepped out into the waiting room. He looked surprised to see me there.

“Ava? Did you forget something?” he asked.

Not waiting for an invitation, I brushed past him and stepped into his office. Staring at the wall, I allowed myself a single sigh.

“Close the door,” I said.

Carlson didn’t question it. He did as I asked, then took a seat behind his desk.

“I think it would be safe to assume you have some unresolved things on your mind,” he surmised.

*Is he kidding?*

I eyed him. “Xavier stormed out of here. So, yes, I have a few unresolved things on my mind. To say the fucking least.”

Carlson nodded and gestured to the chair I had been sitting in earlier. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“Gladly,” I said.

I took a seat and unloaded the worries in my heart and in my head. Carlson listened carefully as I told him about how Xavier and I were stuck in a self-destructive cycle that neither of us knew how to escape. I was tired of hitting my head against the wall and hoped Carlson could provide some insight into our relationship.

When I finished unloading, Carlson took a moment to process what I had said. After a few beats, he cocked his head curiously.

“Do you love Xavier, Ava?” he asked.

My eyes immediately welled with tears. The love I felt for Xavier was the only thing I was sure about in my life.

“I’ve been in love with him since we met,” I said. “Even before we knew we were mates. I love Xavier with all of my heart, and if it weren’t for Silas…”

I stopped myself. There was no point in dwelling in the past. What was done was done, and it was better to focus on how I could make things right for us in the future.

Carlson wrote something on his pad. “Have you put some thought into the future?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Simple. What would the perfect life with Xavier look like?” Carlson asked. “Have you given it any thought?”

“Of course,” I said. “All I want is for us to be happy. I want us to spend time together without all of the drama. I want what other mates have.”

“What about a family?” he asked.

“A family?”

“Yes. You love him. He loves you,” Carlson said. “Don’t you want to raise a family together?”

I thought of Maya with her twins. She looked happier than I thought possible, and Colton clearly adored his babies. They had the perfect family, the perfect relationship. The realization had me sobbing. I cried uncontrollably as my mind continued to contrast what they had with what Xavier and I lacked.

Carlson handed me a tissue and waited patiently for my tears to subside. The last thing I wanted to do was appear weak in front of anyone, but he wasn’t paid to judge me. He was paid to listen. I wiped the last few tears from my eyes and settled down.

“Why did the thought of a family make you cry?” he asked gently.

I took a breath. “Because I don’t think I’ll ever have one.”

“Can you elaborate?” he asked.

“I’m pretty sure Xavier wants to have a family someday,” I said. “But the way we keep cycling through this bullshit— Who would want to raise kids like that?”

“Well, I think the fact that you’re here suggests you’re trying to break that pattern,” Carlson said. “And Xavier, despite getting overwhelmed and angry earlier, did agree to therapy. So breaking the pattern is a strong possibility for you two. But I won’t kid you. It can be difficult.”

“Difficult? More like impossible,” I said.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“It’s impossible to get Xavier to talk about anything. The only way we ever try to fix things is by having sex. But it’s not enough,” I said. “I never thought Xavier would be able to forgive me for what I did to him, but he did. And…and I thought we would be able to build a future together. Instead, he seems hung up on Cali and determined to keep me in the dark.”

“All of that may be true,” Carlson reasoned. “But perhaps… Well, have you ever considered that perhaps you’re the one who’s hung up on Cali?”

I snorted. Was Carlson trying to be Captain Obvious or what?

“Of course I am,” I said. “How could I not be when my mate keeps running back to her?”

I got up, annoyed and eager to go for another run. It had been a mistake to come back to Carlson’s office.

“I came here to get help, not criticism,” I said. “This was a total waste of time.”

With my problems no closer to being resolved than when I had first shown up, I made my way to the door, ready to slam it behind me.

“You’re doing exactly what Xavier did earlier,” Carlson said. “You both need to understand that you can’t run away from your problems. You can walk out that door anytime you want. Or…you can remain here, and we can work together to find a solution. Your choice.”

I paused with my hand on the doorknob. Though I wanted to lash out at him, Carlson was right. I had come back because I wanted to break the pattern, not repeat it.

With a heavy sigh, I returned to my seat.

“What really upset you in our joint session earlier?” Carlson asked.

“Everything was about Xavier,” I said. “And I’m sick of it. I’m sick of making it all about him and having to put my emotions and my needs to the side.”

“I understand,” Carlson said. “You’ve spent so much time and energy focusing on getting Xavier to admit what he wants that you’ve ignored your own needs.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“So then, let me ask you this,” Carlson said. “What is it you want?”

**Episode 5138**

**Greyson**

I poured Kendall about three fingers’ worth of my favorite whiskey and served myself about twice as much. After our harrowing escape, we both needed something stiff to settle our nerves.

Luckily, Kendall had already cooled off. It went a long way to settle the tension between us, though there was still plenty of tension left. She was a woman with too many secrets for my taste.

Having realized right away that going to a public place was a bad idea, I suggested going to my apartment. I could always pick up my car later when the coast was clear. But in the meantime, it was best if we made ourselves scarce.

“Drink?” I offered.

“Thanks,” she said. “This is a really nice apartment, by the way.”

Kendall took the glass from my hands and went back to admiring my apartment. She was doing her best to avoid talking about what the hell was going on, but I would only indulge her for so long. I needed answers.

But first, I needed a drink.

I settled into my favorite chair and downed half of my whiskey. Memories of the last time Cali was here came to mind. I licked my lips as I thought about how much I wanted to bring her back so we could baptize the rest of my apartment.

Instead of bringing back Cali like I had always wanted to, I was hiding out in my apartment with a woman I didn’t trust. In fact, the more I got to know about Kendall, the less I trusted her. She had too many secrets, many of which could’ve gotten me killed.

It made no sense to me but learning about her only added to her mystery. Answers led to more questions instead of insights. I wouldn’t take my eyes off of her until I knew who she really was and what game she was playing.

*Easier said than done*.

Kendall was standing by the balcony with a soft smile on her lips. She stared at downtown, admiring the rising towers, before she turned around to face me. The light picked up the violet in her eyes, giving them a radiant and mesmerizing quality.

Not wanting to fall under any kind of spell, I stared at the amber liquid in my glass.

“You have quite the view,” she said.

I looked up at her. “Did we come here to talk about my apartment?”

The soft expression on her face hardened instantly. I could’ve done a better job of choosing my words, but I wasn’t in the mood for pleasantries.

“You should have never followed me,” she said.

“Oh, well. Excuse me for saving your fucking life,” I said, irritated. “Next time, I’ll turn away and wish you the best of luck.”

“That’s probably the smartest thing you could do,” she said. “You have no idea what you got yourself caught up in.”

After downing the rest of my whiskey, I set the glass down and got up to join her. She sipped from her glass, her radiant eyes watching my every move.

“So why don’t you fill me in?” I asked.

Kendall turned away. I grabbed her arm and turned her around roughly. I was done playing games. It was time she gave me answers.

“Look me in the eye when you talk to me,” I said. “You owe me that much.”

She glanced down at her arm, then back at me. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

I tightened my grip. “Not as far as I can throw you.”

Kendall laughed. “With arms like that, I imagine you can throw me a pretty good distance.”

“Stop playing games,” I said through gritted teeth. “Tell me why you’re running around as Greta. Tell me why a group of mobsters tried to kidnap you today.”

“It’s exactly what I told you earlier,” she said, shaking her arm free.

“Then tell me again,” I said.

Kendall sighed. “You have a mate. You couldn’t possibly imagine how hard it can be to meet someone.”

She was right. I thought of Cali and felt the same sense of overwhelming gratitude and love I always did when she came to mind. I had been lucky to find her, and not a day went by that I didn’t thank my lucky stars I did.

But that didn’t answer my question.

“By the way,” Kendall continued. “I really liked Freddie. So thanks so much for scaring him off.”

“Hm, I wonder if good old Freddie would’ve tried to help you like I did?” I wondered aloud. “I doubt it.”

“Well, thanks to you, I’ll never know,” Kendall said.

“What does this have to do with Greta?” I asked.

She sighed. “I thought I had met someone special. At first, he treated me well and did everything he could to make me happy. We had so much in common, and he was easy to be with.”

*What interests would anyone have in common with her?* I wondered.

I knew so little about Kendall that I couldn't begin to guess what she did when she wasn’t running around town as someone else.

“And then…and then he didn’t treat me so well,” she said, her eyes darkening. “I broke it off, and the former Mr. Wonderful began stalking me. He threatened me and made my life a living hell.”

“Why didn't you go to the police?” I asked. “Or the FBI? Hell, anyone. Why didn’t you get help?”

“Because it turns out that my ex was in the mob,” Kendall said. “What good would going to the police do other than give him more reason to kill me?”

“I see,” I said, putting some pieces together. “Then why would you show up as Greta in a picture with Hans?”

Kendall sipped her whiskey. “I met Hans through a business associate of my ex. He offered to protect me, and it was an offer I didn’t want to refuse. But I was wary. I only agreed to let him protect me if I was able to disguise myself. Hence, Greta was born.”

“Sounds like a risky deal,” I said. “Exchanging one mobster for another? Having to hide yourself in plain sight while pretending to be someone else?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” she admitted. “Thanks to my ex, I didn’t have many options left.”

She stared out at the view as if she were thinking back on her tumultuous past. She sipped her whiskey pensively, and I had no doubt she would’ve been content to leave things right there.

“You could have run,” I suggested.

Kendall laughed bitterly. “He would have found me. There was nowhere on this planet where he couldn’t get to me. Unlike the other promises he made, I knew this was one he would keep.”

I pondered her words until I arrived at my next question.

“All right, so you turned to Hans for protection,” I said. “In exchange for what? Guys like him rarely do anyone favors out of the goodness of their hearts.”

Kendall met my eyes. “In exchange for me.”

My eyes widened before I schooled my features. Kendall had become Hans’s mistress in order to stay alive. It wasn’t exactly the best plan, but I wasn’t sure I would’ve come up with anything better had I been in her shoes. Still, it seemed Kendall had a thing for dangerous men.

“I don’t need you to judge me for what I did,” she said. “Hans was good to me. I liked him.”

“You liked him? Hans was involved in the kidnapping of a boy,” I balked. “He was hardly a model citizen. Don’t get me wrong. I couldn’t care less what you had to do to survive. But to turn to a guy like that?”

Kendall shrugged. “I know. But he kept me safe until someone killed him. Now I’m just trying to keep tabs on my ex so I can stay a step ahead. That’s why I want you to forget about all of this. I have my hands full trying to keep myself alive. I can’t worry about you too.”

“I’m not sure I can just forget all this,” I said. “But I have one more question.”

“Oh, goodie,” she muttered.

“What happened to me outside of the fight club?” I asked.

“I helped you,” she said simply.

“Right. And what happened after?” I asked.

She cocked her head. “After?”

“I came to in my car. My mind was a blank slate,” I said. “How did I get there and why can’t I remember?”

Kendall shrugged. “Maybe you sleepwalk?”

I snarled, not appreciating her cheeky answers. She was making things harder than they had to be, and my patience had run thin long before we reached my apartment.

“All I know is that I helped you fight off those would-be muggers and said goodbye,” she said. “Whatever happened after that, I have no idea. Sorry.”

She downed her whiskey and set the glass down. “Thanks for the hospitality, but it’s time for me to go.”

I followed her to the door. “You sure it’s okay?”

“Can I give you some advice?” she asked, her violet eyes firm. “Don’t worry about me. Worry about yourself. You just opened Pandora’s box.”

**Episode 5139**

Still reeling from my trippy experience, I looked around and shook my head like I couldn’t believe what I had just lived through.

“I—I thought that the dock was collapsing,” I stammered. “The water was rising and—”

“What are you talking about?” Codsworth asked, then hopped up and down on the dock. “See? It isn’t going anywhere.”

Though the dock rocked a bit, Codsworth was right. It wasn’t going anywhere, and the guys weren’t getting sucked into some vortex in the river.

“Yeah, I see,” I said.

I couldn’t explain what had just happened and decided it was best not to say anything more about it. At least not to Codsworth. As I stared out into the water, I thought about some of my past hallucinations. Whatever I had just experienced reminded me of them. It couldn't have been a good sign.

*Are they going to come back like before?*

The sound of laughter and the smell of manure wafted over from the boat. The guys were still having a gay old time spreading shit on the bottom of the boat. Codsworth nudged me.

“Take this and tag the boat,” he said, handing me the spray paint.

I took the can from his hand and began to draw the letters K and R on the front. Just like the Fringeheads, we were boldly claiming credit for the damage we were doing to their boat.

My heart raced as the paint dripped from the main lines of each letter. Despite being hesitant to raise a little hell, I was getting caught up in the excitement along with the rest of my team. It was pretty thrilling getting back at the Fringeheads. They deserved to suffer the same thing they had done to us.

“On my own, I would never have the guts to do something like this,” I admitted.

“It’s not really that big a deal,” Gael insisted. “This is kind of like a sick tradition that goes back to the very first crew rivalry between both schools.”

“Except more intense,” Bear said, swinging his bat. “Anybody want to join me in using their boat as a piñata?”

“Whoa, wait a minute,” I said. “Manure is one thing, but we can’t destroy their boat. I didn’t sign up for that.”

Bear burst out laughing. “I’m just teasing! Oh, man. The look on your face is priceless!”

“Ha,” I said dryly.

“We should probably get going,” Patel said. “Our job here is done.”

After picking up our things, we rushed back to the van. We laughed as we thought about how the Fringeheads were going to react to our prank.

“I wonder how pissed they’re going to be when they realize we beat them at their own game,” Gael said.

“Maybe they can get their sponsor to get them a new boat,” Schmiddy said. “We can come back and trash it too.”

We loaded up into the van, and I was dismayed to notice it still stank of manure.

“Jeez, it smells worse now than it did before,” I said. “Did you guys empty all the duffel bags?”

“That’s not manure,” Jayden or Kayden said. “That’s just Johnny.”

We all laughed as Johnny flipped one of the twins the bird. Schmiddy drove off, and we continued to tease each other.

“Anyone else starving?” Patel asked.

“Let’s get some pizza,” Johnny suggested.

“And beer,” Bear added. “We’re celebrating!”

While the guys talked about how hungry they were and how much they planned to eat, I pinched my nose shut and tried to ignore the wave of nausea washing over me. I was still feeling the effects of whatever had happened to me on the dock and not exactly in the mood to eat.

But I didn’t want to be a party pooper and make it seem like I didn’t have fun. As much as I wanted to go home and shower, I wanted to continue bonding with my team. I would never be able to get them to see me as one of them if I bailed every time they hung out.

We got back to campus and stopped at our favorite pizza place. I jumped out of the van and greedily gulped down the fresh air. The smell of manure was branded inside of my nose, and I knew it would stay there for days.

After washing up thoroughly, we settled in our favorite booth and ordered some pies and pitchers of beer. Despite my queasiness, I felt better after eating a few slices and drinking a few beers.

*I’m glad I came*, I thought.

As I grabbed another slice of pizza, I noticed Johnny was acting strangely whenever the waitress stopped by. He followed her with his eyes but looked down at his feet every time she brought us more beer or pizza.

“What’s going on with him?” I asked Schmiddy.

“Oh him? He’s had a crush on that girl for forever,” he said around a bite of pizza. “But he’s too chickenshit to do anything about it.”

“What? Really?” I asked. “But he’s, like, super outgoing.”

“Except when he’s around girls,” Schmiddy explained. “When they’re around, he tends to clam up…uh, like a clam.”

I poked an elbow in Johnny’s side when the waitress came back to our table.

“What?” he asked, sneaking glances at her.

“Do you like her?” I asked.

His eyes widened with horror. “Don’t say that! She might hear you!”

“So? I don’t want to tell you what to do, but she can’t read your mind,” I said. “Try talking to her. The worst thing that can happen is that she isn’t interested.”

“I dunno,” Johnny said, watching the waitress as she went to another table.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “You’re one of our top rowers. You need to bring that confidence to other areas of your life.”

Johnny smiled. “Thanks, Hart. I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think too long,” I teased, then got up. “Be right back.”

“Where you goin’, Hart?” Bear asked.

“To pee,” I said, making everyone laugh. “That okay with you?”

“Only if you bring a pitcher when you come back,” Bear said.

I rolled my eyes and made my way to the bathroom. My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket.

Greyson.

It was too noisy to take his call inside, so I stepped outside of the restaurant. I couldn’t wait to hear his voice.

“Hey, you,” I said. “I’m so happy you called.”

“Well, I did promise to stay in touch,” he said. “How are you, love?”

“I’m great—” I started.

 A truck blasted its horn at a car as they both drove by.

“Where are you?” Greyson asked.

I filled him in about the Kangaroo Rats act of revenge and how I was probably going to have to burn my clothes to get the smell of manure out of them. Greyson laughed along with me as I told him the extent of our prank. I considered telling him about my hallucination but decided against it.

*Probably better to wait until he gets back*.

Someone pounded on the restaurant window. I turned around to see Schmiddy gesturing from inside. I grinned at Schmiddy, who gave me two thumbs up.

“Is everything okay with the pack?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, I did have a pretty intense conversation with Lola. I want to talk to you about it, but it can wait until you get back.”

“I hope it’s not troubling you too much,” he said.

“It’s not,” I said. “When are you coming home? I miss you.”

“I’m not sure, love,” he said, then sighed. “It’s been one hell of a day.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is there something else?”

“Yeah. I had another run-in with Kendall,” he said. “Things got a little hectic.”

“Oh my gosh. What happened?”

“Someone tried to kidnap Kendall, and I had to come in and help her escape them,” Greyson said.

“What?” I shrieked. “Who tried to kidnap her? Why? Are you okay?”

“Everything is fine, love,” Greyson said. “We got away and laid low at my apartment.”

While I was relieved Greyson hadn’t been hurt, I was less than thrilled about the idea of him and Kendall getting cozy at his place. She had an allure that was hard to ignore, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if she tried to use her wiles on Greyson.

Not that I was jealous. I trusted Greyson implicitly. I just didn’t trust Kendall.

“She said to let it go, but I’m not about to do that,” Greyson said.

“Why not? If she’s telling you it’s dangerous, why not drop it?” I asked.

“Not yet. Besides, I don’t think that’s an option anymore.”

“Why not? Do you have to get involved?” I asked.

“I think I already am,” he said. “There are some things I need to wrap up here. And there’s something definitely off about Kendall. I’m not letting this go until I get all the answers.”

His determination filled me with dread.

**Episode 5140**

**Xavier**

My hands were balled up at my sides, my jaw was clenched tight, and my breaths were labored. I was doing my best not to panic, but my mate was missing, and I had no idea where she was.

I tried calling and texting Ava, but nothing. She hadn’t read any of my texts, and she hadn’t returned any of my calls. Ava could be impulsive, but she was not the kind of woman who would go missing without telling anyone.

The fact that no one knew where she was troubled me most. Even if Ava was pissed at me and refused to answer my calls, she would’ve at least told Marissa where she was heading. But she hadn’t. Why not?

*Where could she be?*

A million scenarios ran through my mind. As I tried to make sense of each one, Marissa stepped into the room. She looked as worried as I felt, but I could also see the harshness in her gaze. As always, she blamed me for whatever was going on with Ava.

“Any news?” I asked.

“The search parties are coming back,” she said.

“All right,” I said, hoping to get good news.

Marissa pinned me with her gaze as we waited for the others to return. I could hear her question before she asked it. She had asked me the same thing no less than a dozen times already.

“Are you sure Ava didn’t mention anything?” she asked. “Not even a clue?”

I sighed. “No, she didn’t.”

The only thing I remembered was that Ava was heading away from the pack house. I didn’t think much of it at the time because we were both upset. I figured Ava wanted to clear her head away from me. It was nothing new and nothing I hadn’t done myself a million times.

Like me, Ava loved to run in the woods. I assumed that after she ran to her heart’s content, she would come back home.

*Where could she have run off to?*

Geraint was part of one of the first search parties to get back. He gave me a pained expression as he shook his head.

“Sorry, we couldn’t find anything,” he said.

My heart dropped. “Fuck.”

“I’m happy to go back out there and keep looking,” Geraint offered.

“Thanks,” I said. “But there are other search parties out there. Let’s see if they had any luck.”

Just then, Josephine returned with Milo and Knox in tow. They were keeping their prescribed distance from each other but had the same glum expression on their faces. It looked like they were about to deliver bad news too.

“No sign of Ava,” Josephine said.

I cursed again as my panic rose. It was clear that nobody saw Ava after she left me in the woods. It confirmed my worst nightmare. Ava never made it back to the pack house.

As the others murmured their concern, I tried to keep my composure. Did Ava deliberately decide not to return, or had something prevented her from coming back? I wasn’t sure which was worse.

I couldn’t help but feel responsible. Maybe if I hadn’t been such a dick during therapy, she wouldn’t have gotten so upset. But I couldn’t help it. I didn't know what to do. I felt overwhelmed. It was like I was being assaulted from all sides.

The last search party made it back to the pack house to deliver the same news. Nobody had seen Ava, and they hadn’t been able to pick up her trail.

“What do you want us to do?” Marissa asked.

As I tried to think of what to tell her and the others, an idea came to mind. I should’ve thought of it earlier. Having been the last person who saw Ava, I knew exactly where to start looking for her.

“I think I know where to look,” I said. “I’m going to see if I can pick up her scent where I last saw her.”

“You want us to come along with you?” Marissa asked.

“We want to help out however we can,” Geraint said.

Despite the fear in my heart, I felt it burst with pride as my pack showed their support. Even Milo and Knox seemed to have put their ridiculous feud aside to help me.

“Thank you. All of you,” I said. “I really appreciate everything you’ve done. But I’d rather you all stay here in case Ava shows up. I can move faster on my own and want to cover as much of the search area as I can.”

With that said, I ran up to my room and tried to ignore how empty it felt without Ava there. She had only been gone a few hours, but it felt like an eternity already.

*I’m going to find her and bring her back*.

I quickly grabbed a pack, and Marissa came into my room as I zipped the bag.

“Is there anything else I can do?” she asked.

“Can you give me a call if Ava gets back?” I asked. “Maybe you guys can run a few more search parties in case Ava manages to get back to Samara territory and needs help to make it to the pack house.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Marissa said.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

She got ready to leave but paused at the door. I looked at her expectantly. She had never been one to let me off the hook easily.

“You know Ava is my best friend,” she said. “Whatever you find, whatever you have to do…bring her back. Don’t screw it up.”

With that final warning, she walked out. I cursed, knowing what was at stake. If something happened to Ava, it could turn the entire pack against me. I had to find her.

A short while later, I was driving, my pack in the trunk. Normally, I would’ve run, but driving was giving me a sense of control that I needed right now. Running felt like it would only cause me to spiral even more. I couldn’t afford to do that right now.

But even in my human form, I couldn’t shake the sense of dread.

*Why wouldn’t she come back?*

Ava had always made it clear that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with me. I had been stubborn and refused to believe her at first. But time after time, she proved me wrong and stuck by my side.

I had fallen in love with her again, and I was sure she still loved me. I was sure she still wanted to spend her life with me. So even if we had had a fight, it didn’t change things. Ava was right. We had fought a million times before but always came back to each other.

So why didn’t she come back that time? Why had she just disappeared? I tried hard not to jump to conclusions, but it felt like something had happened to her.

*Stop. There has to be an explanation.*

Trying to stay positive, I drove back toward to the spot where we had fought, then fucked. I got out, walking a bit and immediately picked up our scents and focused on hers. It was a painful reminder of what I may have lost. Smelling her scent could never compare to what it felt like to hold her in my arms.

*I’m going to find her.*

Following her scent, I realized that it was moving away from the pack house. She had run as far from me as she could.

It made me feel guilty as hell. It was all my fault. If I had just sat through our session, we wouldn’t have fought, and she wouldn’t have taken off like that. As soon as I found her, I would make things right.

I recognized where Ava’s scent was leading me to and wondered if I had gotten turned around.

*She went back to Carlson Greene’s office? What the fuck?*

Of all places, why would she go back to that torture pit? All that guy did was to stir shit up until it reached an intolerable level. Either Ava was a masochist, or she was desperate.

I got back in my car and sped to Greene’s office. Luckily, I found a spot nearby and parked. I got out quickly and continued following her scent. She stepped out of Greene’s office right as I arrived.

My heart swelled at the sight of her, but it wasn’t long before anger overshadowed my relief. Ava had put me through hell just so she could talk more shit about me with Greene? Unacceptable.

Ava’s head whipped up the moment she caught my scent. Our eyes locked, and I gritted my teeth to keep my fury at bay.

“Xavier?” she said with surprise.

I marched right up to her. “Get back to the pack house. Now.”

We were going to have another blowout, but it wasn’t going to be anywhere near that jerk Greene. He knew too much about our issues already.

Ava stood straight as she stared at me with defiance written all over her face. She hadn’t appreciated my tone and looked ready to push back.

“Or what, Alpha?” she asked.

**Episode 5141**

“Well, I can agree with you on that,” I said, leaning against the wall of the restaurant. “There’s something weird going on with Kendall, no doubt about that. I just want you to be careful, Greyson. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I’m fine.”

“I know you are, and I know that you can take care of yourself. I just hate that you’re going through all of this on your own,” I said. “You shouldn’t be alone up there in Portland, dealing with all of this. You should have your pack to support you. And you should let me support you, too.”

“Love, you do support me. I know you’ll always have my back,” he said. “You’ve proven that time and time again. But whatever is going on here, it’s a one man job. Trust me, I’m fine. Really. And I won’t do anything too dangerous.”

“*Greyson*—”

My heart squeezed in my chest. Him saying he wouldn’t do anything dangerous was only to make me feel good. That was never how things went. Danger was just part of our lives, especially with him as Alpha. And even though he was an Alpha, it didn’t mean he was invincible…

“I swear, Cali,” he said firmly. “I’m just going to do a little more investigating.”

I sighed. “Well, I don’t like it, but you’re obviously going to do whatever you want, here. I guess I’ll do some digging on my end as well.”

Greyson’s response was immediate. “What? Cali, no. I don’t want you getting anywhere near this stuff with Kendall. Not anymore. Now that I’ve seen how dangerous this situation is, I want you far away from it. Right now, Kendall’s the only thing linking my memory loss and the marks on my shoulder. That’s the only reason why I’m going after her. The fact that it looks like she’s mixed up with Hans and his crowd tells me everything I need to know about how dangerous she is. No, you need to stay far away from anything she’s involved in. I don’t want you putting yourself in unnecessary danger.”

I took that in, all the while thinking about how I’d had coffee with Kendall, just the other day. It had felt like a completely normal outing—something I would’ve done with any friend. But now I knew that it hadn’t been normal at all—Kendall had lied to my face. She’d been lying to all of us this whole time. She clearly wasn’t just any old collegiate program coordinator.

“Cali,” Greyson pressed. “Tell me you’ll back off.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “I’ll stay away from Kendall. For now.”

“Good—”

“But only until you get home,” I added.

Greyson chuckled. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“And you’ll be home soon, right?” I asked.

“I’ll be home soon,” he said. “I promise.”

“You’d better be,” I told him. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Cali,” he said quietly. “Get home safe.”

“You too.”

“Talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Greyson,” I murmured.

He ended the call, and I stared down at my phone, missing him. But I still had to pee, so I headed into the restaurant and made a beeline for the bathroom. When I was done and had washed my hands, I reached out to open the door but stopped, hesitating for a moment as I thought over the conversation I’d just had with Greyson.

He didn’t want me to keep investigating Kendall—he thought it was too dangerous—but really, *any* information I managed to glean would probably help us piece together who she really was and what she was up to. And surely Greyson didn’t really expect me to just sit around and wait for Kendall to make her next move?

Feeling uncertain, I drummed my fingers against the bathroom doorknob. I was already feeling a lot of guilt when it came to what I was—or, more specifically, what I *wasn’t*—telling Greyson. I intended to fill him in, but I just hadn’t managed to think of a way to tell him about my therapy session with Xavier and Ava. And I hadn’t even *thought* about how to broach the topic of a possible engagement. Could I really lie to him about this, too?

I didn’t know if I’d be able to handle the stress.

My phone buzzed in my hand again, and when I looked down, I saw that it was a message from Lola.

*Hey, where are you? Are you heading home soon?*

I stared down at the message for a long moment—and then it hit me. The solution to my problem was staring me in the face!

Instead of texting, I called Lola.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asked, answering after the first ring. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine,” I said. Then I frowned and added, “Well, everything *might* be fine.”

“What?” Lola asked, sounding understandably confused. “What does that mean? What are you talking about, Cali?”

“Do you remember how I told you not to look into Kendall’s digital footprint?” I asked.

Lola huffed. “Yeah, I remember. You got pretty snippy about it, as I recall. What about it?”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind,” I told her.

Lola gasped. “What? Are you serious?”

“Dead serious,” I said. “I want you to find everything you can on her—bonus points if you can figure out what she’s really doing in Bend. Why is she even at this school? Where was she before? Where does her money come from? Everything you can find.”

“Whoa,” Lola breathed. “I gotta say, Cali, I’m surprised to hear you say this. What’s changed?”

“A whole freaking lot,” I muttered. I told Lola everything Greyson had just told me about Kendall—the other name she went by, his memory loss, the mark that had appeared on his shoulder, Hans, Kendall’s connection with it all, the failed abduction plot, Greyson’s rescue, and her suggestion that he stay out of it.

Lola let out a low whistle. “Wow. Okay. Well, I have a lot to work with now, at least. There’s another name to dig into, and some new associations.”

“Yeah, exactly,” I said. “So you should be able to find out a lot of information about her, right?”

“Let’s hope so,” Lola said. “It sounds like I’m going to be busy tonight.”

“Good,” I said, feeling satisfied. I wanted to gather all the information we could on this woman, and really, if Lola was the one actually doing the investigating, then I *technically* wasn’t involved. That way, I’d be keeping my vow to Greyson and keeping my nose out of all things Kendall.

“Okay, well, I’ve got my marching orders, so I’d better get to work,” Lola said. “It sounds like I have a lot to do.”

“And you’ll let me know if you—”

“I’ll let you know if I find anything,” Lola said. “I’ll show you what I’ve come up with when you get home. I’m sure we’ll have lots to talk about.”

“Thanks, Lola,” I said gratefully.

I ended the call and—feeling better—finally left the bathroom and went to rejoin my teammates. But as I headed for the table, I nearly collided headlong with the waitress as she strode around the corner of the bathroom hallway.

“I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed, stepping out of the way.

“Excuse me,” she breathed, flushing. “Sorry about that.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I said quickly. Then we looked at each other, laughing awkwardly.

Over the woman’s shoulder, I could see my teammates at our table. Johnny’s eyes were on both the waitress and me—though he was probably just watching the waitress.

I smiled to myself, thinking this was my chance to do him a favor. I turned back to the waitress.

“I’m not always with them,” I said. “Does my team come in here often? I hope they behave themselves—though I’m sorry if we’re being too rowdy tonight.”

The waitress—her name tag said “Sandy”—waved an airy hand. “Oh, that’s fine. I don’t mind them at all. I like it when the crew team comes in. They’re so much better than the lacrosse team. The crew guys are really nice, and they always tip really well.” She smiled and leaned in a little closer. “And they’re not bad to look at, either.”

I returned her smile—this was the perfect opportunity to gauge Sandy’s interest in Johnny. “Yeah, so, about that—”

But before I could finish talking, the front door of the restaurant slammed open, and a rush of angry voices poured into the space.

Sandy and I both spun around, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

But when I saw who the angry voices belonged to, I felt the blood drain from my face. My whole body went cold, and I swayed a little on my feet.

Standing at the front of the restaurant was the entire Fringehead team—and they looked mad as hell.

**Episode 5142**

**Xavier**

I glowered at Ava, but she was glaring right back at me, looking as angry as I felt.

She raised an eyebrow, like she was waiting for my answer to her question, but instead of offering one, I took a step forward, grabbed her, and tossed her over my shoulder.

“Xavier! What the fuck?” she burst out, kneeing me hard in the chest. “Put me down!”

I ignored her, though she didn’t stop squirming as I strode toward the car.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she ground out.

I opened the car door and dropped her unceremoniously on the front seat. She glared up at me, but I slammed the door and stalked around to the driver’s side.

Climbing in, I pulled on my seat belt and started the engine.

“What the fuck, Xavier?” Ava sputtered. “You can’t just pick me and move me around like furniture whenever you want to. I’m not a piece of goddamn luggage!”

I looked out at the road as I navigated my way out of the parking lot. I’d known Ava for a long time, and there was something in her voice that told me she didn’t hate what I’d just done. And that she was irritated with herself for not hating it.

“Well?” she demanded, narrowing her blue eyes at me. “Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said coldly. I looked over at her, meeting her eyes. “You can never fucking do that to me again.”

She stared at me in complete disbelief. “I’m sorry, do you actually think you can stop me from seeing a *therapist*?”

That was what finally pushed me over the edge. Anger welled up in my chest, and my heart began to pound. Did she seriously not get why I was mad? Did she really think it was because she’d gone to see Carlson Greene without telling me?

I pulled over, tires screeching, then turned to face her. Her eyes widened, so I was sure the fury I felt was written all over my face.

“I don’t give a shit that you were seeing a doctor, Ava,” I hissed. “I thought you were hurt. I didn’t know where the fuck you were. You just disappeared, and you can’t fucking do that to me. No one knew where you were. You told me you were going home, but when I got back, you weren’t there. I had no idea what had happened to you, and I’m telling you that you can’t just disappear. You can’t do that to me.”

As I spoke, the anger in Ava’s eyes seemed to melt away. When she reached out to rest her hand on my arm, I looked down, surprised. I hadn’t realized that I was shaking.

I took a deep breath. There was a steady buzz of pain in the back of my skull, but I did my best to ignore it.

“I’m sorry, X,” Ava said quietly. “I—I didn’t mean to make you worry. And you’re right—I should’ve told you that I’d changed my mind and wasn’t going back to the house.”

I nodded. “Yeah.” I appreciated the apology, and it eased some of the tightness in my chest. “Now you have to promise that you won’t ever do that to me again.”

She looked at me for a moment longer, then leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips.

“I promise,” she said, speaking so that her lips moved against mine.

I slid my hand into her hair, cupped the back of her neck, and pulled her back into the kiss. I drank her in, taking in her scent and the feel of her body. I thought about the fear I’d experienced when I’d been looking for her in the woods, and I clutched her tighter, glad that she was safe.

When we pulled apart, Ava tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear and sat back in her seat. I straightened in my seat, put the car into drive, and pulled back out onto the road.

Now that I knew she was safe and my anger was ebbing away, my curiosity was growing.

I shot Ava a sideways look. “So, are you going to tell me?”

She didn’t meet my eyes. “Tell you what?”

I waited a beat, wondering if she was going to keep talking. “What were you doing at Carlson’s office? Why did you go back?”

Ava angled herself away from me, staring determinedly out the window. “I just had a few things that I wanted to say to him. Things I didn’t get a chance to say earlier.”

“Like what?” I asked.

A muscle in her jaw twitched. When she turned to look at me, her eyes were blazing. “Out in the woods, you asked me ‘what now?’”

I nodded. I had no idea where this was going. “Yeah. I was really asking you.”

“Well, it’s a hard question to answer. And not just because of the two of us, and this toxic cycle we keep finding ourselves in—it’s a hard question to answer because of me.”

My frown deepened. “What are you saying?”

She bit her lip. Ava was rarely unsure, but it was clear that she was thinking hard, trying to figure out how to say exactly what she wanted to say. “I need to think about some things—things that you clearly aren’t ready to talk about or dissect.”

“Like what?” I asked.

She took a deep breath. “I want to focus on who I am—both with you and…outside of you. And that’s a hard thing to do when I get wrapped up in the two of us.”

I took this in, surprised—and not just by what she was saying, but also because of how much I understood it. The idea she’d just articulated never would’ve occurred to me without her input, but it did make a lot of sense.

Maybe that was part of why it had been so overwhelming, having Ava and Cali in the same room in Carlson Greene’s office—and watching Cali pretending to be me talking to Ava. I wasn’t even sure how to think of myself outside of my mate bonds with the two of them, or outside of my role as Samara Alpha.

“Yeah,” I said, staring out at the road. “I get that.”

She looked at me, clearly shocked. “You do?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I do.”

I wondered what exactly she and Carlson had spoken about when she’d gone back to talk to him alone. Would we have reached this place of understanding a lot earlier if I hadn’t cut the session short by storming out? If I’d just stuck around and let it play out?

I couldn’t help but wonder if Cali was feeling something similar.

I shook my head. I had to stop thinking about Cali. I needed to focus on the woman sitting next to me—on Ava. I *wanted* to focus on her.

I pulled the car over again. It didn’t really matter—the road was deserted—but I left the road entirely and parked behind a stand of pine trees.

Ava looked over at me, clearly confused. “What are you doing?”

I didn’t answer her. Instead, I leaned across the gear shift and kissed her.

She hesitated for just a moment, then she kissed me back. Ava had I had always had passion—sometimes, I thought we’d burn the world down around us. But this was different. This time, when she kissed me, there was fire, but it didn’t scorch me. She felt hot beneath my hands, but I wasn’t afraid of burning.

I slid my tongue along hers and she purred, low in her throat. She moved, climbing over the center console so she could straddle my lap.

The pressure of her against me felt amazing, and I yanked her down, pulling her hips into mine.

She moved her kisses to my ear, licking and nibbling on my earlobe, then making her way down my neck.

I breathed her in as her hair tumbled across my face, soft as satin. I let my hands roam over her body, across the curves and hills and valleys. Her sweatshirt came off—tossed into the back seat—and when I cupped her breasts she gasped, then sighed.

My shirt was the next item of clothing to go, followed by her pants. Then she unbuckled my belt and wrapped her hand around my cock.

“Oh *fuck*,” I sighed, and she tightened the pressure.

I pulled her close and kissed her again as she lowered herself down, guiding me in. We found our rhythm, and, because emotions and adrenaline were already running high, it didn’t take long for my orgasm to build. Ava was already starting to shake.

“Oh *god*, Xavier,” she murmured.

I kissed her again, making sure that when she climaxed, she moaned against my lips. I finished right after her, clutching her tightly.

Ava wrapped her arms around my neck and let me wind down slowly, kissing my shoulder and my neck. I stroked her back as my heartbeat slowed. I was trying to stay in the moment—right here with Ava, in this bubble we’d created—but she’d gotten me thinking, and now I couldn’t seem to stop. One thought in particular just kept pushing through.

Who was I, really? Without Ava, without Cali—without any of it.

Who was Xavier Evers?

**Episode 5143**

**Greyson**

I didn’t like to make the same mistakes twice, so this time, I was more careful when I followed Kendall. I didn’t want her to catch me a second time.

But, as it turned out, it didn’t seem to matter, because she didn’t seem to be doing anything particularly interesting.

After she left my apartment, I followed her downtown for a while. I watched while she went into a small boutique—she didn’t buy anything—then followed her to a takeout place, where she bought a salad, then to a park where she sat and ate her lunch.

Parked across the street, I leaned back in the driver’s seat with a sigh as I watched her feed a bird with her leftover croutons. I was beginning to wonder if this was really the best use of my time. I needed to get some more information on this woman, but maybe this wasn’t the way to do it. Maybe there was another way to figure out what her deal really was.

But I kept watching her as she got up to throw her trash away. Even though it seemed useless, my instincts were telling me not to lose track of her.

She dusted off her hands and looked around, then started out of the park and down the street, slowly walking north.

I followed at a distance, staying far enough behind her that she wouldn’t notice my car if she turned around.

After two blocks, she walked into what turned out to be a bookstore.

“*More* shopping?” I muttered to myself. But still, I pulled into a spot across the street and parked, settling back to wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

I checked the time on my phone. What the hell was she doing in there?

Fed up with waiting, I climbed out of the car. Maybe it wasn’t smart, but I decided it was worth the risk to check out what was going on inside the store.

I crossed the street and headed toward the bookstore, carefully opening the front door. A bell on the door jangled loudly, and I winced.

“Hi,” the clerk behind the counter said, smiling at me. He was holding his phone and had clearly just been looking at it.

“Hey,” I muttered.

I scanned the store. Other than the clerk, the place was completely empty. Kendall was nowhere to be found.

What the hell? Where had she gone? Had she realized that I was following her?

I walked up to the counter, where the clerk had gone back to looking at his phone. “Hey, did a woman come in a little while ago? Tall? Pretty? Purple eyes?”

The clerk looked up at me and nodded. “Yeah, a while ago. She came in, looked around for a minute, then asked to leave through the back. I thought it was weird, but I told her it was fine.”

I resisted the urge to curse at the guy.

Kendall must’ve realized I was following her, though I didn’t know how she could’ve figured it out.

Shit.

“Okay, thanks,” I muttered, then I headed back outside. I needed to get back to my car and figure out a new plan.

But as I stepped onto the sidewalk, I was hit with a familiar scent—it belonged to the guy Kendall was supposedly hooking up with. But that didn’t make any sense. What would he be doing here?

That was a question I wanted an answer to, so I followed the scent, and, when I walked around the next corner, I saw the very guy I was looking for. He was standing on the corner, looking furtively around. It was clear at a glance that he was doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing.

He hadn’t seen me yet, so I took a quick step back—out of view, so the guy wouldn’t catch me. I sincerely doubted that it was a coincidence that I’d run into this guy so close to the last place I’d seen Kendall.

Kendall had officially disappeared, so I decided I’d follow this guy to see if he led me back to her.

The guy started walking, heading south, and after a moment—giving him plenty of distance—I followed. Three blocks later, the guy stopped again.

I ducked into a doorway and watched as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. I was close enough to hear him speaking, though he was keeping his voice low.

“What the hell?” he demanded harshly, the phone pressed to his ear. “What are you doing, calling me? You can’t be calling this number. Do you know what could happen to me if people find out?” He paused, listening. “Don’t call me again,” he snapped, then he ended the call.

He must’ve really meant that last part, because instead of putting his phone back in his pocket, he dropped it into one of the trash cans lining the brick wall and kept walking.

Whoever this guy was, he definitely was *not* just some random hookup, no matter what Kendall was trying to make me believe. But if I was going to find out more than that, I figured I was going to have to confront the guy.

I stepped out of the doorway and started to walk quickly, intending to catch up with him and have it out. But before I could reach him, two other men stepped out of a shadowy alleyway and flanked him, one on either side. They were boxing him in.

The men were wearing identical black suits and were significantly bigger than the guy I’d been following. The guy looked up at them, and his body language told me that he was uncomfortable. He took a step back, trying to break away, but one of the suits grabbed his arm and pulled him back into place between them.

I hung back, watching from a distance. I had a feeling this wasn’t the moment to shift and fight anyone.

The suits frog-marched the guy forward for two more blocks before they turned suddenly, veering into the doorway of a large warehouse.

I scanned the warehouse, then took another look around. I’d followed the trio to an industrial part of the city, where the streets were quieter. I didn’t see anyone nearby, and I decided that even if anyone was looking at me from their window, it would be worth the risk to climb up the side of the building and hopefully find a way inside.

There was a handy drainpipe, and I made quick work of it—it was more like climbing a ladder than anything else—but the climb took long enough that by the time I clambered through a window on the second level and found myself in a shadowy office, the people inside were already mid-conversation.

The office’s door opened up onto a hallway that overlooked the ground floor, where the three men stood. The two suits were still on their feet, but the third man—the one I’d been following—was on his knees in front of them.

Now that they’d stopped moving, I got my first proper look at the guys in suits. They were Fae, by the looks of them. Probably Dark Fae, if their behavior was any indication.

“—and we know you’ve been talking to that bitch!” one of them was bellowing.

“You’re spilling too much information about the boss!” the other man added. “And you know he doesn’t like attention.”

“No, no, no!” the guy said frantically. “I swear, I haven’t told anyone anything!”

I frowned. I didn’t know what any of this meant, but I was starting to suspect that this guy was some kind of informant. The question was whether he was spilling information to Kendall, or to someone else entirely.

My train of thought was interrupted when the suits suddenly moved. I looked down to see they had moved to stand on either side of the guy and had lifted their hands. The guy on the floor looked even more terrified than before.

I felt my own heart rate tick up as I looked around—something was about to happen.

Then I felt it. A supernatural wind rose up in the center of the warehouse, sending debris swirling around the three men. The spiral grew tighter and tighter until there was a sudden crack. The informant seemed to freeze, his face a mask of fear. And then it cracked. *Literally*. His face cracked like plaster, and I could only look on in horror as the informant proceeded to crumble away into dust. It happened so fast, I almost managed to talk myself into believing I was seeing things—but no. It was happening, and in a matter of seconds, all that was left of the man was a small pile of grey dust.

My stomach turned, and suddenly, I couldn’t stop myself.

“What the *fuck*?”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, immediately realizing that I’d spoken out loud.

Shit. Had I just given myself away?

**Episode 5144**

For a long moment, it felt like the entire restaurant—the entire world—had frozen.

Then Patel broke the silence.

“Fringeheads! What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

One of the Fringeheads narrowed his eyes. “I think *we’ll* be the ones asking the questions.”

“Okay, so what are your questions?” Patel asked, looking surly.

This didn’t seem to please the Fringehead, who glowered. “We want to know who the hell you Rats think you are, trespassing on Fringehead territory and vandalizing our boathouse—leaving literal *shit* everywhere.”

Rodrigo let out a loud snort in response to this, and it was clear he was holding in a laugh. This did nothing to appease the Fringeheads, who suddenly looked bigger and more pissed off than ever.

I looked around, flummoxed. I had no idea what to do, so I rushed forward to join my team. Maybe I’d be able to calm everyone down, somehow?

“Okay, okay, okay,” Schmiddy said, getting to his feet. “If—and I’ll just say *if*—anything did happen to your boathouse, Fringeheads, then it was probably well-deserved, considering what the Kangarats’ training area looked like this morning, wouldn’t you say?”

Schmiddy gave the other team a long look, but none of the Fringeheads looked even a little remorseful, which pissed me off. *They* were the ones who’d started this—where did they get off, acting like the injured party? We Kangaroo Rats had only acted in retaliation.

I felt my face heating as I grew angrier, but I was still shocked when a greasy slice of pizza suddenly sailed through the air in a graceful arc, then hit the Fringehead captain right in the face.

Everyone gasped, and I looked around, shocked. Who the hell had thrown that?

The pizza stayed in place for a long moment, then slid down the captain’s face to his shirt, where it clung on for several tense seconds. Finally, it loosened itself and hit the floor with a splat that seemed to thunder through the restaurant.

Once again, the place had gone dead quiet.

The Fringehead captain prodded the greasy mark on his cheek, then looked down at the tomato sauce stain on his shirt. He stared at it, almost like he couldn’t believe his eyes. Then he let out a primal shriek, grabbed an entire pie from the table closest to him, and flung it straight at me.

What the fuck? Why was he coming after *me*? *I* hadn’t thrown that pizza!

I flung myself to the ground like I was ducking an incoming missile. Behind me, a woman cried out as the pie landed on her table.

“What the hell is this?” she demanded.

That was all it took. An instant later, the restaurant was in complete chaos—food was flying through the air, and both crew teams were bellowing at each other like wounded, indignant buffalo.

The restaurant staff were sprinting around, trying to calm patrons and catch pizzas as they flew through the air like frisbees, but they had an uphill battle on their hands. The restaurant patrons who didn’t belong to either crew team were cowering beneath their tables or rushing for the door while the Fringeheads and the Kangaroo Rats turned any and all food items they could lay their hands on into projectiles.

I’d managed to duck that first pizza, but it wasn’t long before I took a pitcher of root beer to the face. Gripped by the need for vengeance, I proceeded to grab a basket of garlic knots and hurl them across the restaurant like grenades. I was sticky and greasy and furious—and having the time of my life. I wasn’t alone in that, either. We were all covered in pizza grease and beer, but everyone was laughing.

But the fun was cut short when I heard the loud ringing of an alarm. I looked around and spied Sandy. She was standing behind me, her expression grim, her hand on the fire alarm. She had pepperoni in her hair, and she looked pissed.

When the alarm blared, everyone froze.

Sandy climbed onto a chair to make herself heard as she glared at the two teams. “Get the hell out of here! All of you! And don’t you ever come back! You’re all banned! For life! We’re calling both your schools and reporting this behavior! You’re going to pay for this!”

Her words had the intended effect—both crew teams dropped their ammo and bolted from the restaurant. Outside, the Fringeheads didn’t wait around for the other shoe to drop; they sprinted for the parking lot and jumped into their cars, screeching away.

The CCU team stood around on the sidewalk, brushing pizza debris off their clothes and shaking beer from their hair.

“Oh, *great*!” Johnny wailed, staring through the restaurant’s front window. “I was just getting up the nerve to make my move on Sandy, and now *this*!”

I rolled my eyes. “What about what she said about calling the school? That seems like a much bigger problem, doesn’t it? What if they really do it? What if we get in trouble? What if I get *expelled*?”

The thought nearly stole the breath from my lungs. The idea of such a loss was definitely painful—which was weird, because I’d be losing something I hadn’t even wanted, initially. When Lola had first surprised me with the crew team scholarship, I’d been irritated as hell. But now that I’d gotten used to it, I’d found that I really liked the team, and I really liked crew. And I was really enjoying going to school, even if I still wasn’t sure what I wanted to major in.

And the idea of losing all of that was kind of bone-rattling.

I looked over at Gael, who must’ve been hit with a slice of Hawaiian pizza, because he had pineapple chunks in his hair.

“Do you really think Sandy will call the school?” I asked. “Should we be worried?”

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Trust me,” he said, “this isn’t the first time this place has dealt with a food fight, and it won’t be the last. No one’s ever gotten into real trouble over it.”

Relief flowed through me. “Okay,” I said. “Glad to hear it.”

Patel snorted. “Okay, you guys, I have to confess—I threw that first slice.”

“I knew it!” Schmiddy crowed.

“I had to do it! That Fringehead captain just has one of those faces that *begs* to be hit with a slice of pizza,” Patel said.

Everyone laughed.

“I should get going,” I said, taking a step toward the parking lot.

“You’re leaving?” Bear asked, looking disappointed.

“I need to take a shower,” I said with a laugh.

The team waved goodbye, and I headed to my car, trying not to touch the seat any more than I had to.

When I got back to the pack house, I headed inside, keen to get out of my sticky clothes and wash the beer out of my hair. But Lola sprinted down the stairs the moment I walked through the front door.

“*There* you are!” she said, her eyes bright. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Why?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Can it wait until after I’ve showered?” I asked plaintively.

“No way,” Lola said, grabbing my arm and pulling me back up the stairs.

She didn’t let up until she’d towed me into her room. Moments later, she was sitting at her desk, where her laptop was open and waiting.

“Okay,” she said, “there’s definitely something weird going on with Kendall.”

“What did you find?” I asked, my curiosity making me forget about my stickiness, at least for a moment.

“Well, I decided to take on a new method because my last search of her didn’t get much except the basics—her dating profiles, the CCU stuff and all,” she said.

“So what did you do…?” I asked warily.

“I did an image search with Kendall’s first and last name from the CCU website—Kendall Turner. That cast a pretty wide net, because she’s obviously not the only person with that name, but I managed to find two images twenty or thirty pages into the search.”

I nodded, trying to look like I understood what she was talking about. I didn’t—nor did I know where she was going with this.

Lola shot me a sideways look. “I can see you think I’m rambling, but I want you to look at this.”

She gestured at a photo on her screen. The image looked like Kendall, but when she clicked on the picture, that spot on the screen went blank.

“What happened?” I asked, frowning.

“That’s a good question,” Lola said. “This happens every time I try. If I come across anyone who even *kind of* looks like Kendall and try to follow the image back to its source, the picture just disappears. Even on the dark web.”

“And that didn’t happen last time, did it?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Big no.”

I stared at the blank spot on Lola’s computer screen, trying to take this in—and failing. “Okay, so what does that mean?”  
 “It means that someone is watching, Cali.”

I looked quickly at Lola. “*What?*”

“Someone’s making sure that we can’t go digging into Kendall’s life.”

**Episode 5145**

**Artemis**

“Taking down the Order of the Winding Thorn?” Celeste gave me a long, appraising look. “I could be interested in that.”

I frowned. I had been hoping for some more enthusiasm on her part. This was an organization that had just tried to kill me—and she needed me. Wouldn’t that mean she’d want to get rid of the threat?

“You *could* be interested in that? What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that I would need more information,” Celeste said.

“Why would you—”  
 “It’s easy enough to *say* that you’re going to take down the Order of the Winding Thorn,” she said, speaking over me. “But how do you plan on doing it, exactly? Have you given the specifics any thought, Artemis? Because I won’t commit to a fantasy. The Order has been around for a long, long time—longer than either of us have been alive. From what I know about it, it is very powerful. Reliable information about its inner workings is hard to come by. No one knows for sure who runs it, or even where its headquarters are based.”

“*No one* knows?” I asked skeptically.

“Honestly, no one knows much of anything about it except that it’s an organization dedicated to war profiteering,” Celeste said. “The people who run it have a vested interest in keeping the war going, so they work from the shadows, pulling strings to make sure the war keeps grinding on.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you have any idea who you’re talking to, here?”

“Excuse me?” Celeste asked, clearly affronted.

“You might prefer to think of me as Kadmos’s heir or whatever, but I was a bounty hunter for years, and I’m pretty damn good at it. I spent most of my life living in the shadows, so there aren’t many secrets that can stay hidden from me. Not for long, anyway. I’ll find whatever information I’m looking for. Take my word for it.”

Celeste looked at me, and we locked eyes—I sent her a silent challenge, daring her to dispute my claim. She looked like she was considering taking me up on that dare, but after a moment, she nodded.

“Fine, you’re a decent hunter,” she said. “I believe you. But I’ll still need to hear some semblance of a plan before I agree to anything.”

I nodded. “Okay. That’s fair.”

I thought for a moment, and my mind immediately went to the second assassin—the one headed for death at any moment.

“The first thing I’ll need to do is talk to the second assassin again. Before his execution, preferably.”

Celeste rolled her eyes. “Very witty.”

“Look, I’ll be able to extract more information from him if he thinks he’s been left alone with a homicidal maniac—that’s me, in case you didn’t follow,” I said, thinking fast. “And I want to see the body of the first assassin again.”

“Oh? The one you killed?” Celeste asked, sounding annoyed.

“That’s the one,” I snapped.

I thought hard about what the first assassin had looked like and what he’d been wearing, but I knew it would be better if I could see him again. I needed to know everything I could about the people the order had sent to kill me.

“Is that all?” Celeste asked.

“No,” I said. “I have some questions for you, too.”

She raised an elegant eyebrow. “Do you? Well, go on then.”

“You said the Order of the Winding Thorn was an organization dedicated to profiteering from war, yes?”

“That’s right,” Celeste said, sniffing haughtily.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

Celeste frowned. “What do *you* mean?”

“Which families currently profit from the ongoing conflict between the Dark Fae and the Light Fae?” I asked.

“Ah.” To my surprise, Celeste let out a small laugh. “Well, Artemis, that is a very long list.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It’s complicated. All the powerful Fae families seem to have their fingers in some war capital project or another.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, floored. “That’s despicable.”

She shrugged casually. “Perhaps. But you have to understand, the wars have been going on for a very long time. After a while, it began to seem foolish *not* to invest in something along those lines. I’m afraid your search will be even harder than anticipated, with such an exhaustive list of candidates.”

“I guess it will,” I admitted. “But that’s okay. There are ways to narrow down that list.”

“Such as?”

“The Order must have eyes and ears everywhere,” I said, speaking mostly to myself. “They clearly knew how to find me, and that I was with you. They knew the best way to get to me and what would lure me to a place where I would be vulnerable—or so they thought,” I added. “That points to spies within your service.”

“I don’t think so,” Celeste said, looking offended. “I think I would know.”

I shook my head. “In my experience, the best spies are the ones you don’t notice—I’ll want to talk to the entire staff, especially the household servants and the lower guardsmen.”

Celeste was eyeing me curiously. “This is the most alive you’ve been since you got here. I don’t approve of your being a bounty hunter, of course, but I can see that you must have been good at it.” She smiled at me. “You know, I think I *will* take you up on that offer—I want you to take down the Order of the Winding Thorn.”

I grinned. “Fine by me. But I want to start immediately.”

“Fine,” she said.

“Tell the guards to put that second assassin in a windowless room and leave him there for the time being.”

“What do you want the guards to tell him?” Celeste asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “That’s important. Make sure you tell the guard to offer no explanation for what’s happening.”

“Are you going to talk to the assassin?” Celeste asked.

“I will,” I said. “But first, I want to see the dead man’s body.”

Celeste wrinkled her nose slightly, but she nodded. “Very well.” She waved a hand, and a tall woman walked over. “General, take Artemis to see the dead man. She wishes to view the body.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the general said, bowing her dark head.

I followed the woman away from Celeste. She walked briskly, and I had to move fast to keep up as she headed for a set of steep stairs. We walked down two flights, then down a hall, then down another flight of stairs. Soon, we were in the lower halls of the palace, and the air was significantly cooler than it was on the upper floors. Given the lack of electric refrigeration, I understood why Celeste’s staff would keep the dead down here.

“In there,” the general said, nodding at an oak door. “Ready?”

I nodded, then followed her through the door. The room beyond it was small—not much bigger than a closet—and must have been the official palace morgue, because there was a stone slab in the middle of the room. There was a body on the slab, covered by a thin muslin sheet.

It wasn’t the first dead body I’d seen—I’d created more than a few—but my heart still beat fast as I stepped forward and grabbed a corner of the sheet. I took a deep breath in through my mouth, trying to ignore the stench of death and decay that permeated the room, and pulled back the muslin to reveal the man I’d killed. He was as still as the stone slab, and almost as pale.

I glanced at the general, who was still standing beside me. “Did you find anything on him? Papers or coins or anything?”

The general shook her head. “Just an empty satchel. Nothing else.”

I frowned. Something about this answer set off an alert in my brain. “An empty satchel? Nothing inside it at all?”

The general shook her head. “Completely empty.”

“Do you still have it?”

“It’s over there,” she said, nodding toward the corner of the small room, though she looked confused.

“Can I see it?”

“I suppose,” the general said slowly. She stepped toward it and picked it up.

When she handed it to me, I looked it over carefully, then ran my fingers over the front flap. It looked just like an ordinary satchel—no designs, no monogram, no tooling in the leather. Nothing that marked it as special in any way. It looked like something any average Fae would’ve carried around to run errands.

But why was this Fae—an assassin sent to kill me—carrying an empty bag?

I lifted the flap of the bag to double check that it was actually empty, and was immediately hit with an intense, blinding pain. It was white-hot and exploded like a bomb behind my eyes. I didn’t even get the chance to cry out before everything went black.

**Episode 5146**

**Greyson**

I was stunned. Shock echoed through my body like a ricocheting bullet. I’d just witnessed an execution. There hadn’t been a gunshot, or a hangman and a noose, but it had been an execution all the same. The two Fae—who apparently hadn’t heard me swearing in shock—stood still, eyeing the pile of dust at their feet.

Finally, one of them spoke.

“I’ll tell the boss about this,” he grunted. “Let him know it’s been handled. Randy’s dead. He won’t be leaking any more shit to Greta.”

The other suit nodded and, up on the floor above, so did I. Those words were all the confirmation I needed—that Randy guy was connected to Kendall, and not because he was her booty call. But what the hell was Kendall doing with the information Randy had been leaking to her? And why did she even need it?

Striding right through the dust pile that had once been a living, breathing person, the suited Fae started toward the doors of the warehouse. Up above them, I hurried to pull out my phone. I wanted to get a picture of them before they took off, in case I needed it. They were moving fast toward the exit, but I zoomed in and managed to grab a couple of quick shots before they disappeared out the door, which slammed shut behind them. I just had to pray that at least one of the pictures wasn’t too blurry to be useful.

With a sigh, I leaned back against the wall for a moment, trying to collect myself. My heart was still beating fast as adrenaline pumped through me. I was wired after what I’d just seen, but Randy was dead and there was nothing I could do about that. Right now, I needed to focus on other things. I thought of all the threads here that connected to Kendall—no matter how much she denied it, she *must* have had something to do with the marks and the memory loss that Codsworth, his friends, and I had all experienced. And now, I knew she was tied to Hans on a deeper level than she’d admitted. After all, an ex-mistress wouldn’t have required an informant. An ex-mistress of Hans would’ve tried to get the hell out in any way that she could.

I pushed a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated. I knew there were connections here that I was missing—connections that I just knew were important. And if I could just piece them together, I might be able to make some sense of all this. But it felt like I was half a step behind the woman, and—no matter how fast I ran—I couldn’t quite catch up.

I looked around. The warehouse was empty and dusty, and looked like it hadn’t been used in a long time. There was no point in sticking around any longer, so I jumped over the second-floor railing and landed on the cement ground of the first floor. It was probably time to head back to the pack house. I’d lost Kendall, so that had gone to shit. Unless I found her again, there really wasn’t anything else for me to do here in Portland.

Was I willing to give up so easily? No, but what would my next move even be? Frustrated, I headed out, thinking about how many blocks I’d need to walk to get back to where I’d parked my car in front of the bookstore.

But when I walked through the door, I stopped immediately. Someone was here. I turned instantly, partially shifting both of my hands to see the two Fae in suits were waiting for me just beyond the exit.

One of the Fae—the one with the mean eyes—smiled. “We were waiting for you to build up the nerve to leave.” He took a threatening step toward me. “Why have you been following us, wolf?”

I did some very fast calculations. There wasn’t time to chat with these guys—after what I’d seen them do to Randy, I knew I couldn’t give them a chance to attack me—so I didn’t hesitate. I lunged forward and partially shifted, raking my claws across the first guy’s throat. I sliced it to ribbons, and blood sprayed from the wound. The Fae looked shocked. He raised a hand to his ripped throat, then fell to his knees. He let out a strangled, gurgling yelp before he fell silent and toppled over.

When I turned to the second Fae, I saw that he had his arms up, his palms aimed toward me—he was getting ready to hit me with magic.

I shot forward, lunging around the Fae and placing myself behind him. He tried to turn around, but I’d already dug my claws into his back, ripping the flesh beneath his cheap suit.

The Fae cried out, his scream guttural and horrified. He wrenched away from me and turned, thrusting his hands up again. He was making the same swooping movements he’d made just before he’d turned that poor bastard Randy into dust. I didn’t know if he was trying to use the same magic on me, but I couldn’t take the chance. I couldn’t fight this guy without fully shifting, and I couldn’t shift in the middle of a city street. With no other options, I turned and took off, sprinting away as fast as I could, knowing I could easily outpace a Fae in a suit.

“Run, wolf! Run!” he shouted after me. “Go as far as you want! We’ll still find you!”

I raced all the way back to my car, my heart thundering. I needed to get the hell out of this city—the sooner the better. At this point, I knew exactly what the Dark Fae mob was capable of, which meant I also knew I was going to have to plan and regroup before they came for me.

I rounded the final corner, turning onto the street where I’d left my car, but I jerked to a stop when I saw Kendall leaning against the door.

She stood straight when she saw me. As I drew closer, I saw that she looked pissed as hell.

I walked slowly toward the car, very conscious of the weight of her glare.

“I told you to leave it alone,” she hissed. “And what did you do? You put yourself in the goddamn middle of everything, didn’t you? You idiot! God, Greyson, why the hell didn’t you listen to me when I told you to steer clear? What the hell were you thinking? All you’ve done is put a target on your own back, and for what? For nothing!”

Her face was flushed with anger, and her eyes flashed, but I kept my mouth shut through her tirade. I still had a lot of questions and not enough answers, and I was hoping she might’ve gotten riled up enough to let some information slip.

But when she reached the end of her rant, I was disappointed to realize she’d said nothing I didn’t already know.

She folded her arms across her chest, glowering at me.

“Okay, point of order,” I said slowly. “I might not have felt the need to get involved if you’d just been honest with me. Why don’t we start now? What do you know?”

“What?” she asked, frowning.

“Tell me what you know—what’s coming. That way, I’ll be able to prepare for it,” I said.

Kendall shook her head. “Forget it.”

“Kendall—”

“No, Greyson, just forget it. I can’t tell you anything.”

I ground my teeth. She was so infuriating, I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and give her a good shake. Why was she being like this? Why was she so damn secretive about everything? What was she trying to protect? Or who?

*More* questions. I just couldn’t figure her out. One thing I did know, however, was that there was clearly something at stake for her—if that weren’t the case, she wouldn’t have come looking for me.

She sighed, and I heard the slightest trace of a sob in the back of the sound. I looked at her curiously, and could’ve sworn I saw a sort of *lost* look flit across her eyes. It was strange—she was always so confident and sure—but it was also gone so fast, I wasn’t even sure that I’d actually seen it.

“I don’t even know why I’m here,” Kendall said, shaking her head. “In fact, I shouldn’t be here at all. I’m leaving.”

She took a step, starting to move past me, but I grabbed her wrist.

“Just tell me,” I said, my voice low.

Kendall looked up at me. This close, I could see the flecks of blue in her purple eyes. “Listen to me, Greyson. Really listen this time, okay? All I can tell you is that you’re about to get hit with a whole shit storm of trouble, and there’s nothing any of us can do to stop it.”

**Episode 5147**

“Someone’s making sure that we can’t go digging into Kendall’s online life.”

I stared at Lola. “What do you mean, *someone*? Who?”

Lola shrugged. “Hell if I know.”

“But you said—”

“I have no idea who the actual person or entity or whatever is,” Lola said. “I just know that something’s blocking me on the real web and the dark web. And not everyone has the skills to do that.”

I looked at her, then at the computer screen—specifically, at the curiously blank spot in the search results where Kendall’s image had just been. But now it was gone, like it had never been there at all. I hadn’t known what to think initially moments ago, but after seeing the photo disappear in front of my eyes…Lola was definitely right. But what did we do?

“What kind of people does Kendall have on her side?” I wondered.

“I don’t think we should assume that the person behind this is on Kendall’s side,” Lola said somewhat ominously. “I mean, it could be, but I dunno.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused. “Why else—”

“I think it could just mean that Kendall is mixed up in something that involves some very powerful people.”

“That could be…but like what?” I asked. “What kind of people are capable of this stuff?”

Lola nodded toward her screen. “I mean… This kind of erasure isn’t something that you or I or some random college employee could do. Regular people don’t have access to the tools you need to make this happen.”

“Do you think this is happening because Kendall has something to do with that Hans guy in Portland?” I asked. “Do you think she killed him or something? Or maybe she’s in trouble for some other, non-related reason?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know, but it sounds like we might’ve just raised more questions.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“I should probably stop looking into this… Maybe you should text Greyson and let him know about this happening?” she asked, pointing at the screen.

I shook my head. “No, I can’t. I only want to tell him when I have something useful to pass on.” I couldn’t tell him I’d asked Lola to dig around—not when he’d asked me to stop digging entirely. “Is there any way for us to figure out who might be tampering with the search results? You’re the hacker here.”

“Hacker in training,” Lola said, holding up a hand. “This might actually be above my pay grade. The kind of code you’d need to do this… It feels like something you’d see on a CIA procedural drama. Government surveillance-level stuff.”

“Do you think they’re surveilling *us*?” I asked, my eyes going wide. “Do they know who we are just because we searched for Kendall’s name and image?”

“They could—”

I let out an alarmed yelp.

“I have some security measures in place,” Lola assured me, speaking quickly. “But they probably wouldn’t withstand an attack from someone who really knows what they’re doing.”

I slammed the laptop shut, then unplugged it from the charger and picked it up.

“What are you doing?” Lola asked.

“I—I don’t know! Maybe we should throw it outside or something?” I said, uncertain.

“What? No!” Lola snatched the computer back from me. “That’s my laptop, and I still need it. I have homework on there, and a bunch of stuff in my Sephora shopping cart. Besides, if they know who we are, then they know who we are. There’s nothing important on my laptop for them to access.” She gave me a long look. “Are you *sure* we shouldn’t text Greyson?”

“What would I even say to him?” I asked. “That someone kept you from cyberstalking Kendall, and it’s possible that said someone now knows who we are?” I shook my head. “No, that information can wait. I can tell him what happened when he gets home. It’s not urgent. Not yet.”

Lola raised her eyebrows, looking like she might disagree on that point.

“I’m going to go talk to Rishika about upping security until Greyson gets back,” I added hurriedly.

Lola heaved a sigh. “I know you’re only saying that to appease me, but I’ll take it.”

I looked down at myself, plucking at my stiff T-shirt. I was still covered in food, and now the beer and soda had dried, making me feel like I was covered in plaster. “But before I do that, I’m going to take a shower.”

“Fine.” Lola opened her laptop and got back to work while I headed for my room.

Twenty minutes and one heavenly shower later, I swung by her room again, and we both headed downstairs to look for Rishika.

We found her in the den, talking to Ravi. They were both on the couch, and looked up when we walked in.

“Hey, Rishika, can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said.

“I’m going to head out on patrol,” Ravi said, getting to his feet.

I waited until he’d left the room and then sat down next to Rishika. I quickly filled her in on everything that Lola and I had found about Kendall, and the freaky thing that was happening on Lola’s computer.

Rishika’s frown continued to deepen as we spoke.

“Sorry,” she said, once I’d finished talking. “I don’t know anything about any of this. Why are you looking up that werewolf from your college, Cali? What does she have to do with anything?”

My stomach dropped. Apparently, Greyson hadn’t told Rishika anything about our Kendall suspicions.

I had a very fast choice to make: Should I follow Greyson’s lead and stay quiet, or follow my gut and fill Rishika in?

I couldn’t worry about the reasoning behind Greyson’s choices at the moment—it was time to make my own decisions, for the pack’s sake. So I took a deep breath.

“Buckle up, Rishika,” I said, and then I told her everything.

It was a winding tale, and by the time I reached the end, Rishika’s mouth was hanging open in shock. But of course, she recovered quickly.

“Okay,” she said briskly. “I’ll beef up our security measures.”

“Good, thanks,” I said, though I couldn’t help but notice that her tone was clipped and brusque. “Rishika, is something wrong?”

She hesitated for a moment, then frowned. “This is a big surprise to me, obviously, but it shouldn’t be. Greyson should’ve told me about this before he left. This is an issue that could impact the safety of the pack—I should’ve been told about it. I should’ve known about this from the beginning, so we could be as prepared as possible. I’m just…” She shook her head. “I’m frustrated.”

I nodded. “I get that,” I said, making a mental note to ask Greyson why he’d chosen not to tell Rishika what was going on. She was his second in command, and she was right—she should’ve known about this. “But honestly, we never thought anything like this would happen.”

But even as I said the words, I realized that the pack wouldn’t have ended up facing this new potential threat if Lola and I hadn’t gone looking for information about Kendall on our own. This was the kind of trouble Greyson didn’t want me wading into.

I couldn’t bring myself to regret it, though. This was important, and Rishika was right—this issue could impact the safety of the pack.

“Okay,” Rishika said, interrupting my train of thought, “I’m going to go let the others know that we’ll be increasing the patrol schedule. And I’ll create a consistent guard rotation around the perimeter of the house so we have eyes on the entrances at all times.”

She got to her feet and strode out of the den, heading for the front door.

“Is there anything else we can do to help?” I asked as Lola and I followed her.

Rishika shook her head. “No, thanks. I can handle it from here. Lola?” she said, looking past me, “I’ll let you know when it’s your turn to patrol.”

Lola nodded, and Rishika opened the front door.

She took a step outside, then something weird happened. All her forward momentum stopped, and it almost looked like she *bounced* back into the house.

“What the hell?” she muttered, stumbling back a step. Frowning, she stepped out of the house again, but the same thing happened, and she was pushed back inside.

“What’s going on?” I asked, baffled.

“I’m not sure,” Rishika said, confusion written all over her face. She turned to me. “You try to leave the house.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I took a step out of the door—or at least I tried to. I could see outside—the day was gray and overcast—but I couldn’t reach it. It was like there was an invisible wall between me and the outdoors.

“Oh my god,” I burst out as I stumbled back into the house. I looked at Lola and Rishika as my heart began to race. “I think we’re trapped.”

**Episode 5148**

**Xavier**

The drive back to the pack house was relatively calm. Relatively because things between Ava and I were always either on the verge of total disaster or in the recovery period *after* total disaster. Still, the drive was…calm, and I was grateful for that.

Things had gone sideways at Greene’s office, and I wasn’t sure if we were going to be able to come back from that. Fortunately, even after the day we’d had, Ava and I weren’t at each other’s throats, which was really kind of miraculous.

My hands started to ache, and I noticed that I was gripping the steering wheel too tightly. I took a deep breath and forced my fingers, along with the rest of my body, to relax.

Despite the relative peace Ava and I were currently enjoying, I was still feeling anxious, and struggling to stay in the moment with her. It always felt like the other shoe was about to drop, and that I’d be presented with another slew of problems with no easy solution. Every time our lives got better, something happened to make them worse. It was hard to stay in the moment with her when I knew that said moment could come to a horrible end at any time.

*Don’t think that way.*

Instead of spiraling, I focused on how good it felt to know that as much as Ava believed in us, she still had her own doubts to deal with. It made me feel less awful about all of the times I’d failed her.

I was feeling so much better that even my headache had faded into a manageable, dull ache. The throbbing pain that had been plaguing me earlier was totally gone, and I hoped it would stay that way.

As soon as I parked in front of the Samara house, I spotted the busted window. I shook my head and sighed inwardly. My headache might’ve been gone, but the twin pains in the ass I’d been dealing with were still waiting for me at home.

I scowled when I remembered that I had yet to tell Josephine about Knox and Milo. Given everything else that I had on my plate, I hadn’t been keen to make the time to speak with her about something as stupid as two idiots who refused to get along.

“You looked like you just stepped in a pile of shit,” Ava noted.

I snorted. “Very nice.”

“Well?” she asked.

“I have to talk to Josephine about Knox and Milo,” I said.

“Why? Did something else happen between them?” Ava asked.

It was then that I realized Ava was blissfully unaware of the chaos I’d been forced to deal with earlier.

I gestured up to the broken window. “*That’s* what else happened.”

Ava’s jaw went slack as I told her about Knox and Milo’s latest altercation. Her expression was the picture of disbelief… And rage.

“They did *what*?” she bellowed. “You’re shitting me, right?”

“If only,” I said with a shrug. “The best solution I could come up with was to keep the two of them as far apart as possible. I told them to follow a strict ten feet apart rule. That window is what happens when they don’t follow the rules.”

“All Knox has to do is watch his goddamn temper,” Ava muttered.

“Again, if only,” I said.

“Do you know what it is about Milo that’s irritating Knox?” Ava asked. “There has to be something going on to explain all this.”

“Don’t you remember the girl that Milo and Knox fought over?” I asked.

I knew for a fact that Ava was going to lose her shit over the reminder, and I relished it. She stared at me and shook her head like I was talking gibberish. But my real prize was what she said next.

“What the hell is so special about this stupid human, anyway?” she asked.

“Beats me,” I said.

“I can’t believe their whole beef is about a girl Knox probably forgot until the moment he saw Milo again,” she said. “I bet it’s probably less about the girl and more about his ego. Knox has never been good at giving things up to people he doesn’t consider worthy.”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t say?”

I happened to be more than a little acquainted with that side of Knox. He was the kind of guy who took pleasure in putting people through their paces.

“I don’t think you should waste Josephine’s time with this,” Ava said. “None of us should have to babysit those idiots. I’m going to handle this right now.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried to handle it,” I said. “I gave them a bunch of chances, then I ordered them to cut it out. Nothing’s working.”

“Maybe nothing like that was ever going to work,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I think Knox just needs to get yelled at by me,” she said. “All this crap of his? That’s him being a stupid kid, not a stupid wolf. Let me handle it.”

“By all means,” I said.

I was happy to let Ava solve my Knox and Milo problem. But when I heard her muttering something about cracking skulls, I decided it would be best if I was there when she had her chat with Knox. Given how angry Ava was, he’d probably need someone there to ensure his safety.

Still, I was fighting a grin as Ava and I made our way into the pack house. If only all of my problems could be solved this easily.

No sooner had we stepped into the house than Ava started yelling.

“Knox!” she shouted. “Get your ass down here, now!”

A few seconds later, Knox came downstairs. He didn’t bother to hide the scowl on his face. Clearly he didn’t like being summoned so dramatically. Tough luck.

“What do you want?” he asked. “And why do you sound so pissed off?”

“I’m pissed because of you,” Ava said.

Knox balked. “Me? What did I do?”

“You need to relax about whatever the hell happened between you and Milo. Hear me?” Ava demanded, getting in his face. “I just found out that you two were fighting each other so hard that you busted a window. What the fuck is that?”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Knox protested. “I’ve been doing exactly what Xavier asked me to. I’ve been nice to that guy from the beginning. I welcomed him to the pack and everything. I don’t know what his deal is.”

I snorted. Knox glanced my way but had better sense than to react. He and I both knew he was lying his ass off. Knox had found every possible way to circumvent my orders and make Milo’s life hell. He’d truly missed his calling as a sadistic drill sergeant.

“Don’t lie to me, Knox,” Ava snapped. “I’ve known you your entire life. I know exactly how you can be. You need to tell me the truth about what’s going on, here. Is this really about something that happened, or is it just your ego at work?”

“This has nothing to do with my ego,” Knox retorted. “I’m reacting like this because Milo is an asshole. He shouldn’t even be in the pack. We don’t need people like him.”

“That’s not your call to make,” Ava said, crossing her arms. “It’s your Alpha’s. And Xavier has already made the decision to accept Milo. So you can either get on board or you can get out.”

“Seriously? You’re actually willing to kick me out?” Knox asked. “I’m not the one with the problem here!”

“Whether you stay or go isn’t my call. It’s Xavier’s,” Ava said. “And I think he’s been pretty clear about his willingness to make that call.”

I bit my lip to keep the smile off my face. Knox had worn my patience thin with his bullshit, but he had no choice but to give in to Ava. It felt good to watch someone else handle a pack problem for a change.

And Ava was handling it well. Knox’s head was bowed, and he was taking his scolding like a contrite little boy.

Suddenly, my phone started to buzz in my pocket. I pulled it out and was surprised to see Cali’s name on the screen.

My first instinct was to answer immediately. Then I remembered how my first instincts with Cali usually got me in trouble. So, instead of answering, I looked at Ava. She and I had finally managed to arrive at an okay place after the chaos at Greene’s office. Did I really want to tempt fate by taking Cali’s call?

Not wanting Ava to redirect her rage at me, I considered letting the call go to voicemail. Whatever it was, it probably wasn’t all that important.

*But what if it’s an emergency?*

That was all I needed to decide. Leaving Ava to it, I stepped out into the hall. When I was out of earshot, I answered the phone.

“Cali? Something wrong?” I asked.

“Xavier! Thank goodness!” she said, sounding stressed. “We need your help. Please. You have to get to the Redwood pack house, right now.”

**Episode 5149**

**Greyson**

My tires squealed as I threw the car around a curve. I was driving so fast, it was a wonder that I didn’t fly right off the road. Keeping my foot on the gas and my eyes forward, I raced toward the pack house. The sooner I got back, the better.

*Portland was a terrible idea*, I thought.

In the end, Kendall had refused to give me any more information. She’d also refused to help me in any way and had made it clear that she was doing me a favor by not doing a damn thing for me.

I was furious with her and hoped, for her sake, that we never saw each other again. Those violet eyes had definitely become a trigger for my rage, and I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to stop my wolf from lunging for her throat.

I tightened my grip on the wheel. As furious as I was with Kendall, I was just as angry with myself, if not more so. I was supposed to know how to handle myself in any situation, yet those two Fae had taken me completely by surprise. It had been a rookie mistake that could easily have cost me my life. My only consolation was that I’d managed to take one of them down. Hopefully, his partner would think twice before coming after me.

I left the mountains and turned onto the main road, jerking the wheel to keep from fishtailing. My phone came to life, buzzing nonstop as a flood of missed calls and texts came in. Apparently, I had cell service again.

I glanced down at the screen, and my eyes widened. In the short time I’d spent out of range, I’d missed dozens of calls and texts from Cali and the other Redwoods.

*What the hell?*

Grabbing my phone, I played Cali’s first voicemail.

“Greyson, it’s me,” she said. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I think that Lola and I might’ve caught the interest of someone powerful. Now we’re all, like, magically trapped in the pack house with no way out. Please call me as soon as you get this!”

My foot lifted off the gas slightly as I stared at my phone. Cali’s message didn’t make sense, but I could practically feel her worry radiating down the line. I played her next message.

“It’s me again,” she said, sounding stressed. “We can’t get through any of the doors or windows. We tried breaking through the walls, but that didn’t work either. It’s like there’s a forcefield covering the entire house from the outside. We don’t know what to do. I really hope you call me back soon…”

Had I been able to, I would’ve teleported back to the pack house. Unfortunately, all I could do was speed up while listening to Cali’s messages.

“I’m worried that this barrier thing around the house might mean that there’s a limited amount of air in here,” she said. “I tried calling Big Mac, but I couldn’t reach her, or Mrs. Smith. I… I’m going to call Xavier and see if he can think of something. But please, call me back. Okay? I just… I need to hear your voice right now.”

My stomach twisted itself into knots. It was bad enough that I hadn’t been able to pick up the phone when Cali needed me, but the fact that she’d been forced to call Xavier made it all the worse. I was her mate. I was supposed to be there for her.

I tried calling her back, but there was no answer. *Fuck.* Tossing my phone down, I pushed the limits of my car and sped up until the accelerometer reached the red zone. The engine was welcome to blow out, just as long as it waited until I made it back to the house.

*Please let her be okay…*

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I made it home in record time.

On the way, I’d tried calling Big Mac and my mother too, but hadn’t been able to reach either of them. It was both odd and troubling that they weren’t available, but I didn’t have time to worry about them. Not yet.

I jumped out of my car and found Xavier and Perrie on the lawn, staring up at the house. They were talking and shaking their heads like they had no idea what to do. They looked as upset as I felt.

Not a good sign.

With a million questions on the tip of my tongue, I rushed up to my brother, eager to get as much information from him as possible. I opened my mouth, but he cut me off to answer every question I had before I got the chance to ask them.

“We’ve searched the area and can’t find anyone actively doing this,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

I opened my mouth again, but Xavier kept going.

“Ava is still searching, but Perrie and I haven’t been able to break through the barrier,” he said.

Feeling powerless, I stared up at the house and wondered what was going on inside. Part of me wanted to shift and ram into it with all my strength, but the rest of me knew how futile it would be. If neither Xavier nor Perrie had managed to get through, then I probably wouldn't be able to manage it either.

“We don’t know what kind of magic this is,” Xavier said. “Could be another fucking witch, or maybe—”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Dark Fae,” I said grimly. “Though I’d prefer if we could confirm it. I haven’t been able to get Big Mac on the phone.”

What I didn’t tell him was that the barrier was probably my fault. Since that information wasn’t especially relevant to the situation, I decided that Xavier didn’t need to know.

I turned from him and saw Cali and Rishika standing in the doorway. Cali looked somewhat relieved to see me, but I could feel her stress.

“I’ll keep trying to call Big Mac,” Xavier said. “Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

I nodded at him, then I ran up to the house and stood as close as I could get to Cali. The barrier felt like a pane of cool glass, smooth and impenetrable. I pressed against it, wishing I could get closer. Cali and Rishika looked so tired. I could only imagine what they’d been through already, and how scared they had to be. It made my heart ache. I wished more than anything that I could break through the barrier and wrap Cali up in my arms.

*Fuck! Why didn’t I just leave well enough alone?*

Before I could say as much to Cali, she started to apologize.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” she said. “This is all my fault. I shouldn’t have tried to play detective. Now everyone’s in danger because of me.”

“No, love,” I said. “You have nothing to be sorry about. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Cali shook her head. “But I did. I didn’t listen to you.”

I looked at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I told Lola to keep looking into Kendall, even after you told me to drop it. I should’ve listened to you,” she said miserably.

I took her hand. “This wasn’t your doing, Cali,” I said. “This is my fault.”

“How?” she asked.

I told her about my encounter with the Dark Fae in Portland. Though I’d been able to kill one, the survivor must’ve had something to do with the barrier around the pack house.

“Kendall warned me, but I kept digging anyway,” I admitted. “This isn’t happening because of anything you did. You shouldn’t feel guilty. This is most likely Dark Fae magic being used in retaliation for what I did.”

Cali processed this, then gave me a long look that I couldn't decipher. She spoke up before I could ask what she was thinking.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty about this either,” she said.

We looked into each other’s eyes for what seemed like an eternity before a pointed cough brought us back into the present. Rishika gave us a strained smile.

“As much as I’m enjoying this guilt-fest, we need to start figuring something out,” she said. “We don’t know anything about this spell, or what could happen if it continues.”

I bumped my fist against the barrier. “Right.”

“Have we tried to contact our not-so-friendly neighborhood witch?” Rishika asked.

I glanced at Xavier. He had the phone up to his ear but shook his head to confirm that Big Mac was still AWOL.

“No luck,” I said. “I’ve been trying to call her since I got Cali’s message. I have no idea where she or my mother could be.”

“Great,” Rishika muttered.

Cali remained silent as she stared at the space between us. She ran her finger along the barrier, then glanced up at me.

“Well if it could be Dark Fae magic, I might have an idea,” she said. “I want to try hacking through it with my sword—the Light Fae power might be able to damage it.”

“No. Absolutely not,” I said, hating that idea. “We don’t know if that’s even remotely safe. This isn’t a game.”

Cali just shook her head. “I think this could work. Don’t worry—I’ve got this.”

“Cali—”

“You should probably take a few steps back,” she said. “Maybe a lot of steps back.”

While Cali’s idea was risky, it was also the only one we had. I couldn’t think of anything else to try, and with Big Mac out of reach, Cali’s magic was the only power we could count on.

I jogged back to join my brother and the other Samaras standing on the lawn. Just as I got ready to tell him Cali’s plan, I saw the sword taking shape in her hands. She slowly pressed it against the barrier.

The next thing I knew, there was a sudden flash, and a loud clap of thunder that made the ground shake. Cali’s screams rang in my ears, bringing terror to my heart.

But the deafening silence that followed was what truly scared me.

**Episode 5150**

*What was that?*

It took me a second to realize what had just happened. One minute I’d had my sword in hand and was breaking through the barrier, and the next, I’d been thrown back by an explosion.

I looked around, feeling dazed and insanely confused. The force of the blast had rattled my head so badly that my vision was blurry. I rubbed a hand over my eyes as I waited for the haze to clear. There was blood running down my face and a sharp ache coming from my arm. Clearly, something had gone terribly wrong.

*Holy shit.*

As my vision settled, I looked around and realized that the blast had torn away half the house. There was a jagged rip running right down the center of the wall, like a bomb had gone off in the living room.

I struggled to my feet, then nearly tripped on something when I tried to take a step. I looked down and let out a horrified gasp. My foot hadn’t caught on *something*—it had caught on *someone*.

*Rishika.*

Her eyes were open, but they couldn’t see anything anymore. She’d been standing right next to me when I’d pressed my sword into the barrier.

The blast that had spared me had killed her.

Pressing a hand to my mouth to silence my sobs, I crouched down next to Rishika. I took one of her hands in both of mine and held it, squeezing my eyes shut.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

I needed to search the house and see if anyone else was hurt. After a few more moments, I gently laid her hand down at her side, stood up, and started walking through what was left of the house. It was eerily silent except for the creaking of the broken floors. The reason for the silence was horrifying.

The rest of the pack had suffered the same fate as Rishika. Ravi was on the couch, impaled by a wooden beam. Perrie was on the porch, her neck at an unnatural angle. I ran through the house, desperate to find a survivor. Instead, all I found were more casualties. Everyone around me was dead, and it was my fault.

*What have I done?*

Pressing against the barrier, I saw that Greyson and Xavier had collapsed on the lawn. They were lying still. Far too still.

That was too much for me. It felt like something was ripping my heart in half. My vision blurred, and the ground under my feet tilted. I fell to my knees and began to scream. I cursed the magic that had left me alive and killed everyone I cared about.

*How could this happen?*

Everyone was dead, and it was all my fault. I’d never meant for anything like this to happen. I hadn’t even thought it was possible. As sobs wracked my body, I felt my grief carrying me toward the brink of madness.

When I opened my eyes, Lola’s face was next to mine. She was staring at me like I’d actually lost my mind.

“Cali? Cali, are you okay?” she asked. “Can you hear me?”

I blinked my tears away and focused on her face. My head felt like it was stuffed with wet cotton, and my sword arm was killing me. Nothing made sense. I thought I’d blown up the house and killed everybody… But then why was Lola here?

*What’s going on?*

Grateful that my world *hadn’t* actually come to a gruesome end, I threw my arms around Lola and gave her a tight hug. It didn’t matter that my arm hurt like hell. All that mattered was that my friends were okay.

Lola hugged me back, and we held each other for a few seconds before she pulled away.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “We heard this massive bang, and then you screamed. Are you okay? That blast threw you all the way down the hall.”

“It did?” I asked. “What else happened?”

“Nothing,” Lola said. “You’ve been out cold for the last ten minutes. Torin healed you, but you still didn’t wake up. Greyson and Xavier are outside, freaking out.”

I finally realized that I could hear them both shouting my name. They sounded terrified and desperate. Thanks to my latest hallucination, I knew exactly what they were feeling.

“I’ve never heard anyone scream like you just did,” Lola said grimly. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, but I think it was a mistake to try that,” I said. “I guess mixing Light Fae and Dark Fae magic isn’t the best idea.”

“Could’ve been worse,” Lola said.

*Yes, it could have*, I thought.

A shiver ran through my body as I relived my hallucination. I had no idea what had brought it on, but I never wanted to experience anything like that again. I just knew that those memories were going to haunt me.

With Lola’s help, I got to my feet and slowly made my way to the door. Greyson and Xavier were pacing back and forth on the porch, looking ready to tear their hair out. The second they saw me, they ran to the door and pressed up against the barrier.

“Cali!” Greyson said. “What the hell just happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little shaken up,” I said. “I guess you were right about using my magic against a Dark Fae spell. I’ll be sure to listen next time.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Greyson said. “You scared the hell out of me. I thought something horrible had happened to you.”

I shook my head and tried to muster up a smile. In my mind, I could still see Greyson and Xavier lying dead on the grass. But, as disturbing as my hallucination had been, I knew it would be better if I kept it to myself. There was still so much going on—the last thing I wanted to do was to make anyone worry about me.

While Greyson continued to pepper me with questions, Xavier stayed quiet. He didn’t ask me if I was okay, but I could see the relief on his face. Still, he turned and started walking away. It hurt, but I told myself that he still cared, even if he didn’t express it as well as Greyson did. I tucked that realization—and the feelings that came with it—into my heart.

“So, that didn’t work,” Rishika said.

“Sorry,” I said. “That was really stupid of me—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Rishika said. “Don’t apologize for trying to help us.”

“You did what you could,” Ravi added.

“We all would’ve tried the same thing, in your shoes,” Lola said.

I waved them all off. “Thanks, I’m just… This is clearly beyond me. I don’t know enough about Fae magic to get rid of this barrier. It makes me feel so useless. I’m sorry. I wish I could do more.”

Everyone stood in silence as I continued to berate myself. I was beyond frustrated and had no idea what to do. We were all out of ideas, and the twin pains in my head and my arm only compounded my feeling of failure.

We were trapped, and Big Mac—the one person who might’ve been able to help us—was nowhere to be found. The Redwoods had become so reliant on her magic that we were essentially helpless without her.

*Damn it! I should be able to fix this*, I thought.

I had magic too. I was half Fae. So why was it so hard for me to bring this damn barrier down? Why couldn’t I wield my magic as well as the person who’d cast the spell on the house? Clearly, I was going to have to do some more magic training, but first we had to break free. Somehow.

Lola rested a hand on my shoulder, like she could tell I needed the support. I gave her a brief smile to let her know that I appreciated her always being in my corner.

With my epic failure in the books, everyone else took turns suggesting possible solutions.

“Does anyone know how to get a hold of Tabitha or Adair?” Greyson asked. “Tabitha can nullify magic—that might be useful.”

“Who knows where they are?” Rishika asked, a little bitterly. “It’s like all the magical folk went to Disney World.”

“We could try asking people who know them,” Ravi suggested.

“Like who?” Lola asked. “Dani?”

Ravi nodded. “Yeah. Maybe Marta?”

As they went back and forth, I was starting to feel dizzy. There was so much going on; how were we going to handle it? The anxiety was making my head throb. Not wanting to pass out again, I got ready to ask Lola to help walk me back to the couch.

“I think I might have something that can help.”

Xavier’s voice cut through the noise everyone else was making. We all turned toward him, and saw that he was coming back to the house with a body slung over his shoulder. This time, Ava was following him.

“Who’s that?” Lola asked.

“And is he still among the living?” Rishika added.

Xavier tossed the body onto the ground. It landed in a heap, and with a mild groan. Whoever he was, he’d clearly tried and failed to put up a fight. Ava nudged him with her foot, causing him to groan again.

“Found this guy creeping around the woods,” she said. “Just a hunch, but I think he probably knows how to fix this.”

**Episode 5151**

**Xavier**

*The fuck are we going to do with this guy?*

I stared down at the body that lay prone at my feet. It was hard to believe that someone who looked so insignificant could be causing so much trouble. He didn’t look strong enough to blow out the candles on a birthday cake, let alone cast the kind of spell that could stump us all.

*This? This is the guy coming after Cali— No, the Redwoods*, I thought.

The Fae on the ground wasn’t just after Cali. He was there to try and take the whole pack out. As hard as it was for me, I had to shift my thoughts away from viewing the guy as a threat to Cali. It wasn’t only about her even if it always felt that way.

As I stared at the seemingly harmless Fae, I kept replaying her terrified phone call in my head. A part of me was thrilled that Cali had called me for help. I had been the one to come running to her rescue because my older brother was MIA. The fact that she still turned to me made me want to rub it in his face, but I decided to be the bigger man and kept my smugness to myself.

A groan pulled me out of my reverie, and I turned my attention to the man on the ground. He shifted, and I got a good look at his face. He was a fairly nondescript-looking Fae. I had never seen him before and doubted anyone would have picked him out of a lineup. He was unimpressive in every way.

So why the hell was some random Fae attacking the Redwood pack? It made zero sense to me. As I leaned in to get a closer look at his face, Ava mind linked with me.

*Step back for a second*, she said. *I want to talk to you.*

I nodded and followed her a few feet away. The others surrounded the Fae, who was still conked out. Judging by their reactions, they had never seen him before either.

“You sure it’s the same guy you saw?” I asked.

“Yeah. I found him a mile or so back. That’s when I called you. He was staring intently at the house, and I figured he had to be our guy,” Ava said. “When we didn’t find anyone in the close perimeter, I knew it was because they had to have moved out of our way. At least you knocked him out before he could use any of his Fae bullshit.”

Yeah, we were both lucky on that count. The Fae were capable of anything, if Cali, Artemis, or Torin were any indication. Even when I’d been in the Fae world it felt like there was no telling what could happen next. It was better that we’d acted first and could ask questions later.

“It’s not easy to take out one of their kind,” I said. “Thanks for helping.”

Ava looked away and shrugged. “I just wanted to get this over with.”

I nodded. She didn’t have to explain further, she had been livid when I told her about Cali’s call. At first, she thought I was running to her rescue, but Ava calmed down when I told her that it was an attack on the Redwoods. When I told her that the Samaras couldn’t sit idly by when our allies were being attacked, she got it. She also insisted on joining us, which turned out to be a good thing.

*Now we’ve just got to make him drop the barrier*, I thought.

I turned back to look at the Fae lying on the ground. He was a total stranger to both packs, but one too powerful for us to ignore. As soon as he woke up, I looked forward to getting answers out of him by any means necessary. Ava and I walked back to where Greyson was kneeling over the Fae. He glanced up as we approached.

“The guy’s still out cold,” he said. “But I think I might know where he came from and who he’s working with.”

“I don’t give a shit who this Fae is,” I said. “I just want the damn barrier to come down so that Cali and the others can be free. We need to wake him up and get him talking.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “Suggestions?”

“Actually, I have some old iron tools stored away in the shed,” I said, nodding my head toward it. “I pulled a cache together after our last stint getting stuck in the Fae world.”

Greyson’s eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t remark on it. He nodded as he got to his feet, then made his way to the shed. He came back a few minutes later carrying a sickle and a heavy hand ax. He passed the sickle to me, and I leaned down to press the flat of the metal blade against the Fae’s cheek.

“Wakey, wakey…” I said.

The Fae’s eyes shot open, and he hissed in pain. He tried to move away from the iron, but I kept it pressed against his cheek. He was going to do as I asked or else.

“Take down the barrier. Now,” I said.

To my surprise, the Fae started to laugh. I could hear the iron burning his skin, but he laughed like he was watching the world’s funniest stand-up act.

“Do you really think this was a smart move, asshole?” he asked.

But he wasn’t looking at me. His comment and his obvious hatred were directed at Greyson. What was going on? Greyson said he didn’t know the guy, but it was clear the Fae knew who he was.

“Shut the fuck up and take the barrier down,” Greyson said.

The tension between them implied they had some kind of history, but I didn’t give a damn. Greyson’s business was his business. All I cared about was freeing Cali and the others. I pressed the point of the sickle harder until it created a dimple in his chin. His eyes flew back to me.

“I’m the one you need to focus on, asshole,” I said and added more pressure to the sickle. “Do what I say or you’re going to get an iron piercing in your face. Take down the fucking barrier.”

The Fae laughed in my face again. Either he was out of his mind, or he had a death wish. He was eating up the last of my patience, and I turned to Greyson so he could try questioning the defiant Fae. It had only been a few minutes since he had woken up, but I was already sick of him.

As I stared at Greyson, I saw his expression change from irritated to alarmed like something finally clicked. Before I got a chance to ask about it, I felt the air getting knocked out of my lungs as a solid punch landed in my stomach.

Moving quickly, I twisted back around and drove the point of the sickle into the Fae’s shoulder. He screamed in pain, but I just pressed my forearm against his throat. The Fae struggled against my hold, so I added more weight until he stopped moving. Greyson moved to my other side and held the ax over the Fae’s right eye.

“Take it down,” he said, his voice deadly. “Take it down right now.”

The Fae dropped his head to the ground, the menacing smile still on his face. “You really are a stupid motherfucker, aren’t you?”

The tension between them was hard to ignore. It seemed my brother knew more than he was sharing. When Greyson had first shown up, he told us all that he was sure there was a Dark Fae at fault. How had he known? What the hell was he up to? What had he gotten the Redwood mixed up in?

I opened my mouth to demand answers from Greyson, then shut it. Whatever Greyson was involved with, it wasn’t my problem. The only reason I was there was so that I could help Cali get free. Let my brother deal with his own mess.

*This is taking too long*, Ava said via mind link. *Move out of the way for a second.*

She didn’t wait for me to move. As I heard her footsteps approaching, I stepped out of the way. I had no idea what she was going to do, but I was confident that she was going to solve the problem immediately. Ava had handled Knox with ease, she’d found the Fae and taken him out without a problem. She was on a roll, and I was anxious to see how she was going to get the Fae to do as we wanted.

Greyson and I stepped back, giving Ava a wide berth to do whatever she had to. The Fae glared at her angrily, ready to laugh in her face as well. Ava got close to him, then leaned over until she was less than a foot away from him. He sneered and waited for her to make her demands.

But Ava never said a word.

Before any of us could stop her, she shifted her hand into a claw and used it to tear out the Fae’s throat. My jaw fell open as I watched him drop dead. His blood stained the grass a bright red as his unseeing eyes stared at the Redwood pack house.

**Episode 5152**

The moment the Dark Fae died, I felt the barrier fall.

What should have been a moment of triumph and utter relief turned into confusion and revulsion. For a second, I wondered if I was suffering from the effects of another hallucination. How could Ava have been so callous? She had torn out that Fae’s throat without so much as a second thought, then glanced at her bloody hand like she had marred her manicure.

*She’s a cold-blooded killer*, I thought.

As I stared at the body on the lawn, I heard the others celebrating. They weren’t concerned about the means so much as the ends. Thanks to Ava, we were free and that was all that mattered to them. Rishika rushed out the door and made her way to Greyson, clearly happy to have been set free and eager to relinquish her temporary responsibility.

Lola let out a whoop and grinned at me before she called up to the rest of the house. “Well…we’re free! We can get outside again!”

The pack house came alive with a rumble of cheers coming from all corners. I wanted to join in the celebration, but I was too busy watching the blood seep into the Fae’s clothes. There was so much blood, and it continued to flow freely despite his heart no longer beating. His eyes were permanently fixed on the house like he could continue to curse us from the great beyond.

I knew I would never forget the look of pain and terror on his face for the rest of my life.

A shiver ran through my body as I thought back to my disturbing vision or whatever it was that had taken over my brain. The bodies and the carnage, though all in my mind, made my stomach twist itself into knots. Just like the Fae lying outside, I saw all my friends strewn about and lying in their own pools of blood. It was nearly impossible for me to separate that horrific fantasy from reality.

*How is everyone so happy right now?* I wondered.

As I struggled to come to terms with the situation, the others ran around the house high-fiving and hugging each other happily. They raced outside to thank the Samaras, blatantly ignoring the corpse on the ground. I shook my head.

We had just watched Ava murder someone without so much as a second thought. Was I really the only one who saw a problem with that? Dark Fae or not, killing him so violently was not the only way to go about things. I wanted to be grateful that I was finally free, but it was hard to tap into that feeling when I was utterly consumed by horror.

*This is so wrong. So, so wrong*, I thought.

I stared at Ava, who was standing over the body. She had a look of triumph on her face, and I wondered if she was about to pull out her phone to take a selfie with the corpse. Her nonchalance made me shake my head. What was wrong with her? A deep frown marred my features as I didn’t bother to hide my disgust. How could Ava just stand there like nothing happened? Like she hadn’t just taken someone’s life. To me, it was unfathomable.

Before I realized what I was doing, I rushed out of the house and down the porch steps. The rest of the Redwoods probably thought I was coming to celebrate with them. Far from it. I stopped right in front of Ava, wary of the bloody hand she had used to kill the Fae.

She looked at me with cool disinterest like I was no more significant than a bug. It didn’t surprise me. Given the right provocation, she would have torn my throat out too. Not that I was worried about that.

“What the hell, Ava?” I asked. “How could you just kill him? We could have gotten information out of him. Now we’ll never know why he cast that spell in the first place or who he’s working with.”

Ava gave me another icy once-over, then looked over her shoulder at Xavier. She was ignoring me in favor of mind linking with him. It only pissed me off further. Whatever she had to say, she could say it to me.

“You just killed that guy,” I said. “You shouldn’t have done that. You have no idea what kind of consequences it’ll trigger. What gives you the right to make that kind of decision?”

Ava finally turned back to look at me. “I just saved your ass. I think you should be thanking me instead of judging me, fucking ingrate.”

Her arrogance coupled with her icy gaze sent me over the edge. Ava thought she was free to do as she pleased, but I was about to let her have it. I didn’t bother to choose my words wisely. I just opened my mouth and let them fly.

“This is so like you,” I said, shaking my head. “You always say that I just do whatever I want, never thinking of others, but you’re the same. You didn’t bother to think about the consequences or how your actions might affect the situation. All you care about is you.”

The color drained from Ava’s face. Her shock immediately gave way to rage, and I saw her curling her hands into fists. I didn’t back down. If she wanted to rip my throat out, she could try. I’d use my light sword to sever her killing hand from the rest of her body.

Ava shook with the effort it took to keep from lashing out. I took a step closer as if daring her to do something about it. I wasn’t the Fae lying dead on the ground. I would fight back if I needed to, and she would be sorry. Ava opened her mouth to respond, but Xavier cut in before she could say a word.

“That’s enough,” he said.

For a second, I thought he was stopping Ava from speaking up. It was good to know that he still had my back. It seemed that Xavier was the only other person there who thought she had gone too far. Unfortunately, my moment of vindication was short-lived.

Xavier stepped closer to Ava, showing everyone whose side he was taking. Xavier was telling me to shut up, not her. As much as I wanted to be upset with him, I couldn’t blame him. I heard myself, and I knew that I had been way out of line. I shouldn’t have let loose on Ava, but I couldn’t help it.

Greyson stepped forward and wrapped his arm around me. I was thankful for his silent support, even if it did feel strange to be standing across from Xavier instead of by his side. He was no longer my mate—he was Ava’s. I didn’t think I would ever get used to our dynamic, but it wasn’t up to me.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Greyson said.

“Me too,” I said.

Not wanting Xavier or Ava to be privy to what else I had to say, I mind linked with Greyson.

“Do you think this really had something to do with what happened with Kendall?” I asked.

“It definitely is. The Fae referenced what I heard the other one say back in Portland,” Greyson said. “Now I’m worried we’ve made things worse by killing another Dark Fae mafia member. But what’s done is done. We can talk about it later.”

Greyson didn’t want to discuss anything in front of Xavier, but I wondered if that was a mistake. Despite no longer being a part of the pack, Xavier and other members of the Samara pack had come out to help us. Given what the Dark Fae mafia was capable, I figured we could use all the help we could get.

“Wouldn’t it be better to have more people on our side than less?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head slightly. “This is a Redwood problem. We don’t need to involve another pack.”

*Too late for that*, I thought.

Greyson’s decision made me realize once again just how separate my life had become from Xavier’s. It wasn’t that long ago that he and I had been inseparable, yet there he was, standing in front of me as he held hands with Ava. I frowned, wishing it didn’t bother me as much as it did.

“Thank you for your help,” Greyson said to Ava. “I’m grateful for what you did.”

“Oh, *you’re* welcome,” Ava said pointedly.

“I’m grateful, but I think we should have discussed your plan first,” Greyson said.

A storm passed over Xavier’s face. He took a step forward, putting himself between Ava and Greyson. It was a simple, protective move that sent a current of jealousy sparking through my body. Xavier used to protect *me* like that. Sadly, I was no longer his. I was someone else’s mate and no longer his concern.

“We didn’t need to discuss anything with you,” Xavier said. “Cali called me for help because she couldn’t reach you. Your pack had a problem, and the Samaras fixed it. You got a problem with that?”

**Episode 5153**

**Greyson**

*Who the fuck does he think he is?* I raged internally.

I couldn’t believe Xavier had just said that out loud. That he would turn what could have been a catastrophe into a pissing match between Alphas. He was so immature and so fucking aggravating that I went from being grateful, to feeling murderous. It took everything I had in me to keep from shifting. I wanted to take my claws and go at it with my asshole brother. He had no idea how close he came to being another corpse on the ground.

*How dare he come in and talk like that in front of the Redwood pack…in front of Cali?*

My body trembled as my rage threatened to overwhelm me. I didn’t give a shit if Xavier was the Alpha of the Samara pack. He had disrespected me in front of my pack and my mate. It wasn’t something I could let pass. Xavier was challenging my authority, and I was not going to back down.

But…if I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t sure if I was angrier at Xavier or at myself. While my brother had crossed the line with his comment, he wasn’t wrong. I hadn’t been around to protect my pack, and Cali had been forced to reach out to him. I had no problem with Xavier coming to her rescue. I had a problem with the fact that I hadn’t been able to.

I didn’t blame Cali for reaching out to Xavier after she couldn’t get in contact with me. That was my fault, not hers. I hadn’t been able to take her call because I had been too busy fucking up in Portland. Instead of taking Kendall’s advice to leave well enough alone, I ignored her and got my pack and my home in trouble. Cali had spent hours trapped behind a magical barrier, terrified as she desperately tried to reach me.

I hated that I had put her in that position. I should have known and done better.

Xavier was still looking at me, a smug expression on his face. He was pushing my buttons on purpose and waiting for me to react. Not wanting to give him what he wanted, I swallowed my anger and forced myself to remain calm.

I wasn’t going to fight Xavier over it. He wasn’t the bad guy there. He was just my asshole brother.

“No, I don’t have a problem,” I said. “I appreciate you and the Samaras for coming to help the Redwood pack. We’re all grateful.”

The twin looks of shock on Xavier and Ava’s faces were well worth swallowing my pride. He could try and provoke me all he wanted. I wasn’t going to give him the pleasure of lashing out. Not when shocking him was so much more entertaining. I could only imagine what Xavier and Ava were saying via mind link.

“Yeah, well. If that’s all, we’re going to get out of here,” Xavier said curtly. “Perrie, let’s go.”

I turned to see Perrie and Lilac exchanging a few words. Perrie waved at Xavier to wait for a moment until she finished her conversation, then she ran to join Xavier and Ava. The three of them left without saying goodbye, heading in the direction of the Samara pack house.

*Good riddance*, I thought.

Cali and I watched them until they disappeared into the forest. I held her closer, and she tipped her head so that it was resting against my shoulder. With my brother gone, I could give all my attention to her. I leaned down to press a kiss to the crown of her head. While Ava’s tactic had been too brutal for my taste, I was still grateful she had gotten my pack free. I couldn’t imagine what I would have done if we hadn’t been able to bring down the barrier.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I think I’m just really tired.”

“It’s been a long day,” I said. “Why don’t you head back inside? I’ll meet you in there after I do a quick check-in with the rest of the pack.”

Cali hummed in agreement before making her way back into the house. I watched her for a second, wondering if she really was just tired. She seemed shell-shocked, which was understandable given what she had just gone through. Wanting to be by her side, I decided to make my check-in as brief as possible.

Luckily, everyone seemed to be okay. My pack was just relieved to be free again, and I was relieved that none of them had been hurt because of my actions. I vowed never to do anything that would endanger them again, but I wasn’t sure how long that promise would hold given the corpse on our property.

*We have to dispose of it before someone sees it*, I thought.

While the majority of the pack members were okay, Rishika was not. She seemed almost as upset as Cali about the magical barrier. I felt bad. She was a capable member of the pack, but what she had experienced had exceeded her abilities.

“I want to debrief about everything that happened today,” she said. “We can talk about it tomorrow once we all get some rest. Does that work for you?”

She was breathing heavily and kept pacing back and forth as if she was too agitated to relax. I had the distinct sense that she was pissed off about something, but I lacked the energy to ask her about it. It could wait until the next day.

“Sure, that works,” I said. “Get some rest.”

“Yeah, right,” Rishika muttered. “Maybe after I kill a bottle.”

By the time I finally got back to my room, Cali was lying in bed with an arm flung over her eyes. She looked like she was just dozing, but I could see the frown on her face. I lay down in bed next to her and pulled her close to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

Cali moved her arm as she twisted to look up at me. “Why are you apologizing? I already told you it wasn’t your fault.”

I shook my head. “This time I’m apologizing because I wasn’t here, and you had to call someone else to help you.”

Someone else… I couldn’t even bring myself to say Xavier’s name. He had come to the rescue, but his attitude about it left a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn’t want Cali to feel like she had to rely on someone else, and I sure as hell didn’t want her to have to rely on Xavier ever again.

Cali shifted her gaze away. “It’s fine. It’s not something you have to apologize for.”

I could tell that she meant what she said, but she sounded strangely distracted as she said it. There was definitely something off with her. The only thing I wasn’t sure about was if she was acting that way because of the barrier or something else. Even the way she had yelled at Ava had been so unlike her.

A small part of me wondered if she did blame me for what happened. Had she actually wanted to scream at me instead of Ava? Being trapped in the house had been stressful and traumatic for Cali. Perhaps yelling at Ava had been her way of venting all those overwhelming emotions.

“It’s okay if you’re mad at me,” I said. “I understand.”

She turned back to look at me, surprise etched on her beautiful face. She looked so cute that all I wanted to do was kiss her.

“What are you talking about, Greyson?” she asked. “I’m not mad at you at all.”

“Then what is it then?” I asked. “I can tell there’s something bothering you. I want to help you if I can.”

“I saw some things when I got knocked out,” Cali said quietly. “Things that seemed so real they terrified me.”

“What do you mean? What did you see?” I asked.

Cali took a shuddering breath, then started to tell me about her horrible dream. My heart went out to her as she recounted the blood and carnage she thought she had caused. By the time she was finished, her body was shaking, and she was crying. My heart broke in half for her, and I wished that I could have taken her pain away from her and made it my own. I would have done anything to ease it away.

“Is there anything I can do, love?” I asked. “Anything you want. Please. Anything so you don’t keep suffering like this.”

“I just want to be in the moment,” Cali said, running her hands over my chest. “I— I don’t want to think about this anymore. I don’t want to think at all.”

“I can do that,” I said.

I leaned down and kissed her. She kissed me back desperately, and it wasn’t long before we were both breathless. If she wanted me to take her mind off her horrible vision, then I would do just that. In fact, it would be my pleasure.

**Episode 5154**

*I want this. I need this.*

Greyson’s kiss was exactly what I needed to stay in the moment. I melted into his embrace, loving the feel of his lips sliding over mine. All I wanted to do was focus on him and not think about anything else.

I sighed into his mouth as the tension I had been carrying slipped out of my body. He kissed me passionately, making it impossible for me to do anything but kiss him back. My mind was wiped clean, and I reveled in the sensation of Greyson’s hands running over my body. He caressed me until my body curled into his, desperate to eliminate the distance between us.

Greyson pinned my hands over my head as he kissed me into oblivion. I submitted to him and the pleasure that took me away from my pain. He weighed me down with his body, and I basked in the feel of him. His weight held me in place as he moved his body over mine, driving me to the edge of my sanity. Greyson kissed his way down my chest, pausing to get me out of my shirt and bra. He tossed them aside, then leaned back over me to run his tongue over my sensitive skin.

“Greyson…” I sighed.

His tongue teased my nipples until I was writhing beneath him. He kissed his way down my torso as I trembled with need. Greyson peeled me out of my pants and underwear. He stared down at me as I lay naked on his bed, looking like he had no idea where he should have been staring. His gaze made me feel like my body was on fire. I wanted him so badly I could hardly stand it.

Seeing my growing need, Greyson settled between my legs and began to relieve the ache at the center of my core. I slipped my hand in his hair and moaned as his tongue drove me wild.

Gone were the horrible visions I had been struck with. Gone was the terror I felt when we had all been locked behind the barrier. Gone was everything that wasn’t the pleasure that Greyson was giving me. My mind was a total blank and had ceded control to my body as it was overwhelmed with ecstasy.

“I’m so close,” I gasped.

Greyson used his agile tongue to stroke my clit. It was all I needed to shoot off into the stratosphere. I cried out his name, and he groaned against me, then kissed my inner thigh.

Before I could catch my breath, Greyson was pushing me toward another orgasm. I came hard and fast, somehow still greedy for more. He gave me as much as I needed until I was finally gasping on the bed. I turned my head to watch him take his clothes off. His eyes stayed on me as he joined me in bed.

Greyson sighed my name as he slid inside me. I ran my nails down his back, loving our connection. Xavier had been the one to come to my rescue, but I didn’t feel safe until Greyson had wrapped me up in his arms. I shivered as he whispered words of devotion in my ear, making my heart swell with love.

We reached our peak together and collapsed onto the bed as we came down from our mutual high. Greyson pulled me into his arms, and we fell asleep moments later, both of us leaving our horrible day far behind.

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My eyes fluttered open slowly, and I noticed that the sun had come up. Though I had slept well, it felt like the night had flown by. I wished that I could fall back asleep and forget about the day I had ahead of me.

Greyson had his arm wrapped around me. I breathed him in, feeling utterly at peace in his embrace. His warmth made me want to curl even further into him. He was still asleep, and I took the chance to study his handsome face. I traced his full, sensual lips with my eyes and shivered when I thought about how he had used them to bring me so much pleasure.

*If only we could spend all day in bed*, I thought.

As I continued to stare at him, my vision from the day before came back to haunt me. The carnage and the grief were there, ready to drown me in terror all over again. It was going to be impossible to forget what I had seen, but I felt better after having shared the burden of it with Greyson. He would help me figure out what was going on with me after we handled all the Dark Fae stuff.

Greyson’s eyes blinked open, then focused on me. He grinned, and I couldn’t help but smile back at him. I leaned forward to kiss him, wishing we could stay in this moment forever. Unfortunately, the stress of the day before was coming back in full force.

As if reading my thoughts, Greyson pulled away and stared up at the ceiling. He looked as anxious as I felt. I rubbed my hand over his chest.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“I’m thinking about how the Dark Fae mafia probably isn’t finished with us. And I’m thinking that they might be sending more people to come after me and the rest of the pack,” he said. “They didn’t like that I was snooping around, and they sure as hell don’t like it that I keep killing the guys they send after me.”

I nodded, and Greyson took my hand in his as he stared deeply into my eyes.

“I’m worried they’ll come after you because they know that would hurt me the most,” he said. “I’ll die if anything happens to you.”

“Then we’ll just have to stop them,” I said. “Do you think we should tell the Samaras?”

“I was considering it,” Greyson said.

I could tell he wasn’t happy about the prospect of having to speak to Xavier. The Samaras had come to our rescue, but that didn’t mean that it was easy for the two packs to come together. Unfortunately, not coming together was no longer an option.

“Well, they’re involved now,” I said. “Ava was the one who killed the second Fae.”

Greyson sighed. “Xavier is not going to take this well at all.”

“There’s no denying that,” I said.

I thought back to how Xavier and Ava had acted the day before. It still didn’t sit right with me. While I knew that I could always count on Xavier to come help me if I needed him to, I wasn’t sure I was keen on the idea of Ava always being with him. I had no idea he was going to bring her or why he did. Worse. I had no idea he was going to agree with her brutal actions. She had ripped a guy’s throat out and he backed her up like it was the only way to handle things.

He was no longer the Xavier I knew. He was Ava’s Xavier. And that stung, but I wisely kept it to myself.

“I don’t think Xavier will listen to me,” Greyson said. “Makes me wonder if I should send Rishika instead. That way it’s pack business and not one brother speaking to another.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said. “But what are we going to do about the Dark Fae?”

“Just like you said. We’re going to stop them,” he said. “First, we’ll shore up the pack’s defenses. Rishika and I will work out a system to make sure the house is always under protection. And…”

“What is it?” I asked.

Greyson hesitated. “I think we need to talk to Kendall. Or Greta. Or whatever her name really is.”

I frowned. “I don’t think that’s the best idea. All of this is happening because we got too involved with her. It’s like you said. It seems like Kendall’s involved in so much stuff. Not just the mafia, but also the whole internet surveillance thing. What are we going to be inadvertently inviting into our home by getting more involved with her?”

“I agree with you, but I’m not sure what else we can do,” Greyson said. “Kendall is the one who knows most about what’s going on. She’s the one who can give us the information we need.”

“She’ll give us information if she feels like it,” I said. “She has so many secrets, and we don’t know how many of them are dangerous. We still don’t really know what side she’s on.”

“Then we’ll just have to be careful with her,” Greyson said. “We’ll take more than we give. I wish there was another way, but this is it.”

“I get it,” I said. “I don’t love it, but I get it. I don’t have any other ideas either.”

“So it’s decided,” he said. “I’ll get Kendall today.”

“Yeah, and I’m coming with you,” I said.

**Episode 5155**

**Artemis**

I came back to the world one heartbeat at a time. The first thing I was cognizant of was a softness underneath me, something warm and supportive gently cradling me. Then, slowly—oh, so slowly—I willed my ten-ton eyelids to open. I blinked against the brightness before my bedroom at the Dark Fae court came into focus.

*What the f—*

“Did you have a nice rest?”

I twisted my neck, wincing as a bright pain shot down my spine, and found Celeste sitting in a chair at my bedside. Easing myself back on my pillows, I groaned, pressing a hand against my eyes to block out the light—and the dull pain that throbbed behind them with each heartbeat.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice rough like I’d just swallowed a bag of gravel. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so lousy. I felt like I’d been run over by a herd of wild horses. Or hit by Xavier’s car and then dragged for a few miles. Just *blinking* hurt.

“That bag must have held some kind of magic,” she said gravely. “It was a last-ditch effort on the part of the dead assassin to finish the job. You’re lucky it didn’t quite hit the mark.”

I dropped my hand from my face to shoot her a glare. *Lucky? In what universe does nearly dying make me lucky?*  “What is that supposed to mean?”

Celeste shrugged. “The bag held magic—a magic that would specifically target only someone who had Kadmos’s blood running through their veins.” She frowned. “This kind of magic is an ugly thing. Truly uncivilized.”

“If that’s the case, why am I not dead?”

“Dumb luck,” she said simply. “The magic had time to mellow out, time for its effect to fade. If you had opened that bag ten hours earlier, you *would* be dead.”

The cold truth of her words sent a chill down my spine. I took no small amount of pride in the way I’d scraped and fought my whole life. How I’d become a fucking good bounty hunter, a woman capable of taking care of myself, of protecting myself regardless of the forces I went up against. When I decided to return to the Fae world to search for my father, I knew there would be risks. But after all the other forces I’d fought—and conquered—it had never truly occurred to me that I might be killed. Or that these people who sought to prolong the war were capable of more than a few threats. I thought I was holding my own against their assassination attempts—and I was certainly doing a better job of protecting myself than the palace guards were. But the Order had outmaneuvered me. I’d never imagined that bag would have all the power of a loaded shotgun pointed right at my face. And because of my oversight, my ignorance, I’d very nearly died.

*And the only reason I’m still alive now? I got lucky.*

This was unacceptable. I wouldn’t—no, I *couldn’t*—let them keep trying to kill me. This had to end. Now. Well, soon. As soon as was fucking possible.

I blew out a breath. “The one upside to all of this is that now we can narrow our search.”

Celeste’s brows rose, but if I didn’t know any better, I’d say she looked impressed. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Well, this magic doesn’t seem particularly common; I imagine there aren’t a lot of magic users who can be traced back to the source.”

“That’s a fair assumption.” She nodded. “I do have to say, Artemis, I’m finding your handling of all this thoroughly impressive. Most would balk at this experience, and yet you’re more determined. I’m more certain than ever that you’ll be able to find a way to bring the Order down.”

“Of course I will,” I said with the same cold certainty Celeste had when she’d told me it was only by pure luck that I hadn’t died. “It’s what I do.”

Celeste smiled. “You’re correct. This does, in fact, create a far more limited list of potential leaders of the Order. The type of magic that satchel was imbued with only works if both Light and Dark Fae work together.”

It was my turn to look surprised. “Light and Dark Fae…combining their magic? I thought that was frowned upon in both societies.”

“On the surface, it is very much frowned upon. But our people are not our systems. Our world is made up of individual Fae who are flawed, desperate, and ambitious, and those Fae make choices every day. Often those choices involve money and power because money and power will supersede everything for some of the Fae, even centuries-old anger.”

This was news to me. The centuries-long hatred between the Dark and Light Fae had always seemed like an irrefutable rule of the universe. And that prejudice was so powerful, it overcame anything else. It had always seemed so black and white, to my knowledge.

But that was before I’d learned that the war didn’t just take, it also gave. For certain individuals, the war was the gift that kept giving. Money, power, influence. And really, who wouldn’t be willing to get their hands dirty if it meant ensuring control over the Fae world? Who wouldn’t play nice with the opposition if they got unlimited power in return?

But then again, if the continuation of the war was just the machinations of the powerful, then perhaps the prejudice between Light and Dark Fae was too.

*Maybe it’s all a lie. An act put on by the most powerful to keep the Fae world locked in a never-ending war.*

My head spun with the implications. My parents had married to bring an end to that war, and I was a product of that goal…

And then I was kidnapped, and the war continued to rage on. It couldn’t be a coincidence. Bile rose up my throat, and it had nothing to do with the poisonous magic. Had this been what I was fighting against my entire life without even knowing it?

“Artemis?” Celeste was looking at me with something resembling concern. I shook myself out of my darkening thoughts. I could pick that puzzle apart later. For now, I had a job to do.

“With the limitations of this magic in mind, who do you think would still be on the list of potential Order elites?” I asked.

She seemed to ponder this for a moment. “I can think of three families of powerful means who have shown sympathies to the other side. Two Dark and one Light, but their alliances don’t mean anything. I’ve heard all of them praising the war out of one side of their mouths and protecting their opposite allies with the other on more than one occasion. It was unusual enough for me to mark and remember it.”

“Well, it’s certainly a start,” I said. I tried to push myself to sit up, groaning at the effort and the aches that flared across my body, and Celeste gently put her hands on my shoulders to press me back down.

“You’re not quite ready to be back on your feet yet.”

“And yet, I suspect these assassins won’t wait for me to be one hundred percent. The longer I lie around like this, the longer I’ll be a sitting duck.”

Celeste shook her head. “You have some time. It’ll take a while for word to reach the appropriate parties about the assassin’s death—as well as the news that the magic on the bag didn’t kill you either. And, of course, you remain under the watchful protection of the court, but I know how you feel about that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Might as well just leave my door unlocked and unguarded—it amounts to the same thing.”

“As I was saying,” Celeste said with a long-suffering sigh. “Take this time to rest—and to consider how you’ll be approaching these families. Their powerful status means you’ll need to be particularly careful and circumspect in your manner,” she said meaningfully.

“So you don’t want me to go charging in on horseback, arrows nocked,” I said wryly. “Got it.” It made sense, but it was still a little disappointing. Utilizing my hard won bounty hunting skills was second nature to me and, if I was being honest, it sounded a lot better than playing courtier with a bunch of people who may or may not be trying to kill me. I still couldn’t passably play the part of Kadmos’s heir in my own court. How was I supposed to get the information I needed?

Celeste must have seen the disappointment on my face, because she took my hand. “Not exactly. But I do think you’ll have to consider the best way to get in with them and get the information you need.” Her expression turned grave. “As a bounty hunter or as a member of my household and the daughter of Kadmos.”

**Episode 5156**

I waited for Greyson to reply. He still hadn’t said anything since I’d told him I was going to join him. This wasn’t typically the kind of thing he rushed to agree to, so I knew better than to assume he’d be fine with it. Still, I was ready to push back if he disagreed.

Finally, and unsurprisingly, he shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, love. It could be really dangerous.”

*So what?* I wanted to snap. Everything was always, constantly dangerous, wasn’t it? It had been incredibly dangerous to sit around, locked in the pack house, wondering if we were gonna run out of air, waiting for someone to take care of the Dark Fae who had cast that horrible spell on us in the first place. I was already involved—whether Greyson liked it or not.

“It’s dangerous for you to go alone,” I pressed. “We’ll have a better chance if we go together. I know it.”

Greyson opened his mouth, his expression a determined refusal, but I cut him off.

“*No*, please listen. All this time, we’ve been trying to work this from separate angles, and look where it’s gotten us. You had to fight off a bunch of Dark Fae on your own; the pack house was attacked and we had to go to the Samaras for help.” I knew it was fighting dirty to bring up Xavier’s involvement, but I was willing to stoop that low if it meant Greyson allowing me to help. He could be so stubborn sometimes, and we couldn’t afford that right now.

He gave me a long look, like he knew exactly what I was trying to do, and he was determined to find whatever reason he could to disagree with me, but he finally let out a long sigh. “Fine. You can come with me. But if things go sideways, my priority is going to be getting you out of harm’s way, even if that means drawing out this search for even longer.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed easily. “I would do the same for you.”

I knew he didn’t want me involved at all, so I appreciated it all the more that he was willing to listen to me and was allowing me to help despite his reservations. I figured trying to argue any further might make him drop the whole thing, so I made myself scarce and went back upstairs to take a shower.

When I was done getting ready, I found Greyson in his bedroom. “Okay, I think our best shot is to start by trying to find Kendall. What do you think about that?”

He frowned. “What do you mean? I tracked her yesterday. We already know where she is.”

“Well, yes, but what I mean is we could try and set up a meeting. I mean, Kendall already knows we’re involved at this point, and she should probably know about what happened with the Dark Fae mafia yesterday, so we can use that information to get her to agree. They tried to kill us yesterday. She can’t really say that we’re not involved at this point.”

He nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. Go ahead and reach out to her. Hopefully she’ll be receptive to a meetup. I’m gonna go take a shower.”

I grabbed my phone out of my pocket and shot off a quick text to Kendall. *We need to meet. Are you back in Bend?*

Once Greyson was ready for the day, we headed downstairs together to get breakfast. Jay and Lola were waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs, and before I could even get the words, “Good morning,” out, Lola cut me off.

“So?” she asked. “What have you decided?”

“We have a plan,” Greyson said. “And we’ll let everyone know what’s going on before we head out, okay?”

“Not okay.” She frowned. “That’s not fair. I’ve been working my ass off on this—I was the one who figured out all the stuff about the surveillance. I should be involved in the planning, and I definitely deserve to find out what’s going on before the rest of the pack.”

I looked at Greyson. “She’s right, you know. Lola was a big reason we found another Kendall clue yesterday. We should at least keep her up to date with what we’re doing.”

“Fine,” he said with a sigh. “Lola, we’re going to meet up with Kendall today to try to get more information out of her.”

“Great idea! I’m coming with you.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re not.”

“Why not?”

“Because three of us showing up to talk is a bit much, don’t you think? We don’t want to put Kendall on the defensive by outnumbering her. We need her to work with us, and she’s made it pretty damn clear she doesn’t want to. We need to play this carefully, or she’s going to be of no help to us at all.”

From the look on Lola’s face, I worried she was going to dig her heels in for the long haul. Lola wasn’t exactly submissive when it came to getting her way. But, after a long, dramatic sigh, she said, “I guess that’s a good point. But I fully expect to be kept updated through texts! I will not be left out of the loop. Do you hear me?”

I fought back a laugh. “I can do that.”

With that sorted, we headed to the kitchen together and found Torin already bustling around the space, getting coffee and breakfast together for the house.

“Good morning, Torin.” I smiled. “It smells great in here. What would we do without you?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Starve, probably.”

I sat down at the table and pulled out my phone. No response from Kendall yet. Hopefully she wasn’t going to blow us off completely. That definitely wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. I set my phone down on the table, and then, almost as soon as I released it, it buzzed.

Kendall replied after all. *I’m back in Bend, but I don’t think we should meet.*

I rolled my eyes. I’d had about enough of her giving us the runaround. It was like pulling teeth to get her to help with literally anything. But I wasn’t going to take no for an answer. The Dark Fae mafia had their sights set on us whether she wanted to play nice or not. So she didn’t get the option. Not anymore.

*You can either agree*, I replied, *or I can just show up. It’s your choice.*

For once, her response was immediate. *Fine. Meet me at my place.*

*Sounds great*, I texted. *What time?*

Those three dots popped up. Kendall was typing out her response. And she was taking her sweet time with it. I rolled my eyes and set my phone down. She’d agreed to meet. That was progress. And while she figured out whether or not she was going to jerk me around some more, I was going to enjoy my breakfast.

“She’s willing to meet today,” I told Greyson. “Now it’s just a matter of when.”

Torin passed us two mugs of coffee, followed by two plates full of eggs, toast, and bacon. “Wow, you went all out. Thanks, Torin. This looks amazing!”

Greyson stood from the table.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To fill Rishika in and have her go talk to the Samaras.”

While Greyson was gone, I took my sweet time enjoying my breakfast and chatting with Lola, Jay, and Torin. Once my plate was clean and I’d taken the last sip of my coffee, I picked my phone up again to see if Kendall had graced me with a response.

I frowned. *Still the three dots? That’s so strange. How long does it take to check a calendar? What could be taking her so long to get back to us?*

She was probably just stalling, I realized. It figured that she was still being as difficult as possible. Did she not like us, or something? Even so, it seemed unnecessarily rude to just blow us off. We were in danger here too. It wasn’t like we were inserting ourselves in her life just to annoy her. We had a dog in this fight as well. And the sooner she started acting like a team player and letting us help sort this situation, the sooner we could go our separate ways once and for all.

Greyson came back into the kitchen and peered over my shoulder at my phone. “Anything?”

“Not yet. She’s been typing this whole time.” I sighed. “Do you think she’s just messing with us? What if she’s already leaving?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll find her if that’s the case. I found her yesterday. I can do it again.”

My phone buzzed in my hand, and Greyson and I looked back down at the screen. It was Kendall again.

*Finally!*

But her text was a one-word response: *HELP*

**Episode 5157**

**Ava**

“What are you so smiley about?” Marissa asked.

She and I were stretched across my bed, just hanging out. I was still riding high from the confrontation yesterday. How I’d come to the rescue and saved the day for the whole Redwood pack. How Xavier hadn’t been able to keep his hands off me when we got home. I hadn’t been able to keep the stupid grin from my face ever since.

“You won’t believe what happened yesterday.” I filled her in on the whole episode—how Cali had called Xavier for help, how *I* had been the one who killed the Dark Fae and brought the barrier down.

“I saved the whole Redwood pack—including Cali.” I wrinkled my nose in distaste, practically spitting Cali’s name out. My smile disappeared. “And I did it all on my own.”

Marissa laughed. “Tell me how you really feel, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not even about that. I *saved* her. I did what nobody else could or would do, and you know what that bitch did? She not only had the audacity to *not* thank me, but she straight up yelled at me. She *complained* about how I decided to save the day. She was whining to Xavier about how they might run out of oxygen, and when I come in and fix that problem for her, suffocating is suddenly less important than me killing some psychotic Dark Fae.”

“I can’t believe that,” Marissa said, her eyes wide. “Like, that is literally unbelievable. How could she be so selfish? Not only did you save her out of the goodness of your heart—”

I held up a hand. “I can’t actually say that’s completely true. I killed the guy because I was tired of sticking around there, waiting for someone to finally do what needed to be done to fix the problem. The way they were going, it would have taken all damn day.”

Marissa waved me off. “That doesn’t even matter. At the end of the day, all that matters is you saved Cali even though there was nothing in it for you. *That* was selfless.”

“You know what? It was, wasn’t it? God, would it have killed her to acknowledge me doing something good, for once?”

“I mean, probably? If she convinces herself you’re the bad guy, then she can keep justifying the wedge she keeps driving between you and Xavier. I have no clue how Greyson puts up with that shit.”

I sighed. Greyson, I understood. He and I were more or less in the same boat, after all. Stuck on the sidelines while our mates clung to their other mate bond—

*No, you and Greyson aren’t the same.* I shook myself. *Cali might flit back and forth between the Evers brothers, but Xavier chose* you*. He backed you yesterday against Cali. You and Greyson aren’t in the same situation at all.*

“The things you do for love,” I said simply. “Poor guy. It can’t be easy loving someone like that.”

Marissa snorted. “I mean, if you want to talk about easy, I think everyone’s lives would be a hell of a lot easier if Cali weren’t around at all.”

I laughed. “I can’t argue with that.”

“Mm. Wishful thinking, though.”

Before I could respond, Xavier’s voice cut into my mind. *Ava, can you please come downstairs and meet me in the den? We have a visitor.*

I sat upright. “Gotta go. Xavier needs me.”

Marissa waggled her brows at me. “Get it, girl. Make him forget all about that Redwood bitch.”

“Oh, I’m working on it.” I winked and headed downstairs to see what was going on. Xavier had sounded so formal in the mind link. *Who would be visiting us?*

On my way downstairs, I passed Knox’s room and was surprised to see Milo in there with him. They seemed to be in the middle of a serious conversation. I smiled. *It looks like my cousin actually listened to me for once in his life. Another check in the column for Ava.*

This was good. While the Samara pack was stronger now than it had been in a long time, we still couldn’t afford to deal with any in-fighting. And the fact that I was the one who’d ultimately gotten through to Knox put a smile on my face. I was a hell of a Luna. Making things happen inside my pack and outside of it.

*Xavier’s lucky to have me.*

I was on cloud nine by the time I reached the bottom of the stairs. And then, when I saw who our “visitor” was, my good mood soured in an instant.

“Hello, Rishika,” I said, my tone cordial.

She was sitting on the couch across from Xavier. I took a seat next to him, my mood darkening more and more with each passing second. If Rishika was here, it could only mean one thing: more fucking Cali problems.

I painted on my best imitation of a smile as I turned to Xavier. “What’s going on?”

He shrugged. “I actually don’t know yet. I was waiting for you.”

Just like that, my smile turned into a genuine grin. He’d waited for me. As the Alpha, even with me being the Luna, he didn’t have to wait for me if he didn’t want to. But he’d chosen to. He didn’t want to tend to this pack business without me by his side.

*He really did pick me.*

Yesterday was the definition of chaotic, and I was beyond furious when Xavier told me he needed to go help Cali with something. I felt like all the progress we’d fought for had been erased with one phone call from Cali. But in the end, everything was okay. Xavier had backed me. Even going against Cali to do so. And in the end, Xavier had ended up back in the Samara house—and my bed.

*He’s mine. He really is mine.*

I turned to Rishika and nodded. “I’m here now, so please continue with whatever you were saying.”

“Greyson wanted me to let you know that the guy you killed yesterday was a member of the Dark Fae mafia,” Rishika said flatly. “So the Samaras will need to be extra careful. I imagine the mafia will be retaliating soon, and, Ava, you’re their most likely target.”

I frowned. “What are you—”

Next to me, Xavier leapt to his feet. “Are you fucking kidding me?!” he roared.

My jaw dropped. *Holy shit. He is PISSED.*

Rishika, on the other hand, didn’t seem too shaken by his explosion. “Yes, it’s unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate?!” he spat. “This is un-fucking-acceptable! Greyson didn’t say shit about the Dark Fae mafia being involved with this!”

Rishika was silent for a beat. Then, she shrugged one shoulder. “He is now. I came here to let you know, and now I have. You’ll need to talk to Greyson if you have any problems with this news.”

“Oh, I’ll fucking talk…” Xavier muttered under his breath.

Rishika stood and headed to the door. She paused, then turned around to face us. “You had our back, and we won’t forget that. We’ll have yours too.” And then, without another word, or waiting for us to respond, she left.

I stared after her in complete disbelief. *What kind of clusterfuck did the Redwoods get us into now?*

Once Rishika was outside, I turned to Xavier. He’d gone from calm to exploding in a second flat, but I was getting angry now too. “What the hell were the Redwoods thinking?” I snapped. “They’re caught in some kind of fight with the mafia, and they call *you* to help clean up the mess? Without telling you who they’re up against? I mean, what the fuck?!”

Xavier shook his head. “I have no idea what they could be thinking. But Greyson’s clearly fucking up leading the Redwood pack if he’s messing around with the Dark Fae mafia.”

“And Cali didn’t do a damn thing to help—that’s for sure,” I added darkly.

Xavier’s head shot up, and he glared at me. “What do you mean?”

My eyes narrowed, and my hackles rose. Xavier was going to have to be very, very careful in how he responded. “Cali shouldn’t have called you. It put the entire Samara pack at risk, and she never mentioned what the risks of getting involved were, did she? She just came crying to you about her problems like she always does.”

“Ava, we don’t even know what Cali knew or didn’t know. You’re so quick to jump to blame—”

*Jesus fucking Christ. Here we go again.* Dread and rage twisted in my stomach. Maybe he hadn’t chosen me so definitively after all.

I bared my teeth in fury. “You don’t think Greyson is honest with her? You don’t think she knows what’s going on over there just as well as he does? She’s his Luna, for all intents and purposes. She’s not some innocent bystander! Why are you so reluctant to blame her for anything?”

**Episode 5158**

**Greyson**

Cali and I smashed the speed limits as we raced toward campus, my foot pressed against the gas pedal. The whole time, Cali kept her phone pressed to her ear, trying again and again to reach Kendall. The more the minutes that passed by, the more uneasy I was getting about bringing her with me. I understood her argument—and hadn’t been shocked by it—but something was feeling off.

“Why won’t she pick up the phone?!” she growled. “It’s not like she didn’t have the thing glued to her when she was texting us earlier.”

I had a few theories, but none of them boded well for Kendall. If she really was in danger—say, if she was with someone who wanted to hurt her—then a fumbled text message would be a hell of a lot easier than taking our calls.

Cali swore and dropped her phone in her lap. “It just keeps going to voicemail.”

“Did you try the university operator? Maybe you can call her office just to be sure she’s not there?”

“I tried that too. There was no answer from her office, either.”

I released one hand from the steering wheel to catch Cali’s fingers and give them a squeeze. “We’ll figure this out. It’ll be okay, love.”

She tore her gaze away from her phone to look at me. “Will it?” she asked quietly.

“I hope so.”

This wasn’t anything like how I’d imagined our day would go. I wasn’t overly optimistic about what we’d find. Kendall was caught up with the Dark Fae mafia in ways I could only imagine. If she’d gotten herself in some kind of trouble, I wasn’t convinced there was a ton we could do to help her. Not that we wouldn’t try.

The car screeched into the driveway, and I slammed on my brakes. I barely had the car in park before Cali launched herself out of the car and raced up the front porch steps. I hurried after her, and when I reached the door, a wave of dread rolled over me to find it slightly ajar. There was no sound coming from inside.

What were we about to find in there?

Cali moved to push the door open, but I caught her arm and pulled her back. *Wait*, I said through the mind link.

I cocked my head and listened. It was still quiet, too quiet. I couldn’t hear even the slightest of movements inside. I slowly pushed the door open with one hand, my body still protectively blocking Cali. She gasped when she saw the state of Kendall’s house. The living room was in complete disarray. The furniture had been turned over, and there were paperwork and books all over the ground.

Cali’s voice slipped through my mind. *Who do you think did this?*

I shook my head. *I have no idea.*

There were too many possibilities at play here. It could be a simple robbery, but the way all the circumstances aligned made that seem less likely. The timing felt a bit too coincidental. Somebody—possibly not even Kendall—had sent that help text to Cali. But why? And what were they looking for? If they left, had they found something?

I picked up Kendall’s scent all around us—no surprise since this was her house. But somebody else had to have done this.

*Why can’t I detect anyone else here?*

Cali mind linked again. *Do you think Kendall—*

Suddenly, the bedroom door swung open, and two guys rushed out. One of them slammed into me, and the other one grabbed Cali.

She screamed as a bag was pulled over her head.

*Oh hell no.* Whatever these guys wanted, whoever they worked with, they’d just made a huge fucking mistake. You didn’t mess with an Alpha’s mate and live to tell the tale. I pulled my own attacker off and shoved him into the couch. I lunged toward Cali just as she fired off a blast of magic that missed her attacker by a hair. Instead, the magic flew over his shoulder and shattered the mirror behind him.

“Shit!” The guy jumped back, his eyes wide. “Nobody told us she was Fae!”

The guy who’d attacked me threw himself at me again. “No shit!”

I grappled with him for a beat, slowly gaining the upper hand. These guys were tough, but I was an Alpha werewolf. There weren’t a lot of forces that could match that. Then with a grunt of effort, the guy sent a blast of magic at *me*. I flew back into the wall with a *crunch*.

The realization hit me along with another wave of dread. My darkest suspicions had just been confirmed. These guys were Fae, and chances were, they were Dark Fae. All my cocky bluster disappeared. I had to be careful here. I had no clue what kind of magic they might have up their sleeves—and I couldn’t risk Cali getting hurt because I was careless.

For her own part, Cali didn’t seem to share my concern. Her sword appeared in a flash of light, and she lunged at her attacker, swinging wildly. He stumbled back into me to avoid getting hit, and I caught him by the arms and swung him into the wall with all my might. Cracks ran up the wall and across the ceiling, and plaster rained down on us.

Cali finally tore off her hood and slammed her shield into the other guy, driving him deeper into Kendall’s house. I wished I could fight with her—two on one were much better odds against a Dark Fae—but I was busy dealing with the other guy. Despite how hard I’d slammed him into the wall, he’d gotten right back up again, looking more pissed off than ever.

He held his hands out and started blasting magic at me, each time missing by mere inches. Each blast only wrecked Kendall’s house more. Holes and cracks appeared in her walls. Her bookshelf was completely destroyed. Her television sported a smoking hole in it. The Fae threw out another blast, and a chunk of ceiling collapsed, sending drywall and plaster everywhere, and obscuring my vision.

Cali’s scream cut through the air, and I swiped at my eyes, desperate to regain my vision. Before I could get a handle on the situation, something—or somebody—slammed into me and drove me to the floor.

I immediately shifted, snarling and lunging to Cali’s defense. No more playing nice. If I had to rip these guys’ throats out, then so be it.

Just as I reached her, I was hit by a blast from one of the other Fae. Pain lanced through my body, and I howled and tumbled to the floor. Gritting my teeth, I tried to recover and get back on my feet, but my whole body thrummed with an echo of that pain. These Dark Fae packed a hell of a punch.

Nearby, one of the Fae said, “Finish him.”

Adrenaline poured into my veins, and I scrambled to my feet just in time to see the Dark Fae preparing to blast me. Every muscle in my body screamed for me to dodge the attack, but if I moved, I’d put Cali in the line of fire. I simply couldn’t do that. I’d die protecting her, if that was what it took. So instead of moving, I braced for the impact.

*I love you, Cali.*

Movement blurred at my side as Cali drove her sword past me and stabbed the Fae with it. He screamed and fell back, clutching his side. The other Fae sent a blast that clipped me in the shoulder, knocking Cali and me back. The thump her body made as she hit the floor sent fear swirling through my stomach.

The two Fae scrambled for the door and disappeared. I wished I could go after them, but I had to make sure Cali was okay. Did the blast hit her too? Or was it just me who knocked her off her feet?

I turned to find her pushing herself into a sitting position. *Love, are you all right?*

“I’m fine,” she said. She did look okay, if a little disheveled from the fight. “But, Greyson, you’re bleeding. You took a hell of a hit.”

I shifted back and felt warm blood slipping down my bare skin from the wound on my shoulder. But I couldn’t care less about that. “It’ll heal. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Really.”

I pulled her into a hug, so relieved I could cry. That had been far too close for comfort. That blast could have been worse. Much worse. Cali had saved my life. And to think I hadn’t wanted her to come today. If she hadn’t, things could have gone very differently. And not in a good way. Those two Fae were powerful, and they’d gotten the drop on us. Thank god things had gone a different way.

A voice cut through the house. “What the hell are you doing here?”

**Episode 5159**

**Xavier**

A string of words rushed to the tip of my tongue—more anger at Ava and excuses for Cali—but I held them back and turned away, rubbed my face. Pain twinged through my skull.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I don’t mean to cause you pain. But… I think my anger is justified here, Xavier. How is it that you can never see any of Cali’s faults?”

*And how is it that that’s all you can see?* Any time Cali’s name came out of my mouth, Ava’s head started spinning. I understood her frustration—I really did. I knew I’d acted the same way whenever Cali mentioned Greyson, but would it kill Ava to extend me the same understanding? None of this was ideal. But I’d chosen Ava. I was here with her. I loved her. Yesterday, I’d even backed her *against* Cali. So why were we still fighting about this?

“Xavier, say something,” Ava pressed.

I finally turned to face her. “If Cali calls, I can’t not go. It would be like if you called for help, and I ignored it. You understand that, right?”

She stared at me incredulously. “No, I don’t fucking understand that. I don’t understand how you could possibly think that’s true! Cali and I are *not* the same. You’re not the Alpha of the Redwood pack. You’re the Alpha of the *Samara* pack. We might both be your mates, technically, but *I’m* your Luna. Does that not mean anything to you?”

She was staring at me as though she were pleading with me. Even after all this time, it was a strange thing to see on her face. Usually, when I looked at Ava, I saw confidence and anger, jealousy and love. Never vulnerability. Never pleading.

My gut instinct was to push back. To get her to concede. It was like she was being willfully ignorant. Honestly, it was pissing me off that she was trying to push me into what felt like a choice. Making me choose her over Cali *again*. How many times would it take for her to believe that I’d chosen her? I was here, wasn’t I? I’d made *her* my Luna, hadn’t I? I’d stayed through—or despite—all this shit, and I’d backed her against Cali. We were in this together, and I wasn’t going anywhere. Not even if I still wanted to help Cali out when she needed it. What part of that was so fucking hard to understand?

But then I ran her words through my mind again, and it struck me that she might be saying something else altogether. I’d never thought about Cali as an extension of the Redwood pack. All this time, I’d been so focused on what the hell it could mean to have two mates and how I could be with Ava without hurting her, that I’d never considered the reality of what choosing to help Cali would mean for my place as Alpha of the Samara pack.

Because, Ava aside, running off to help Cali had landed my mate and my pack in a world of trouble. Now the Dark Fae mafia had the Samaras and, even worse, *Ava*, in their sights. If I had focused more on what getting involved in Cali’s affairs could mean for my pack, we might have never ended up in this clusterfuck.

I took Ava’s hand and pressed a kiss against her knuckles. “You’re right.”

Ava’s jaw dropped. “I’m right?”

I nodded. “You’re right.” I pulled her in for a gentle kiss. “I do have to think about things, not just as someone with two mates, but as an Alpha who has a mate in another pack. It complicates things more than I’d ever realized.”

She brought her free hand up to cup my cheek. “I know you’re committed to the Samara pack. I’ve never questioned that commitment. You’re a strong Alpha, and I’m so proud to be your Luna. But I need you to remember that commitment even when Cali asks you for help.”

I nodded. Her request was more than fair, considering everything. “I appreciate you being honest with me, and I’m glad we can talk about it like this. Even if it’s not always easy.”

She smiled at me, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. I tried not to linger on that image. “Maybe meeting with Carlson was a good thing after all.”

I laughed. “I’m not sure I’d go that far.” My expression sobered, and I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I hope you know how important you are to me. And how important it is to me for you to understand why I’m doing the things I’m doing. I know this situation we’re in…it’s not easy. And it’s not always easy to talk about, and I want you to know how much it means to me that you feel you can be honest with me.”

Her smile was wan, but it looked genuine. “I want you to be honest too, even when you say things I don’t want to hear.”

 “And I want to assure you that I know what my choice to be Alpha means for you and the Samara pack. I might not always think things through in the heat of the moment, and I’ll work on that, but you and the Samaras come first—always.”

“I do,” she said simply. “And I’ll never regret supporting you in this. The Samaras have grown under your leadership already.”

“And yours too.” I smiled. “I never regret making you my Luna, Ava. I mean, just look at how yesterday would have gone if you weren’t there. You were incredible.”

Her lips curved up and she preened at my compliment. Something like relief rushed through me. Things were a fucking mess that I could never quite solve, but I did want her to be happy with me. She deserved at least that.

Ava’s expression turned wicked. “I know you showed your appreciation for me last night, but my memory might be failing. I think I need another demonstration.”

I grinned and pulled her down onto the couch and into my lap, covering her mouth with mine. I kissed her deeply, hungrily, doing everything I could to tell her without words exactly how I felt. She hummed and melted into the kiss, tightening her arms around my neck. We lost ourselves in each other, in that easy rhythm. I could have kissed her for hours, days, and still wanted more.

When we finally came up for air, Ava rested her forehead against mine. “I think I could get used to this kind of appreciation.”

Pain lanced through my skull, absolutely destroying the moment, and I tried to hold in a wince. But Ava was too close, and she knew me too well. Her happy expression dimmed.

“Another headache?”

“Mm…you know what I want.” I leaned in to try to pick up where we’d left off, determined not to spoil the moment for her.

She sat back and then got up from my lap. Of course, she didn’t buy it.

“I’m going to grab some of your pain meds,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

I sighed as I watched her go. We’d made it through another fight about Cali, and I couldn’t be more relieved. But I wasn’t about to tip my hat to Carlson Greene. That ill-fated three-way therapy session had caused a hell of a lot more trouble than it was worth. Part of me was honestly surprised that we’d survived that clusterfuck, yet here we were.

The only thing still hanging over us was what had happened at the mall. I believed Marissa wouldn’t tell Ava, but I still wondered whether or not *I* should tell Ava. The fact that I still hadn’t must have meant my instinct to let it die was correct—wasn’t it?

What good would come from telling Ava I’d mistakenly said Cali’s name at the jewelry shop? My head throbbed in response. Another sign that telling Ava had absolutely no upside. Sometimes you could be too honest.

Things with Ava had been good lately, and we’d worked damn hard to get to this point. There was no reason to screw all that up, especially if it involved Cali. She was too much of a sore point for Ava. Every time. Just helping Cali yesterday had sent Ava into a tailspin. I couldn’t keep putting us in this position over and over again. Sooner or later, Ava would reach her limit. And honestly, if we did ever reach that point, I wouldn’t blame her.

But I loved Ava. I wanted to be with her. And that meant I had to stop pushing her away, even if that was never my intention when I helped Cali.

As for the jewelry shop incident, it was a mistake, one I wouldn’t make ever again. But I still had to get Ava a Valentine’s Day gift.

And as Ava came back in, my painkillers in hand, I realized I knew exactly what to get her.

**Episode 5160**

*What the fuck?!*

Greyson and I both spun around in surprise. It was Kendall. Kendall was standing in the doorway. Kendall, who was, apparently, alive and unharmed and—

“How the hell did you sneak up on us?” Greyson demanded.

Kendall scowled as she stepped into her house. “I’m the one who should be asking the questions here. Like what the fuck did you to do my place?” She pushed past us, fury radiating off her in waves. I’d never seen her so angry before, and I backed out of her way.

“Cali, Greyson, what the hell are you doing in my house?” she pressed. “And why the fuck are you naked, Greyson?”

Confusion and unease and embarrassment collided. Why was she acting like this? And why was she blaming us for what had happened here? She had to know we hadn’t done anything. That we were only here because she’d asked us to come.

“But…you asked us for help!” I finally managed. “You texted me and…and then you weren’t answering my calls, and we thought you were about to be murdered, so we rushed out here!”

Kendall snorted. “Why would I do that? I know how to order pepperoni on my own, thanks.” She threw a pizza box down on her coffee table, which was surprisingly still upright. I was so shocked to see her alive and unharmed that I hadn’t noticed the box until now. She straightened a couple of chairs before turning to us. “So…what’s this about me being murdered?”

I looked to Greyson, my eyes begging for help. What was I supposed to say? I felt like we were stuck in *The* *Twilight Zone*. Had Kendall suffered some kind of amnesia or something? I mean, it hadn’t taken that long for us to drive from the pack house—Greyson had made sure of that. What could have happened in that short amount of time to change the situation from “HELP” to casually going out to get a pizza? And how was her text for help *not* connected to scary Fae guys who’d fucked up her house?

Greyson looked from me to Kendall, his brow furrowed. “So, you didn’t send an SOS to Cali?”

Her purple eyes flashed angrily at Greyson. “You ruined my place! How did you even get in here?” Then she turned her gaze on me. “You, on the other hand, always seem to be somewhere you’re not supposed to be.”

“The door was open—” I began, my voice defensive.

Greyson cut me off. “No, you’re not the one asking the questions right now. Tell me now, Kendall. Did you or did you not text Cali asking for help?”

She scoffed, shaking her head. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

He sighed. “Fuck. Obviously, we were set up.”

Kendall looked around at the destruction all around us. “You were set up to destroy my house? What is wrong with you guys? Why can’t you just leave me the hell alone?”

And just like that, my patience ran out. Ever since we’d met Kendall, it had been one lie or mystery after another. She never told us anything about herself; she inserted herself into our affairs. And then, when things got dangerous and *our* lives were on the line, she was playing mind games and making us out to be bad guys?

Enough was enough. I wasn’t playing games with her any longer.

I marched up to Kendall, phone in hand. “Why are you lying?” I shoved my phone in her face, showing her the text message she’d sent earlier. “Are you saying you didn’t send this?”

She frowned at the text, then shifted her gaze back to mine. “I didn’t.”

Greyson huffed in frustration. “Then how do you explain it? We were texting you. We’ve been in communication with you all this time. But now, that’s not you?”

“My phone was stolen,” she said gravely. And then she pulled a brand-new phone out of her purse. It was still in the packaging. She dropped it on the table next to the pizza box. “As you can see, I picked up a new one.”

I stared down at the phone like it held the answers I was so desperately seeking. None of this made sense!

Greyson shook his head. “*If* you’re telling the truth, then someone used your phone to lure Cali here.”

Kendall’s eyes flashed with something I couldn’t quite parse. *Is she worried about something?* But just as quickly as the look of concern or whatever it was appeared, Kendall’s eyes returned to a dark, probing, angry purple. I cut her off before she could try to chew us out again.

“Listen, you need to stop blaming us like we’re the ones who did something wrong here,” I said firmly. “We got that message and thought you were in some kind of trouble, so we came here to help you. When we got here, your door was open. And because we were worried about you, we came inside, found the place ransacked, and then we were attacked. The only reason we’re here at all is because we wanted to help you. So if you could maybe stop acting like we’re the enemy for two seconds—”

She cut me off with a sharp look. “You were attacked?”

I nodded. “By Fae.”

Her expression darkened.

“There were two of them,” Greyson added. “I think they were trying to kidnap Cali. And if I had to guess, I’d say they were Dark Fae, something we know that *you* know more about than you’re letting on.”

Her expression went blank, and instead of responding, she began picking up the mess of her house. I frowned. *Is she really bothered by the mess, or is she just using that as an excuse to not talk to us and answer our questions?* The place really was trashed, though.

“Do you want some help?” I asked. I stepped closer, trying to get a better look at her face.

She shook her head. “Don’t bother. I can clean up by myself. You two should go.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Greyson said. “You’ve made it clear I shouldn’t get involved, but since it’s obvious now that we’re *all* involved, it’s time you tell us what the fuck is really going on.”

She didn’t answer, of course. Instead, she busied herself picking up the largest shards from her broken mirror. I raised my brows at Greyson.

*So, this is going well*, I said through the mind link. *Maybe we need to go with a gentler approach?*

He sighed and softened his voice. “Kendall, someone used you to get to me. To get to Cali. So, whatever it is that is going on, you need to tell us. Please.”

“Why?” she snapped. At least she was finally engaging in conversation. “So you can put us all in worse danger?”

I threw my hands up. “We’re just trying to help!”

“Funny. I don’t remember asking for anyone’s help,” Kendall said. “Why did you even text me this morning anyway? What do you want?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Oh, you know, I just thought you should be aware that the Redwood pack had an eventful visit from the Dark Fae mafia last night.” I told her about the barrier over the house. I left out the horrifying vision I had while I was knocked out.

“Cali was injured trying to break that barrier,” Greyson added. “And the unwelcome visitor is now dead, so we don’t have any leads on what to do next. And that’s where you come in.”

Kendall dropped a large piece of the mirror, and it shattered at her feet as she swung to face us, her expression incredulous. “You killed a Dark Fae?”

Greyson snorted. “Are you finally starting to get it now?”

Kendall stalked over to the door. “What I get is that you ignored me. You ignored my warning.”

“So what?” I asked. “So Greyson didn’t listen to you, but who can blame him?”

She spun on me. “And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

I stood my ground. I wasn’t about to let her intimidate me, not after everything that had happened. “You haven’t exactly been forthcoming with us. About anything.”

“You’re wrong. I told Greyson to stay out of it, and now look at what happened.”

“It’s too late to stay out of it,” Greyson snapped. “And even if I wanted to, I can’t. The Dark Fae won’t let me. They sent someone to my pack house, and just now they tried to kidnap my mate. So, for the love of god, will you please stop playing annoying mystery woman and tell us what the fuck is going on?”

“It’s time for you to leave.” Kendall started shoving us toward the door.

“But—” I began.

She cut me off. “Get the hell out of here, and don’t contact me again.”

And then, before either of us could get another word in, she slammed the door in our faces.

**Episode 5161**

Greyson and I were tense and quiet in the car as we headed back to the pack house from Kendall’s place. What had happened back there? Neither of us said a word until Greyson slammed his fist onto the steering wheel. I completely understood his frustration.

“What the hell is going on here?!” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I really wish I did.” Talking to Kendall had been a huge bust. Not only had she *not* been helpful, but she’d deliberately avoided answering any question we had, then had the nerve to shove us out of her house and slam the door in our faces. If that didn’t say, “trust me less!” I didn’t know what did.

“I’m sorry, love,” Greyson murmured. He looked out at the road, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t mean to yell like that—not at you. I’m just frustrated.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “I am too. I don’t know where we go from here.”

“I just don’t get why Kendall’s being so damn stubborn. Why can’t she see that whatever danger she’s in—we’re facing it too?” Greyson asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, a knot in my stomach. “Do you think we should just spell it out like that? Clearly all our other ways haven’t worked.”

“Honestly, I’m tempted to turn this car around and go back and try to talk some sense into her.”

“I know how you feel, but I don’t think confronting her again is going to help,” I reasoned. “She seemed pretty determined when she kicked us out.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, casting a glance at the rearview mirror.

He’d been doing that the whole ride home, and I frowned.

“Why do you keep looking behind us?” I asked him. “Is something wrong?”

He looked at me. “I hope not. I just thought we were being followed.”

My stomach flipped as I swiveled to look out the back window. “Are we?”

“I don’t think so,” Greyson said, but I wasn’t sure I believed him.

“Do you think those Dark Fae who attacked us could be after us again?” I wondered. There was a dark car behind us on the road, but that could be anyone.

Greyson tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t know. But I’m not willing to take any chances. If it is, I have no intention of leading those Dark Fae back to the pack house. Maybe there’s a way to find out.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Hold on,” he said, and before I could ask any more questions, he spun the wheel and took a sharp turn off the main road onto a narrower street. I squealed and grasped my seat, trying to stay upright.

Greyson checked the rearview mirror while I turned in my seat—the road behind us was empty. The dark car wasn’t there. We weren’t being followed.

“Thank god,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “But I think I’m going to take an alternate route back to the house. Just in case.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said, keeping an eye on the road behind us in my side mirror. I leaned back in my seat with a sigh. “What I’m still trying to figure out is *why* the Dark Fae are so freaking intent on coming after us.” I glanced at Greyson. “What exactly did you see when you were in Portland?”

He shook his head, a dark look clouding his features. “Honestly, if I knew half of the shit that was going to happen out there, I never would’ve gone.”

“You don’t need to shoulder this blame, Greyson,” I said quickly. “You didn’t know what was going to happen—there was no way to know. And you were looking out for the pack. That’s what an Alpha is supposed to do.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he muttered, still looking grim.

“So what did happen while you were there?” I pressed. “I mean, you must have seen something to have made the Dark Fae feel threatened enough to come after us like this.”

Greyson blew out a frustrated breath. “I asked a few questions. I guess that must’ve ruffled some feathers.”

“I’ll say,” I agreed.

Greyson was quiet for a moment. “But the thing I’m becoming more and more sure of is that everything leads back to Kendall.”

“Kendall?” I repeated.

“She’s the reason we’re being targeted,” he said. “I just can’t decide which side of things she’s on. Or—hell—maybe she’s playing both sides at once. I just haven’t been able to figure out the reason. Not yet. And that worries me.”

I nodded, taking this in. I had a sudden flash of that horrible vision I’d had, and I jerked in my seat.

“Cali?” Greyson said, looking quickly at me. “Are you okay?”

“Do you think the Dark Fae were able to give me that vision I had because I’m part Fae?” I asked, my mouth going dry.

“Do *you* think so?” he asked, looking shocked at the thought.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean, I don’t know as much about Fae magic as I should. It’s all still kind of new to me.”

He thought for a moment, frowning. Then he shrugged. “I guess it’s possible. I suppose anything is possible, especially when it comes to the Fae. But as far as I know, you’re the only one who was affected like that. But,” he went on, “you’re also the only one who tried to use your Fae magic against the Dark Fae. Maybe what happened was some kind of Dark Fae defense mechanism?”

“I guess that could be it,” I said slowly. Though the thought didn’t make me feel any better.

I leaned back in my seat and passed a hand through my hair. I had hoped that talking to Kendall would at least bring us a little closer to the truth, but when it came to solid answers, I felt further away than ever.

“What are you thinking about, love?” Greyson asked, casting a sidelong glance at me.

“What if it happens again?” I wondered aloud.

“What?” Greyson asked. “What do you mean?”

“What if I have trouble separating the vision from reality? What if they make me do something terrible?” I took a shaking breath.

Greyson didn’t answer right away. He pulled the car to the side of the empty road and cut the engine.

“Greyson? What are you doing—”

“Cali, listen to me,” he said, turning to look at me. “I’m not trying to make you feel worse, okay? I’m just speculating here. But the one thing I know for sure is that—no matter what—I’m going to stick by your side. Whatever the Dark Fae throw at us, we’re going to face it side by side—together.”

Tears leapt to my eyes, and I leaned forward, resting my forehead against his chest. “Thank you,” I whispered. “I need that confidence. And that support.”

His arms went around me and as I leaned across the center console, he pulled me close to him. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of him. It was spicy and warm and slightly vanilla-y. It was Greyson, and my pulse slowed as I breathed him in. He always did this to me—calmed me and made me feel safe and centered.

“I know you’re right,” I said, sliding my arms around him and holding tight. Until there was some kind of pattern with these visions—they were just night nightmares, and we couldn’t draw any conclusions. That was both comforting and frustrating. It was comforting to know that there was nothing more to do than we’d already done. We just had to wait. But that was the frustrating part, too. Sitting back and waiting for something to happen to us wasn’t really my style, and I knew it wasn’t Greyson’s. But what choice did we have?

I took another deep breath and tried to push the racing thoughts from my head. For the moment, I was just grateful to be here in this quiet car, safe in Greyson’s arms.

He pulled slightly away so he could look down at me. Then he put his finger beneath my chin and tilted my head up to his. The stormy look was gone from his eyes as he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me gently.

But I didn’t want to be kissed gently. Not now. I had energy to burn. So I looped my arm around his neck and pulled him closer, opening my mouth against his and deepening the kiss.

Greyson responded immediately, pushing his tongue against mine. A growl rumbled in his throat, and he reached for me, grabbing me by the hips, and pulled me across the gear shift and into his lap.

“You seem tense,” he said, his hand stroking down my back.

“I was,” I said, sighing against his touch.

He smiled. “Well, I can think of one way to take your mind off things…”

**Episode 5162**

**Greyson**

Cali’s body was hot against mine as she slid on top of me, straddling my lap. For just an instant, I thought about other cars on the road and was grateful I’d gone with the darkest tint for my windows.

I slid my hand into Cali’s soft hair and grabbed a handful, smiling when she moaned into my mouth as I pulled. The gentle kiss I’d intended to give her was just a distant memory now, and our make-out session was growing hotter by the second.

But that wasn’t surprising. I’d kissed Cali thousands of times, but every single time she ignited a passion in me I’d never felt before. It happened without fail, but it never stopped thrilling me.

She’d been so tense and nervous; I’d only stopped the car to reassure her. I didn’t know how far she wanted to take this, but when she reached down and pulled off her shirt, I got some idea of where she was hoping this would end up.

I smiled as I cupped my hands around her breasts, which were still clad in her lacy bra. It turned me on even more knowing that she’d been wearing this the whole time. I ran my fingers over her taut nipples. “I’m going to take my time with you,” I murmured.

“Greyson,” she moaned, dropping her head back as I slipped my fingers into her bra, squeezing her nipples. “I don’t know how long I can wait.”

I decided to take this as a challenge. I slipped the bra straps off her smooth shoulders, one at a time, then kissed the tops of her breasts. First the left, then the right.

She moaned again and squirmed, grinding herself against me, but I didn’t move any faster. Finally, when I’d gotten her panting, I slipped one hand around to her back and unclasped her bra, then took a breast into my mouth.

“Oh *god*,” she cried, closing her eyes.

“You can just call me Greyson,” I teased. “You always forget that.”

She narrowed her eyes, then reached down and grabbed the handle of my seat so it slid all the way back. That gave her more room, and she slid herself out of her jeans and panties.

Then she smiled. She knew the sight of her fully naked would be a test of my willpower—and she was right.

With a growl, I grabbed her close and pulled her down—hard—onto my lap.

“Oh god,” she moaned. She gasped when I slipped two fingers into her. “*Greyson.*”

She was already wet, and the feel of her made me even harder. I circled my fingers around her clit as I slid my pants down. Then I guided her onto my cock, making her cry out as I filled her.

“Oh god, *yes*, Greyson.” She bit her lip as she braced her hands on the roof of the car and pushed herself down, driving my cock farther into her. “*Please*.”

I loved it when she begged, and I dug my fingers into the flesh of her hips and drove my cock into her. She rocked against me, bucking and arching back.

“Just like that,” she murmured. “Just like that.”

She was coming now, her orgasm shattering her.

Then I exploded. My brain was a field of fireworks as I climaxed, and I pounded into her. In response she tightened around me, making me moan and drawing everything out of me.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, holding onto her tightly. “Oh fuck, Cali.”

She rode me until I finished, only stopping when my breathing slowed. Then she leaned in and kissed my cheek, then my jaw, then my neck.

“You were right,” she whispered. “That did really take my mind off things.”

I chuckled. “Glad to hear it.”

She pulled herself free of me and made her way back into the passenger seat. I pulled a package of wipes out of the glove box and handed them to her.

She took them with a smile. “Think you could grab my clothes?” she asked, nodding toward the backseat.

I retrieved her clothes while she cleaned up. After I had straightened myself up, I looked over at her, watching as she pulled her bra back on, then her shirt. When she was finished, she still looked like she’d been ravaged—her lips kiss-swollen and her hair mussed. I reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Before I could pull it back, she grabbed my hand and held it close, kissing my palm. When she smiled up at me, her face was bright and free from worry.

I knew that what had just happened between us was just a distraction, and the trouble we were facing wasn’t going to go away, no matter how many times we made love in my car. But I loved Cali, and I hated to see her worry. I would do anything it took to help her get through this.

“I guess we should probably get back to the pack house,” I said, though I had to admit I felt reluctant about the idea. Sitting with her in the quiet car, basking in the warm, post-sex glow, felt pretty amazing, and part of me would’ve loved to stay and avoid all the uncertainty ahead. But that wasn’t an option. I had a responsibility. Not just to Cali, but to the whole pack.

All this shit with the Dark Fae mafia had blown up into something that couldn’t be ignored, so the only option was just to face it.

“You ready?” I asked her.

“Ready,” she said with a nod.

I started the car again and pulled back onto the road.

“So,” Cali said, turning to me as we headed in the direction of the pack house again, “what are we going to do about Kendall?”

“Cali—” I started, but she talked over me.

“I know you already told me not to get involved with anything surrounding Kendall, but I think that ship has already sailed, don’t you?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I frowned. “Maybe, but I still don’t want you to go any further down the Kendall rabbit hole.” I couldn’t help thinking about the mysterious memory loss I’d suffered in Portland. I still didn’t have an explanation for what happened, but I was sure Kendall had something to do with it, however much she denied it. Add that to the Dark Fae fucking with Cali’s mind, and it was too much of a risk.

“Greyson, I really think you’re being—”

“I know you do, but I’m not going to put you in that kind of danger,” I said firmly. “Anyway, the first thing we need to do is fill the whole pack in on what we do know. They need to be aware of everything that’s going on. Everything that’s happened could put them at risk too.” I looked at her. “Can you be patient for a little while? Give me a chance to figure this out? Will you do that?”

Cali’s frown deepened. “You know, Greyson, my patience will only last for so long—”

“Cali—”

“But I will back off. For now,” she clarified.

“Thank you,” I said with relief. “That’s all I’m asking for. But if you do have any more visions, I want you to tell me right away,” I added.

“I will,” she agreed.

We arrived at the pack house, and I parked the car in the driveway. But as I moved to get out of the car, Cali put a hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Hey, you need to talk to Rishika.”

“Rishika?” I repeated. “Why?”

“She was upset that you didn’t tell her what was going on with the Dark Fae stuff,” Cali said.

I tensed. “I really didn’t know what I was getting into when I left for Portland,” I started, feeling defensive, but then I stopped. “You’re right. Rishika needs to be aware of everything that’s going on with the pack, and if you noticed she was upset, then I need to smooth things over with her. She’s too important to the pack.”

Cali nodded.

“That’s the first thing I’ll do,” I promised. I got out of the car and walked around to open the door for Cali. As we headed toward the house, I thought through what I needed to say to Rishika.

It needed to be some kind of apology, without any excuses. And I needed to make it clear that I trusted her implicitly. Which I did. I was running through what I wanted to say as we reached the porch steps, but the sound of an approaching car stopped me. I turned and recognized Xavier’s car as it screeched to a stop, scattering gravel.

Sure enough, Xavier flung the car door open, stomped out, and started toward us.

I could tell at a glance he was pissed—what else was new?

I looked at Cali, who was watching Xavier’s approach with wide eyes. “What do you think he wants?”

**Episode 5163**

**Xavier**

As I walked toward Greyson and Cali, I noticed they were holding hands, and my anger spiked. It did it again when they both turned to look at me, moving in perfect synchronicity.

I knew I shouldn’t let it affect me—I had to remember that this had nothing to do with Cali and everything to do with Ava. That was why I was here.

“Xavier—” Greyson started, but I didn’t let him finish.

“The fucking Dark Fae *mafia*?” I snapped. “You dragged Ava into your fucking mess?”

“I don’t know—”

“The hell you don’t!” I shot back. “And now she’s got a bullseye on her back!”

Greyson took a breath. “No one here told Ava to kill that Fae—that was *her* decision.”

I snorted in disgust. “Oh, fuck off. You’re just making excuses for your own mistakes, and you know it.”

My head gave a painful throb. I ground my teeth, trying to ignore it.

I looked over at Cali. “If Ava hadn’t killed that Fae, Cali would still be trapped in the house, along with most of the other Redwoods. You should be grateful Ava did what needed to be done. Besides,” I went on, rounding on my brother, “did it ever fucking occur to you that maybe Ava wouldn’t have killed that Fae if she had known what was going on and what the risks were? But she didn’t know—none of us did—because you made a choice to keep us completely in the dark. No fucking surprise there!”

“Xavier,” Cali started, “Greyson didn’t know the Dark Fae were coming after the Redwood pack. Nobody knew.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to argue with Cali. I wasn’t surprised she was defending Greyson’s recklessness—but I didn’t like it either.

Gritting my teeth harder, I tried to breathe through another wave of pain as it crashed over me.

Greyson crossed his arms over his chest. “So does that mean you’re done bitching?”

“Oh, I’ve only just started,” I snarled. “And you can shove that fucking attitude right up your—”

“This conversation isn’t getting us anywhere,” Cali cut in. She turned to me. “Xavier, I know this thing with the Dark Fae mafia is upsetting—”

“*Upsetting?*” I repeated, astonished. “There’s a Dark Fae mafia after my mate, and you’re making it sound like the pizza place forgot pepperoni!”

“—but we are all in the same boat,” she went on. “We’re just trying to figure out what’s going on and what’s the best way to deal with this.”

I shook my head, frustration and fury rising in my chest.

Cali turned to Greyson. “Why don’t you talk to Rishika?”

Greyson hesitated, looking between Cali and me. Then he took a deep breath. “The Redwoods are here if you need us,” he said, though it looked like the words cost him.

I was about to snap back that it was the Redwoods who needed the Samaras and that Cali had called me when she was in trouble, but I caught a look at Cali’s face before I spoke. She was staring at me with a pleading look in her eyes, so I kept my mouth shut.

As Greyson turned and headed up the porch steps and into the house, I rubbed my temples for a moment, trying to massage some of the pain away—not that it did any good.

Cali’s face was troubled. “Your headaches aren’t any better?” she asked sympathetically.

I forced myself to smile. I knew I could tell her that they were fine and not to worry about it, but I didn’t want to lie to Cali. I just shrugged, not saying anything.

She reached out and put a hand on my arm. It was only for a moment, and it was the briefest of touches, but when her skin met mine, the pain in my head ebbed just a little.

“I’m sorry for how things went yesterday. What happened with the Dark Fae really took us all by surprise. We’re still dealing with it.”

On instinct, I started to reach for her hand, but then I remembered myself and stopped. The pain in my head swelled, curling around the back of my head and moving inexorably down my spine.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sorry about all of that,” I said, nodding up at the house, indicating Greyson. “I’m sorry I snapped. I didn’t mean to drag you into all of this.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“Anyway, I should get going.” I started to turn, but her hand reached out again, tightening around my arm. I looked down at it, thrown by how good it felt to feel the contact between us.

When I looked up, our eyes locked. We stayed like that for a long moment. I opened my mouth—I wanted to say something, but I hesitated. What would I say? What *should* I say?

A cold wind kicked up and swirled around us. It blew some stray leaves from the porch, and the movement caught Cali’s eye. It distracted her and broke the suspended moment.

She let go of my arm quickly and took a step back, looking away as if she realized she was feeling something neither of us were allowed to feel.

“I’ll see you later,” I said quietly. She nodded, and I turned and started back to my car.

The walk to where I had parked felt like it took forever. The distance loomed in front of me, and I had to force myself to move my feet—picking one up and putting it down. Then the other one. It was a struggle to willingly put distance between Cali and myself, but I made it and slid into the car.

Closing the door behind me, I sat behind the wheel for a moment, absurdly unable to start the car.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I didn’t look over, but I didn’t have to. I could feel Cali’s eyes on me, and I knew she was still standing next to the porch steps, just where I had left her.

My headache bloomed again, moving up and around my skull to settle behind my eye. I rubbed my forehead. “Fuck,” I breathed, closing my eyes against the pain. The headache was always there, but right now, it was nothing more than an ugly reminder of the completely fucked-up situation I was in.

I opened my eyes again and looked down, brushing my fingers along the spot on my arm where Cali had held on, just moments before.

There was no point in denying what I felt—what I knew she and I both felt—when she’d touched me. It had been a sizzle of electricity and heat. I could feel it still.

I knew that was true, but I also knew that the moment I drove away, she was going to walk up those porch steps and straight back into Greyson’s arms.

And that was probably for the best. I put both hands on the steering wheel and gripped tightly. That *was* for the best. Cali was with Greyson, and I was with Ava.

But there was a voice in the back of my head reminding me that Cali had reached out to me when she needed help. And that had to mean something. That had to mean she was beginning to trust me again. And if that was possible—if we could re-establish trust—could her love for me be that far behind?

Cali had reached out to me for help, but it had been Ava who had actually done the helping, I reminded myself with a surge of frustration. I started the car, feeling suddenly furious with myself. Ava had been the one to step in and help Cali and the rest of the Redwoods, and now she was in danger. That was why I had come here. How fucked up was it that I was even thinking of Cali when I’d come here to defend Ava?

The pain in my head spiked again as I pulled my car down the long driveway. It was all I could do to not look in the rearview mirror to check if Cali was still there, but I managed it. Anyway, I figured that the more distance I put between us, the better my head would feel.

But as I turned my car onto the road, the pain didn’t lessen. If anything, it just got worse, growing more and more intense as I drove.

I did all the things I usually did—I took a deep breath, I pressed my finger to my temple, then the back of my neck, trying to loosen the tightness. But nothing worked.

The pain kept growing, and my vision blurred.

“Shit,” I muttered, wiping my eyes and blinking hard, trying to see straight.

But when I looked up, I saw I was heading straight for a tree. “*Fuck!*”

I gave the wheel a violent pull, trying to swerve out of the way, but I must have pulled too hard because the car banked and began to tip.

**Episode 5164**

I waited until Xavier had pulled out of the driveway and disappeared down the road before I turned to climb up the porch steps. When I got to the top, I paused for a moment, closing my eyes as I remembered what it was like to touch him. He hadn’t pulled away when I’d reached out for him, which was what I thought he would do. Despite us defeating Adéluce, things between Xavier and me had been understandably distant, so why hadn’t he pulled back this time?

I wasn’t sure what that meant. But maybe it didn’t mean anything at all. Maybe I was reading more into that tiny moment than I should. After all, I was just trying to show him that I cared about him, and that I could acknowledge how upset he had been. It’s something friends did, and I was trying to be Xavier’s friend, despite everything.

Even as I’d looked at him, I could see the conflict in his blue eyes, and the pain too. I knew the headaches were still bothering him, no matter what he did or didn’t say. But I couldn’t bring myself to ask about it, not when it caused me pain too.

I reached for the door but stopped with my hand on the knob. Were headaches contagious? I had thought I’d felt one coming on when Xavier had pulled into the driveway and stormed toward us, angry with Greyson and looking for a fight.

Fortunately, it hadn’t come to that. I was glad Greyson hadn’t taken the bait, and that I’d been able to smooth things over between them. This time, at least.

I sighed as I thought about Xavier. Our new status as friends was off to a rocky start, but I had to remember that there were signs of progress. Though I couldn’t ignore how I’d felt when I realized Xavier had come over to defend Ava.

But I shook my head, annoyed with myself. Of course he was defending Ava. She was his mate. Greyson would do the same for me. I just wished it didn’t matter to me that Xavier was going to bat for Ava.

The pain in my head grew more intense, and I opened the door and headed inside, determined to knock it out before it got ahold on me. All I needed were a couple of painkillers.

I started up the stairs, thinking of the bottle of ibuprofen in my bathroom cabinet, but I wobbled a little, and the hand gripping the banister felt suddenly cold and slick with sweat.

I took a deep breath. Maybe I should eat something. Maybe that would help. Come to think of it, when *was* the last time I had eaten?

But the pain in my head spiked again, and I continued up the stairs. I needed to deal with the pain first, food second.

The house was quiet as I reached the top of the stairs and started down the hall to my room. The room was dim, which helped a little. I headed to the bathroom and shook a couple of pills into my hand, then washed them down with a drink of water from the sink.

Afterward, I stumbled to my bed and sank onto it. I took a deep breath but found I was still feeling a little unsteady. I smiled to myself, thinking that there was a time in the not so recent past when just looking at Xavier would make me feel unsteady, but I knew that wasn’t what this was. Whatever this was, it felt different.

The room seemed to tilt, and I gripped the bed to stay upright. Food. I needed food. I needed something in my stomach before I passed out, so I forced myself up and back into the hall. As I headed down the hallway, I passed Violet’s room, where the door was open.

“Cali!”

I looked over to see Lilac standing in the middle of the room. He smiled and waved me over. “Can you come in for a minute?”

“What’s up?” I asked, stepping into the doorway.

He grinned. “I want a second opinion on the Valentine’s gift I’m planning on getting Perrie.”

I returned his smile and stepped into the room. “Sure. Happy to help. What is it?”

Lilac turned to me. “Okay, since you’re a girl, you can help me decide—”

“Since she’s a *girl*?” Violet scoffed from her seat on her bed. “And what am I?”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “You’re my sister, that’s what you are, so you don’t count.”

Violet glared at him. “You can ask any girl you want, Lilac, it doesn’t matter. I’m pretty sure Cali will agree with me that this is the stupidest gift imaginable.”

“What is it?” I asked, really curious now.

Lilac held out his phone, which was open to a picture of a heart-shaped cake pan.

My head spun as I looked at the photo. I was really hoping the painkillers would kick in soon. “Hang on, you want to get Pierre a cake pan? For Valentine’s Day?” I asked, baffled.

Violet laughed. “I told you it was stupid.”

“Okay, but listen,” Lilac said defensively, “not only does Pierre like cake, but it’s also heart shaped. You know, for Valentine’s Day.”

“No, yeah, I get that part,” I said slowly. “But maybe a cake pan isn’t the way to go with it. If she likes cake, why don’t you get her an actual cake? With some roses to go with it?”

“A cake?” Lilac repeated. “Where am I going to get a cake?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Violet muttered.

“I’m sure Torin would be happy to help you,” I said.

Lilac considered this for a moment. “Yeah, that’s not a bad idea.”  
 His sister stared at him, gobsmacked. “Are you kidding me right now, Lilac?”

“What?” he asked, turning to look at her.

“That’s exactly what I told you to do! Get her a damn cake!”

“I already told you!” Lilac shot back. “You don’t count!”

I rubbed my head, which was pounding now. “Violet, what are you getting Charlie?”

“I’m going to get him a box of his favorite chocolates from this little candy store downtown. They have these really good truffles he loves and—” She frowned at me. “Cali, are you okay?”

“Hmm? What?” I asked.

“You look kind of pale.”

“What? Oh yeah, all this talk about cake and chocolate is reminding me that I’m hungry. I’m going to grab something to eat.” I started toward the door.

“What did you get Greyson?” Violet wondered.

I thought of the whiskey I’d gotten him, and my heart sank a little. Suddenly it seemed like a really impersonal gift. Not meaningful or romantic in any way. And I’d gotten the same thing for Xavier, which neither of them would like.

“Um, still working on it,” I said, too embarrassed to admit what I’d actually gotten.

“Well, you better hurry,” Lilac advised. “There’s not much time left.”

My head gave a painful throb. “Yeah, I know. Thanks for reminding me.”

I turned and walked out, then headed downstairs toward the kitchen. I had just walked in when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

When I looked down at it, I saw it was Codsworth calling. Even seeing his name popping up on my screen made my stomach tighten with fear and worry. Why was he calling? Was it possible he had suddenly remembered something he shouldn’t have?

Annoyed with myself, I pushed the thought away. I was freaking out for no reason. All the stuff with the Dark Fae and Kendall was really getting to me—I was way too paranoid for my own good.

“Hello?” I answered cautiously. “Codsworth?”

“Hey, Cali,” came his voice, sounding normal. “How are you?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “How are you? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I’m not calling about anything supernatural, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You’re not?” I asked, cautiously optimistic.

“Nah. I still don’t know what happened, but whatever it was, it might just have to stay a mystery,” he went on. “Whatever happened—and I’m pretty sure something *did* happen—I can’t prove anything either way. It’s not much closure, but it’s good enough for now. Anyway, I’ve gotten pretty popular on the forums because of all this.”

“Oh, that’s good,” I said, relief flowing through me. “So, what’s up?”

“I’m calling because of the Fringeheads,” he said.

“You are?” I asked, suddenly nervous again. “What is it now?”

“I’m calling the team together. We need to get some things ironed out.”

“Why?” I asked hesitantly.

“It’s not going to stop at pizza,” he said grimly.

“It’s not?”  
 “No way. These things never do.”

“So what are we going to do?” I asked.

“Don’t even worry about it, Cali,” Codsworth said. “I’ve got it all worked out.”

“You do?” I said, feeling more worried by the moment.

“You better believe it.” He chuckled. “Get ready, because we’re going to steal their mascot!”

**Episode 5165**

**Xavier**

Pain radiated through me, and I groaned. What the fuck had just happened? When I sat up, I looked around, shocked. I wasn’t in my car at the base of a tree, but in a banquet hall. And when I looked down, I saw I was wearing a dark suit with a pocket square and a tight bow tie.

*Well, this can’t be right.*

In front of me was a place setting—lavish, with half a dozen forks, three wine glasses, and an intricately folded napkin. A feast was set upon the plate—a still-sizzling steak, golden roasted potatoes with gravy pouring off the sides. Asparagus so perfect they looked like a painting, all topped with blood-red pomegranate seeds, bright as gems. But there was just one plate. I sat at one end of a long, wooden table, and all the way at the other end, just one other place was set.

I looked around, baffled. I was alone, but as I gazed around, a door opened at the other end of the room. Cali stepped in, wearing a glittering dress that practically dripped from her. She looked stunning, and I was struck momentarily speechless as I looked at her.

She smiled at me. “I’m sorry for being late, Xavier,” she said softly, “but I wanted to look my best.”

“That’s…fine,” I murmured, more baffled than ever. “It’s not a problem.”

“I’m so glad we could finally meet like this. It’s been so long, and I wanted to make something very clear to you.” She paused at the place setting at the far end of the table, but instead of taking her seat, she stepped onto the chair, then onto the table. The plate and glassware clattered and broke as her dress trailed across it, knocking some of it over. She stood for just a moment, then began walking toward me. She walked slowly, the sway of her hips making the dress catch the light. She said nothing, but when she had crossed the table halfway, she knelt.

My heart thudded as she got down on all fours and crawled the rest of the way toward me, her dark eyes fixed on mine. I wanted her so badly, my body felt like it was about to explode. I stared at her, drinking in every move she made. All I could think about was her dress and how quickly I could get it off of her. How fast I could find my way to her skin and her breasts and her—

“Xavier,” she purred as she came ever closer, “you don’t know how long I’ve been waiting for you to come back.”

Up close, I could see her dress was like crystals. Hard and sparkling. She reached out and ran a hand down my chest, over the buttons of my shirt, then grabbed hold of the jacket lapel.

“Cali—” I breathed, my voice only a rasp.

Still holding tight to me, she leaned even closer to whisper into my ear, “Xavier, let’s have a baby.”

Her breath felt warm on my cheek. Warm and…wet? I reached up and touched the spot, and my hand came away sticky. I smelled blood—my own blood.

*Wake up! Open your eyes!*

I blinked and managed to get my eyes open, and when I did, I was no longer in the banquet hall. I was no longer wearing a suit, and I was no longer looking at Cali. I was in my car, and the thing was flipped onto its side.

A wolf was next to me, using its snout to prod me awake. *Okay, eyes open. Now get out of here.*

It was a good idea, but when I tried to move, I realized I was pinned into place by my seat belt. My head spun as I tried to order my thoughts, but it was hard as it ached with pain that was nearly unbearable.

What the hell had just happened?

I leaned my head back against the seat, wishing I could just go back to sleep—back to my dream with Cali. It had felt so real.

But the wolf wasn’t having it. It wouldn’t leave me alone.

*Open your eyes. You’re not going to sleep. Get up. You need to get out of this car. Stop wasting time. You need to get out.*

The voice was familiar somehow, though I couldn’t quite place it.

“Stop,” I muttered, pushing the wolf away. “Leave me alone.”

*Out you get. Come on. Let’s move.*

I sighed and reached for my seat belt latch, but my fingers weren’t cooperating. They fumbled around as I searched for the release.

*Let’s go*, the wolf said, nudging me again.

“Seat belt,” I murmured.

The wolf gave a low growl and, a moment later, I heard the seat belt ripping. The wolf had torn it with her teeth, cutting it in half.

*Okay, out you go*, she said, pushing me toward the smashed driver’s side window.

I managed to crawl through the opening and then collapsed onto the ground as searing pain radiated through me. I opened my eyes and looked up at the wolf, who stood over me. *How do I know her?* I wondered, frowning. Why did she look so familiar?

*You’re safe now*, the wolf said.

I nodded and reached out to touch her silvery coat. Then I looked into her eyes and realized who it was—

“*Mom?*” I choked out. “Is that you?”

She threw back her head and howled.

My eyes snapped open, and I looked wildly around for my mother. But she wasn’t there. No one was there. I was still in the car, surrounded by chunks of broken glass, blood was still warm on my cheek. The howl I had heard was nothing but the blaring of my horn, which had somehow gotten stuck when I flipped.

I shook my head, though the movement made everything throb. It must’ve been a dream. I frowned as I wracked my brain—what had my mom been doing? What had she been saying to me?

*Get out of the car.*

I fumbled for the seat belt release. I managed to find it, but the glass of my window was only cracked, so I had to shatter it with a fist before I could crawl out.

When I did, I found myself high in the air—the car had rolled onto the passenger side. I rolled down the hood, tumbling to the ground with a low moan.

*Fuck*. Everything hurt. My head, my back, my hands, my shoulders. I was too disoriented to take a good survey, but I was in rough shape.

I struggled to my feet, trying to stand, but I couldn’t make it. There was just too much pain.

“Dammit,” I breathed, bracing a hand on my car and painfully hauling myself to my feet. But the pressure on the car was too much. I hadn’t realized it, but the car wasn’t steady, and when I put even a little pressure on it, it rocked. I took a step back as I watched it keel over—continuing its roll—and slide down the rocky embankment on the side of the road. It took only a half-second for the car to go over, then crash into a bank of boulders a hundred yards downhill.

I stared in shock as the sound of crushing metal and shattering glass echoed around me. If I hadn’t gotten out—if I hadn’t had that dream—I might have gone over the side of the road with my car.

Struggling to make sense, I shook my head. Had it really been a dream?

I looked quickly around, half-expecting to see my mom nearby, watching me, but there was no one there. I was alone.

The rush of adrenaline spent, I staggered forward and leaned against a scraggly pine by the side of the road. My thoughts were still speeding around my head, but I tried to slow them down, trying to make sense of what the hell had just happened to me.

I needed to focus on the timeline—one event leading to another.

I had left the Redwood pack house—and Cali—and started driving home.

And then what?

My headache had gotten worse. Much worse. It had been hard to see. I was rubbing my eyes, and then there’d been a tree.

I rubbed my temples as the pain in my head spiked. I’d swerved to avoid hitting the tree, and then…nothing. I couldn’t remember what happened after that. Everything after I’d swerved was blank.

The next thing I remembered was being in the banquet hall with Cali. She’d been crawling toward me, that look in her eyes—

That had to have been a dream.

And then my mom.

I pushed off the tree and staggered toward the road. Whatever had happened, one thing was certain—I needed help. I could hear the rumble of an approaching car, and I held up a bloody hand, signaling for it to stop.

It did stop, and the rear window rolled down. A gruff voice spoke.

“Need a hand, wolf?”

**Episode 5166**

**Greyson**

In the study, I pulled out two clean glasses. “You want a whiskey?” I asked Rishika.

She shook her head silently.

Turning back to the bar, I poured myself a drink. Her attitude was about what I had expected—cool but not outwardly angry. That was fine. I could work with that, whiskey or not.

“How are things going?” I asked, sitting at the other end of the couch with my drink.

“Okay. We’re keeping on top of things,” she said. “We’ve increased patrols, of course. There’s been some pushback but nothing I can’t handle. We’re doing a house guard as well, making sure we keep an eye on all entrances into the house. Everyone’s doing okay with it, but Sage and Ravi kind of got into it a couple of shifts ago, so I’m going to pair them up until they both cool off.”

“That sounds good,” I said with a nod. “Listen, Rishika, I’m not actually here to talk about strategies—I asked to talk to you because I want to apologize.”

She tensed. “You don’t have to—”

“I *want* to,” I said. “It’s the least I can do, and you deserve it. I know I put you in a tough position when I didn’t give you a heads-up about what I knew about the Dark Fae mafia.”

“Thanks for saying that.” Then Rishika thought for a moment. “I wasn’t the only one taken by surprise.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When I went to talk to the Samaras, Xavier was pretty pissed off too.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know about that. And I’m dealing with Xavier. I think once he calms down, things should be okay between us. At least as okay as they will probably ever be,” I amended. “But I want to make something clear to you, Rishika. I made you second in command because I believe in you, and I trust you. I don’t want you to think that I intentionally left you out of pack business. Things in Portland happened really fast, and then somehow everything got even faster. I was working on staying on my feet, and I didn’t feel like I had a lot of options. I didn’t fully know what I was dealing with. If I had thought the mess I was in was going to affect the pack, I would’ve found a time to tell you what was going on.”

Rishika took this in, then nodded. “Well, thanks. I appreciate your honesty, Greyson. And I’m still committed to protecting this pack—just like I have been doing. I just hope that next time—if there is a next time—you’ll find a time to fill me in so I can do exactly what you expect your second to do.”

I grinned at her. “That’s a deal.”

“Good.”

“Now,” I said, leaning back and taking a sip of my drink, “tell me about the security plans.”

“Well, like I said, I’ve increased the patrols, which not everyone was happy about at first. But once I explained the severity of the situation, everyone pretty much stopped griping. At least to my face,” she said with a shrug. “We have a guard on the house, but I’m not really sure what more I can do around here. It’s one thing to keep a few bad Fae agents from getting to the pack

house, but now we know that’s not their only weapon. How can we keep them from using bubble magic or whatever shit they did on the house?”

“Yeah,” I said, blowing out a breath. “We haven’t had the best luck fighting that kind of unpredictable magic. You remember when Big Mac used something similar to keep Cali inside, and now this? A disaster both times. I’m just glad no one stayed trapped in the house for long this time.”

“Yeah,” Rishika agreed. “I guess it was a good thing Xavier showed up when Cali called, and Ava was able to come too. But I don’t think we can—or should—count on the Samaras to help us again.”

I gripped the glass in my hand. I was glad no one had been trapped, but I wished Cali hadn’t had to rely on Xavier. I couldn’t help thinking that I should’ve been there when she needed me.

But there was no way to go back. I was just going to have to make sure nothing like that ever happened again.

“It does make me wonder what would’ve happened if Ava hadn’t killed that Fae,” Rishika went on.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, killing the Fae broke the magic, but at what price, you know? It would’ve been nice to interrogate him a little. Find out who sent him. And why. Anyway,” she said, pushing a hand through her dark hair, “I suspect that Fae’s death is only going to make another attack all the more likely.”

“I agree,” I admitted, “but what’s done is done. The question is what the hell do we do now?”

“That is the question,” Rishika muttered. But before she could say more, we heard a commotion through the open door of the den.

“Big Mac!” Cali’s voice called out. “Mrs. Smith! Hi! What are you doing here?”

“What a nice surprise!” Torin’s voice chorused as he ran down the hall toward the front door.

I heard the door closing, and then Jay and Lola’s voices mingled with the others.

I smiled at Rishika. “I might have an idea of what to do now.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “Them?” she asked, tipping her head toward the door.

“Let’s go say hello,” I said, finishing my whiskey and getting to my feet.

Rishika and I headed out of the den and followed the sound of voices toward the front door, where Big Mac and my mother were saying hello to everyone and hanging up their coats.

“Mom, I wasn’t expecting to see you,” I said, walking toward her. It was a surprise, but the timing really couldn’t have been better. If there was anyone who knew about tricky magic, it was Big Mac.

The only question was if she could be persuaded to help us. When it came to Big Mac, there was never a certain answer to that question.

I was glad Big Mac had shown up, and I was glad to see my mom, though as I considered the situation, I started to worry. There was still so much I didn’t know, but if the Dark Fae were seeking revenge against the Redwood pack as a whole, then Big Mac and my mother might have put themselves in danger just by visiting.

I glanced at Cali, who was hanging up coats in the hall closet. She looked tired. There were dark circles under her eyes. She was probably exhausted from all the drama of the last few days.

“How’s the wedding planning going?” Lola asked.

Big Mac rolled her eyes at the question, but my mom beamed.

“It’s going well. We just finalized the flowers,” she said with a smile.

“And you’re fully decided to not kill Lucian for stealing your thunder?” Lola asked. “By announcing his own wedding?”

“No, no, no.” My mom laughed.

“Well, we sure are excited about it,” Jay said, throwing his arm around Lola’s shoulders.

“I can’t wait.” Lola smiled.

“We can’t either,” my mom said. She smiled and stepped toward me, pulling me into a hug. “Hello, Greyson.”

“Hi, Mom,” I murmured, hugging her back. “How are you?”

“Enough of that,” Big Mac muttered, grabbing my arm and towing me into the small office next to the front door. She eyed me closely. “I heard you had a little Fae trouble. That a rumor?”

“It’s not a rumor,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes. “Is that why you called me?”

“It is,” I admitted. “Though it would have been nice if you’d actually returned the call—”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” she snapped.

“There was a Fae here, and he cast some magic over the house—a kind of bubble charm. It was invisible, but no one could leave the house. They were trapped—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she said, cutting me off. “And you want my help, right?”

Big Mac was like a storm brewing, and I had a feeling she was just winding me up—making me explain everything and asking for her help—just for the joy of telling me no.

“We’ve got a problem,” I admitted. “This kind of magic isn’t something any of us know about. And we’ve got these Dark Fae breathing down our necks. We do need—”

“Okay.”

I stared at the witch, surprised. “Okay?” I asked, not understanding.

“Okay.”

“What does that mean?” I asked warily, wondering if this was a trap.

Big Mac sighed theatrically. “That means okay, I will help you.”

“You will?” I asked, still not fully believing her.

“I have to,” she said, giving me a grim look. “Because you’re going to need all the help you can get.”

**Episode 5167**

*You’re going to need all the help you can get.*

I was close enough to Greyson and Big Mac that I could hear her words, and I stiffened as she spoke. Under different circumstances, I might’ve been able to dismiss Big Mac’s comments. She was almost always snarky and pessimistic, but this felt different. This felt ominous, like Big Mac really thought we were in deep trouble.

I thought about the bubble charm magic the Fae had put over the house, and how terrifying it had been to be able to look outside, but not be able to leave. Being trapped in the house wasn’t something I wanted to repeat—despite this not even being the first time—and that went double for those horrible hallucinations I’d experienced.

“So what can we do?” I asked, stepping over to the doorway of the study.

Big Mac gave me her beady-eyed stare. “I don’t know.”

I stared back at her, stunned. “But—if you don’t know what we can do, why did you offer to help?” I asked, a note of hysteria in my voice.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Oh, calm down. I didn’t say it was hopeless, did I? I just said I didn’t know what to do yet. I need to figure it out.”

“Well, we can tell you all we know,” Greyson offered, “but it isn’t much.”

“I’ll take it anyway,” Big Mac grunted.

Greyson shrugged. “The Dark Fae showed up, used the bubble magic on the house to trap everyone inside. Then Ava came, and the magic ended when Ava killed him.”

Big Mac took that in. “Is there anything else?”  
 I hesitated. Big Mac wasn’t wouldn’t like what I was about to tell her, but she needed to know everything we knew. “I tried to break through the bubble using my own Fae magic,” I confessed.

“*What?*” Big Mac asked, her eyes wide.

“But it backfired and knocked me out. And while I was out, I had this really violent, awful vision.”

Big Mac thought about this for a moment, then raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you think your vision had anything to do with the Dark Fae?”

“Well, I think it happened because I used my own magic, and I was the only Fae,” I told her.

Big Mac was quiet. She looked past me at Torin, who was in the living room with Mrs. Smith and the others, sipping a mug of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha. “What about him?” she asked, nodding at Torin.

“What about him?” I asked.

“He’s Fae,” Big Mac pointed out. “Did he have visions?”

I shook my head. “He said he didn’t.”

Big Mac considered this. “I’m not assuming anything or ruling anything out, but why wouldn’t the Dark Fae do that to everyone?”

“I—I don’t know,” I admitted. “All I know is that the vision showed me that everyone was dead. It still haunts me,” I said with a shudder.

Big Mac nodded. “Okay. Is there anything else?”

I couldn’t think of anything. I looked at Greyson. “Is there anything we’re leaving out?”

Greyson thought for a moment, then stepped toward the door. “Why don’t you come with me? I’ll go over everything that’s happened, and everything that led up to the attack. I can walk you through it.”

I was about to say I would come too, but I stopped myself. I was still dizzy and feeling pretty out of it. I could smell the aroma of the white chocolate mocha, and I needed to get one before they were gone.

As Greyson and Big Mac walked away, I headed for the kitchen, where I found Mrs. Smith standing at the counter.

“Cali!” she said, smiling as I walked in. “I was wondering where you’d gone off to.”

“Any more mochas?” I wondered.

Mrs. Smith handed me a mug. “I saved one just for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking a grateful gulp before leaning against the counter. “So, are you and Big Mac still wedding planning?”

Mrs. Smith looked at me, startled. “Of course we are. I was just telling Lola we finalized the flowers today. Why wouldn’t we be planning?”

I shrugged. “No reason. I just feel like I haven’t heard much of anything about it.”

“Well, that’s probably because Big Mac and I don’t live here anymore and aren’t part of the gossip ecosystem.”

“That’s true,” I said with a laugh. Though my laughter died out when I remembered when they’d left, and how much we had missed them. “It’s a shame you two don’t come around more often.”

“Well, MacKenzie and I needed some time alone together. Especially after living here. After all the drama of the pack house, we just needed time to be on our own and reconnect. But now that we’ve been away for a while, we’ve gotten that, and I expect we’ll visit more frequently,” Mrs. Smith said, leaning against the counter.

“That’s great to hear,” I told her. “I know Greyson will appreciate that, though he might not say it out loud.”

That made Mrs. Smith laugh. “Yes, well, the Evers brothers are not known for talking about how they feel, are they?”

“No, they are not,” I agreed. “Though,” I added, thinking of the weekend they’d taken to connect, “I do think they’re trying. And making some progress.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mrs. Smith said. “Now, how are you for mocha, Cali? Do you want more—”

“Hey, Cali?” Ravi said, walking into the kitchen.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“There’s a van with a bunch of guys outside,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the door. “They’re asking for you. I think it’s your crew team.”

I stared at him in shock. “My team? They came here?”

“Uh, yeah. Isn’t that what I just said?” Ravi asked, looking suddenly confused.

“Oh god,” I muttered. I looked over at Mrs. Smith. “It was great seeing you. I hope you meant what you said about coming around here more often.”

“I’ll see you soon,” she promised as I headed out of the kitchen.

I grabbed a banana and a bagel as I strode toward the front door but ran into Lola before I reached it.

“Cali!” she said, grabbing hold of my arm. “What are they doing here?” she asked, tipping her head toward the front door and the waiting crew team.

“I have no idea.” I took a bite of my bagel. “I didn’t invite them.”

“You didn’t?” Lola asked.

“I talked to Codsworth earlier, and he mentioned doing something as a team, but he never said anything about just showing up like this.”

Lola shook her head, looking grave. “You have to get rid of them.”

“I know—”

“There’s too much going on around here,” she went on.

“I know that,” I said. I took another bite of my bagel, and as I chewed, I thought hard about what I could tell them. I needed to think of a reasonable way to tell them not to come to the pack house anymore—or at least as long as we were being targeted by the Dark Fae. It was just too risky.

Of course, I couldn’t actually say any of that for a million good reasons; that was all Codsworth would need to hear to freak out.

But I had to get rid of them somehow, in a way that wasn’t mean but also wouldn’t raise suspicions.

“What should I tell them?” I wondered.

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. Tell them that you have the flu, or you’re on your period. That usually makes guys run away.”

I glared at her. “Do I look like I have the flu?”

Lola gave me a sweeping glance, then shrugged one shoulder. “The jury’s kind of out on that one. I don’t know, Cali, tell them whatever you want. Just make sure they don’t come back here again, okay?”

“Thanks. What would I do without your help, Lola?” I muttered as I headed out the front door.

I peeled the banana and took a few quick bites as I stepped outside. The van door opened as I came down the stairs, and Codsworth hopped out.

“Hey, there you are,” he said with a smile. “So. Are you ready?”

I looked at him, puzzled. “Ready for what? What are you guys doing here?”

Codsworth looked back at me, just as confused. “What are you talking about? Don’t you remember?”

The mascot. I’d completely forgotten.

I managed not to roll my eyes. “Codsworth, I told you no. I’m not—”

Codsworth grabbed hold of my wrist and tugged. “Of course you are! Come on!” he said, pulling me into the van. “We’re going to get that mascot!”

The rest of the team was in the van, and they cheered when they saw me.

“Lil’ Hart!” Schmiddy yelled, throwing up his hands in celebration.

“You guys—” I started, but no one was listening.

Codsworth pulled the door shut, and the van screeched away.

**Episode 5168**

**Xavier**

I went from zero to fucking wary in two seconds and found myself taking a step back from the car.

These guys weren’t “Good Samaritans” who just happened to find me on the side of the road. Whoever was in there knew I was a werewolf, and not because they were werewolves too, which was bad. I kept my guard all the way up and braced myself for whatever was about to happen.

“I don’t need any help,” I said. “But thanks.”

“You sure? You don’t look so good,” the voice said. “You been in an accident or something?”

With my clothes torn and stained with blood, it was hard to deny that I had been in a crash. Not that it was any of their business. I managed to get out of the accident in one piece. I could make it home without taking a ride from a stranger who already knew too much about me.

“I’m fine. I don’t need any help. Thanks,” I said, my tone firm.

The mysterious voice grew more menacing. “You need to get in the car right now. It’s not a choice.”

To prove his point, every door except the driver’s opened. Three large men stepped out, each of them with a meaner expression than the last. Whoever was at the wheel had brought his A-team. I held my ground as they formed a loose semi-circle around me.

“Whoa. Who are you and why the fuck are you here?” I asked.

“We’re here to help you,” the voice said. “Get in the car.”

There was no way in hell I was getting in the car with the voice and his goon squad. I gritted my teeth as I tried to keep my temper at bay. My car was totaled, and my head was killing me. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with a half-assed kidnapping attempt.

Deciding it was high time for me to bolt into the woods, I took another step back. As I did, one of the guys raised his hand. I froze. Only two kinds of people used that move to fight. The first kind were witches. They always raised one hand or both to cast a spell or use their powerful magic.

The second kind were Fae.

*Fucking Greyson*, I thought.

The assholes demanding I get in their car must be connected to Greyson and the shit he dragged back with him from Portland. He had stuck his nose in all the wrong places, and suddenly it was my problem to deal with. And, like usual, my goddamn fool of an older brother was nowhere to be found. Once again, I had to clean up the mess he made.

*Okay, maybe this isn’t all his fault. Maybe this is because of Ava too.*

But if it was Ava’s problem, then it was my problem too. The Fae standing around me looked ready to cast whatever spell they needed to so they could drag me back to their hideout. It was going to be a three-on-one fight, but I had faced much worse odds before.

I plastered a friendly smile on my face. “On second thought, I could use a ride back home. I banged my head pretty hard and don’t feel like myself.”

“Great,” the voice said. “Get in.”

*Never going to happen*, I thought.

All I had to do to take them all out was get them to drop their guard. I would play along until I could strike. A part of me knew that taking those Fae out was going to lead to more problems in the near future, but what choice did I have? They must have followed me from Redwood house. If I hadn’t crashed my car, they might have followed me all the way to the Samara pack house… and to Ava.

*Talk about a fucked-up silver lining*.

Regardless of how we crossed paths, if Ava was their ultimate prize, I was more than happy to disappoint them. I took a step toward the open door of the vehicle, looking like I was about to hop in. As I ducked down, I stepped into a lunge and shifted before I tackled the guy standing closest to me.

I tore his throat out before he hit the ground.

I watched as the air around me started to blur. Then the car morphed from an unmarked SUV into a souped-up sedan… Were they using a glamour on it? Seconds later, I was hit by a blast of magic and knocked onto my back. I rolled over and charged the second Fae as he got ready to blast me again. He tumbled back into the car and slammed his head against the glass.

I turned and charged the third Fae, aiming my claws at his eyes. He blasted me with magic and knocked the wind out of me for a second. Recovering quickly, I lunged at him again and managed to sink my fangs into his shoulder. He howled in pain and punched my head to get me to let go. I sank my teeth further into his flesh, drawing more blood and making him scream.

He fell to the ground and wrestled with me. A blast of magic knocked me to the side, but I jumped back up and bit down on his arm. He punched me as he struggled to get loose. I swiped at his face, leaving deep gouge marks across his cheek.

Just as I got ready to go for his jugular, he blasted my head with magic and knocked me out momentarily. The Fae got up and ran off to the car, but I still had a chunk of his flesh between my teeth. I recovered as the car peeled away, leaving the dead Fae behind.

Once I was sure they were gone, I shifted back and went to make sure that the guy on the ground was actually dead. As his unseeing eyes stared up at the sky, I went through his pockets to find out who he was. The only thing I managed to find was a ripped business card. It belonged to a bar in Portland.

*Of course*.

I had no doubt that the guys who had tried to take me were Dark Fae. It seemed the shit that was after Greyson was now after the rest of us too. As much as I wanted to curse him out, all I could think about was Ava. I was worried that the Dark Fae were going to try to kidnap Ava like they had tried and failed with me.

She was strong, but I wasn’t sure she’d be able to take three Fae at once.

Wanting to get back home as soon as possible, I shifted and dragged the body deeper into the woods. I didn’t bother to bury him, figuring the Fae already knew what I had done. Why try to hide it?

With the body sufficiently covered by fallen branches and dead leaves, I took off and raced back to the Samara pack house. I took a long, winding route back home. After my unwanted encounter, I wasn’t going to take any chances and risk leading those assholes right to Ava.

The Dark Fae knew that a werewolf killed one of their guys, but they still didn’t know which werewolf did it. They still didn’t know about Ava, and I aimed to keep it that way. If they had known she was responsible, they wouldn’t have bothered trying to follow me.

Still, I had to assume the Dark Fae mafia wasn’t stupid. If they suspected a werewolf had taken out one of their own, it was only a matter of time before they figured out who. There were only so many pack houses in the area.

*You throw a bunch of darts, and eventually one’s gonna hit the bullseye*.

And thanks to what she had done, Ava was wearing a giant bullseye on her back. I ran faster until I finally saw the pack house through the clearing ahead of me. There was no one lurking around, but I still did a quick check of the perimeter and scented the area. So far, none of the Dark Fae had made it anywhere near the pack house.

I shifted back and burst in through the front door. Ava and Marissa jumped to their feet like they were about to be attacked. Their initial surprise gave way to more as they got a good look at my clothes and face. Ava rushed up to me and threw her arms around my neck.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

Her heart raced against mine, and I realized I must have looked a lot worse than I felt. There were streaks of blood and dirt on my arms, and my jeans were ripped to shreds. None of it mattered. As Ava tightened her embrace, I realized I had never felt better. I wished we could stay in that moment and forget about the rest of the world, but it was a luxury we couldn’t afford. It was too risky.

I pulled back and took her face in my hands. “Ava, you need to leave. *Now*.”

**Episode 5169**

**Greyson**

My eyes widened, and my jaw went slightly slack as I stared at Ravi like he had grown a second head.

“You just let her go?” I asked incredulously.

Ravi shrugged. “What was I supposed to do? It’s not like some random group of strangers showed up out of the blue. They were Cali’s teammates.”

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “I get that, but didn’t we just get attacked by Dark Fae? None of us should be stepping out of the house without so much as a second thought. It’s dangerous.”

“Tell her team that,” Ravi muttered.

I pulled my phone out to call Cali just as she called me.

“Cali. Where are you?” I asked.

She explained what happened and how she had essentially been taken by her friends. She didn’t sound any happier about it than I did. I could hear her teammates laughing in the background and felt somewhat better that she wasn’t out and about on her own. Not that a group of humans would be able to fend off a single member of the Dark Fae mafia alone.

As much as I wanted to keep Cali close, I knew I couldn’t keep her locked up like some kind of prisoner. I was going to have to let her out of the house so she could attend her classes and go to crew practice.

“I’m not mad that you left,” I said. “I just wish you had given me a heads-up.”

Cali sighed. “Trust me, I’m as annoyed about this whole ordeal as you are. I didn’t plan on going out today, and I didn’t even get the chance to turn it down. Now I’m here until this thing is over.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’ll have someone from the pack join you or at least follow you from a close distance.”

“That sounds good,” she said.

I was surprised. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, having a bag shoved over my head has given me an all-new perspective on having personal protection,” she said wryly.

“Sounds like your friends have an alternate calling as professional kidnappers,” I said.

“Or something,” Cali replied, then someone called for her. “I’m sorry, I have to go. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“Okay, love,” I said. “See you soon.”

We ended the call, and I immediately started going through the list of people I could send to watch after her. Cali’s safety was my utmost priority, and I would have gone to her myself if I wasn’t also worried about the safety of my pack. The last thing I wanted to do was step out and cause the members of the Redwood pack to call Xavier for help again.

As I walked through the house, I spotted Lola hanging out with Jay in the kitchen. Perfect. I made my way to them. They paused their conversation as I got close.

“What’s up?” Lola asked, no doubt seeing the question on my face.

“Cali’s out with her friend, and I’d feel much better if someone were out there tailing her to make sure she’s okay,” I said. “I’d like you to go.”

Lola nodded. “Sure, Jay and I can shadow Cali. After being stuck in this house, we wouldn’t mind getting some fresh air.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “I’m sure it won’t be much fun just watching her from afar, but I want to make sure she makes it home safe.”

“No worries,” Jay said. “It feels good to be useful.”

“We’ll catch up to them,” Lola said.

“Thank you,” I said, some of the tension leaving my body.

Jay clapped me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. We got this.”

“Let me know as soon as you find her,” I said. “And keep me posted about what’s going on until you all get back.”

“No problem,” Lola said.

With Cali soon to be taken care of, I made my way back to Big Mac and was surprised to find her sitting with Torin. Sabine noticed my expression and rushed to fill me in.

“Torin is telling us about how the Light Fae used iron to defend themselves against the Dark Fae army and vice versa during the war,” she said. “Most of the time, though, iron is used as a means to torture and kill the enemy.”

Torin’s face contorted with pain as he forced himself to live through what were surely horrible memories. His fingers were curled into his thigh, and he had broken out in a light sweat. Giving Big Mac intel was torturous for him. It was obvious he had been through some horrible things, but he was the only person who could give us insight into the Dark Fae’s weaknesses.

“What about the time that you used your magic to form a barrier like the one used by that Dark Fae?” I asked Big Mac. “Can you try that again?”

My mom shook her head. “Absolutely not. I won’t let MacKenzie do that again. It requires too much energy. That damn barrier nearly killed her.”

“I’m not sure I could even if I wanted to,” Big Mac said.

I nodded. “I remember. I wouldn’t want to put her through that again, but isn’t there something she could use?”

“Something that won’t kill you,” Sabine insisted.

We all went quiet for a beat as we racked our brains for possible solutions. We were facing a foe that was not only powerful, but also relentless. It was only a matter of time before they got to us all. If one Dark Fae had been able to trap the whole Redwood pack, then what would a group of them be capable of?

Desperate to find some kind of defense, I thought about what Torin had said about using iron. It was easy to get and very effective against any Fae.

“What if we create traps made out of iron?” I asked. “Would that work?”

“I think so,” Big Mac said. “I can help make a bunch of iron traps that can act like a sort of barrier.”

“That’s great, but what about the patrols?” Ravi asked. “We can’t have our patrols getting trapped by accident.”

“That’s fine,” Big Mac said. “I can make it so the traps only respond to Fae.”

“What about Cali and Torin?” I asked.

It didn’t do much good to keep the Dark Fae at bay if it meant risking their lives.

“I can create a special ward to protect them,” Big Mac said.

I gave a half shrug. “Well, it’s not a perfect plan by any means. But it’s a plan. What do you need from us?”

“Traps, somewhere to work, and a pot of coffee,” Big Mac said.

She, Sabine, and Ravi got to work creating the magical iron traps. They were going to be busy for a while, which meant I could turn my attention to the other things that were troubling. Before I could, Rishika pulled me aside.

“Should we talk to the other Alphas about what’s going on?” she asked.

“Yes, I think this is something that should be brought to the alliance’s attention,” I said. “It doesn’t seem like the Dark Fae are too discriminating when it comes to which werewolves they attack. Best if everyone in the area is on guard.”

Xavier already knew about the danger lurking out there and, given how things had ended between us the last time we spoke, I doubted he was going to listen to anything else I said. Still, I had no choice but to call him. He was rightfully pissed that I hadn’t warned him about the mafia coming after me, and I wasn’t about to get another earful for not giving him a heads-up.

My call immediately went to voicemail. Either Xavier was busy, or he refused to take my call. Committed to keeping him informed, I left him a message after the third and final call I made.

“Xavier, it’s me,” I said. “We’re working on a defense plan against the Dark Fae. Call me back when you get this message.”

I ended the call, then stared at my phone, wondering if it made sense to call Lucian. It was the last thing I wanted to do because it was Lucian. He wanted to be in the alliance, but if anyone wanted to get in contact with him, they had to call his sister, Aysel. I gritted my teeth.

*Ugh.*

It was so absurd that I considered making one of the new requirements to join the alliance be that every Alpha had to have their own phone. If Lucian was determined to be some kind of modern Luddite, then he could join another alliance.

After dialing Aysel’s number, I put my cell to my ear. She answered right away, her phone manners so impeccable it made me want to roll my eyes.

“Greyson! I’m so happy to hear from you,” she said, chipper as ever. “I hope you haven’t forgotten about the Valentine’s Day party. It’s going to be the event of the season.”

*For fuck’s sake…*

“I haven’t forgotten, Aysel,” I said. “Can I speak to Lucian? It’s urgent.”

“Oh no,” Aysel said. “I’m so sorry, but Lucian is totally offline right now.”

“What does that mean?” I said, scowling at the phone like she could see me.

“He’s getting a massage,” she said.

*Is she fucking kidding me?* I raged internally.

“Tell him to call me ASAP!” I said, then hung up.

I took a few breaths to calm down, then called Mace and hoped that call would go better than my first. The phone rang once before he answered. I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to the punch.

“What the fuck did you do?”

**Episode 5170**

The massive ball of tension that had settled in the pit of my stomach was finally unwinding.

I was glad I had had the chance to explain what happened to Greyson without alerting my teammates to what was really going on. Despite the danger seemingly lurking in every corner, I couldn’t just ditch my team to stay home all the time.

And being around the boisterous boys really did wonders to lift my spirits. As we talked about getting back at the Fringeheads, I was able to forget about the endless dangers that had descended on the Redwood pack. They were still there, but at least I had been able to put them on the back burner for a bit.

“Is everyone ready?” Gael asked.

The guys and I cheered as if on cue.

“We have to hit them hard,” Bear said. “Harder than they thought possible.”

His words confused and troubled me. Hitting was not part of the plan, and hitting them hard was definitely out of the question.

“Um, I thought Codsworth said something about getting their mascot,” I said. “I don’t remember agreeing to hit anyone. That’s too much, right?”

Kayden—or possibly Jayden—laughed. I wished I could join in the fun with him, but I wasn’t about to cop a record for assault and battery. There was such a thing as being part of the team, and then there was straight-up criminal activity.

“As much as we would love to beat the crap out of those fuckwads, we’re not going to,” Kayden/Jayden said. “What Bear means is that we’re hitting them where it counts and where it’ll hurt them most. We’re going after their beloved mascot.”

“So…we’re going to punch their mascot?” I asked, not feeling any better about the plan.

“No. The mascot isn’t a person,” Patel explained. “Their mascot is a fish. They call it Fringey, and he’s like a demigod to them.”

Rodrigo laughed. “We should deep fry it.”

“Extra crispy and served as a fish taco,” Schmiddy added.

I balked. “I’m not taking part in anything that ends up harming a fish!”

Maybe I was being over-the-top by worrying about a poor fish’s rights, but the guys were getting a maniacal look in their eyes that just didn’t sit right with me.

“Relax, Cali,” Johnny said. “We’re not going to hurt the fish. We’re just going to kidnap it.”

“And eat it,” Rodrigo joked until he saw my face. “I’m kidding, Hart. Jeez.”

“Promise me that none of you are planning to harm or eat the fish,” I said. “Right now. Promise me.”

Each of the guys held up a hand and promised not to harm Fringey. It was the only way I would go with them. As Schmiddy rolled his eyes and lamented the loss of his potential fish taco, my phone buzzed with a text message from Lola.

*Heads up. Me and Jay are behind you.*

I tried to look out of the rear-view mirror to spot them, but it was too grimy for me to make anything out. Not willing to dirty my hand, I trusted that they were tailing the van. Knowing they were close by made me feel a lot better. Eventually, the van slowed to a stop, and Gael turned around to address us all.

“We’re here,” he said, his eyes bright with malicious excitement.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Fringehead central,” Bear said.

“Right,” I said. “And where do you think they keep their fish?”

“In a fish tank,” Johnny replied. “Duh.”

I rolled my eyes so hard they nearly fell out of my head. “Obviously. But where do they keep the fish tank?”

“It’s supposed to be in the athletic center,” Bear said. “Maybe in the coach’s office.”

“*Maybe* it’s there?” I asked, the knot in my stomach growing again. “We’re going to break into the Fringeheads’ coach’s office, and we don’t even know if what we’re after is in there? How is that a good plan?”

“Relax, Cali,” Codsworth said, pulling out a set of keys. “We’re not breaking in. At least, not technically.”

His words only made me feel worse.

“How did you get those keys?” I asked.

“Trust us, you don’t want to know,” Patel assured me. “All that matters is that we have them.”

I took a deep breath and tried to take their advice. We weren’t breaking into Fort Knox, and we weren’t about to break prisoners out of Gitmo. We were just getting ready to take part in a harmless prank. No fish would be harmed in the process, and neither would we.

*Compared to the shit Greyson and I have been dealing with, stealing Fringey will be a piece of cake*.

Codsworth opened the door, and we filed out. Bear had parked at the loading dock, close enough to the athletic center without being too obvious. As I stretched my legs, a car drove past us.

*Isn’t that Jay’s car?* I wondered.

Once again, some of the tension left my body. It felt good knowing Lola had my back. No matter how wacky the revenge plan was, she would be there to help. If nothing else, she and Jay could act as my getaway drivers.

“Listen up,” Codsworth said. “Once we get inside, just act like you belong there. Don’t walk around looking all suspicious and shit, or we’ll get caught.”

The other guys nodded like it was the world’s best plan. I, on the other hand, shook my head like I was the only one who had any common sense. How was it going to be possible for me to break into a place where I didn’t belong and then act natural about it?

Codsworth used his stolen keys to open one of the side doors. We all slipped inside, then immediately started arguing with each other about where to go. We went down one hall only to argue and change directions. It was hard not to look suspicious when it was obvious we had no fucking idea where we were going.

Finally, we made our way to the main room of the athletic center. My heart raced as we followed a sign that pointed us in the direction of the coaches’ offices. Once we reached the narrow hall filled with closed doors, it was easy to find the one we needed. As Codsworth got ready to unlock the door, a voice spoke up behind us.

“You guys looking for someone?” the deep voice said.

I jumped ten feet in the air and spun around to see a middle-aged janitor holding a mop staring at us curiously. He didn’t look like he was on the verge of calling the cops, but that didn’t stop me from feeling like I was on the verge of a heart attack. Not knowing what else to do, I smiled at him.

“No, we found what we came for,” Patel said casually. “We just wanted to leave a surprise for Coach. To thank him and whatnot.”

The janitor grinned. “All right then. Have a good night.”

“Thanks, you too,” Patel said.

The janitor moved on, and I let out a huge breath of relief. Codsworth opened the door and gestured for us to go in.

“Kayden, you keep watch,” he said.

“Got it,” Kayden replied.

As I got ready to step into the room, Jayden grabbed me and pulled me back. I tensed, expecting a sudden attack.

“Watch out for the laser beams,” he said.

I looked around, wondering how I had missed them. “What? Why didn’t anyone say anything about them before?”

Bear laughed. “Jeez, Cali. Do you really think they would protect a goldfish with an alarm system from *Mission Impossible*? It’s just a fish.”

“*It’s just a fish*,” I said, mocking his voice. “Shut up and let’s take this stupid fish already.”

They laughed as we stepped into the office. Rolling my eyes, I focused on our objective before we ran out of time. I heard the gurgling from the tank before my eyes landed on it. The rather unimpressive tank sat on the window’s ledge. Inside of it was a single goldfish, swimming around lazily without a care in the world.

“Here, fishy, fishy,” Johnny said.

He and Patel went to get the tank while I made sure that was all they did. Bear went for something else entirely.

“Check this out,” he said.

He picked up the mascot costume and put the giant head over his. It looked like a real Fringehead fish that had been given the Disney treatment. It was far too cute to be accurate.  Bear started to dance around the office like an idiot, getting the most out of our silly prank.

“Hey now, what’s going on here?” he asked. “I smell something fishy.”

“Oh god,” I said. “Please stop.”

“Why, when things are going so swimmingly?” Bear asked.

“Knock that shit off,” Gael said. “We gotta go.”

“Fine,” Bear said, then tried to take the head off. “Oh shit. It’s stuck!”

Just then, Kayden stuck his head inside the office. “The janitor’s coming!”

In a panic, we all ran out of the office. Bear slammed into the door on his way out, unable to see a damn thing.

“Get this shit off of me!” he said. “I can’t run with this on!”

With no time to waste, all I could do was grab his arm and drag him along with me. I looked up to see the janitor running our way at full speed.

**Episode 5171**

**Artemis**

I was in the library, sitting at a table stacked high with books related to the Fae court.

The book I had in front of me was a historical ledger that held every detail related to what went on in court and all the processes related to it. Whoever had been charged with writing down every single event had gone above and beyond in their duties. I was reading about the riveting case regarding the court’s decision about grains and trying my best not to fall into a coma.

*This is so goddamn boring!*

I wiped my eyes as I struggled to stay awake. Celeste had subtly insisted that I read all the court’s ledgers in order to get a better understanding of how it worked, but I was hoping to find more than just that between the pages. If the ledgers really did record everything the court handled, then surely they would mention something about the Order of the Winding Thorn.

An organization like that didn’t just pop up out of nowhere—not in the Fae world. A secret organization like the Winding Thorn that was so well-structured it could send assassins into the Dark Fae court had to have had some historical weight to it. Or so I thought. I wasn’t dealing with some fly-by-night assassin’s club, yet I couldn’t find a damn thing about them in the ledger I was reading. At least, I couldn’t find anything related to the Winding Thorn in the passages from 2000 years ago.

In no mood to pore over more grain deals, I skipped ahead in the book. It was about the size of my head and so thick that I could have flung it from a catapult to take down a wall. After flipping past half the pages, I was dismayed to see that I had only skipped over 200 years of history. The level of detail was so insanely precise that I knew I would have to read every line with a magnifying glass to find the information I wanted.

I groaned.

*Isn’t the best way to learn about the Dark Fae court just simply to be a part of the court?* I wondered.

Celeste had said as much when she told me that one of the easiest ways to get the information I wanted was to be a member of the Mauvais family. But I wasn’t so sure it was the best way. On the one hand, presenting myself as Kadmos’s daughter and rightful heir to the entire court could have put a larger target on my back. On the other hand, could putting myself out there make the Order less willing to send assassins after me?

I had more questions than answers floating around in my head and the book in my hands was doing nothing to help me. Sick of the tiny text on its pages, I closed it and was horrified to see that it was only the first tome of forty.

*Forty fucking ledgers? Absolutely not!*

I couldn’t get out of that stuffy library fast enough. If I wanted information about the Order, then the best thing I could do was go speak to the assassin myself. He would be able to tell me who was coming after me and why.

But the clock was ticking.

The assassin was set to be executed, and I had no time to waste if I wanted to speak to him before his head was removed from his body. With my mission in mind, I stepped out of the library and nearly ran into my personal guard. Celeste could say all she wanted about me being an adept fighter, but the fact that she had assigned a guard to keep me safe said otherwise. Clearly, she didn’t trust that I could keep myself safe.

*Well, she does have to protect her investment by any means possible*, I thought.

Celeste had been waiting for years for me—or Adair—to come back. Since Adair was essentially a moot point, I was her only hope. She was going to do anything she had to do to keep me safe. But that didn’t mean I was happy about having a guard on my ass all the time. He made me feel like I was on a leash. A long one, sure—but a leash nonetheless.

“I want to go speak to the assassin who’s set to be executed,” I said. “Take me there.”

Expecting him to bow and spin on his heels and immediately give me what I wanted, I balked when he shook his head firmly. I stared at him like he had lost his mind.

“No,” he said, in case I missed it.

“Why not?” I asked. “He doesn’t really pose much danger to me now that he’s about to die.”

“Still, I cannot take you,” the guard said. “We would need to get approval from Celeste first.”

I clenched my teeth so hard they squeaked. Celeste had been the one to tell me to investigate the Order. So why the hell wouldn’t she let me talk to the guy?

“I would offer to take you to her now,” the guard added, “but I’m afraid she’s extremely busy at the moment.”

“Great. At this rate the guy is going to be in two pieces before I get a chance to see him,” I grumbled. “So where can I go? You know, since I’m not allowed to do as I please.”

“You’re allowed to go to the market, the library, and your chambers,” the guard said. “Any other place will first require Celeste’s permission.”

*This is ridiculous*, I thought.

I sighed. “Fine. I’m hungry, and I want to go to the market to find something to eat.”

He nodded and led the way. While I did like the idea of grabbing something to eat, I had another craving I was going to satisfy first. We arrived at the market quickly, and I was once again struck by the bustling activity and frenetic energy of the place.

There were stalls selling food, wares, clothes, and all manner of things someone with a purse full of money could be interested in. Unlike the few places I was allowed to travel to in the palace, the market was full of smells, sounds, and tantalizing treats for the eyes.

Looking for the perfect escape route, my eyes landed on a clothing stall. It had undergarments, dresses, pants, and everything else to dress a discerning Fae from head to toe. I walked toward it with my guard in tow.

“I want to buy something here first,” I said.

He was about to step in with me when I gave him a scandalized look. I put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I’m going to try things on. Surely, I’m allowed at least a modicum of privacy.”

The guard didn’t look too keen on the idea, but he grunted and stayed put as I walked in. Inside the small shop, I ran my hand over various items of clothing as I worked my way toward the back. There were a few pieces that caught my eye, but they weren’t part of my main objective. I picked up a garment at random and was intrigued to see that it was actually sexy lingerie. Well, the Fae version of it. The lace was styled in a pattern I had never seen before, and for a moment I was tempted to actually try it on.

*Next time*, I thought.

“Could I try this on?” I asked.

The kindly Fae who was tending the store led me to a curtained area in the back. She closed me inside and offered to stay close by in case I wanted to try anything else on. Carefully putting the lingerie in a corner, I slipped out through the back. I made a note to return to the store when I wasn’t pressed for time.

Rounding the corner, I blended into the crowd and made my way to where the buildings were. I remembered where Marius had been held and knew that was where the assassin would be. Minutes later, I was navigating down a row of seemingly empty cells.

*Did they already execute him, or did he escape?* I wondered.

My heart raced as I ran down another corridor. Finally, I saw him sticking a hand out a narrow window. He heard my footsteps and turned around to face me. His clothes were torn, and his face was bloody—a clear indication that his time in jail had been far from pleasant. His eyes were bloodshot and wide, but he laughed like he was having the time of his life in his tiny cell.

“Now, this is a particular kind of torture, isn’t it?” he asked.

I didn’t bother to answer him. Wary as ever, I slowly approached the bars that separated him from me. The assassin took another step closer as well. We stared at each other, our gazes sweeping each other from head to toe, each of us eager to get something from the other. He wanted my life, and I wanted information.

“Dangling exactly what I want right in front of me?” he asked. “That’s about the cruelest thing they could do to me yet.”

His words and the mad stare that accompanied them sent a shiver down my spine, but I brushed his comment off. He had failed to kill me and had earned himself an expedited death. I had nothing to fear so I focused on my objective.

“I want to know who sent you to kill me,” I said. “I know you’ve been tortured, and I can bring an end to that. Maybe we can work something out so you can die with your dignity intact.”

The assassin stared at me for another second, his eyes glassy with madness, before he tipped his head back and laughed heartily.

“You want to know who it is that wants you dead? That’s something that I’ll gladly take to my grave, just like everyone before me,” he said. “Ever since this war began, Light Fae and Dark Fae alike—even the court—die with their secrets.”

He laughed again, and my cheeks burned with indignation and humiliation. He was committed to the cause. Unfortunately for me, his cause and that of all the other assassins was to see me dead. The assassin cocked his head, and I braced myself for what he was about to say next.

“Tell me,” he said. “Where do you think your secrets will be buried?”

**Episode 5172**

**Xavier**

Ava stared at me like I had lost my damn mind, and I felt like I was on the verge of doing just that. My head was spinning at a thousand miles per hour as I tried to think of all the places where Ava would be safe. I had to take her away from the pack house and protect her until I solved our Dark Fae problem.

Easier said than done, of course.

It wasn’t like I could just send Ava to some random cabin in the woods. Shit. We basically lived in a cabin in the woods, and the Dark Fae were damn close to finding it.

*Can I send her off with Gabriel and Mikah?*

There was no one else I trusted more than them, but how would they make it to the Samara house without leading the Dark Fae right to us?

*What about Big Mac?*

The best way to fight magic was with magic, but would the witch even want to help me and Ava? I didn’t want to put the life of my Luna in the hands of someone who wasn’t keen to help us in whatever she could.

*What if I send her somewhere like Portland?*

If hiding out in the middle of nowhere wasn’t a good idea, then maybe Ava would have better luck in a big city. Unfortunately, what little I knew about the Dark Fae mafia included the fact that they were set up in Portland. If I sent Ava there, I might as well tie a red bow around her neck. They were already keeping tabs on me, which was why they had been able to follow me from the Redwood house.

It was a risky situation to say the least. Worse than that, I wasn’t sure there was anything I would be able to do. I hated that feeling.

“I’m not sure where,” I said. “But I’m going to get you out of here. I’ll find a safe place for you to lie low.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ava balked. “Why would I leave? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Ava, it’s not safe here,” I said. “I don’t care how many stones I have to turn over, how many favors I have to call in, or how many threats I have to make. I’m going to keep you safe and make sure that nothing happens to you. Nothing will happen to you.”

With my worry and stress multiplying tenfold, it was no wonder I started to ramble. The thought of anyone hurting Ava was so painful that it nearly made me double over. I refused to let anyone get close to her. I would rip them to shreds before they got the chance. Ava was my mate. She was my Luna. The possibility of losing her was too terrifying.

It was a complete 180 to how I used to feel about her. There was a time when I would have relished the danger that she was in. I didn’t care whether she lived or died, but that was no longer the case. Now, I wasn’t sure I could live without her.

“Xavier!”

I snapped out of my reverie to stare at Ava. She cupped my face in her hands and stared into my eyes like she could see into the depths of my despair.

“What’s going on, X?” she asked. “Talk to me, please. Focus only on me.”

The longer I stared into her eyes, the easier it became to breathe. My mind slowed until I was able to think clearly, and my heart was no longer jackhammering in my chest. I pressed my forehead against hers.

“I was just attacked by the Dark Fae,” I said. “They’re watching me, which means that they must already be watching you. You need to leave, Ava. You have to protect yourself before they find you.”

Ava’s eyes went wide. “There’s no way I’m going anywhere. I would never give the Dark Fae the satisfaction of driving me out of my own home.”

Her words didn’t surprise me at all. Ava had never been one to cut tail and run. She faced every challenge head-on. And that was exactly why I was so worried about her.

“You’re the Luna,” I said. “Part of your duty is to protect yourself.”

“Are you kidding me?” she said. “What kind of Luna only thinks about herself? These guys aren’t just after me. The way I see it, they don’t give a shit who they kill out here.”

“Even more reason to keep yourself safe,” I said. “They won’t stop until they kill the people responsible for taking out their guys. The best way to keep the pack safe is to keep yourself safe.”

“So what? So I can stay Luna?” she asked. “What good is a Luna without a pack? I’m staying right here.”

We went back and forth, playing semantics until my head was throbbing. I gritted my teeth and did my best to keep my frustrations at bay. I wanted to keep my Luna safe, but Ava wasn’t making it easy.

“This is all Cali’s fault,” she said. “She’s the reason those Fae are even out here. She always gets her ass into trouble, and we’re the ones who have to deal with it.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “You can’t just blame Cali when shit gets bad. She was trapped in that house along with everyone else in the Redwood pack. She had no idea what was going on any more than we did. It’s not always her fault.”

*If anything, it’s Greyson*, I thought.

It was his fault that we were all in this shitty situation. If he hadn’t gone to Portland and stuck his nose where it didn’t belong, we wouldn’t be facing off with the Dark Fae. I wanted to rage at him for getting into trouble and for failing to tell us about it before it was too late.

*But what good would it do?*

Blaming Greyson didn’t change the fact that Ava did what she did. And it sure as hell didn’t change the fact that her life was in danger. What was done was done. All that was left was to figure out how to deal with the consequences.

“You’re the one who killed the Fae outside the Redwood pack house. That’s on you. You’re in this mess because of the choice you made,” I said. “Did it work in the moment? Yes. But we didn’t wait to learn about what was really going on. Because of that, we’re dealing with a shitstorm. Things are spiraling, and those Dark Fae want revenge.”

“Xa—” Ava started.

I held my hand up. “My only goal right now is to keep you safe. I have to protect my mate, my Luna. And I have to protect my pack. I don’t want to argue with you about this.”

Ava closed her mouth and let my words sink in. Thankfully, she seemed like she was actually pondering, instead of getting ready to tell me to fuck off.

*Miracle*, I thought.

“Okay,” she said finally. “If you think that leaving is best—especially for the pack—then I’ll go.”

Relief washed over me. I was so grateful that I didn’t have to start World War III with her.

“Okay, good,” I said.

“But, first, I want to tell the pack what’s going on,” she said. “I don’t want to disappear on them.”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea. And you’re not disappearing, Ava. You’re not abandoning the pack, and I’m not abandoning you either. I’m going to figure this out. We’re going to figure this out. Believe me.”

Ava nodded and hugged me close. She felt so delicate, so…small. I knew that wasn’t true, but it didn’t make me worry any less.

“I’ll find a safe place for you to go to,” I said. “They won’t find you there, and I’ll make sure they stop trying to find you. I’ll kill the whole damn mafia if I have to. They won’t know what hit them.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less of you, Alpha,” she said.

I took her hand and called for the rest of the pack to join us in the living room. They gathered quickly, no doubt having heard the edge in my voice.

“Holy shit,” Knox said. “What happened to you? Is that blood?”

I sighed. “We’ve got a problem.”

I told them all about what was going on with the Dark Fae mafia and how they had made multiple attempts to kill the people who kept killing their guys. They learned about the reasoning behind the attack on the Redwood pack and about how Ava’s short-term solution was leading to long-term problems. We had to take drastic action, and it wasn’t necessarily the kind of action we liked to take.

The Samaras took it all in, and I waited for them to start railing against my decision the way Ava had.

“Whatever we have to do to protect our Luna, we’ll do it,” Donovan said, breaking the silence first.

“I have a distant cousin who lives in Idaho,” Josephine said. “She could lie low there for however long she needs to.”

“Why does she have to run at all?” Geraint asked. “They made the first strike, and Ava retaliated. Shouldn’t it end there?”

“Yeah, and if they already attacked our Alpha, then running could make us look even weaker,” Knox said. “Running is too risky. What if they ambush you? I don’t think Ava should go anywhere. We’re safer here. We can protect her here.”

A few others murmured their agreement, and I did my best not to lose my cool. They had no idea how powerful the foe we were facing was. I understood where they were coming from, but there was never going to be a great solution to our dilemma. During my ill-fated trip to the Fae world, I had learned exactly what they were capable of. I didn’t want to come off as a coward, but I wasn’t going to play the fool either. Regardless, my pride was not worth risking the loss of Ava.

Both sides—those who wanted Ava to go versus those who wanted her to stay—debated heatedly until we all heard the sound of a distant howl. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Marissa was out on patrol, and I knew exactly what that howl meant. So did everyone else.

Someone had crossed into our territory. It was too late for Ava to run. They were already here.

**Episode 5173**

**Greyson**

Mace’s acidic tone and his harsh words totally caught me off guard.

The last time we spoke hadn’t led to any hostilities. He’d always had a short fuse, but he had outdone himself with this version of a greeting. I cut him off before he got the chance to jump down my throat over whatever I had supposedly done.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “What do you mean, what did I do?”

Mace huffed. “Ever since you called Maren about that guy named Hans or whatever, she’s been freaking out. She feels like she’s being watched. What did you say to her? Who is that guy?”

*Fuck*, I thought.

Suddenly, I knew exactly why Mace was so pissed at me. And I was instantly worried. If Maren felt like she was being watched, then I was sure it was because she was. Someone was tailing her because of me. I had no idea that consulting with Maren would somehow get her tangled up in the mess I was in. It shouldn’t have.

We hadn’t done more than have a quick chat on the phone. Yet here was Mace, accusing me of having fucked shit up for them, too. I hoped to hell it wasn’t the case. All Maren had done was tell me that Hans was dead.

I never thought that a single phone call could be tied back to her. I didn’t think it was possible for her to face the same kind of retaliation I was facing. Then again, I hadn’t expected the Dark Fae to beat me back home to attack Cali and the rest of the pack either.

There was no limit to what the Dark Fae mafia were capable of. They had an army of henchmen to do their bidding, and it was obvious they had no problem hurting innocent people.

“Did something specific happen? Is Maren okay?” I asked. “Is Fenrir?”

“Yeah, Maren and the kid are okay,” Mace said, not sounding any happier.

“Good. Listen, I never meant for anything to happen, okay?” I said. “I never thought this could be traced back to her.”

“What got back to her?” Mace asked. “What the fuck is going on?”

“The reason I called you is because I’ve got a situation involving the Dark Fae,” I said. “I was sniffing around, and there could be some old acquaintances of Maren’s—”

Mace growled.

“I didn’t say a thing about her to them,” I said. “I haven’t involved her in any way whatsoever, but they’re definitely sniffing around. I know that Maren knows how to handle them and that world—”

“You better watch what you say,” Mace warned.

“I know she can handle herself,” I repeated. “But I’ll do whatever I can to protect her and Fenrir and even the Blue Bloods if they need it.”

Mace sighed. “Fine. As long as Maren isn’t involved in any of this shit you’re looking into.”

“She isn’t, and she’ll remain that way,” I assured him.

As soon as I knew that Cali and my pack were safe, I could devote all of my energy and attention to resolving the Dark Fae situation. The attack on our pack house was all the motivation I needed to want to take them all out.

If that was even possible.

“If anything changes at all, you call me,” Mace said. “This is the woman I love we’re talking about. I don’t want anything coming out of the blue to put her life in danger.”

It still shocked me to hear Mace saying that, but I understood exactly how he was feeling. Mace was willing to do whatever he had to to protect Maren, just like I would do anything to protect Cali.

“I promise,” I said.

We hung up, and I tucked my phone away. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I tried to keep my nerves at bay. The Dark Fae mafia had a more extensive network than I could have ever imagined, and they were more than happy to use it to get to anyone who was looking into them.

Clearly, I had poked the wrong bear when I started looking into Kendall. She had warned me, but I didn’t take her seriously. I should have. Whatever she was caught up in was bigger and more complicated than I could have ever imagined. All I had to do to set things off was ask a few innocuous questions.

My questions had provoked the wrong people, and we were all paying the price. I knew there was more to it than that, but I couldn’t remember. There was a gap in my memory, and I was starting to suspect that it wasn’t a random one. Kendall knew more than she was saying, but she refused to tell me anything of use.

I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

As worried as ever, I joined Big Mac and the others hoping they had made more progress than I had. Big Mac looked up at me as I approached and gave me a confident nod.

“I’ve got everything set up around the house,” she said.

“Great,” I said.

“I’ve essentially set up a Fae tripwire. If it gets activated by a Fae crossing it, then they’re going to get caught in it,” she explained. “I have various iron traps that will deploy once triggered. Any Fae who walks through this barrier isn’t going to know what hit them.”

“I think they’ll know when their flesh burns off their bones,” Ravi said.

“Seriously, Ravi?” Rishika asked, glaring at him.

Big Mac shrugged. “I take it back. I guess they will know.”

“That all sounds good in theory,” I said. “But how do we know that it’ll actually work? And what about the ward?”

“Right here,” Big Mac said.

She turned to my mother, who handed her two bracelets. Big Mac held them in the air, then offered one to Torin. He immediately put it on and held it up to admire it in the light.

“I like it,” he said. “It’s shiny.”

“Great. But…I’m concerned about this working the way it’s supposed to,” I said. “What if the ward malfunctions and Cali or Torin get hurt? Or what if the tripwire doesn’t work at all and fails to alert us to unwanted Fae visitors?”

“Are you questioning whether I’m good at what I do?” Big Mac grumbled.

Having poked yet another bear, I put my hands up to fend off whatever attack was coming my way. Luckily, my mom interjected to save the day.

“Honey, no,” she said. “He just wants to be sure. That’s all. You know there’s a lot at stake. Can we show him, so he doesn’t worry?”

Big Mac sighed. “Fine, everyone follow me.”

She led us all outside where we formed a semicircle with her in the center. She pointed to the tree line just beyond the house.

“Watch right over there,” she said.

The others turned to the tree line while I watched her swirl her hand. Suddenly there was a flash of light. Moments later, I saw an orb floating in the air. It hovered higher and higher, then swirled around Big Mac before darting past me. It left a sparkling trail that reminded me of a wisp. The orb of light sped towards the trees, seemingly making the most of its newfound life and freedom.

“Keep your eye on it,” Big Mac said.

The wisp-like thing raced to the edge of the tree line, then exploded like a mini supernova. It looked like a small bird hitting a wall at high speed. Ravi and Rishika turned to each other, stunned expressions on their faces.

“Wow,” Rishika said.

“Well, shit,” Ravi said. “That seems pretty effective to me.”

“I can’t disagree with that,” I said.

“But how do we know it’ll really work?” Rishika asked. “That was magic you created. It wasn’t real Fae.”

Big Mac looked annoyed, but she nodded. “You’re right.”

“I guess we won’t know until we know,” I said. “Let’s just hope things work the way they’re supposed to.”

Big Mac had done her best, but I was still worried about Cali. The ward was a double-edged sword that could easily be turned against us. I wasn’t sure if I could cross the ward without getting zapped like the wisp. And even if I could cross it safely, Cali would still run the risk of getting seriously hurt.

It was a potential lose-lose scenario.

“Is that really the plan?” Rishika asked.

I sighed. “It is until I can think of something better.”

“What if the ward takes down all forms of magic?” Charlie offered.

“Think things through before you open your mouth,” Big Mac said, rolling her eyes.

We all stared at the tree line and wondered what else we could do. My biggest concern was to keep Cali and the rest of the pack safe, but I wasn’t sure if the ward or the Dark Fae mafia posed a bigger, more immediate threat. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Torin staring at the bracelet that Big Mac had given him.

“I know how we can solve this,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Simple. I’ll test the tripwire.”

**Episode 5174**

The soles of my shoes squeaked as I ran down the hallway as fast as I could.

I used one arm to propel me forward while I used the other to drag Bear along with me. The mascot head was flipped backward and made it impossible for him to see a thing.

The sound of pounding footsteps behind us made me risk a glance over my shoulder. The janitor ran after us. He had a walkie-talkie in his hand and was telling whoever was on the other end all about us.

“We need to lose him!” I yelled.

“You guys, go,” Johnny said. “I’ll act as bait and let him catch me.”

“No!” we all shouted at him.

If one of us was caught, we were all as good as caught. We ran toward the other end of the hallway, which forked into two corridors.

“We need to split up!” I said.

“Yeah! He can’t chase us all at once,” Gael said. “Ready. Three…two…one!”

We split into two groups, each taking one of the corridors, while the janitor shouted at us from behind.

“I said stop! Stop right now!” he yelled.

His voice only made us run faster. Codsworth, Kayden, Patel, Bear, and I kept running, hoping that we would eventually find a way out. Bear was an arm’s length behind me, still struggling to get the mascot head off his own.

*We can’t keep running forever*, I thought.

I looked back and sighed in relief when I saw that the janitor wasn’t chasing us. Gael, Jayden, Rodrigo, Schmiddy, and Johnny were no doubt putting the poor man through his paces. The rest of us slowed down to catch our breath. It was only going to be a momentary rest. We were still in enemy territory, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the janitor, or campus security, found us hiding out.

“What now?” Kayden asked.

“We gotta keep going,” Patel said. “We’re not exactly well hidden here.”

I wasn’t sure what to do. No matter what, we would have to risk running into the janitor or security. Water splashed onto the ground, and I turned to see Patel holding the tank away from his chest. Poor Fringey was inside, fighting the turbulent waves all the running had created. He was probably dizzy as well, but at least he was alive.

“Hey! This door is open!” Kayden said.

He had run down the hall ahead of us and was holding the door open for the rest of us. We didn’t hesitate to take our only exit. On the way, Codsworth helped me push Bear in the right direction before he slammed into a wall. Having to carry around a fish tank was hard enough. None of us wanted to drag around an unconscious teammate.

We left the corridor and ran into what looked like a dining hall, only more commercialized. There were tons of signs with different pictures of smoothies on them as well as little round tables without any stools. Kayden jumped the smoothie counter and waved us over.

“Come on!” he said. “Let’s go hide in the kitchen area.”

“And get this thing off me!” Bear said.

We all scuttled into the kitchen area and got ready to lie low for a bit. We were breathing heavily and huddled close. I hoped the other guys had managed to find a place to hide too. What had started out as a simple prank had turned into mission impossible. Except that we were the bad guys.

*This feels so strange*, I thought.

The campus felt alien to me. We didn’t belong here, and I couldn’t wait until we could leave. We all sat quietly on the floor as we stared at the fish tank in Patel’s arms. The bobbed with turbulent waves, but otherwise it didn’t do much else.

Suddenly, everyone except me and Bear burst out laughing. Kayden, Patel, and Codsworth laughed hysterically like they had just heard the amazing punchline to a joke.

“What? What’s so funny?” Bear asked.

His question only made the others laugh harder. I wasn’t sure why. Nothing about our situation was funny, and we were probably only minutes away from being caught and tossed into campus jail. Codsworth wiped the tears from his eyes, then spun Bear’s mascot head around so he could see. Moments later, he started to laugh too. I shook my head.

As they got their chuckle on, I peeked my head out of the kitchen to see if the coast was clear. It was quiet. The janitor was nowhere to be seen, and the whole place seemed to be as abandoned as we had found it. Just as I got ready to tell the guys it was time to go, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. They were moving fast and looked ready to rush me. I raised my hands defensively and got ready to blast whoever it was with magic

“Dude, it’s me!” Lola said.

She stepped closer, and I saw Jay was walking right behind her. I dropped my arms and let out a heavy breath. So it *had* been Jay’s car I’d seen driving by.

“You scared the crap out of me!” I said.

“Sorry! You’ve been running everywhere, and it’s been really hard for us to find you,” Lola said. “Do you know how bad the signal is on this stupid campus? Trying to track your phone has been a nightmare! What the hell are you even doing here?”

I sighed. “Come in here.”

Lola and Jay followed me into the kitchen where the boys had formed an impromptu conga line in an attempt to free Bear from the mascot head. Jay snickered as the cartoonized head refused to budge. I would have laughed too if we weren’t fugitives on our rival school’s campus.

I pointed my thumb at the tank. “We stole a fish.”

“You stole a fish?” Lola echoed.

I nodded. “A fish.”

“What’s the big deal about a fish?” Jay asked.

Lola and Jay listened intently, if somewhat incredulously, when I filled them in on the details of our elaborate prank. By the end of it, they both thought we were idiots, but funny idiots. I was inclined to agree, especially when the guys gave up trying to help Bear.

“This is probably for the best,” Kayden reasoned. “I mean, he’s way more attractive this way.”

“Like ten times hotter,” Codsworth agreed. “I don’t know why we didn’t think of this sooner.”

“I feel like I can finally look at him directly,” Patel said. “Without all the ugly in the way, it’s way easier.”

“All of you shut the hell up,” Bear said. “I might not be the hottest, but at least I’m not ugly on the inside like the rest of you!”

“Only because you’re already so ugly on the outside,” Kayden countered.

Lola laughed along with the guys, then shook her head. At least she was having a good time with our dilemma.

“I might know somewhere where the mascot head can come in handy,” she said. “In fact, it’s gonna help you get out of here.”

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With a new plan hatched, we carefully snuck out of the kitchen where we had been hiding. We tiptoed through the smoothie lounge and sent Gael a text to let him know what we were up to. His group hadn’t been caught either and were eager to regroup with us. Jay, who had been scouting ahead, came back to give us the go ahead.

“There’s no one around,” he said. “We should go.”

Trusting his nose, I motioned for the others to go first.

“I’ll bring up the rear,” I said, readjusting the fish tank.

Patel had put me on fish duty, and I had no idea how I was going to run around with the big, wet cube in my arms. It was ridiculously noticeable and sure to get me caught if any security spotted it. I tried to put it under my jacket, but there was no way I could hide it.

*Just gotta run fast*, I thought.

We slipped outside and let Lola and Jay herd us to where the hockey game had let out. Students were wearing the school colors and celebrating their team’s victory. The energy was vibrant, and everyone was having too much fun to notice us outsiders walking among them.

Well, for the most part.

Bear became the recipient of dozens of high fives and spontaneous hugs. He played his part well and started to dance around the students before he high fived them and spurred them on.

“Yeah, go Fringeheads!” he said.

“Ugh, this feels so wrong,” Codsworth muttered.

“Let’s just get out of here,” I said.

We pushed Bear along before he was swallowed by the crowd. I could see the exit just up ahead and felt my heart race in my chest. We were almost home-free.

“Shit,” Patel said.

Campus security was making their way through the throngs of people. They were stopping students and speaking to them before moving on to the next group. If the janitor tipped them off about the fish or the fact that one of our group was wearing a mascot head, we were doomed.

Hoping to avoid security, I tried to herd Lola and the guys toward the parking lot. Easier said than done. We were swimming against the stream of students that wanted to stay on campus. As I stepped into a gap between people, someone tripped and bumped into me hard. I gasped when I heard a distinctive crack.

*Shit!*

The moment my shirt started to get wet, I knew I was in serious trouble. I checked on Fringey and gasped again. There was a huge crack in the tank, and the water was leaking fast.

**Episode 5175**

**Greyson**

“Absolutely not,” I said firmly. There was no way in hell I was going to let Torin test out the tripwire to see if it was effective against the Fae. It was an incredibly selfless thing for him to offer—not a shocker for Torin—but for that same reason it was just way too dangerous. “I appreciate your initiative, but that won’t be necessary.”

“I can do it,” Torin insisted. “Believe me, I’ve been through worse. Plus, this was my idea. I want everyone to know they can trust it. To take some comfort in knowing those Fae can’t just walk in and wreak havoc anymore.”

“Torin, we get where you’re coming from, but none of us wants to see you get hurt. You’re a strong dude, but the issue isn’t whether or not you can handle it; it’s that you shouldn’t have to,” Ravi said.

I nodded. “Exactly. This would put you at an unnecessary risk. I won’t allow it.”

“Is it unnecessary, though?” Torin asked. “We know the Dark Fae have come after the pack house once already. If we can prevent them from getting close to us and head them off, I think we should do it. We were helpless against them last time. Putting up the strongest possible defense is a no-brainer, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t believe Torin was really suggesting this. Or that he was pushing back so hard after I’d told him no. He was usually such an easygoing guy. But going out on a limb like this? Insisting we let him put himself in possibly grave danger? This was a side of Torin I’d never seen since the Fae world. I could tell how much it meant to him to be able to help, and I didn’t want to be the guy who stood in the way of that for him…but I couldn’t very well let him be the test dummy for our Fae firing squad.

I turned to Big Mac. “Is there a way to lessen the impact of the tripwire just for a moment so we can test it?”

As usual, she looked displeased with my question. “This isn’t a microwave; you can’t just set the power setting lower and call it good.”

My mother leaned in and whispered something in Big Mac’s ear. With a long-suffering sigh, Big Mac met my eyes and nodded. “Fine, I’ll lower it. I get the concern here, but I don’t want anyone to get hurt if you’re intent on testing this thing out.”

I said a little prayer of thanks for my mother’s influence on Big Mac. It probably went without saying, but I had a sneaking suspicion that without their relationship tying the witch to the Redwood pack, Big Mac probably would have ditched us a long time ago.

To Big Mac, I said, “Thank you for working with us on this.”

She just grumbled something about “helpless werewolves” and waved her hands. She mumbled some witchy words and then nodded. “It’s done.”

“Thank you,” I said again. We were so indebted to her—a little extra dose of gratitude couldn’t hurt. I turned to Torin. “Are you sure about this?”

He nodded. “Yes. This pack is mine too, isn’t it?”

Ravi threw an arm around Torin’s shoulder. “Of course it is, man.”

I smiled. “Torin, you’re an honorary member of the Redwood pack. You’re one of us, and as such, I think it’s important that I, your Alpha, go through first. Sound good?”

Nobody disagreed with this approach.

“*You* should be fine,” Big Mac said. “The tripwire isn’t rigged for werewolves. You should be able to pass through without any issue.”

With a little luck, her theory would prove right. I shifted and made my way toward the woods, following the same path the little wisp-like thing had taken. I braced myself as I got closer to the tripwire, but nothing happened. I didn’t feel so much as a single hair moved by any kind of magic.

I turned back and Big Mac gave me a thumbs-up. I returned to join the group again and shifted back to my human form.

“That was it?” I asked. “It seems to work, at least for werewolves.”

Torin nodded and pulled in a deep breath. “Now it’s my turn.”

Torin, wearing his bracelet, began to walk toward the woods. With each step that brought him closer to the tripwire, the ache in the pit of my stomach grew more intense.

*If something happens to him, I will never forgive myself.*

Cali would forgive me, of course, but she’d be beside herself if Torin were harmed. It was a good thing she wasn’t here now, because if she were, I had no doubt in my mind that she’d be the one testing the ward. She’d never let Torin take a risk that she could take herself. I knew the feeling. I wished I could have taken this risk on myself too. It was all well and good for a werewolf to test it, but like Big Mac had said, werewolves weren’t the target.

I braced myself as Torin reached the edge of the woods.

“He’s past it,” Big Mac said.

Torin spun on his heel to face us. “Did I do it?!” he shouted.

“Yes!” Rishika shouted back.

Torin threw a fist in the air, and the ache in my stomach dissipated. The bracelets worked. I could bring Cali back here without a problem. She’d be safe. Hopefully, we’d all be safe.

“Now come back here without the bracelet on,” I called out. “And take it slow. We just want to see that the ward activates, that’s it.”

Torin nodded, and I prayed that I wasn’t making a gigantic mistake. I trusted Big Mac, but I knew better than most that magic often had a mind of its own. All the careful spellcasting in the world didn’t negate the possibility for things to go sideways. There was no way to guarantee that Torin could safely cross the barrier.

Torin took the bracelet off and tossed it back toward the house.

Ravi clapped. “Nice throw, dude!”

“Are we a baseball team?” Violet asked with a raised brow.

Lilac shrugged. “We could start one. Would we play the other packs?”

“Quiet down, everyone, please,” I said.

We all watched in silence as Torin approached the tripwire again.

Suddenly, Torin stopped in his tracks. For all intents and purposes, it looked like he’d hit a wall the same way the little wisp had. I could almost see the phantom outline of the tripwire now running along the ground, humming with magic. I watched, horrified and fascinated, as it started to expand. More wires peeled away from the main tripwire and wrapped themselves around Torin, who struggled against the binds. He looked like a fly that had just gotten himself caught in a spiderweb.

“Okay, that’s enough!” I called out. “Let him down.”

But before Big Mac could terminate the spell, an explosion rocked the forest.

“Fuck!” I burst into action, hauling ass toward Torin. *Dear god. Don’t let him be dead. Don’t let him be dead.*

I knew this would happen. I knew this was a bad idea. Why the hell had I let Torin talk me into this?!

“Torin!” I shouted as the Fae hit the ground.

Blue smoke filled the air around the triggered tripwire, making me cough as I approached with the rest of the group in tow behind me. I reached Torin and shifted my hand to tear away at the magical binding still wrapped around him. Then I pulled him through to the other side of the barrier. He was limp, and his eyes were closed.

*Shit.*

My worst fears were coming true. Torin had sacrificed himself to test our barrier. What the hell was I going to tell Cali? How could I possibly explain this to her? How could I ever forgive myself?

“Torin?” I shook him. Hard. “Torin, are you okay?”

The Fae’s eyes slowly fluttered open, and relief exploded in my chest. *He’s not dead. Holy shit. He’s not dead.*

“Greyson?” he mumbled. “Why are you sparkling?”

I looked around with a frown and realized the explosion had been caused by…a *glitter bomb*? I was totally covered in the stuff, and so was Torin. We were both going to be trying to wash this stuff off for the rest of our lives. This must have been the alteration Big Mac made to the spell. Rather than a lethal dose of magic and iron, Torin had been hit by glitter. Still, couldn’t she have used something less annoying? This felt like a petty punishment for asking for her help.

Rishika waved at the glitter still floating through the air. “So, it worked then?”

I nodded. “I’d say so.”

“I do know a few things,” Big Mac said.

“Well, if you change it back to the armed version, then we should be ready for anything the Dark Fae throw at us,” I said.

Ravi nodded grimly. “As long as it’s Fae.”

**Episode 5176**

**Artemis**

Once again, the assassin’s words sent a chill down my spine. There was an edge to his tone that was sharper than my favorite dagger.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have come. I don’t know how many people might be keeping tabs on this guy…*

I shook off the thought. Sure, he’d tried to kill me, but he had failed. And I wasn’t going to let him think I was some shrinking violet. He held no power—and certainly not over me. I wouldn’t let him intimidate me.

I pushed my shoulders back and stalked up to the bars separating me from the bloodied assassin. “I did kill one of you, so I’d suggest you watch your tone. I came here because I thought you and I could make a deal, but you know what? I’m thinking better of that now. Good luck in the afterlife.”

With that, I turned on my heel and walked to the door, half-expecting him to call out to me. He didn’t. He kept his silence, his vow of loyalty to those who had sent him. Apparently, it was worth his life.

I stepped outside into the stone hallway and let my shoulders slump with a sigh. *What a colossal waste of time.* I hadn’t found out anything about the Order, and my guard was probably losing his shit looking for me. Celeste would be pissed once word got back to her, and that’d be a whole other fire for me to put out.

I looked back at the door leading to the prison cell. I wasn’t sure when this guy was going to be executed, but knowing Celeste, it was probably soon. She didn’t seem the type to drag things out if there was nothing to gain from it, and unfortunately that assassin seemed all too happy to keep his lips sealed until the last breath left his body.

I cursed as I hurried back to the market. This very well could have been my only chance to get information out of someone with a direct link to the Order, and it had all been for naught. No doubt Celeste would put more guards on me once she found out about this…

*It’s funny. For someone who said I needed to find the identity of the Order, whether as the heir or a bounty hunter, she sure is hell-bent on getting in the way of me using my bounty hunter skills to solve this.*

*Stupid assassin. If he would have just told me something,* anything*.*

It was so annoying to come up empty-handed, but part of me couldn’t help the sliver of respect I had for the assassin. If I were in his shoes, I wouldn’t reveal anything I knew, either. And even though I’d breathe a sigh of relief when he was executed and one less person in the world wanted me dead, you had to respect someone who believed so strongly in their values they were willing to die for them.

I was nearly out of the castle, intent on finding my guard, when the assassin’s words suddenly hit me anew. *Ever since this war began, Light Fae and Dark Fae alike—even the court—die with their secrets.*

Realization rippled through me, and I spun on my heel and rushed down the steps toward the kitchens.

When I entered the kitchens, I looked around madly for Aelwen. It’d been a while since I’d last seen the Fae, and she was the only person I knew here other than Celeste or the guard or the general—all of whom I would never choose to discuss something like this with.

Aelwen and I didn’t have the friendliest connection, sure. But Marius had pointed me in her direction, and if nothing else, I would trust that. I spotted Aelwen over by one of the counters, holding a bowl and a whisk.

I didn’t hesitate—I barreled over to her and grabbed her by the elbow, dragging her across the room.

“What are you doing?” Aelwen snapped. Strangely, she didn’t stop whisking, even as I pulled her into a root cellar and shut the door behind us. The whisk scraped against the bowl in time with my racing heart.

“Long time no see,” I said.

She scowled in reply. “That was on purpose. What are you doing here?”

“I need your help.”

Aelwen rolled her eyes. “Nobody told me the precious heir was hard of hearing.”

I frowned. “Wait, what are you talking about? I’m not—”

“I already told you I’ve no intention of being even remotely involved with you—not if you’re one of Celeste’s little pets—and the Marius thing isn’t doing anything to help your case, if I’m being honest.”

“Dear gods. You are impossible.” I groaned. Did she have to be so damn stubborn? It wasn’t like I was gonna ask her to poison someone. And she still hadn’t stopped whisking, so it wasn’t like I was being all that disruptive to her work either.

“Indeed,” Aelwen said. “So, you’d best be on your way, don’t you think?”

“You’re the only person I know here,” I pressed. “And if Marius told me to seek you out, it means he trusts you. I trust *him*, which means that you’re the only person I can come to about this. Please, Aelwen. The fate of the Fae world could depend on this.”

I half-expected her to laugh at that and send me away, but she seemed to mull my words over as she continued to whisk whatever the hell was in that bowl.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Go on. I am a rather trustworthy, competent person. Your words.”

I raised a brow. “I didn’t say all those words, but sure.” I cut to the chase. “Where are the dead Fae buried here?”

Her expression shifted in a heartbeat, and for the first time since I’d pulled her away, she stopped whisking. She tried to turn around to leave, but I reached around her and put my hand on the door. It was a position we’d been in a few times now. I’m sure she was getting equally as sick of it.

“Come on, Aelwen, just answer the question.”

She groaned. “Why are you always coming to me with bad news?! What did I do to deserve that fool Marius sending you to my door? You don’t just talk about the dead in the kitchen!”

“Okay, fine! Where should I talk about them then? Would you like to go there?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Now you’re just being rude.”

“No, what I’m doing is asking you to tell me where the dead are located. I know they’ve got to be here somewhere. Each citadel in the Fae world has an area where they bury their dead. The court especially would have a mausoleum or something, wouldn’t they? All I need is to know where it is.” It was my turn to narrow my eyes. “*You* know where it is. Tell me, Aelwen, and I’ll be on my way and out of your hair.”

Aelwen didn’t speak. At some point, she’d started whisking again and was biting her lip, looking terrified.

I grabbed the bowl and tried to yank it out of her grip. “Would you stop?!”

“Do you want flat meringues?” she hissed, holding on tight. “Because that’s how you get flat meringues!”

“Answer the question, Aelwen, or I swear you’ll have bigger things to worry about than flat—”

“Fine! The crypts are below the city! Does that answer your question?”

“Almost.” I released the bowl, and she continued her frantic whisking. The woman had to have forearms of steel. “How do I get to the crypts?”

“Oh, it’s quite simple. You die,” she said sarcastically.

I pulled in a deep breath and prayed for the patience to keep me from shoving that damn whisk down her throat. This didn’t have to be so hard. If she hadn’t fought me every step of the way, I could have left her alone long ago and been on my way. “Aelwen, you must know where they are. The kitchens are already down here, and you said you’ve worked here for years.”

“Fine.” She sighed. “I know where they are. You can get to them via a staircase by the main gate. It’s just off to the left, and if you head down it one flight, then take the hallway veering off to the right, then turn right again, then take another staircase through the undercroft and follow the passage downward, it’ll lead you to the crypt.”

I blinked. I’d done my best to memorize her instructions, but I hadn’t been here long and hadn’t even come close to becoming familiar with the entire grounds. I thought about asking her to repeat the instructions, more slowly this time, or perhaps taking the time to write them down.

I shook my head. There was a secret society out there planning my death. I didn’t have any time to waste. “You know what? I only followed about half of what you just said, so you’re going to take me there instead.”

**Episode 5177**

*Oh my god! What do I do?*

The fish tank had a huge crack running down one side, and the poor goldfish was losing water with each passing second. The leak wasn’t, like, buckets at a time, but it was a steady stream, and I could see the water level getting lower and lower.

And Patel had also lost water before, when we’d been running, so it wasn’t like the fish had been in the best shape to start with.

“*Lola*,” I whisper-screamed. “There’s a *crack*!”

She frowned. “A crack? In *what*?”

I nodded down at the ever-widening split leaking water on my shirt. “What do you think?!”

Her eyes widened. “Oh shit. Maybe we can glue it? Or tape it?”

“With *what*?” I hissed. “Do you carry around a roll of duct tape with you or something?”

Codsworth pushed me along. “Come on! We need to get out of here while we still can. I just heard from Gael. They’re close by…”

As if on cue, we spotted the five other crew team members, Gael, Jayden, Johnny, Schmiddy, and Rodrigo, coming toward us. *We’re finally reunited!* I breathed out a sigh of relief that was quite literally dampened by the water running against my skin.

“Lola? Jay, right?” Schmiddy asked as they approached.

“Hey! We’re here to join in on the fun,” Lola said. Jay gave him a silent nod.

“Well, the fun is in serious danger of coming to an end,” Gael said. “We need to get back to the car ASAP.”

“You’re telling me!” I said. “The tank is leaking!”

Codsworth gasped. “*What?*”

“Shit!” Schmiddy cried. “I never meant for things to go this far! I can’t kill an innocent creature!”

The rest of the team were similarly freaked out. And they all gathered around me in a panic, like their proximity alone could keep the tank from emptying. No one was helping and no one had any bright ideas. The only thing I could do was try to keep them away so they didn’t make it worse. Over Gael’s shoulder, I spotted a campus security officer heading straight for us.

*Oh no…*

But running away would only make things worse, right? *I wish I never agreed to this stupid mascot plot!*

“Is there a reason you’re all standing here in the middle of the sidewalk?” the security officer asked. “We have to keep it moving. Can you continue this meeting in your dorms?”

“Yes!” I agreed quickly.

“Of course!” Lola piped up, standing awkwardly in front of me to hide the leaking fish tank.

The officer frowned, his gaze traveling across our group and landing on Schmiddy. “Where’d you get that shirt?”

It was then that I realized Schmiddy was wearing a CCU shirt.

*Oh, crap. This is it. This is how we get caught. Not because of the fish tank leaking down my shirt, but because Schmiddy didn’t think twice about his wardrobe for this stupid heist!*

Gael stepped up beside Schmiddy. “Please forgive our friend. He goes to CCU, but we shouldn’t hold it against him, right? It’s a friendly rivalry.”

“Yeah, go Fringeheads!” Kayden said. “The Kangaroo Rats fucking suck!”

Another stream of water slipped against my skin, and a chill ran down my spine. *Fringey can’t have much more time! We need to get out of here and get him somewhere safe—and deep!*

The other crew guys nodded in agreement, showing at best half-hearted enthusiasm for our archrival. Bear, still wearing the Fringehead mascot head, chest bumped Codsworth, who almost fell over.

The security guard looked satisfied. “All right. Well, get a move on, then, and get home safe.”

*Phew, we’re in the clear.*

The security guard turned away just as his walkie-talkie went off. “Be on the lookout for an unknown student wearing a Fringehead mascot head—not the rest of the body—and Fringey the fish.”

Another wave of horror slipped down my spine. “We need to leave!” I whisper-yelled to the guys. “Security is looking for us!”

The campus security guard turned back around and scanned our group. For a long moment, we all stared at each other, knowing only one thing: we’d just been found out.

Lola was the first to move. She grabbed the fish bowl, grappling with me for a moment before yanking it out of my arms.

“Lola, what are you—” I began.

“Hey, catch!” She shoved the fish at the officer, who fumbled with the leaking bowl.

“Run!” Jay shouted, and we all took off, trying to make a break for it. Lola’s maneuver had at least bought us a few precious seconds to get a head start on the security officer.

*Hopefully he doesn’t try to chase us down with the fish in his arms. The poor little guy really needs some help.*

“Back to the van!” Gael shouted.

Jay ran alongside me as we made our great escape. “We can’t go back to the house just yet,” he said. “We also need to be super careful. The *you know who* might be watching us.”

His words sent a spark of fear through me, and it made me run all the faster.

“Right,” I agreed, my voice little more than a wheeze.

*This might be one of the most reckless things I’ve ever done.* Just going out with the crew team like this was incredibly risky, given the fact that the Dark Fae mafia seemed hell-bent on kidnapping me, hurting me, or… Well, there were no good options there. But in my defense, my crew team had just sort of grabbed me and brought me along. They had no idea what kind of threat I was facing, and I didn’t want them to get pulled into any supernatural danger. Good old-fashioned breaking and entering was more than enough as it was.

When I woke up this morning, I never even considered the possibility that mundane, human campus police might become a bigger problem for me than the Dark Fae mafia.

*One thing’s for sure. We are never heisting ever again!*

We sprinted all the way back to the van. The parking lot somehow wasn’t crawling with campus security or the real police, thank goodness.

Gael yanked open the sliding door and gestured for us to jump in. “Go, go, go!”

One by one, the guys hopped in. Then Gael turned to me. “Come on, Lil’ Hart! We gotta get out of here!”

“I’m going to go with Jay and Lola back home,” I said. “I’ll see you at practice? Let’s…um, never do this again, okay?”

Gael nodded. “Hard agree. This was maybe a little too much excitement. I just hope Coach doesn’t find out.”

Johnny stuck his head out. “We’re not getting any younger here, and I’m too pretty to go to campus jail!”

“I don’t know, you’d fit right in in real jail,” Codsworth quipped.

“No one asked you, Kurt!” Johnny shot back.

Rodrigo shoved Bear’s head out of the way. “There is no way in hell you’re driving. Take that stupid mascot head off!”

The boys kept squabbling, and I smiled at Gael. “Get back safe. We’ll figure out what to do with the head later.”

“We’ll hold it for ransom!” Schmiddy called from inside the van.

Lola tugged on my hand. “We better go back. Your boyfriend is having that, uh, thing?”

I bit back a snort. *Great lying, Lola.*

I said my goodbyes to the team, and then Lola, Jay, and I ran back to the car. As we made our way through the lines of cars, a golf cart with the campus security logo on it rolled past just as the crew van peeled out of the parking lot. We ducked down behind a car to avoid being seen.

“This way!” Jay said, taking the lead. We took a long, circuitous route to his car, staying low and out of sight of the golf cart. My stomach clenched with nerves the whole time. This was so far beyond the kind of collegiate sports hijinks I’d imagined we’d be getting up to tonight. And on top of that, I couldn’t shake the sense that something was…off.

“Why was that the best thing we’ve done in a long time?” Lola asked.

“I’m glad you had fun,” I deadpanned. Having the time of her life while committing theft and trying to evade the authorities was pretty much right up Lola’s alley. It was a shame she wasn’t the one who’d joined the team. But then again, she’d probably be a terrible influence on the rest of the guys. They’d be doing far worse with Lola as their ringleader.

She grinned, not the least bit repentant. “The most.”

“The car isn’t far from here,” Jay said. “I parked a bit off campus.”

I turned around to see if we’d been spotted by campus police. The coast was clear. I felt my shoulders loosen a bit.

*We just might get away—*

Suddenly, my eyes fixed on someone standing in the darkness, alone, masked, and staring right at me.

**Episode 5178**

**Xavier**

My paws pounded against the ground as I ran on patrol around the Samara land with Donovan, Marissa, and Geraint. This was the fourth time I’d made them check the patrol route. I could still smell the Fae in the woods—I’d determined their scent at this point and knew what they were, no guessing needed. They were definitely here. The issue was, I couldn’t tell how many of them had been trespassing on our territory. From what I could tell, whoever *had* been here had already left, but they had gotten close. Too close.

Marissa hadn’t been able to get a good look at them. According to her, they were incredibly fast, and once she’d howled, they’d all but disappeared. She’d been out on a patrol with Simon and Cresta, and the two had quickly provided backup, but the Fae *was* fast as hell. Still, the fact that they’d been bold enough to cross onto my land meant only one thing: they wanted revenge for what Ava did.

Which, of course, was unacceptable. I wasn’t about to let anyone within a hundred feet of my mate. Ava could certainly hold her own—she’d proven that when the Dark Fae had attacked the Redwood pack—but these Fae were as powerful as they were crafty. The thought of her being their target made me sick. I didn’t know what would possess these Dark Fae, or any Fae for that matter, to want to go up against an entire werewolf pack. One would think they’d just cut their losses and move on. They were the mafia, weren’t they? Death was part of the deal. But, hey, if they wanted a fight, I was only too happy to give it to them.

I mind linked with Marissa, asking the same question I’d already asked a million times. *Which way did the Fae run?*

We rounded the trees and were almost back on the pack house grounds when she replied, *They went north.*

*Their scent is still so strong*, Donovan added. *Almost like they haven’t retreated very far. Xavier, do you want us to follow and pursue?*

The thought was tempting. Hunting down the Fae that were threatening my pack, my Luna, and ending them for good. It was nothing less than they deserved for putting their sights on Ava. But no. We shouldn’t do that. These Fae weren’t ordinary enemies. They were powerful and cunning, and what they’d done to the Redwood pack probably only scratched the surface of what they were capable of. For all we knew, they were trying to draw us out into combat and pick us off away from the aid of the rest of the pack.

No, now wasn’t the time to strike. We had to play this just right if we wanted a chance against these Dark Fae assholes.

*No*, I replied. *Let’s go back to the pack house. Everyone needs to stay close to home for now. Let’s not allow ourselves to be lured out. We’ll need to update the others back at the pack house so they don’t follow the scent anywhere either.*

We arrived back at the house right in time for the next patrol shift to begin.

*Be careful*, I told them. *The Fae are definitely out there, and I’m getting the impression they’re trying to lure us out. Don’t let them. The scent is still strong and leads north, away from the pack house. For now, it should stay that way. If there’s any change in the scent, or you come across anything else that doesn’t seem right, let me know right away the same way Marissa did.*

The patrol agreed and headed out. I shifted back to my human form and headed inside to find Ava. She was in our room, standing at the window and watching as the patrol shift headed out. She didn’t acknowledge my presence when I came in, and I stood beside her at the window for a moment. My fingers brushed against hers.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly. I had a sneaking suspicion that I already knew the answer.

For a moment, she didn’t speak. Then with a sigh, she shook her head. “No, I’m not. I hate that I can’t go out there and help everyone. I hate staying cooped up in here, just waiting for the axe to fall. I should be helping. I’m the Luna. I should be defending our pack just the same as you.”

I took her gently by her arms, turning her away from the window. “That could be exactly what these people want. If you go out there, you’re vulnerable, and it’s all the easier for these people to make you a target.” I cupped her face. “I can’t let that happen. I know this is hard for you. I know staying here, inside, isn’t ideal. But I can’t—I won’t—let anything happen to you. I’m going to figure this out, okay? I just need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

She leaned into my touch. “Of course I trust you.” She took my hands in hers, twining our fingers together. “I was thinking maybe it’d be best if I try to go to Knox’s parents in California. They’re in the Sycamore pack. That way, I can stay within the protection of another pack, and they’re family, so I know I can trust them.”

I thought about it for a moment. It wasn’t a bad idea, getting her far, far away from the Samara land and, ideally, the Portland-based Fae mafia. But there were logistics to consider, too, and I still didn’t think it was safe to send her out of the house. The Dark Fae were absolutely watching the house. Of that, I had no doubt. They’d already tried to kill me as well. Simply trying to move Ava from the pack house to her aunt and uncle’s pack in California could be all the chance the Dark Fae needed to make their move.

I shook my head, wincing at the pained expression that crossed her face. She’d been hoping for an escape from her confinement, and I’d just dashed those hopes.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We don’t want to give the Fae any chance to hurt you, and there are a hundred ways they can make a move on you while you’re traveling to California. I’m sorry, Ava, but I need you to stay here. Let me protect you. Please.”

She stared up at me, her eyes glassy. I could tell it was taking all her strength to not break down and cry. She forced a watery smile and kissed me. “I trust you with everything I have. Just…promise me you’ll be safe, okay?”

I nodded. “I promise.” I pulled her in for a kiss.

“Why don’t you come downstairs?” I suggested when we broke apart. “I might be protecting you, but the two of us are protecting the pack as the Alpha and Luna. That hasn’t changed just because you’re cooped up inside.”

She smiled, and for the first time since I’d come into the room, it looked genuine. As we reached the bottom of the stairs, I looked around for Marissa to ask her something else about the patrols. Perrie sidled up to me.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said. “Your phone has been blowing up.” She passed it over to me.

“Oh, thanks.” I checked the display and saw several missed calls from Greyson.

“I’ll see you in there,” Ava said, heading into the living room.

I nodded and called Greyson back. “Hey, I was out on patrol. What’s up?”

“Everything good there?” Greyson asked.

I huffed out a laugh. “No, not really. The whole fucking forest reeks of Fae.”

Greyson sighed into the phone. “Well, I was trying to reply to your question from earlier. The picture you sent over of that fight club card. It is Dark Fae. It’s the club I fought for back when I was a Rogue.”

My teeth ground together so hard my molars creaked. I’d known the card was Dark Fae, but I hadn’t realized my brother had such a close connection with these assholes. “Well, they jumped me on my way home.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Greyson said. He sounded tense and uncomfortable, and I took just the slightest bit of pleasure from it because this mess was all his fucking fault anyway, wasn’t it? “I know it probably doesn’t matter, but for what it’s worth, I never imagined crossing paths with the Dark Fae again. And it was definitely not my intention to get you and the Samaras caught up in this, too.”

“You’re right,” I said. “It doesn’t matter what you intended. We’re still on their fucking hit list.”

My brother sighed again. “Listen, we’ve set up a bunch of cold iron around the Redwood territory. Bic Mac helped. I’m sure I could get her to help the Samaras too.”

“If the witch will do it and not bitch at me, then sure.” We could use all the protections we could get. And pissed as I was at Greyson, I wasn’t about to turn down something that might help keep Ava safe.

“It’s not a perfect defensive measure,” he added. “The Dark Fae mafia has always associated with other supernaturals—wolves among them—so be on the lookout. But it’s at least something.” He paused for a moment. “Don’t worry. Cali will be safe.”

I had no fucking clue how to respond to that. “I know what to do if it’s not Fae.”

“Same here. We’ll do what we do best—show them the Redwoods and the Samaras are not to be fucked with.”

**Episode 5179**

For a split second, I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t peel my gaze away from the masked person in the alley. I forced my lungs to open, sucking down air, and then tore my eyes away from the masked person.

“Guys!” I all but shrieked. “There’s someone in the—”

I stopped. When I looked back, the person was gone. *W-What?*

Lola and Jay stopped short and turned to look at me.

“What is it?” Lola asked. “There’s someone where?”

I helplessly looked back at the alley. “I mean…yeah. There was just someone there. I swear—I just saw them, and they were staring at us.”

Lola looked at the now empty alley, too. “Maybe your eyes are playing tricks on you. We did just commit a felony.”

“I don’t think stealing a fish counts as a felony,” Jay said. “Probably a petty misdemeanor, tops.”

“No, I definitely saw them! They were staring at us and wearing a mask!”

Lola frowned. “And the fact that they’re not there anymore?”

“It means something!” I insisted. “I have a bad feeling about it.”

Lola sniffed the air. “For what it’s worth, I don’t smell anything nefarious. Just lots of humans and stale nachos.”

“Same,” Jay said, nodding. “Come on. We better get a move on.”

Their confidence gave me some comfort as we continued our way to Jay’s car, but it didn’t totally ease the worry gnawing at my gut. All it took to mask your scent was a spell or something, right? That kind of thing was probably child’s play for the Dark Fae mafia.

*And who wears a mask around town at night when it’s not Halloween—unless they’re up to no good? It was so creepy! And so was their disappearing act.*

I kept looking over my shoulder as we continued to walk, just waiting for that guy to pop out again, still staring at us. Despite everything Lola and Jay said, I couldn’t shake the sense that we were being watched, that something was terribly wrong.

My hands were shaking as I pulled out my cell phone and called Greyson.

It rang. And rang.

*Come on, come on. Pick up! I need you.*

Finally, he answered. “Cali? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, even though in this moment I was definitely *not* fine. “We’re walking to the car right now to come home.”

“Good. I’m going to need you to wait outside the pack house grounds for me to bring you this bracelet that Big Mac made. You shouldn’t try to enter the Redwood territory without it under any circumstances.”

I frowned. I couldn’t come and go anymore? “Um…okay?”

“I know it probably sounds weird, but it’s all to protect you. We’ve put up a protective ward around the house with help from Big Mac. Since you’re part Fae, the ward will affect you, unless I give you that bracelet first. It’s perfectly safe, I promise. We tested it out and everything.”

“Wow. Sounds like you’ve been busy. And Big Mac helped? That’s…surprising.”

*Where was Big Mac when we were all locked in the Redwood pack house?* I mean, not that I wasn’t grateful to have her help making the Redwood pack safer, but would it have killed her to help when we were in crisis too?

“I know,” Greyson said. “Anyway, the Redwood territory and the pack house should be a lot safer from here on out.”

A tiny bit of the fear in my chest loosened. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Can I talk to Jay, so I can fill him in on everything?”

“Of course. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Greyson’s warm voice was like a ray of sunlight chasing away all my fears. I passed my phone over to Jay, who seemed to have a lot of questions for Greyson about the protections on the Redwood territory.

A strange prickling sensation had me spinning around suddenly. Once again, nothing was there but us and a bunch of cars.

“Maybe we should go back to the car a different way,” I told Lola.

Her brows rose. “Really? You still have that bad feeling?”

I nodded, and Lola urged Jay along a different, more circuitous path back to the car. After a bit, he ended the call with Greyson and passed my phone back to me.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“Cali’s spooked,” Lola said. “We’re taking the long way back.”

But as we took a turn around a building, another wave of dread rushed over me, and I suddenly felt even worse. Out of nowhere, a dull pain echoed between my temples. A hot flash of dread hit me as I was suddenly reminded of the horrible nightmare-slash-vision I’d had when the Dark Fae had trapped us inside the packhouse.

*Is someone casting magic on me right now?* I looked around wildly, my head throbbing in response. The idea that someone could be manipulating me with magic right now and I couldn’t even see them was absolutely terrifying.

Then, out of the corner of my eyes, I saw something move. I zeroed in on it. *Is it…a person?* God, I’d never felt so freaked out and paranoid. But…no. There was nothing. I shook my head, shutting my eyes because the pain in my skull really was awful. And then, when I looked again, I saw a pair of familiar eyes staring back at me.

*Xavier?*

I stopped in my tracks. “Xavier, what are you doing here?”

He slowly approached. “I came after you. You’re always getting yourself into some kind of trouble, aren’t you? Who else is going to bail you out? After all, isn’t that what *friends* are for?”

There was a bite in his tone at that word. *Friends.* I frowned. *What the heck is he doing here? How did he even know where I was?*

None of this made sense. And ever since he’d backed Ava when she’d killed that Dark Fae, I hadn’t expected to see Xavier again so soon. Certainly not showing up at my college’s rival campus to lecture me about me needing to be bailed out.

I looked around for Lola and Jay, but they were nowhere to be found. It was just Xavier and me.

I straightened my shoulders. “I actually don’t need your help, Xavier. I have magic, I’m Fae, and I’ve gotten myself out of much worse situations than this stupid fish heist. I’m perfectly capable of helping myself.”

He laughed. “Of course you are. Well, I can just leave then, since you’re feeling so confident.”

He turned to disappear back into the shadows, but I couldn’t let us leave things like this. I rushed forward to grab his hand.

“Wait!”

He turned to face me, looming over me, his eyes glittering in the darkness. He leaned down close, so close a chill slipped down my spine.

“Follow me,” he whispered.

Suddenly, I was jerked back by someone’s grip on my arm. I turned to see a wide-eyed Lola standing behind me.

“Cali?! What’s going on? Who are you talking to?” She looked around wildly. It almost looked comical. How could she not see Xavier there? He was standing right next to me.

Only, when I turned back to where Xavier was standing, he was gone.

I blinked, and my headache grew to tremendous proportions. “I…Xavier. He was just there. Wasn’t he?” I turned back to Lola and Jay. “He was just there, right? Didn’t you see him?”

Jay shook his head. “No, it’s just us.”

“What? H-How?” I turned back again, and this time I saw a wisp floating where Xavier had been standing. *What the hell is going on?* My head was pounding, and everything took on a sort of shimmery quality. I felt a little bit like I was drunk.

I blinked. Yep. The wisp was still there.

“You guys see that, right?” I asked. “The wisp. I think it wants us to follow it. I think something weird is going on here. Something’s not right, and this wisp is here to help us. We should follow it, right?”

Lola and Jay exchanged a glance, probably mind linking.

I groaned, clutching my head. “I know how it sounds, but something is clearly going on! We need to get out of here, and if this wisp can help…”

“Let’s follow it then,” Lola said, “but take my hand.”

Slowly, cautiously, we followed the wisp. We were on a well-lit side street now, and I felt a little better because it’d be so much harder for someone to sneak up on us. And with this wisp as our guide, we had nothing to worry about—right? Wisps were here to help. Maybe it could help me make sense of all of this crazy stuff.

Suddenly, I lurched to a stop, practically ripped away from Lola’s side.

Before I knew it, there was an arm wrapped around me and a knife at my neck.

A harsh voice whispered in my ear. “Hello, little halfling.”

**Episode 5180**

**Greyson**

I hung up the call with Xavier. As tense and unenjoyable as it had been, it was still my one “pause” from everything after having the pack patrol the border of the ward. I’d shown them the boundary and told them to be careful not to go past it, so they stayed within the protected bounds should any uninvited Fae show up.

I mulled over my conversation with Xavier again. God, I wished anything could be easy with him. I didn’t know my brother had found that card—I’d been trying to get a hold of him, but clearly he’d been going through plenty of shit of his own at the Samara pack house, as well. This whole thing was so fucking maddening. Ava had made a rash decision when she’d killed that Dark Fae, but she didn’t deserve to have a target put on her back, or for her pack to get pulled into this mess, too.

I found Big Mac sipping tea with my mother in the kitchen. She glowered when she saw me approach. “You look like you’re about to ask me for something.”

“You’re right, as usual,” I said with forced cheer. I filled her in on Ava and Xavier’s involvement with the Dark Fae mafia when they’d come to the Redwood pack’s rescue. “And now the Dark Fae are causing trouble for them too. Can you help them set up a barrier like we did here? I’m worried about Xavier. Ava killed one of the Dark Fae’s own, so I know for certain they’re going to be wanting blood for blood. And if I’m on their hit list just for asking a few questions, then I’m sure Ava’s become public enemy number one.” I realized I was rambling, nervously filling the silence while waiting for Big Mac to respond to my request, so I shut up.

It was just…it was important to me that Big Mac help the Samaras out as well. They deserved the help. They never asked to get caught up in the mess I’d made. And Xavier had sounded worried on the phone, which was why I’d wanted to reassure him that Cali was safe. That he had one less thing to worry about. It was a peace offering, of sorts. I knew that despite everything going on, my brother did still care deeply about Cali…I just wished it were outside the bounds of the *due destini*.

But, still, I was glad I’d told him all the same. Even if he clearly hadn’t taken it for the gesture of good will that it was.

I cleared my throat. “So…um, will you help them?”

Big Mac still hadn’t said a single word. And she looked annoyed as hell by my request. Then my mother put a hand on Big Mac’s shoulder, and with a long sigh, the witch turned back to me and nodded.

“I’ll help. But Xavier had better say thank you.”

“He will,” I said quickly, relief rushing through me. “And if he doesn’t, I’ll talk to him. Thank you, Big Mac. It means a lot to have your help.”

I turned to my mom. “Are you going with her?”

Sabine nodded, and I held out my arms for a hug. “Please, be careful,” I said to her when she wrapped her arms around me. “And keep me updated, okay?”

“Fine,” Big Mac said with a wave of her hand.

“We’ll be in touch if anything happens, and if not, you’ll see us as soon as we’re done,” my mom said.

Then Big Mac took Sabine’s hand, and the two of them blipped out of the kitchen, leaving their still half-drunk mugs behind.

*Well, that’s settled, at least.* A line of tension thrummed through my stomach. As much as I worried about Big Mac and my mother getting themselves in trouble, at least once everything was said and done, the Samara pack and my brother would be safer for it. Against the Dark Fae mafia, we could use just about any advantage we could get.

I was about to go back outside to patrol the boundary again—call me paranoid—when I saw Rishika racing up to the house in her wolf form. She was sprinting at top speed, bursting across the pack house grounds with obvious agitation. That thread of tension in my stomach exploded.

I raced outside to meet her on the porch. “What happened?”

She mind linked, *There’s movement outside the perimeter.*

I immediately shifted into my wolf form. *Is it a Fae?*

*I…I think it’s a wolf.*

The hesitation in her tone brought me up short. *You think? Is it someone we know? It’s not Kendall, is it? Or another Rogue?*

*It’s not. It’s someone else.* Something *else.*

Suspicion warred with dread. If they truly were wolves, they could cross over the boundary without any problem. But what kind of creature looked like a wolf but wasn’t? What were those fucking Fae up to now?

*Take me there. Now.*

If someone was trying to get in, I was going to head them off. Alpha style.

Like I’d told Xavier, it wasn’t surprising that a werewolf would show up. The Dark Fae mafia associated with all types, anyone looking to make a quick buck doing less than savory work—I knew from experience—and there were more than just werewolves in Portland.

*Thank god it’s not Kendall lurking outside the border*, I thought to myself. *That would be a twist we do not need right now.*

I’d actually tried contacting Kendall earlier, but of course she’d been radio silent. *Of fucking course.* Maybe it was for the best that she was lying low these days, considering what happened to her house and those Fae grabbing her. Or maybe something had happened to her. I hoped not, but if that were the case, at least I’d tried to help.

Still, it bothered me that she hadn’t said anything.

We rounded a copse of thick trees, and sure enough, I caught the scent of a wolf, but it was strange, somehow. Off. I couldn’t really put my finger on it.

The rest of the patrol were there, too: Charlie, Violet, and Ravi. I could see the tension in each of their bodies. They were all on edge, watching the wolf as it moved. We followed after it as it moved up and down the barrier.

I tried to mind link to the wolf. *Who are you? What are you doing here? You’re about to cross onto Redwood lands.*

The wolf seemed like a Rogue, but it couldn’t be a coincidence that a Rogue showed up during all of this, could it?

The wolf didn’t respond. It slowed to a stop, and I started forward, careful not to cross the boundary. I bared my teeth, making it clear what would happen next if the wolf crossed through to us.

It didn’t stop the wolf. It started running at us, head-on. And we all stood our ground as the wolf raced toward us. There was no way in hell the wolf could stand up to the five of us, so I wasn’t worried about getting hurt. If anything, I was a little horrified that this wolf was being so reckless.

I was about to lunge at the wolf, ready to sink my teeth into it, when it suddenly lurched to a stop. Like earlier, when Torin had tested the ward, I watched the tripwire snag, and then everything happened very quickly. The tripwire tangled up the “wolf,” and then an explosion rocked the woods around us. It looked an awful lot like the glitter that rained down earlier, but this time it was cold iron.

The wolf let out a very human-like, earsplitting shriek, and we watched in horror as the wolf turned into a Fae whose skin was marred by the shards of cold iron cutting into it.

*They were glamouring themselves!* I shouted through the mind link to the others.

I crept closer, spotting a large shard of iron protruding from the Fae’s eyes. It had stabbed all the way through. The Fae was dead. And then I saw something below the Fae that had also been shredded in the explosion, and my stomach turned an awful somersault.

It was a werewolf’s fur.

A soul-sick fury burned through me. *They skinned a fucking werewolf?* How*?*

Werewolves reverted to their human forms when they were killed. I could only imagine the depths of evil the Dark Fae had gone to to get this fur. Fuck. This was getting more and more personal by the second.

I mind linked to Rishika. *I want to see if there are any others. Stay behind me and be on alert.*

Rishika followed me out past the perimeter. I’d never been more aware of the danger of stepping out beyond the boundary, but I was an Alpha. If anything, the only ones who should be scared were the Fae.

I scented the air. It was a confusing mix of that weird, awful wolf-fur scent and Fae magic. It had to be. Then a strange wind blew past, and the scent disappeared. I heard Rishika yelp behind me a split second before pain barreled into me. It felt like I’d just been stabbed in the spine.

I craned my neck to snap at—nothing. It was just air.

I turned in a slow circle, confused. I could see and smell my own blood, and Rishika’s.

*We need to get back—*

The pain dug into me again, and I reared back, slamming into something I couldn’t see. I mind linked to Rishika. *They’ve glamoured themselves! They’re all invisible!*

**Episode 5181**

**Xavier**

“The tripwire will put a stop to any Fae who tries to enter your grounds. The idea is that they’ll be prevented from entering entirely, but at the very least, you’ll have a heads-up because it’ll be loud,” Big Mac was saying, speaking very quickly as she gave us a rundown of her tripwire action plan.

I nodded. Honestly, I wasn’t all that concerned about the details—I just wanted to know if it was going to work.

“And that’s it? No Dark Fae can get in? It works?” I asked carefully, trying to keep my voice even because—as stressed as I was, I did appreciate Big Mac showing up to help us fortify the Samara pack house against the Dark Fae. It wasn’t something I’d ever thought I’d have to do, but my life was often funny that way.

“Of course it works,” Big Mac said shortly. “We already tested it at the Redwood house, and I’m not going through that bullshit with you as well. It worked. Take my word for it. Torin tested it himself.”

“I believe you,” I said.

“The only Fae who can get through that barrier are the ones with my protective items on them, and that’s just Torin and Cali. Well, it *will* be Cali, when Greyson gives her the bracelet when she gets back from whatever stupid college thing she’s off doing,” Big Mac muttered.

“I believe she’s participating in a sport,” Mrs. Smith supplied.

“I really don’t give a damn,” Big Mac said. “The only thing that matters is that as long as these tripwires are up, only the Fae you know and associate with will be able to move around freely.”

I nodded, fighting to keep my expression blank. Ava was standing next to me, and I wasn’t looking to start anything with her—not now, when my main priority was keeping her safe. But I was privately relieved that Cali would be safe from the tripwires, and I was glad that my brother had taken precautions to protect her. Now I just needed to do the same thing for Ava.

“So it’s done?” I asked. “The barrier’s been set up?  
 Big Mac took a deep breath, then waved her hand. She spoke quietly, far too low for me to distinguish any words. But as she murmured, I felt a strange swirl in the air—almost like the air pressure had dropped, just for a moment. The air seemed to crackle with electricity, and then it went back to normal.

The witch looked up at me. “Yes. It’s done.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully.

But before Big Mac could respond, the windows shook, as if something outside the house had just exploded.

“What the fuck was that?” I demanded as everyone ducked instinctively. I looked around, but the glass in the windows was still intact, even though my ears were throbbing from the sound.

I rushed to the window and looked outside, searching the landscape for whatever it was that had caused the massive shock.

“Was it the tripwire?” Ava asked, joining me at the window. “Already?”

“I’m not sure, but you need to be careful,” I said. I was sure of that, but I was just as certain that I needed to get my ass outside and see what the hell had just happened.

I turned back to Big Mac… But she was gone. Mrs. Smith, too.

“They blipped out of here when they heard the explosion,” Ava said.

“Whatever,” I muttered. There was nothing I could do about that, so I sprinted for the front door, shifting as I leapt off the porch.

Immediately, I spotted smoke rising from a spot on the tree line. *There*.

I ran toward it, and as I approached, I spotted a body on the ground. Fausto was standing next to it, also in wolf form.

*What the fuck happened?* I demanded.

Fausto shook his head*. I’m not sure. This guy just appeared out of nowhere.*

*What the hell does that mean?* I asked.

*I was just standing here, looking into the woods. This guy came running over, but before I could do anything, it was like he hit a wall or something*, Fausto said, sounding stressed. *Then this web thing kind of…grabbed him. Then there was that explosion, and I hit the deck. There was metal flying everywhere. I don’t know what the hell’s going on.*

I sighed*. It’s like a tripwire and a barrier had a baby*. *Big Mac—the witch—she set it up to protect us from the Dark Fae. Do me a favor and let everyone know that it’s been set up? It’s going to help us fight.*

Fausto nodded and headed toward the house. I looked down at the body, which was still smoking. And there was a smell—the same scent I’d picked earlier. It was a strange, almost incense-like smell. It had to be coming from the Fae.

*What should we do with it?* Ava asked.

I turned to see that she was standing behind me, also in wolf form. She’d followed me out.

*What are you doing?* I asked. *You should be inside.*

She ignored me. *Should we do something with the body? Use it to send a message to anyone else who might be thinking about paying us a visit?*

But before I could answer, something tackled Ava to the ground, and there was a sharp burst of light.

Magic.

Shit. I looked around, shocked. It had come out of nowhere. Ava was on the ground, writhing and literally fighting with something I couldn’t see. An invisible creature.

I lunged toward her, snapping at the air until my teeth finally connected with something. I bit down—after I’d double-checked to make sure I wasn’t accidentally biting Ava . It wasn’t her, but it *was* human shaped. I could sense it.

I locked my jaw, eliciting an agonized cry. A moment later, the figure on top of Ava went limp.

When it stopped moving—seemingly dead—I opened my mouth and let the being fall to the ground. The body was still invisible, and I stared at it in wonder. I had no idea what the hell was going on, or why the first body that had hit the tripwire had become temporarily visible while in its hold, but this one had stayed invisible. I didn’t understand it, and I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

*This Fae was glamoured*, I told Ava, spitting the Fae’s blood from my mouth.

Ava got to her feet. *Glamoured? What does that mean?*

*It means there could be more Fae who entered the property before Big Mac placed the ward*, I said darkly. *Fuck. I need to tell the others.*

*I’ll tell them—*

*No!* I bellowed. *No fucking way.*

She turned to look at me. *Why not?*

*You are not leaving my side*, I told her.

*I’m just going to go back to the house—*

*There’s no way you’re going back in there*, I said, shaking my head. *Not if there could be invisible Fae in there. One just attacked you, remember?*

She thought this over for a moment. *Okay, I won’t go back inside. I won’t leave your side.*

*Good. Let’s go*, I said firmly.

I started to run, and Ava fell into step next to me, easily keeping pace. I closed the gap between us, running close enough that I could feel her fur brushing against mine. I needed that contact. I needed to know that she was okay.

When we ran around the corner of the house, my worst fears were realized. The Samaras were all out of the house and fighting hard. Donovan and Marissa were closest to us, growling and snarling as they fought what looked like nothing. But I knew better. They were fighting someone invisible.

How many Fae *were* there?

There was no way to know. I sprinted toward them and jumped into the fight, but fighting something I couldn’t see was practically impossible. The Fae’s horrible scent was everywhere, so I couldn’t even follow a scent trail. It spread like a fog, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. Had they done that on purpose to mess with us? To make us dizzy? Because if so, it was working.

*Lure them to the tripwire*, I barked at Donovan. I turned to Marissa, who was trying to find her invisible foe with her teeth. *The tripwire, Marissa! The Fae won’t know it’s there until it’s too late. We have to use it to our advantage.*

Donovan nodded and took off, running toward the tree line, where the tripwire had been set. I turned to watch him, and—just as I’d hoped—a group of Fae became visible when they hit the border, a weblike net catching them and wrapping them up.

And then there was another explosion.

But this time, I saw it happen.

The other Samaras saw it, too, and figured blowing up their enemies would work for them, as well. And it did. They ran toward the tripwire, drawing the invisible Fae after them. Soon, there were three more explosions.

My spirits started to lift. Maybe this was going to work. Maybe we were going to get the upper hand after all.

Knox was on the ground, struggling beneath something I couldn’t see. He was having a hard time, and I was just about to go help him when I heard something that made me stop in my tracks.

It was the sound of squealing car tires.

*Stay close*, I told Ava as I turned. Then I saw it—the car I’d seen earlier. The Fae who’d followed us and attacked me. One of them had used a glamour that had fallen away after I’d attacked. Was that Fae—the one in the car—the one responsible for making all the others invisible?

*Where are we going?* Ava asked as she burst into a sprint alongside me.

*We need to follow that car*, I told her.

Then I dropped my head and sprinted after it.

**Episode 5182**

The knife was pressed so tightly against my neck, I didn’t dare move a muscle. In the split second I’d tried to struggle against it, I’d felt the blade nick my flesh. Now, I could feel the warm, unbearably slow trickle of blood as it made its way down my throat.

Lola and Jay were standing in front of me, looking ready to shift.

Lola’s eyes flashed angrily. “Let her go!”

“We don’t want any trouble,” Jay said, his voice more reasonable. “Just let her go, man.”

The Fae laughed, though the sound was cold and eerie. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll be doing that. See, this little Fae’s werewolf boy toy has become a bit of a problem for us.”

“What are you talking about?” Jay asked, his voice harder now.

“I think you know what I’m talking about,” the Fae said. “Her little boyfriend has been asking a few too many questions. Questions we don’t like. Questions we can’t have him asking. So we have to do something.” The knife dug into me. “We have to send him a *message.*”

I swallowed hard. “If you kill me—or whatever it is you’re planning to do—you’ll regret it. That much I can guarantee.”

The Fae dug the knife in harder. I was terrified—I couldn’t help it. My mind was spinning as I tried to figure out what the hell I was going to do. I needed to get out of this, right now*.* I thought of my magic—my sword and shield—but I couldn’t think of any way to use it that wouldn’t end with me getting my throat slashed. This outcome didn’t seem ideal, particularly considering the fact that Torin wasn’t around to heal me.

“Normally, I wouldn’t even bother killing a little half-Fae like you,” he growled, his grip on my arm tightening to the point where tears came to my eyes. “You’re so little and useless. Normally, you’d be beneath my notice, but orders are orders.”

His grip felt like a vise, and I drew in a breath as the pain shot through me. Acting totally on instinct, I dropped my head and bit the hand he was using to hold the knife to my throat. I bit down as hard as I could, my mind going completely blank as I sank my teeth into his skin.

After that, everything happened very quickly. The knife fell to the ground with a clatter as the Fae bellowed in pain. Lola and Jay shifted, and I reached deep within myself and drew on my magic, summoning up my shield.

When it appeared in my hand, I immediately wrenched it upward, smacking the Fae in the jaw with everything I had.

The Fae hissed in shock and pain. He stumbled back a step and let go of my arm.

Finally released, I threw myself toward Lola and Jay, who were already lunging toward the Fae, ready to tear the guy apart.

But then they stopped.

In midair.

I blinked at their frozen forms, then turned to look at the Fae. He was on the ground, but his hand was raised and aimed at the still forms of Lola and Jay.

I stared with total shock. He’d just *stopped* the two wolves coming toward him. My breath caught as my heart pumped. How had he done it? My magic achieved the polar opposite of what this Fae was doing—it blasted people back—but they still moved in accordance with the laws of gravity. So how had this Fae gotten Lola and Jay to stop in midair?

And my initial assessment had been wrong—they weren’t actually frozen. They weren’t moving forward, but they were still snapping and struggling, trying to get at the Fae.

That was what snapped me out of my stunned stupor. This wasn’t over.

I spun toward the Fae and raised my hands, sending a blast of magic right at him. “Let go of my friends!”

My magic blasted him back, but the Fae moved quickly and gracefully, leaning in to the blast and using his own momentum to roll over his shoulder and get back to his feet like he was in a freaking action movie.

“Dammit,” I muttered. It sucked that my magic hadn’t disarmed him completely, but it *had* done what I’d wanted it to do. The magic he’d been using was disrupted, and Jay and Lola were released. They both dropped to the ground.

They recovered quickly and shot forward toward the Fae, their powerful teeth flashing. But just as they were closing in to attack, they pounced…on nothing.

They both jumped, but collided with each other, landing in a heap in the spot where the Fae had just been standing. But he was gone. I hadn’t even seen it happen. One instant he’d been there, and the next he’d just…vanished.

“Where did he go?” I shouted

I spun around, searching for him, and found him standing directly behind me.

I screamed and blasted him again. He stumbled back a few steps, but I didn’t even come close to knocking him down. The only thing I seemed to be doing was making him angrier.

His eyes flashed as he advanced on me.

My heart pounded painfully. I was still scared, yes—but I was mad, too.

“You still think half-Fae are weak?” I demanded. “Am I still beneath your notice?”

The guy was still coming toward me, so I took a deep breath. If we were going to fight, then I was going to need my sword. I was about to summon it when it felt like my feet fell out from beneath me.

I looked up at the Fae and saw that he’d raised his hand again. He was twisting it in the air, his eyes narrowed on me. He wasn’t touching me, but something was happening.

Suddenly I realized that he was somehow pulling my shadow, and as if I were physically attached to it…I was getting dragged along with it.

For a moment I was in total shock. How was this happening? How was the Fae doing this?

My arms scraped along the sidewalk as I got pulled, and I fought the urge to scream. I had to just grab onto something! Terrified, I reached out, desperately scrambling to grab anything I could hold on to. Quickly, I summoned my shield, hoping that I could get it to catch onto something, or, at the very least, use it against the Fae. I cried out, swinging my shield into the sidewalk, and it screeched horribly as it dragged along the concrete.

Lola ran after me, moving so quickly her feet barely seemed to touch the sidewalk.

“Cali!” she shouted. “Hang on!”

“Lola!” I shrieked, but my voice was hoarse. “Help me!”

She leapt toward the Fae, but—again—just as she was about to make contact, he disappeared, seeming to vanish by jumping into his own shadow like it was a pool. Now he was well out of Lola’s range.

Lola snarled furiously, but the disappearing act had released me. I slid to a stop on the sidewalk, my shield disappearing. Then I scrambled to my feet, my heart hammering. I looked around quickly, spinning in circles, looking for the Fae.

“Where is he?” I screamed.

His shadow was gone, and so was he, but I didn’t feel relieved—I was so terrified, I was almost paralyzed. I was certain he was going to pop up again, just like he’d done last time, and I kept turning, kept scanning the darkness.

*No! Stop, Cali! Get ahold of yourself! You need to get out of here*, I reminded myself.

I sprinted over to Lola, who was also looking around, and practically launched myself at her back.

“I need to get on!” I gasped out, trying to climb up.

The little talking-to I’d just given myself had worked, and my mind was suddenly clear. I knew exactly what I needed to do.

“We need to get back to the pack house!” I shouted, looking around for Jay. He was running toward us.

There was a lot I didn’t understand, but what I knew for certain was that this Fae—whoever he was—had been sent by someone from the Dark Fae mafia. *Orders are orders*, he’d said.

“We need to get back to the pack house, right now!” I said, fighting for breath. “We need to get Greyson! Go!”

Lola nodded her furry head and crouched down, making it easier for me to scramble onto her back. I climbed on and tried to refrain from digging my knees into her sides as I held on.

She began to run—sprint, really—down the street, Jay falling into step next to us. They were looking straight ahead as they navigated the streets, but I was looking everywhere, scanning the darkness.

Even as we ran, I couldn’t relax. I couldn’t stop thinking about the Fae’s powers, and his ability to disappear like a fleeting shadow. His magic used shadows, and the streets were full of them. He could’ve been anywhere.

**Episode 5183**

Using my magic always drained me, so it took all my concentration to hold on to Lola as she and Jay wove through the dark streets toward home. It got even harder when we reached the woods and the trail grew rougher. Jay and Lola jumped and skidded across the uneven ground, and it was all I could do not to slip off Lola’s back.

In addition to holding on, I also had to focus on watching the shadows. I didn’t know what that Fae’s magic could and couldn’t do. How could I? I’d never seen anyone use shadows as part of their magic before, and while it felt like something I shouldn’t have been surprised to see, I couldn’t help but feel completely floored. There was still so much about the Fae world that I didn’t understand.

Torin healed, which made sense. My mother grew plants—also something I could understand. Astrid had been able to change the appearance of things and people with her glamour magic. That had been strange, but not unthinkable. I was pretty sure Maren had some kind of telekinesis.

Along with Artemis’s skill set, those had been all the Fae powers I’d encountered up to this point, but it looked like I was going to have to add “shadow magic” to the list of possibilities.

I lost my train of thought when something moved in my peripheral vision. I turned toward it, expecting to see the Fae at any moment, but there was nothing there.

I ground my teeth, feeling both scared and stupid. It was like I was being gaslit by the darkness.

Then something else flickered to my right.

I whipped around and peered into the darkness.

“Keep your eyes open!” I yelled into the wind. “I think he’s here!”

I really wished I could mind link with Jay and Lola—it would’ve been incredibly useful to be able to communicate with them without announcing my intentions to anyone close enough to hear me—but that wasn’t in the cards.

So I just adjusted my grip so I could hold onto Lola’s fur with one hand while keeping my other hand free. I wanted to be able to blast at a moment’s notice.

But before I could even begin to summon my magic, Jay went down. It happened so suddenly that for a moment, I almost thought he’d disappeared, too. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone.

I screamed, but when I looked down, I realized he hadn’t disappeared, only fallen. Hard.

Lola skidded to a stop, but when she turned to look back, I screamed again. She snarled with fury as we both saw what looked like an inky black tentacle of a shadow unfurl and curl its way around Jay’s neck.

Lola leapt toward it, teeth snapping, but it didn’t retreat. Jay struggled to free himself, but the shadow began to pull him off the path and into the creeping shadows.

Still on Lola’s back, I blasted the shadow, and it fell back. But as it did, two more tentacles unfurled and grabbed at Jay.

“Holy shit,” I muttered.

Suddenly, the shadow tentacles were everywhere. There were too many to fight.

Suddenly, Jay vanished, disappearing into a shadow.

I stared at the space he’d last occupied in shocked horror. He was gone.

Lola spun around, yelping in distress as she looked for Jay.

“Jay!” I screamed, and, like he was responding to my call, there was a thundering BOOM and Jay reappeared. He flew into the air like he’d been catapulted out of the ground. He soared upwards, then the shadow tentacles grabbed him again and slammed his body to the ground.

He lay still, not moving a muscle.

Lola let out a low howl and started toward him, but then the tentacles reappeared and reached for her.

I raised my hands and blasted. “Run!” I shouted at Lola.

I felt her hesitate beneath me. I didn’t want to leave Jay behind either, but staying here wasn’t going to do him any good. It wouldn’t help him—or the rest of the pack—if we stayed here and got ourselves captured. Or killed.

“Run!” I yelled again. “Go! We need to get Greyson!”

For a moment, Lola didn’t move, and I had no idea what she was going to do. But then the shadow tentacles were on us, already starting to wrap around her. It was too late.

“Shit,” I snarled, summoning my sword. When it materialized in my hand, I slashed at the tentacles. This seemed to slow them down, which I hadn’t really expected. They didn’t seem to be coming back as quickly as before, either.

“RUN!” I shouted at Lola—and thankfully, she began to move.

Lola sprinted away, but she was whimpering. Her gait was off, so I knew she had been hurt, but I also knew she was worried about leaving Jay behind.

I was worried too. I hoped he was okay, and I knew he was strong. Surely one Fae wouldn’t be able to take him down.

Lola was moving, but she was running in a zigzag pattern. I didn’t know if she was just rattled, or if this was a strategy to keep us from being targeted, but when I looked around, I recognized the woods and realized we weren’t far from the pack house.

*GREYSON!* I yelled through the mind link. *We need you! We need help! We’re being attacked!*

But there was no reply. I had no idea if Greyson had heard me.

I thought about the trap Big Mac had set up. Maybe it would keep the Fae from coming after us.

Lola was moving breathtakingly fast, but when I turned back, I saw that the shadow tentacles were still coming for us, snaking their way along the forest floor like menacing fog.

Leaning down, I swiped at them with my sword. As I did, a bright light appeared, giving me a good look at all of them and allowing me to cut through them all at once.

Then, without warning, Lola swerved, and I heard the blare of a car horn.

I hadn’t been prepared for Lola’s quick change of direction and found myself airborne, thrown from Lola’s back.

I reached out, but I couldn’t tell which way was up or even in which direction I was falling. I was completely disoriented—at least until I hit the ground with a bone-rattling slam.

I groaned as pain coursed through me. I was sure I’d just broken something. My ears were ringing, and when I managed to open my eyes, I saw Lola on the ground a little ways away from me. She wasn’t moving.

Behind Lola, I saw a car in the distance. That was the source of the light that had illuminated the shadow tentacles.

I watched the car, blinking into its blinding light, which meant I was watching when it reversed and drove away, disappearing with a screech.

I’d just closed my eyes again when I heard a familiar howl.

My heart raced, and I tried to push myself up.

“Lola,” I rasped. But then pain exploded in my shin and I dropped back down to the ground, gasping.

I knew I needed to move. I knew I needed to get Lola out of here and get help. I knew the shadow Fae was somewhere close, but I couldn’t seem to organize my thoughts. I felt so confused, like I was moving through molasses.

I blinked as I stared into the distance. Was that the light from the pack house? Maybe Greyson could hear me now.

*Greyson! Please…help. Lola. Jay.*

Still no response.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to my feet and, gritting my teeth against the pain, I started moving toward the light. The pack house was my only thought.

“Help!” I tried to shout, but my voice was hoarse and barely audible. Tears were streaming down my face, but I fought to keep running, trying to ignore the monstrous pain in my leg and my side.

Then I hit a wall. Literally. I slammed into something—into nothing—and was sent sprawling. But I was only on the ground for a moment. An instant later, I was pulled into the air. Were the shadows taking ahold of me?

Fuck, what was I supposed to do? I was so vulnerable like this, so exposed. I struggled, trying to get free, but whatever was holding me only tightened its grip.

“Help!” I rasped.

An instant later, I heard something approach from behind me. I couldn’t see anything, but I heard a snapping sound, and then a deafening explosion. But the sound was muffled by the warm, furry body covering mine, shielding me from the blast.

When the sound finally faded, there was a metallic smell in the air.

I was shaking with fear, but there was something strangely comforting about the wolf lying on top of me.

“Lola?” I asked blearily.

I felt a hot tongue on my skin. The wolf was licking me.

*Cali? Cali, are you okay?*

My eyes flew open. I knew that voice.

The wolf was Xavier.

**Episode 5184**

**Greyson**

I stopped dead, my head spinning at what I’d just witnessed. I’d been running, trying desperately to find Cali. I’d heard her through the mind link, calling for help. Telling me that she was in danger and that she needed me.

I’d left Rishika and the others behind—locked in battle with the invisible Fae—as I sprinted away. Because of Big Mac’s anti-Fae tripwire, things were going a hell of a lot better than they otherwise might’ve gone, but Rishika, Charlie, Sage, and I had ended up fighting some of the Fae outside the protection of the tripwire. That had made things harder, and at one point I’d yelled at them all to fall back, behind the protection of the barrier.

For a moment, it had felt like the Fae were going to fall back too, but then I’d heard Cali’s voice through the mind link and all hell had broken loose.

The instant I’d heard her voice, I’d turned to run. But as I’d rounded the corner of the house, I’d watched my worst fear come to life before my eyes.

When Big Mac had created the wards, I’d been instantly worried about Cali’s safety. The tripwire was dangerous for Fae, and while Big Mac had a solution for that, Cali hadn’t been there to receive it. I was supposed to give it to her, but I hadn’t had a chance yet, and now I’d just seen her come horrifically close to being killed by the tripwire.

Then Xavier had appeared. He’d saved her, freeing her from the web and shielding her from the ensuing explosion.

Where the fuck Xavier had come from, I had no idea. But I didn’t care. I was just grateful that he’d made it to her in time.

I sprinted over and skidded to a stop next to Cali, who lay prone on the ground.

*What happened?* I demanded.

Xavier looked up at me. *Why doesn’t she have the protective object?*

Before I could respond, I heard Ava’s voice in my head.

*No time for fighting, boys*, she said. *They’re going to get away! We have to stop the glamour!*

Xavier didn’t hesitate, taking off the moment he heard Ava’s voice. I saw a car in the distance, Ava’s wolf standing on top of it. The car looked pretty beat up—the roof was caved in, the windows were smashed, and all the tires had been popped.

I stared at it in confusion. What the hell was going on? Was the Fae responsibility for the mass invisibility glamour *inside* that car? Was that even possible?

I wanted to follow my brother and find out what the hell was going on, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t just leave Cali. I would never.

I stepped toward her. *Are you alright, love? Can you hear me?*

She didn’t answer. I looked her over, my heart pounding as I checked for wounds. I licked her face, hoping that the healing mate lick would revive her.

When she still didn’t move, I threw back my head and howled, fear clawing its way up my throat.

*Rishika! Can you hear me? I need you to get Torin. Fast.*

*I hear you. I’ll get him*, Rishika said, sounding tense.

I nuzzled Cali’s neck. *Everything’s going to be okay, love. Torin’s coming. He’s going to help you—*

Cali’s eyes opened. “Greyson…” she rasped.

*I’m here, love*, I assured her.

She reached up and grabbed my fur, her eyes widening with sudden fear. “Greyson, there’s a Fae out there. A Shadowman…”

I frowned down at her. I couldn’t follow what she was saying. She wasn’t making any sense. What was a Shadowman? Or *who?*

I was about to ask her exactly that, but when I looked up, I saw Rishika running toward me with Torin on her heels. In the distance, I heard the crunch of metal and a howling wolf. I looked over to see my brother fighting at Ava’s side.

*Torin’s here*, I said, looking back down at Cali.

“Go,” she whispered. She jerked her chin toward the sound of fighting. “Go help them.”

I nodded and spun around, sprinting toward where Xavier and Ava were doing battle against a Fae. The Fae was holding a magic sabre—a sword. Had the Fae somehow conjured it the way Cali, Artemis, and Adair could summon certain weapons? This one flashed menacingly as the Fae swung it toward Xavier.

Xavier dodged, and I saw the Fae glance over his shoulder. There was something about the way he looked around that told me he was protecting someone.

The Fae was focused on Xavier and Ava, so he didn’t see me approach. I took advantage of that. I leapt at his back, catching him by surprise. I sank my teeth into the Fae’s shoulder and tore, ripping the flesh.

The Fae let out a bellow of shock and pain, and his magic sword disappeared.

After that, it was easy to rip the guy’s throat out.

When he collapsed at my feet—dead—I looked at Xavier.

*There’s still one more*, he told me.

*What?* I asked, looking quickly around.

*It’s the one doing the glamour*, Xavier said.

I took that in. *So they were they invisible to you, too?*

Xavier nodded.

*I can’t see them, but I can smell them*, Ava said. *That damn incense scent… That’s the Fae, right?*

*I think so*, Xavier said. *I was tracking them based on the gasoline from their shitty car from our first encounter.*

Ava made a frustrated noise. *Fucking disgusting. Are they taunting us on purpose?*

Then, without waiting for an answer, she started forward, already hunting for the Fae. She had her nose to the ground, searching for the scent, but as she approached the tree line, dark tentacles shot out from the woods. They uncurled like smoke and wrapped around her feet, jerking her to the ground.

She snarled and started to fight, but the tentacles were already dragging her into the trees.

Xavier lunged, biting and snapping at the tentacles. But as he did, more tentacles shot out and wrapped around him, too.

Shit.

I leapt forward and attacked the tentacle wrapping itself around Xavier’s waist. It retreated and he got to his feet, launching himself at the tentacles that were swarming Ava. Together, we worked to fight them off, even as my head spun.

*The Shadowman*. Was this what Cali had been talking about? Was this the Shadowman? Were these tentacles seriously just shadows?

They sure *felt* real, and they still had a pretty solid grip on Ava.

Xavier and I worked quickly, biting and slashing, but the harder we fought, the more tentacles seemed to appear.

“It’s really no use.”

The voice was low and cool and seemed to wind around the back of my skull.

I looked up and saw a Fae standing in front of us, staring down at Xavier, Ava, and me.

He smiled slightly, as though the sight of us trying to fight the tentacles amused him. “Fighting is pointless. There are more of these and more of us than you can ever know.” He tipped his head, eyeing me closely. “You crossed the wrong group of people, wolf.”

I snarled at him—he had crossed the wrong group of werewolves, and I was going to show him exactly why.

The tentacles had been working on me as I stared at the guy, but when I lunged toward him, I tore through them with the force of my momentum. But the guy blinked out of existence, and I landed heavily where he’d just been standing.

I turned on the spot, looking around, searching for the guy. He’d already appeared again, just behind Xavier, and this time, when I lunged, I managed to grab hold of his arm before he could disappear again.

Knowing this was my shot, I bit down hard, determined to hold on to the Fae and drag him to the tripwire, where Big Mac’s magic could take care of him. I was ready to end this guy once and for all.

But then I saw shadowy movement out of the corner of my eye. It was the tentacles, and they were coming for me. They swept under me and wrapped around me. In the blink of an eye, there was one around my middle, and another one wrapping itself around my neck. It began to squeeze, and I coughed, trying to fight it off.

The tentacles were coming for Xavier and Ava as well, though they were fighting and kicking and snapping, trying to break free.

I had to do something, fast, so I tried to shift back to human. The crack of bones that always accompanied the shift echoed through the trees, and the tentacles stilled for just a moment, as though I’d startled them. Thinking that this was my chance, I fought harder, trying to free myself, but the tentacles sprang to life once again. The one around my neck cinched tighter and tighter, and soon my vision began to blur. I couldn’t breathe—the shadows were choking the life out of me.

**Episode 5185**

Torin’s hands felt warm and comforting as they passed over me, again and again. The pain coursing through me began to fade, and then—when he pulled his hands away—it disappeared entirely.

“Thank you,” I said, getting unsteadily to my feet. The pain was gone, though I still felt a little lightheaded. But I didn’t have time for that. Not now. I had to get to Greyson—I had to help him.

I looked around quickly, trying to figure out what was going on. Jay and Lola were still out there, and there was no telling what had happened to them since I’d last seen them. And—my stomach dropped when this occurred to me—Greyson and Xavier were out there too. I needed to check on them. I needed to see them.

I’d just started forward when Torin grabbed my arm.

“Cali, what are you doing?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” I countered, shaking my arm free of his grasp.

“You have to be careful,” he warned me.

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have the bracelet, Cali!” he said. “If you go through the tripwire, you could get hurt again. You have to be careful, it’s far too dangerous.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but before I could say a word, I heard a horrible howl rise into the cold air. Deep in my gut, I knew that the wolf making that anguished sound was Greyson.

“CALI!” Torin called, but I didn’t listen. I was running—*sprinting*—toward the sound.

I heard Torin start after me with a frustrated grunt, but I didn’t care. A moment later, I heard Rishika racing toward me too.

“Cai! You can’t!” Torin called. “Stop!”

But I didn’t stop. I ran faster, and when I reached the place where I’d gotten tangled up in the tripwire web, I saw something that made my heart drop to the frozen ground beneath my feet—Greyson, suspended in the air, tangled up in tentacle-like shadows.

“Oh god,” I breathed. The tentacles were choking him. He was clearly fighting to get free, but it was no use. Beyond him, I saw that Xavier and Ava—both in their wolf forms—were also being suspended in the air by the terrifying shadows. Both my mates were in trouble, and I was frozen in terror.

I needed to do something. I needed to act.

Something moved in the shadows, and when I saw the Fae who’d attacked me, I screamed. Torin’s arms encircled my waist, holding me back as I tried to surge forward, toward the evil Fae. Torin held fast, but my arms were free, and I raised them to shoot a blast of magic toward the Fae. My magic went flying, and Rishika launched herself after it. Just having reached us, she bounded into the fight, trying to free Greyson, Xavier, and Ava.

Suddenly, there was a flash of blindingly bright light, followed by a series of loud pops. Metal seemed to rain down from the sky, and I saw what looked like a chain reaction happening along the tripwire as my magic collided with it.

With a yelp, Rishika hurried back to where I stood. She pushed me down and used her body to protect both Torin and me from the falling metal.

I looked up, past the bulk of Rishika’s furry body, and could see the metal raining down like a summer shower. Rishika had most of my body covered, but my skin still burned and stung as small chunks of it hit me, and I realized with a jolt that the metal was iron.

The shadow Fae I’d been charging toward had no wolf to protect him from the worst of the iron rain, and I watched as chunks of metal showered down on him. He flinched and then crouched down, yelling out in pain. He put his hands over his head, but that did nothing to protect him from the iron that was pelting down like massive hailstones.

I could see the iron was taking a toll on him as he sank lower and lower, his body taking a beating from the raining metal. That was what Big Mac had intended, after all. It was brutal to watch, but I couldn’t seem to look away. As terrifying as this Fae was, I hated to see someone hurting so badly, but there was nothing I could do to stop it.

And as the iron rain continued to fall, the tentacles holding Greyson, Xavier, and Ava began to drop away.

Hope caught in my chest like a gasp when I saw Greyson’s body drop to the ground, then shift back to human.

“Greyson!” I screamed, trying to push past Rishika.

“Wait!” Torin said, catching my arm again. He pulled a bracelet off his own wrist and put it onto mine. “Take this. Now go get him! Get him back on this side of the tripwire!”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I ran out from behind Rishika and toward the woods, where Greyson was lying on the ground. I threw myself down beside him, throwing my arms around him. He looked roughed up, but the marks around his neck from the shadow tentacles were already healing.

“Greyson,” I breathed, pushing the light hair away from his face.

Behind me, I heard someone coughing. I turned to see Xavier pushing himself to a sitting position not far from Greyson and me. Xavier had also shifted back to human and when I looked over, our eyes connected for a moment.

Greyson coughed. “Love?”

I turned back to him, looking into his gray eyes. “I’m here, Greyson. I’m here. It’s okay.”

And for a quiet moment, it almost felt like everything *was* okay. But then there was a loud screeching sound. I whipped around and saw a car peeling away, scattering gravel as it roared down the driveway and onto the road.

Xavier got to his feet and went tearing after it, shifting as he ran. An instant later, Ava was hot on his heels.

“Rishika,” Greyson coughed, looking at her over my shoulder. “Follow them. The Fae orchestrating this attack is in that car.”

Rishika turned and sprinted away with Torin, leaving Greyson and me alone.

“Love, are you alright?” Greyson asked, looking me over carefully. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” I murmured automatically. I *was* alright—I was here, alive, and with Greyson. I was fine.

“I’m so sorry for not getting you the protective bracelet soon enough,” he said, his voice low and frustrated. “I hate that you came back to this huge mess, and that the Dark Fae found you while you were away.” He shook his head. “I should never have let you go. This is my fault. I knew something like this was bound to happen—”

“Greyson,” I said, cutting him off and wrapping my arms around him. “It’s okay. It really is. I’m home. I made it back. I’m okay. It’s over. At least for now.”

I pulled away from Greyson’s embrace when I heard another groan. But when I saw who had made the sound, I pressed myself closer again.

“That’s him,” I whispered, my heart pounding with fear.

“What?” Greyson asked, looking around.

“The man who attacked me. He followed us back here when he found us on campus.” I peered past Greyson, eyeing the moaning, crumpled figure. I’d seen him taken down by that iron, and I was amazed that he was still breathing. “How the hell is he still alive after that?”

“I don’t know, but he doesn’t look great,” Greyson said. “That iron really fucked him up.”

I shivered. I wasn’t worried about the Fae, just rattled by everything that had just happened.

Disentangling himself from me, Greyson got to his feet and strode to where the Fae was lying. He reached down and grabbed the guy, pulling him up roughly by the collar until the Fae was forced to stand. He swayed for a moment, then Greyson started walking, hauling the guy after him as he made his way toward the pack house.

“You’re coming with us,” Greyson growled.

“Wait!” I said, scrambling to my feet. “Hang on, Greyson. Let’s think about this.”

“Think about what?” Greyson asked.

“The tripwire,” I said, pointing. “What if it goes off again?”

Greyson shrugged. “Then he dies. But I don’t think it will. I think your magic shorted it out. Let’s see,” he said, and started forward again.

Sure enough, as Greyson dragged the stumbling Fae over the tripwire, nothing happened—though I did flinch as they crossed over.

Torin appeared at my shoulder as we walked toward the house. “What are you going to do with him?” he asked.

“What do you think?” Greyson asked shortly.

“I…I don’t know,” Torin admitted.

Greyson looked down at the Fae, who looked so bruised and battered and out of it, I was freshly shocked that he was alive. He gave the guy a rough shake. “We’ve got a living mafia grunt, and we’re going to ask him a few questions.”

**Episode 5186**

**Artemis**

Pulling my cloak more tightly around me, I looked around. The marketplace—which had been bustling—was closing down for the night and was quieter now, with only a few vendors still closing up their stands and carts. I was waiting for Aelwen to arrive from the kitchens when she finished. I looked around for her but saw nothing except the few food stalls that remained open.

The smell of frying meat drifted through the air, making my stomach rumble, but the thought of actually eating anything made me feel sick. I was too tense to actually want to eat, and now I was nervous. I was starting to think that the Fae wasn’t going to show up at all.

Well, if she didn’t, that was fine, I supposed. I knew where she worked, after all, and it wouldn’t be all that difficult to find out where she lived. And I’d always known how to get reluctant people to talk.

I was just starting to think up a new plan when Aelwen appeared in the darkening market. She looked around, then hurried toward me. When she reached me, I saw that she was flushed and out of breath.

“Are you okay?” I asked curiously.

Aelwen looked at me, almost suspiciously, then shook her head. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Fine by me,” I muttered, starting after her as she began to walk. “Think of Marius. He’d want you to help me.”

The woman glared at me. “Are you trying to make this worse?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at this response, but I kept my mouth shut after that as I followed Aelwen through the narrow streets.

She led us away from the marketplace, and I realized we were moving toward the main gate. As we drew closer, a knot of anxiety formed in my stomach. Then I remembered my Fae promise, and the knot grew larger.

“The crypts are underneath the city, right?” I asked Aelwen.

“That’s typically where crypts are found,” she said tartly.

I rolled my eyes at her sarcasm, but her answer did make me feel a little better. Wherever she ended up taking me, I’d still be inside the citadel, so I didn’t need to worry about breaking my Fae promise.

At least I *hoped* I didn’t need to worry.

But if I wasn’t worried, Aelwen sure was. Her face was pinched with tension, and her eyes kept darting around like she expected someone to jump out and scare her at any moment. She jumped at every unexpected noise, including the soft cooing of a bird and the jangle of keys from a passerby.

“What’s wrong?” I finally asked, annoyed. Her jumpiness was infectious.

She looked over at me in shock, like she couldn’t believe I’d asked the question. “What’s wrong? What’s *wrong*?”

“What *is* wrong?” I asked, baffled.

“You’re Celeste’s *guest*,” she hissed, looking at me like I was missing something obvious.

“Yeah? So?”

“*So?* Do you know what could happen to me if something bad happened to you?” she asked.

“No…” I grudgingly admitted.

Aelwen rolled her eyes. “Normal Fae don’t just go looking for the crypts at night, you know. I mean, maybe when you’re young and into doing stupid things, or maybe as part of a dare, but that is not what’s happening here. And that means you have some kind of sneaky agenda that I don’t know about.”

Shit. I didn’t have an answer for any of that, so I sidestepped that line of questioning by smiling at her. “Aw, Aelwen, does that mean you’re worried about me?”

Her eyes narrowed even further, and sparks seemed to fly from them. “The only thing I’m worried about is covering my own ass.”

I laughed again. “Listen, there’s nothing to worry about. Your ass is going to be fine. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. And you, for that matter.”

“Wonderful,” Aelwen muttered, not looking reassured in the least.

But I hadn’t been lying—I *could* take care of myself. I shivered slightly as a cold breeze blew through the narrow street, thinking of all the weapons I’d stashed about my person before setting out. I had a knife at my hip, of course. Then there was the one in my right boot, and the one tucked into the back of my waistband, and the small dagger I’d hidden up my sleeve. I could fight perfectly fine hand to hand, of course, but I felt even better knowing I was well armed. I was ready for anything.

Not that I had any idea what I might run into. I didn’t know if the Order would send someone after me, or even if I was being watched at this very moment.

Aelwen was right about one thing, though—this expedition could very easily go south, and it would be up to me to protect her if it did. That was the only honorable thing to do. Not only because she was helping me when she clearly didn’t want to, but also because I owed it to Marius. He’d been trying to look out for her before I’d sent him on the potentially impossible mission of finding Cali in the human world, and I owed it to him to keep her safe.

“Hello?”

Aelwen’s sharp voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and I glanced at her. “What?”

The Fae rolled her eyes. “Look around. We’re here.”

We’d stopped in front of a stone archway, the top of which was only barely taller than my head.

“Oh, this is it?” I asked.

Aelwen nodded, then shrugged, looking slightly defeated. “After you.”

I took a deep breath, but Aelwen was watching me closely, so I didn’t hesitate before I plunged through the archway and headed down the staircase. The steps were shorter than normal steps, and steeply graded. The staircase wound sharply down, and I felt Aelwen close behind me as I made my way down.

Already dark and already cold, it only grew darker and colder as we moved downward. There were candles flickering in iron holders on the stone wall, and I snagged one as we walked by. It helped a little, but the tiny light only really illuminated the walls, telling me that they were damp and covered with grime.

“This is quite a place,” I muttered.

“I knew you’d like it,” Aelwen said sarcastically. “That’s why I *insisted* on bringing you to visit.”

I smiled to myself, understanding why she and Marius had hit it off.

When we finally reached the bottom of the staircase, Aelwen pointed to the left. “That way.”

The passageway was low and dark, and we walked in silence. Eventually, we reached another doorway, and when we passed through it, the space opened up. The room we walked into was large, and I felt like I could breathe again.

I looked around and saw moss hanging off the stone walls, and ferns growing from cracks in the stone floor. The place was almost like an underground garden, and I could smell soil and plant growth in the close, still air.

When I looked up, I saw that there were slivers of light coming in through spiderwebbing cracks in the stone ceiling, and through one particularly large hole, I glimpsed the silvery moon.

“Where are we?” I asked softly.

“What does it look like? These are the crypts,” Aelwen said.

I shook my head in disbelief as I looked around. “Does everyone who dies get buried here?”

Aelwen shrugged. “Yeah. Basically.”

“Everyone?”

The Fae thought for a moment. “Yeah, there are a lot of important court members entombed here. People who died in the war get the most elaborate graves—like that one there,” she said, indicating a tall spire.

We walked around, the only sound our soft footfalls on the mossy ground. I eyed the statues and elaborately engraved gravestones with both curiosity and an odd kind of reverence.

I saw a statue in the distance and walked toward it. It stood near the center of the huge space, and as I approached it, I held up my candle so I could see it more clearly. It was a statue of a man, and it towered over me. The figure was large and dressed as a warrior, though the expression on his face looked beatific. Ivy was growing at the base of the statue, and the vines snaked upward, obscuring the carved epitaph. I pulled at a vine to see better, and a thorn caught my finger.

“Ow,” I hissed, putting my finger in my mouth.

When I stepped back, I realized I’d gotten a thorn in my knee as well and pulled that free.

“Who is this guy?” I asked Aelwen.

“This one?” she asked, looking up at the statue’s handsome face.

“Yeah,” I said dreamily. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the stone figure. “There’s something about it… It’s almost familiar, though I’m not sure why.”

“This is Kadmos,” Aelwen said. “Of the Mauvais family.”

**Episode 5187**

“Wait… *What?*” I burst out, hurrying after Greyson as he dragged the Fae toward the pack house. “Greyson, what’s the plan here?”

“No plan,” he said, looking grim. “I’m just going to ask him some questions.”

“Yeah, but *what* questions, exactly?” I asked. “And how are you going to ask him?”

I eyed the Fae nervously. He was looking pretty beat up, and had dropped back into unconsciousness in Greyson’s grasp, which only made him look more vulnerable. It was a weird feeling—I didn’t feel sorry for him, but I didn’t want Greyson to torture the guy either, even if he *had* just tried to kill us all.

I glanced at Torin, and the nervous look on his face told me that he was thinking the same thing.

“I’m going to ask him how to stop the Dark Fae mafia from attacking us,” Greyson said flatly.

“I’m pretty sure he already told us what he knows,” I said. I remembered the guy saying *orders are orders*, and I couldn’t help but think that he probably wasn’t the one making the decisions for his group. “He said you asked too many questions about…Hans.”

Greyson shook his head, looking frustrated. “I don’t know about that. I know that’s what he said, but I’ve been thinking about it, and that doesn’t make any sense. I asked the wrong people a couple of questions in Portland, sure, and got into a fight or two… But to follow me to the pack house? Leaving Portland should’ve been enough for them. It doesn’t track. I know Ava killed that other Fae, but even that doesn’t seem to warrant what they’re doing to us. This seems like something else.”

“I agree with you on that,” I admitted. “But won’t keeping this guy just give the Dark Fae mafia another reason to keep attacking us? Isn’t taking a prisoner going to antagonize them?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I guess a lot depends on what we learn from our visitor,” Greyson said, shooting the Fae in his grip a dirty look.

Torin cleared his throat. “If we want to prevent him from using Fae magic, we should probably put some iron on his wrists.” He grimaced at the idea. “It’s not very nice, but it will stop him.”

I shuddered at the thought. I’d felt pure iron on my skin before at Nneka’s place, and it hadn’t been a pleasant experience, to say the least. Actually, it had hurt like hell, which meant the bombs Big Mac had set were *brutal*. Effective, but brutal.

My stomach twisted into a nervous knot. I just didn’t want any of us to make this situation worse.

“That’s good advice, Torin. Thanks,” Greyson said.

As we approached the house, Ravi, Charlie, and Violet walked over to meet us.

“Greyson, there you are. What should we be doing?” Ravi asked. He looked around. “It doesn’t seem like there are any Fae left to fight.”

“Call Big Mac,” Greyson said. “I want to know if we can repair the tripwire and if there were any vulnerabilities exposed or created during the fight before Cali’s magic took it out. See if she can come over and check things out.”

Ravi nodded. “Roger that, boss. I’ll call her now.”

Greyson dragged the captive Fae toward the porch and dropped him next to the steps. He looked down at the guy. “Torin, stay with him, will you? Keep an eye on him. I’m going to run to the basement and get the iron shackles.”

“Sure,” Torin said, though he looked a little green around the gills.

I followed Greyson up the porch steps and into the house. “Greyson, do you really think it’s a good idea to bring that Fae into the pack house?”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

I glanced out the door, where I could see Torin standing guard over the crumpled Fae. “That guy has magic I’ve never seen before. I believe Torin’s claim that the iron can stop his magic, but it still seems risky.”

Greyson gave me a long look. “Are you suggesting I kill him?”

“What? *No!*” I said quickly, astonished.

Greyson stepped toward me and cupped my face between his hands. “Love, I’m not going to kill him. At least not when we can get some information out of him. But I won’t put you or the rest of the pack at risk, either. I’m getting the iron.”

He leaned in to kiss my forehead, then headed for the basement.

I sighed, then walked back outside, coming to stand next to Torin.

“Here,” I said, handing back the bracelet Torin had given me. “Thanks for this.”

He smiled. “I wish I’d been there to give it to you sooner. But I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Same to you,” I told him.

“Cali!”

I turned and saw Lola, Jay, and Rishika walking toward me. Xavier and Ava were with them, all of them in human form.

“Lola!” I yelled, running toward her. I practically launched myself at my friend, throwing my arms around her and hugging her tightly.

“Hey, watch it!” Lola said with a laugh. “I’m still healing.”

I squeezed her tight, then pulled back to look up at her. “Lola, I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, speaking over me.

“I never should’ve left you—”

“You did what you had to do!”

“Well, you *both* left me,” Jay put in.

Lola glared at him. “How can you say that, Jay? We were running for our *lives*, remember? We were luring him away from you!”

Jay laughed. “I’m kidding,” he said, kissing Lola’s hair.

“Ugh, you’re going to be kidding out your ass if you don’t knock it off,” Lola muttered.

I looked over at Xavier, who met my eyes for just a moment, then his gaze slid to Greyson, who was coming down the porch steps.

“Greyson, what are you doing?” Xavier asked.

Greyson leaned down to put the shackles on the unconscious Fae. “I’m going to question this guy when he wakes up and try to get to the bottom of what the hell is going on.”

I flinched as he finished snapping the shackles into place. The Fae’s skin immediately grew red and irritated when it came into contact with the metal. I knew it was going to hurt when the guy woke up, and that it would only get worse from there.

I looked away, hugging myself as I shuddered. Lola put her arm around me.

“Let me know what he says,” Xavier said, nodding toward the Fae. “I want to know everything that happens.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, I will. What happened with the car?”

“We were following it, but then it just disappeared,” Rishika said.

“Disappeared?” Greyson asked, incredulous.

“Vanished,” Ava confirmed. “Literally.”

“Even that shitty incense smell was gone. It’s the only way we have to identify them, and who knows if it was just a plan to fuck with our sense of smell that backfired on them? We can’t bank on that at all,” Xavier said. “We couldn’t see it or hear it. We couldn’t track shit, but I’m sure it’ll come back. Whoever these guys are, it’s not like they’re going to take this loss lying down.”

“No, probably not,” Greyson muttered.

Xavier glanced at Ava. “We need to get back to the pack house. We’ve been under siege there too.”

“Yeah, you should go,” Greyson said. “We have plenty to handle here, but you know where we are if you need help.”

Greyson turned to Rishika, and Xavier and Ava turned to leave. Ava shifted, sprinting into the forest, but before Xavier could do the same, I stepped toward him.

“Xavier.” I caught his hand and he turned back to face me, clearly surprised.

The way he looked at me reminded me of the weird vision I’d had back on campus, when Xavier had come out of the shadows. I took a deep breath and clung harder to his hand, almost like I was trying to reassure myself that this Xavier was real.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice low. If I didn’t get the words out then I might never say them. “For saving me back there, I mean. With the tripwire.”

He didn’t pull his hand away and nodded, once.

“Yeah, don’t mention it,” he said, his voice gravelly. Then he turned his head, like he’d just heard someone call his name.

He dropped my hand.

“I have to go,” he said.

Before I could say anything, he turned away, already shifting. I watched as he bounded off toward the forest. I watched him go until he disappeared into the darkness of the trees. When I turned back, I found myself looking right into Greyson’s eyes. He’d been watching me watching Xavier, and his gaze was dark and stormy.

My stomach dropped, and I started feeling like I’d just been caught doing something I shouldn’t. Seeing Greyson like this…it was a horrible feeling.

I swallowed hard, and just as Greyson was about to turn away, I took a step forward.

“Greyson, wait,” I said quickly. “I can explain.”

**Episode 5188**

**Xavier**

Just like I’d requested, Ava stayed close to me as we ran back to the pack house—close enough that I could feel the brush of her fur against my side. And as much as I wanted her close to me so I knew she was safe, it felt strange, too. It was a weird juxtaposition, running next to Ava when I could still feel Cali’s hand in mine…

I hadn’t expected her to take it. For a moment, I’d frozen, unable to think of what to do next. Her soft skin on mine made my mind go to dark places it shouldn’t. I knew how soft all of Cali was, how she sounded when I kissed those soft places.

But I needed to stop thinking like that.

I gave my head a sharp shake. There wasn’t time for that kind of thinking. We were facing a lot of trouble, and right now, I needed to focus on the situation with the Dark Fae mafia.

As we sprinted through the woods, my mind turned to the Samaras, and I wondered what I was going to find when I got back to the pack house. The Fae around the Redwood house had finally retreated, but there was no way to know if they’d vacated our land, too, or if there were going to be stragglers. I extended my senses, searching the shadows of the woods. I didn’t see or hear or sense anything moving in the trees that didn’t belong there.

*Holy shit*, Ava muttered.

When we reached the pack house clearing, I realized what had surprised her.

The brittle winter grass around the pack house was trampled down, like a steamroller had just been through. And where it wasn’t torn up and muddy, the grass was streaked with drying blood. Lying on top of that blood was a truly shocking number of dead Fae.

Ava and I slowed to a stop, looking around in wonder.

*Shit*, she said. *That’s a lot of Fae.*

*That’s a lot of* dead *Fae*, I amended.

Big Mac’s tripwire had clearly done a hell of a lot of damage. I’d be impressed maybe if it weren’t so fucking gruesome. Though, I was grateful.

But then my thoughts immediately flashed back to the moment I’d seen Cali tangled up in the thing. Just thinking about that moment made my heart start pounding. I’d been scared shitless at the sight of her, suspended and bound. I’d been completely terrified, actually, which was a rare thing for an Alpha. In that moment, my vision and my mind had both tunneled down, and all I’d been able to think about was Cali. In that moment, I’d known that no matter what it took, I was going to save her. I *had* to.

I was thankful as fuck that I’d been able to. Just seeing these Fae here, like this… The knowledge that Cali could’ve ended up like that was too much. The thought made me sick, but it was just the reality of what almost happened.

I glanced at Ava, my pulse ticked up again. Things had gotten really close with her, too. Too close. Going to save Cali had left Ava exposed, which had been a risk, considering the fact that there was a target on her back. I was just lucky it hadn’t backfired.

Though, to be fair, Cali had literally been tied up at the time, and Ava had still been able to fight.

“Welcome back, Alpha,” Geraint said, striding toward us.

I shifted back to human, and Ava did the same.

“All quiet here now?” I asked, glancing around.

Geraint nodded. “Yeah, now. We were able to get rid of the Fae who made it past the trap.”

“Any problems?” I asked.

The man shrugged. “A few, but we used the technique you mentioned—weaving in and out of the tripwire—and that worked well for us.” He nodded toward a dead body. “Obviously.”

“This all of them?” I asked.

“No. At some point, something happened, and they became visible. They retreated after that. It wasn’t all that long ago. You two just missed the action.”

I nodded, taking this in. Something had happened, and the Fae had become visible. That was interesting. I wondered if that timing coincided with the moment that car had disappeared. Maybe the Fae inside had pulled the glamour’s focus to the car, leaving all the other Fae exposed. Or maybe the car had just driven out of range.

There was no way to answer that question. I needed to focus on what was in front of me.

“Get a few of the others and clean this place up,” I told Geraint. “Let’s get rid of these bodies.”

He nodded. “You got it.”

Ava and I headed into the house. As soon as we walked through the door, Marissa emerged from the living room.

“Ava!” she called, looking relieved. She rushed forward and threw her arms around her friend. “I’m so glad you’re back. I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” Ava said, hugging Marissa back.

I stepped past them and looked into the living room, where it seemed most of the pack had gathered. They said hello and waved when they saw me, but I didn’t return the greeting. I was assessing what I saw—everyone looked okay. Maybe a little worse for wear, but they were all there, which meant no one had died. That was good.

“Everyone!” I called out, stepping into the room. “Glad to see you all still alive—”

“That makes two of us,” Knox noted.

I ignored him. “Thanks for all of your hard work, and for protecting the pack house. I’m really proud of you. You’re all strong wolves, and I knew you’d be able to handle anything that came your way. You should be proud of yourselves, too.”

A cheer went up, and a few people raised their beers.

“I’m sure the bigger fight is still to come, but when it does, we’ll be ready.” This triggered another cheer, which I waited out. “But for now, everyone needs to get some rest.”

There was a little grumbling, but it seemed the pack agreed, because everyone got to their feet and started shuffling out of the living room.

“Have a good night, Alpha,” Josephine said as she passed me.

“Good night,” I said, nodding to the departing pack.

Finally, it was just Ava and me left in the living room. I eyed her curiously. She hadn’t said anything to the pack when I’d been addressing them, which was strange for her. She was more involved with her pack than any Luna I’d ever known, and I wondered if what had happened during the fight at the Redwood pack house was still upsetting her. She did look pretty rattled, and her blue eyes were darting around.

“Hey,” I said quietly, reaching for her hand. “Let’s go upstairs.”

She didn’t protest as I led her up the stairs and into our room. I shut the door, then headed into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I was filthy—covered in dirt and mud and blood—and I was looking forward to a hot shower.

As the bathroom filled with steam, I leaned out the door to call to Ava. “It’s going to be pretty lonely in here. Are you coming in?”

Through the steam I saw Ava nod, but she didn’t move. Confused, I stepped back into the bedroom.

“Are you okay?” I asked, eyeing her carefully. “I mean, I know a lot happened tonight. The Dark Fae mafia came looking for you, then there was the fight and those weird shadow tentacles. It was a lot, and we both had a couple of pretty close calls.”

Ava nodded again, but still didn’t speak.

I frowned at her silence. *Ava, talk to me.*

She finally looked at me, meeting my eyes. Then she sighed. “I understand why you saved her, Xavier.”

“What?” I asked. That was not the response I’d been expecting.

“I really do get it,” she went on. “I know that no matter what my own issues with Cali are, you’re always going to save her. I get that.”

I looked at her carefully. This wasn’t what I’d expected to hear—not by a longshot—so I took a moment to process it.

“Okay,” I finally said. “It sounds like there’s a *but* coming.”

She looked at me for a moment. “But you didn’t have to use the mate bond lick on her,” she said, her voice cracking.

I sighed. “Oh, come on, Ava.”

That response lit something in her eye. Suddenly, there was an angry spark burning behind the blue, and it grew as she turned to look straight at me.

“Ava?”

She didn’t answer. She’d gone quiet again, but the fire behind her eyes burned brighter.

I sighed again and ran a hand through my hair, feeling dirt and leaves and sticks leftover from the skirmish in the woods.

“Ava, I’m not going to ask again—tell me what’s wrong.”

**Episode 5189**

**Greyson**

When I saw the anxiety on Cali’s face, I instantly felt bad. I hated that she felt like she had to rush to explain that moment with Xavier. And frankly, I didn’t even want to hear the explanation. No, scratch that—I didn’t *need* to hear it.

I knew—and had known for a while—that Xavier and Cali still had a connection. It wasn’t my favorite thing, but I’d processed it, and I knew I couldn’t let it rattle me. It was just better if I didn’t fixate on it.

Which wasn’t to say that it hadn’t hurt to see her hand in my brother’s grip.

But I shook my head. “Love, you don’t need to explain anything to me.”

“No, I know… But I want to, Greyson,” Cali said, looking worried. “Is that okay?”

I took a deep breath. “Of course. If you want to.”

She took a step closer to me. “I was just thanking him for saving me from the tripwire.”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “I should’ve thanked him too.” I had to force those words out, but it was true. I really was grateful that he’d been there. If he hadn’t been, I couldn’t bear to think about what might’ve happened. I’d been too far away and a second too late.

However I felt about Xavier coming to Cali’s rescue, what mattered was that Cali was here, and safe. That was what I needed to focus on, because if I thought about my brother saving her for too long, my body went tense and my mind started to fixate on it, and I didn’t want that.

“But I did want to tell you about something weird that happened on campus,” Cali added.

“Weird? What happened?” I asked, instantly worried.

Cali frowned. “At first I thought it was the Dark Fae messing with my head—you know, like that vision I had at the house when we were all trapped inside that bubble?—but now I’m not so sure that’s what it was.”

“What makes you think so?” I asked.

Her frown deepened. “Well, the mafia guy who attacked me—the one in the house—he had shadow magic. That was his whole thing, right? That was what he used on me and you and Xavier and Lola and Jay and Ava. That was *all* he used. So how could he have gotten into my head?” She shook her head. “No, I don’t think that was him. Plus, I saw a wisp afterward.”

“A wisp?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, it was trying to lead us to safety, but it didn’t work.” She thought for a moment. “I don’t think wisps can cause visions like that, but I don’t know what did cause it. I mean, if it’s not the Dark Fae mafia creating these visions, then what is it?”

Her expression clouded over, and I saw her shoulders tense. I could sense how rattled she was, and I stepped toward her, wrapping my arms around her.

“Hey,” I said soothingly. “Don’t worry about it. Not right now. We’ll figure it all out. I’m just glad you’re safe, love.”

She nodded and tried to smile, but she still looked worried.

“Let’s get inside,” I said, taking her hand.

I started toward the house and up the porch steps. Rishika walked out of the house just as I was heading in.

“Hey, Greyson.” She nodded toward the lawn. “We’re almost done clearing up out here.”

“Good, thanks,” I said.

Cali and I had just walked into the house when there was a strange rushing of air, and Big Mac appeared in the living room.

“She’s here!” Ravi called out.

“Thanks, Ravi,” I said wryly, walking into the room.

“Well?” Big Mac asked, turning to me.

“You were right,” I confirmed. “Thanks for installing the tripwire. It worked great.”

“Like I said,” the witch said, looking pleased with herself.

“But we’ve got a problem,” I went on.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “What kind of a problem?”

“Well, Cali shot some magic at the tripwire, and it short-circuited,” I told her. “It’s not working now.”

Big Mac glared at Cali, who shrugged and gave her a strained smile.

“Sorry?” she offered.

Big Mac heaved a sigh and waved her hand. “I suppose that kind of thing was always a possibility,” she admitted. “Okay, I’ll check the barrier over and see if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thanks.”

Big Mac nodded and closed her eyes. I saw her eyeballs moving beneath her eyelids, and she made a noise deep in her throat. Finally, she opened her eyes again and clapped her hands together. “Okay, that’s all set.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Yep. It should be back online. I’ve tweaked the weak spots, too, so we shouldn’t have any more problems,” she added, giving Cali a sideways glance.

“Thank you, Big Mac. We really appreciate that,” I said sincerely.

She shrugged and gave me a half-hearted salute. “Sure thing, Alpha,” she said sardonically.

An instant later she was gone, having blipped away.

I was relieved to know the tripwire was back in place, and I turned to Cali with a smile.

“Let’s head upstairs,” I told her. “You need some rest.”

Cali nodded and, as I walked toward the stairs, I glanced at Rishika, who’d followed me into the living room when Big Mac had appeared.

“That goes for the pack, too,” I said. “Everyone should get some rest. Let’s just get the Dark Fae guy down to the basement and make sure he’s locked up.”

“You got it, Alpha,” Rishika said, turning toward the basement, presumably to prepare suitable restraints.

Taking Cali’s hand, I led her up the stairs and to my room. As soon as the door was shut, Cali leaned into me, burying her face in my chest.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson,” she said, her voice muffled. “I just want you to know that.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I said, hugging her back. “You should know by now that I’m a strong man, love. I don’t feel threatened by hand-holding.”

Cali pulled back to look into my eyes and gave me a half-hearted smile. I stroked a finger softly down the curve of her cheek.

“Don’t worry, love,” I said. Then I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips.

It was supposed to be light and gentle, but the taste of her lips did something to my senses, and I leaned into her, kissing her harder. I felt her respond, opening her mouth as my tongue pressed against her lips.

Eyes closed, I walked her back to the bed. The mattress caught her legs, and I put my arm around her, catching her just before she fell onto it.

I leaned over and pulled her shirt up over her head, then I trailed my finger down the center of her chest, between her breasts. She gasped, and I smiled.

“I love you, Cali,” I whispered, kissing her again. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I’m always going to be there.”

She nodded, looking up into my eyes. “I know. I won’t let them hurt you either, you know.”

“I know,” I said, my voice low and husky. Heat was racing through me now. I loved Cali, and all I could think about was showing her how much and then some. I undid the button of her jeans and pushed them down over her hips. She wriggled for a moment then kicked them off. Her panties were next.

I kissed her again, then turned her around so she was facing away from me and pulled her back into my chest.

Leaning down, I whispered into her ear. “On the bed. Hands and knees.”

I felt her body react, but she didn’t hesitate. Obeying in an instant, she crawled onto the bed, her back arching as she looked back at me. I groaned at the sight of her—fuck if that didn’t immediately make me harder.

Already naked, I couldn’t hide my arousal from her, but I was going to make sure she felt the same. So I ran a soft hand around the curve of her ass. She shivered, then moaned.

“Touch me,” she said. “Please.”

“Like this?” I asked when I slipped a finger into her pussy.

“Oh *god*, Greyson,” she whimpered, arching more.

I swirled my finger around until she began to pant, teasing her further by adding another finger. I leaned over, kissing up her back as I palmed at her ass.

“Is that how you wanted it?” I asked.

“More.” She pressed her ass back against me, and it was my turn to groan.

“Is that so?” I managed to ask.

She nodded, so I removed my fingers from her pussy. Hearing her whimper sent any blood left to my cock. In one swift movement, I grabbed her hips and pulled her roughly back, entering her all at once.

“*Fuck*,” she said, moaning.

I kept my hands on her hips, pulling her closer so I could fill her completely. She pushed bak against me, rocking against my cock in a way that made me see spots. She tightened around me as she came, and that pushed me over the edge.

“Oh *fuck*,” I moaned, fire coursing through me.

She was so tight, so fucking good. I leaned down to press a kiss to her naked back.

“That was incredible,” she said softly, collapsing onto the bed.

I smiled and climbed up beside her. I wrapped myself around her, feeling her relax in my arms.

I’d known she was tired, but even I was surprised by how fast her eyes closed. She was asleep almost instantly, and I pulled the blanket around us, tucking her in.

I looked at her for a moment, stroking her hair softly. I thought of what she’d been through recently, and how everything had happened because of me. But even though I knew it was something I had started, I still wasn’t exactly sure what I’d done. And the time I couldn’t account for—before I’d woken up in my car—still haunted me.

What I *did* know was that Cali had almost died because of me. I’d brought the Dark Fae Mafia attacks to the pack. That was happening because of me, but I was sick of playing games. It was time to end this, once and for all.

The Dark Fae with the shadow powers was in my basement, and I was going to get some answers from him. And I knew exactly who was going to help me do it.

**Episode 5190**

**Xavier**

Ava wrapped her arms around her torso, holding herself tightly.

“Look, I’m not trying to make this a thing, I’m just trying to tell you how I feel,” she said in a measured voice. “I really do understand, Xavier, but if you ever wonder why I lash out and get upset when things involve…*her*, it’s just because I love you.”

“I know that, Ava—”

“No, I don’t know if you do,” she interrupted. “Or maybe you just don’t get *how* I love you. Because it’s this immense, all-consuming kind of love. Like you’re taking up my whole heart and head. I just… I just want you all to myself.” She looked away from me. “I know you know how that feels too, because of the *due destini*. I just wish you felt the same about me as I feel about you.”

I stared at Ava for a long moment. I was taking in everything she’d said, but I wasn’t sure what to say in response. So, in the end, I just stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her.

“I will do whatever I have to do to protect you,” I told her. “My mate bond with Cali won’t ever change that. You and I are bonded. We both know that—I know you feel it, too.” I waited until she nodded her head against my chest. “But our bond doesn’t nullify my bond with Cali, either.”

She pulled in a deep breath, and I felt it shaking through her.

I put my finger beneath her chin and tipped her face up so her eyes met mine. They were wide and glossy with tears, and I leaned forward and kissed her. The kiss was soft and gentle and unusually sweet. Ava was always so full of fire, so this was unusual for us, but it felt really good all the same.

Ava’s hands went to my sides, and she took a step toward me, closing the gap between us. Her body was warm, and the way it fitted into me made my own temperature rise. I deepened the kiss, and she responded. My mind was starting to empty, the way it usually did when she pressed her naked body against mine, but there was something else I wanted to say to her before things really heated up between us, so I gently pulled away.

“But no matter what, I love you, Ava,” I said, holding her tightly. “And I’m not going to stop fighting until these fucking Fae mafia clowns leave you alone.”

I reached down and lifted her into my arms. She felt light as air, and the way she leaned into me made me feel like I was carrying nothing at all as I turned and started toward the bathroom, where the hot shower was still running.

“I’ll kill every single one of them if I have to,” I vowed to her. “If that’s what will keep you safe.”

I kissed her again, and this time, she melted into me. My tongue slid along hers, and heat seared through me. I loved Ava, and I felt our connection in every cell in my body.

I nudged the shower door open and stepped inside, letting the water wash over us as we kissed. The water was hot and flowed over us, washing away the dried blood and sweat and mud.

Carefully setting Ava down on the tile floor, I pulled away from the kiss and grabbed the soap. I turned her around so she wasn’t facing me and washed her carefully, letting my hands glide over her body. I smiled to myself when she began to moan softly.

“I think they’re clean,” she said, laughing as my soapy hands went over her breasts for the third time.

“Can’t be too careful,” I murmured into her ear.

Grabbing the shampoo, I washed her long, dark hair, moving my hands slowly, massaging her scalp and her shoulders. Ava was always so tough, so it always amused me to feel her going liquid beneath my touch.

She closed her eyes and rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, then turned to me with a wicked smile. “My turn.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What does that—”

Then she grabbed my cock, and I stopped talking. I inhaled deeply as she stroked me, feeling like she’d set my whole body on fire.

Her smile grew as she moved her soapy hands over my body, teasing me the same way I’d teased her. She moved to stand behind me, massaging my shoulders as the soap suds ran down my back and chest. I couldn’t see her smile as I moaned with pleasure, but I could feel it. I hadn’t realized how tight my shoulders were until she began to knead them, and I felt the tension I’d been carrying start to flow out.

Then she reached around and grabbed my cock again. I sucked in a breath, but her hands were moving achingly slowly—she was teasing me.

With a low growl, I spun around and pressed her against the tile wall of the shower. She smiled as I entered her.

“God, that feels amazing,” she murmured.

“I know what you mean,” I breathed, pushing further into her. We moved slowly, finding our rhythm. I felt my climax building, but I was in no hurry.

“I could do this all night,” Ava gasped out, leaning forward and nipping my shoulder. “You feel *so* good, X.”

“Think you can last that long?” I asked, smiling at her as I shifted my position slightly, angling myself in a way that made her eyes squeeze shut.

“No,” she whispered. “No, I can’t last that long.”

She was starting to shake now, and I knew she was close, so I leaned down and kissed her, hard. This did the trick, and she moaned into my mouth as she came. Then she wrapped her legs around my waist, opening herself up to me and pushing me over the edge. “Ava, *fuck*,” I groaned, pumping into her. I leaned my head back, gasping into the spray of the shower.

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Once we’d dried off, we drifted toward the bed, still wrapped around each other and basking in a post-sex haze.

Ava lay in my arms, tracing patterns onto my chest with a finger. She looked up at me curiously. “It looks like you’re thinking about something.”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, I guess. It was a crazy day.” I shook my head. “So much shit went down in such a short amount of time. I’m still processing it.”

Her gaze stayed on my face. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not talking about the wild stuff *I’m* thinking about?” She paused for a moment. “Was there something else?”

I hesitated, wondering if I should tell her what was really on my mind. I was still trying to understand it myself, but I did want to be open with her.

“I saw my mom,” I said quietly.

Ava sat up in bed, understandably shocked. “What?”

I nodded, tucking my hands behind my head. “Yeah, I know. I crashed the car—”

“*What?*” Ava’s eyes were big as dinner plates.

“I had a headache and couldn’t see where I was going. This was before the Dark Fae mafia attacked me. I ran into a tree, and I was in pretty bad shape.” I obviously skipped over my dream about Cali in the weird dining room. “When I woke up, there was a wolf nudging me awake, trying to get me to leave the car.”

“A wolf?” Ava asked.

“Yeah. It was my mom’s.”

“Wow,” she breathed. “That *is* wild.”

I shrugged, trying to downplay how crazy the experience had been. “It was. And it’s just so *weird* that I saw her.”

“It’s not weird,” Ava said. “It might really have been her.”

“Come on,” I said. “I was totally out of it, and the mind is a powerful thing. It was probably just my subconscious trying to get me to save my own ass. But…” I thought for a moment, remembering what it had felt like to see the car I’d just escaped go over the edge of the cliff and crash at the bottom. “I don’t know, there have been times when I really have felt like my mom was watching over me.”

I thought about the medium at the paranormal hotel, who’d given Colton and me a message from our mother. I’d thought about that a lot since it had happened, and it made me wonder whether my mom really was watching over me… And if she was, then what had she seen?

“Well, ultimately, it was a good thing, right?” Ava said. “Whether she was just in your head or not. Because of her, you were able to get out of the car.”

“Yeah, and then I was attacked by the Dark Fae mafia,” I said dryly.

“And you were able to get out of that, too,” Ava countered. Then she leaned back against the headboard, lapsing into silence.

“What is it?” I asked.

She looked at me like she was about to say something, then she changed her mind and shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“No, tell me what you’re thinking about,” I urged, putting my hand on her thigh beneath the blanket.

Ava bit her lip. “I think about your mom all the time, X.”

“You do?” I asked, surprised. I’d never even considered that as a possibility.

She nodded. “Yeah. Do you think…” She took a deep breath, then met my eyes. “Do you think she’s forgiven me for what I did?”

**Episode 5191**

**Artemis**

My foot kicked up gravel as I came to a sudden stop. A chill went down my spine, and it took everything in me to keep from trembling. She said the name so casually like it meant nothing to her, yet it had knocked me off center

“What?” I said, my voice hardly above a whisper.

“This is the great Kadmos, you know, the warrior extraordinaire,” Aelwen said, waving a hand nonchalantly. “All covered up, that is.”

She stared up at the vine covered statue, completely unaware of the effect my father’s name had had on me. Stepping closer, I started to hack at the thick vines strangling the marble statue. With both hands, I used brute strength to remove the unwanted plants. Beneath the greenery was a plaque that bore my father’s name, his date of birth and…the date he had died.

*This can’t be*, I thought.

My father’s storied life had been callously summed up with two simple dates. He had lived, he had died, and then he had been immortalized with a statue along with the other past members of the Dark Fae court.

A heavy weight pressed on my chest, making it impossible for me to breathe. The numbers in front of my eyes blurred. I looked up, but the vines had covered the statue’s face. Wanting to get a closer look, I climbed onto the base of the statue and started pulling at the vines up top.

*Why are these damn vines here in the first place?* I wondered.

Thorns dug into my fingers and tore at the skin on my palms, but I didn’t care. There was no way that my father’s statue could be so covered up. I was still convinced he was alive, but even if he wasn’t, the statue shouldn’t have been under a thick layer of vines. I tore at the offensive vines like a woman possessed.

“Leave it. You’re going to hurt yourself,” Aelwen warned.

It was too soon for his statue to have fallen into such a state. It was like someone had wanted the world to forget about him as quickly as possible. It wasn’t until I could see the marble features of my father’s face that the weight on my chest lightened.

Ignoring her, I cursed as I tore more of the vines away from the statue. They were hardier than any vine I had ever encountered. The branches were thick and laced with thorns at least an inch long. No matter how much of it I removed, what was left still clung stubbornly to the statue. I had to fight for every inch.

“This shit is impossible,” I muttered, staring at my bloodied hands.

“That’s the Lenria plant, the stupid thorn,” Aelwen said. “It winds around everything it can find and is nearly impossible to get rid of. It’s such an annoying weed.”

I froze again. The Winding Thorn?

I looked around the quiet crypt and saw that some statues were covered in Lenria while others didn’t have a single vine. A part of me wondered if I was losing my mind. Could a plant selectively choose what statues to cover or was there more to it? Crazy or not, it couldn’t have been a coincidence. Things didn’t just happen in the Fae world.

After glancing at my father’s face one more time, I jumped off the statue and landed in a crouch before I got to my feet. With my curiosity at an all-time high, I approached one of the other vine-covered statues. I ripped through the thick layer of vines, wincing with each thorn that pricked my skin.

“Who’s this one?” I asked.

Aelwen stepped closer. “That’s Eritraeus from the Haseneau family.”

She said it like I should have recognized the name instantly. Perhaps if I had been more devoted to my studies, I would have recognized it. Unfortunately, all I knew about the Dark Fae court was its insanely detailed policy regarding grain harvesting and distribution.

“I’ve never heard of them,” I said. “Are they still around?”

Aelwen stared at me like I had lost my mind. “What? Of course they are. His grandson, Kastian Haseneau, is now the highest member on the Fae court other than Celeste’s husband. You’re bound to cross paths with him.”

“I’d rather not. I’m not too keen on the idea of meeting anyone in the court,” I said. “Who’s to say that this powerful grandson isn’t a secret member of the Winding Thorn?”

Though I had been eschewing my studies in favor of more hands-on activities, I had learned enough about the Dark Fae court to know not to trust them. Ulterior motives were often their only motive, and I wasn’t looking to become anyone’s prey or pawn.

Aelwen laughed. “Try again. Kastian has been doing all he can to fill the leadership position ever since Kadmos died.”

I winced. It was another grim reminder that everyone thought my father was dead. As much as I wanted to disagree, there wasn’t too much evidence to contest their belief. My father had all but vanished into thin air and had left little clues behind as to where he could be…dead or alive.

“What’s wrong?” Aelwen asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I said. “It’s just that these vines are a little overwhelming. It’s like every bit of it is glued to the statue.”

“Better to leave them in place then,” Aelwen said, then shivered. “Are we done here? I’ve had enough creeping around the crypts. I want to get back to my dough.”

I took another look around. I was nowhere near done with the place. The crypt was so large and seemed to hold so many secrets that I could have easily spent days surveying the various statues and still have no idea what I was looking for.

“Yeah, I think I’ve seen enough,” I said. “For now.”

If I wanted to visit the crypt again, I knew the way. I could come back alone and take as much time as I needed.

“Great,” Aelwen said. “Let’s go.”

As Aelwen and I retraced our steps, I was lost in thought about the Lenria plant and the statues it had chosen to cover. When we reached the palace, I turned to Aelwen.

“Thank you for taking me to the crypt,” I said. “I hope we can keep our little adventure between us.”

She scoffed. “As if I would admit to anyone that I’ve been sneaking around with Celeste’s virtual prisoner. Remember that I’m the one who took the bigger risk by taking you there.”

“And I appreciate it,” I said.

“Now forget all about it,” Aelwen said, turning to head back into her kitchen.

Satisfied that our secret would stay between us, I made my way back to my room. I probably should’ve gone back to the library, but the thought of sitting in front of all those ancient tomes was depressing. It was full of details, facts, and figures that were pointless unless Celeste was preparing to give me an exam on the history of the Dark Fae court.

Instead of books, my mind went back to the statues in the crypt. The statue of Eritraeus Haseneau took center stage. There was more to things than what Aelwen and everyone else in the palace was telling me. While they were content to let things lie as they were, I wasn’t. Much of the success I had experienced as a bounty hunter was due to my instincts. They rarely failed me and more often than not revealed what no one else could see or sense.

And my instincts were telling me that Eritraeus Haseneau’s grandson was a piece of the Winding Thorn puzzle. If he really was holding up the Dark Fae court in my father’s absence, then he was worth talking to…and keeping an eye on.

In my room, I caught sight of myself in the mirror and winced. I was a total mess. My hair was in disarray, my clothes and shoes were covered in dirt, my arms were covered in scratches, and my hands were bloody. The Lenria plant had put up one hell of a fight and made it look obvious that I hadn’t been tucked away in the library for the last hour or so.

Not wanting to raise suspicions about my whereabouts, I cleaned up as quickly as I could before Celeste saw me. As I was buttoning my fresh shirt, there was a knock at the door. Celeste stepped in a moment later and looked me up from head to toe. Luckily, she didn’t see anything to make her suspicious.

“How are your studies going?” she asked.

“Great, I’m learning so much,” I said.

“Wonderful,” she said.

“Speaking of the court,” I said. “Would it be possible for me to speak with Kastian Haseneau?”

Celeste’s eyes widened, and she shut the door behind her. Her expression hardened as she stepped closer. It wasn’t a good look, that was for sure.

“Why do you want to speak with him?”

**Episode 5192**

Despite the constant danger we faced, life went on as usual. As much as I wanted to laze about in bed and pretend like the previous day had never happened, I didn’t have the option. The team was counting on me, and I refused to let them down.

“Yeah, I’ll be there soon,” I said into the phone.

Gael and I chatted for another minute before we both hung up, and I hurried around the room to gather my things. The cup of coffee in my hand sloshed around as I turned. All the while, Greyson followed my every move like he was terrified something was going to snatch me away before his eyes.

*Lord knows the Dark Fae have already tried*, I thought.

“I’m taking you to crew practice today,” he said suddenly.

The coffee burned a trail down my throat as I stared at him. His tone didn’t brook an argument, not that I intended to give him one. He was being overprotective because of the danger the Dark Fae mafia posed. After my last run-in with them, I wasn’t about to turn down his gracious offer.

I nodded. “Sure. That sounds like a good idea.”

He sighed. “Whatever I can do to make sure you stay safe. I don’t like the idea of you leaving the pack house—”

“I’m not safer here than I am anywhere else,” I said.

The thought of being trapped in the house again filled me with dread. The Dark Fae had ruined the notion of a home, sweet, home for me. What was the point of lying low at home when they could easily get to me there as well?

“Trust me, I know,” Greyson said, sounding pained.

I stopped what I was doing and wrapped my arms around him. He hugged me back and dropped a kiss on my head.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” I said. “I’m a lot harder to kill than I look.”

“Thank goodness for that,” he said. “I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

“Okay.”

I packed the last of my things into my duffel bag, then joined Greyson downstairs. He was speaking with Rishika, who nodded at whatever he had just said. They both turned to look at me as I approached them.

“Rishika’s coming with us,” Greyson said. “She’ll stay with you while you’re at practice.”

That was new to me, and I didn’t bother to hide my surprise. Having Jay and Lola tail me was one thing, but to have someone with me all day was another. I didn’t want my team to think there was something going on, even if there was.

“You think that’s necessary?” I asked. “I mean, I like you, Rishika. Don’t get me wrong. But isn’t this a bit much?”

Rishika turned to Greyson, who stared at me with a grave expression on his face. He had already made up his mind, but that didn’t stop me from questioning his decision.

“I’m not taking any chances,” he said. “I would go myself, but I’ve got to deal with the Dark Fae we captured. Besides, Rishika is best equipped to protect you. Please don’t fight me on this. I need to know you’re safe at all times when I’m not with you.”

“No, I get it,” I said. “Well, I guess we should get going.”

The three of us piled into Greyson’s car and made our way to campus. On the way, I noticed that Greyson kept looking into the rearview mirror. He took a different path than usual and drove at varying speeds on the highway. If someone was following us, his maneuvers would force them to reveal themselves.

It took us three times longer than usual to get to practice, but at least no one was on our tail. I didn’t blame Greyson for being extra careful. We couldn’t afford to deal with any more nasty surprises courtesy of the Dark Fae mafia. When we finally got to campus, I said goodbye and got ready to race out of his car. Greyson stopped me as soon as my fingers landed on the door handle.

“I trust Rishika to keep you safe, but I want you to be careful,” he said. “If something happens, don’t try and take on any Dark Fae alone. They have powers that we’re still trying to get a handle on. It’s better to avoid them at all costs.”

The nightmare from yesterday came back to mind, and I shivered as a chill went down my spine. I would avoid taking on any Dark Fae if at all possible. But if push came to shove, I could tap into my powers.

“I’ll only fight if I have no other options,” I said.

“Good,” Greyson said.

He leaned over to kiss me, and I melted into him, the rest of the world falling away. As much as I would’ve loved to have stayed there with him, I had to go. I hopped out of his car with Rishika close behind. We made our way to the crew facilities as Greyson drove off.

“Thanks for coming with me today,” I said, then smiled. “I bet if you were on our crew team, we would never lose a race.”

Rishika chuckled. “I don’t know about that. I prefer sports that involve punching and kicking.”

“Yeah, we mostly have rowing and screaming,” I said. “Oh, and the occasional splashing. Sure you’re not into that?”

“Mm, hard pass.”

We fell into an amicable silence as we walked. At one point, Rishika responded to a text. She looked up and let out a quiet sigh. Was she worried about something?

“How long do you think practice is going to be?” she asked.

“It’s probably going to be a long one,” I said. “Our regatta is coming up, and we’re training as much as possible to make sure we’re ready.”

“I get that, but how long do you think that will take?” she asked. “Like a couple of hours? All day?”

I shrugged. “Sorry, I have no idea. It all depends on what Coach thinks we need to practice. I can ask him and let you know. Why? Is something wrong?”

Rishika turned her head. “I…have some things to do.”

She seemed uncomfortable, and it was so unlike her that I couldn’t help but try and figure out why. I put a hand on her upper arm to get her attention.

“Are you sure there isn’t something else going on?” I asked. “I can call Greyson and maybe have Jay or Ravi come with me instead.”

“No, that’s fine. It’s not necessary,” Rishika said. “I’ll stay as long as you need me to. It’s just that…”

“It’s just what?” I asked. “Whatever it is, just tell me. I’m not here to judge or anything.”

“I…have plans with Cresta this afternoon,” she said. “A date.”

My stomach tightened. Suddenly I understood why Rishika had been so hesitant to clue me in. Still, I gave her a soft smile.

“I appreciate your discretion, but please don’t feel like you have to hide your personal life from me,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong about having plans with someone else.”

“I just didn’t want things to get weird,” Rishika said.

A laugh bubbled out of me. “Seriously? Our lives are nothing but weird!”

Rishika laughed too. “I can’t argue that. But are you really okay with this? With me and Cresta, I mean?”

“Honestly, I’m still trying to get used to you dating other people, but I meant what I said before,” I said. “You have the right to see whoever you want. I know your feelings for Artemis haven’t changed.”

“I miss Artemis so much,” Rishika said. “But I get that she had to go. I just hope she finds what she went looking for.”

“Me too,” I said. “We both want nothing but the best for her.”

I gave Rishika a quick hug, then we were on our way. By the time I got to the dock area, the guys were all there. They were lined up, and our coach was walking back and forth as he lectured them about something. He was probably drilling them with the strategy we would be using for the regatta.

“I’d better go,” I said. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Absolutely. I’ll hang back here and keep an eye on all sides.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “See you later.”

“I’ll be seeing you all day,” she joked.

I chuckled and still had a smile on my face as I jogged down the dock to where my team was. As I got closer, I noticed all of the guys had glum expressions on their faces. The coach’s voice echoed off the water, and I could tell immediately that he wasn’t explaining so much as yelling at all of the guys.

The second Coach saw me, he barreled toward me like he was going to tear me apart. I braced myself for whatever was coming my way but got knocked on my ass the second he opened his mouth.

“What do you know about the break-in at the Fringeheads?” he asked.

**Episode 5193**

**Greyson**

After dropping Cali and Rishika off, I steeled myself for what I had to do next.

I parked down the street from Kendall’s place and stared at it as I tried to come up with a plan. She was the last person I wanted to see, and I knew she never wanted to see me again. Too bad for her, I was more persistent than she could’ve imagined.

But she was just as persistent. No matter how many times I asked, she never told me what I needed to know. Given the chance, she would’ve happily taken her secrets to the grave. Given the chance, the Dark Fae mafia would have made it so.

That was why I had to speak to her.

Our last encounter hadn’t gone too well, but she was the only one who could give me answers. Whatever she was keeping from me was surely the key to figuring out how to stop the Dark Fae mafia. She was one of the few people who had tangled with them and lived to tell the tale.

*Should I call or should I just knock on her door?* I wondered.

There was always a chance that she wouldn’t be home, though I couldn’t imagine where else she would be. She was hiding out from the Dark Fae mafia too, and I doubted she would be traipsing all over town, leaving a trail that could lead right back to her.

No, Kendall hadn’t managed to stay alive this long by being stupid.

Figuring she was home, I knew it would be better to catch her by surprise than give her a heads-up about my arrival. If she knew I was about to make an unwanted visit, she would’ve done everything possible to avoid me.

Kendall had made it perfectly clear that she didn’t want me to reach out to her again. In fact, it was the only thing she had been clear about. But that was before the Dark Fae mafia had launched a full assault on the Redwood and Samara packs. There was no way we could sweep that under the rug.

And there was no way Kendall could act like she wasn’t a part of it. No matter how much she hated the sight of me, there was no way she could avoid me. I wouldn’t allow it. Not when the stakes were so goddamn high.

Despite the ruthlessness of the Dark Fae mafia, we had all been incredibly lucky so far. Nobody had been seriously hurt, and I vowed to make sure that no one ever would. My fingers tightened around the steering wheel as my thoughts went back to the night before.

Xavier had rescued Cali from the magical tripwire, and she had held his hand in gratitude. I wasn’t sure which hurt me more—that my brother had been the one to save my mate or that she had taken the time to thank him like that. Regardless, it ate me up inside. Cali should have been thanking me, but I hadn’t been the one to save her.

And I hated that.

As Cali’s mate, I should be the one who was always there for her. She should rely only on me. Instead, Xavier had been the one to run to her rescue. Not once, but twice. That was two times too many and exactly the reason why I was getting ready to confront Kendall. It was about time I put an end to the Dark Fae mafia bullshit.

I got out of my car and started walking across the street. My head was on a swivel as I surveyed the area, making sure there were no signs of trouble. The last thing I wanted was to get caught off guard yet again.

Showing up to Kendall’s place was a big risk. I was exposing myself to all kinds of attacks, but I didn’t think the Dark Fae mafia was reckless enough to attack me in broad daylight in this area. There were far too many human houses around here, and I doubted the Dark Fae wanted any human law enforcement on their asses.

*I hope*.

I made it to Kendall’s driveway and looked up at the small house. I couldn’t hear any movement inside or see anything through the front window. That made sense if Kendall was home alone… *Or if there’s another ambush waiting for me* *like last time*, I thought darkly. I kept my guard up and footsteps light as I took a few long strides up the drive and ended up at the front door.

I raised my hand to knock just as the door swung open. Kendall was holding a box and looked startled to see me standing there. Her violet eyes flashed angrily as she narrowed them on me.

“I told you to stay the fuck away from me,” she said.

Her tone was deadly but had zero effect on me. I didn’t give a shit what she wanted; I was there to get what I wanted.

“Yeah, I’ve never been too good at obeying,” I said, then glanced at the box. “You going somewhere?”

Kendall pulled the box closer to her chest. “That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, but I think it is.” I pushed past her to get into her house, then stopped short. It was completely empty save for a few other boxes and stray cables on the floor. I turned back to Kendall. “What’s going on?”

“You can see for yourself,” she said. “I’m moving.”

“Where?” I asked.

“Somewhere you won’t be able to find me,” she said.

Her words struck the wrong chord within me. Dropping all pretense of being polite, I got in Kendall’s face and made sure she didn’t miss a thing I was about to say.

“I’m not going to stop until you tell me what’s really going on,” I said.

She shook her head. “That could be a deadly mistake.”

Sick of her aversion tactics, I slammed the front door shut. She jumped at the loud sound but held her ground as I got back in her face. I boxed her in, implying that she should’ve been just as afraid of me as the Dark Fae after her.

“I’ve had enough of this,” I snarled. “You just made a goddamn threat—”

“I’m not threatening you,” she said, cutting in. “I’m just stating a fact. The more you poke around into matters that have nothing to do with you, the closer you get to setting off an explosion. Once this mess explodes, you’ll be drowning in shrapnel. You won’t know what hit you.”

“That explosion already happened,” I said. “Did you know the Dark Fae mafia attacked my pack? And the Samara pack?”

Kendall’s eyes widened as her thin veneer of defiance faltered. She looked alarmed enough to bolt out of here and take off to parts unknown.

“Was anyone hurt?” she asked.

I blinked. “I’m surprised you give a shit.”

The hard look returned, and she glared at me with disdain. The feeling was mutual. I glared right back at her, not intimidated in the slightest.

“Was anyone hurt?” she asked again.

“There were a few injuries but nothing major,” I said. “We were lucky. We managed to hold off the attack. For now.”

Kendall let out a breath. Had I not known any better, I would’ve sworn she was worried about both packs. Fortunately, I did know better.

“I’m…glad to hear it,” she mumbled. “But I really have to go. I can’t stay here another minute. It’s too dangerous.”

“No,” I said, blocking her path.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” she asked. “This is bigger than you can imagine. The longer you’re here with me, the more danger you’ll all be in.”

“Trust me, I know,” I said, then gestured to her empty house. “It’s obvious you’re running away from something big. Whatever it is, let me help you. I’m sure you’re sick of having to constantly look over your shoulder.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think you can help me,” she said. “This is more than you can handle.”

“Only because I don’t know the full extent of things,” I said. “But what I do know is that running away isn’t going to solve anything. They’re going to keep coming after you. And my pack. I need your help.”

“You think I wouldn’t help myself if I could?” she asked. “The only way you can help me, and yourself, is to get lost and stay that way. So far, running has kept me alive. If you keep pushing things, it’ll be the only way you’ll be able to stay alive too.”

“I’m not running. Not now or ever,” I said. “And especially not after catching one of the Dark Fae.”

Kendall’s eyes shot up to mine. “Alive? You caught one of them alive?”

I nodded. “His shitty luck might be our lucky break. I’m going to interrogate him today, and I thought you might want to join me. Will you?”

**Episode 5194**

**Xavier**

Sweat poured off my brow as I did a muscle-up over the pull-up bar. My body trembled as I held the pose for a few seconds before I dipped below the bar again. I widened my grip and banged out a last set of pull-ups before I dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups.

With my body occupied, my mind was left free to wander. It brought back memories of the night before when I had hesitated to answer Ava’s question. If only things had been simpler. I wished more than anything that I could have told Ava that my mother had forgiven her. Hell, I wished Colton would fully forgive her too. But my desires were nothing more than a pipe dream.

If anything, Marlene had warned me to be careful around Ava. She had never trusted her and in the end, she had been right. But…that was before. Ava had changed and had done what she could to make things up to me.

I didn’t want to lie to Ava, but telling her the truth wasn’t an option either. How could I tell her that my mother would never forgive her? If I had been that candid, Ava would’ve been crushed. She would have been destined to live with the burden of her guilt for the rest of her life. I refused to do that to my mate.

My sweaty hands slipped on the concrete floor, and I decided I’d had enough. I got up to wipe my face with my towel, then used it to dry off my chest and abs. As I drank some water, I thought about what mattered most in my life.

I loved Ava and was proud to have her as my Luna. It didn’t matter that Marlene and Colton couldn’t forgive her. All that mattered was that *I* had forgiven her. All that mattered was that we made the most of our second chance.

Given that, I answered Ava’s question as best I could and told her that I didn’t know if Marlene had explicitly forgiven her. Her eyes had dimmed a bit, and I rushed in to tell her that perhaps, in time, my mother would forgive Ava. It was a long shot, but it was better than no shot at all.

Before Ava could question it, I pulled her into a hug and held her tight. I thought about what I said to her.

*“Silas caused a lot of things to happen, things that affected each of us in different ways,” I said. “And as nice as it would be to have my mother forgive you, she’s not here anymore. But we are. And that’s all that matters. We have each other. Everything else is extra or none of our business.”*

*Ava’s eyes shined as she looked into mine. She leaned in to kiss me until we forgot about the world. My mother and brother could think what they wanted of her; it didn’t make a difference to me.*

*“Thank you, X,” she said. “Thank you for being so open and honest with me.”*

I grimaced. Had I been open and honest with her, or had I just been trying to avoid World War III? Things would never be easy between us, and I realized it was best to appreciate things as they were. I was as honest with Ava as I could be at the moment.

And it was more than enough.

I smiled when I thought about how happy Ava had been after our talk. It was amazing how easily I had lifted her spirits by saying the right things. Usually, I was too busy sticking my foot in my mouth to do right by her. Being able to get past all of our past bullshit and current problems was awesome.

*“You know I love you, right?” she asked.*

*I smiled. “Of course. Isn’t that why we fight all the time?”*

*Ava laughed. “Maybe.”*

Shaking the pleasant memories from my head, I put all the weights I had used back, then went to go find Ava. She had just come back from a run and looked energized.

“We should go check on the pack,” I said. “I want to make sure we’re still united. We don’t want to risk lowering our guards and giving the Dark Fae a chance to sneak up on us again.”

“Never,” Ava said. “I’m sure the pack is ready to kick Dark Fae ass as much as I am. Let’s go.”

I smiled and let her lead the way. She was in a good mood, which put me in a better mood. We joined the rest of the pack, which was also feeling upbeat. It wouldn’t have surprised me if they had been warier or more paranoid given what we had just gone through. Instead, they were all swapping war stories about fighting the Dark Fae.

“That tripwire was something else!” Knox said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It totally saved us,” Josephine said.

“Magic to the rescue,” Geraint added. “Well, *that* kind of magic.”

Not only were the Samaras united against our common foe, but they were looking forward to the next fight. I would have much preferred to never deal with the Dark Fae mafia again, but at least I knew my pack was ready to face them head-on again.

“How about you two join me for a patrol?” I asked.

Knox and Ava exchanged a glance, then nodded. Within minutes, we had all shifted and were running toward the tripwire. It stood there, utterly innocuous and invisible to the naked eye. But that tripwire had saved all our asses.

*Big ups to Big Mac*, I thought.

Then I stopped thinking entirely and let my body take over. There was no better escape than running in my wolf form with Ava beside me. I felt free and unencumbered by the duties that every Alpha had to deal with. Unfortunately, I couldn’t revel in that feeling. We all had to keep our guard up until the Dark Fae mafia was dealt with.

Ava, Knox, and I surveyed the area around the tripwire. The carnage was all gone, and there was no discernible scent that I could pick up. It was almost like it had never happened, but we all knew damn well what had almost happened. We had been taken by surprise by the Dark Fae and nearly paid for it with our lives. I realized how screwed we would have been without Big Mac’s help.

And I knew the only reason she had helped us was because of Greyson.

I thought back to when I had saved Cali from the tripwire. The look on Greyson’s face had been hard to miss and all too easy to decipher. He had taken a hit, and it wasn’t just because I had saved Cali. Again.

No. What really hurt my brother was the fact that Cali had thanked me in front of him. She had given me her hand, and I hadn’t hesitated to take it. What were we supposed to do? Pretend it didn’t happen?

I wasn’t sorry that Cali had given me her thanks, but I was sorry that Ava had been there to see it too. She had been upset, but she had managed to move past it. Would Greyson be able to?

*Not my problem*, I thought.

After we circled around, we met in the middle and decided Ava was right. Broadening our patrol perimeter could keep us from suffering another sneak attack. It wasn’t a fail-safe measure, but at the very least, it would buy our scouts enough time to make it through the tripwire if we were to be attacked again.

I gave it some thought and increased the distance just enough. It was a risk, but it was one we would all have to take to keep the pack safe. I mind linked to tell Ava and Knox about my plan. They weren’t any more thrilled about it than I was, but we had few options.

*Do you think the Fae could enlist a witch of their own to help them?* Knox asked.

*Shit*, Ava said, horrified by the notion.

*I have no idea. I’ll have to ask Big Mac about it*, I said. *But I sure as hell hope not.*

As we started back toward the pack house, I had to pause for a moment. My headache was creeping back in with a vengeance, and I didn’t want Knox to know. I suspected Ava had a sixth sense about it and would eventually figure it out. But that didn’t mean I wanted the rest of the pack to be clued into what was happening. I wondered when the headaches would finally stop. I couldn’t imagine living the rest of my life that way. I refused to.

The second we reached the pack house, I shifted back and rushed inside to get some painkillers. Having to rely on them to get through my day pissed me off to no end. All they did was put a Band-Aid on my pain and make it somewhat bearable. My phone buzzed as I knocked the pills back. It was Greyson calling.

“Hi,” I said.

“If you can, you should come over to the Redwood pack house,” he said.

“Why?” I asked, rubbing my temple.

“We’re about to interrogate the Fae we captured,” he said. “Thought you might want to be here.”

**Episode 5195**

My mouth went drier than a desert.

I stared blankly at Coach, hoping I could keep the guilt from bubbling up and giving me away. He had asked me if I knew anything about the break-in, but he was looking at me like he already knew who was responsible.

I gulped and tried to think of another way I could stall. There was no way I could tell him the truth, but I hated lying. I was terrible at it. Some people could lie as easily as they breathed. Not me. I usually gave myself away before I even opened my mouth.

And if I did try to lie to Coach, everything I said would eventually spiral into a complete web of contradictory lies. My legs trembled. I was screwed.

Just as I got ready to play possum and pretend to faint, Gael made his way over to where we were standing. He glanced at me and gave a subtle nod. He was there to save the day.

“We already told Coach that we have no idea what’s going on over there,” he said. “We didn’t even know about the break-in until Coach brought it up.”

“Oh. Yeah,” I said lamely.

“Seriously, what an awful thing to do to a good team,” Gael said. “Was anything taken during the break-in?”

Relief washed over me as Gael spoke up on my behalf. Still, I avoided looking at him. Coach continued to stare at me like he was trying to drill a hole into my head. If I made the wrong face, he would be onto me. So I became a statue and hardly took a breath until his gaze finally shifted to Gael.

“If I find out otherwise…” he said.

Coach let us fill in the blank on his terrifying threat. We suffered under the scrutiny of his intense stare before he turned to the rest of the team.

“I want to see everyone working twice as hard today!” he said. “No slacking. No half-assing!”

“Yes, Coach!” we all shouted.

*Does that mean we’ll be here all day?* I wondered.

Not wanting to forget about Rishika’s date, I waited for Coach to turn back around so I could ask him how long practice was going to take. But when he spun around, his glare was so intense that I figured my question could wait. I wasn’t about to poke the bear.

“What the hell is everyone standing around for?” he barked. “Get rowing!”

As Gael and I jogged to join the rest of our team, which was headed for the boats, I turned to give him a smile.

“Thanks for stepping in for me,” I said. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“I’m the captain,” Gael said. “I have to look out for my crew. But we still have a serious problem on our hands.”

I stopped as my stomach curled into knots. “What now? We handed back the fish. Why can’t we just act like it never happened and forget all about it?”

Gael stepped closer and lowered his voice. “We still have the mascot head that Bear took.”

“Where?” I asked.

I looked around, as if he would have been dumb enough to leave it out in the open. Then again, the mascot would stick out like a sore thumb no matter where it was. Codsworth joined us as Gael explained.

“We hid it under some tarps in the boathouse,” Gael said. “I don’t think Coach will find it, but we can’t keep it there forever.”

“Definitely not. We have to do something about that head,” Codsworth said. “I’ve heard people talking about stolen spirit totems haunting the people who stole them.”

Gael and I stared at Codsworth like he had lost his mind. We didn’t have time for any more of his crazy beliefs or conspiracy theories.

“It’s a mascot head,” I said.

“And it’s not a very good one either,” Gael said. “Did you guys see how fake it looks? All that money for their fancy facilities and their beloved fish looks like shit.”

Codsworth shrugged. “Good or not, it doesn’t matter. We still need to do something about it.”

“Can’t we just return it?” I asked. “Maybe anonymously?”

Gael shook his head. “That’s too risky. We all heard Coach. If he finds out, we’re screwed.”

“How about we bury it?” Codsworth asked, lighting up. “You got plenty of space on your land, right, Cali?”

I rolled my eyes, thinking he was joking. But his earnest gaze told me otherwise. I shook my head vehemently.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You’re not bringing that thing anywhere near my place.”

“Why not? It makes perfect sense,” Codsworth said.

“Not happening,” I said. “We’re not adding more crimes to the list. Sorry.”

The last thing I needed was for a superstitious, supernatural-obsessed Codsworth and the rest of my crew team traipsing all over the pack grounds. Codsworth had barely survived his last scrape with the supernatural world. Neither he nor the rest of the team would stand a chance against the Dark Fae mafia. No. They had to stay the hell away from the pack and our land.

*There’s too much supernatural shit going on already. No need to make it worse*, I thought.

“Let’s just keep it hidden for now,” I said. “We can get it when we figure out what to do with it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gael said. “Let’s go before Coach loses his shit. Again.”

We got on our boat and started practice. Coach barked orders via his megaphone and screamed so loud he made our ears ring. He reprimanded us for every mistake we made and had us do so many calisthenics as punishment that I thought we were going to die.

“What the hell was that, Bear? Patel?” Coach screamed. “Gael, are you even trying to be a damn captain to your team? Everyone get the hell back on this dock and give me fifty burpees!”

Our boat coasted over the water as we groaned. While I didn’t have to row, my arms were still screaming from the last set of burpees we had done. Coach didn’t come out and say it, but he was absolutely punishing us for the Fringehead break-in. He called it practice, but that was capital punishment.

We got to the dock and banged out fifty burpees. My arms gave out so many times that I lay on the ground more often than not. Coach screamed at us until we all finished our reps, then screamed at us until we were back on the boat and rowing at top speed.

Hours later—or perhaps even days—we dragged our bedraggled asses to the dock one last time. Practice was finally over. The second I helped the guys load up the boats, I rushed over to Rishika. Every one of my muscles was screaming.

“Good job out there,” she said. “You can really take a scolding.”

“Thanks,” I said with a laugh. “Coach has trained us well.”

“Greyson’s waiting for us in the parking lot,” she said.

“Oh, wow,” I said. “Has he been waiting long?”

“Yeah, but he refused to leave and come back again,” Rishika said.

I wasn’t surprised and figured Greyson wasn’t going to take any more chances. Rishika and I made our way back to the parking lot where he had dropped us off that morning. I was dying to get home and soothe my aching bones with a hot bath. If we didn’t win the regatta, it wouldn’t be for lack of conditioning.

As we approached Greyson’s car, I slowed. Greyson wasn’t alone. I frowned. He hadn’t mentioned anything about someone joining us.

“Who’s that with him?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rishika said. “He didn’t mention anyone to me.”

When we got closer, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Kendall was sitting in the back seat of the car and looking about as enthusiastic about it as someone sitting in the electric chair.

*What is she doing here?*

Despite the confusion, Rishika and I got in Greyson’s car. She got in the back with the sullen Kendall, and I sat up front next to Greyson.

“Hey,” I said, leaning over to kiss him.

As good as it felt to have his lips pressed against mine, I felt a little self-conscious kissing Greyson in front of Kendall. I was tempted to cut it short, but I shook it off. I leaned into Greyson, and he responded by deepening the kiss. He was my mate, and I had no reason to feel weird about kissing him.

“How was practice, love?” Greyson asked.

“Brutal,” I said, then turned to Kendall. “Hey, how’s it going?”

Kendall glanced my way, then turned to look out the window. She didn’t bother to reply to my greeting. It was obvious she didn’t want to be here. The tension between her and Greyson was off the charts.

“So…what’s going on?” I asked.

“Kendall is going to assist us during the interrogation,” Greyson said, looking at her briefly.

“Oh, good,” I said.

Kendall scoffed, and the rest of us pretended not to hear it. I wasn’t sure how helpful she was going to be during the interrogation, but if Greyson had taken the trouble to find her and bring her, then it had to have been for a reason.

It was a quiet, awkward drive to the pack house. I was looking forward to hopping out of the car the moment I got the chance. The tension was suffocating. But I forgot about my escape when I saw Xavier waiting outside for us.

*Greyson invited him too?*

Xavier’s eyes followed me as we got out of the car and approached him. I tried not to let it affect me, but he was watching me like a predator watched its prey. I shouldn’t have liked it as much as I did. When we got close, he shifted his gaze to Kendall before he turned to Greyson.

“So where is this Fae?” he asked.

**Episode 5196**

**Xavier**

*This ought to be good*, I thought.

After getting the world’s most awkward reception outside, Greyson led us downstairs to the pack house’s basement. They were keeping the Dark Fae mafia member there, which I thought was stupid. The Dark Fae had proven just how deadly they could be, but instead of keeping them at a distance, Greyson had brought his Fae captive home.

All the Fae had to do was escape to unleash another attack on the Redwood pack. It was unlikely but not impossible. Had I been the Redwood Alpha, I would have kept the Fae under lock and key far away from the pack house. But I wasn’t, so I kept my mouth shut. Actually, nobody said a word, and I wondered what was causing all the tension in the air. I glanced at Cali, then Greyson, and finally Kendall, but I couldn’t tell why they were all so tense.

Were they not looking forward to beating some answers out of that Dark Fae asshole? Because I was. I’d been dying for the chance ever since Greyson had invited me to attend the interrogation. I figured they would have been just as eager to unravel the Dark Fae mystery. The mood was far from upbeat, but the overwhelming amount of tension had nothing to do with the Dark Fae on the premises. It was something else. But what?

I glanced at Cali again. She had been surprised to see me waiting outside of the pack house. It was obvious Greyson hadn’t bothered to tell her that I was coming over. He hadn’t thought it important to share the news with her.

*Fuck him*, I thought.

Greyson was probably still hurting about me saving Cali’s life, but that didn’t explain the tension. Was it because of Kendall then? I glanced at her as she trudged her way to the basement with us. Greyson had mentioned she was coming, but she didn’t look too happy to be there. In fact, she looked ready to bolt any second. Frankly, I had no idea why she was there or what she had to do with all the Dark Fae mafia shit.

*I better get some answers soon.*

We came to a stop in front of the basement door. I couldn’t hear anything from inside, but I could smell blood from where I was standing. Greyson turned to me.

“I think I should lead the investigation,” he said.

I snorted. “Of course you should. Because you’re so damned qualified to do it, right?”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. I could tell he wanted to say a few choice words, and I puffed my chest out as if daring him to do just that. He had done nothing if not prove that he wasn’t capable of handling the situation. If it hadn’t been for Big Mac and me, the Redwoods would have been taken out by the Dark Fae mafia already.

Never mind the fact that Big Mac and Greyson had saved the Samaras by creating a tripwire for us. The only reason things were a total shitstorm was because Greyson had brought the Dark Fae to our doorsteps. So as far as I was concerned, he wasn’t the right guy to get the answers needed, and I wasn’t afraid of saying it to his face.

“You’re welcome to lead it if you want to,” Greyson said.

*Well, shit*.

I stared at him for a second. “Are you serious?”

“Do either of you have any idea what you’re doing?” Kendall asked. “Do you even know what you’re dealing with?”

Everyone turned to her. Her violet eyes flashed with the anger she had barely been able to hide beneath her enigmatic surface.

“If that guy is who you all say he is—”

“He is,” Greyson said.

“If he is, then don’t expect him to say much,” she said. “Loose lips are a death sentence in the Dark Fae mafia. Nothing you could do could ever compare to what they’ll do to him if he talks.”

“And just who are you?” I asked. “How is it that you know so much about these Fae?”

Kendall shrugged and tried to dim her intensity. “All I know is that they can be tough to crack. Don’t expect any miracles.”

I snorted. “And isn’t that why you’re here? To provide us with a miracle?”

Kendall glared at me as I crossed my arms. She could stare all she wanted; I wasn’t the one keeping secrets. And she was absolutely not telling us everything she knew.

Cali cleared her throat. “Shouldn’t we try talking to him?”

“*Try* is pretty much all you can do,” Kendall said. “You’ll see pretty quickly that it won’t get you anywhere.”

“Are you all okay with me leading the investigation?” Greyson asked. “He might be willing to cooperate if it’s just one of us talking to him.”

The others nodded, and I kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t okay with Greyson taking the lead, but I wasn’t about to fight him on it. My head was killing me, and arguing with Greyson was only going to make it worse. The faster we got started, the sooner we could get answers.

We stepped into the dimly lit room and closed the door behind us. The Dark Fae looked like hell. He was propped up in the middle of the room with his arms stretched out to either side. The iron shackles were chafing his skin raw and looked so painful that I fought the urge to grimace. His time at the Redwood pack house had been anything but pleasant.

The Fae was in pain, but I could see the look of disdain in his eyes and felt his defiance radiating off of him in waves. The way he sneered made me want to kick the look off his face. If he didn’t give us the information we needed, I would be rearranging his features with the sole of my shoe.

Greyson knelt next to his captive. “We have a few questions for you.”

“I already told you fucks that I’m not telling you shit,” the Fae said.

I balled my hand into a fist and got ready to turn the Fae’s eyes black and blue. Cali reached out and gently took my hand, keeping me in place. The Fae watched it all and sneered.

“You need a halfling to hold your hand, little wolf?” he taunted. “Pathetic.”

“You’re lucky she did, asshole,” I snarled. “Otherwise, you’d be missing a limb right now.”

“You should consider answering his questions,” Kendall said, cutting in.

The Fae regarded her with a cold, calculating gaze. She held her ground, but I could tell she didn’t like being in the same room, house, or zip code as the guy. The Fae shook his head, unwilling to budge.

“You should reconsider,” Greyson said. “Things will be a lot worse for you if you don’t.”

“I doubt that,” the Dark Fae said. “You have no idea what you’re up against.”

“I’ll be happy to show this asshole what werewolves are capable of,” I snarled. “And we don’t need a magical tripwire to do it.”

“Enough,” Greyson said. “Let me handle this.”

“Handle what?” the Fae asked. “Nothing you say is going to change my mind.”

I listened to Greyson say everything possible to convince the Fae asshole to talk. I could hear the iron sizzling his skin, but he kept his lips sealed. He was never going to tell us a damn thing. My head pounded, and the last of my patience slipped away.

“If he’s not going to talk, then he’s useless,” I said. “Maybe we should just throw him into the tripwire and enjoy the fireworks as he explodes into a million pieces.”

Cali turned to me, a mixture of horror and sadness on her face. As much as I wanted to fold her into my arms and tell her that I didn’t mean a word of it, I couldn’t. For various reasons. My words were harsh, and my threat was savage, but sometimes you had to play hard to win. The only way she, Ava, and the rest of us would ever be safe was if we got that Dark Fae talking.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Cali said. “All we need to know is who is behind this. Who sent you? Why?”

The Fae’s eyes stayed fixated on Cali’s face. Something about the way he was looking at her didn’t sit right with me. As I got ready to kick his head like a soccer ball, Kendall stepped closer and leaned down to whisper in his ear. I couldn’t hear what she was saying, but I did catch the Fae’s surprised reaction. Whatever she was whispering had caught him off guard…and scared him.

Sweat broke out across his brow, and the room was soon filled with the stench of his fear. Kendall straightened and stepped back like nothing happened. The Fae recovered quickly and hid his fear behind his mask of defiance. He glared at us like we were the ones in shackles instead of him.

“It’s too late,” he hissed. “They’re already coming for you. All of you.”

**Episode 5197**

The Dark Fae’s threat made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

His words were terrifying, but it was the conviction with which they were delivered that shook me to my core. He glared at me with such hatred and disdain that it made me physically ill. The sooner I got out of that makeshift dungeon, the better.

I had no idea what Kendall had whispered to the Fae, but whatever it was, it had scared him. He had barely been able to hide his reaction, but it clearly hadn’t been enough to get him to cooperate. If anything, her message had just pushed him over the edge.

Xavier growled quietly, and I stole a glance at him. His fists were balled at his sides, and he glared at the Fae like he was getting ready to throw him into the tripwire. The thought sent a chill down my spine. Xavier was holding onto his temper by a thin thread, and I didn’t want him to lose his shit and attack the Fae. He seemed tenser than usual, but I wasn’t sure why. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to come after all. He probably thought it was his duty as an Alpha to be present, but that didn’t mean he was going to enjoy it.

*Or is it something else?* I wondered.

Was Xavier so tense because he was thinking about what had happened the day before? I had thanked him for saving my life, not fully realizing the repercussions that would come from it. As much as I wanted to know what was going on, I wasn’t going to ask. Not in front of everyone and certainly not in front of Greyson.

“If he doesn’t want to talk, there’s no point in keeping him company,” Greyson said.

“Enjoy your lives while you can,” the Fae said. “Fucking filthy wolves. And you, halfling trash. Just wait until—”

Xavier snarled, and Greyson used his shoulder to push him out of the room before slamming the door shut behind him.

“Anyone else regret trying to reason with him?” I said, trying to hide how shaken I was.

“What are you going to do about him?” Xavier asked Greyson. “He’s not talking except to issue more threats against the packs.”

Greyson sighed. “I think all we can do is brace for whatever attack is coming next. We have to double down our defenses and make sure we won’t be caught off guard. Big Mac can help us, and we might be able to recruit more magic users to help us too.”

“Those are all half measures,” Xavier said. “We can’t just keep playing defense and expect to end this. We need to strike and take them out before they take us out.”

“I’m all ears if you have a plan,” Greyson said. “But unless you can get more out of that Fae than I can, we don’t know enough to strike back.”

They went back and forth, arguing what was the best plan of action and conceding that neither really knew what to do other than brace for an attack. Kendall stood close by, not saying a word. She had gone back to being sullenly quiet, and I figured she could at least tell me what she had said to the Fae.

“What did you say to him in there?” I asked. “Before he said we were all as good as dead.”

She shrugged. “Something I thought he needed to hear.”

I gritted my teeth as I fought to keep the frustration from showing on my face. Kendall took zipped lips to an all-new level. She was as vague as ever and somehow less helpful than she had been before. I wasn’t sure how she was supposed to be an asset when she told us less than the Dark Fae did.

“Whatever you said to him seemed to spook him,” I said. “Not for long. But long enough.”

“Seems like it,” Kendall said.

“So what did you say?” I asked.

Kendall gave me a half smile, then leaned in close. “I told him I would slit his throat.”

My blood ran cold as I leaned away from her. Her violet eyes were as hard as stone, making me wonder just how deadly she really was.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

But before she could answer, she turned her bright eyes on Greyson.

“I warned you he wouldn’t talk,” she said.

“We’re just getting started,” Greyson replied. “He’ll talk soon enough, or—”

 “Whoa. Stop. I agreed to come out here with you, and I did that,” she said. “But I’m not sticking around here all day.”

“I think you should,” Greyson said. “We need to have a conversation about what we plan to do.”

Xavier snorted. “I already know what I think we should do, and it starts by taking a little trip outside.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Greyson said. “We need more than just brutality to solve this problem. Kendall, we need you to help us. You know more about the Dark Fae mafia than anyone here.”

Kendall sighed. “Fine. I’ll stick around to talk, but don’t expect that to make a difference.”

“It will,” Greyson said.

“It better,” Xavier muttered.

We all went upstairs. Lola flagged me down the second she spotted me, and I broke off from the rest of the group.

“So what happened?” she asked. “Did that asshole say anything?”

I shook my head. “I wish, but that guy isn’t saying a word. Oh, except to threaten us. So there’s that.”

“Maybe we should use more iron,” Lola said, then did a double take when she saw Kendall. “Whoa! What is she doing here?”

Kendall rolled her eyes and followed Greyson into the kitchen along with Xavier. Lola stared after her with wide eyes. I didn’t blame her. Up until then, we had treated Kendall like the prime suspect in a mystery novel. She was an elusive, possibly toxic woman whose dangerous liaisons had turned our worlds upside down. And we had welcomed her into our home with open arms.

“Greyson invited her over,” I said.

“What? Why?” Lola asked. “Isn’t she the reason we’re in this mess?”

“He thought she could help us get that Dark Fae talking,” I explained. “But it didn’t help.”

“She’s probably still in cahoots with them,” Lola said.

“No, I don’t think that’s—”

My phone buzzed, cutting me off. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw I had received a text from Codsworth. I gritted my teeth. If he asked about burying the head on Redwood land one more time, I was going to bury him in a shallow grave.

*We’re going to get rid of the head.*

The blood drained from my face as Coach’s threat came back to mind. Codsworth’s message was as simple as it was stressful. What did he mean they were going to “get rid” of it? What decision had they come to, and why hadn’t they included me in the process of making it?

“What’s wrong?” Lola asked.

“I think I need to go back to campus,” I said. “Like ASAP.”

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“Always wanted to be a bus driver,” Jay muttered.

He was none too pleased about being asked to act as my chaperone and chauffeur, but Greyson refused to let me leave the house without a bodyguard. Lola argued that she was coming with me, but he had insisted Jay join us too in case we ran into some trouble with the Dark Fae.

I was sure Rishika would’ve happily come with me, but she had already gone off to enjoy her date with Cresta. She had left for the Samara house the second we got home, and I wasn’t about to have Greyson call her back. We had few options, which meant Jay hadn’t been given a choice. He sighed as he came to another red light. He tapped his fingers on the dash impatiently.

“Thanks for coming with me, Jay,” I said. “I know you’d rather be anywhere but here.”

“Sure,” he said.

We got to campus and parked close to the boathouse. Jay followed closely behind as Lola and I walked on ahead.

“What’s the plan?” Lola asked.

“I don’t really know,” I said. “Codsworth just told me to meet them by the boathouse.”

“All right. You go ahead then,” she said. “Jay and I will hang back and keep an eye on things. Right, babe?”

“Yep,” Jay said as he stepped closer.

“Thanks,” I said and went off.

I found Patel carrying a shovel and hurried to catch up with him. My eyes scanned the area, making sure we wouldn’t be running into any unwanted visitors. Patel saw me and waved me over with his free hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We’re meeting in the woods by the track field,” he said.

I looked past him to see Bear and Kayden carrying something wrapped up in a tarp. Given the odd shape of the thing, it didn’t take a genius to figure out what it was. Then again, considering my crew mates’ antics, I thought it best to confirm.

“Is that the head?” I asked. “The Fringehead?”

“Yep, the one and only,” Patel said. “We’re going to bury it in an unmarked grave

*Not a hole. A grave. Okay…*

“Is that really the best idea?” I asked.

Digging a hole in the woods wasn’t a problem, but I wasn’t sure that going into the woods was wise. The Dark Fae seemed to be all over the area, if their attacks on both pack houses were any indication.

“Well, it wasn’t mine,” Patel admitted. “This is all Codsworth.”

*Of course*.

The rest of the team caught up to us. They looked eager to get rid of the mascot head by whatever means necessary. I only wished they had listened to me about just giving it back anonymously.

“Did you speak to that guy?” Gael asked.

“Huh? What guy?” I asked, baffled.

“There was some guy asking about you,” Bear said.

I stopped, then did a full circle as I looked around nervously. Was the Dark Fae mafia already there?

**Episode 5198**

**Greyson**

Determined to make the most of our meeting, I led Xavier and Kendall into my study. They took seats at the table as I closed the door behind me and locked it. I didn’t want anyone storming in while we came up with a game plan for the Dark Fae.

Despite being the one who wanted to have a conversation, I had to fight to focus on the task at hand. My mind kept drifting back to Cali. She said she had to deal with an emergency on campus, but I wished she hadn’t felt the need to go back. The Fae’s gruesome threats were anything but idle, and the Dark Fae mafia had already proven how easily they could find us.

Who could say they weren’t watching us at all times?

Had it been up to me, I would’ve kept Cali at my side at all times. It was the only way I knew she would be absolutely safe. But I swore to myself that I wasn’t going to keep her prisoner. She deserved to live her life and, as her mate, it was my duty to make sure she could. Luckily, Cali never argued with me about having a bodyguard with her. I knew Lola and Jay would do anything to protect her…

*But is it enough?* I wondered.

A part of me immediately said no. I could never protect Cali enough, and I didn’t think anyone in the Redwood pack was up to the task. Not even Rishika. She was strong, but she wouldn’t be able to fight a group of Fae while also fighting to keep Cali safe. I had been on edge the entire time she had been watching Cali and had only been able to relax after they were both in my car.

I was just as on edge with Jay and Lola watching Cali as I was when Rishika was doing it, but at least Cali had two guards with her. They would be able to give the Dark Fae more of a fight if it came down to it. And Jay already knew firsthand how dangerous they were. He would be able to hold them off while Lola and Cali ran to safety. If it even came to that.

*It’s enough for now*, I thought.

“So?” Xavier said, looking at me expectantly.

His tone grated on every one of my nerves. I didn’t appreciate his attitude or his total lack of decorum, but there was no point in fighting with him about it. Let him be an asshole. We had bigger things to deal with.

“I thought we could have a productive conversation about our situation,” I said. “Together we can find a better solution than alone.”

Kendall looked between us, her incredulity evident on her face. “What do you two have in mind?”

Xavier and I jumped at the chance to offer our opinion on next steps. As always, we were at odds with each other.

“I’d like to question the prisoner further,” I said, preferring diplomacy.

“It’s a waste of time trying to talk to that Fae,” Xavier said, preferring brutality.

“Why do you say that?” I asked. “That Fae is an asset. We should use him to get as much information as we can about the mafia.”

“And I’d totally agree with you if that Fae would open his fucking mouth to issue anything than threats,” Xavier said. “We need to be more proactive. We gotta go on the offensive and find out who’s pulling the strings so we can put an end to it.”

“Right. What better way to find out who’s the main string puller than to question our prisoner?” I asked. “We just keep at him, and he’ll tell us everything.”

Kendall shook her head. “It’s not that simple. The Dark Fae mafia is a tightly controlled organization. Everything is on a need-to-know basis, and the smaller players often have no idea who’s giving the orders.”

I leaned back in my seat and pinned Kendall with my gaze. It was the most information she had given me in days. Every time she opened up, she revealed more about how deeply tangled she was with the mafia. She was the one we should’ve been interrogating instead of the Fae.

*If only*.

“You know an awful lot about the Dark Fae mafia,” I said. “Why?”

“I know a lot about a lot of things,” Kendall countered. “Didn’t you ask me the same thing about my interest in vampires? I already told you why I have an interest in the Dark Fae mafia.”

“Hm,” I said.

Her little backstory with Hans came to mind, but I still found it hard to believe that she was his girlfriend. It was just too unlikely. Unsure of what the truth really was, I let Kendall stick to her story and just rolled with it. What did it matter how involved she was with Hans? It didn’t help resolve our problems.

“So you’re some kind of self-appointed Dark Fae expert? Fine,” Xavier said. “You tell us, then. What should we do?”

“The best thing you can do is stay out of it,” she said simply.

Xavier snorted as I shook my head. If Kendall thought we were all going to pack up and run away like she did, then she was out of her mind.

“That’s not going to happen,” I said.

“They attacked us,” Xavier said. “We can’t just pretend that didn’t happen.”

Kendall got to her feet. “I’m not telling you not to defend yourselves. I have no doubt the Dark Fae mafia will strike again. It’s only a matter of time. It’s the only real thing that prisoner of yours said.”

“Right, that’s why we go in hot and—” Xavier started.

“If you go in guns blazing while trying to find the top of this organization, you’ll fail,” she said. “Guaranteed.”

“And if we do nothing, we fail. Guaranteed.” Xavier scoffed. “Nice couple of options you gave us there. Glad we brought you in.”

“Yeah, one of the differences between us is that I went for the easy choice and decided to get the hell out of Dodge while I still have the chance,” she said. “Best of luck with the prisoner. I’m leaving now.”

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Kendall slipped out of the study to disappear into the ether. She refused to tell us a damn thing despite the danger we were in. I wasn’t sure why I thought she would open up to help us. Xavier turned to look at me.

“I hope you’re not going to blame me for that,” he said.

“No, I’m not. I’m just frustrated that she refused to say a fucking thing,” I said. “But…you could have been less antagonistic toward her.”

Xavier chuckled. “So you *do* blame me?”

He was spoiling for a fight, but I wasn’t going to give him one. I had invited my brother over to discuss a very serious matter, not because I wanted to get into it with him. That wouldn’t solve anything. We had to work together if we wanted to keep our packs safe.

“You’re fine,” I said. “That’s why I asked you here. I want you with me on this.”

“In that case, can I be frank?” he asked.

“You’re going to be frank regardless of what I say,” I said. “So fire away.”

“I say we go back downstairs—just you and me—and we make that Fae open his fucking mouth. We’re Alphas. Who is he to spit in our faces and issue threats like that?”

Though he was being held captive, the Fae in the basement was part of a powerful organization. They were not only dangerous, but totally ruthless and capable of getting to anyone in the pack at any time. The last thing I wanted to do was give them more reason to come after us sooner rather than later.

But I could also see what Xavier was saying.

If two Alphas couldn’t intimidate the Fae into talking, then who else could? As much as I wanted to take the high road, it was no longer an option. Oddly enough, I was happy Cali had stepped out. I knew she didn’t like the idea of us using brutal means to make the Fae talk, but what she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her. The means didn’t matter so much as the ends, and I was going to do whatever I had to do to keep my pack and my mate safe.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s see if we can make him talk.”

“Fuck, yeah,” Xavier said.

We made our way back downstairs, not bothering to muffle our footsteps. I wanted that Fae to know we were coming for him. Scaring him might have even made our interrogation a little easier. Xavier cracked his knuckles as we stood outside the door to our makeshift prison.

“This time, let me do the talking first,” he said.

“Sure,” I said.

I opened the door, and we both walked in…only to stop short. My jaw dropped along with Xavier’s as we stared at the empty shackles. The Fae was gone.

**Episode 5199**

*What do I do? What do I do?*

It took everything I had to quell my fears and keep from freaking out the rest of my team. The last thing I wanted was to be forced to explain to them why I was on the verge of a panic attack.

*What’s wrong with me? Oh, nothing. I’m just being targeted by a magical mafia hell-bent on ending my ass. No biggie!*

“Uh, what guy?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “Who was he? What did he say?”

Bear shrugged. “I didn’t actually talk to the guy.”

“Huh? Then who did?” I asked.

“Johnny was the one who told me about the guy,” Bear said. “Ask him.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I made my way to Johnny to get the 411 in case I was about to have an emergency on my hands.

“Johnny. Bear said you told him about a guy who was looking for me,” I said. “Did he say what his name was?”

“Huh?” Johnny stared at me like he had no idea what I was talking about.

“The guy,” I said.

“Oh, the guy. Right,” he said, finally remembering. “I didn’t speak to him. Rodrigo did. He was the one who told me.”

I walked to where Rodrigo was and asked him about the mysterious guy who had stopped by. Rodrigo furrowed his brow, then shook his head.

“Nah, I heard it from Kayden,” he said.

“Kayden,” I said. “Did you speak to the guy who was looking for me? What did he want?”

“What? No, that wasn’t me,” he said. “That was Jayden. He told me about it.”

*For shit’s sake*.

I was at my wit’s end with the guys and moments away from tearing my hair out at the roots. With the last vestiges of my patience at risk, I turned to Jayden.

“Jayden?” I asked.

“Yeah, I spoke to the guy,” he said. “He was really curious about you.”

“What? Curious how? What did he say?” I asked. “Do you remember what he looked like? What did he want to know?”

Jayden held up his hands at the barrage of questions. I urged him again like my life depended on it because it very well could have.

“The guy told me he was from the registrar’s office,” he said. “He wanted to ask you about this course you had inquired about. Something like that.”

*A course? What course?*

“I haven’t made any inquiries like that,” I said. “Are you sure?”

Jayden frowned and took a moment to think about it. I fully expected him to tell me that he wasn’t sure after all and that the guy had actually spoken to the mascot head instead. Then he nodded.

“What did he look like?” I asked.

“Hm. He was kinda tall, but not like, too tall,” Jayden said, then shrugged. “I dunno. He just looked like a guy to me. You know?”

“No, Jayden,” I said. “I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“If this is important, I’m sure the guy will try to contact you again,” Gael cut in. “But we need to bury this head ASAP. We can’t be out here all day.”

“You’re right,” I said, not really meaning it.

The story the guy gave Jayden sounded bogus to me. If it had been someone from the registrar’s office, they would have called or emailed me. The fact that someone had taken the effort to come find me in person left me uneasy.

“Follow me, guys,” Codsworth said. “And Cali.”

We followed him into the woods to a spot that was a little ways beyond the tree line. My head swung from side to side as I tried to take in my surroundings. I didn’t know if the guy was still lurking around and wanted to get out of the woods as quickly as possible.

“This is the perfect spot,” Codsworth said. “Nobody will ever find it here. This spot is covered in poison ivy during the warmer months. Everyone stays pretty far away from here.”

“I sure hope there isn’t any there now,” I said.

“Is this far enough out?” Kayden asked.

“How much farther do you think we need?” Patel asked.

“It’s not about how far we go,” Codsworth said. “It’s about the right spot, and this is it.”

“I agree,” I said. “This is a perfect spot. Why go any farther into the woods?”

As far as I was concerned, any spot was good as long as we didn’t have to venture farther into a maze of trees and crooked paths. I wasn’t trying to lead myself to the slaughter. I would stay out in the open where Jay and Lola could still see me if a Dark Fae really was poking around.

“Fine, fine,” Gael said. “Let’s just do it here and get it over with.”

Patel struck the spot with the shovel in his hands. The metal tip bounced back, and he gave us a sheepish grin. He tightened his grip on the shovel, ready to try again.

“One more time,” he said. “I didn’t put my full weight into it.”

He tried again, but the shovel bounced off the ground. It was partially frozen and nearly hard as cement. Patel tried a few more times only to end with the same result.

“Give me that,” Bear said, taking the shovel. “I’ll do it.”

“By all means, He-Man,” Patel said.

Bear winked at him, then proceeded to slam the shovel into the ground with all his might. The shovel handle snapped in half before it clattered to the ground.

“Whoops,” Bear said.

“Way to go, bro,” Johnny said.

“Somebody start with the pickaxe,” Gael ordered. “Fast.”

We all looked around at each other. The only tool we had was the shovel, and it was out of service. Nobody had thought to bring a pickaxe.

“Fucking great,” Johnny said. “What do we do now?”

“I told you we should have brought one,” Jayden said. “Didn’t I say it?”

“You didn’t say shit,” Kayden argued. “What you said was that we needed a jackhammer and a drill. Like we have any of that shit.”

“We have more stuff we could’ve used,” Jayden argued.

“What does it matter? We didn’t bring a damn thing,” Bear said.

“You would’ve just broken them all too,” Patel said. “Didn’t you see the ground is frozen?”

“You didn’t either!” Bear said.

The more they argued, the more my anxiety grew. I didn’t want to stay out there all day. The guys were making so much noise that anyone could have found us.

“Why don’t we just find a better spot?” I suggested.

My idea only intensified the argument amongst the guys. They each gave their own opinion as to what was the best spot and argued their points until I thought my ears would fall off. With the guys distracted, I took the chance to slip further into the woods.

If we couldn’t decide on the perfect spot, then I would make one. When I was far enough away from the group, I summoned my magic and blasted a hole at my feet. It was big enough to hide the mascot head and deep enough that no one would stumble on it.

“Guys! Come here, quick!” I said.

They came running to where I was and looked around at everything except for the hole.

“What the hell was that?” Patel asked.

“It sounded like a bomb went off,” Bear said.

“I didn’t hear anything,” I said, then took a half step back. “But I did find this.”

They looked at the hole I had made and glanced back up at me.

“I found it while I was looking for another spot,” I lied. “What do you think? Good?”

Codsworth stared at it in awe. “This has to be an omen. A really good one.”

“Let’s just bury the damn thing and get out of here,” Gael said.

We did just that, and I helped toss dirt on top of the head. I was happy the guys didn’t take time to ask me any details about my fortunate discovery. The faster we worked, the faster we could get the hell out of the woods. I wanted to find Jay and Lola so we could all go back home.

“Let the spirits that inhabit this totem escape their prison and find peace elsewhere,” Codsworth said over the shallow grave. “Namaste.”

The rest of us rolled our eyes but let him carry on with his ceremony to keep the spirits at rest. Eventually, we emerged from the woods feeling relieved and freer than ever. The guys shouted that the Curse of the Giant Fringehead Head was finally over.

“We should go get pizza and beer to celebrate,” Patel said.

“I wish I could hang out,” I said. “But I have so much to do at home. I’ll see you at the next practice!”

Bear pumped his fist in the air. “Go Kangaroo Rats!”

“Go Kangaroo Rats!” I shouted along with the other guys.

We pumped our fists in the air, then I was off to find Lola and Jay. I hadn’t seen them at all while we were in the woods, but I knew they had to be close. I smiled and slowed my approach when I noticed they were kissing.

*That’s so sweet*, I thought.

I took my time walking toward them, but they never broke apart. I frowned. They should have heard me the second I left the guys. What was going on?

“Hey, you two!” I said. “Lola? Jay?”

They didn’t respond. I jogged closer and wondered why they couldn’t hear me. Why were they still kissing after I had called out to them? I got ready to call out again, then stopped short as I realized what was going on.

Lola and Jay were frozen.

**Episode 5200**

*This can’t be real.*

I stood stock-still and stared at my friends as I tried to make sense of what was going on. How did they end up that way? How was it even possible? Lola and Jay were perfectly frozen, but the leaves in the trees around them swayed in the wind. I shook my head, unable to process what I was seeing.

I looked around and wondered if I was having another nightmare hallucination thing. It was the only explanation that made sense. My mind was always able to conjure up the worst, and that was no exception. The last hallucination I had experienced was when we were trapped in the pack house by that Dark Fae. The guy who had lied about being from the registrar’s office was probably Dark Fae too.

Their presence seemed to have a horrible effect on me, but what I was seeing didn’t feel like a hallucination. Lola and Jay were frozen, yes, but that was all. They weren’t being swallowed up by the ground, and they weren’t being carried off into the sky by some horrible dragon bat. They were just sitting there, making out. Lola and Jay were frozen in time while everything around them continued to move.

*This isn’t a hallucination*.

I was awake, and I needed to help my friends. I snapped out of my daze and ran toward them at full speed. As I got closer, I saw that Lola and Jay weren’t kissing after all. Jay was reaching out to help Lola, whose face was puckered into some sort of grimace. I did a circle around them, then stopped where I started. Slowly, I leaned in close and hoped they could hear me.

“I’m here, you guys,” I said. “I’m going to help you get out of this, okay? I’ll figure it out.”

Easier said than done. I scanned Lola and Jay from head to toe and wondered if it was even safe to touch them. I considered laying my hands on them to see if that would somehow break the spell. But right as I was about to put a hand on Lola’s shoulder, I remembered what happened the last time I tried to fight dark magic with light magic.

*Right. Kaboom*.

When I had tentatively pressed the tip of my light sword against the barrier around the house, I had launched myself across the room and fell into a crazy nightmare. Not wanting to see if lightning would strike twice, I tapped Lola’s arm with my finger. I was instantly zapped by magic.

“Ouch! God,” I said.

I shook out my hand and figured it was better to get zapped than to be hit with another nasty hallucination. Unfortunately, it also meant I wouldn’t be able to help my friends. I wouldn’t risk their lives by trying to use my magic on them. Better to leave such things to the professionals.

*But how am I going to get them out of here?*

Taking a step back, I stared at the frozen couple and wondered if there was any way I could move them to Jay’s car. Once I got them loaded up, I could race back to the pack house or even go straight to Big Mac’s. I had to figure it out. There was no way I was going to leave them there to get help. Even if I didn’t think they were in any immediate danger, they were right in the open and could have easily been found by anyone taking a stroll in the woods.

Determined to help, I tried to find a spot where I could touch them and not get zapped. It was impossible. Whatever magic was keeping them frozen was also casting a barrier to keep anyone from touching them. My sense of urgency gave way to panic. I had to save my friends, but I had no idea how.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps coming toward me. I whipped around to see a tall guy marching my way. His face was grim, and his eyes were fixed on me. I started to back away. Whoever he was, he was bad news and more than likely the one who had frozen Jay and Lola. As much as I hated to leave them, the best thing I could do for them was to not get caught. I had to run.

“I gotta go now,” I said. “I’ll come back for you as soon as I can.”

I took off with no destination in mind. My only concern was to get away from the guy who was in no rush to catch up with me. I considered running toward my crew mates. They were probably still in the woods and slowly making their way back to campus. I opened my mouth to shout their names, then stopped myself. My crew mates were big guys, but they were no match against a Dark Fae. I refused to risk their lives to save my own.

So I kept running.

The guy walking behind me increased his pace but otherwise remained calm. The serenity with which he stalked me was more chilling than the fact that he was stalking me. It was like he wasn’t worried at all about catching me because it was assured.

*We’ll see about that.*

I ran to the first building I saw. It was a garage where the school kept the maintenance equipment used on the grounds. It was big and no doubt had plenty of places for me to hide until I could call for help. I ran to the front door, but it was locked. I cursed, then glanced over my shoulder. The guy was still coming for me.

I ran to the next door, but it was also locked. I cursed again, then spotted a window. It would have been easy to break, but it was too small to crawl through. Desperate, I scrambled to find another door only to realize it was locked too. Unlike the other doors, that one was backed by the woods.

With no one around to see, I summoned my magic and blasted the lock on the door open. The door swung open, and I rushed inside, looking for somewhere to hide. Most of the equipment inside was too small to hide behind, but eventually I found a huge tractor whose wheels could have hidden five of me. Diving behind it, I tucked myself into a ball and waited as my pulse raced. Breathing as quietly as possible, I strained my ears to catch any sounds of an approaching attacker.

Moments later, a car approached and stopped right outside the building. A door opened, and then I heard a hushed conversation. The broken door swung open and banged against the wall. The sound of footsteps echoed off the walls, and I held my breath. I backed myself into the corner as much as I could and hoped they couldn’t see me.

*Don’t panic. Don’t you dare.*

I may have been alone, and I may have been outnumbered, but I had my Fae magic, my sword, and my shield. There were more of them than me, but I wasn’t completely defenseless. If they attacked me, they would get it as good as they gave it.

Granted, it would have been better if I didn’t have to give anything at all. I thought about calling for help but knew it would be too much noise. I considered sending Greyson a text instead. It would be quiet, and I could keep hiding until he found me. Moving slowly to keep from making any noise, I got my phone and sent him an SOS text.

“We know you’re here, halfling,” a harsh voice said. “No need to fight us. We just want to talk.”

Daring to peer from behind the wheel, I caught sight of the feet of several men. If they had just wanted to talk, they wouldn’t have come as a group.

“Are you sure she’s here?” another Fae asked.

“I saw her go in,” a different one said. “She’s here.”

The footsteps scattered as they went looking for me in the garage. They walked close to where I was, but none of them saw me. They called for me to come out and promised not to hurt me. Too bad for them I wasn’t a fool. I would stay hidden until they left and then wait for Greyson.

But my plans went to shit the second my phone dinged with a message. Greyson had texted me back and given me away without realizing it.

“There!” one of the Dark Fae said.

They ran after me as I rushed toward the broken door. I ran outside and right into the arms of a large, giant-looking Fae. He grinned as he lifted me off the ground.

“Look what I found,” he said.

“No! Let me go!” I said.

He tightened his hold around me and nearly cut off my air supply. Pushing away from him, I got ready to summon my sword and chop his arms off. But one of his cronies held the tip of an iron blade in my face while the rest surrounded me.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” he said. “Wouldn’t want to scar that pretty face.”

“The boss wants to talk to you,” the big Fae said.

“I’m not talking to anyone!” I said, struggling. “Let me go!”

The other Fae ignored me as they made quick work of taping my mouth shut and binding my hands. Unable to move or speak, they tossed me into the trunk of their car to take me to see their boss.