**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 41**

**Episodes 5201–5295**

**Episode 5201**

**Xavier**

Greyson and I were still trying to make sense of the missing Fae, but we weren’t really getting anywhere. We were no closer to finding him than we were when we came in here. I paced the room, looking for any explanation, any sign of what had happened.

“I don’t get it. How could he have just walked out of here? The iron chains and shackles are still here just lying on the ground. How the hell did he escape them?” I asked.

Greyson was quiet as he checked his phone, his expression darkening.

“Now what’s going on?” I said. “Did the guy text you to taunt us about losing him?”

Greyson let out a small chuckle. “Nah. It’s Cali,” he replied, sliding the phone back into his pocket. “Can you look into the Fae prisoner for me while I go see about her?”

I nodded. “Sure, but what’s up? Is she okay?” Greyson was acting kind of strange, if I was being honest.

“Cali needs my help, but I’ll deal with it.”

Though I was still concerned, I didn’t want to get into it with Greyson right now. If he didn’t need my help with Cali, I was going to have to accept that. It wasn’t like I didn’t have enough on my plate as it was. And I could only imagine that Greyson was still a little miffed about me being the one to rescue Cali from the tripwire.

Even if he didn’t realize it, he was probably being all mysterious about Cali right now because he wanted to be the one to help her, to prove something to himself.

Backing off, I returned my attention to the empty room. “I’ll track him down, don’t worry. Even if he did somehow manage to weasel his way out of here, he can’t have gotten far.”

“Thanks,” Greyson said as he headed for the door. “Contact me if you need me, keep me in the loop.”

I stopped him just before he cleared the threshold. “And let me know what’s up with Cali.”

Greyson gave me a long look but said nothing before he hurried off.

I wasn’t happy about not being involved in helping Cali, but this was one of those times where I was going to have to let Greyson take the lead. It was my new reality—Cali couldn’t be my problem all the time. I had Ava and my pack to worry about now. I couldn’t keep dropping everything each and every time Cali was in trouble—which was pretty much constantly. I had other priorities now.

*Yeah, but Cali will always be way up there on the list, no matter how much I’m trying to convince myself otherwise. If she’s in trouble, it’s like I can’t think straight until I’m able to confirm with my own two eyes that she’s safe.*

I sighed, fending off a wave of frustration at just how complicated things were now. I was going to have to work hard to convince myself that things were better this way. And I had to admit, in a lot of ways, they really were.

For one thing, I wasn’t involved in the constant tug-of-war with my brother over Cali every day like I had been before. I had Ava by my side, my strong powerful Luna who understood me in ways Cali would never be able to since she was a werewolf. And it didn’t hurt that Ava was all mine. I didn’t have to compete with anyone for her attention or her time.

I had my pack, and I was slowly but steadily building the Samaras into a force to be reckoned with. I’d secured my Alpha position within the pack, and it felt natural and right. I was excelling in the role I was born for, a welcome change from playing second to my brother.

Things were good for me now. I might not have been able to run off to rescue Cali from peril every five minutes anymore, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t happy with how things had turned out. And I trusted my brother. He was perfectly capable of helping Cali out of whatever bind she was in, so that would have to be enough for now.

I took another look around the room, searching for anything we might have missed. There really wasn’t any way out except through the door, but it was locked when we came in. Even if he’d somehow blown through the lock, it wouldn’t have been left intact.

And there was no way the Fae could have used magic to escape—the iron shackles would have negated that.

“Shit,” I hissed under my breath. I felt like I was in one of those escape games where you had to find your way out of a seemingly impossible situation.

I was at a loss.

I hated to admit it, but the Fae had given us the slip. The only thing I could think to do next was to try and pick up his scent and see if that led me anywhere.

I started to head out when I heard something that sounded like a rattling chain. I paused and listened closely, thinking that I might be imagining it. I waited, my ears primed for the sound again, but there was nothing.

I moved to go but then there it was again, the rattling chains.

I slowly turned around, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. The chains and shackles were all still lying on the ground…but were they in the same place?

I remained still, my eyes scanning the room carefully. But there were no more sounds, and nothing moved.

*I must be imagining it. It’s been a long day, and I’m probably hallucinating because I’m so beat.*

I stepped out of the room and ran right into Ravi.

“Hey, Xavier. Greyson told me what happened—that Fae escaping. I came to help.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But there doesn’t seem to be much here. Maybe we can head outside and try to pick up his scent or some sign of where he might’ve gone? Fae have a lot of tricks up their sleeves, but we’ve got some skills of our own as far as tracking goes.”

“Damn right we do,” Ravi said soberly. Then he glanced over my shoulder. “Still, just doesn’t make sense. We’ve held all manner of folks down here, and none of them have gotten away like this—at least not without leaving a trace behind.”

“Agreed. Something’s not right. But nothing about the Dark Fae Mafia has made sense so far. They’re proving to be a lot more powerful and adept than any of the other Fae we’ve encountered over the years.”

Together, Ravi and I left the basement and headed outside. We split up, each of us walking the yard and even making our way into the woods trying to find a scent, a sign, a drop of blood, anything that might have given us a clue.

“I got nothing,” Ravi said as he came jogging up to join me a while later. “This is so crazy! I can’t believe the guy just disappeared.”

“I know. I haven’t found anything either. It’s so strange.” I looked out into the distance, my eyes straining to pick up movement, a trail, anything.

“What now?” Ravi asked.

“Now I suppose we just keep with what we’ve been doing. Everyone should continue doing their patrols or following whatever directives Rishika and Greyson gave. It would be wise to keep our defenses up, especially now that we know we have a prisoner on the loose.”

I took another look around, hating the feeling of being outsmarted.

“And there’s no way the Dark Fae mafia don’t know by now that we’ve captured one of their own, though if his disappearance is any indication, maybe he’s already back in their fold,” I said.

“Could be,” Ravi replied. “I’m going to go join the patrols, but give me a holler if you find anything.”

“Will do,” I said, pulling out my phone to check it.

No word from Greyson about Cali. Whatever she needed help with, she obviously didn’t need help from me. No matter how much I understood why she would call Greyson over me, it still felt so weird.

I took one last look around outside and then made my way back into the basement.

*I have this nagging feeling that there’s something I missed, but what? All I know is, there’s no way this guy could just disappear without leaving some sort of hint behind.*

I returned to the room and checked the lock again, confirming for the millionth time that it hadn’t been tampered with. I stepped inside and looked down at the iron shackles and chain. My stomach dropped. I could have sworn that they weren’t lying by the door when I left.

*Did one of the Redwoods come in here and move them?*

My frustration growing, I turned to go ask if anyone had been in here recently when I heard the sound of the iron shackles dragging quickly along the ground.

I turned around just in time to see one of the chains lift from the ground right before it wrapped around my throat, choking me.

**Episode 5202**

**Greyson**

I was pacing back and forth in my study, trying not to worry too much—but I wasn’t doing a very good job of that. I’d gotten the SOS text from Cali, and then…nothing. She hadn’t responded to any of my follow-up texts. They showed that they’d been delivered and even read, but still nothing.

*Why isn’t she answering me? I have to find her. If I don’t and something happens to her, Xavier will never let me live it down, and I would never forgive myself, either.*

As much as I wanted to push the image out of my mind, I couldn’t help but obsess a bit over the memory of Xavier saving Cali from the tripwire. He’d been right there when she needed him—and I was grateful for that since, if he hadn’t reacted, Cali could have been badly hurt. But that didn’t make *me* feel any better about not being there when she needed me.

There was no way I was about to let that happen again. Cali needed me, and I was going to find her. I just had to figure out how.

My phone rang—it was Jay.

“Hey, is Cali back at the pack house?” Jay asked as soon as I answered.

Now I was really alarmed. “What? No, I thought you and Lola were with her? How can you not know where she is?”

“We *were* with her, and then something happened—we were frozen by what had to be Fae magic. When we were finally released from it, Cali was nowhere to be found.”

My panic had finally broken through my resolve, and my mind was racing. These Fae just weren’t going to let up. They were on our asses and using their magic to run circles around us.

“Did you see any of the Dark Fae mafia? There’s no way in hell they don’t have anything to do with this.”

“No, we haven’t—we didn’t actually see any Fae at all, but just like you, I’m sure they’re involved. Right now, Lola and I are busy trying to pick up Cali’s scent. We don’t have anything yet, but I’m sure we’ll pick it up soon. It’s not like she could have disappeared into thin air.”

“Good. Keep searching, and I’m on my way. Where are you?”

Jay quickly gave me their location, and then I was out of the house in a flash. I was almost to my car when I realized I could use my phone to track Cali’s phone. I opened the app and waited until the screen showed Cali’s dot on the CCU campus.

*That’s a good sign, right? Maybe she’s just on campus somewhere. Maybe her text was about some kind of normal life trouble. Maybe it’s not as bad as I think, and she just needs help with some school or crew issue.*

But even as I thought that, I knew it wasn’t true. Cali would never send an SOS text unless she absolutely needed to. She was always so eager to take care of herself without bothering anyone, so there had to be a good reason she’d reached out to me for help.

I just wished she would answer her damn phone.

I ran to the garage only to discover that someone else’s car was blocking me in. I considered shifting and running to campus, but there was too much risk of being seen. Not to mention that I would have to go back inside to pack clothes…

I spotted a motorcycle parked off to the side, and, without a moment of hesitation, I hopped on, throttled the bike to life, and took off down the street.

I was racing toward campus and driving way beyond the speed limit, but I didn’t care about that. I could feel it in my gut. Something was very wrong, and I had to get to Cali before things went from bad to worse.

I pulled out my phone and called Xavier. Maybe Cali had contacted him by now? I didn’t like the idea of alerting Xavier that I wasn’t exactly in control of the situation, but I didn’t have much of a choice. My pride was less important than locating Cali.

*It’s funny how now I’m hoping that she contacted Xavier when, before, I wanted to take care of this all on my own. If she did get ahold of Xavier, then maybe he knows where she is. That’s all that matters now, finding her by any means necessary.*

But the phone rang and rang until it went to Xavier’s voicemail. He obviously still had his hands full tracking down the escaped Fae. I couldn’t help but wonder if the two were somehow connected. First the Fae vanished into thin air, and now the same thing had happened with Cali. Was Cali’s disappearance payback? Did the Fae take her because we’d taken one of theirs?

I put my phone away and shook off those thoughts. I didn’t even want to think like that—there had to be some reasonable explanation for this. Especially since as far as the Dark Fae mafia knew, we didn’t have even one of theirs anymore. He’d walked right out from under us.

If Cali hadn’t sent the SOS, I wouldn’t be so damn afraid. She didn’t exaggerate about stuff like this. Only a dire situation would prompt her to send a text like that. She knew all too well how much it would worry me, and so there was no way she would take that lightly.

I suddenly realized that I hadn’t told anyone where I was going. Normally that wouldn’t be a big deal, and Rishika would assume control of things while I was gone, but she was off on a date with Cresta. Next in line would be Jay, but he was with Lola searching for Cali.

Maybe it was a good thing that my brother was still there at the house. He was an Alpha and more than capable of holding down the fort in my absence. I just hoped that his search for the Fae wouldn’t carry him too far away from the pack house. It was probably wishful thinking, but maybe he’d already located the Fae—that would be best-case scenario.

I pulled onto the campus and checked the tracking app again to find Cali. I knew the app wasn’t totally exact, but at least it still showed that she was here…somewhere.

I texted Jay, who texted back quickly to tell me that he and Lola were down at the boathouse.

I headed that way and found Jay and Lola talking to the crew team. I hopped off my bike and ran up to them, not bothering to keep the urgency out of my voice.

“Any word? Has anyone seen her?”

Even before they answered, I could tell by the look on their faces that Cali was still missing.

“We left Cali shortly after we…took care of something,” Codsworth explained.

I quickly picked up on the uneasy look on his and the others’ faces. “You’re hiding something, and now’s not the time for that. What the hell were you doing before she went missing?”

Gael stepped in. “We had to bury the Fringehead’s mascot head in the woods,” he explained hesitantly. “That’s all—nothing major. Just normal college rivalry stuff.”

I had so many questions, but now wasn’t the time. I would ask Cali anything and everything once she was back safely by my side.

“And none of you has any idea where she went after that?” I asked.

“No,” they all said.

“Some registrar guy came by asking about her. It was really weird—and he had a *lot* of questions,” Jayden said. “I told Cali about it, and she didn’t seem to have any clue about who this guy might be or why he was asking about her. Could that have anything to do with it?”

My blood ran cold. “Some guy? Where is he? What was his name?”

Jayden held up his hands. “No idea. I told you all I know.”

Just then, Lola came running over and pulled me aside. “I’ve got her scent!” she whispered excitedly.

“Great.” I turned back to Cali’s crew team. “If any of you hear from Cali, notify me immediately.”

“We will!” they called after us as Lola, Jay, and I raced off.

“Her scent leads in this direction, toward the maintenance building,” Lola explained as we ran.

I let out a sigh of relief when I picked up a strong whiff of Cali’s scent. I was hoping like hell that all of this was some big misunderstanding, and we’d find her unharmed and could laugh about how freaked out we’d all been, but I wasn’t confident about that outcome.

I quickly checked the tracking app again. The dot seemed to be only a few yards away. “We’re close,” I said. “She’s here somewhere. Let’s split up and search the area.”

I raced toward the rear of the building and stopped cold when I saw something lying in the middle of a nearly deserted parking lot. My heart dropped as I got closer.

It was Cali’s phone, but where the hell was Cali?

**Episode 5203**

**Greyson**

I picked up Cali’s phone and saw my text messages on the screen, each one more panicked than the last. The most recent one was all caps, demanding to know where she was and what was wrong. Then I saw a string of unread texts from Lola that had the same energy as mine, asking Cali where the hell she’d gone.

I hated that we’d lost her. Lola and Jay were probably beating themselves up over it, too. But it was clear that the Fae had their crosshairs right on us, so I couldn’t blame them for losing her. It wasn’t like there was much of anything they could have done against powerful Fae magic.

No, the only person to blame was whoever was responsible for Cali being gone. I didn’t care what it took—I was going to find her.

I gave Cali’s phone a quick once-over and saw that the case was cracked like it had fallen and fallen hard. My heart skipped a beat as I imagined her dropping the phone in some kind of struggle. Was she hurt? Was she scared? I didn’t even want to ask the other questions circling in my mind, so I did my best to push them away.

“Is that her phone?” Lola asked as she and Jay came running up.

“It is,” I said. “Found it lying on the ground.”

“Shit! Cali would never just leave her phone somewhere willingly.” A shock of worry creased Lola’s features. “This is bad.”

“And her scent seems to drop off right here,” Jay added. He took a few steps in every direction with his nose lifted, as he tried his damnedest to pick up Cali’s scent again. “Shit. Nothing,” he finally said. “This is so bad.”

I looked around, noting a set of skid marks on the ground nearby. My panic was about to reach a fever pitch, but I held it back, trying to think clearly.

“The only explanation is that someone took her,” I said, my voice coming out a lot calmer than I felt. “She must have known she was in trouble and sent the SOS text…and then she somehow got separated from her phone. I can’t imagine that her kidnappers wanted her to be tracked, and they made sure she wouldn’t be.”

I thought back to what Jayden had said about someone from the registrar’s office asking about Cali. That made no sense. Why would a school administrator ask a bunch of random students questions about another student? They would go to the student themself, wouldn’t they? And that’s assuming a registrar would even go as far as physically seeking out a student in the first place.

Something wasn’t right. I was starting to get angry as I thought about all that I didn’t know. Someone had snatched Cali in broad daylight, and I didn’t have a fucking clue how to get her back.

I stooped down to examine the tire marks. My gut told me that they would lead to Cali, and right now they were just about the only clue I had to go on.

“Jay, Lola, go over this campus with a fine-tooth comb and look for something—*anything*—that might lead us to Cali. In the meantime, I’m going to try to trace whatever made these tracks,” I said.

Lola’s eyes went wide, and she looked crestfallen. “I didn’t even notice those tire marks! Some tracker I am.”

“Come on, Lola. Now’s not the time to beat yourself up over your detective skills. Let’s keep looking,” Jay said. “You found her scent before, maybe you can find it again.”

I watched them go, knowing that if I had any chance of finding Cali, I was going to have to pick up her scent again. But if she’d been taken in a car, that wasn’t going to be easy. I trusted Jay, and if he said the scent had dropped off, it was gone. That didn’t bode well for my chances of finding Cali, which sent a spike of anxiety right through me.

*Cali, where the hell are you? Please, please be okay!*

Even though I knew that it was a longshot, I reached out to her via mind link.

*Cali, are you close by? Can you hear me? I’m here on campus looking for you. I’m in the parking lot of the maintenance building. Tell me where you are!*

As expected, there was no reply.

The only choice I had right now was to make an educated guess about the direction the car had gone. I looked around and realized there was only one way out of the parking lot, so at least I could start there.

I ran back to where I’d parked my bike and hopped on. I was about to ride off toward the parking lot when I picked up a somewhat familiar scent.

*Incense?*

I remembered Xavier and Ava making some comment about a smell like this when they were fighting with the Dark Fae mafia. And I remembered smelling it, too, though I didn’t think much of it at the time. But maybe it could help me, now. I finally felt a spark of hope. A scent I could follow was better than trying to make guesses based on a couple of skid marks any day.

I finally pulled out, letting the faint scent guide me. I just hoped this trail was strong and steady enough to send me in the right direction. And I didn’t even want to think that it might belong to some college kid who simply liked to use the same incense as the Dark Fae mafia.

As I passed by the campus buildings, I thought immediately of Kendall. If some Dark Fae was here posing as a registrar administrator, then Kendall might know something about it. After all, she purported to be a CCU employee herself. It couldn’t be some random coincidence that every time something Fae-related happened, there was some connection to Kendall.

*I need to talk to her, but will she even answer?*

I called her, doing my best to keep a firm grip on the handlebars and not crash. The phone didn’t even ring, just went straight to voicemail.

*Fuck.*

Was she ignoring my calls? I supposed that tracked since she’d pretty much demanded that I never seek her out again. But I couldn’t let that stop me. I had to find Cali, and if she could help me do that, it didn’t matter what she wanted. Cali’s life was on the line, and if I could just talk to her, I was sure she’d be willing to help.

Doing my best to keep control of the bike, I sent her a text.

*Call me now*

Still nothing. It showed as delivered, but there was no way to know if she’d read it.

I accelerated, hoping to close the gap between me and the car that had taken Cali—even if it meant driving recklessly fast.

I slowed for a moment as the wind shifted, taking the incense aroma with it. I banged a hand on the handlebars in frustration. Without that scent to lead the way, there was no way I would be able to find Cali. It was the only real lead I had, and the longer it took for me to get to Cali, the riskier it was for her.

*I never should have let her go back to school. I understand why it’s important for her to do this, but it leaves her too exposed. If she’d been at the pack house, no one would have been able to get to her like this!*

My phone rang, and I let out a sigh of relief. It was Kendall.

“Greyson, how many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone—”

I cut her off. “Cali’s been kidnapped,” I said, seething with anger. There was a pause, and I added, “Before you start in on how you told me there would be trouble, just cut it. The bullshit has to stop now. You know what’s going on and you’re probably in danger, too, I get that. We can help each other. But if you don’t tell me everything I need to know, Cali might not make it out of this alive.”

“Greyson, you brought this on yourself! I literally—”

“Listen to me. If anything happens to Cali, I swear I will blame you and hunt you down.”

“So let me get this straight. I tell you to stay away from me, you don’t, and now you and Cali are in the trouble I told you you’d be in if you didn’t, and you have the audacity to threaten me?”

“Yes. I will hold you responsible.” I didn’t have time to worry about the mistakes I’d made. I’d had my reasons for pursuing Kendall, and none of that mattered anymore. The only thing that I cared about was that Cali was in trouble, and I would do anything to get her back.

“What is it that you want to know?” Kendall said, her voice icy cold.

“Let’s start with this. Who the fuck are you?”

**Episode 5204**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s reaction had me completely thrown. All I’d done was ask about Kastian Haseneau, and the change in Celeste was palpable. Her normally cool, unaffected demeanor had taken a huge hit, and she looked shaken, thrown off her game.

Why was she so on edge about me asking a simple question about a random Fae? It didn’t make sense. She obviously wanted me to immerse myself in all this Fae-ness, so why was she so put off when I had questions and wanted to dive deeper into it?

Celeste fixed her eyes on me, waiting for an answer. I wondered if she’d practiced this look, the stony, direct, unblinking stare that could probably strip the paint off a car if she looked long enough.

I’d been in some pretty intense stare-downs in my day, but this one definitely took the cake. I was going to have to be quick and confident with my answer if I were going to survive this little impromptu face-off Celeste was forcing me into.

Keeping my gaze steady, I scrambled to come up with a credible explanation. There was no way I could reveal that I’d learned about Kastian during my secret trip to the crypt. Nor would I ever reveal who’d told me about him, either, since that was part of my bounty hunter code of honor.

What kind of bounty hunter would I be if I went around revealing my sources? I needed to do whatever it took to retain Aelwen’s trust and help. And if Celeste were to learn of Aelwen’s involvement, there was no telling what Celeste might do. There was no way I was going to get Aelwen fired—or worse—on my account.

And then out of nowhere, it came to me—the perfect way to throw Celeste off my trail.

“I came across the Haseneau name in one of those books you insisted I read. What’s the big deal?” I said breezily. I even crossed my arms across my chest and gave her a petulant look that I hoped would give a little more credence to my excuse.

If I seemed annoyed by the question and even more annoyed that she’d forced me to study something she obviously didn’t want me to ask about, then that would hopefully distract her from asking too many questions that might expose how I’d really learned about Kastian.

Celeste kept her steady gaze right on me, and I gave it right back. It was important to maintain eye contact when telling a lie. I couldn’t falter and risk showing uncertainty, doubt, or fear. If I did, Celeste would rip me apart in an instant, I knew that. And if she somehow coerced me into telling her how I’d really found out about Kastian, it probably wouldn’t be all that hard for her to find out who’d told me about the crypts.

But, to my credit, I was built for this sort of thing. Celeste had no idea who she was dealing with. I was damn good at being duplicitous and could tell perfect lies in my sleep. If she was expecting me to slip up and crumble under her stare, she was going to be disappointed—though I could admit that Celeste had the whole penetrating stare thing down.

“Isn’t that the point of all the studying you made me do? So I can learn who’s who? Otherwise, I could have spent my time doing something a little less, I don’t know, boring?”

Celeste nodded slowly, her expression unreadable. Then with one of her patented exasperated sighs, she finally broke the hard look between us. “Fine. But why are you so interested in him? Surely you came across many names during your studies. Why are you so focused on this one?”

There was that stare again.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Guess I just thought I should start somewhere, and since Kastian’s still alive, I’d like to meet him. Might do me some good to learn about such an important Dark Fae, wouldn’t you agree?”

Celeste scoffed at me. “Do you really think you’re ready to meet someone from the court?”

“Why not? I’ve been studying and doing all the things that you asked of me, Celeste—”

“And yet you still have much to learn,” she interrupted.

I was starting to get a little frustrated with this whole thing. Why did Celeste think this court was so damn special that I wasn’t even worthy of coming before them—even when I had claim to the family legacy?

“But I’ve met you, haven’t I? Aren’t you a member of the court?”

“Do not twist my words, Artemis. Being presented before the court isn’t something you can afford to take lightly. If you go before you’re ready and give them a bad impression, it will stay with you forever, making you weak and defenseless. We can’t afford that. We need them to support you, to trust you, and, most of all, to like you.”

“I couldn’t care less what other people think about me,” I replied.

If I hadn’t developed a thick skin and I’d spent my life up until now worried about people’s impressions of me, I would have lost my mind a long time ago. It wasn’t easy being a bounty hunter, especially under the thumb of someone as awful and hated as the Kollector. People despised him and then me by default, and the only way I survived was by ignoring all the stares, the snide comments, the outright violence enacted against me because of who I was and who I worked for.

“That may have been your M.O. before, and I’m sure you have your reasons for ignoring people’s opinions of you, but that won’t fly with the court. This is a situation in which you need to care. I’m not going to waste any more time convincing you of that. Either you accept that this is the way things are, or we should stop while we’re ahead. Feel free to tell me now if you can’t abide by the way things work here.”

I wanted to tell her where to go, remind her that she was the one who needed me just as much if not more than I needed her, but I kept my mouth shut. I had a feeling that this road I was starting down with Celeste and the council and everything in between would lead me to Kadmos, so I was willing to hold my tongue for the time being.

“I’ll take your silence as acceptance, however begrudging,” she said. “At any rate, I think you need to be more patient for the time being. You will see the court in due time—when you’re ready and capable and not a minute before.”

“Fine, I get it,” I said. Still, Celeste’s reaction to my interest in Kastian was intriguing, and I filed it away for later. It was a good sign. It meant I was close to something big.

*I have to wonder if she would have reacted like this if I’d asked to meet some other member of the Fae court—someone other than Kastian. Would she have had the same reaction?*

“So glad we finally understand each other. I assure you that it’s best if you and I remain on the same page,” Celeste said.

I was willing to play nice for now, but that didn’t mean I liked it. My frustration was obvious in my voice as I said, “I’m an accomplished bounty hunter—”

“I know—you won’t let me forget it,” Celeste said with a bored wave of her hand.

I paused for a moment and bit back a sharp reply. Now wasn’t the time to argue with Celeste. “As I was saying…you’ve trusted me to look into the Winding Thorn. What more do I need to do?”

“Being a bounty hunter and looking into the Winding Thorn are admirable qualities to be sure, but hunting criminals for money isn’t a skill that translates as seamlessly as you think it does to our purposes. Surviving the court is far more difficult and dangerous than capturing some heathenish murderer.”

“But—”

Celeste held up a hand, stopping me. “No buts. Artemis, I need you to survive this meeting and come out on top. The Dark Fae need you.”

The gravity of Celeste’s words hit me hard. I was still determined to find my father, but hearing Celeste put things that way made me realize how much pressure I was under to take up the cause my father began so long ago.

“Pleased to learn that you’ve been studying your materials,” Celeste said, already moving toward the door. “Keep it up. It will come in handy for you. And, in the meantime, please stay out of trouble.”

After Celeste was gone, I began pacing, wondering what it was about Kastian that had caused her to have such a strong, visceral reaction. Not much shook the woman up, but my mention of Kastian certainly had.

And that meant only one thing—I was going to have to seek out Kastian on my own.

**Episode 5205**

My head was buzzing and rumbling like crazy. I tried to pull the earbuds out only to discover I wasn’t wearing any. Was my head making these sounds? I’d never heard sounds like these before, and I was completely disoriented. It almost felt like I was being thrown around in a laundry machine.

I opened my eyes only to realize that they were already open. I was in a dark room, but why was I lying on my side? I tried to get up, but my hands were tied behind my back, and my head was pounding, making me dizzy.

I swallowed back a bit of nausea, and laid my head down slowly, trying to calm the pulsing pain in my temples. A second later, I realized that the strange sounds in my ears were coming through the floor. The sound was vaguely familiar, but I was having a bit of trouble placing it.

Where the hell was I? Then I remembered.

*I’ve been kidnapped!*

This wasn’t a room at all! I was locked in the trunk of a car! I screamed, but it was muffled against the tape on my mouth. That wouldn’t do. I built up my magic and tried to use it to free my hands, but it quickly fizzled to nothing. I tried again, frantic to get free and escape, but still nothing happened. The more I moved, the more my wrists started to burn. Soon, it became a palpable pain.

*The rope binding my hands must be laced with iron.*

Tears welled in my eyes. The pain was so acute that I couldn’t help but cry out. Was removing them even an option? How would I do that without hurting myself further?

Shit. I wasn’t sure what to do—this was certainly making it easier for whoever had kidnapped me. When we reached our destination, they’d be able to hurt me easily. The iron was subduing my magic, and without my magic, I would be at their mercy.

*So that means I have to do whatever it takes to make sure they don’t get the chance to lay a finger on me.*

I wriggled and rolled around until I was able to run the corner of the tape on my mouth against the carpeted floor beneath me. It was tedious and painstaking, and my cheek quickly turned raw from the repetitive motion, but little by little I peeled back the tape until my mouth was freed.

Then I screamed at the tops of my lungs.

I heard a loud pounding behind me that seemed to vibrate through the entire trunk. Seconds later, a harsh voice filtered through.

“Shut the hell up in there! Trust me, there’s no one around who cares about your fucking screaming!”

*Screw it! If they think I’m going to make this easy for them, they’ve got another thing coming. I’ll scream until I’m hoarse if I have to.*

I screamed again, as loudly as I possibly could. My throat burned, and the pounding in my head intensified threefold, but I didn’t stop. If I caused enough ruckus, maybe I could get them to stop the car and come back to check on me, and then…well, I would figure out what to do when the time came.

“We’ll put a plastic bag on your head if you keep it up!” the voice shouted back. “Shut up, I said!”

I gulped. The cold realization that they obviously wouldn’t hesitate to kill me settled in the pit of my stomach. At least now I knew exactly what the stakes were, and that I was dealing with a cold group of people who didn’t give a damn if their bait was dead or alive.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked in a much less shrill tone.

I got no response and total panic took over. I strained and fought, trying to free my hands from their restraints. But the rope only cut deeper into my wrists, and the pain became more acute. I went slack, once again trying to will away the throbbing pain in my head. I wasn’t going to be able to save myself if I overexerted and passed out.

*Think, Cali. Think. You’ve been in situations like this before, and you got out of them! You can and will get out of this one, too. You just have to calm down and figure out how to outsmart them.*

I didn’t know exactly who was in this car, but I knew I was smarter than them, and my will to live was stronger than their desire to kill me—at least I wanted to believe that. I was just going to have to stay calm and think things through.

Then it dawned on me: Didn’t all trunks have some kind of release lever? It occurred to me that it was unfortunate that car manufacturers had to add this feature for people like me—those who were taken against their will and stuffed in a trunk.

A chill raced down my spine as the reality of my situation became all the more clear.

My eyes were adjusting to the dark, but it was still hard to see. This was another one of those times when I wished I had werewolf senses…and werewolf strength for that matter. Xavier or Greyson would probably be out of these restraints and would have kicked their way out of the trunk by now.

But if I could just locate that release lever, I wouldn’t need werewolf senses or strength to get the hell out of this trunk.

Unfortunately, the only way I could manage to look around was by contorting my body in various uncomfortable positions. I didn’t see the lever anywhere, and I hoped that this car was new enough to even *have* one of the levers. There was a chance that this car had been made before they started adding that feature.

*Let’s hope my kidnappers favor newer cars…*

My entire body was starting to cramp up, and every bump the car went over sent my aching head smashing against the roof of the trunk. I almost cried out in pain, but somehow, I knew that would probably be music to my captors’ ears, and I wasn’t about to give them that satisfaction.

Overcome by the pain and dealing with rising panic, I went completely still, concentrating on taking a series of deep breaths to calm myself before I began another, more methodical search for the release lever.

*Where could that thing be? Why can’t I find it?*

And then I heard snatches of a conversation start up inside the car.

I rolled closer to the back seat was so I could hear better. Somebody was laughing and saying, “This is easier than fishing with a big juicy worm. She gave us a bit of a run for our money in the beginning, but in the end, she walked right into our arms where she belongs.”

More laughter.

“The halfling is the perfect bait,” someone else said. “I can’t believe our luck in finding her.”

I was annoyed—did they really just compare me to a juicy worm? What the hell?

But then I focused on the fact that I was being used as bait…but for what? What were they trying to catch?

“The other one was way harder to get,” the other voice replied.

The rest of the conversation was drowned out by the noise of the car rumbling over more bumps, but if I wasn’t mistaken, I was sure someone had mentioned that “the Redwood Alpha would fall for it.”

My stomach dropped.

*Greyson? Is that who they’re trying to catch?*

Then, after going over a few more bumps that rattled the car and once again sent me slamming against the interior of the trunk, I heard Kendall’s name. But then someone turned on music, and I couldn’t hear anything else.

I rolled onto my back, wondering what was going on. If I was the bait, there was no way Greyson wasn’t the prize. I had no idea how Kendall fit into all this. Was she one of them? Had she set this up?

All I knew was that I wasn’t about to let them use me to trap Greyson. And I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was going to come after me.

*I wish I never sent that SOS! It’s going to lure him right into their trap!*

I had to do something before this went any further—which meant I had to escape. There was no other option if I wanted to survive and keep Greyson safe while I was at it.

The car slowed for the first time since I came to, and the brake lights flooded the interior with soft red light—and I nearly giggled with glee when I spotted the release lever. There was no way I was going to be able to reach it with my mouth, so using every bit of my ebbing strength, I maneuvered onto my knees in the cramped space, backed into the lever, and pulled.

The trunk popped open, and I nearly went spilling out onto the highway.

**Episode 5206**

**Xavier**

I was trying my damnedest not to choke, but it was growing harder by the second to avoid it. The Fae was strong, and the chain was getting tighter and tighter around my neck. Burning pain sliced down my throat, and I let out a choked growl as I jammed two fingers under the chain, trying my hardest to take the pressure off.

I felt like a complete idiot. The Fae hadn’t escaped at all! He’d been right here under my nose the entire time. I wasn’t sure how, but clearly, he was using some kind of glamour magic to make himself invisible. That explained the rattling sounds I thought I heard—the Fae had been positioning himself for this attack and waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Why hadn’t it occurred to me that he’d used a spell to make it look like he’d left? The Fae were obviously capable of some pretty amazing things, but iron shackles were iron shackles, and I should have known that the Fae couldn’t actually slip out of them.

I twisted and flailed against the Fae, trying to keep breathing while working to throw him off me. Despite my efforts to pull it away from my neck, the Fae kept pulling the iron chain tighter. I wasn’t all that worried about the iron since I didn’t react to it the way the Fae did, but it barely mattered if I wasn’t reacting to the metal itself when it was being used to choke me to death.

No one could survive without oxygen, werewolf or otherwise, and the Fae was slowly stealing that away from me. If I didn’t stop him soon, he was going to make an example out of me for the rest of his Dark Fae mafia buddies to see, and I wasn’t about to let that happen.

I struggled and thrashed, throwing kicks behind me to try to strike out at my opponent, but he was fast and agile, and I kept missing him. I planted my feet and then quickly drove us both back against the wall. The Fae grunted in pain on impact and finally loosened his grip.

That was all I needed.

I spun around and partially shifted both claws, preparing to strike, only there was no one there. The Fae was still cloaked, but fuck that. He wasn’t going to trick me again. He was here, even if I couldn’t see him. And if he was here then he could most certainly bleed just like a man without an active cloaking glamour.

I saw the chains and shackles coming right for me, and I slashed the air between them. A strangled scream tore through the air, and blood spurted like a fountain bursting out from an invisible source. The Fae partially materialized and stumbled back against the wall.

I grabbed him. “You were wearing iron; how the hell were you able to cloak yourself?” I hissed. I tightened his shirt around his neck, giving him a taste of the choking treatment he’d just given me.

Blood dribbled from the Fae’s mouth as he gurgled a choked reply. “I told you we were coming for you.” And then he dropped dead.

I released the dead Fae with disgust. All that fighting and all that searching for him, and in the end, he was of no use to us. At least now I knew that the Fae wasn’t loose somewhere in the house terrorizing any of the pack members.

I looked down at the Fae’s limp body and shook my head, still reeling from how he’d outsmarted us. But I’d gotten the last laugh.

I kicked at the iron chains strewn across the floor. Iron was foolproof as far as I knew, so that meant someone else must have been using glamour magic on this Fae—someone who had to be doing it from the outside. I raced upstairs. If the dying Fae was right, and more Dark Fae mafia were headed our way, was there a chance they’d already arrived? If so, the entire pack might come under attack at any second.

I had to get everyone mobilized and safe. Greyson had left me in charge, and I took that seriously. I didn’t want to see any harm come to the Redwood pack, which meant I was going to have to think quickly and clearly to figure out how best to meet the Dark Fae mafia threat head on.

But what about the tripwire?

That would keep them at bay, but it would only protect the pack members who were still inside the pack house. It was the patrols I was really worried about, since they were on the other side of the tripwire and would be left vulnerable. Lilac, Violet, Sage, Ravi, Charlie, and others were out there somewhere, and I had to alert them.

Staying within the confines of the tripwire so that I wouldn’t be caught off guard by an attack, I called out to them via mind link. I quickly grew too impatient and frantic to wait for an answer, so I crossed over into the woods just beyond the tripwires and cupped my hands around my mouth and used my voice, screaming, “Patrols, come back to the pack house! We are under attack!”

Luckily, my voice carried because a few tense minutes later, Charlie, Violet, Lilac, and Sage came sprinting out of the woods and into the yard. Torin came running from inside the house to join us along with a few others, and everyone was watching me with wide eyes as I explained the situation.

“We’re under attack. We need to ready ourselves for a preemptive strike or a defensive one depending on just how close the Dark Fae mafia are.” I clapped my hands to get everyone into action. “Everyone, get ready to fight!”

Everyone immediately jumped into action, following my orders as if I were their Alpha. I had to admit that it was a weird feeling. This was what I’d always wanted—to lead the Redwood pack. It felt right but at the same time, not. This wasn’t my place anymore, and I felt that in my gut. But right now, it was where I had to be.

But now wasn’t the time to process that. The only thing I knew was that the fate of the Redwood pack depended on what I did next, how I led them when their true leader couldn’t be here. There was a time when I wouldn’t have lifted a finger to help Greyson, and there was something comforting about how much things had changed between us.

We weren’t the best of friends yet—nowhere near it—but we had mutual respect, and that was almost as good as genuine friendship. At least in our case. Maybe the camping trip had done more for us than I thought.

This was just another thing I didn’t really have time to contemplate—but I would have to revisit it sometime in the future.

I stood out in the yard, watching everyone shift as they rushed up to wait for my orders.

“The Dark Fae mafia must be just outside the tripwire,” I said. “Proceed with extreme caution.”

I shifted and led the charge, heading for the perimeter. As we got closer to the woods, I checked to make sure that Torin had his bracelet on and would be safe against Big Mac’s tripwire. We couldn’t afford to have him blown up.

I hoped it wouldn’t come to it, but there could be injuries that would require Torin’s healing powers. And, despite Torin’s gentle nature, I’d seen what Torin could do on the battlefield. We needed him.

I picked up Ravi and Zainab’s scents and quickly changed direction to head their way. It didn’t take long before I picked up on the telltale sounds of fighting—growling and snarling and the thudding sound of flesh hitting flesh.

We raced toward the noise and soon saw Ravi and Zainab fending off several Fae. The Redwoods closed in on the Fae, and a vicious fight commenced.

Some of the Fae stood their ground and went toe to toe with us, blasting us with magic, dodging attacks, being tackled to the ground by our best fighters, but others quickly fled into the woods.

I evaded a couple of magic blasts as I sank my teeth into a Fae that was closing in on Ravi. Charlie and Violet took down another, and after another long brutal span of fighting, several Fae were left lying dead on the ground at our feet.

Once I was sure we’d neutralized the Fae threat, I took a quick check and realized that miraculously, there were no serious injuries.

Torin was busy healing a nasty gash on Charlie’s leg, but otherwise, the pack looked okay.

“Things were looking a little grim for a minute there,” Ravi admitted. “Thanks for taking charge and rushing in with the calvary.”

Struck by the words “taking charge,” I froze. I was the Samara Alpha, not the Redwood Alpha. And if the Dark Fae mafia had attacked the Redwood pack, chances are they were doing the same to the Samaras.

**Episode 5207**

I flailed my bound arms, doing everything in my power not to tumble over the lip of the trunk and out onto the highway below. I winced at the thought of not only how painful that would be, but just how injured—or worse—I would end up. I’d had plenty of brushes with death, but somehow, ending up smeared on the highway seemed like the worst way to go.

The car hit another bump and swerved, and I almost fell out again. I braced myself against one side trying to figure out what I should do now. I’d finally gotten the trunk open but hadn’t quite thought past that. Jumping wasn’t an option, but if I stayed, the Fae would use me to lure Greyson and kill him the first chance they got.

*And then they’ll kill me, too, because there’ll be no more use for me then. Staying in this trunk is a death sentence, and jumping* out *of this trunk is a death sentence!*

What the hell could I really do? As far as I could figure, I was screwed.

The car swerved again, and I fell to the side. The music that was playing inside the car grew suddenly louder as a Fae’s voice reached me loud and clear. I couldn’t see much from my vantage point, but he’d obviously just rolled down the window to shout at me.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing back there? Lie back down!” he yelled. The lid of the trunk started speeding downward as the Fae tried to close it on me. The hard metal trunk lid struck me on the back, knocking me down. The pain was sharp, and my head began to pound worse than ever.

I wanted nothing more than to lay down and regain my bearings, but I wasn’t about to let myself be trapped again. Gritting my teeth, I used my back to push against the trunk top and managed to keep it open.

“I said lie the fuck down!” the Fae shouted again, still trying to slam the trunk closed.

Using every bit of effort I could muster, I managed to keep him from closing it and returning me to square one, but I didn’t know how long I would be able to keep it up. I was in an awkward position, still in danger of spilling out onto the road, and the Fae wasn’t showing any signs of giving up.

“Let me kill her! She’s a pain in the ass. We’ll find some other bait!” the Fae yelled to his friends in the car.

“No! The boss wants her alive,” someone replied.

“Well at least pull over so I can knock her out. She keeps fighting me, and I can’t close the trunk!”

The other Fae cackled. “Why bother? It’s not like she can go anywhere.” To make his point, the car swerved sharply to the left, sending me tumbling to the side.

I snarled, realizing that they were actually enjoying this. If I could just get my hands free, I’d blast them all to hell. But how was I going to get free of these restraints? It wasn’t like I could just break out of them. But there had to be a way. I couldn’t give up.

Despite the pain in my head and my body, my fear, and all the odds stacked against me, I was going to have to keep a clear head so I could think my way out of this.

My eyes landed on the lip of the trunk lid hovering just above me, and I got an idea. I rose to my knees, my back butting up against the trunk lid. I was going to be sore as hell tomorrow, but it felt good to think that there would be a tomorrow to get to.

Grunting with effort, I began raking the iron laced rope along the trunk’s sharp edge, using it like a saw. My shoulders started to burn almost instantly, and the rope was taking a hell of a long time to even fray. The driver kept swerving and speeding up to keep me off balance, causing me so many close calls with falling out of the trunk that I started shaking with fear as I continued sliding the rope along the sharp edge.

My head was pounding worse than ever, my stomach was spasming since my core was mostly responsible for keeping me upright and stable, and I couldn’t stop picturing becoming a splatter on the highway, but I continued trying to sever the rope.

When the car swerved again, I toppled down hard. Rather than scramble back up to my knees to keep at the rope, I stole a moment of rest, panting with exertion and anxiety. When I finally stopped feeling like the world was spinning around me, I lifted up my wrists so I could examine my progress.

I cursed under my breath when I saw that the rope was barely affected. It was like trying to cut through a board with a feather.

I groaned in frustration. That had taken a lot out of me, and it hadn’t even worked. I didn’t think I had it in me to keep trying. By the time I even managed to partially fray the rope, we would probably have arrived at wherever they were taking me in the first place.

I looked around for something—anything—that might help.

*Shouldn’t there be a jack or something in here?*

I began searching for it, but I knew that it would be under the carpet I was lying on since it wasn’t lying in plain sight. And with my hands bound it was going to take a miracle for me to be able to peel back the carpet to check. With my current luck, I’d do all that work only to discover that there was no jack at all.

I looked up at the sound of a motorcycle zooming toward me. My first reaction was to duck, thinking that it was probably another group of Dark Fae mafia coming to help. Then I remembered Kendall drove a motorcycle…

My kidnappers had brought Kendall up only a short time ago. Great—Greyson was right not to trust her. She was on her way to the party and ready to get her revenge on me for sticking my nose in her business.

I wished I had something to throw at her, but there was the matter of my bound hands, so other than throwing *myself* at her, I had nothing.

Desperate, I reached up and began sawing the rope against the trunk lid again. I knew in my gut that it was no use—I was just wasting precious energy, but what other choice did I really have?

The motorcycle sped up and the car jolted forward too, sending me tumbling back against the rear wall of the trunk. My head hit first, and I landed awkwardly, my neck bent at an angle. Slowly, I maneuvered back onto my knees and wondered what the hell was happening. Were they racing each other? It made no sense.

Unsurprisingly, the motorcycle was a lot faster than the car, and it started gaining on us. When the driver came into view, I started to wonder how hard I’d just hit my head.

*Am I hallucinating right now? Is that Greyson?!*

He quickly closed the gap between us, and the car launched forward as the driver tried to slam on the brakes so that Greyson would crash into us. But Greyson reacted fast and slowed down at the same rate, narrowly avoiding a collision. At the same moment, his mind link entered my brain.

*Cali, you’re going to have to jump! I’ll catch you!*

The car started to accelerate again. I knew that I could trust Greyson, and at this point, he was my only hope. There was no way I was going to be able to saw off these restraints and vaulting myself outside onto the pavement was a death wish.

But how the hell was I supposed to jump from a moving car onto a moving motorcycle? Had I heard him right?

He gestured with one arm and now he was close enough that I could hear his voice. “Jump, Cali. Jump as far as you can, and I’ll catch you.” He revved the bike’s engine and aligned himself with the trunk. He was being surgical with the speed and matched it perfectly so that he ended up only about a foot away from me.

*He’s so close, maybe I can do it…*

I could feel the car starting to accelerate again. If I waited too long, Greyson would only get farther away and then would have to take even more time to align himself again.

It was now or never.

“Come on Cali, I’ve got you. Trust me! Jump!”

*I do trust him. He wouldn’t ask me to do this if he wasn’t sure he could catch me.*

I swallowed down my fear, reared back, and vaulted out of the trunk…

**Episode 5208**

**Artemis**

I waited awhile before I finally peeked out of my room and scanned up and down the long hallway. I was starting to worry that mentioning Kastian’s name around Celeste had aroused her suspicions enough to make her start having me watched. It wouldn’t have surprised me. The Fae world always had something lingering in the shadows.

Celeste and I were in a shaky alliance at best, and it wouldn’t take much for her to lose trust in me and beef up security. But as far as I could tell, the hallway was clear. Hopefully this meant she’d really bought my excuse.

I was supposed to have free run of the palace and surrounding grounds, so walking around shouldn’t cause any alarm. I slipped out of my room and headed toward the library. If anyone asked, I could claim quite convincingly that I was headed there to continue my studies.

But what I was really hoping to find was something that would point me in the direction of Kastian’s whereabouts. From the moment Aelwen had told me about the man, I’d grown obsessed with finding a way to meet him. I had a feeling that he would be a step in the right direction to learning more about Kadmos.

The only way I would ever be okay about waiting under Celeste’s watchful eye for all this time was if I were able to do as much investigating as I could in the meantime. Otherwise, this was a monumental waste of time, and time was the one thing I didn’t have a lot of.

I moved quickly through the palace, peeking around corners and into open rooms, but I didn’t find anything I thought would help. I had no clue what I expected to find—it wasn’t like Celeste had a map that would lead me right to Kastian, but I had to try.

I finally arrived at the library. All the books were right where I’d left them…except one of them was closed when I could have sworn I’d left it open. I leaned close to examine it. There was a bookmark where there wasn’t one before. I pulled it out and saw that there was a single letter written on it. “A.”

I paused to think. The only explanation was that it was a message from Aelwen. She was the only “A” I knew other than myself. I took the bookmark and concealed it in my shirt and made my way down to the kitchen, hoping that I wasn’t barking up the wrong tree.

Aelwen was waiting for me when I arrived and pulled me into an alcove. “It took you long enough!” she said. She handed me a mask. “There’s a masquerade ball this evening.”

I took the mask and looked at it with confusion. “So?”

“So?! What the hell do you think? Kastian will be there!” Aelwen snapped. “Do you want to go or not?”

I smirked at her, thinking that Marius had been right. Aelwen and I had gotten off to a bumpy start, and I’d been skeptical about her initially because of her history with Marius, but since then, she’d proven to be a big help. Without her, I would never have learned about Kastian, and now she had single-handedly won me the opportunity to meet him face-to-face.

It looked like my luck was finally turning around.

\*\*\*

A few anxious hours later, I stood in front of a mirror, examining my figure in one of Celeste’s solid-gold-framed mirrors. I was wearing one of the many gowns Celeste had sent to me as part of my formal court training.

This particular one was long and sparkly and hugged my body in all the right places. It was sexy without being too revealing, and the shoes I’d paired with it—a four-inch heeled sandal encrusted with sparkling rhinestones—were just as perfect.

I wished that Rishika could see me now. I hadn’t dressed up all that much back at the pack house since there wasn’t much cause to get all dolled up. But I could admit I looked damn good tonight.

Gowns had never really been my thing, but maybe if I’d known how stunning I looked in them, I would’ve worn them more often. Who knew that one of the benefits of being swept into this whole thing with Celeste was that I would get some nice fashions to add to my wardrobe?

*Come to think of it, maybe Rishika would think this outfit is a little too much. She’s a no-frills type of girl just like I am…however, I can’t imagine that she would kick me out of bed if she saw me in this.*

I smiled wistfully, imagining Rishika’s reaction if I were to appear in front of her dressed to the nines. I pictured her eyes lighting up and the subtle way she licked her lips when she was turned on. I fanned myself as my temperature rose just a bit at the memory.

Rishika wasn’t the type to get dressed up either, but I’d love to see Rishika wearing something like this. Rishika was stunning when dressed down in sweats and jeans. The few times I’d seen her all dressed up—usually for one of Lucian’s awful events—it was almost too much to take. If both of us were dressed up like this, we’d be the couple everyone envied.

And there was no doubt in my mind that Marius would drool all over himself if he saw me in this gown. Then again, it didn’t take all that much to get his salivary glands going in the first place. Still, I wouldn’t mind seeing proof of his admiration. Marius had grown on me in a big way, so maybe he deserved to see me at my best, too.

I rotated in front of the mirror, admiring the high slit in the back of the dress. It was a shame I was wasting this little number on strangers and court intrigue. It would be much better suited for a nice date, a fancy dinner, a walk along a promenade somewhere with Rishika.

But that wasn’t on the table right now. I had a Dark Fae court member to meet.

I slipped on the mask Aelwen gave me and marveled at the overall effect. There was something so undeniably sexy about someone in a mask. But was it enough? Would I stick out like a sore thumb?

Once Aelwen had shared the news about the opportunity to meet Kastian tonight, I’d told her that it might be too risky. Celeste wasn’t stupid, and there was a good chance she would recognize me the minute I walked in. But Aelwen had quickly explained that the party was for younger court members and their allies and friends, which meant Celeste wouldn’t be in attendance.

As I snuck out of my room, I hoped that Aelwen was right.

Walking in the gown as if I’d been raised wearing fancy dresses like this took a little effort, but by the time I crossed the courtyard to the east ballroom, I had it down pretty well. I was used to being a chameleon, and so I was more than up to the challenge of looking like I belonged.

But I would hate to get in a sword fight in this getup. It was a bit confining.

I heard the sound of music and laughter as I approached the tall double doors that led into the ballroom. I glided into the hallway just outside the ballroom and paused to check my reflection, making sure everything was in place before I entered.

“All right, Artemis, here goes,” I said to myself as I floated into the grand space. I was immediately taken by the glamorous costumes. Aelwen was right—this was a younger crowd, which accounted for how rowdy it was.

I did a quick scan for Celeste and then relaxed a little as I began to look around for Kastian. I only had Kastian’s grandfather’s sculpted features to use as a guide. And it didn’t help that everyone was wearing a mask, which made identifying him next to impossible.

I bumped into a group of guests, and an attractive woman turned to look at me. She gave me a quick up-and-down and then smiled. “I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

I sized her up. The woman was beautiful, but she reeked of privilege.

“Well, we’ve just met now,” I replied.

I started to move past her, but her friend stopped me. “Are you a member of the court?”

I paused. “I’m a friend of the court.”

This elicited a round of giggles from the two women. “But aren’t we all friends?” the friend said.

The beautiful woman signaled to a tall man who had his back to us. He turned around, and his eyes immediately landed right on me. He took a step toward me as if drawn my way. He flashed a dazzling smile, his eyes sparkling as he said, “Hello, I’m Kastian. Are you one of Celeste’s spies?”

**Episode 5209**

**Greyson**

My heart was in my throat as I watched Cali leap from the speeding car. It was one of those moments that was supposed to feel like it was unfolding in slow motion—but at this speed and with her life literally in my hands, it was all happening way too fast.

I didn’t want her to jump—at all—but I couldn’t see any other alternative. She’d done her part in getting the trunk open, and now it was my job to get her to safety.

This was the only way. It wasn’t like my motorcycle could force the speeding car to come to a stop. If anything, they could swerve and knock me off the bike or barrel right over me at their first opportunity. These guys wanted nothing more than to destroy us, and I wasn’t going to make it easy for them.

The car had started to accelerate just as Cali jumped, widening the gap between me and the vehicle. Cali’s momentum only took her so far, and she was starting to fall down toward the pavement right before my eyes.

Gripping the handlebars tightly, I throttled the engine and accelerated, swooping under her just before she hit the ground. I braced for impact as Cali landed clumsily on the bike, all flailing limbs and yelps of fear, her face turned to me.

I reached out one arm to steady her—her ability to keep her balance challenged by her bound hands—but I managed to pull her close and keep her on the bike.

*We did it. But fuck was that close!*

“Wrap your legs around me and hold on tight,” I said.

Cali obliged, and I quickly put both hands back on the handlebars since the bike was swerving and wobbling from the sudden shift in weight. Concentrating, I quickly compensated and straightened it out until we were riding smooth and straight once again.

“Piece of cake,” I joked.

I was breathing hard and so was Cali, but we’d done it. She was out of the trunk and in one piece.

Cali was leaning back against the handlebars, staring at me, too shell-shocked to speak. She was shaking like a leaf, and my anger at these Fae assholes for daring to cause her this kind of distress spiked. If I could get my hands on even one of those bastards, I would do unspeakable things to them, show them just how I dealt with anyone who dared lay a finger on my mate.

My heart was pounding as I finally slowed down. “It’s okay, Cali, don’t be afraid. You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

“How did you even find me?” Cali asked, her voice quivering with fear and probably adrenaline. “I sent the SOS, but that was back on campus. Once I realized I was out on the open road, I— I didn’t think you’d be able to track me down.”

“I had to,” I replied. “You know I would stop at nothing to protect you.”

I wanted to kiss her and take her in my arms, but now wasn’t the time. There would be plenty of time for that once we were clear of these Fae.

I turned my attention back to the road, knowing it was only a matter of time before the Fae realized they’d lost their precious cargo.

I slowed down even more, putting distance between us and the car. I was debating what our next move should be.

*Should I make a U-turn and head in the opposite direction? Lead the Fae on a chase in the hopes that I can outrun them? If I can get away from them and back to the pack house, we can regroup, and Xavier and I can work together to figure out how to stop the Dark Fae mafia once and for all.*

If it were just me, I would probably gun this motorcycle until I was even with the car, jump off the bike, and make my way into the vehicle to methodically kick all their asses, but I couldn’t take that chance with Cali here. My priority was getting her out of harm’s way.

Deciding to go with my first plan, I was about to make a U-turn when the car skidded to a sudden stop. It spun to the side, forcing me to swerve sharply or be hit. Something struck the front tire, and the bike began to shake and wobble, threatening to throw us both over the handlebars.

*What the hell was that? Fae magic?*

There wasn’t any time to figure it out. I was doing everything in my power not to crash right into the car, which was now driving straight down the center of the road and blocking me from passing. On any other road, I could simply veer onto the shoulder and go around them, but this road had sharp drop-offs on either side, so it was the road or nothing.

“Hold on,” I said to Cali as I struggled to maintain control. The tires were losing their grip, and we were starting to slide out of control. Making a split-second decision to bail, I wrapped my arms around Cali and leapt from the bike.

We hit the ground hard, but thankfully I took the brunt of it. As we rolled and skidded across the ground, sliding dangerously close to the unmanned bike and the speeding car, I did everything I could to shield Cali from the scrape of the rough pavement. I screamed and gritted my teeth as the asphalt tore my clothes and skin to shreds in the process.

The motorcycle was on its side now, and it skidded fast right into the back of the car and immediately burst into flames.

I shouted, “Cali, brace yourself!” as we rolled right into the wreckage, my head slamming against an airborne piece of tailpipe. Searing pain overtook me. I rolled one more time before I realized that Cali wasn’t pressed up against me anymore.

Groaning, I rolled over onto my stomach and looked for her.

*Where the hell is she? Where did I lose her? Please let her be okay!*

I scrambled to my feet as quickly as I could, but I was unsteady and almost collapsed right where I stood. Blood was flowing heavily from the stinging gash in my head and running into my eyes, blurring my vision.

*On the plus side, at least it’s my blood and not Cali’s.*

Relief coursed through me when I finally spotted her on the ground a couple of feet behind me. I staggered toward her just as she started to get to her feet. She was bruised and scraped up, her clothes filthy and torn, her wrists still bound with the rope, but at least she was standing.

*Are you okay?* I mind linked.

*Are you?* she asked, her eyes wide as she looked at me. I could only imagine how bad I looked.

*I asked you first—*

Cali screamed as someone grabbed me from behind and threw me to the ground. I hadn’t even noticed that the Fae had stopped the car and now had us surrounded.

“Quite a spill you took there!” the Fae hissed as he kicked me hard in the stomach, knocking the wind right out of me. I crumpled into a ball, trying to protect my core and head from any more attacks as I coughed and wheezed.

Cali screamed again as I saw one of the Fae grab her and carry her kicking and screaming back to the car.

I was on my feet immediately, fighting off the Fae who was doing his best to restrain me. Even though I couldn’t see straight and was in more pain than I’d felt in a long while, I wheeled around and punched the Fae in the mouth. He staggered backward and fell.

Fighting through the pain and confusion, I ran after Cali, knowing that if I could just get to her, I could beat that Fae to a pulp, even in my current state, and get Cali away from him.

I’d almost caught up to them when I was blasted by magic. My entire body was enveloped in painful, electric heat, and I dropped to my knees.

The Fae I’d knocked down came over and grabbed me by the hair.

“Aw, too bad, Alpha werewolf, you took the bait way too early.”

He revealed a silver-bladed knife and raised it over his head just before he was struck by something. He flew backward and collapsed, the blade spinning across the ground and far enough away that he would have to crawl quite a distance to get to it.

I spun, and my mouth dropped open in surprise. “*Kendall?*”

Kendall hopped off her motorcycle and walked toward me. The Fae car peeled away, and in seconds, it was so far it looked like a dot in the distance. Even so, I took a few steps toward it, despite the fact that it was clearly too far away for me to catch it.

I turned on Kendall. “They have Cali! Why aren’t you going after them?”

When Kendall didn’t respond, I charged toward her, shifting as I attacked.

**Episode 5210**

**Xavier**

I was running as fast as I could, racing through the woods toward the Samara pack house at breakneck speed. I’d left without giving the Redwoods any explanation. All I could think about was Ava. I’d left her on her own knowing that our woods were teeming with Fae who wanted to destroy us all. I only hoped I wasn’t too late.

If the Fae had decided to level an attack on the Samara pack house, it would be for no other reason than to get to Ava. They knew she’d killed the Dark Fae, which had set this whole thing in motion.

For all I knew, the Fae attack on the Redwood pack house had been little more than a diversion to move me away from their real target: my pack—and Ava.

*Fuck! I’m the Samara Alpha. The Redwood pack is Greyson’s to watch over. I never should have agreed to stay there. If something happens to Ava, I will never forgive myself. And I’ll never forgive Greyson, either, for putting me in that position. He has a second, and it’s not me. It should have been Rishika’s responsibility to lead the pack in Greyson’s absence, not mine!*

If the Dark Fae mafia had staged an attack on the Samara pack, the only hope I had was that my pack would rise to the challenge and hold their ground. I felt confident that they would. We’d been training extensively, and my pack was full of seasoned, capable fighters. And while I wasn’t there, they had Ava to lead them.

But I knew Ava well and was worried that she would take on too much as Luna, and with me nowhere to be found, put herself in a vulnerable situation. She always threw herself into fights without much regard for her own safety. She took risks, fighting with the kind of reckless abandon that was effective but dangerous.

That was why I had to get to her as fast as I could. I wanted—*needed*—to be by her side to make sure she was safe. If I was there, I could make sure that no Fae even got close to her.

On the other hand, if the tripwire functioned like it was supposed to, the Fae wouldn’t even be able to get to the pack house, let alone to Ava—unless the pack was drawn out into the woods beyond the tripwire to defend themselves. I hoped that at the very least, they were smart enough to use the resources that Big Mac had put in place for us. But I knew that fights like these were unpredictable, and even if they tried to keep inside the tripwire, necessity there were eventualities that could draw them out farther.

As I thundered onto Samara territory, I picked up that strange, yet familiar, incense smell. Fuck. That meant the Dark Fae were here. I was getting closer to the tripwire perimeter, and I growled as I heard the sound of fighting.

I smelled blood, too.

But it didn’t smell like werewolf blood, thank god. Did that mean it had to be Fae blood? Maybe. Hopefully that meant the Samaras were holding their own and the fight had only just begun.

I spotted Knox and Geraint taking on a couple of Fae just beyond the tripwire. Knox took a blast of magic to the face, and it threw him across the ground, but he recovered quickly. He rushed the Fae who’d blasted him and ripped into her abdomen, killing the Fae instantly. I looked on proudly as Geraint made quick work of another Fae who was trying to blast him with magic.

*It looks like we’re putting up a fight the Fae didn’t expect. I just hope Ava’s okay.*

I heard a Fae scream, and I spotted him thrashing in the tripwire, struggling to free himself. At the same moment, an explosion went off sending iron fragments raining down upon the trapped Fae, who let out a final bone-chilling scream before dying.

*One less Fae is definitely okay by me. Big Mac came through for us with the tripwires.*

But there were plenty more Fae where that one came from. I charged at the one closest to me, all the while keeping my eyes and ears open for any sign of Ava. The Fae disappeared into thin air just before I made contact, and I stumbled to a stop.

I looked around, my hackles up. I was on edge and ready to strike at a moment’s notice. The invisible Fae back at the Redwood pack house had taught me a thing or two about the tricks the Fae had at their disposal, and I wasn’t going to fall for their magical treachery again. The Fae was still close, and I was going to kill him whether I could see him or not.

I drew in a deep breath and picked up a trace of the incense smell to my right, and without missing a beat, I charged. I slammed into something I couldn’t see and fell to the ground. I began snapping my strong jaws open and closed, longing for the sensation of biting down into flesh. My first three attempts at biting the Fae got me nothing but a mouthful of dirt, but my next lunge hit its mark.

I growled in satisfaction as blood sprayed into my mouth. The wounded Fae screamed in agony and flickered into stark relief in front of me with a huge gash in his arm. I grabbed him and flung him into the tripwire. With another loud explosion of iron shards, the Fae was dead.

I spit out a glob of blood and moved deeper into the fray. My pulse quickened when I picked up Ava’s scent. She was nearby. My eyes quickly scanned the chaos around me for any sign of her.

*Ava, I’m here. Where are you?* I mind linked.

Her mind link came back only a second later. *Xavier! Where have you been?*

I was about to remind her that I’d gone to the Redwood house—originally to help Greyson interrogate our Fae prisoner—but before I could say a word, Ava’s sweet voice filled my head again.

*I was so worried about you, X! The Fae caught us by surprise and attacked our patrols beyond the tripwire. Luckily, Perrie escaped them and came to the pack house to warn us. We mobilized quickly, and the pack immediately went out to defend. We haven’t lost anyone, but we’re only just now getting the upper hand. They’re coming at us hard, so I don’t know how long we’ll be able to hold the advantage.*

Finally, Ava appeared in front of me, and we locked eyes. I was so moved. I’d thought she was about to accuse me of abandoning the Samaras in favor of the Redwoods (and by association, Cali), but that wasn’t it at all. I felt guilty for jumping to that conclusion, and my regret over leaving her to fend for herself and our pack on her own bubbled up inside of me.

I quickly closed the distance between us and nuzzled her, drawing in her scent.

*I’m sorry I wasn’t here with you, Ava. But I’m here now. We’re going to clear these fuckers out and then figure out how to get rid of them for good.*

Shoulder to shoulder, Ava and I jumped into the fray to help the pack against the remaining Fae. My original count hadn’t considered all the Fae who’d apparently been utilizing their invisibility powers, and I watched as some of the Samaras were tossed around and attacked by invisible forces.

*Knox, behind you!* I mind linked when the sharp incense smell whipped past me, headed in Knox’s direction.

Ava and I sprinted over to join him, but Knox was quick and had obviously picked up on the scent at the same time I had. He tore into the Fae and brought the screaming man out of his glamour, so Knox could see him well enough to go in for the kill. Ava and I skidded to stop as Knox tackled the Fae and killed him instantly.

*Watch yourself*, I said to Ava as a Fae set his sights on her and began lobbing bolts of magic her way. A few of the magic bolts made contact, but Ava took them in stride and kept sprinting toward the Fae with her teeth bared. Together, we tore into the Fae, ripping it to shreds between the two of us.

Another Fae materialized right in front of us and shot magic blasts at us, but we both dodged and circled back to tackle the Fae to the ground. The Fae tried to use his invisibility glamour again right before we began attacking, but Ava was too quick and latched onto the Fae’s arm and tore it off. Screams filled the air.

I grabbed one of the screaming Fae’s legs in my jaws and flung him into a section of tripwire just as we heard Milo’s howl of pain.

I quickly raced off in the direction of the howl and spotted Knox standing over Milo’s body, blood dripping from his mouth.

Marissa appeared and shifted back as she took in the scene, her eyes wild with disbelief as they landed on Knox. “Knox, what the hell did you do?!”

**Episode 5211**

**Greyson**

Fury coursed through me as I lunged at Kendall. She shifted just as I collided with her, and the two of us crashed to the ground. We rolled around on the asphalt, both snarling. Kendall batted at me, and I angrily knocked her paw away.

I was furious—how could Kendall have allowed the Fae to get away *with Cali*? She knew getting Cali back was the whole fucking point. And what was I supposed to do now? My motorcycle was trashed, which meant I had no way to go after them. But Kendall’s bike was just fine. And why shouldn’t it be? She’d just stood there, watching Cali be taken and doing fucking *nothing* about it.

My anger had officially reached a boiling point. I was sick to death of the way that Kendall was always around but never actually helpful. Ever since she’d shown up, she’d always been connected in some way to the threats coming at the Redwood pack and at Cali, but she’d maintained a careful distance whenever it came time to actually do anything about them. She’d always stood apart, not wanting to get involved, like this shit had nothing to do with her.

But that was going to end. *Now*.

Kendall dodged as I snapped at her, then kicked at me with her powerful back legs. I wasn’t sure what exactly I wanted from her, but it was time that I made it clear to her that whatever it was she was doing, I’d had enough of it. She couldn’t toy with the Alpha of the Redwood pack any longer.

Through my rage, I could feel Kendall fighting hard against me, and I found myself surprised by her tenacity. I was an Alpha, after all—I was bigger than her, and stronger—but she wasn’t giving in. Finally, she managed to push me off her. Surprisingly enough, she was holding her own.

I launched myself at her again and we rolled around on the wet road, then into the trees, crashing through brush and bushes as we both tried to gain the upper hand.

*What the fuck are you doing?* Kendall demanded through the mind link, her eyes flashing with shock and anger.

I growled, deep in my throat. *Something I should’ve done a long time ago.*

Kendall made a frustrated noise and, rearing back, snapped at my leg. She connected, and pain shot through me, surprising a yelp out of me. This forced me to back off for an instant, which gave her a window of opportunity. She broke away from me, taking a quick step back. She turned her back on me, and I took my chance, leaping after her. I tackled her from behind and drove her to the ground.

I had her at a disadvantage, but, annoyingly, she wasn’t giving up. With a snarl of fury, she kicked, catching me in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of me for a moment, but—gritting my teeth—I held on tight. She squirmed beneath me, wriggling until she was facing up, then took a swipe at me with her claws.

I dodged that one, but not quickly enough to keep her from catching the side of my jaw. I felt her claws ripping through my fur, and the warmth that followed told me I was bleeding. But I kept fighting. Kendall was strong, and I knew I couldn’t give her another opportunity to get the upper hand.

She could fight back for as long as she wanted. I didn’t care. We both knew who would win this fight.

I looked down at her. Even in her wolf form, her eyes were shockingly purple, stark against her dark wolf fur. She was watching my every move, her gaze steely with anger. She could be as angry as she fucking wanted.

She snarled and kicked at me again, but I was working hard, making sure I stayed in control.

*You’re wasting your time attacking me, Greyson. Considering that I just saved your fucking ass—again.*

This stopped me for a moment as I thought back on what had just happened. I’d been dazed and bleary from the crash when the Fae had come at me, though I’d definitely been aware of his silver dagger. And then… *What?* I fought to remember. Something had hit the Fae, and I’d been able to get free, away from the lethal silver.

But what had hit him? What had happened? What had Kendall used to knock the Fae away from me?

*You could’ve gone after the Fae*, I snapped at her. *You could’ve saved Cali, we both know that. So why didn’t you?*

Kendall snarled again and tried to shove me off her. *Yeah, because that worked out so fucking well for you. Haven’t you realized that you can’t stop a fucking car with a motorcycle? What good would chasing them have done?*

I took this in. I had to admit that she was right about the motorcycle—I’d had the same thought when I’d overtaken them. I could keep up with them, but the bike simply didn’t have enough power to force a car off the road.

But then my thoughts went to Cali. I thought of her, hands bound, being dragged away from me. I thought of how terrified she had to be, and I felt my anger flare again.

*We could at least be following them*, I shot back. *Now we have no fucking idea where they are.*

*Oh, yeah, well, looking back, I guess it would’ve been better to just stay back and let you die with a silver dagger in your neck, asshole*, Kendall snapped. *But instead of just admitting that you fucking owe me, you’re attacking me.*

I growled. There was something about what she was saying that was really pissing me off. Maybe it was because she was making some rational points. But worry for Cali kept my fury burning hot, and I wasn’t ready for rationality.

*The only thing that’s keeping me from ripping your throat out right now is that I’m sure you know more than you’ve been telling me*, I told her.

*So you’re admitting that you need me*, Kendall said, needling me.

*I’m not fucking admitting anything*, I retorted. Whether or not that was true—whether or not *anything* she was saying was true—I was too pissed off to concede even an inch to her. *All I want is to save Cali.*

She kicked me hard, catching me in the ribs. *Then let me help you, dipshit.*

I ground my teeth. *I’m done letting you do anything, Kendall—*

*What the hell is that supposed to—*

*Since you came into our lives, your constant stream of half-truths and secrecy and shitty evasion have resulted in the Redwoods being under constant threat of attack. And now Cali is in danger. Cali—my mate—is in danger.*

Kendall looked up at me, and as I looked back at her, I thought I saw wheels turning behind her eyes. After a few seconds, apparently having come to some conclusion or another, she stopped fighting me. She went still beneath me, which surprised me so much I nearly stumbled backward.

Then she shifted back to human. It happened quickly, and before I knew it, her naked human body was stretched out on the ground beneath me.

“Greyson,” she said, her voice breathless but calm. “Listen to me. I’m not going to fight you—but I am going to help you.”

I felt the heat rising from her body, like there was a fire burning beneath her smooth skin. Her chest rose and fell against me as she breathed quickly, still out of breath from our fight.

I shifted back to human, too, but kept her pressed to the ground beneath me.

“Give me one good reason why I should believe anything you say,” I said, my voice low and harsh.

Kendall’s purple eyes sparkled as the sun came out from behind a cloud. Her hair fanned out on the ground, looking like silk against the rough asphalt. And as I held her down, her arms pinned to the ground, I saw a thin trickle of blood sliding across her throat.

There was a surge of something in my chest—hope, or want, or something like it. For a moment, I really *wanted* to believe her. Was that longing real, or was I just plain desperate to learn the truth of what was going on?

Kendall was a manipulator, and she had my number. She knew I’d want to believe anything that would help Cali. So was she just playing games? Again?

She could barely move, but she still managed to shrug. “I don’t know. You’re just going to have to make a choice, Greyson.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re going to have to give me something to work with, Kendall.”

She met my eyes, and hers were hard as flint. “Okay, I’ll give you something. What if I told you that Hans is still alive?”

**Episode 5212**

I struggled against the ropes on my wrists, but I could already feel the pain setting in. Iron was a bitch, wasn’t it? The iron-infused ropes kept me trapped in more ways than one. The iron ensured that I couldn’t use my magic, but it didn’t keep me from clawing and scratching, which was exactly what I did, doing everything I could to attack the Fae trying to hold me still.

“*Enough*,” the guy growled, looking pissed.

I squirmed and pushed, then managed to twist around in my seat to look out at the road behind the speeding car. I was praying that I’d see Greyson on his motorcycle, following us, but the road was totally empty. My heart sank, and I felt more alone than ever.

The last time I’d seen Greyson, he’d been locked in combat with one of the Dark Fae, fighting like hell to get to me.

The memory caused a cold thrill of fear to move through me. I hadn’t seen the end of that fight. I’d been pulled away, and… Oh god, what if the Fae had killed Greyson?

I squeezed my eyes shut as terror clawed its way up my chest. My throat felt tight, but I forced myself to take a deep breath. No, Greyson wasn’t dead. I couldn’t think like that. I wouldn’t allow myself to believe it.

But there were other scary possibilities, too. What if Greyson was hurt? What if he needed my help?

I took another deep breath. I couldn’t fall apart. I needed to stay focused and stay hopeful. I also needed to get the hell out of this car.

I’d stilled for a moment, and the Fae trying to subdue me must’ve thought I was done fighting, because he relaxed his grip on me. So when I smacked his face with my bound hands and drew blood with my nails, he looked surprised as hell.

“*Dammit!*” he snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously. He grabbed me around the throat and yanked me close. “If you try that again, little one, I’m going to squeeze your throat so hard your eyes will pop out of your damn head.”

I spat into his face. The Fae looked astonished, then fury took over once again. He drew his fist back like he was getting ready to hit me, but the other Fae grabbed his hand, stopping him.

“There’s no need for that,” the other Fae said mildly.

“What the fuck are you—”

“She’s going to stop fighting, aren’t you?” the second Fae said, looking at me. He didn’t shout—he didn’t even look angry—but I could hear the warning in his words.

It was a struggle, but I forced my body to relax.

This was enough of an agreement from me for the second Fae, who smiled.

“See?” he said. “That’s settled, then. I knew you’d listen to reason.”

I looked up at the second Fae. His eyes were dark and cold and, despite his milder manner, he scared me even more than the Fae who’d just threatened to choke me.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded.

The second Fae laughed, the sound high and sharp. “Come on, that’s not my call.”

I thought about this for a moment. Then—hoping to sow a little division in the ranks—I said, “Oh, I see, you’re just a lackey, then? You’re not allowed to make any decisions on your own?”

The Fae laughed again. “Nice try, kid.”

Gritting my teeth, I squirmed in place, trying to figure out how much room I had to maneuver.

Not much, as it turned out. The first Fae grabbed my arm and forced me to stay still.

Left with nothing else to do, I thought hard. I tried to remember everything that had happened when Greyson had overtaken the car. A flash of memory came to me, and I remembered overhearing one of the Fae saying they were using Greyson as bait, and that he’d shown up too early. Then there was the strange mention of Kendall. That had stood out to me, too.

“What do you guys know about Kendall?” I asked, figuring it couldn’t hurt to do a little digging. Well, maybe it could, but I asked anyway.

I took note of the speaking look that passed between the two Fae. Neither of them said anything, but their silence spoke volumes—they definitely knew something.

“That’s enough questions,” the driver said harshly, casting an angry glance over his shoulder.

My pulse kicked up, though my heart was already beating fast. I was onto something. I had no idea *what*, exactly, but the atmosphere in the car had changed when I’d asked about Kendall. There was something here, I just knew it.

I thought quickly, trying to figure out what I could say that might elicit a response from the Fae.

“If you’re thinking that Kendall is going to come to my rescue or something, you can forget it,” I said. “We’re not exactly friends—”

“I already told you to shut the hell up,” the driver snarled, whipping around to glare at me.

He turned back to the road when he heard the deafening blare of a truck horn. He’d drifted into the oncoming lane, and he swore and jerked the wheel hard to avoid colliding with the semi-truck barreling toward us.

“Keep your eyes on the road,” the second Fae said, with the quiet warning in his voice again.

“Then keep her quiet,” the driver snapped. “And don’t tell me how to drive.”

The first Fae glowered at me. “You heard what he said—shut the hell up. No more talking.”

I swallowed hard, panic starting to set in. My heart was racing, my palms were starting to sweat, and I could feel myself growing hot and flushed. My whole body was shifting into disaster mode, and I couldn’t seem to deep breathe my way out of it. How could I? I was completely freaked out. Someone high up in the Dark Fae mafia wanted me—but why? What use could I possibly be to them?

The answer came to me immediately—I could be used as bait for Greyson.

That wasn’t good, but I forced myself to keep thinking it out. I had to understand this if I was going to do anything about it.

This wasn’t just about Greyson. Kendall was tied into this, somehow, though I had no idea how.

There was so much I didn’t know for sure, but one thing seemed clear—whoever it was who’d ordered me kidnapped, they probably had plans to kill me. And that just wasn’t going to work for me.

Moving slowly and quietly, trying to avoid attracting the attention of the Fae on either side of me, I ran my fingers along the rope that was binding my hands. The iron filaments woven through it stung my fingers, but I was surprised to realize that the rope was frayed. Maybe that had happened when I’d hit the road after Greyson had shown up.

I kept my movements tiny, but I maneuvered my hands until I could scrape at the frayed section with my fingernails.

I’d gotten one side loose and was trying to reposition my hands so I could get to the other side when my elbow smacked into the ribs of the first Fae.

“What are you doing?” he growled, glaring at me.

“I’m just trying to get comfortable,” I said, thinking quickly. “You couldn’t give me any more room, could you?”

“No,” he said flatly, and refocused on the window.

I went back to work, scraping at the weakened section of the rope. I kept at it until—finally—I felt the rope break. It unraveled quietly, and—mercifully—the Fae sitting on either side of me didn’t seem to notice.

I flexed my fingers, feeling the familiar tingling of my magic. With the rope gone, I could access my magic again, but I had to think. I had to be strategic about this. I felt my shoulders tense as I glanced between the three Fae. One in front, one on either side of me—so who to strike first? I needed to be careful, because I knew I might only get one shot.

Mind made up, I took a deep breath, then shoved the guy on my right. I needed a little room, and that did the trick.

“Hey!” he shouted, but I ignored him as I summoned my magic.

I sent a blast toward the first Fae on my right, but he grabbed for me just as I loosed the magic, and my hand jerked. The blast of magic went off-course and hit the driver in the back of the head.

“Shit!” someone yelled as the car swerved violently off the road. An instant later, a tree appeared in front of us, and we slammed right into it.

I wasn’t wearing a seat belt, and I found myself launched into the air, sailing over the front seat and heading straight for the windshield.

**Episode 5213**

**Xavier**

*Knox, what the hell did you do?*

Marissa surged past me and headed straight for Knox, who looked up. When he shifted back to human, he was ashen faced.

“I—I didn’t do this,” he stammered.

I looked past Knox to see the Fae—the *surviving* Fae, at least—fleeing into the safety of the trees beyond the pack house. I nodded, feeling satisfied. Whatever else was going on, at least the pack was out of danger—that was my top priority.

Marissa shifted back to human. “Xavier!” she snapped, whipping around to look at me. “You saw it! You saw what he did!”

I shifted back too and shook my head. “I didn’t see anything.” I turned to Knox. “What happened?”

Knox swallowed hard. “It was one of the Fae—he attacked Milo. I heard Milo yelp, and I came over to help him, but… But it was too late.”

I registered the wild look on Knox’s face, then glanced over at Ava, who’d shifted too.

“What do you think?” I asked quietly.

She looked tense. “I didn’t see either of them. Not during the fight—not until now. But I believe Knox—”

“I heard Milo and Knox arguing,” someone said. I turned to see Perrie striding over. “It was right before we were attacked. They were yelling at each other.”

“I heard it, too.”

“Me too.”

The pack was gathering as we faced down Knox, who was still standing next to Milo’s bloodied form. All eyes were on Knox.

“Yeah, we were arguing,” Knox admitted, looking quickly around at the curious pack, “but that was nothing. Less than nothing. And it has nothing to do with this.”

“How do you explain the fresh blood on your face?” Marissa demanded. “If it were from the fight, it would’ve already been dry.”

Knox’s eyes went even wider. He touched his face, then looked down at the blood smeared across his fingers. He looked shocked, like he was only noticing it for the first time. “It’s… I don’t know. But I swear, it isn’t Milo’s—”

“Sure,” Marissa said harshly.

“It’s not! It’s Dark Fae blood!” Knox insisted. He scanned the crowd, starting to look desperate. “Check it if you don’t believe me! You’ll see! Smell it!”

Ava turned to me. “What do you think, X? You’re the Alpha.”

I knew she wasn’t saying this out loud for my sake. I felt the same thing she’d picked up on—the pack was anxious, and Ava was reminding them that I was the one in charge.

I stepped toward Knox and looked at him closely. I inhaled deeply through my nose—the blood on Knox’s face wasn’t Milo’s. I turned to the pack. “There’s some of Milo’s blood on his hands, but that doesn’t mean he’s guilty—”

“And it doesn’t mean he’s not!” Grace called out.

“There should be an investigation,” Carmen agreed. “Milo was a Loneclaw, and everyone knows he and Knox had beef. We need to know the truth.”

I pushed a hand through my hair and ran through the possibilities in my head. Carmen was right about one thing—we did all know that Knox and Milo had never gotten along. The feud between them was definitely bad, but was it murder-level bad?

I eyed Knox closely. I’d been so sure he understood that he needed to work with Milo—for the good of the pack—but maybe I’d been wrong. What if Knox had only been pretending to agree with me? What if he’d been biding his time and had made his move when he had the chance, using the Fae attack for cover?

That was possible, I reminded myself. Somehow, though, I doubted it.

“Hey, come on, you know me!” Knox said. He looked at me, then at the pack. “I hope none of you really believe that I’d actually kill Milo. I mean, yeah, we didn’t like each other, but come on. Milo was a Samara, just like me, so when he was attacked, I tried to save him. That’s what a pack is supposed to do.” He looked at me desperately. “You have to believe me!”

I shook my head. “I don’t have to believe anyone.” Knox looked worried and scared, but he also managed to look offended by my words, so I added, “But I am *inclined* to believe you—”

“Maybe this is something for the council to decide,” Geraint interjected.

I snorted with laughter as I looked over my shoulder at Geraint. I thought he was joking, but I was shocked to see that he was looking grave.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, floored. “Come on, the council? The council’s a fucking joke.”

Geraint sighed. “I agree that the council’s reputation for fairness and diplomacy is nothing to celebrate, but I *am* serious. How could I not be? A pack member being accused of killing another pack member is a very serious issue.”

Knox threw up his hands. “But I didn’t—”

Geraint didn’t wait for him to finish. “Don’t forget, the council made our pack take Knox in, so they may have a vested interest in resolving this matter—”

“Forget it,” I said shortly. It was time to shut this council shit down. “None of this has anything to do with the council. I am the Alpha of this pack, and it’s my right to resolve this.”

I looked around, making sure there were no dissenters among the pack, and caught sight of Ava, whose mouth was turned up in a small smile. She was clearly pleased that I’d taken a firm stand on the issue, and I appreciated her support.

“I’m sorry that Milo’s dead,” I said, looking at Marissa’s unhappy face. “None of us are happy that there’s been a death within our pack. But there’s no use pointing fingers. The only people responsible for Milo’s death are the Dark Fae mafia. We need to remember that. I don’t want the members of this pack turning on each other. I believe Knox when he says he didn’t do it. He’s proven himself in battle many times before. He’s loyal to the pack. Milo’s death is a tragedy, but not one to be laid at Knox’s feet.”

My voice rang in the cold air, echoing off the trees. I scanned the pack, and after a moment, I saw people begin to nod. The pack was in agreement, they were going to follow my lead.

“We should be doing *something* to find out the truth,” Perrie said quietly.

“You’re absolutely right. We should be preparing for Milo’s funeral rites. Carmen?” I looked through the crowd until the man stepped forward. “Head that up, will you?”

“Of course,” he said with a nod. He started directing the pack members, putting people into groups and assigning tasks. Everyone started to trickle away.

“Xavier?”

I looked over to see Knox move to stand next to me. He still looked pale and was more rattled than I’d ever seen him. “Yeah?”

“Thank you,” he said, taking a shaky breath. “For standing up for me like that.”

I clapped the shrimp on the shoulder. “It’s fine,” I said. “I believe you didn’t do it.”

Ava moved to stand next to Milo’s dead body, taking charge of it.

“Geraint?” I called.

“What’s up?” he asked, turning back to face me.

“Grab Josephine and head out on a patrol. Do the whole perimeter. Make sure the Fae have actually retreated. We don’t need another surprise attack.”

Geraint nodded. “You got it.”

“Keep your eyes open,” I said as he walked away. I grabbed my phone, and was surprised to see I had a voicemail from Greyson.

“Xavier, it’s me. Cali’s missing. Call me.”

My stomach dropped, then it fell even further when I saw a text from Lola: *Is Cali with you???*

I texted back: *Why would she be with me?*

Lola’s response came immediately, like she was glued to her phone*. I don’t know. I haven’t heard from her. Or Greyson.*

I could barely breathe. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I had the distinct feeling that I needed to do *something*.

“Xavier, where do you think the funeral pyre should go?” Ava asked. “Perrie’s getting the wood arranged for…” She stopped talking and looked at me, worry creasing her brow. “What is it? Xavier? What’s wrong?”

I looked over at her, baffled. I had no idea what to say to her. She could obviously see that something was wrong—it was probably clear from the expression on my face. But how much should I tell her? Was I supposed to raise the alarm? It definitely was alarming that Cali was gone, especially with the Dark Fae mafia threat still looming…

“Xavier?” Ava said, her voice breaking into my thoughts. “What is it?

I looked into her blue eyes. I had a choice to make, and I knew it was a risky one. Was leaving to look for Cali worth the risk of hurting Ava again?

**Episode 5214**

The windshield was flying toward me. I knew I was about to hit it, and I braced myself for impact. There was nothing in my head but fear… But then, out of nowhere, my shield blossomed into life—and not a millisecond too soon. It saved me from the worst of the impact as I sailed through the windshield. The glass exploded like a bomb as the shield hit it, and I flew through the air, landing hard on the crumpled hood of the car, the glass scattered around me. I slid across the newly-corrugated metal and tumbled to the ground.

I landed hard and just lay there for a moment, dazed and dizzy. My head was spinning like a top, and I had to blink hard to get the stars to dissipate from my field of vision.

But then my mind reminded me that I was still in danger, and I staggered to my feet, leaning on the car for support. The ground was slippery with new snow and crunchy with chunks of safety glass from the broken windshield.

I looked down at the shield in my hand, stunned by the sight of it. I didn’t even remember summoning it. I’d felt the magic in my hands, but there’d been no conscious thoughts about it. Had my shield appeared in my hand purely instinctively?

I heard a groan from inside the car, then someone started cursing fluently.

Looking over, I saw that the driver was slumped over the steering wheel and not moving at all. But behind him, the other two Fae were moving.

Shit.

I had to get out of here. I didn’t have time to think—hell, I didn’t even have time to check myself for injuries. I just needed to get as far away from these Fae as possible.

I tried to run, but my feet slid out from underneath me. The snow was too slippery, and I was still unsteady from the crash.

I needed to get away from the road. The car’s headlights were still on and illuminating me, so I moved away from their path. When I was in shadow again, I slid to a stop, grabbing a branch for support so I didn’t fall on my ass. I looked around and realized with a thrill of fear that I was on the steep side of the mountain, a ridge with a sharp drop-off only a foot in front of me. Unless I wanted to run back to the road—and the car—there was nowhere to go but down.

Behind me, I heard a car door wrenching open and the voices of the Fae, grumbling and shouting at each other.

Then, out of nowhere, a blast of magic exploded ten feet away from me.

“There!” one of the Fae bellowed, and they both started running.

Startled, I lost my grip on the branch, and gravity took over.

“*Shit shit shit!*” I slid over the ridge of the mountain, just as one of the Fae slammed into me.

My heart felt like it left my body as I fell backwards into empty space, and then I hit the hard, snowy ground and let out a pained groan. Once again, I had no idea how it happened, but I managed to land on my shield.

The angry Fae latched on to me, and together, we slid down the steep slope. We would’ve kept going, but the Fae dug his heels into the snow, and we tumbled to a messy stop.

While he was distracted, I took the opportunity to swing at him. I landed a pretty solid punch to his jaw, snapping his head back. He tried to blast me with his magic, but my punch had thrown him off-balance, and his magic shot into the trees. He rolled off me, which left me free—but also removed my only anchor. I screamed as I started to slide once again.

“You’re not getting away that easily!” the Fae screeched at me.

He launched himself forward and grabbed me again, but his weight and momentum made us slide even faster—a scenario which was not helped by the fact that we were using my shield like some kind of magical toboggan.

“Oh my god,” I muttered to myself. “*Get off!*”

“Make me!” the Fae taunted.

I took his advice and punched him again, but he hung on tight. I kicked and elbowed, but I couldn’t throw him off. I did manage to summon up my sword and hit him with the hilt, right in the face.

The snowy trees whizzed by, and, in some strange, distant corner of my brain, I thought of how, when we were kids, Lola and I used to spend every winter riding down the hill just outside my house on plastic saucers. We’d always had to be careful, though, because the hill ended at the road and the saucers tended to have a mind of their own.

And, just like the saucers from my childhood, I couldn’t control this ride either. The shield spun wildly, seeming to hit every rock and jutting branch on the mountainside.

Suddenly, I remembered that Lola and I had eventually figured out a way to steer. That had to be worth a try now.

“Lean left!” I screamed at the Fae as we hurtled toward a huge pine tree.

Astonishingly, the Fae listened to me, leaning hard to the left. Together, we managed to avoid slamming into the massive tree.

“Lean right!” I yelled as a set of gnarly looking boulders appeared just ahead of us.

The Fae leaned right, and we managed to brush past the jagged rocks. When I looked back at him, he grinned at me triumphantly. I responded by slamming my sword into his ribs.

With a yelp, he tumbled off the shield and rolled into an ancient aspen, hitting it with a loud thud.

I looked back at him as he struggled to his feet, but the distance between us continued to grow as I kept sliding down the mountain.

Before he vanished into the distance, I saw him try to stand, then fall back to his knees and collapse into the snow.

“Good,” I said. Served him right.

Then I faced forward again and screamed—I was about to slam into a tree.

“Shit!” I tried to steer the shield away, but I was no amateur—I knew I’d already run out of time to steer.

Gripping my sword, I used it like a ski pole and slammed it into the snow, sending the shield careening to the right. I barely missed the tree, coming close enough the shield scraped against the trunk.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” I burst out.

I’d escaped that tree by the skin of my teeth, but I wasn’t out of the woods yet—metaphorically or literally. I seemed to have found a rough trail, but trees were whipping past me way too fast for comfort—worse still, I was speeding toward the tree line. I could see openness beyond, but in order to reach it, I was going to have to pass through a dense cluster of trees.

I braced myself, throwing my hands up in front of my face to protect my eyes.

I blasted through, the branches and shrubs seeming to reach out and grab for my coat, trying to tug me back. But my momentum was too strong. Suddenly, I was through the trees and out in the open.

I looked around, baffled. For a moment, I had no idea where I’d ended up, but then someone started yelling at me.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

A second later a skier zoomed past me, swerving hard to avoid a collision.

Holy shit, I was on a ski slope!

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Looking at the smooth, white snow ahead, I saw that I was headed straight for a group of people. I realized, with a sinking stomach, it was a ski class. A *kids’* class, made up of a bunch of tiny humans all dressed in brightly colored parkas and ski pants. They looked over at me in surprise as I hurtled toward them.

I tried to change course, but I was going too fast, so I just started screaming. “Watch out! Heads up! Coming through! Move!”

The brightly colored kids dove out of the way as I plowed through the group.

“Hey!”

“Watch it!”

“Sorry! I’m sorry! I can’t stop!” I shrieked as I flew past.

“Are you *crazy*?” someone bellowed.

I was certainly starting to *feel* crazy. My head was still pounding from the accident, my body was aching from my unplanned sled ride down the mountain, and I’d just about had it.

At that point, I hit a bump, and the shield started to spin. I was one hundred percent out of control now, veering off the ski slope and toward the parking lot. I was so dizzy, I didn’t even see the hill I was heading toward—but I definitely felt it when I suddenly went airborne.

After a few seconds, I hit the ground hard and kept sliding toward a road, just like the one at my parents’ house. But I’d just slid down a mountain, fought off a Dark Fae, and mowed through a ski school—I was *not* going to end up flattened by a speeding car. With the last of my strength, I thrust my sword into the snow, and finally—*finally*—slowed myself down.

Still, I coasted a little farther than I’d planned and came to a stop in the middle of the road.

I sat there, heart pounding, trying to wrap my brain around the fact that I was still alive… And then I heard the sudden roar of an engine.

I whirled around to see a motorcycle speeding down the road, heading straight for me.

**Episode 5215**

**Artemis**

I raised an eyebrow. I wasn’t quite sure how to interpret Kastian’s tone. Was it teasing or threatening? I wasn’t sure. Either way, I knew I didn’t want to play his game. I was going to play one of my own.

I lowered my lashes and gave him a slow, smoldering look.

“Me? A spy? Now why would you think something like that?” I asked, keeping my voice light.

Kastian’s gaze tracked slowly down, then back up, taking in my dress, my body, then my face. I had to fight not to roll my eyes—Fae could be so predictable.

He smiled again. “Well, I’ve never seen you before. Of that I’m sure, because I would absolutely remember meeting someone like you.”

“And so you just assume I’m a spy?” I shrugged. “Well, I’d be a pretty poor spy to just come out and say it, wouldn’t I?”

I was keeping my tone light and almost playful, but internally, I was turning his words over in my head. He’d assumed that I was a spy—why? Did Celeste really have spies? Was that common knowledge? She and I had spent a lot of time together, but she’d never mentioned a spy network to me.

And if she did have spies, then why? What did she use them for? Was she telling them to look into the Order, too? If so, were they not having any luck? Was that why she’d agreed—in so many words—to let me try my hand at figuring it out?

The thoughts swirled around in my head, but Kastian’s light laugh tugged me back to the moment.

His eyes sparkled as he looked me over again. “Oh, I’ll be sure to ask you about *all* your secrets.” He leaned slightly forward. “Later. When we’re in a better position.”

The innuendo was obvious, and certainly not lost on me. His lack of subtlety didn’t keep a small thrill from running down my spine. Though I knew that wouldn’t be happening.

It wasn’t that I’d ruled out sleeping with Kastian to get the information I needed, but having sex with a spoiled Fae certainly wasn’t on my bucket list. There was something about the smug look on his face that told me he probably wasn’t a giver in bed.

He took a step closer to me and snapped his fingers. The gesture startled me, but an instant later, a goblet appeared in front of me, presented to me by a small Fae in servant’s clothes.

“You still haven’t told me your name,” Kastian said, taking the goblet and handing it to me.

I accepted the drink and peered down at the dark red contents, feeling a little wary. I’d always heard that the parties Fae nobles threw could get pretty wild. The kind of wild where a person might forget herself.

Not that I’d ever been to any of those parties. The circles I’d run in when I was a bounty hunter hadn’t exactly been filled with nobility.

The only time I’d ever actually been to one of those parties—other than this one—was the time Marius and I had infiltrated a party together. But that had been different—we hadn’t taken part in the festivities.

Besides, I couldn’t forget the time I’d drunk water that had been laced with a sleeping agent, resulting in the most intense sex dream of my entire life. The experience still haunted me.

Heat rushed to my face at the memory, and I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I wasn’t keen on drinking from the goblet, but I was here, and so was Kastian, and if I was going to get any information, then I needed to play my game, and play it well.

I lifted the goblet in a small toast, then pressed it to my lips.

“My name is Ari,” I said silkily.

Kastian raised his own goblet. “Well then, Ari, welcome.” He took a long drink. “Let me introduce you to everyone.”

He rested his hand on the small of my back. I could feel his nails—so long, they were basically claws—pressing into my flesh.

Kastian guided me over to a corner of the ballroom where a small sitting area had been arranged. It was already occupied by a knot of Fae who were leaning close to speak, passing what looked like a pipe back and forth.

As we approached, a beautiful Fae woman looked up at us. She had black corkscrew curls and dark, shining skin. She blew a mouthful of smoke at me, then slid her gaze to Kastian.

“Kas, who’s your plaything tonight?” she asked teasingly.

Kastian laughed. “This is Ari. She’s new, so be nice and don’t bite, Cadhla.”

The woman, Cadhla, gave me a hungry smile, then took another hit from the hookah. The smoke swirled around me, making me feel a little light-headed, so I was only half-listening as Kastian introduced the rest of the group. But I wasn’t too high to know that I recognized some of their family names. They were names I remembered from the crypt, and from my own reading and research. I looked at the young, bright faces staring up at me and realized they were all sons and daughters of the Fae nobility. As Rishika would’ve said, I’d just hit the jackpot.

I hadn’t known what to expect when I’d walked into this party, but I’d somehow found myself in exactly the situation I’d hoped for. Now what the hell was I supposed to do next?

“Ari!”

I looked up to see Kastian waving me over. I hadn’t realized it, but he’d wandered deeper into the group, leaving me standing awkwardly at the edge.

I moved closer to him, and his hand immediately landed on my back again as he looked at his friends. “Everyone, Ari is here as a guest of Celeste—”

Cadhla laughed. “A guest? Celeste has *guests* now?”

“Celeste never has anyone,” said a young man with spiky blond hair. “She doesn’t even have anyone to warm her frigid bed, since her own husband won’t have her.”

Everyone laughed.

“Come now, Dorphus,” Kastian chided, though he was laughing too. “There’s no need to be so crude.”

“If Adair Mauvais didn’t want *me*, I simply wouldn’t be able to show my face ever again,” a young woman said, shaking her red curls in obvious horror. “If *I* had a man like that and lost him, I don’t know how I’d find the will to go on.”

“*So* hot,” Dorphus agreed.

“I’d let Adair leave me,” another woman said, giggling.

“I wouldn’t let him get out of bed long enough to leave me,” a young man retorted, winking at Dorphus.

They group laughed, and I wrapped my sweating hands around my goblet, feeling awkward as hell as they all gushed about how hot and bangable my uncle was. All I could do was pray no one mentioned Kadmos. It was bad enough listening to them describe what they wanted to do to my uncle. If they started in on my father, I had no idea what I’d do.

I took another gulp of my drink and realized I was already feeling woozy. It usually took half a dozen beers for me to even feel a buzz, but I supposed I shouldn’t have been too surprised. Leave it to the Fae to have strong alcohol.

Not sure what else to do, I was about to take another sip, but I stopped myself. I needed to be careful. I couldn’t afford to get drunk and say something I shouldn’t.

I glanced at Kastian, who was smiling and casually sipping his drink. He had bright eyes and a wide smile, but there was something dangerous about him too. It was probably the fact that he was an unknown variable—there was no telling where Kastian might fall when it came to Fae politics.

But he could be useful, I reminded myself. I couldn’t lose sight of that.

There was a small orchestra in the far corner and, finally finished with the waltz they’d been playing, they started on a new song with a lively beat.

“I love this one!” exclaimed the girl with the red curls. She grabbed the hand of the man with spiky hair and dragged him off to dance.

Dorphus followed them, taking two women by the hand as he went.

I was watching them go when I felt a hand slip into mine. The sharp nails digging into my palm told me it belonged to Kastian.

He was smiling when I looked over at him, his eyes alight with a strange fire.

“Shall we join them?” he asked, nodding toward the dance floor.

I wasn’t really into dancing, but this felt like the next step of our game, so I was about to agree when Cadhla stepped between Kastian and me.

“Yes?” I asked her, surprised.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Ari, before any of *that*, there’s something you need to do first.”

**Episode 5216**

**Greyson**

I craned my neck to look around Kendall at the road ahead. We were racing along the snow-lined highway, on the lookout for the Dark Fae who’d taken Cali.

I’d wanted to drive, but Kendall had flat-out refused. She had set her jaw and—not wanting to waste any more time—I’d let it go and ceded control of the bike. I probably would’ve been the same if it were my own. It didn’t matter in the end. All I cared about was finding Cali, and that was what I needed to focus on.

Well, that and the news that Kendall had just dropped on me like a freaking bombshell. I was desperate to go after Cali, so I hadn’t pressed her for more information about Hans being alive. Thinking about it as we sped down the road, the freezing wind whipping at my eyes, I wasn’t sure if I actually believed her. Kendall didn’t exactly have a good track record when it came to being truthful.

One way or the other, I had a lot more questions for her, though I wasn’t completely sure where I was going to start. At least she’d agreed to go after the car that had taken Cali.

*Hans is alive?*

My head spun as I turned the idea over. Cali had told me that she’d heard Kendall talking on the phone, saying that Hans was dead—she’d been giving a full report on him. But maybe that had been a lie, or maybe Kendall had only just learned about Han’s continuing existence.

I shook my head. *If* it were true—if Hans was still somehow alive—that would give me cause for concern. Hans was a dangerous character in general, and not all that fond of me personally. He hadn’t exactly appreciated the fact that I’d stood up to him during the incident with Maren and Fenrir. But would that one offense be enough to drive Hans to all-out war?

The roar of the motorcycle engine was deafening. The road was rocky, and the wind was whipping past my ears, so I had to bellow when I addressed Kendall.

“How long have you known?”

Kendall’s body tensed. I was pressed against it, so I felt it happen. She was quiet for a moment, then she shook her head. “No way. I’ve already told you too much.”

I had one hand braced on the back of the seat, and my free arm was looped around Kendall. I tightened my grip on her, and felt her body stiffen even further. “Bullshit. You’ve told me almost nothing.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “You’d better be careful, Greyson.”

“And why is that?” I asked, bracing for a fight.

She raised an eyebrow. “You squeeze me any tighter, and I might lose control of this bike. And then where would we be?”

I cinched my grip even tighter, until I could feel her diaphragm moving against my arm whenever she took a breath. “*How long have you known?*”

She gave her head a quick shake. “I only found out a short while ago,” she said stiffly.

I thought this over, trying to determine whether or not I believed her. That was a difficult question, where Kendall was concerned.

“Is any of what you told me about Greta true?” I demanded.

She shrugged. “Some of it.”

“And how much is *some*?” I yelled over the roar of the bike and the wind.

I felt her take a deep breath, almost like a resigned sigh.

“I told you this already, Greyson, but you just won’t listen to me,” she said. “It’s dangerous to know too much.

Anger flared in my chest. I really didn’t like it when people kept secrets from me.

“Take a look at where we’ve ended up, Kendall,” I growled. “It might be dangerous to know too much, but ignorance is clearly more dangerous.”

“Maybe, but—”

“You can’t have it both ways, Kendall,” I snapped, brushing her hair out of my eyes as the wind whipped it across my face. We were too close—I needed some distance from her, but there was no chance of that happening. Not now, when we were looking for Cali.

Kendall swerved the bike, narrowly avoiding a patch of black ice. She gripped the handlebars so tightly, her knuckles were white. “There’s nothing I want more than to have a heart-to-heart with you, Greyson, but I really think we should leave this for later.”

I ground my teeth. I wanted answers, and I wasn’t used to waiting, but she did have a point. The road that wound up the mountain was snowy, and there were dangers around every bend. Kendall needed to focus if we wanted to stay on the bike, so I nodded.

“Fine,” I muttered. Then, louder: “But we are going to talk later. And I have a lot of questions I’m going to want answered.”

“I can’t wait,” Kendall said sarcastically, her voice whipping back to me on the wind.

We drove for another mile or so, the wind growing colder as we climbed the mountain. I never got cold, but I could feel the icy wind biting my skin, doing its best to give me frostbite. I kept my eyes open for any sign of Cali or the bastard Fae who’d taken her.

Suddenly, I spotted something moving in the trees just ahead of us. I squinted into the darkness—what the hell was that?

I was just about to point it out to Kendall when she jammed on the brakes, and we skidded across the road.

Just as we did, a kid on a sled sailed off the hill above us and landed hard on the road.

Wait—hang on. That wasn’t a kid, and she wasn’t on a sled. It was Cali, and she was sliding on what I belatedly recognized as her magic shield.

“What the fuck?” Kendall growled, fighting to keep control of the bike.

Cali looked up as she skidded across the road, finally coming to a stop right in front of us.

My heart leapt into my throat as we slid closer. The road was icy, and we were still sliding, getting dangerously close to Cali. She raised her hands as though she was going to blast us with her magic, and I realized that she didn’t recognize us.

“Cali!” I bellowed.

She hesitated, her eyes widening with shock. “*Greyson?*”

“Come *on*!” Kendall snarled, finally wrestling the bike to a halt, only an inch or two from where Cali had landed.

I leapt off the bike and swept Cali into my arms.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I demanded, running my hands over her arms and face, checking for injuries. “Cali, speak to me.”

“I’m—I’m okay,” she breathed, her voice nothing but a whisper. She looked shell-shocked and terrified, and she felt wooden in my arms.

I bent to kiss her cheeks, then her lips, and that seemed to wake her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck, burying her face in my shoulder.

“Greyson,” she murmured.

“I’m so sorry, love,” I said, pressing my own face against her hair. “I’m so, so sorry. I tried to stop the Fae, but they—”

“I know, I know,” she said. “And don’t apologize. I’m glad to see you. I was worried about you.”

I leaned back and looked at her, then down at the shield, then up at the hill from which she’d fallen. My mind raced, but I just couldn’t make sense of what I was seeing.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked. “How the hell did you get away? And how did you end up on the road?”

She took a shaking breath. “I blasted the driver, and he crashed into a tree—”

“*What?*”

“I got away, but then I slid down the mountain,” Cali admitted. “And then plowed through a children’s ski class. And then flew over that hill,” she said, nodding upward. “I used the shield to protect me during the crash, but then I ended up using it like a saucer. It worked pretty well, actually.”

“*Cali*,” I said, shaking my head.

Kendall cut the bike’s engine, and Cali looked up like she was noticing her for the first time.

“Kendall?” Cali looked at her, then back at me. “What’s she doing here?”

“It really doesn’t matter,” Kendall said shortly. “I’m here, you’re here, and we’re all alive. It’s all very exciting. But we should go.”

I looked at the bike, realizing in a moment there wasn’t enough room for all of us. “Kendall, why don’t you take Cali back to the pack house? I can shift and meet you there—”

“Greyson, no!” Cali said, clinging to me tighter. “I can go with you.”

“I really think it would be better if—Kendall?”

Kendall wasn’t listening to me. Her purple eyes were focused on something behind me.

I turned around to see what she’d spotted, and saw that it was a car—and it was heading straight for us.

Kendall’s expression darkened. “They’re coming.”

**Episode 5217**

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Greyson—or Kendall. How could I? I’d just tobogganed down the side of a mountain and landed in the road, where I’d nearly been hit by Greyson and Kendall, who were both naked and straddling a motorcycle.

My mind was still struggling to come to terms with this, even though I was sure there was a rational explanation for their appearance. There had to be. But I still had some questions.

Questions, however, were going to have to wait—right now, we had to deal with the car that was speeding toward us.

Rationally, I knew it couldn’t be the same Dark Fae who’d tried to kidnap me. That car was wrapped around a tree at the top of the mountain, thanks to me.

But I’d left a couple of Fae alive, which meant they were capable of contacting their friends, and now there was a car speeding toward us. Given my luck lately, this was going to be bad.

Still holding me tightly, Greyson stepped off the road. “Into the woods.”

Kendall nodded, then grabbed her bike and wheeled it to the side of the road. “A car can’t chase us through the woods.”

“Fuck that,” Greyson muttered.

Kendall looked at him. “What?”

He shook his head. “I’m sick of being chased.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

I looked at Greyson, also keen to hear the answer to that question.

“This has to end,” he growled. “Now.”

I stared at him, stunned. I was surprised to hear that he wanted to fight it out, and even more surprised that he wasn’t telling me to run. I was expecting him to hide me in the woods for safety, but instead, he set me down and gave me a nod, letting me know I was going to fight alongside him.

And I wouldn’t have had it any other way. After all, I was the one who’d been kidnapped by the Dark Fae. I was the one who’d been used as bait. I had an axe to grind against these assholes.

But as we moved into the shadows of the woods, I was gripped by sudden fear. I looked up at Greyson’s blond head. He was leading the way, holding my hand. The Dark Fae had wanted to use me as bait—bait to attract Greyson. I knew that for sure. I still had no idea how they felt about Kendall—maybe they hated her even more than Greyson—but I was still terrified.

Had the Fae succeeded in baiting their trap? Was it possible that this had been their plan all along—to get all three of us together? Had my escape inadvertently put us all in jeopardy?

“Okay, stop,” Kendall said, putting up her hand. She glanced back at the road. “This is far enough. A car won’t be able to get this far into the woods.”

“You’re sure?” I asked, my heart pounding.

She nodded. “If they want us, they’re going to have to get out of the car and come get us.”

“And we’ll be waiting,” Greyson added.

I swallowed hard. I was scared, but I could feel my magic vibrating through my body like a plucked guitar string. It was humming impatiently, ready to be unleashed. I was scared, but I was angry, too. I had a score to settle with these Fae.

Greyson, Kendall, and I stood together, watching as the car slowed, pulled onto the shoulder, and stopped. The driver cut the engine and suddenly, the world seemed very, very quiet. I heard my pulse drumming in my ears as I waited for someone to exit the car. But nothing happened. The car doors stayed shut.

Were they ever going to get out of that damn car? Part of me just wanted to get this over with, once and for all. The other part of me—the part that had been terrified as hell when I’d woken up in a dark car trunk with my hands bound—wished we could just blip ourselves out of here. *That* part of me just wanted to be home, in bed, and actively forgetting that any of this had ever happened.

“Patience, love,” Greyson murmured, not looking away from the car.

I looked up at him. I hadn’t spoken out loud, but it was like Greyson had read my mind. Despite the situation, I smiled a little at that idea. I felt better, now that I was with him. Safer and more secure. I felt like we could take on whoever was in that car, as long as we were together.

Kendall raised a finger to get our attention, then pointed to a car. I looked over to see that the doors were finally opening. Moments later, four men stepped out.

I swallowed hard. The men were big and mean-looking, their faces hard and suspicious. As one, they all turned toward the woods and squinted into the darkness. I felt like they were looking straight at me, and I started to shiver.

Greyson glanced down at me. *Use your shield to keep yourself safe, love*, he told me, speaking through the mind link.

Kendall’s eyes were trained on the men as she crouched down. She moved to the right, shifting silently as she went. I stared at her, astonished by how effortless her shift had been.

*Protect yourself, love*, Greyson said, giving me a stern look. *Don’t worry about us, okay?*

He waited until I nodded, then gave me an encouraging smile. Then he crouched down too and began to move to the right, shifting into his powerful grey wolf form as he moved.

My eyes followed him as he moved soundlessly through the brush. I’d thought that Kendall was impressive—and she was—but Greyson was just so… *Alpha*. So large and powerful and commanding. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I was amazed that he could move so soundlessly, as large as he was.

Then something moved just ahead of me. I looked up quickly, my heart racing. I summoned my shield and raised it, ready to defend myself against the Dark Fae who were quickly closing in on me. I shook my head, angry with myself. I shouldn’t have let myself get distracted by watching Greyson. I should’ve kept my eyes on the Dark Fae.

I heard a growl in the distance and looked around quickly, feeling anxious. Sound bounced off the trees in strange ways, so I wasn’t sure if the growl had come from Greyson or Kendall.

Somewhere nearby, a Fae let out a pained yelp. Moments later, a figure burst out of the trees and lunged toward me. He sent a blast of magic at me as he ran, but my shield deflected the blast easily.

I braced myself for the next blow, but then I stopped. Why the hell was I on the defensive? I had a *sword*, for crying out loud.

My hand tingled and an instant later, my sword appeared. I raised it and charged toward the Fae with a shout. The guy looked surprised as hell, and I used his moment of confusion to my advantage, slamming the flat of my sword into his chest.

The Fae gasped and flew backward, collapsing to the ground. I stepped toward him, ready to make sure he stayed down, but before I could move, Kendall and Greyson emerged from the trees. They jogged toward me, breathing hard. They both had blood on their muzzles.

Seeing the Fae on the ground at my feet, Kendall shifted back to human and raised a hand to keep me from attacking the Fae again.

“Hang on,” she told me.

“What?” I asked, shocked.

She stepped forward. “I have a message for this Fae.”

“What message?” I asked, but Kendall ignored me.

She grabbed the guy and yanked him to his feet. He dangled limply from her hand, and she glared at him. “I want you to give Hans a message.”

*Hans?* Did she just say *Hans*? What the hell was she talking about? Wasn’t Hans dead?

I looked at Greyson, who’d just shifted back to human.

*What’s she talking about?* I asked him. *What’s going on?*

“You tell Hans that if he keeps fucking with us like this, he’s not going to like the end result.” Kendall gave the Fae a rough shake. “You tell him that he should focus on his own well-being. You tell him to stay away from the werewolves, and stay the fuck away from me. You got that?”

The Fae mumbled something unintelligible. I’d hit him pretty hard, and he still looked dazed.

Kendall dropped him, and he fell to the ground. “Now get the hell out of here. I’ll give you ten seconds before I rip your throat out.”

The Fae heaved himself to his feet, muttering to himself. He glowered at Kendall, but he must’ve believed her threat because he hustled away, heading back toward the road.

I turned, looking between Kendall and Greyson. “Okay, will someone please tell me what the *hell* is going on?”

**Episode 5218**

**Xavier**

Ava hooked her arm through mine and pulled me away. “Hey, X, come on. Something’s wrong—I can tell,” she said. “Why don’t you save us both the trouble and just tell me what’s up? Is it Milo?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to lie to Ava, but I was wary to let her know the real reason I was acting strange. Something *was* wrong, and it had to do with Cali. I wasn’t sure how to say that. Did I really need to sort it out right now—with Ava of all people—or did I kind of have a death wish?

*You can’t afford to think like that right now.*

Ava looked at me for a moment, her brow furrowing, then her gaze traveled down to the phone in my hand. When she looked back up at me, there was a question in her eyes.

“I got a few messages from Greyson and Lola,” I admitted.

“About what?”

“Cali. She’s gone missing.”

Ava thought about this for a moment. Then she met my eyes. “What do you want to do about it?”

The familiar ache started up, right at the base of my skull. I didn’t answer right away. I knew what I *wanted* to do, but it happened to be the exact opposite of what I knew I *should* do. I *wanted* to run off and look for Cali. It was a natural reaction. Something primitive and primal—I didn’t even have to think about it.

But I couldn’t admit that to Ava. It would only hurt her—and hadn’t I just been beating myself up for not being with my pack when they needed me? For concerning myself more with the Redwoods than the Samaras?

So I looked Ava in the eye, ignoring the pain as it spread to my temples. “I’m not going to do anything about it.”

Ava tipped her head. The gesture was small, but it was just enough to convey her surprise, and her skepticism.

“I’m going to call Greyson and tell him to keep me updated about Cali, but right now, my priority is the Samaras. There’s no reason to believe the worst is over for us.”

Ava opened her mouth to speak, but then Perrie strode over.

“We’re moving Milo’s body now, Ava,” she said. “We could use you.”

Ava stretched up to kiss my cheek. “I’ll check in with you later.”

I nodded, glad she didn’t try to meet my eyes. I didn’t know how well I was masking the sharp pain that was erupting behind them.

I watched as Ava rejoined the main group. She called out a few orders, and a group of pack members carefully lifted Milo’s body, cradled by a tarp. The pack was silent as they walked him back to the house, and I noticed that they all tried not to look at the dead wolf.

I wanted until Ava and the others had disappeared around the side of the house, then I dialed Greyson’s number.

Before I could make the call, though, I stopped myself. My instinct was to call him and start strategizing, but I had to believe that Greyson could handle this. He had a whole pack at his beck and call, and at some point, I was going to have to start trusting my brother. If Greyson found Cali, he’d let me know. I believed that.

I also had to accept the fact that Cali couldn’t be my top priority anymore. Greyson and I had established a certain level of trust between us—it was a fragile trust, but I knew I should probably respect it. And I could.

The part about not making Cali my top priority? That wasn’t going to be quite so easy. But I knew I had to do it. I was a pack Alpha now, which meant that Ava and the Samaras had to come first. Every time.

I gave my head a hard shake, which made my head throb painfully. I gritted my teeth, but I was oddly grateful for the pain. It would help me remember. The Samara pack was my focus. I was their Alpha. I hadn’t been there when they’d been attacked, hadn’t been there when Milo was murdered, and I wasn’t going to let that happen again.

Taking a deep breath, I turned toward the house and headed for the funeral pyre. Funeral rites were important to werewolves, and I wanted to make sure we did everything right.

I took a step and stopped. I wasn’t going to call Greyson, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t be in contact at all.

*Let me know what’s going on*. I sent the text to Lola, though it took me a while to write it out. The simple task was made ridiculously difficult by the fact that my head was pounding so hard, it was making my vision blurry. I was going to have to remember not to drive anywhere. I didn’t need to wrap another car around a tree.

Message sent, I started moving again, trying to convince myself not to feel guilty for abandoning Cali.

My hands curled into fists as I walked toward the pyre, the dry winter grass crunching under my feet. The harder I tried to ignore my guilt, the guiltier I felt. I hated to think of Cali missing—it made me crazy. No matter what, I still loved her, and the knowledge that she was probably in danger was killing me.

*Ava. The Samaras. Ava. The Samaras. You are the Alpha*, I reminded myself, chanting the words in my head.

When I reached the side of the house where the funeral preparations were taking place, I found Ava watching over everything, pointing in two directions at once.

“No, the wood needs to go over by the pyre, Pierre,” she said. “We’re not using it for the bonfire. We’ll get more wood for that. And no, Annika, I don’t think we have a proper shroud. Just use a sheet or something.”

When she caught sight of me, she excused herself and walked toward me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said. “How’s it going?”

She looked anxious. “Knox is taking this whole thing pretty hard,” she said quietly, so only I could hear her.

“That right?” I looked past her to where Milo’s body lay, still as a stone. Knox might’ve been taking this hard, but not as hard as Milo.

“I think you need to say something,” Ava told me.

“Like what?” I asked.

“You need to make it clear to the pack that Knox is telling the truth about what happened with Milo.”  
 I ran a hand through my hair. “You think so?”

She nodded firmly. “Yeah, I really do. And I think if you don’t nip this gossip in the bud right now, we’re going to have a problem on our hands.”

“What do you mean? What kind of a problem?”  
 “The kind where no one in the pack ever trusts Knox again,” Ava said.

I thought this over for a moment, then nodded, though it made the pain in my head worse. “Okay. I’ll handle it.”

I reached up to rub my head in an attempt to ease the pain, but I aborted the movement just in time. I didn’t want Ava to realize that my headache was back. I couldn’t help but wonder if the pain was related to the guilt I was feeling over not leaving to look for Cali—if it was linked to my decision to stay. The timing certainly lined up, and it did feel like a form of punishment.

I settled for rolling my neck, which only gave me an instant of relief.

There were raised voices in the main group, and I looked over to see what was happening. Moments later, there was an anguished cry as Cresta ran toward Milo’s body, seeing it for the first time.

Her expression was shocked, and she looked around in horror. “He’s dead! What happened? What the hell happened?”

I stepped forward. “We believe Milo was killed fighting the Dark Fae—”

“You *believe*?” Cresta repeated incredulously. “What the hell does that mean?” She pointed a finger and when I turned, I saw that she’d aimed it at Knox, who stood rooted to the spot. “I bet *he* did it!”

“I didn’t!” Knox cried.

I gritted my teeth as frustration rose up in my chest. I’d thought this was all settled. I didn’t want to keep having this argument. “I’m the Alpha, Cresta, and I’m telling you what happened. When the Dark Fae attacked—”

“That’s not good enough!” she screamed, absolutely livid.

Fury replaced my frustration, and I stepped toward her. “Are you telling me the word of your Alpha isn’t good enough for you?”

The anger in Cresta’s eyes faltered slightly, but then she shook her head stubbornly. “Milo was my *friend*. He deserves better than this.”

“Cresta,” Ava started, moving to stand next to me, but Cresta spoke over her.

“I’m going to the council.”

**Episode 5219**

**Artemis**

I frowned at Cadhla, confused. “What do you mean, I have to do something first? What do I have to do?”

When it came to this kind of thing and Fae, I wasn’t exactly trusting. We were a tricky folk. Whatever this was going to be, I had to stay alert.

Kastian laughed. “Come on, Cadhla. That’s so *antiquated*, even for you.”

Cadhla glanced at him, then turned back to me with a shrug. “It’s not every day that you bring someone new into the fold, Kastian. We might as well take the opportunity when we get it. Besides, don’t you want to see what she’s made of?”

This sounded a little like a threat, and I watched both of them closely.

Kastian smiled darkly. “I wasn’t aware that I’d invited anyone into the fold.”

I narrowed my eyes as I looked between them. I knew Cadhla was trying to scare me, but I had to admit, her cloak and dagger act was kind of working for me. My interest had been fully piqued by the mysterious way they were speaking, though I did have to wonder if these soft Fae nobles were even capable of doing anything daring, or remotely dangerous. They were bored rich kids. It wasn’t as though any of them were involved in the war…

No—that was a dangerous assumption. There was every chance that they had ties to the war. That was why I’d come here, after all—to gauge the involvement of these privileged children. So who was to say that the charming Fae with the sexy smile *wasn’t* involved with the Order of the Winding Thorn? He very well could be—that was what I’d come here to find out, and I might just have stumbled onto a good way to infiltrate this group and gain their trust.

Kastian still wasn’t enthusiastic about Cadhla’s challenge, so I decided to make the next move.

I threw back the rest of my drink and slammed the goblet down on one of the small, linen-covered tables. “Let’s do it. I’m up for whatever you’ve got.”

Cadhla’s eyes brightened and she clapped her hands, making her many jeweled bracelets jingle musically. “Lovely! Oh, I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Ari. There was something I liked about you right away.”

Remembering the cold look she’d given me when I’d walked over, I only just managed not to roll my eyes.

Cadhla turned toward the dance floor. “Everyone! We have a newcomer! You know what that means!”

People stopped dancing and all eyes turned to me, the gazes curious. Seeing how easily Cadhla commanded attention, I started to get the sense that this woman was just as important and powerful as Kastian. That was something to remember—she was worth watching, too.

“Follow me,” Cadhla said, waving me forward.

“Okay,” I said with a shrug, then I followed her as she led the way out of the ballroom.

Kastian and a few of the others fell in beside us, and as we navigated the palace passageways, I realized that we were moving in the direction of the main gates.

With that realization, my pace faltered—I just hoped whatever was about to happen wouldn’t violate my Fae promise to stay in the palace.

Kastian looked at me, his eyes twinkling. “Having second thoughts, Ari?”

I managed a smile and a breezy laugh. “None at all,” I said, and kept walking.

We turned before we reached the palace gates, and when we stopped, I was relieved to find myself in one of the palace courtyards.

It was a lovely place; one I’d only seen in passing. There were a few trees and flowers, but the main focus of the space was a large pool fed by a waterfall. At the bottom of the waterfall was a collection of smooth rocks. I looked at the rocks, then at Cadhla and Kastian, waiting for instructions.

“Well?” I asked.

Cadhla pointed at the rocks. “You have to stand there and drink a bottle of wine. If you don’t fall into the water, you get to enjoy the rest of the night with us.”

*That’s it? Ha.*

“And if I do fall?” I asked.

“Then better luck next time,” Cadhla said with a shrug.

I thought about this for a moment. It sounded a little too easy, considering the fuss they were making. But what the hell—I could do this.

I stepped into the pond, hiking up my skirts as I waded in. Closer now, I could see that the rocks were wet and slick from the constant pressure of the waterfall and, as I climbed up, I felt my feet slip out from under me.

I nearly toppled over, but then I felt a familiar hand on the small of my back, steadying me. I turned around with a frown, “Rishika?”

What was I thinking? I was in the Fae world, at a Fae party, surrounded by Fae nobility. Rishika was nowhere near me.

Kastian stepped to the edge of the pond and leaned toward me. “You should be more careful, Ari. The initiation hasn’t even started yet.”

Regaining my footing, I shook my head. “Don’t worry about me—I’ll be fine. I’m ready.”

He smiled at me. “I hope so. I’d hate to see you fall. I was just starting to enjoy your company.”

Someone handed him a bottle of wine, and he passed it to me with a wink.

“Thanks,” I muttered. Gripping the bottle, I climbed to the top of the rocks and turned around, facing the waiting crowd. I popped the cork and took a swig of wine. “Now what?”

Suddenly, there was a blast of magic. It hit the waterfall behind me, spraying water everywhere.

“What the fuck?” I yelled, spinning around to search for the culprit.

Cadhla grinned at me wickedly. “Come now, that was just a warning shot, Ari. Are you ready?”

Oh. Now I understood. I was supposed to stand on the wet rocks, drinking, while the rest of them tried to knock me off with magic. That actually made more sense.

I took another swig of wine. “I’m ready!”

Another blast came my way, this one narrowly missing me. The next one was fired right at me, but I dodged it, hopping onto another rock.

The crowd was loving this, and I gulped down the wine as I dodged magic blasts right and left.

A few hit me, but they felt soft, like no one was actually trying to kill me, which was a relief. Only one hit made me spit out a mouthful of wine.

“Not bad!” someone shouted as I leapt over a blast directed at my feet.

Another blast spun me around, making my dress float around me.

“She’s got style! I like it!”

This went on for a while, until—finally finished with the wine—I smashed the bottle against the rocks and jumped clear of a double shot from Dorphus and Cadhla.

“That’s it!” Cadhla said with a laugh. “She’s had enough! Ari has earned her place!”

A cheer rose up from the gathered Fae, and I started to make my way down the rocks.

Kastian waded into the water and offered his hand, helping me to dry land. “That was amazing, Ari. Though I am sorry this group insisted you be put through that. It *is* childish.”

Feeling the full effect of the bottle of wine I’d just pounded, I grinned up at him. “I enjoyed it.”

He looked at me, surprised. “You did?”

“Yeah, it was fun,” I said. “I’d do that again anytime.”

Kastian laughed, and this one sounded less guarded. “I assure you, you won’t have to do any such thing. But there is something else I’d still like to do.”

I followed him back to the ballroom. The musicians were playing a lively song and all around us, people were pairing up to dance.

Kastian took my hand. “I wonder if you’re as good at dancing as you are at dodging magic.”

I laughed. “I can hold my own.”

He paused and leaned toward me, a gleam in his eyes. “I don’t wish for you to dance *alone*, Ari.”

As he led me into the dancing, I looked at the smile beneath his mask. It really hadn’t taken much to hook him. When we reached the center of the floor, he stopped and pulled me into his arms.

Kastian turned out to be a very good dancer—sure and smooth—and, as he led me across the dance floor, I could practically feel the envious eyes of other partygoers on my back. Though I did wonder if they were envious of me for dancing with Kastian, or if it was the other way around.

But Kastian only had eyes for me. He trailed a finger along the edge of my mask, then slipped the tip of it under the edge.

“What are you doing with my mask?” I asked, confused.

He met my eyes. “I must admit, I can’t wait to find out what lies beneath.”

**Episode 5220**

**Greyson**

Cali wanted to know what the hell was going on, and I couldn’t blame her. I wanted to know, too. It was possible that I was missing something important, but I didn’t see how anything Kendall had just said to the nearly unconscious Fae was going to stop the Dark Fae mafia from continuing their assault on us. Where was the proof? Did she even have any?

Honestly, I would’ve felt a lot better if we’d just killed the guy. I know it wouldn’t have been something Cali’d like, but what were the other options? *Hope* that Kendall was right? I couldn’t really sit with that.

“You’re not going to just let him go, are you?” I asked Kendall incredulously. I could still hear the Fae fumbling with the car. There was still time to get him.

She wiped a streak of blood from her mouth with the back of her hand. “Hell yeah I am. Somebody has to act as the messenger.”

“What the hell good is that—”

“Excuse me!” Cali interrupted, looking between Kendall and me. “I have a quick question for you. Hans Tolverssin is *alive*? Did I hear that right? Was anyone planning on telling me that tiny, insignificant piece of information?”

Kendall shrugged. “We just did.”

Cali glared at her. “I heard what you said to the Fae, Kendall—you didn’t actually tell me.” She turned to look at me. “Greyson? Did you know that Hans was still alive?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Kendall spoke over me. “I just told him.”

Cali swung her gaze back to Kendall. “Excuse me, I was asking my mate a question.”

Kendall’s purple eyes flashed dangerously, and I cleared my throat, not wanting the two of them to get into it.

“Yeah, Cali, I did just find out about Hans. I’m as surprised as you are.” I turned to Kendall. “Listen, about this Fae you want to keep alive—what makes you think your threat is going to make Hans back off? I never him to be a guy who scared easily.”

Kendall shrugged, though she still looked tense and poised to fight. “Hans is a smart guy. He’ll catch my drift.”

“And why do you think that?” I asked.

“Like everyone else around here, he’s allergic to dying. He’ll heed my warning,” she said, with baffling certainty.

I felt an increasingly familiar frustration building in my chest—pure Kendall-inspired anger.

“I’m going to need more assurance than that,” I growled.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what to tell you, Greyson. I can’t give you any more information. I told you about Hans. Now you know. That’s the best I can do for you, man.”

With that, she turned on her heel and started back toward the road, and her motorcycle.

I made a frustrated sound in my throat and—grabbing Cali’s hand—marched after Kendall.

“You’re not getting away that easily,” I snapped, easily catching up to her.

“I’m not trying to escape you, Greyson,” she shot back. Then she gave me a cool look. “Unless I need to.”

“What do you know?” I demanded. “I’m positive that it’s more than you’ve actually said, so spill it.”

“I don’t know what you want me to—”

“Cut the bullshit, Kendall, and tell me why Hans won’t stop attacking us.”

“I’ve already told you—”

“The hell you have!” I exploded. “Your explanation isn’t worth the time you took to feed it to me. I know you know more, and I want to know the truth. I’m sick of fucking around with you.”

We’d reached the road, and Kendall stepped toward her bike, reaching for the handlebars.

“Take Cali home, Greyson. We’ll talk later,” she said, clearly blowing me off.

“We’ll talk now,” I snarled. I grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to look at me.

She looked up at me, clearly surprised, then her gaze drifted down, focusing on the hand I was using to grasp her smooth shoulder. She was still naked, and the heat of her body sank into my hand. When she looked back up at me, her purple eyes had darkened menacingly.

I could see that she was pissed, but I didn’t loosen my grip on her. That might’ve been a mistake, because the contact between us sent that same, undefined emotional jolt through me that I’d felt before, when I’d had her pinned to the ground. The wave of feeling was shocking enough that I released her and took a step back.

She opened one of her bike’s saddlebags and pulled out some clothes. Glowering at me, she yanked on a pair of black jeans. “The Fae aren’t going to bother you again, Greyson. Don’t worry about it,” she said, pulling a black T-shirt over her head.

I couldn’t say I agreed with this assessment, but before I had a chance to argue, she hopped on her bike and kickstarted the engine. The sound of the motorcycle was deafening on the quiet road. Without looking back, she headed off, gunning the engine as she sped down the road and out of sight.

The silence that crept up on us as she disappeared felt strangely loud, and I stared down at the hand I’d used to grip her bare shoulder.

“—don’t you think, Greyson?”

“What?” I asked. Yanked out of my thoughts, I looked quickly up and found Cali staring at me.

She frowned. “I was just saying that every time we look into Kendall, we come away with more questions than we had going in. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Yes,” I said, nodding. “I do think that.”

Cali shook her head, staring down the road. “It’s like you said—we shouldn’t trust her.”

I pulled Cali into a hug, wrapping my arms around her tightly. “I know. I’m going to try to remember that.”

The wind blew around us, and Cali shivered in my arms.

“Okay, it’s time for us to get home,” I said. “You ready?”

She nodded. “Let’s get out of here.”

I shifted to my wolf form and crouched down so Cali could climb onto my back. A moment later, I was running through the woods in the direction of the pack house. Cali leaned forward, trying to escape the worst of the wind. I was glad I hadn’t convinced Kendall to take Cali home on the bike—I felt better carrying her home myself, making sure that she was safe. And I liked that it was just the two of us.

Still, I had to admit that if Cali hadn’t been with me, I might’ve pushed Kendall harder for answers. But that might’ve been difficult, even with her there. I still wasn’t sure what to make of the strange feelings I’d experienced when I’d confronted her. I couldn’t even articulate what they were like. “Odd” was the most accurate word I could think of, but even that wasn’t right. I hadn’t been in the right mindset at all, and I didn’t like not knowing why.

I ducked under a branch loaded with snow, and Cali’s grip around my neck tightened.

*Do you think Kendall’s right?* she asked through the mind link.

*Right about what?* I asked. Really, I wasn’t sure if Kendall was right about anything.

*Do you think Hans is really going to stop?*

I sighed to myself*. I honestly have no idea, love.*

*Kendall seemed pretty sure.*

*Yes, she did*, I agreed. *She usually is. But I did see the look in that Fae’s eyes when she was talking to him—*

*Threatening him*, Cali corrected.

*Right.* I thought about what I’d seen. *He wasn’t afraid—not exactly—but it was clear that he was taking her threat seriously.*

*Yeah, I saw that too*,Cali agreed*. But I don’t know…*

*What?* I asked.

*Maybe it was just that he knew what the alternative was. I mean, I’d already hit him with my sword once, and I was about to finish him off when Kendall stopped me*.

I thought about that. It was possible that Cali had a point. If Kendall hadn’t intervened, Cali might’ve killed that Fae. Cali wasn’t bloodthirsty, but she could be fierce. And I had to wonder if Kendall had intervened specifically to keep the Fae from being killed.

But somehow, I found that hard to believe, if for no other reason than that I’d seen her kill one of the other Fae only moments earlier. She’d savagely ripped the guy’s throat out, so she didn’t seem overly concerned with their welfare.

*Us*, Cali said thoughtfully.

*What?* I asked, wondering if I’d missed part of the conversation. *Us what?*

*Us. That’s what Kendall said to that Fae. Do you remember?*

*I don’t know*, I said slowly. *Remind me.*

*Kendall told the guy that if Hans doesn’t stop fucking with* us*, he’d be sorry.*

*Right, yeah, now I remember*, I said. *What about it?*

Cali’s grip tightened on my fur. *What if we weren’t the* us *she was talking about?*

**Episode 5221**

**Xavier**

Cresta was really getting under my skin, and I was working hard to control my temper. “Going to the council against my orders suggests you don’t support me as Alpha—which means that you should reconsider being part of the Samara pack,” I snapped.

*The council, really? Does she really believe they have our best interests in mind? I know she’s new to pack life, but she has to realize that I’m better than those dopes in the council any day when it comes to protecting the pack.*

Cresta’s face fell. “I’m not saying I want to leave the Samara pack…” She trailed off. “I just…forget it. You don’t get it.”

I was about to respond, but then I saw the pain in her eyes. She was hurting over Milo’s death.

*Come on, X, don’t be so harsh. She just lost her friend, and she’s upset about it*, Ava mind linked. *Put yourself in her shoes. We only just met Milo, but she’s been with him for a while. They traveled together. Built a bond. This is awful for her.*

I took in Ava’s words and paused, all too aware that the pack was watching me closely to see how I was going to respond. I needed to thread the needle here, make it clear that I was in charge but also show that I was completely sympathetic to each pack member's feelings.

This was more complicated than me simply yelling and pounding my chest to assert that I was in charge. As an Alpha, I had to show my leadership rather than keep reminding everyone that they should listen to every word I said without question.

“I understand that you're upset, Cresta, I do,” I said. “There isn’t anyone here who doesn’t know what it’s like to lose someone you care about. And Milo, while new to the pack, was a committed member of the pack and deserves to be honored for his sacrifice. But at the same time, you need to respect my authority. If I find anything that suggests Milo wasn’t killed by one of the Fae”—I gave Knox a pointed glance, and he didn’t look away— “then I will get to the bottom of it.”

I put a hand on Cresta’s shoulder. “I need you to believe me and trust that I will do whatever it takes to do right by Milo. Can you do that?”

Cresta wiped a tear from her eye and nodded.

“Since you were Milo’s friend, you should be the one to give the eulogy at the pyre.”

“I will,” Cresta said before whispering, “thank you.”

Ava immediately pulled Cresta aside, giving me a smile before turning and leading Cresta away. I was happy Ava was there to help pick up the pieces. I didn’t want Cresta to go off alone and get all worked up again. I knew all too well how often grief could get in the way of logic.

I felt a lot better. I’d made the right decision to listen to Ava instead of letting my anger get the better of me. But now I needed to make sure the others were in alignment. Feelings and tensions were running hot, and I needed to keep things under control.

*I can’t have anyone going around sowing seeds of doubt about who’s in charge here. I have to assert myself, especially at times like these. Adrenaline is still pumping after an intense fight like that, and I have to make sure our energies are going in the right direction.*

I turned to the rest of the pack who were lingering, waiting for me to cap off this hellish day. “Milo’s death is a heavy blow to the Samara pack,” I began. “Many of us haven’t had a chance to get to know him, but he freely pledged his loyalty to us as a Samara. He gave his life trying to defend us, and that must be remembered.

“As your Alpha, I feel the loss as well. But it only hardens my commitment to making the Samara pack stronger and better. We can’t let Milo’s death be in vain. We are Samaras!”

The others cheered, pumping their fists in the air.

Ava turned back to look at me from where she stood with Cresta on the porch, a proud smile on her lips. I knew Ava was sincere. Ava and I often had problems and disagreements and arguments and everything in between, but what I never doubted for a second was her loyalty to me. No matter what, Ava always had my back. It was a comforting feeling.

Donovan stepped forward from the rest. “What are our plans to defend against more Dark Fae attacks? We were partially prepared with the witch’s tripwire charms, but otherwise, I’m not afraid to admit that we were caught by surprise. I’m sure I speak for everyone when I say I don’t want that to happen again.”

Murmurs rose about going on the offensive, taking the fight to the Fae. That sounded good in theory, but Milo’s death was proof that the Fae weren’t a force to be taken lightly. I was certain we were strong enough to meet their threat, but we had to be smart and tactical about it, or there was a good chance more of the Samaras could end up like Milo, and I wasn’t ready to make that sacrifice.

“Quiet,” I said, my voice loud and stern. “For the time being, we will maintain a defensive position, keep the tripwire up, keep up with our regular patrols. But I’m not ruling out a counteroffensive. I understand that we have to be ready for the threat should it come to our door again, and I know that we will be.”

Donovan nodded at that, and the others seemed to be in agreement as well. I appreciated Donovan’s concerns, and I liked that I had a pack that wasn’t afraid to voice their concerns. I wanted it to be clear who was in charge, but I also didn’t want to have a pack that was afraid to speak up.

“I plan on talking to the other packs to see if there are any updates on their end about what the Fae are up to now that we’ve had a few encounters with them. Whatever I learn, I’ll tell you all as soon as I can.”

Luckily, this seemed to placate the pack.

“Everyone, you fought hard today. Thank you. Go get cleaned up, get the patrols fed and ready to get back out there, and let’s protect our pack,” I said in closing.

With that, I stepped away, my mind shifting to Cali. I pulled out my phone and cursed in frustration at the blank screen.

Not a single notification.

*Why haven’t I heard from anyone? They called to tell me she was missing but no updates since then? Not even from my brother? I find it hard to believe he hasn’t tracked her down yet.*

I was about to call my brother when the phone rang. It was Greyson.

“Xavier, hey. Wanted to let you know that Cali’s back,” Greyson said without any preamble.

I let out a sigh of relief, realizing how tense and wound up I’d been since I’d learned Cali was missing. All the stress I’d felt from the moment I saw Lola’s text about her finally lifted.

“The damn Fae mafia kidnapped her. They were trying to bait me, according to Cali, though for what is anyone’s guess. They had her tied up in the trunk, and you know how much of a fighter she is—she broke free, and I was able to scoop her up. That wasn’t the end of the fight, but we got through it, and she’s safe.”

“I can’t believe she went through all that! Is she okay? Any injuries?” I felt like I should go to Cali, be by her side, comfort her after a harrowing experience like that—but that wasn’t my place anymore. Greyson would have to handle that, and it was frustrating to think that I couldn’t be there for her like Greyson could.

*At least she’s okay. That’s all that matters. My brother saved her, and Cali played a huge role in saving herself, too. That’s a good thing.*

“I don’t get these Dark Fae mafia fuckers,” I spat. “I was just talking with the Samaras about what our next moves should be, and more and more—especially after hearing what they did to Cali—I’m thinking that there’s something to be said about going after them and finishing them off once and for all.”

Greyson sighed. “I get it. I’m on the fence myself. Wondering if we should wait them out or try to catch them by surprise. But I don’t know if that’ll work, and I don’t know if I’m willing to trust Kendall.”

I looked over as some of the pack members began gathering supplies for Milo’s pyre. I knew they would support whatever decision I made.

“I think it’s time for you to get off the fence,” I said to Greyson. “It’s time we send the Dark Fae mafia our own message.”

The line was silent for a while before Greyson finally asked, “What do you have in mind?”

**Episode 5222**

I was still mulling over my conversation with Greyson about what Kendall meant by her little “us” statement. If Kendall wasn’t referring to the packs—which based on how Kendall made it a point to distance herself from everybody was likely the case—who was she referring to?

*Who is this “us?” And where has she been hiding them? Does she have someone else she’s vowed to protect? Is that why she’s so cold and closed off with us?*

Lola looked up from the kitchen table as I came walking in. “Yay, you’re not dead!” she said with a grin.

I wasn’t amused. I’d come very close to that outcome and wasn’t able to see the lighter side of that yet. Those Fae hadn’t given a damn about my life, and I’d had to fight like hell to save myself. My entire body still ached from the effort.

“It was a nightmare,” I said. “Stuffed in a trunk, my hands bound with iron-laced rope, fought my way out of the trunk—wasn’t easy—and then had to jump onto Greyson’s bike—only to get recaptured. Then, nearly get thrown through the windshield when the Fae wrecked the car. Kendall and Greyson saved me, thank god.”

“Oh gosh, Cali, that’s so awful!” Lola said, pulling me into a hug. “I’m so sorry for losing you. Jay and I were supposed to protect you, and we failed miserably.” Lola shook her head. “It’s going to take a while for me to forgive myself for that.”

“It’s not your fault,” I responded. “You were hit with some powerful Fae magic. I’m not sure you could have prevented that. I’m just glad neither of you were hurt.”

“Thanks for that. We were so worried,” Lola said.

“Me too, but we’re fine. But if you’ll excuse me, I need to go take a hot shower and wash this day off—”

I started to leave, but Lola grabbed my hand. “Remember, tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. Did you get Greyson something special?”

I sighed. “Yes, I’ve taken care of it.” I lowered my voice. “What did you get Jay?”

Lola grinned. “Do you really want to know?”

Covering my ears, I sprinted out of the kitchen yelling, “No!”

I paused by the living room where Greyson was talking to Rishika.

“I’m going to leave Big Mac’s wards up in the meantime to protect the pack just in case the Dark Fae mafia comes back around.” Greyson glanced at me as I walked in. “Xavier wants to go after the Dark Fae mafia.”

I took that in, a bit of dread forming in my chest. I wasn’t thrilled about that, but I wasn’t surprised. Xavier tended to be the more impulsive one between him and Greyson, but at the same time, I understood his logic. He wasn’t willing to wait around for the Dark Fae mafia to dictate the terms of battle, and I understood that he was going to try to do what he could to gain the advantage.

“I get it, I guess. The Dark Fae mafia attacked the Samaras and are specifically targeting Ava for killing one of theirs. I guess I just hate to think that there will be any more bloodshed,” I said.

*It’s not like all our fights don’t end up this way—constant battles, death, injuries. But this is the life we’re in. I only wish that we weren’t locked in another battle already. Especially with a vicious group like the Dark Fae mafia.*

“Maybe that won’t be the case if what Kendall said holds true,” Greyson interrupted. “I told Xavier that I was a little skeptical of her but willing to give her a chance. That’s why I’m maintaining our defenses.”

Greyson let out a weary sigh, and not for the first time, I could see how much being Alpha weighed on him. So many hard decisions to make even after hard battles and high-stress situations like the one he’d just helped save me from. It had to be exhausting.

“But Xavier is free to do whatever he wants, of course,” Greyson continued. “And right now, I don’t have the slightest clue what he plans to do.”

“I know, but that’s the point of him having his own pack, I guess. He can make whatever moves he thinks are best for his pack,” I said.

It still felt weird to think that Xavier wasn’t part of *this* pack anymore. Strange to think that he was his own separate entity now with his own people to worry about. His own Luna to support. And that meant I wasn’t top of mind for him anymore—though deep down, I doubted Xavier would ever forget about me entirely. Our connection was way too deep for that.

“Keep your protective bracelet on at all times,” Greyson said. “I told Torin the same. I don’t want either of you getting injured by mistake.”

I held up my warm. “I will. I know they protect me and Torin from getting hurt by Big Mac’s tripwires, but wearing them also singles us out as the only Fae in the Redwood pack.”

Greyson shrugged. “It is what it is. Your protection is all that matters. And it’s not like we didn’t know you were the only Fae before now.”

“I know. I guess I’m just bummed that because of what’s happened, it’s now a fight of Fae against Fae. It just feels wrong somehow.”

“And that’s the fault of the Dark Fae, not you,” Greyson replied. “They’re the ones trying their damnedest to wipe us off the map. We’re defending ourselves.”

I understood where Greyson was coming from. And I wasn’t Dark Fae, but Artemis was. For me, that complicated things. It wasn’t just good guys against bad guys. I couldn’t help but wonder how Artemis would feel about this if she were here and had to kill her own.

I shook off the morbid thoughts, tired of being in a dark place. I was grateful that Greyson and I had come through our last ordeal in one piece, and for now, I was just going to hold onto that and think positively.

I went for the stairs, finally ready for that shower, when my phone buzzed. My heart skipped when I saw that it was a text from Xavier.

*I heard you were missing.*

I paused, unsure of what to send as the proper reply. Things had changed so much between us, but I was almost giddy that just like I’d hoped, I was still on Xavier’s mind. He’d been worried about me. I loved that he was asking about me. I missed that so much.

*But I shouldn’t read too much into it*, I thought. *We agreed to be friends, and it’s normal for friends to check in when the other’s been in trouble. It’s probably nothing more than that.*

*I’m here*,I replied. I winced after I sent the message, realizing it was a pretty lame reply. Then I quickly followed up with: *How did you know I was missing?*

I assumed Greyson mentioned it to him while the two of them were comparing notes on the Dark Fae mafia. But then I saw Xavier’s response.

*Lola texted me when she was trying to find out where you were.*

I smiled. Lola had her own issues with Xavier since the whole Adéluce thing, but she’d put all that aside and reached out to Xavier anyway because she was worried about me. And that meant that deep down, a part of her still trusted Xavier to have my best interest in mind—and a part of her knew there was a very real chance that if I were missing, Xavier would be the person I’d run to or the person who would drop everything to find me.

I wasn’t sure how to reply to his text. Suddenly, this all felt so awkward. It was painful to think that this was what things had come to. Xavier and I no longer knew how to navigate such a simple conversation—a reality that was compounded when I saw the three bubbles that indicated Xavier was typing…and then, nothing.

Greyson came walking in, and feeling even more awkward, I shoved my phone in my pocket after typing, *Sorry, got to go!* ending the conversation.

“There you are. How is it that you can look so good after spending the day in a trunk?” Greyson said with a smile.

“I guess it’s a talent,” I joked, though I was still feeling a little worn down from the entire situation.

“Clearly,” Greyson replied. “Didn’t want anything. Just came in to check on you. Today was rough. You sure you’re okay? Because if not, maybe you should go see Torin so he can make sure you’re all good.”

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him. “I’m sure I’m okay… And I can’t remember if I ever thanked you for coming to save me.”

Greyson kissed me. “Now you have. And you don’t have to thank me.”

“Sure I do.” I gestured to the shower. “Was about to get in. Want to join me?”

**Episode 5223**

**Artemis**

I was a little tipsy…well…maybe a little more than tipsy…but I knew innuendo when I heard it. The crazy part was that I didn’t mind it all that much. I grinned and hooked my fingers into Kastian’s, slowly and gently pulling his hand away from the mask. “What lies beneath, huh? I could say the same to you,” I countered.

“I hope you will. I can tell you’re beautiful underneath this mask,” Kastian replied. He leaned in, his lips so close that if he wanted to, he could press his lips to mine with only the smallest movement. “And I appreciate beauty more than you could ever know.”

I reacted to that despite myself. Who didn’t like to be told they were beautiful? Especially by someone as attractive as Kastian. I closed my eyes for a moment and saw Rishika standing in front of me, pushing my hair out of my face and telling me that I was beautiful. I imagined her scent, her warmth, the way she used to say my name.

An ache pulsed in the center of my chest. I was missing Rishika fiercely. Moments like this would be even more enjoyable with her by my side, both of us in our gowns and masks, dancing to this beautiful music in this amazing ballroom. If she were here, it would feel like we were the only two people in the world.

The music changed to something slower, and I was brought back to the here and now when Kastian pulled me close. I gasped, and he laughed.

“You’re enjoying yourself, I can tell,” Kastian said. “And I am, too.”

“It’s hard not to on a night like this,” I said, meaning it. I wondered, for a moment, what it would be like to be here to simply have a good time like the rest of the Fae here. To waste the night away dancing with a handsome man and drinking good wine and spirits.

*Okay, Artemis, get a grip. That’s not why you’re here, to start crushing on this guy. You have to focus. Don’t let yourself get sucked up in this party or in Kastian…though he’s making it hard.*

And besides that, there was a good chance he was a key player in this whole Order situation. If only my woozy head could get with the program. Getting on the good side of these Fae nobles was good, but I couldn’t have come here for nothing.

And if Kastian and his friends were part of the Order, I had to keep my head on a swivel because they were dangerous and out for blood—my blood in particular. This was one of those times when something really bad might be in a really attractive package.

I put my hands flat on Kastian’s chest and then ran my fingers along his shoulders and said, “Tell me about yourself.”

Kastian held me closer. “What do you want to know?” He spun me around, and I relaxed, letting him take the lead. He was an amazing dancer. Yet another point for him.

I played it cool. “You should reveal a secret.”

Kastian pulled back and eyed me. “Reveal a secret? Are we ready to do that? We’ve only just met.”

I waited a second, wondering if I had overplayed my hand. I was starting to wish I hadn’t had that drink. I needed to be sharp tonight—not under the influence of that drink and with this handsome man whispering sweet nothings in my ear. My guard was lowered, and that was dangerous.

I smiled at him. “You show me yours; I’ll show you mine.”

Kastian laughed, his hand spread out and strong on my lower back as he moved me around the dance floor with more grace than I would have expected. There was a sensual quality to the way he moved against me—another reminder that I couldn’t let the drink cloud my judgment. He was charming, and the drink had lowered my immunity to those charms.

“You know who I am,” he said—and it wasn’t a question.

“I do. You’re Kastian.”

“Yes, that’s my name. But do you know who my family is?”

I knew all too well, but I decided to keep that to myself, curious about what he might be about to offer up.

I suspected Kastian was one of those types who liked to impress people with his family history and with how important they were because of it. That kind behavior almost came naturally to people like him, who’d been raised learning about their family’s impact and influence so they could use it to set themselves apart from those without such impressive pedigrees.

I’d never been in that position until very recently. And now that I was, Celeste wouldn’t even let me reveal it. Not that I ever planned to be the kind of person to wear my family’s name like armor.

“I’m a member of the Haseneau family. Surely you’ve heard of us?” Kastian said.

I thought about the statue in the crypt, about how I’d seen his family’s name all through the books I’d read, and played it down. “I’ve heard mention of that family.”

He smiled. “Of course you have. Everybody knows who the Haseneau are.” Then he took a long look around at all the people dancing in their masks. “In fact, I know everyone in this room…except you.”

He locked eyes with me, and I felt a warmth in places I shouldn’t. I wanted to blame it on all the Fae drink, and I probably could—in part. But some of it was that Kastian had that thing that made people fawn over him, and apparently, I wasn’t as good at resisting him as I would’ve hoped.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I told you. I’m Ari.” I held my breath, hoping he wasn’t about to ask any more questions. I wasn’t in any condition to spin an entire lie about my background out of thin air.

“I know that’s what you told me, but what family are you from?”

I hesitated. The drink had muddled my mind, and once again I was mad at myself for drinking so much—but I hadn’t had much of a choice with that little test they gave me. I was going to have to think extra hard to keep from making a mistake. Luckily, I had enough of my wits about me to know that giving my true last name could be risky.

Not to mention that Celeste would be furious if I revealed it. I didn’t want to blow things with her, at least not at this point. I had to be smart about this.

“I was orphaned.” And that wasn’t *exactly* a lie, and I was proud of how believably it flowed from my lips.

Kastian took that in with a tight nod. “I’m sorry to hear that. Life deals some of us—all of us at times—shitty hands.”

A moment later, Cadhla and her friends glided over and interrupted. “I hate to break up this dance, but we’re heading down,” she said, passing a conspiratorial glance between me and Kastian.

Kastian took my hand and led me after the others. “And we’re off!”

“Where are we going?” I asked, feeling a spike of nervousness. It wasn’t that I didn’t think I could handle myself alone with them, but I wasn’t in my normal state of mind and was wary of getting myself in any situation where I might have to think faster than I was capable of right then.

Kastian grinned at me over his shoulder. “You said you want to know my secrets. This is one of them.”

My nervousness melted away, and I was intrigued. I didn’t even feel threatened as I fell into step with Kastian, and we descended a winding staircase off the main hall and walked down a corridor that led to a beautiful underground pool.

I stood back and watched as the others began to strip down to their undergarments without a hint of shame or bashfulness. I hesitated, not sure if it was the smartest idea to swim with the Fae drink still affecting me so strongly.

Kastian paused, noting my hesitation. “Don’t worry, I’ll go first to show you it’s safe.” He pulled off his shirt, revealing a perfectly sculpted chest and abdomen. I found myself completely enthralled by how good-looking he was—a feeling I didn’t get often. Marius was great, and Rishika was the best, but there was something to be said for a person who took such good care of themselves—which Kastian obviously did.

He stepped out of his pants next and then turned toward the pool, his back to me. My eyes swept from his strong legs all the way up to his muscled back, stopping at the tattoo between his shoulders. It was a strange symbol encircled by intertwining, winding thorns.

I stepped back in shock.

*Does Kastian know who I really am? Is he going to try and kill me?*

**Episode 5224**

**Greyson**

I wasn’t a fool. I would never turn down a shower with Cali. In fact, now that she’d mentioned it, I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I needed her.

And at that same moment, it was like all the anxiety and fear I’d felt when she’d been taken by the Dark Fae mafia washed over me. I wanted nothing more than to be as close to her as I could—it would be yet another reminder of why I would risk anything and everything for Cali—time and time again.

I started to walk forward, watching her eyes widen and fill with desire as I got closer to her. She took my hand and led me into the bathroom and started the shower.

I stripped down, my eyes on hers as I pulled off my underwear and stepped under the hot spray. Cali slipped in right after me. I took a moment to stop and admire her body, my arousal growing by the second. Her eyes dropped, and a slight smile appeared on her lips as she took in the sight of my erection.

“Like what you see?” I asked as I backed her up against the wall, then bent over to adjust the temperature.

“You know I do,” Cali said, her voice barely above a whisper.

All of that and we’d barely touched each other since we entered the bathroom. Our eyes were locked, and the tension was building as quickly as the steam gathering around us.

I picked up the soap and a loofah. “Want me to wash your back?”

Without a word she turned around, giving me a perfect view of her ass at the apex of her long, shapely legs. It took so much effort to stop from grabbing her and doing everything that had run through my mind from the moment she mentioned the shower.

I began soaping her up, using my hands more than the loofah and covering her in suds. It felt so good to just touch her skin, smoothing soap over every single inch of her. I got down on my knees and had her place each foot on my shoulder in turn so I could soap up her feet, legs, and thighs.

“This is the best view, hands down,” I said as I finished soaping up her legs.

Then, slowly, I ran my hands all the way up until they met the V between her legs. I lingered there, getting close to her center but not too close, wanting to keep building things and loving getting her all worked up like this.

I stood and gently pushed her under the shower. I watched her rinse the soap off her body as I lathered soap all over myself.

We switched places, and I closed my eyes as the water ran down my body. I was enjoying the sensation. In my mind, I was imagining Cali naked, her body wrapped around mine, her tongue pressing warm and insistent into my mouth.

I felt Cali’s hands on me, and I kept my eyes closed as she wrapped a hot, wet hand around my shaft and began stroking it slowly. I bit my lip, relishing the feel of her breasts against my back. I braced my hands on the wall as she kept going, tugging fast and then slowing down only to speed up again.

I was so hard now, and I wanted only one thing.

Quickly, I turned around, surprising Cali so that she let out a little yelp of surprise as I walked her back against the wall. I took her by the hips and gently turned her around. I reached down between us and slid a finger inside of her, testing her, and finding her as slick on the inside as she was on the outside.

“Greyson,” Cali said around a sharp intake of breath. “I need you inside me.”

Without another moment of hesitation, I took my cock in my hand and pushed inside of her.

I reached around and closed my hand loosely around her neck as I began a steady, rocking stroke. It felt so good—and that was no surprise. Every time I made love to Cali, I was in awe of how amazing it felt, how well I fit inside of her.

“Yes, Greyson. Yes, harder.”

And I went harder, using a knee to spread her legs wider, my hand resting on her waist before sliding down to squeeze the soft, round curve of her ass, which vibrated deliciously with my every thrust.

Cali’s hands were high up on the wall, and she held on for dear life as I lost myself in the pleasure of her, not thinking straight, not thinking at all as I gave in to the sweet slick feel of her sex encased around me.

She lifted her foot onto the rim of the tub and slammed back against me over and over, meeting my thrusts and then shuddering and whispering, “I’m coming.”

I gritted my teeth, holding back, wanting to enjoy the feel of her coming on my cock without being distracted by my own climax.

She reared back against me, her body shuddering with the last jolts of her release, and only then did I allow myself to come. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, riding out my own climax, and then we both sagged against the wall, breathing hard, laughing.

“That was amazing,” Cali said. “And I know just what to do now.”

“What?” I asked, yawning.

She yawned too and then said, “Sleep.”

\*\*\*

It felt like the next morning came a little too quickly, but that was okay because I was so well rested and satisfied from the night before.

Without waking Cali, I slipped out of bed and headed downstairs.

It was Valentine’s Day—my first of what I hoped would be many with Cali—and I wanted to start the day off right.

I got to work preparing breakfast for Cali. I quickly whipped up all her favorites—including a tall stack of pancakes. I was so grateful we’d be able to spend some quality time together before Lucian’s party tonight.

For the first time maybe ever, I was looking forward to the Vanguard Alpha’s party—it was a good way to put the Dark Fae drama behind us, at least for one night.

The only risk I could see would be in getting there. Once we arrived at Lucian’s, I would feel pretty safe—there was no way the Fae would risk attacking that many werewolves in one place.

I finished up and then made my way back to Cali’s room. As soon as she saw me, she flashed a smile that melted my heart. She stretched and sat up, her smile growing bigger as she lifted her nose to the air.

“Do I smell pancakes?”

I presented the plate from behind my back, and she reached for them, but I stopped her.

“No, let me feed you.”

I served her a bite from the heart-shaped pancakes I’d tried to make, and she loved it.

“Greyson, oh my gosh. It tastes so good!”

“I’m glad,” I said before leaning forward and kissing her, tasting the sweet maple syrup on her lips. “Happy Valentine’s Day, love.”

She looked up at me. “I love you.”

I leaned in for another kiss. “Love you, too.” I lingered there, enjoying the closeness between us.

“My turn,” she said.

She took the plate and began feeding me with her fingers, and I kissed the tips every time they came close. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect morning.

“We’ll never make it out of bed if we keep this up,” Cali said.

“I fail to see the problem with that,” I joked.

“Be careful what you wish for.”

That only made me crave her more.

She kissed me, then pulled away to look me in the eye. “Wait, I want to give you your Valentine’s gift.” She hopped out of bed, and I watched as she dug something out of one of her drawers, curious about what she’d gotten me.

She turned around to face me, hiding the gift behind her back. If she only knew that seeing her like this was plenty—I didn’t need anything else.

“Hope you like it,” she said as she handed me a package. I tore it open and was surprised to see it was a bottle of whiskey. I was impressed.

“How did you know I liked this whiskey?”

“I talked to the salesperson,” she admitted. “Apparently, she knows her stuff.”

“Thank you—”

“Wait, there’s more,” Cali interrupted. “Hang on.”

She grabbed her robe and rushed into the bathroom. I sat back on the bed, listening to her moving around in there and wondering what the heck she was up to. Luckily, I didn’t have to wait long. She reappeared only a minute or two later wrapped in the robe with that sexy grin on her face.

“Now, this, I didn’t need to consult anyone about.” She reached into the pocket of her robe and handed me an envelope.

“What’s this?” I said, opening it and pulling out a receipt. I was confused. “What’s this for?”

Cali stepped toward me and opened the robe, revealing set of lacy red lingerie.

**Episode 5225**

Hopefully Greyson couldn’t tell, but I was feeling self-conscious in the lingerie. It was pretty daring for me. All of it bright red—from the crotchless panties to the lacy top. And there were way more straps than fabric—all of it accentuating every single curve I had.

This little getup left nothing to the imagination.

Greyson was basically speechless.

I felt myself blush as I let my robe slip to the floor. “You like it?”

Greyson ran a hand down his face. “Do I *like* it? Fucking hell, love, are you kidding me right now?” I flushed even more as Greyson grunted, “Get over here.”

I walked toward him, my anticipation building. Greyson reached out to run a finger along the barely-there lace, slid a finger under the straps outlining my otherwise bare breasts, and tugged gently.

“I love *everything* about this,” he said. “This is the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“Not too cheesy?”

“What? Far from it.”

His hands started wandering all over my body, his eyes wide as he drank me in. “It’s like you were made to wear this…like they had you in mind when they sketched it.”

“Thank you,” I said, pleased that Greyson was responding so well. I couldn’t have asked for a better reaction. “I wasn’t exactly sure what to get you at first, but somehow a stuffed bear just didn’t seem right. And you don’t really eat chocolate…”

“Too bad, because I’m having a few ideas about all the things I could do with chocolate right now.”

My blush deepened. “I know this was kind of for me…but for you…”

“It’s perfect,” Greyson said again. Then he stood, wrapped his strong arms around me, lifted me up from the floor, and kissed me.

His lips burned a trail from my mouth down to my neck, and I threw my head back as he devoured me, teeth and lips and tongue making a meal of my flesh. Finally, he ended up at my breasts, and my confidence built as he used his teeth to tug at the bejeweled straps framing my bare breasts.

Then he laid me on the bed, kissing everything that wasn’t covered by lingerie—and there was a lot of ground to cover.

His hands were busy caressing me, squeezing me, prodding at the soft parts of me that were quickly turning slick. He paused at my crotchless panties, kissed the sensitive area just below my belly button, and then dove lower and covered my fluttering, soaking wet sex with his mouth.

I moaned and grabbed his hair, arching off the bed as his tongue spread me open and dove inside, lapping at me, kissing my clit, worshiping me. His eyes found mine, and he grinned as his tongue worked me over, smiling wickedly every time a gasp, moan, or whimper left my lips.

He flipped me onto my stomach, nibbled at my ass cheeks, planted soft kisses along the small of my back. Then I felt his hands unclasping my crotchless panties from my sheer knee-highs before he slid them off, leaving me completely naked from the waist down—and pretty much from the waist up, too, since my “bra” was little more than sparkling straps with lace detail on the back.

I lay there and enjoyed Greyson’s tongue. There wasn’t anywhere he was afraid to go, and I spread my legs and reared back against his face as he ate me out from behind, his hands on my ass and spreading me open so he could lick and suck and kiss every inch of me.

“Greyson, I’m going to come—” I panted, feeling that familiar quake in the pit of my stomach that signaled how close I was.

I felt the bed shift, and then Greyson was inside of me, hard and thick and moving quickly, urging me toward the climax I’d promised.

I gripped the sheets and took a deep breath, calmed myself a bit so I could hold off my orgasm. I wanted to enjoy this. I wanted to savor the sensation of Greyson making love to me with such devotion that I could feel the love and reverence pouring off him even though he was thrusting hard, making my entire body shake with impact.

Wordlessly, Greyson slid free of me and then rolled me onto my back. His eyes were low lidded, his lips slightly parted as he took me in. I could tell by the look on his face that he liked everything he saw, and that made me warm all over.

“I look good, don’t I?” I asked in a small voice, loving how his hands kept playing with the straps of my bra. Then he palmed my breasts and squeezed them together. He bent over and licked them slowly, not leaving one inch untouched, his teeth nibbling gently at my nipples.

He looked up at me. “You look better than good, Cali. You look absolutely fucking phenomenal.”

I laughed, throwing my head back and closing my eyes. And then I gasped at the surprise of Greyson entering me again. He felt harder and longer than before, and I spread my legs so I could take him in deeper.

“I like when you do that,” Greyson said, running his hands up and down my legs. He bent down and kissed me slowly, lovingly, a perfect contrast to the ferocious pump of his hips, our bodies coming together over and over again with a delicious smacking sound that echoed off the walls.

Greyson rose to his knees and swirled his shaft inside of me, pressing himself against my walls, driving me crazy.

“And I like when you do that,” I gasped, rising off the bed as my orgasm threatened again, and this time, I wasn’t sure how long I could hold off.

But I wanted Greyson to come first, so that meant I was going to have to make it happen.

I reached down and squeezed my breasts together, keeping my eyes on Greyson. Then I smoothed my hands down until my fingers came to rest on my clit, and I rubbed it slowly, licking my lips and pivoting my hips against Greyson so I was stroking him as he thrusted.

“Fuck, Cali,” he ground out. He slammed a hand against the headboard and gritted his teeth. “What are you doing to me?”

And then I felt it, he was coming. He collapsed on top of me, his body rigid, his hips grinding against mine now rather than thrusting, his breath shooting out in hard gasps.

“Fuck, you feel so good. Come for me now, love. I love you so much. I want to feel you come.”

“I love you, too, Greyson.”

And then I was right there with him, straining and writhing and moaning out my pleasure, my hands grasping Greyson’s back, raking at him, my mouth open but not a sound coming out as I tried to catch my breath as my orgasm finally overtook me.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed, but when I finally opened my eyes, I was in Greyson’s arms, our legs tangled together. I let out a happy sigh and closed my eyes again.

*I can’t believe how lucky I am to have this man in my life. He’s so powerful and sexy and drop-dead gorgeous.*

I ran a hand over his rippled abdomen.

*And his body—it’s perfect. Hard muscle and beautifully tanned skin from head to toe. Sexy scars, too. Is he even real?*

Greyson reached over and grabbed the whiskey off the nightstand. “I can’t wait to drink this. Thanks again, love.”

“You can have some tonight,” I said. “And the next and the next. That’s why I got you a big bottle.”

Greyson laughed. “Sounds like a plan. And remember the party at Lucian’s tonight.”

“Oh crap, I almost forgot!” I said. “I don’t even know what to wear!” My mind was already racing through the possibilities.

“As long as it’s got a little more fabric than what you just had on, we’ll be fine, I think.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him a playful shove. “Ha, ha.”

“Not that I would mind seeing you in next to nothing; it’s all the other people I would be worried about,” Greyson said. He leaned down to kiss me again. “Mmm, I can still taste the syrup on your lips, or maybe you’re just that sweet all on your own.”

I kissed him back. “You always know the perfect thing to say, don’t you?”

“It’s easy when it comes to you.”

We connected eyes for a beat, and then Greyson said, “I want to give you your gift now, love.”

Greyson got up to retrieve it, and I was instantly struck by the memory of spotting the ring in Greyson’s bag.

*That can’t be it, right? He’s not really about to ask… He’s not going to…*

I couldn’t even form the words, that was how nervous I was. I was starting to panic. I shot upright and reached out as if to stop him from leaving the room. “Greyson, wait!”

**Episode 5226**

**Xavier**

I was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching Ava as she slept. I was eager to wake her, but since it was Valentine’s Day, I was torn and thinking I should let her sleep—especially after last night. I didn’t think we’d gotten more than a few hours of sleep.

Ava moaned softly and turned onto her side, exposing her long, bare legs. I couldn’t resist. I snuggled up to her and kissed her neck. She pressed against me, her hands clutching at me, pulling me closer.

“What time is it?” she murmured.

“Early. You can go back to sleep.”

She yawned and turned to face me. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

I kissed her then and pulled her close, squeezed her, before pulling away and telling her, “Got you something.”

I was nervous as I got out of bed to go get the package I’d kept hidden in the back of my closet. How she hadn’t managed to go sniffing for it yet, I didn’t know. *Here goes nothing.*

Ava sat up and watched me rummaging around. “You didn’t have to get me anything, you know.”

I chuckled as I finally located the package and pulled it out. “You say that, but I have a sneaking suspicion that if I hadn’t, you wouldn’t be smiling at me the way you are right now.”

Ava shook her head. “No, I’m serious. You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I know that, but it’s not about proving myself to you. It’s about doing something for you that I want to do. This is something I want to give you. I just hope you get it.”

Ava gave me a questioning look. “I’m confused, what do you mean?”

I handed her the wrapped gift. “Open it.”

Just as she began tearing at the paper, I stopped her. “And if you don’t get it, it’s okay. Okay?”

Ava shook her head. “Okay, now I *really* don’t get what you’re talking about. Did you get me a gag gift or something?”

“Let’s hope you don’t see it that way.”

*I really struggled to pick something she’ll appreciate. It took me a while, and Marissa was on my back, but I finally thought of the perfect gift—at least I hope I did.*

Ava’s eyes widened as she removed all the wrapping paper, and I watched her closely, unsure of whether she was completely baffled or feigning surprise—or did she actually remember?

Ava held up a single red rose and put it to her nose to draw in its scent. Then she pulled out a heart-shaped box of chocolates and a velvet jewelry box. She paused to look at me before opening it, and the look she gave me made all the struggle to bring this gift together so very worth it.

Finally, she opened the box, gasping as she removed the bracelet. She looked up at me again, and this time, her beautiful eyes were glistening. “You remembered.”

I smiled.

“It’s what you got me for our first Valentine’s Day together,” she added.

“Almost the same,” I corrected her. “The rose, the chocolates—all of that is nearly identical to what I got you that day, but as far as the bracelet, well, I have a bit more to spend these days, so it’s a step up. I hope you like it.”

Ava held out her wrist. “Put it on me, please.”

I clasped it on and then brought her delicate wrist to my lips and kissed it. The bracelet looked damn good on her.

“I love it,” she said, her eyes wide and happy as she twisted her wrist around to admire it. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you,” I said.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Okay, now you’re laying it on thick.”

“If not on a day like today, then when?” I joked.

Ava smiled, her expression softening. “There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about that bracelet you gave me that day. And then I lost it when…”

I pulled her into a hug as her soft voice trailed into silence. I kissed her. “Don’t think about any of that, okay? I want today to be special.”

She picked up the rose and smelled it again. “And this is so perfect, too.” She winced. “Ouch! I pricked my finger.”

I took her finger in my mouth and licked away the blood. I looked up to see that she had her eyes closed, and a soft moan purred from her throat.

“Everything you do makes me feel so good and happy,” she said dreamily.

“Everything?” I asked, pulling her to me roughly. I kissed her hard, quickly pushing my tongue between her lips and kicking off a full-blown make-out session. I walked her back against the wall and pinned her wrists over her head, admiring how beautiful the delicate bracelet looked as it slid down her arm.

“Everything,” she said between kisses.

I let go of her wrists and trailed my hands slowly down her body until they came to rest on her thighs, just below the hem of her nightshirt. Slowly, I pushed the nightshirt up, revealing that she had nothing on underneath. I inhaled a sharp breath as my cock sprang to life.

“Naughty. You knew just what I wanted for Valentine’s Day—you naked.” She giggled as I pulled off her shirt and tossed it to the floor. Then I kissed her again, pressing her warm body against mine, her large, soft breasts flattening against my chest.

I reached up and threaded my fingers through her thick, silky hair and gently tugged her head back, peppering kisses all across her cheeks and face.

“Wait, that’s only part of your gift,” Ava said before dropping to her knees.

I watched in complete bliss as she tugged me out of my clothes, smiling when my erection sprang free. She found the swollen tip with her mouth and sucked, sending me collapsing back against the wall as tendrils of white-hot satisfaction snaked through my entire body.

I reached down to take a handful of her hair in my hand as she continued, one hand working on my balls while the other swirled and twisted around the base of my shaft.

*If this is what Valentine’s Day can be like, I’m surprised I never liked it all that much before.*

Ava gripped my hips and slammed me in and out of her mouth, her soft, wet lips suckling me, a low rumble of pleasure rolling out of her throat as she increased her pace. Fuck, I wasn’t going to last very long if she kept doing that.

Ava suddenly pulled back and pushed me back against the wall. My head was still spinning, and I wasn’t sure if I would be able to keep my footing for long. I was already on the brink of explosion, and my knees were only going to get weaker from here.

“You be still; I’m going to do all the work,” Ava said.

“Whatever you say,” I breathed as Ava reached between her legs and began to slowly circle her fingers around her clit. She backed up to sit on the bed and opened her legs wide so I had the perfect view of everything she was doing to herself.

“Ava, you’re so fucking beautiful,” I said, my eyes on her fingers as they went to work caressing her soaking wet folds.

“You ready, X?” she said, getting off the bed and walking to me. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and then turned around so she had her back to me. Then she took me in her hand and bent over. “Remember, I said don’t move.”

I remained stock-still as she notched me at her opening and then quickly pivoted her hips back until I was inside of her. Then, while I stood against the wall, she worked her hips against me, bucking and rolling them, rushing forward and slamming back, making good on her promise to do all the work.

For my part, I was useless anyway, struck dumb by how good it felt and lost in the sight of Ava riding me, stroking me, edging me toward a release that I wanted so bad I could taste it.

I reached down to grab Ava’s hips so I could take control, but she slapped my hands away.

“No, let me,” she said, pulling me away from the wall and then pushing me down on the bed.

I’d barely landed on my back before she was mounting me once again, taking me deep inside of her. I laid back, watching her, enjoying the show and liking the sight of her in control, but even then, with Ava’s perfect body moving on top of me, something kept nagging at the back of my mind.

I’d planned everything perfectly. Ava had remembered the bracelet and loved her gifts. She was happy, and I was happy, that was for damn sure…but why did I feel like something was missing?

*Why doesn’t this feel right?*

**Episode 5227**

**Greyson**

I paused, unsure why Cali was insisting I wait to give her her Valentine’s Day gift. “Wait for what? You gave me my gifts, and I loved them. Now I’m ready to give you the ones I got for you. I can’t wait to make you as happy as you just made me.”

I’d put a lot of pressure on myself to find the right gift, and I was confident I’d done a good job of picking something that would surprise and excite her…though I doubted anything could top the lingerie and whiskey combo she’d gotten me. I was still on cloud nine.

But then, Cali started rambling. “That’s nice of you, Greyson…getting me a gift and all, but…I don’t know. I guess I just don’t feel like I need a gift.You do so much for me already, and just spending time with you is really all the gift I need. So if you want to just wait or even…rethink your gift and just come back to bed…”

*She’s nervous about something, but what? It’s just a Valentine’s Day gift…why is she acting this way?*

Now I was nervous about what I’d gotten her. Maybe I screwed up and should’ve gotten something simpler, gone the safe route of a dozen roses and a box of chocolates. I wondered if I should run out and see if I could get chocolates and not even give her the gift I’d planned, but then I stopped myself.

*I put a lot of thought into what I got her…if she doesn’t like it, fine. It’s the thought that counts, right?*

I continued toward the closet to get the gift when I started to wonder…was she worried that what she got me wasn’t as expensive as what I’d gotten her? I could care less about that stuff, and she had to know that.

Cali’s gifts to me were a reminder of how much value certain gifts had despite their price point. Maybe she hadn’t spent as much on me as I had on her, but I would never forget seeing her in that lingerie for as long as I lived. I wouldn’t trade that for anything. And I loved the whiskey she got me and couldn’t wait to drink it.

I quickly shook all those random worries out of my head. Whatever the reason for her rambling, I was sure she was going to be ecstatic when she saw what I had for her. I was excited about the gift, and she would be, too. And there was no way in hell she could’ve guessed what it was, so whatever the reason for her strange behavior, it had nothing to do with what she knew about my gift.

I retrieved the gift and handed it to her with a, “Happy Valentine’s Day!” My heart rate sped up as soon as she had it in her hands. I’d fantasized for days about how happy she would be once she saw what I’d gotten her, and now I was only seconds away from seeing her reaction.

Cali eyed the large box. “That’s for me?” She looked surprised…and something else I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Yes, it’s for you, silly,” I said. “I hope you like it.”

I watched anxiously as Cali opened the box. She gasped as she held up a dozen roses and the card. But I couldn’t help but notice that the smile on her face didn’t quite reach her eyes.

*Fuck. She hates it.*

“What’s wrong?” I asked cautiously. I eyed the flowers. They were all in good shape and were as brilliantly red as when I’d initially picked them out. I didn’t know all that much about flowers, but this was a nice bouquet, I knew that much.

I was at a loss. Cali was usually so excited about anything I did for her—however big or small. And she hadn’t even opened the card yet and already she seemed like she was…underwhelmed?

Cali hesitated, and I took her hand. “It’s okay if you don’t like the roses, Cali. I can get a different color, or get you two dozen roses—”

“No, Greyson, it’s not that.” Her eyes were tearing up, and I was growing more confused by the second.

“What’s wrong? I don’t understand what’s happening, Cali. Did I do something? Did I—”

She looked up at me and said quietly, “I thought you were going to propose to me.”

For a beat, I was speechless. Completely thrown. “What? You did?”

Why would she think that? We’d talked about it ad nauseum, and we’d both agreed that now wasn’t the time. I had no idea when that time would be, and I was sure she didn’t either, which made it all the stranger that she would think I would just pop up with a proposal.

“Yes…what happened to the ring?” Cali asked.

Now I was really confused. “Ring? What ring?”

Cali sighed. “I lied to you before. Remember that time I told you that Lola and I were playing fuck, marry, kill? Well…that wasn’t what we were doing.”

I blinked and stared at her, still trying to follow, still feeling lost. I remembered that day well enough, but I still didn’t understand what that had to do with Cali hating my gift and thinking I was going to propose.

“I was unpacking your stuff when you got back from your camping trip, and I saw the engagement ring, and I thought….”

It took me a few seconds, but then it finally dawned on me. “Oh, you’re talking about Colton’s ring!” I laughed, relief washing through me. “Oh, yeah, *that.* Definitely not for you.”

The look on Cali’s face stopped me cold. Realization spread across her face…and there was maybe even a glint of disappointment. “That was Colton’s ring?”

“Yeah. I was holding the ring for him. He’s planning to propose to Maya at the party tonight.”

Cali’s eyebrows shot up. “A *public* proposal? To *Maya?* That seems like a recipe for disaster.”

“I’m not worried about Colton or Maya; I’m focused on you right now and how you just reacted. I didn’t get it before, but now that you’ve explained it… Are you okay? You’re not upset, are you?”

Cali’s reactions hadn’t been exactly positive in the past at the thought of a proposal from me since it would hold her feet to fire and make her choose, once and for all, between me and my brother. I was in no hurry to make her do that, so I was becoming confused all over again, at how crestfallen she seemed because I hadn’t given her a ring today.

*It’s not like she would’ve said yes. Did she want me to propose just so she could, what, turn me down? I don’t get it.*

“I’m not upset, I was just confused…really confused, obviously,” Cali said. “But don’t let that ruin the moment…it was just a misunderstanding—I know that now.”

I nodded slowly, willing to move on. Wanting to, at this point.

“Okay…you still haven’t opened the card yet. Come on, open it. I can’t stand the suspense, and, of course, if you don’t like it…”

Cali looked down at the card in her hand as if seeing it for the first time. “Sorry, I was so wrapped up in what I thought was going to happen that I didn’t even pay attention to what is actually right in front of my face.”

She ripped the card open and then looked up at me in disbelief. “*London?* You’re taking me to London?” She pressed the card to her chest and raced over to hug me. “I love it!”

I looked her in the eyes and could tell she meant it. But now I couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if I *had* gotten her an engagement ring. I just couldn’t stop thinking about how disappointed she seemed even though she was still so hesitant to make a choice—and that was why I would never spring a proposal on her.

I thought about my conversation with my mother and how she’d helped me realize that I shouldn’t propose just because I wanted to—even though marrying Cali was something I wanted more than anything. No matter how much I wanted it…it didn’t matter. It was something we both had to be ready for, a step we both had to be comfortable taking. I couldn’t even think of proposing to Cali until she was ready.

“As for the whole ring confusion, you know I want to marry you, Cali. We’ve talked about it. But because you’re not capable of deciding yet, I’m willing to wait. Because you’re worth the wait.”

“Greyson, I—”

I interrupted her with a kiss. Now that Cali had brought marriage back into the conversation—even mistakenly—it was going to be all I could think about over the next few days. But just as I’d told Cali, I was willing to wait. As for how long, it probably wouldn’t even be a possibility until the *due destini* factor was resolved.

Somehow.

**Episode 5228**

**Artemis**

I awoke from a steamy dream involving Rishika and someone else…someone I couldn’t quite pull from the fading memory. It wasn’t Marius…but maybe it was? I tried to remember as I stretched out in my bed…and bumped against something warm.

My eyes snapped open. This wasn’t my bed, and it certainly wasn’t my bedroom—where was I? And who the fuck was lying next to me?

I sat up and gathered the covers around me, causing the person next to me to stir—as well as several others who were lying in bed with me—and I was completely mortified. Am I in bed with a bunch of…naked people? What happened last night??

*Did I drink so much last night that I can’t remember how I got into bed? I remember meeting Kastian…and then meeting his friends and…some sort of competition thing…ugh. Everything else is kind of blurry.*

I was still wearing clothes—though nothing more than my undergarments, but still…

I got up and tried to crawl over the closest body, hoping to get the fuck out of there before someone woke up and forced me to truly face what I’d done the night before. I was trying my hardest to move like a ninja traversing a room of lasers, but then my knee bumped against a naked back, and I froze when I saw the tattoo, dark but prominent even in the dim lighting, right between the shoulder blades.

*Fuck. That tattoo…it’s Kastian. Did I sleep with Kastian last night?! Is that what happened? Please no! If I did that, I’ve really fucked up royally.*

I froze, hoping that if I pretended like I hadn’t moved, everyone would just stay asleep. When no one stirred, I started to move past, but then Kastian suddenly turned over, and just like that, I was straddling him. His eyes shot open and trailed from my legs up to my eyes. He grinned.

“Going so soon?” He stretched, his fingers nearly brushing up against another naked body draped in a sheet. I watched the movement of his hands like they were vipers, scared shitless that he was going to touch someone and jostle them awake, and the awkwardness of this moment would increase tenfold.

I let out a breath when his fingers just missed touching anyone else. When I met his eyes again, he was still looking at me like something he wanted to have for breakfast. Heat rose to my cheeks as I tried to regain my bearings. He was maskless now and had one of the most gorgeous faces I’d ever seen.

*How can a man be this good-looking? He was handsome with the mask, and without it, he’s downright otherworldly.*

“I-I shouldn’t be here,” I stammered. “I have to go.”

I looked around. Some of the others were starting to stir, and I felt a sudden surge of urgency. I had no idea what time it was, where I was, and I was a little freaked out about what would happen if Celeste discovered I’d spent the night somewhere other than my bedroom.

And what would she think if she happened into this room and saw me half naked in bed with an entire team of Fae? How would I ever be able to look her in the eye again? What would she think of me? It wasn’t that I cared all that much about what Celeste thought of me…but maybe I did.

I tore my eyes away from Kastian and hit the floor, already scanning the room for my clothes. My foggy brain took pity on me, and I had a vague memory of dropping them on a bench or something…and then I spotted them draped over a chair in the corner.

*Okay, Artemis. You’re going to get your clothes, get dressed, and act like none of this ever happened.*

I started toward my clothes just as Kastian grabbed my hand.

“I was wrong,” he said. “It doesn’t happen often, but I can admit it, I was totally and completely wrong.”

Against my better judgment, I didn’t rip out of his grasp, run and get my stuff, and sprint out of the room. Instead, I turned back to him and asked, “Wrong? About what?”

Kastian brushed his fingers along my wrists. “You’re even more beautiful than I imagined.”

I pulled my hand away from his warm grasp and touched my face. I wasn’t wearing my mask anymore! Panicking, I turned and made a beeline for my clothes. “I have to go!”

I grabbed my dress and shoes and hurried out, all too aware that Kastian was propped up on his elbow, watching me.

So much for keeping my identity a secret. Not only had he seen my face, but he’d also seen a lot more than that. What had gotten into me? Was it just the Fae wine or was it something else? I liked blowing off steam as much as the next person, but it was rare for me to let my guard down around strangers—and even rarer for me to wake up in bed with multiple people.

Clumsily and nearly tripping over myself too many times to count, I finally slipped on my gown and hurried back to my room, thankful that my brain was finally chugging along enough to orient me in the huge palace. With only a few wrong turns, I was finally able to safely navigate my way back to my room.

I quickly shut the door behind me and leaned back against it, trying to remember everything that happened last night. Once again, I remembered meeting Kastian, the Fae wine…and the pool! Oh, yeah, we went swimming. Kastian stripped down and jumped in and then—

Celeste’s voice startled me. “Did you have a good night out?”

I jumped and shrieked in surprise. I hadn’t noticed Celeste perched in a chair across from my bed, as if waiting for me. I wondered how long she’d been there, and knew that however long it had been, she knew I hadn’t been here since the evening before.

Celeste got up and walked over to me. Though her pretty face was as calm and collected as ever, her eyes told a different story. She was pissed.

“How could you be so careless, Artemis? I thought I made it perfectly clear how important it is for you to maintain a low profile, and this is what you do? Go out all night with people who could have easily recognized you? I can smell the Fae alcohol all over you!”

I stared back at her, wanting to counter with something like *I’m an adult!* or *You can’t talk to me like that!* But Celeste was admittedly scary, and at the moment, I couldn’t disagree with her. I’d made some pretty boneheaded decisions last night—and I’d literally just woken up in a bed with who knew how many people after doing who the fuck knows the night before.

I wasn’t in any position to argue that I’d done the right thing.

“Artemis, I know you’re young and you like to have fun and you think you’re invincible, but you better wise up.” She shook her head, the anger in her eyes transforming to disappointment.

“Call me crazy, but I expect better of you! But I suppose this is just another sign that you’re not ready to face the court.” She stepped close, and I knew she was about to land her final nagging blow. “If you show another lapse in judgment like this, I will not hesitate to assign another guard to keep you in line.”

And then, without another word, Celeste stalked out, slamming the door behind her so hard that the heavy portraits and mirrors on the walls shook and rattled.

I slumped onto my bed. Celeste was right. I’d let the night and Kastian’s charms and the Fae alcohol get the better of me, and I only hoped none of it would come back to haunt me…but at the same time, I now had a very important piece of the puzzle in place.

Kastian was involved somehow with the Order, but how?

A knock on the door startled me again. Was Celeste back so soon to finish reaming me about how stupid I was?

But I opened the door to find Aelwen standing in the hallway, looking like she was frightened of being spotted. She quickly slipped inside, closing the door behind her.

In a low voice, she said, “I know you and Kastian met last night. But you need to be careful; he’s involved with someone already.”

Of course he was. There was no way someone as smooth and good-looking as Kastian was completely unattached. “I have no intention of getting involved with him, but thanks for the warning. I’ve got a good idea about his reputation.”

Aelwen didn’t look convinced. “It’s not his reputation you need to worry about. It’s that the person Kastian was involved with has disappeared…and she wasn’t the first.”

**Episode 5229**

I’d just finished getting dressed, pausing to admire the beautiful roses Greyson had gotten me. They were even more stunning in the full light of day. I felt bad that I’d made Greyson think I didn’t like the flowers or the amazing trip he planned for us. Who wouldn’t love a trip to London with the person they loved?

*Greyson always knows just how to surprise me. I can’t believe he wants to whisk me away. It’s so rare for us to get time alone…and the thought of going to Europe hadn’t crossed my mind. It’s such a great gift, and I hope he realizes that.*

After the whole proposal snafu, I’d reassured him so many times that the trip and the flowers were the best gift I could’ve ever wanted, but then I’d started to wonder if bending over backward to make him feel better had only made things worse.

I was mad at myself for mentioning the proposal. Once I realized he wasn’t proposing and that I’d obviously made a mistake, I should’ve kept my disappointment to myself. And I’d surprised myself with that—especially since I’d literally been dreading the thought of him proposing and me having to tell him no because of the circumstances we were under.

The *due destini* was still such a force in our lives, no matter how much I wished it weren’t.

Either way, I was going to do everything in my power to make sure he knew how much I loved the flowers and the romantic trip to London he’d promised me.

I checked myself over in the mirror and saw the flowers in the reflection. I turned around and bent close to draw in the scent of them. I didn’t think I’d ever smelled roses this fragrant, and it made me smile. Greyson had picked the best, most perfect bouquet of flowers I’d ever seen, just more proof of how thoughtful he was.

I was glad Greyson seemed to like the whiskey, and I *knew* beyond a shadow of a doubt that he liked the lingerie. It was a win-win for both of us. I’d gotten to feel sexy, and he’d enjoyed the sight of me wearing something daring and beautiful and naughty.

My body warmed at the memory of the amazing sex that followed, and I smiled to myself again. Despite our little hiccup, this was shaping up to be the best Valentine’s Day ever.

*I should pick something even sexier for our trip to London. Or maybe I’ll buy something in London to surprise him with. I just want to make him feel like the luckiest man in the world because he makes me feel like the luckiest girl in the world every single day.*

I would run my idea by Lola—she knew about that kind of stuff.

After taking one final loving glance at my flowers, I made my way downstairs and ran into Torin.

“Cali, hey! I’ve been looking for you.” He handed me an envelope. “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

I was surprised and suddenly aware that I hadn’t bought anything for any of the other pack members. I’d been so wrapped up in picking the perfect gift for Greyson…and so nervous about the prospect of him proposing…that I hadn’t thought about anyone else in the pack house.

“Thank you, Torin, but I, uh, didn’t get you anything.”

Torin waved that off. “Who cares? I wasn’t expecting anyone to. I did my research, and I know that getting *everyone* a card is what they make elementary school children do so no one feels left out. But since I’ve never experienced Valentine’s Day until now, I decided to make up for lost time and do something I missed out on.”

I held up the card between us, admiring the fancy, bright red, paisley patterned envelope. “It’s so cute already. I can only imagine how great the card is going to be.”

Torin’s smile widened. “All I wanted in return was that smile of yours, and I got it, so I’m happy.”

I was moved. “I can do you one better than that.” I hugged him and smacked a kiss on his cheek.

“Okay, okay, open it! I can’t handle the suspense!” Torin said excitedly.

I opened the card and smiled at the puff of glitter that rained down on us both. “Whoa, okay, if I’d gotten this card in elementary school, I would’ve fallen in love with you even *if* everyone got the same one.”

Torin blushed. “Thanks. That’s the reaction I wanted.”

I turned the card over in my hands to read the message. *Cali, I love watching you love so hard—be it the pack or your mates. Valentine’s Day was made for a sweet person like you! Love, Torin.*

“Wow, Torin,” I said, tearing up a little. “That is so sweet. Thank you!”

“Glad you like it!” Torin said, pulling a stack of cards from a little fanny pack around his waist. “Have you seen Lola? She’s next.”

“I’m sure she’s around somewhere—but remember, Torin, to keep wearing your bracelet.”

Torin nodded. “Of course, I’ve got it on. Greyson already told me how important it is to keep it on, and I have no intention of taking it off and getting blown to bits by an iron shower.” He winced. “Probably in my top five worst ways to die.”

Torin hurried off, and I stood there admiring the card and brushing sparkles from my hair. It was at times like this where I was so happy to have a pack in my life. If I’d never met Xavier or Greyson, I wouldn’t know Torin or anyone else, and I wouldn’t have this warm feeling in my stomach about how great my friends were.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I saw it was a text from Kendall.

*I need to talk to you now. In person.*

I was thrown. *Right now? On Valentine’s Day?* I supposed it wasn’t the biggest holiday of the year or anything, but I had plans to spend it with Greyson until the party tonight. I realized Greyson wasn’t on the text thread, but he should be. He needed to know that Kendall was reaching out since we were still on the fence about whether or not we could even trust her.

I went looking for Greyson and found him in his study, putting the whiskey I’d gotten him on the shelf with his other ones. I couldn’t help but notice how much fancier mine looked than all the rest with its sparkly crystal bottle and fancy gold stopper at the top.

“Hey, you should see this,” I said, showing him the text from Kendall. “I just got it. She wants to meet.”

His eyes darkened as he read the text. Then he shook his head. “I just don’t get it. For all intents and purposes, Kendall seems like a rolling stone. I feel like she’s trying to appear to be one, anyway, the type of person who doesn’t stay anywhere for very long. But she’s still around, still contacting us even though she pretends to want nothing to do with us. Why?”

“Don’t know. And I wonder why she wants to talk to me all of a sudden.”

Greyson shrugged. “I don’t have the slightest idea, but I’m not crazy about her contacting you directly. It doesn’t feel right. Text back and tell her you’ll meet her, but that I’m coming with.”

I texted her Greyson’s message, and Kendall’s reply came quickly, as if she’d been holding the phone in her hand, waiting for me to answer.

“She said she’s outside,” I said to Greyson.

“What? Outside?”

I nodded. “Yup. Guess she wasn’t about to take no for an answer.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Greyson said as we started toward the front door. But then Greyson stopped me. “Wait, you’ve got your bracelet on, right?” He quickly looked me over to confirm.

I grabbed his head and pulled him into a kiss. When I pulled away, he had a smile on his lips but was eyeing me with surprise.

“What was that for?”

I smiled. “Do I need a reason?”

“Hell no,” Greyson said, chuckling as we went outside.

Kendall was waiting by her motorcycle and gave us a small wave as we emerged from the house.

Even in the craziest situations, Kendall always seemed to be cool, calm, and collected, but something was different now. She seemed a little rattled. Cagey, even.

“So, what’s this all about?” Greyson asked as we approached. He’d taken my hand, and I could feel him moving me behind him slightly as if to put himself between me and Kendall.

Kendall hadn’t really proven herself to be all that trustworthy, but I wasn’t afraid of her, and I didn’t think she would lash out at me…but obviously Greyson felt differently. Maybe it was because of how off her energy was today.

Kendall hesitated for a moment as if she were mulling over what she was about to say before she finally asked, “Can I stay with you?”

**Episode 5230**

**Greyson**

*Stay with us? Is she really asking us that after everything that’s happened?*

I wasn’t exactly sure what Kendall meant by that… She couldn’t possibly….

“What do you mean, Kendall? Stay with me? With Cali?” I asked.

Kendall rolled her eyes as if I were the one who’d just dropped a bomb on her. “No, well, yes—I mean with the Redwood pack. You and Cali are part of the Redwood pack, so I guess that, yeah, I’m asking to stay with you two, too.”

I paused to think about that. Did I really want the person who’d unleashed all this Dark Fae mafia bullshit on us to stay in our pack house—on Valentine’s Day—and attract more danger to the people I cared about?

Kendall hadn’t been all that helpful to us whenever we’d come to her seeking answers, so what made her think I was willing to stick my neck out for her? Open our home to her?

My first instinct was to shut it down right away. Kendall had to have other places she could run to. But before I could figure out a tactful way to let her down easy, Cali spoke up.

“Of course you can.” She turned to me. “Right?” Cali was giving me that look I couldn’t resist. She was so kind and was always trying to help people—even when she didn’t know them all that well.

*Great. Cali didn’t mean to, but she’s putting me on the spot. But I suppose it’s not a huge deal if Kendall stays. She’ll be surrounded by pack members, so it’s not like she’ll try anything.*

Making no effort to hide my reluctance, I said, “I suppose it’ll be okay…for a while.”

Relief filled Kendall’s face. “Thank you.”

She seemed a lot less tense than she had a few seconds ago, but there was still something unsettling about the way she looked. *Frightened* was maybe too strong of a word, but there was something there I’d never seen from her before. And then for Kendall to come here asking for our help—and that was exactly what this was—something must have set her off. Something had spooked her enough to come running to us. Before now, she’d seemed so reluctant to get involved in any pack stuff, and she’d made no secret about keeping her distance and wanting us to butt out of her life. So why the sudden change?

*It’s strange for her to ask this, but it makes sense to have her here, actually. What better way to keep an eye on someone you don’t trust than to have them in your own home?*

As we made our way back inside with Kendall in tow, Cali paused.

“Kendall, we’re going to a big Valentine’s Day party tonight. Would you like to come? It’ll be fun…an experience, anyway. Lots of decorations, an amazing house, good music and food, that sort of thing. Plus most of the packs in the area will attend, so you’ll be able to meet some new people.”

Kendall didn’t seem to hear her and let out a distracted, “What?”

“Lucian, the Vanguard Alpha, is throwing a big Valentine’s Day party, and the guy loves to host. I’m sure he would love to have you,” I said.

*It’ll give the princeling a new person to show off to, a fresh pair of eyes to witness his out-of-control opulence and grandstanding.*

Kendall seemed hesitant. “That sounds nice, I guess, but I don’t know about going to a Valentine’s Day party as a third wheel. Valentine’s Day is pretty pointless as far as holidays go. The only good thing is the discounted chocolate.”

“It should be pretty fun though,” Cali said. “There’ll be lots of people there, plenty of those in our own pack. I promise, it’ll be fun.”

Kendall shook her head. “I…don’t know. I think I just want to lie low right now.”

Cali opened the door and stepped through. Kendall was about to follow when I stepped between them, blocking Kendall’s way.

“I think it’s important for you to come with us tonight.” My tone wasn’t exactly harsh, but it definitely suggested I wasn’t about to take no for an answer. “Besides, everyone will be there, and the pack house will be empty—which, if you’re asking to stay with us, may not be what you want right now. Plus, it’s not like you have anything else to do…do you?”

“Okay,” Kendall finally said, her jaw fixed as if she were biting back saying something else. “But I know the only reason you’re pressing me on this is because you still don’t trust me.”

I smiled and gestured her inside. She was perceptive, I had to give her that. I wondered if she thought she’d even given me a reason to trust her. She’d saved me from the Fae, sure, but had then let them speed off with Cali without trying to stop them. And she hadn’t been forthcoming to us about much of anything…which suggested she was hiding something.

Why *would* we trust her? She’d helped us, yes, but I could argue that every single time she helped us, she was helping herself just the same.

“Welcome back to the Redwood pack house,” Cali said brightly as she started to lead Kendall upstairs to show her where she would be staying.

“Wait a sec, Cali,” I said.

Cali gave me a questioning look. “What’s up?”

“I have one more question for Kendall.”

Kendall’s purple eyes flashed as they came to rest on me. “What now?”

“Remember what you said yesterday? About ‘us’?”

Kendall shrugged. “Um…yeah?”

“I’d like to know what ‘us’ you were referring to.”

Kendall narrowed her gaze at me. “Are you serious? You’re a smart guy, you do know what ‘us’ *means*, don’t you? Obviously, I meant the three of *us*,” she said, pointing to Cali and me. “You, me, and Cali. What other ‘us’ would there be?” She shook her head, incredulous.

“That’s exactly what I want to know,” I said. “I just want to know why, after all you’ve done to push us away, you were suddenly being so inclusive. Why in that moment were you so concerned about keeping Hans away from us?”

Kendall stepped closer to me. “Because the Dark Fae have suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the packs his people have tangled with over the last few days. Hans is a smart man. He isn’t about to wipe out all his loyal men just because he feels insulted or has some lame urge for revenge. He knows what he’s lost, believe me. I just wanted to make it clear to him. And you two were there, so I included you in the threat. No big deal. You’re looking too deep into it.”

“And is that really enough to make him stop?” Cali asked. “You just threatening him like that? Seems like it would be a little harder to keep a guy like that calm. He’s out for blood, and I can’t see him giving that up just because of what you said.”

Kendall shrugged. “We’ll see, won’t we? I can’t know every move he’s going to make, but what I said could very well have an impact on him. Let’s just hope it does.”

A few minutes later, I was alone in my study, trying to piece things together. Kendall was still being cagey about the whole Hans thing and the threat she’d sent his way, but I was still confused about why she’d come here of all places. Like I’d said to Cali before, she seemed more like the type to cut and run when things got too messy.

And it was so typical for her not to explain why she needed to stay with us in the first place. I could’ve asked why and pressed the issue, but Kendall was so skittish that not only would she have most likely avoided answering, but she probably would’ve just hopped on her bike and sped off, and who knew if we would even hear from her again?

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration since nothing was any clearer than it was a few minutes ago. I got up and made my way upstairs. She could stay here, but she was going to have to give me some answers. I was giving her a safe place to stay, so she should give me information. That seemed like a fair trade to me.

I stood outside her door for only a second before opening it without knocking, wanting to catch her by surprise. And that was exactly what I did.

She was naked from the waist up with her back to me. I was thrown and stood there frozen in the doorway, hoping like hell that Cali didn’t happen by at this exact moment and wonder what the hell was going on.

*Of all the ways I could have pictured this going…*

I was hit with that same strange sensation as before when she turned and asked, “Can I help you with something, Grey?”

**Episode 5231**

The smell of lavender and vanilla wafted up to my nose.

As much as I loved the smell of freshly done laundry, the scents were making my stomach twist into knots. I dug my fingers into the fresh towels and other sundries I was carrying, wondering if it was all a mistake.

I’d agreed to let Kendall stay maybe too quickly. I wasn’t someone who liked to create waves, so I thought saying yes would mean having fewer potential issues with her in the end… But then I’d looked at Greyson’s face. I knew he was conflicted about letting her stay in the pack house, and now I was feeling that way too. Still, he’d agreed, and I trusted him not to make a decision like this simply because I’d jumped the gun.

I made my way to the room where she would be staying and soon realized that her presence wasn’t the only thing I was conflicted about. Thinking about attending Lucian’s Valentine’s Day party was stressing me out even more. I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to go after all. We were supposed to be keeping a low profile until the Dark Fae mafia threat could be eliminated. Going out to a party was an easy way to bring unwanted attention to ourselves.

*Wish I had thought of that earlier.*

I sighed. It had been my decision to go in the first place. Despite my mixed feelings about it, it made no sense to second-guess myself after I had worked so hard to convince Greyson to go. He was totally behind it, and there was no way to back out.

*What am I actually stressed out about then?* I wondered.

It felt like all my lingering doubts could be traced back to Kendall. Having someone so shady staying so close was bound to make anyone uncomfortable, but I couldn’t let it get to me. We had to suffer her presence until we resolved our mutual Dark Fae mafia problem. Greyson said it was in our best interest to keep her close, and I had to trust him. Kendall could stay at the pack house as long as he needed her to. I was determined not to let her presence affect my life or what should have been a special day with Greyson.

My newfound confidence took an immediate hit the second I approached Kendall’s open door. Greyson was standing in the doorway, his gaze focused solely on Kendall. She was standing just beyond him, fully naked and not looking the least bit ashamed about it. My stomach clenched as fear took over.

Had I just walked in on something, or was it all a misunderstanding?

Refusing to entertain the former, I went with the latter. I cleared my throat, maybe a bit too loudly, to clear the air and break the tension. Greyson turned to look at me as Kendall took a step back into the room.

“I brought fresh towels and some other things for Kendall,” I said, sounding way too chipper.

Greyson let me pass by, then took one last, very long look at Kendall. He stared at her like he was making a silent threat. His eyes stayed locked on hers until he finally exited the room without saying a word. The second he was out of sight, it was like all the oxygen rushed back into the room. As his mate, it was easy for me to forget the intensity and sheer power of Greyson’s presence.

Kendall took the pile from my hand and wrapped herself in a towel. I was grateful that she had granted me the courtesy. For a moment, I thought she was just going to parade around the house naked. Kendall snorted and shook her head.

“Does your mate ever knock?” she asked.

Not willing to help her bash Greyson, I ignored her question and got ready to follow him out. I stepped one foot outside of her room, then hesitated. I turned back to face Kendall. She was drying her hair but paused when she sensed my eyes on her.

“Is there something you want to ask me?” she asked.

I bit my lip. I had at least a million questions, but I managed to resist temptation. There was no point in asking her anything. She raised her brows as she waited.

“I’ll see you downstairs before we leave for the party,” I said.

With my curiosity tucked away, I turned around and left her room. I all but fled and nearly collided with Greyson as he made his way downstairs. He still had a grim expression on his face.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

He took a breath and let it out slowly. “I wanted to ask Kendall more about the Dark Fae mafia, and…”

“Okay,” I said. “And what?”

“I decided not to ask,” he said.

“Really? Why not?” I asked.

It was surprising considering how determined Greyson was to get answers from her. He had never been one to back down, yet he had changed his mind so easily? Greyson looked away as he cleared his throat.

“Well, I walked in without thinking, and she was in the middle of getting dressed,” he said. “It didn’t seem like the right time.”

He started to make his way downstairs again, but I stopped him. His eyes took their time to find their way back to mine. I held his gaze for a moment before I spoke.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” I asked.

He arched his brow. “Is there something you want to ask me?”

His question only intensified the feeling that had been growing within me. There was something going on, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Not yet.

“Are you maybe having second thoughts about keeping Kendall so close?” I asked.

Greyson took a second to ponder my question. He gave me a soft smile, and I knew I was onto something.

“Maybe I am,” he admitted. “But I’d still like to keep her close so we can watch what she’s up to. Is that okay with you?”

I smiled. “Of course, *Alpha*.”

Greyson laughed as he pulled me into his arms. “I propose we take the rest of the day off. From now on, it’s just you and me.”

“Can we really do that?” I asked. “I mean, given what’s going on?”

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Greyson said. “Don’t we deserve to celebrate it without worrying about any of this other shit? I think we do.”

I smiled again, knowing that I didn’t need to give him an answer. Instead, I leaned forward to kiss him deeply. Greyson tightened his embrace, and I slipped my arms around his neck to hold him even closer. There was nothing I wanted to do more than spend the rest of the day just like that, just the two of us. We would make the most of our time together before the real world came crashing back in.

Greyson pulled back. “It’s settled then. This is our day.”

I nodded. “Just you and me. Oh, except for Lucian’s party.”

“I don’t give a shit about the princeling’s little party,” Greyson said. “As long as I get to spend the whole night with you in my arms, I don’t care where we are. Lucian’s party or some dive bar in the middle of nowhere.”

“You’re such a romantic,” I teased.

“You love it,” he said, then pulled me into another kiss.

As his tongue danced with mine, I did my best to forget about everything except Greyson. Nothing else mattered except him. Whatever doubts I had about Kendall, whatever fears I felt about the Dark Fae mafia and their threat, it all faded away until there was nothing but Greyson.

We kissed each other passionately, and I fell deeper into our embrace. I was with the man I loved. He was the one who made my pulse race and my body ache. We had each other, and that was all that mattered to me. Nothing else.

I sighed as Greyson ran his strong hands over my body. We were nowhere near our room and very much in a space where anyone from the pack could stumble onto us. Lost in our passion, I wrapped a leg around Greyson’s waist as he pushed me against the closest wall. I was moments away from telling him to forget about the stupid party so we could spend the rest of the day in our room.

With the world at a respectable distance, I could make Greyson feel the way he made me feel. I never wanted him to doubt himself. He was a great Alpha, and we were all lucky to have him as our leader. Beyond that, I was lucky to call him my mate.

Just as I got ready to drag Greyson to my room, I heard people moving around the pack house. It snapped me out of my lust-filled haze, and I pushed back from Greyson. He gave me a carnal grin as we caught our breath. I put a hand against his chest as I checked the time.

Then I grimaced. It was much later than I had thought.

“Pause on that thought,” I said. “We have a party to get to!”

**Episode 5232**

**Xavier**

*Here we go*, I thought.

Lucian’s servants let us in through the overly ornate doors, then immediately closed them the second we stepped onto the freshly polished marble floors. I stifled a sigh and did my best not to show just how much I didn’t want to be at the Vanguard palace.

I wasn’t sure what was getting to me most. The idea of spending any more time with the arrogant princeling or the insanely over-decorated interior of the palace. No matter where I looked, there were stupid hearts and loads of pink shit on display. It wasn’t my scene, and it sure as hell wasn’t my vibe.

When I first heard about the Valentine’s Day party, I thought it was the dumbest thing ever. We weren’t children. Why did we need a party? Lucian didn’t need a reason to do anything, and eventually he managed to wrangle all the packs into taking part in his holiday farce.

*Isn’t Valentine’s Day supposed to be a quiet, intimate affair?*

I thought back to earlier in the day when I was alone with Ava. It had been so perfect, but all too brief. Compared to our intimate moment, Lucian’s party was an eyesore on the opposite end of the spectrum. The princeling seemed incapable of anything low-key and was intent on forcing us to celebrate with him.

Though all I wanted to do was turn around and go back home, I focused on the real reason I had dragged my ass to the palace: my pack. They took in their surroundings with some kind of childlike wonder. For the first time since Milo’s death, I saw something on their faces other than grief.

*It’s worth it*, I thought.

If all the chocolates, hearts, flowers, and stupid pink shit made my pack forget about their pain, then it was worth it. I would endure whatever I had to in order to do what was best for them. But if Lucian came at me dressed like some adult Cupid, then I was going to deck him.

“Ugh,” Ava said in my ear. “Look at all this crap. He really outdid himself this time.”

I snorted. “He outdoes himself every time.”

Behind me, the others continued to gawk at the supposedly romantic decor. A few of them started to rub their noses. Marissa sneezed, then cursed.

“What is that smell?” she asked. “It’s suffocating in here.”

“It smells like a perfume store for old ladies,” I said.

The air was redolent with the aroma of fresh roses, but our heightened sense of smell made it hard for us to breathe. Eventually it felt like I had actually eaten a damn rose. All the while, the staff sashayed around us as they tended to their duties. They were all wearing ridiculous red and white satin uniforms.

We were each handed a bright red rose and asked to wait in the foyer. The only light in the vast room was cast by hundreds of candles placed on every surface. The tiny flames burned bright inside their heart-shaped sconces. There was a new portrait of Lucian and Elle smiling down at us from the wall. They were wearing some frilly getup that made Lucian look like King Louis XIV and Elle like that queen who loved cake or whatever. They were staring into each other’s eyes with what was supposed to be a look of love.

It all made me want to retch.

“Good evening, Xavier and Ava,” one of the red and white staff members said. “It is my pleasure to escort you to the ballroom. Please follow me.”

“Lead the way,” I said, not bothering to hide my lack of enthusiasm.

The servant smiled happily and led the pack to the ballroom. The doors opened, and we stepped into what looked like a grand gala from the eighteenth century. The music stopped as everyone turned to look at us.

“Xavier and Ava, the Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack,” the servant announced, then bowed.

The other guests did a kind of golf-clap/head-bow thing as Ava and I walked farther into the ballroom. The music began to play as the pack followed behind us, still marveling at the sights. I recognized most of the guests already there. I saw Paige and Duke, Porter and Rowena, Mace and Maren, as well as some of the members of their respective packs. Everyone was dressed formally and enjoying appetizers and flutes of champagne that were being passed around.

*But are they having any fun?* I wondered.

“Hm, I wonder what Greyson will think about seeing Mace and Maren coupled together today,” Ava said.

“It should be interesting,” I said, matching her smirk.

My eyes swept the room, ignoring the decor and focusing on the faces staring back at me. I was surprised to see that Cali and Greyson weren’t there. I frowned. Had they decided not to come? Had that even been an option? I searched the room again, then did my best to ignore the bitter disappointment I felt deep inside.

Determined to make the most of Lucian’s stupid, fancy party, I led Ava to the bar. I saw rows of top-shelf liquor bottles and intended to drink my fill of Lucian’s quality booze. I ordered for us, then leaned against the bar.

Ava stared at me for a long beat before she spoke. “You don’t want to be here, do you?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Does anyone really want to be here?”

Ava laughed. “Probably not. But I think it’s good for the packs to have a break.”

“We’ll see how everyone feels when we can’t get the smell of roses out of our nice clothes,” I said.

“We’ll just have to get used to smelling so damn pretty,” Ava joked.

“Or like a pretty funeral home—” I started.

Colton cut through the other Valentine’s Day revelers and came barreling toward us. Despite being dressed in a nice suit, he looked like a wreck. His hair was messy from running his fingers through it, and his skin was slightly flushed like he was sweating buckets. Colton’s eyes were wide and frantic as he looked around the ballroom before looking back at me.

“Has anyone seen Greyson?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t,” I said.

“It seems the Redwood Alpha is choosing to be fashionably late,” Ava quipped.

“Did he say how late? Wait, were you joking? Fuck,” Colton said, sounding more distressed. “I tried calling him a bunch of times, but he’s not answering his phone.”

The bartender handed me my single malt whiskey, and I took a sip as Colton tried calling Greyson again. He shook his head and looked ready to scream.

“What is wrong with you?” I asked.

Colton stared at me. “You know.”

“I do?” I asked, taking another sip.

“Yes, Xavier. You know that Greyson has the ring. My ring,” he said. “How can I propose to Maya without the ring? It won’t count!”

I handed Colton my drink and patted him on the shoulder. “You need this more than I do right now.”

“Thanks,” he said, then knocked it back in one go.

“If Greyson said he’s bringing the ring,” I said, “then rest assured, he’s bringing that ring. He’ll be here.”

“How can you be so sure?” Colton asked. “What if their car broke down? What if they had to go to a different party? What if they bailed?”

I motioned for the bartender to bring me two more whiskeys, then turned to face my twin. He was on the verge of having a panic attack on what was supposed to be one of the happiest nights of his life. Just as I got ready to talk him off the ledge, the Redwoods arrived.

“Greyson and Cali, Alpha and Luna of the Redwood pack,” the servant said, then bowed.

All eyes were on Greyson and Cali as they walked ahead of their pack. I saw all the usual faces but paused when I spotted Kendall. She didn’t look too keen to be here, but she was dressed up nonetheless. Interesting. I wondered what my brother had in mind, or if he just wanted to keep her close at all times. Regardless, I was sure I would know by the end of the night.

As always, my gaze drifted to Cali and lingered. Her dress made her look lovelier than any flower, and her scent made my mouth water. She was so vibrant and so happy that it felt like I was staring at the sun. I watched every step she took, mesmerized by her beauty and aching to hold her close.

She turned to smile up at Greyson, and I felt a tremor of jealousy radiate through me. The other guests murmured about how good they looked together and how happy Cali seemed to be. It ate at me, but I kept my expression passive. Eventually, I turned away and found Ava staring at me intently from behind her drink.

She smiled before taking another sip. “Should be a memorable evening.”

I smiled, but silently hoped that the only memorable thing to happen that evening would be Colton’s proposal. With my new drink in hand, I nodded at him.

“So about tonight,” I said. “What do you need me to do?”

**Episode 5233**

“Holy freaking moly,” I murmured.

I had been a fool to think that I could ever wrap my head around how over the top Lucian was willing to go for one of his events. As soon as he had made the invitation to us, I had been preparing myself for what was surely going to be an exaggerated celebration of Valentine’s Day.

I thought I knew what to expect, but the moment we stepped into the Vanguard palace, I realized my error. There was no way I could have ever prepared myself for the spectacle to come. Lucian had outdone himself by decorating his palace like something out of a Disney movie. There were hearts, flowers, and images of Cupid absolutely everywhere, and even the servants were decked out in red and white satin like they were Cupid’s representatives on Earth.

Greyson—along with every other male member of the pack and Lola—snorted the second they saw it. They joked about the smell of roses and wretched at the sight of those chalky candy hearts. But all their criticism fell silent after one of the staff announced our arrival. The music stopped playing momentarily as all eyes landed on us. It was probably the most epic entrance I would ever make and yet another reminder that there was no limit to Lucian’s sense of extravagance.

Lucian and Elle materialized from the crowd to greet us personally. Elle looked even more stunning in person than she had in the new portrait hanging in the foyer. She was radiating bliss and looked happier than I had ever seen her. Maybe the engagement and her impending marriage would be good for her after all.

We hugged each other tightly.

“It’s been too long,” Elle said.

“Too, too long. I missed you,” I said. “You look stunning. I take it things are going well?”

“Things couldn’t be better,” she said. “And you look amazing. I’m so happy to see you.”

Greyson was as gracious as he could be to Lucian, then smiled at Elle to greet her warmly. Lucian took my hand and kissed it lightly.

“So good to see you, Caliana,” he said. “You truly are a vision. Beautiful, elegant, and the envy of nearly every woman in this room.”

I smiled demurely. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Lucian. And you flatter me. Thank you.”

Though I blushed at his kind words, I could never forget how his flattery had once repulsed me. Lucian had fawned all over me, eager to make me fall under his charming spell so that he could use me for Seluna’s demonic means. He was still the same old Lucian, but I could sense something different in him. He flattered me nonstop, but his eyes rarely strayed from Elle.

He was head over heels in love with her.

Frankly, it was a relief. Lucian was as unpredictable as he was over-the-top, and it was always a challenge to figure out his true motivations. But with Elle’s hand secured in his and his love for her on display for everyone, it was easy to see what was motivating his every action. His Valentine’s Day party was the perfect way to celebrate his new ways.

As I watched Elle smile at her beloved, I remembered a time when she had doubted his abilities as an Alpha. Compared to an Alpha like Greyson, Lucian was no match. And he didn’t have to be. Sometime since the last time we all saw each other, Lucian must have proved himself to his Luna. He had earned her respect and was happily basking in their love.

Honestly? I was thrilled for them.

“Greyson, I’d like to have a word with you regarding the palace’s reconstruction plans,” Lucian said, pulling him aside.

I smiled at Elle. “You seem so happy.”

“I am. Things couldn’t be more perfect. Lucian couldn’t be more perfect.” Elle beamed, then she sighed. “Everything is coming together for the wedding. But…I’m worried about my old pack. Should I invite them?”

The idea of getting married and not having my parents there was inconceivable to me. I wasn’t sure I could truly celebrate on my wedding day if they weren’t around to see it. Then again, my parents weren’t wolves like Elle’s father was. I wasn’t sure how it would work or if inviting her old pack would lead to trouble on her special day.

“Have you brought this up with Lucian?” I asked.

“Yes, and he says that he wants me to be happy,” she said. “I’m free to do what I want.”

“Hm, right now I can’t tell if you’re more worried about what the werewolves would think or what your father would think,” I said.

Elle sighed again. “The concept of marriage is foreign to my old pack. I feel like most of them would think having a grand ceremony is a waste of time. Still, something tells me my father should be there.”

“That sounds like more than enough reason to invite him,” I said.

“I think so, too,” Elle said, sounding conflicted.

“I promise to talk to Greyson about it,” I said. “We’ll figure out how to help your father if he does decide to come to the wedding.”

Elle’s eyes lit up, and she pulled me into a quick hug. “Thank you! You’re the best! Amazing! Splendid!”

I laughed. “Now you’re starting to sound like Lucian.”

We pulled back, and I caught sight of Xavier and Ava near the bar. Seeing them hit me in a way I hadn’t expected. They were both dressed formally like everyone else and looked about as happy to be there as the rest of us. But that wasn’t what struck me.

The longer I stared at them, the more it felt like something was wrong. It was like the final piece to a puzzle had been jammed into the wrong place. It was like someone had made an errant brushstroke over the surface of a masterpiece. Xavier and Ava together was…wrong. Totally wrong.

But that was nonsense. I was at the party with Greyson, and, of course, Xavier would be there with Ava. There was nothing wrong about it, but, unfortunately, my mind couldn’t convince my heart of that. I would never be okay seeing them as a couple.

Just as I was about to turn away, Ava wrapped her arm around Xavier’s shoulders. She had a bracelet on her wrist that twinkled in the light. I frowned. I didn’t remember seeing it before and wondered if Xavier had gifted her the bracelet for Valentine’s Day.

*Why does that…annoy me?* I wondered.

Before I had the chance to ruminate on the bracelet, Maya stepped out of the crowd and dropped her frustration at our feet.

“So…why are we even here again?” she asked.

“Because we were invited,” I said, smiling at Elle.

Maya scoffed. “But why did we even bother to come?”

Elle looked confused, and I scrambled to come up with a way to excuse Maya’s faux pas. What was she thinking complaining about the party to the hostess? Luckily, Aysel stepped in at precisely the right moment.

“Sorry, but I’m stealing Elle away from you,” she said with a smile. “We have wedding details to discuss.”

“Of course,” I said, feeling relieved.

Maya and I watched them go before she rolled her eyes. She gestured to the grand ballroom and shook her head in disgust.

“This is so not how I wanted to spend my Valentine’s Day,” she said.

“It’s a little much, I know,” I said. “But maybe you should try going with the flow.”

Maya’s eyes narrowed. “Did you talk to Colton? That’s exactly what he said.”

“Really? I mean, that’s a coincidence. I haven’t spoken to him yet,” I said. “But maybe Colton is right. It is Valentine’s Day, after all.”

“I know, I just told you,” she said. “And this is not how I want to spend it.”

Seeing she was about to lose the rest of her temper, I decided it was wiser to change topics. And to take a half step away from her.

“How are the twins—” I started to ask.

Maya looked around. “Have you seen Colton?”

“Yeah, he’s talking to Xavier,” I said, pointing them out.

“There he is…” she said, then turned back to me. “Can you see how weird he’s acting? He’s being weird, right?”

“Xavier is?” I asked, confused.

Maya rolled her eyes. “No. Colton.”

“Oh. I actually have no idea,” I said. “I haven’t spoken to him yet, remember?”

“He’s acting weird,” Maya said. “Too weird. I swear, if he keeps at it, I’m going to slap him.”

Maya’s hand twitched at her side like it was getting ready to smack some sense into Colton. Poor guy. He was probably nervous about his proposal and the fact that Greyson had to bring the ring.

“Maybe Colton has something special planned,” I said, hoping to get Maya off his back.

My plan backfired immediately. Maya’s eyes snapped back to me, and she took my upper arms in her hands. Her grip wasn’t painful, but I sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere until she got what she wanted. I gulped.

“Um, Maya?” I asked.

“Tell me right now, Caliana Hart,” she said. “What. Do. You. Know?”

**Episode 5234**

**Xavier**

Colton took the second drink out of my hand and knocked it back himself. He was two whiskies in but no closer to being relaxed. He was so far from chill that it was comical. I smirked as he ran his fingers through his hair yet again. If he kept it up, he would go bald before the night was over.

“The only thing you might have to do is stop me from killing Greyson if he forgot the ring,” he said.

*And that’s my cue to step in*, I thought.

I grabbed Colton by the arm and shook him a bit. “Bro. Take a breath and chill the fuck out.”

He rolled his eyes but did as I asked. It took him a few tries, but eventually he lost the killer glint in his eyes. I let him go and straightened his coat, not wanting to add any more wrinkles than he already had.

“Do you have some kind of plan?” I asked.

“A plan?” he asked, staring blankly. “What plan do I need? I propose, she accepts. It doesn’t get any simpler than that.”

Ava draped her arm over my shoulders. “In case you missed it, we’re at a very public party. Are you saying you’re just going to drop down on one knee in the middle of this ballroom and propose in front of everyone? Personally, I wouldn’t have a problem with it. But maybe Maya will.”

Colton glared at her. “That’s not what I was planning to do.”

“Right. Because you hadn’t planned anything at all, correct?” Ava asked.

My twin and my mate squared off with each other as if they were getting ready to tear each other’s throats out. Their usual hostility was bad enough, but there was no way in hell I was going to let them fight at Lucian’s party. Ava was right about it being very public, and I wasn’t going to give the other packs anything to gossip about.

“Ava, can you get me another drink, please?” I asked.

“Sure, X,” she said, staring at Colton. “No problem.”

I pulled Colton away from her and made sure to stand between them. Colton looked more stressed out than he had when he first asked me about Greyson.

“So, where are you going to propose?” I asked.

“This palace is huge. I’ll wait until Maya and I can be alone in one of the million rooms here. I’ll propose then,” Colton said. “Are you okay with that, or do you want me to run it by Ava?”

My brother had crossed the line, and I couldn’t let it slide. I got that Ava wasn’t his favorite person, but she was my Luna, and he had to respect her.

I glared at him. “This has nothing to do with Ava and everything to do with you. What’s up with you, man? I’m trying to be on your side, but you’re pissing me off by attacking her. She was just trying to help. Why are you being such a dick about it? I get that you’re anxious about tonight, but don’t take that shit out on Ava.”

Colton let out a heavy breath. “Fine. You’re right. I’m sorry. But what about the ring? This whole night is ruined if I don’t have it.”

Ava returned with my drink. “Greyson is standing right over there. Why don’t you just go and ask him? Or do you need a grown-up to do it?”

I shot her a look and mind linked with her.

*Don’t antagonize him*, I said.

She smiled. *I would never.*

Fortunately, Colton wasn’t in the mood to spar with her. Not when he was so close to getting his ring on Maya’s finger. He headed off toward Greyson, then stopped.

“Where’s Maya?” he asked.

“Why does that matter right now?” I asked. “Just go.”

“I don’t want her to see Greyson giving me the ring,” Colton said.

“Do you want me to distract Maya?” Ava asked.

“No,” I said immediately.

She shrugged. “I’m just trying to be helpful.”

“Don’t,” Colton said.

We watched as he made his way to Greyson. He walked like a shady robot: his entire body stiff except for his head, which swiveled around like it was hanging loose. I wasn’t sure how long he would be able to keep his secret from Maya. After wishing my brother luck, I turned to Ava.

“Maybe you can take the night off tonight? Don’t stir the pot, and don’t stoke the flames,” I said. “Just for tonight?”

Ava wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “For you…I’ll consider taking my foot off the gas. Maybe.”

“So thoughtful,” I said.

She laughed as she leaned in to kiss me. I wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close as she melted into me. Then I pulled back with a smirk.

“Admit it. You find tension a turn-on,” I said. “No matter where it comes from.”

“I won’t admit to anything,” she said, a wicked gleam in her eye.

The other guests started to dance, and it wasn’t long before Ava pulled me onto the dance floor. I looked down at my lovely Luna and stifled a smile. Ava was practically glowing as she swayed to the music with me. Trouble and tension were her biggest aphrodisiacs. They made her come alive and made her irresistible.

Our bodies moved like one as we danced around the grand ballroom. Just as we were starting to get into it, Lucian’s annoying voice interrupted the music. He waited until we were all looking at him before speaking again. I snorted. The princeling was sitting on a dais-like platform that was decorated with hearts, flowers, and candles.

*What the hell, man?* I wondered.

It was like Lucian, despite being an Alpha, had no shame or any dignity. I would have gladly preferred to have been pantsed in front of an audience of millions than to dress as he was dressed and sit on that platform. He was wearing more makeup than most of the women at the party, and I had a feeling he was wearing some kind of rose musk cologne for the occasion.

As if all the decor he had managed to get on the platform wasn’t enough, Lucian had also managed to make his Luna look like the very definition of beauty itself. There was no denying that Lucian was an attractive, if froofy, guy. But with Elle by his side, looking serene and joyful, he looked like a king. A really annoying, pain-in-the-ass king. How Elle put up with him was beyond me, but clearly, she was in love with Lucian.

Though I’d had my doubts about them, I had to admit they looked very happy together.

“Welcome, everyone! Thank you all for attending my little celebration of the day of love!” Lucian said. “In keeping with the Vanguard tradition, I ask that everyone exchange partners with the couple behind them for a special dance. One meant to make the heart grow fonder.”

I groaned. It was such a fucking Lucian thing to do. Just as I was starting to forget about how much I disliked him and to enjoy the party, he had to pull one of his stupid moves. Begrudgingly, I spun around, then immediately froze. Greyson and Cali were staring at me, looking no more pleased about the dance than I was.

We stared at each other as the awkward tension began to grow. Had I been able to, I would have stuffed a heart down Lucian’s throat. Instead, I stood there like a fool until Ava leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“It’s just one dance,” she said. “Don’t wear yourself out.”

She moved off with Greyson, who kept his eyes on Cali until he was finally forced to turn away. I took Cali’s hands gently, if a little awkwardly, before leading her in the opposite direction. Her hand was soft and warm in mine, and I had to force myself to relax. We started to dance, and I hoped that she couldn’t feel how tense I was.

Cali smiled. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” I said, with a smile.

Truth be told, it felt strange to hold Cali in my arms. My mind went back to that morning with Ava and how conflicted I had felt. It had been so right and yet so wrong at the same time. But with Cali, it felt—

“Do you think Lucian planned this?” Cali asked, cutting into my thoughts.

Just like that, I felt the tension in my muscles slipping away. Funny how Cali could do that to me. She had the power to wind me up like a spring one second and make me feel looser than a cooked noodle the next. I smiled.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” I said. “The jerk.”

“Well, I’m glad he did,” she said with a laugh.

“Why?” I asked.

Cali bit her lip for a second, making me forget about my question. She ran her tongue over the spot, and I had to force the breath into my lungs and reason back into my head.

“I have something for you,” she said.

Suddenly, I wasn’t so irked with Lucian.

**Episode 5235**

*It’s now or never*, I thought.

Thanks to Lucian’s never-ending sense of mischief, I had been handed the perfect opportunity to give Xavier his Valentine’s Day gift. If it hadn’t been for the special dance, I might have missed my chance.

Granted, I was feeling a lot less confident than I had when I’d brought his gift with me.

With a thousand butterflies wreaking fluttery havoc inside my stomach, I anxiously led Xavier out of the ballroom. There were too many eyes and too many fans of gossip in there for what I had in mind. Xavier came willingly at first, then hesitated as I led him farther away from the party. I didn’t blame him. I was being way too weird.

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

“I don’t want to make a big deal about this, and we both know how people can take things out of context,” I said. “Especially with Lucian around. I don’t want to give anyone anything to talk about because they won’t ever stop talking about it…”

I realized I was rambling, but I couldn’t stop myself. Despite my best efforts, I was feeling way more nervous than I should have been. My hands were shaky, and I hoped that it wasn’t too obvious to Xavier. Jeez. It shouldn’t have been that nerve-wracking to give him a gift. Back when I bought it, I had managed to convince myself it was a good idea. It was way too late to go back on it. I had to see it through, while simultaneously praying I wouldn’t spontaneously combust from the stress of it.

*I should have just bought him a stupid card*, I thought.

Instead, I had opted to make some silly little gesture that was making me break out into a sweat. If it hadn’t been for the roses, I was sure Xavier would have been able to scent my abject terror. Not wanting to hyper focus on Xavier’s gift, I thought about how easy it had been to give Greyson his gift. It felt like I stepped into an oven as my cheeks grew flushed. I remembered Greyson’s gratitude and how exhausted we both were after. Yeah…the gift I got for Xavier was nothing like that.

The bottle I had gotten for him was special, but nothing out of this world. It was a kind gesture, yet not over-the-top. I thought about the bracelet on Ava’s wrist and felt myself calming down. My gift to Xavier was nothing like that either. It was just a simple gift.

I led Xavier to the coatroom where I had left my bag. With a deep breath, I present the bottle of whiskey to him. He didn’t bother to hide the confusion on his face.

“What is this?” he asked.

I pushed it into his hands like it was about to burst into flames in mine. The sooner it was out of my possession, the sooner I could stop freaking out about it.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” I said.

Xavier stared at me uncomfortably. The silence between us stretched until it felt like an eternity had passed. It was infinitely more awkward than when Lucian had forced us to switch partners.

“Thank you,” Xavier said eventually. “But…I didn’t get you anything.”

Eager to move past the horribly awkward moment, I waved his comment aside. I gave him a wobbly smile and hoped that he would take it at face value.

“I didn’t expect you to,” I said. “I wasn’t even sure about getting anything at all.”

“But you did,” he murmured.

“I did,” I said.

We were plagued with another awkward beat of silence. As Xavier stared at the bottle, I felt like I was drowning in my mixed emotions. I forced a smile.

“You don’t need to get me anything,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting anything. I… Just think of this as a gift from one friend to another.”

The words felt foreign as they came out of my mouth. Xavier was a lot of things to me, but just a friend wasn’t one of them. It felt wrong to say it, let alone think it, but I smiled widely like it was all I wanted. The last thing I wanted to do was make things between us even more complicated. Xavier’s eyes left the bottle to lock onto mine.

“Friends?” he asked.

I averted my eyes from his intense gaze. “Isn’t that what we are?”

What was supposed to be a simple gift was turning into a maelstrom of intense emotions. I was dying inside and wondering if I had made a huge mistake. It would have been better if I had left well enough alone and not gotten him a present.

*Should I take it back? What if he doesn’t even like this kind of whiskey?* I agonized.

Xavier lifted the bottle slightly higher. “How did you know?”

“Hm?” I asked.

“This is one of my favorites,” he said. “Gabe, Colton, and I used to drink this back in the day.”

“Oh, really? I had no idea,” I said. “Lucky guess, I guess.”

“Yeah. This used to be pretty hard to find,” Xavier said. “It took a while for the distillers to get any traction out here… Cali, I—”

I put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay,” I said. “You don’t have to do this. Make small talk with me and everything. It’s just a gift, and I wanted to give it to you. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Xavier stopped and stared at me with a puzzled expression. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I don’t want to make things awkward. And I definitely don’t want to cause problems with Ava,” I said. “I can take the bottle back if it will help. We can act like this never happened.”

“Why would you take it back?” Xavier asked, tightening his grip on the bottle.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I had no idea what to say. Things hadn’t turned out like I had imagined, and I was worried I would only make things worse. Unfortunately, the silence was worse than anything I could ever say, so I made myself speak.

“You can just pretend that today is another regular day,” I said. “It’s just a normal day—not some made-up holiday about giving gifts of love and all that—and I happened to give you a bottle of whiskey. Enjoy it. Please.”

*God, I’m just rambling now.* Desperate to flee, I started to leave the coatroom. Xavier reached out and stopped me by putting his hand over my arm. The warmth that radiated from his skin made my heart race. I couldn’t help it—it was this instinct within me, one that I’d been trying not to think about.

“But this isn’t just another day, is it?” he asked, his voice low.

I looked up into his eyes and gulped. My heart galloped in my chest as he took a step closer. Xavier took up every bit of space and sucked up all the air until I could hardly breathe.

“Xavier,” I said. It was meant to be a warning, but my voice sounded high and breathy.

“I can’t do what you asked me,” he said.

Confusion knocked the growing lust out of my head.

“Huh, which part?” I asked. “I-I said a lot.”

Had I been able to, I would have made a joke. Had I been able to, I would have taken a step back. Instead, I stood there and fought the urge to melt into a puddle. Xavier was standing so close and staring at me in a way that reached deep inside me. The rest of the world fell away as I was reminded how things between us used to be.

Xavier lifted my chin with his free hand. “I know what I want, and I know what I don’t want.”

His touch, his voice, and everything else about him made me tremble as I stared into his eyes. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to tell me, and a part of me didn’t give a damn. His touch was like this long-lost memory that had finally come back.

Still, I didn’t know what he was talking about. There was so much happening between us… I was intrigued…and terrified. So much so that I was almost afraid to ask him what he meant. But if I didn’t say something, I would no longer be able to resist the very big temptation staring at me.

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice hardly above a whisper.

Xavier leaned in closer until I could feel his breath on my lips. All I had to do was lean in slightly and I would be able to taste him. The proximity to him was so great that it made me dizzy with desire. Somehow, I managed to stay perfectly still.

“Friends,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

His eyes darkened. “I don’t want to be your friend, Cali.”

**Episode 5236**

**Xavier**

Cali’s eyes were wide, and it was all I could do to keep myself from kissing the shock away from her full, pouty lips.

“I…I don’t know what you mean,” she said after what felt like the longest silence of my entire fucking life. “You don’t want to be my friend? Why? No matter what, we should always be friends, shouldn’t we?”

I tightened my grip on her arms. It was taking everything in me not to have my lips do the talking for me. “No…that’s not…” I pulled in a deep breath. It was time to explain what I’d been trying so damn hard to deny for all this time. And to do that, I had to choose my words carefully. I might never get another chance at this. I couldn’t fuck this up.

“I’m not saying I don’t want your friendship,” I said, my words slow and measured. “It’s that I don’t want to settle for that. I don’t *just* want to be your friend. I want more.”

If possible, she looked even more shocked now. Her jaw dropped, and my urge to taste her delicious mouth increased tenfold. Tension thrummed between us, so taut I could barely breathe. I was hyper aware of every one of Cali’s movements. The rapid rise and fall of her chest. The way her pupils dilated as she stared back at me. The way her cheeks darkened and that sexy blush spread down her neck. It drove me wild, seeing proof of how I affected her.

Finally, Cali’s lips parted, and she shook her head. “What are you talking about?” Now she sounded more pissed off than shocked. I didn’t necessarily blame her, but I wasn’t going to apologize for how I felt either.

“I want to be more than friends,” I said. God, I sounded like a broken record. But how the hell was I supposed to explain any of this to Cali? I’d tried to keep things between us platonic—god knew I’d tried. I wanted to earn her trust back. But it just wasn’t working. And as much as it made things better between Ava and me to keep Cali at arm’s length, if I was being honest with myself—like fully fucking honest without holding back anything—it felt wrong.

Cali was my mate too. It didn’t feel right to keep my distance from her. I didn’t want to do it anymore.

Besides, Cali had to know what I was talking about, didn’t she? I wasn’t imagining everything I’d felt. The constant push and pull between us. Everything I’d done to ignore all the signs of our mate bond, the desire that had never gone away, had never dimmed in the slightest, was nothing but smoke and mirrors.

And I knew it was the truth. I knew it wasn’t something I was just imagining because Ava had picked up on it too. To the detriment of our own relationship. And while part of me wished things were simpler, because I did love Ava and I didn’t want to hurt her, I couldn’t deny my true feelings any longer. As messy as it was.

But how much of this could I really tell Cali? Self-doubt rushed over me like a bucket of icy water. *Should I even be telling Cali any of this? Shit, have I said too much?*

Cali was still staring at me, silent and no doubt waiting for me to make sense of my sudden confession. But why couldn’t *she* say something? Anything? Hell, slapping me in the face would feel better than just standing here with my words filling the air between us. Waiting for her response. Wondering what it might be. How much I’d screwed things up between us even more.

She pulled away from me, breaking our connection entirely. “How can you say this to me? It’s Valentine’s Day. We’re at a party. A party we came to with other people. What do you expect me to say right now, Xavier?”

“I…” I gulped. “I want you to say what you feel.”

Cali shook her head again, a look of disgust on her face. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

And, with that, she turned on her heel and stalked back toward the ballroom.

Fuck. Fucking *fuck*.

My body moved ahead of my brain, a knee-jerk urge to go after her, to somehow try to fix this situation my big mouth had created.

*Maybe I can take it all back…*

But as soon as the thought registered, I stopped short. It was too late for that. And, deep down, I knew I didn’t want to take it back. Not a single word of it. I’d meant everything I’d said, and it had taken a hell of a lot of courage to put myself out there like that. I didn’t regret telling her the truth. If anything, it was a long time coming.

I only wished I had explained it better. I’d tried to word things carefully, but I’d still rushed the confession. After everything that had happened between us, and the distance I’d put between us, I should have known it would take more than a passionate confession to get her to change her mind. She deserved the truth, and I’d given it to her, but I should have eased her into it instead of hitting her with it all at once.

Because, unlike Cali, none of this was sudden to me. Everything I’d said had been on my mind for a long time now. I’d been thinking about it almost constantly. I’d had some time to sort through my feelings before trying to put words to them.

Although I sort of hated to admit it, all of this, everything I’d said to Cali, had been born out of the unease I’d felt with Ava. She was my mate too. I loved her too. I wanted to make her happy because she deserved to be happy.

But none of that changed the fact that something still felt so very wrong between us. And I couldn’t help wondering if the problem was the fact that Ava wasn’t Cali.

I watched Cali disappear, replaying our interaction in my mind. It wasn’t anything like what I’d expected.

*Is she upset because I told her how I feel? Or…is she upset because she doesn’t feel the same way? Or she’s upset because she does?*

My stomach twisted violently at the thought. And yet, I almost wished it were the latter. It’d be painful, sure. It’d absolutely crush me. But it’d also offer a final answer to the question that had been eating away at me ever since Adéluce had cursed me. Finally, there would be closure. It was agonizing, but it was simple too.

But I knew Cali better than she knew herself. And I knew she felt the same way. That was why she’d had to leave me just now—because she wasn’t ready to face those feelings, or what it would mean to admit she had them.

I’d give her time. It was the least I could do, after everything. But how much time could I truly give her? If what I felt was real, and she felt the same way, then why should we suffer any longer?

“Where the hell have you been?!”

Colton’s voice yanked me from my thoughts. As I turned to look at him, he shoved me back into the coatroom.

“Colton—”

“Greyson said he had no idea what I was asking him about,” my twin continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “He pretended he didn’t have the ring. I never knew what a fucking comedian our big brother was. Of course he’d pick *now* to make his debut.” Colton dug the ring out of his jacket pocket. It sparkled in the low light of the coat room, and he frowned down at it. “Should I clean it? It looks kind of dingy, right? Do you think Greyson did something to make it less sparkly?”

The beginning of a headache pressed in on my temples, and for the first time in a while, I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with Cali or Ava. “You’re being a goddamn idiot. Why on earth would Greyson make Maya’s ring less sparkly? Believe it or not, he’s excited for you two.”

Immediately, my mind conjured up the image of me kneeling in front of Cali, an engagement ring held out in my hand. I could picture it like it was happening right now. The shock and love and desire on Cali’s face, the way my heart would race as I waited for her to—

Colton grabbed me and shoved me against the wall. “Are you even listening to me?”

I snapped out of it, rubbing my head. What a ridiculous thing to think about right now. Maybe I needed Colton to knock some sense into me.

Colton stared at me, betrayal and rage in his eyes. “I thought you were going to help me.”

*So fucking dramatic.*

“I *am*,” I said, annoyed.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I sighed, my mind shifting back to Cali’s shocked reaction to my confession. “No.”

Colton’s eyes narrowed. “Are you fucking kidding me? Can you just put aside whatever shit is going on with you and be my brother for two minutes? ’Cause if you can’t, should I ask Greyson?”

**Episode 5237**

I stood in the entrance to the ballroom, staring out at the people dancing and mingling without really seeing them. Xavier’s words replayed in my head for what felt like the thousandth time since I’d walked away from him.

*I don’t just want to be your friend. I want more.*

Emotions swarmed through my mind with the force of a hurricane. How could he just throw that at me? At first, I’d thought for sure that I’d misunderstood him. And that was awful all on its own, thinking that he didn’t even want to be my friend anymore. That we’d go back to the way things were when Adéluce was controlling him—that he’d treat me like a stranger again. That he’d finally, truly rejected me and didn’t want me in his life at all.

But somehow, once he’d clarified what he meant, it had almost gotten worse. I’d understood what he was telling me: He wanted to be with me again, as if nothing had ever happened to pull us apart in the first place.

But that…that just wasn’t even in the realm of possibility anymore, was it?

Because it was impossible for him to want to be with me again, wasn’t it? Hadn’t he chosen Ava? Hadn’t we moved past this and dissected this to death already? How could I possibly forget everything that had happened? That Ava was his Luna! That he’d admitted to being in love with her. That he’d kissed her and…

*God, I don’t even want to think about that.*

How could Xavier do this to me? And on my first Valentine’s Day with Greyson? Greyson, who had been nothing but supportive of me while Xavier was pushing me out of his life and forging new connections with Ava and the Samara pack. Greyson, my rock. The mate I could always count on. The mate who didn’t play games with me. The mate who didn’t get a headache whenever I was around because he was hung up on another woman.

*Seriously, what the hell was Xavier thinking? Did he expect me to just say, “Hey, that’s great. Let’s just forget that Greyson and Ava are here, and we can pick up right where we left off!”*

But even as the thought rushed through my head, frantic and angry as it was, I couldn’t deny the longing that hit me like a ton of bricks. I did want that. Or, at least, part of me wanted it. The part of me that never stopped loving Xavier. The part that didn’t want to be his friend either.

For that part of me, being with Xavier was what I’d always wanted. Not to hurt Greyson, or even Ava, but to be with Xavier.

But I couldn’t do any of that—for obvious reasons. Xavier had already made his choice, after all. He’d left the Redwood pack. He was with Ava. Hell, he was the Samara *Alpha*, and Ava was leading the pack alongside him. As his *Luna*. Not only had their mate bond been renewed, but it was stronger than ever. He’d bound himself to her in a way he’d never done with me. And there was no going back to the way things were before.

And yet, none of that changed the deep connection Xavier and I still had. The connection that had tortured us from the moment we’d locked eyes for the first time.

I sighed. No, I couldn’t be with Xavier. And I wouldn’t do anything that might hurt Greyson. I loved him just as deeply.

*The* due destini *has cursed us all.*

A hot, wet stripe ran down my cheek, and I realized I was crying. Here I was, at a party full of people celebrating love, and I was crying because one of my mates had just confessed his feelings for me. And it was everything I’d ever wanted to hear and the most devastating combination of words all at once.

*Dammit, Xavier.*

I couldn’t let anyone at the party see me like this. I certainly couldn’t go back into the ballroom with tears smudging my makeup, looking like I’d just been given terrible news. It’d raise too many questions, and I wasn’t prepared to answer any of them.

*I can’t let Greyson see me like this.* Not on this special day. Everything was supposed to be perfect. He deserved a perfect day. One day out of the whole year when our lives weren’t in danger, and he wasn’t in competition with Xavier and worrying about my heart being torn in two. It didn’t seem like much to ask, and I desperately wanted to give it to him.

I backed out of the doorway to the ballroom and veered down the hallway, looking for a bathroom. I needed to get myself cleaned up before someone saw me like this.

What would I even say to Greyson if he caught me looking like this? How could I possibly explain any of this to him?

*Sorry I’m a mess. Xavier just told me he wants us to be together again.*

The mere thought had my stomach twisting so violently it hurt. I knew I should tell Greyson what had happened, that he deserved to know, but why do that to him? Why tell him something that’d just hurt him and probably make things between him and Xavier even more tense?

No, Greyson deserved to enjoy this day for what it was supposed to be about. A protective flare of anger stirred in my belly. *I wish Xavier had kept his mouth shut. Things could have been perfectly civil. I never should have bought him that whiskey. Maybe then none of this would have happened.*

I did my best to ignore the fact that everything he said was what I’d always known to be true.

I was still wiping tears—angry tears, now—from my eyes when I ran into Gabriel and Mikah in the hallway. I blinked, my eyes widening. “What are you guys doing here?”

“What, you think we’re too good for Lucian’s ridiculous parties?” Gabriel teased.

I shook my head, forcing a watery smile. “No, I just mean—I didn’t realize you were coming. It’s a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m only teasing you,” Gabriel said. “We were just as surprised, actually. But Mikah insisted we make an appearance. He doesn’t look it, but he’s a romantic. He couldn’t miss a chance to attend a lavish, love-themed to-do.”

I raised a brow at Mikah. That sounded nothing like the pragmatic vampire I knew.

Mikah glared. “That isn’t true. Gabriel wanted free reign on all the complimentary food and drinks, so here we are.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Gabriel asked, shrugging helplessly. “The mercenary business doesn’t pay what it used to, you know.”

Mikah rolled his eyes, and Gabriel focused more intently on me. “Are you okay, Cali?”

I tried to brighten my admittedly weak smile. “I just got an eyelash in my eye. If you follow the music, you’ll find the ballroom. I’ll see you there in a few.”

I hurried away before he could reply. Despite his playful demeanor, he was a pretty insightful guy, and Mikah was even more so. It wouldn’t take much for them to piece together that there was nothing wrong with my eyes. Besides, just seeing Gabriel reminded me of Xavier, and the tears started welling up again.

*Get a grip, Cali. You’ve been managing these feelings for long enough now; you should be able to get through one fucking evening without publicly falling apart.*

I looked around as I continued down one of the long hallways of the Vanguard palace.

*I could have sworn there were bathrooms here. Did Lucian have them moved for the party? Is that even possible?*

I wouldn’t put it past Lucian. His willpower, whimsy, and seemingly endless wealth could make just about anything happen.

I turned around to continue my search and realized I’d gone in one huge circle. I was back by the coatroom. The same room where Xavier had told me he wanted to be more than friends. I ignored the sight of the room and stopped in front of the mirror hanging on the wall. Surely, Xavier would have gone back to the party by now.

I paused to fix my makeup, which, thankfully, wasn’t as bad as I feared it would be. I touched up the smudges under my eyes. *There.* I didn’t look quite as polished as I had at the beginning of the evening, but at least now I wouldn’t risk looking like a raccoon.

I froze, sensing someone behind me. My gaze slipped from my face to the sight of Xavier standing some distance behind me, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My heart skipped up into a new rhythm, and heat rushed into my face—along with another dose of righteous fury.

He had no right to make me feel like this. Just like he’d had no right to say any of those things earlier.

I spun around to confront him but stopped short when I found him standing right behind me, leaning down so our faces were inches apart.

“W-What do you want from me?” I stammered.

He pulled me close, his lips barely brushing against mine. “Everything.”

And then he closed the distance between us entirely and kissed me.

**Episode 5238**

**Greyson**

I scanned the ballroom for Cali. After Lucian’s forced couples exchange—in which I’d ended up in an awkward dance with Ava that had lasted about five minutes too long—Ava and I had both been all too happy to leave our pathetic excuse for polite small talk behind and find our mates. At least we agreed on that much. From what little I’d gathered from the series of clipped monosyllabic responses she’d had to all of my polite questions, Ava had been just as anxious for the dance to be over as I was.

Only, I couldn’t seem to find Cali among the partygoers moving and mingling in the ballroom. My gaze *did* land on Kendall, though. Because, of fucking course it did. It seemed the universe never missed an opportunity for me to find her—whether either of us wanted it or not.

She was standing alone by the bar, holding a cocktail glass in one hand. Her head was tilted up, and those purple eyes sparkled in the light from the chandelier. She certainly presented one hell of an image—as mysterious as she was unapproachable.

*Why did she agree to come along to this party if she isn’t planning to talk to anyone?*

I shook myself. What did it matter? Kendall’s thoughts were as opaque to me as they’d ever been, and, like always, I was sure she had her reasons for whatever she was doing. Either way, it wasn’t my responsibility, or my problem. At least, not right this moment. I tried not to think about how that might change once the party was over and we were heading back to the pack house.

Instead, I continued my search for Cali. The woman I actually *wanted* to spend time with. I still couldn’t see her through the crowd, but I did manage to pick up her scent. My mouth twisted in a grimace when I picked up another scent mingled with Cali’s: Xavier’s.

But that didn’t necessarily mean anything. In a party of this size, all more or less crammed into one room, it wouldn’t be hard for scents to co-mingle, especially considering they’d been forced to dance together too.

*Don’t overthink it.*

I followed Cali’s scent out of the ballroom and across the hallway. Her scent led farther out, toward the coatroom adjacent the ballroom entrance, but I’d already found her. Cali was standing in the hallway, staring into a mirror just outside the coatroom.

In the mirror’s reflection, I could see her wiping tears from her eyes, and my stomach plummeted. I rushed over to her.

“Love, what’s wrong?”

She turned to face me with a hiccupping sob. “Greyson.” She threw arms around my neck. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry! I never planned for this to happen. I was going to keep my distance. I promise! I wasn’t going to let it ruin our first Valentine’s Day together, and now look what’s happened!”

Confusion warred with panic, and at first, all I could do was hug her back and try to help her calm down. Then I gently eased myself out of her grip, stepping back so I could see her tearstained face. I couldn’t make sense of what she was saying.

“What are you apologizing for?” I asked.

“Xavier and I—” she began, her voice breaking.

My heart swelled. “Oh, love. I don’t care that you and Xavier danced together. That was Lucian’s little party game. I had to dance with Ava, remember? I don’t hold it against you. You shouldn’t feel upset—”

Shaking her head, she cut me off. “I kissed him. I kissed Xavier.”

A deep, thick silence set in, punctuated only by a slight ringing in my ears. I opened my mouth, then closed it. Then opened it again, trying to find the right combination of words. A response that wouldn’t upset Cali further and wouldn’t give in to the flurry of emotions inside of me.

“You— You what?”

Cali wrung her hands together. “I kissed him. I’m so sorry, Greyson. He actually…well, he kissed me first. But I kissed him back. Xavier can tell you himself.” She spun around, looking wildly up and down the hallway, and then into the empty coat room. “Where…where did he go?”

Now she was the one who looked confused.

Jealousy simmered inside me, and I knew it wouldn’t take much to bring it to a full boil, but something held it in check.

*Wait. This doesn’t add up.*

It wasn’t that I thought Cali was lying to me. I knew Xavier and Cali had more than likely left the ballroom together, which accounted for their scents mingling. But that was just the thing: Right now, I couldn’t detect Xavier’s scent on Cali at all. The kind of scent that a kiss would definitely leave.

“Um…there’s no one around, love,” I pointed out, trying not to sound like a complete jackass. She was clearly distraught about this so-called kiss, but I was still piecing together how it could have possibly happened. “The coatroom’s empty. The hallways are empty. It’s just me and you. If Xavier had been kissing you, I feel like I would have at least seen him leave. I’d smell him.”

I’d smell him *on* her too.

Cali’s brows drew together as she touched her lips. She seemed to be playing out something in her mind. “I…I’m sorry. I guess…maybe I didn’t?”

“What do you mean? Are you sorry you didn’t kiss my brother?” I was aiming for a joke, but it fell flat the moment the words left my lips.

“N-No, that’s not—” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I thought I had, is all…” Her voice trailed off.

My jealousy dried up, replaced by genuine concern. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Cali wasn’t making any sense, but what I didn’t understand was why she would think she’d kissed Xavier when it was obvious that she hadn’t. He wasn’t anywhere near here, as far as I could tell from scent alone.

I mean, if the evidence had backed up her claim, I’d probably be pretty pissed off, but it didn’t. And Cali’s reaction was off too. It was…almost too much? We’d had issues before over kisses that happened between Cali and Xavier—moments when their own mate bond proved too strong to ignore, I had to assume—and every time it had happened had absolutely sucked. It was never a good experience, never something I enjoyed. But it also had never brought out such a tearful reaction from Cali before.

“Do you want to go home, love?” I asked gently. “I’m just a little concerned. You’re not really acting like yourself.”

She shook her head and wiped her face, slightly smudging her makeup. “No!” She pulled me close to her. “I don’t want to leave. This is our very first Valentine’s Day together. It has to be perfect. It needs to be special.”

I kissed her forehead. “I told you before. We don’t need a party to make our time together special. Besides, I think what we did earlier was pretty special.”

I expected her to blush at the innuendo, but she just shook her head again. “I don’t want to leave. Let’s go back into the ballroom and celebrate with all our friends. Besides, I want to dance with you some more. Just let me tidy up.” She spun around to fix her makeup in the mirror, her expression suddenly focused and lacking the heartfelt grief I’d seen earlier.

Yeah, something was definitely off.

“We really don’t have to stay,” I said again. “Lucian saw us. That’s all he needs. We can go—”

“This night isn’t about Lucian,” she said, turning back around and taking my hand. She pulled me back toward the ballroom.

“What is this night about then?” I mumbled under my breath. If Cali heard me, she didn’t respond. She might be ready to get back into Valentine’s Day mode, but I sure as hell wasn’t. Something had clearly upset her, and I wanted to know what it was. Since she wasn’t offering up answers, Xavier was the obvious person to go to next.

I scanned the ballroom. *Speaking of which… Where is Xavier?*

Duke and Paige stepped in our path. Great. We could be here for-fucking-ever.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you two? We were just—”

“—Greyson, Cali, we wanted to share our wonderful news!” Paige said, cutting me off. “We’re expecting a baby!”

Cali gasped. “Oh my god! You’d been trying for so long! That’s wonderful! Congratulations!”

I tried to match Cali’s enthusiasm but probably fell short. After promising to meet up with Paige later, Cali allowed me to lead her over to Jay and Lola. Cali immediately went to talk to Lola, and I sidled up to Jay.

“Can you keep an eye on Cali?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “I need to go take care of something.”

“Uh, sure.”

I headed off to look for Xavier, stopping briefly over where Kendall was still stationed by the bar.

“You can stay as long as you want, but I’m probably leaving soon,” I told her.

She grabbed my arm firmly. “You can’t.”

I scoffed. “What? Are you afraid to socialize?”

She leaned in close. “I think someone followed us here.”

**Episode 5239**

I let my brave, happy front drop the second Greyson walked away. I desperately wanted to salvage what remained of our evening together, to make this the perfect, wonderful first Valentine’s Day together that Greyson deserved, but I didn’t have the strength to keep the facade up for long.

*What the hell happened back there in the coatroom? Where did Xavier go? Was he even there at all to begin with?*

Greyson didn’t seem to think so. I’d been so worried about him being angry, or hurt, or hating me for what I’d done. It had never even occurred to me that he might not believe me. That I…that I might not even believe myself.

Lola grabbed my arm, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Okay, what’s going on now?”

I frowned. There was a hell of a lot going on, but I wasn’t sure exactly what Lola was talking about. She didn’t know about what had happened in the coatroom. “Um…what do you mean?”

“Greyson just told Jay to keep an eye on you,” she pressed. “Why would he do that unless there was something going on?”

My mouth went dry. I got where she was coming from and that she just wanted to help. But how was I supposed to explain the inexplicable to her? Especially when the inexplicable thing was Xavier himself? After Xavier left the Redwood pack, Lola’s opinion of him had never really recovered. She wouldn’t be happy to learn I’d gotten him a Valentine’s Day present, or…or what he’d told me in the coatroom.

*And there’s a whole other maddening layer to tonight.* In the weird turn of events when I was *sure* I’d kissed Xavier, only to learn that it might never have happened, I’d almost forgotten about his confession.

*What a night. So much for the perfect first Valentine’s Day for Greyson and me.* And now he was asking Jay to babysit me? Was it even possible to salvage things tonight? Maybe I should have let him take me home after all…

“Cali,” Lola pressed. “You’re starting to freak me out. Come on. What’s the deal? Does it have to do with Xavier?”

I blinked, shocked at how quickly she’d figured it out. “Why do you say that?”

She shrugged. “Everything seemed fine until Lucian pulled that stunt with switching dance partners. Now…you don’t look fine. What happened?”

I sighed. It wasn’t like I was going to be able to lie to her. I took a deep breath, then as casually as possible said, “I told Greyson that I kissed Xavier.”

It was like I’d dropped a bomb right in front of her. Lola’s eyes widened, and she stepped back with a gasp. “You *what*?!”

“Can you keep it down?” I asked, looking around. “So, yeah. I told Greyson. But he didn’t believe me, and now…” I sighed again. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. “And now, I’m not sure I believe it either.”

Her brows knit together. “Wait. Are you saying you kissed Xavier here? With everybody around?” She lowered her voice even more. “With *Ava* nearby?”

“Well, I thought I did. But now I’m not sure what happened.”

Lola frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense. Either you locked lips, or you didn’t. It’s a pretty clear line to draw. How could you not know if it happened or not?”

Now it was my turn to lower my voice. “I…I don’t know if any of it was real… I’m…I’m so confused, Lola.”

At that whispered confession, Lola’s expression changed. Confusion shifted to understanding, then pity. She pulled me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Cali.”

I didn’t respond. I was sorry too. Sorry I’d lost my grip on reality. Sorry I was making Greyson worry. Sorry my best friend looked at me with pity.

I stepped back from the hug. “Did you notice if anyone else has been acting weird?”

She shrugged. “I mean, other than Lucian being Lucian and always being weird? No. You’re the only one I’m aware of who’s experiencing the phantom kissing of exes.”

I groaned. *Of course I am. It’s gotta be the most uniquely Cali problem in the world.*

“Have you talked to Xavier about it?” she asked.

I shook my head. Xavier had told me he wanted to be together, and I’d practically run away from him. “I’m…I don’t think I want to talk about anything more with Xavier tonight.”

“What does that mean?” Lola asked.

I shook my head. *No, I need to talk to him. Obviously it’ll be uncomfortable—hence the avoidance—but we need to sort things out. Maybe once we do, I’ll stop struggling to distinguish fantasy from reality.* Or maybe he could help me make sense of things.

My mind was made up. Before I talked to anyone about what Xavier said, I needed to talk to Xavier first, to at least figure out if I’d imagined or hallucinated the kiss.

“Actually, you’re right,” I said. “I need to talk to him. Right now.”

Lola looked around. “I haven’t seen Xavier in a while.” She grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. “But there’s Ava. Why don’t you go ask her where Xavier is?”

I frowned. “I mean, I could…” But getting Ava involved in this would only make things worse, right? Right.

“Oh my god, Cali.” Lola held fast to my shoulders like she was afraid I was actually going to walk off. “I was just kidding. And, hey, maybe it’s not such a good idea to talk to Xavier about the kiss.”

I turned to face her. “Why not?”

“I mean, if he wasn’t thinking about kissing you before, that’s all he’s gonna be thinking about if you bring it up, right?”

As I struggled to follow her logic, I spotted Xavier entering the ballroom with Colton. It was now or never. Once the party was over, we’d go back to our respective pack houses, still locked in the middle of this war with the dark Fae, and who knew when we’d get to talk about this again?

I had to take the chance.

“I’m going,” I said to Lola before beelining for Xavier. His eyes locked with mine as I approached, then widened, like he was surprised to see me. Or was he worried?

Colton was still glued to his side. I couldn’t talk to Xavier with Colton there.

Colton smiled. “Hey, Cali.”

Maybe it was just me—it could very well just be me—but he kind of had a weird vibe coming off him.

*Did Xavier say something to him about what happened? Or…what didn’t happen?*

“Um, hi.” I turned my gaze on Xavier. “Do you have a minute?”

“Not right now,” he said brusquely. “Maybe later.”

And then he turned away from me, and I was left standing there, stunned.

*Well, that was definitely not the reaction I was expecting from the guy who just told me he wants to be with me.* If anything, it was borderline rude.

Is he angry with me because I practically ran away from him when he opened up to me? *Okay, that’s…not unreasonable.* I knew how hard it was for Xavier to be honest about his feelings, to open up to people, even me. Maybe especially me, considering recent events. And what had I done? I’d pretty much blown him off.

Guilt nagged at my belly, but it was weak in comparison to the embarrassment of being cast aside like that. And then, another horrific thought occurred to me. What if I imagined our conversation? What if that hadn’t been real either? Just like the kiss?

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I turned and headed away from him and Colton as fast as I could without making a scene. I didn’t want Greyson to worry, and I definitely didn’t want to draw Ava’s attention to me being near Xavier either.

Still, I thought I might be sick. *What’s wrong with me? Why is this happening to me?*

I instinctively headed back toward Lola. I knew I could count on her to be my support. I stopped short, however, when I saw Rowena on the dance floor with Porter.

Rowena was a witch. *She might have an idea what’s going on with me.*

I headed in their direction, pausing just a couple of feet away. They really made a lovely couple. I hated to disturb them, but I needed someone to help me get my head on straight, and right now she was the top candidate.

I approached them and cleared my throat. “Mind if I cut in?”

Porter smiled. “I’d be happy to dance with you, Cali.”

I blushed, shaking my head. “No, sorry. I mean, I’m not here to dance. I’m wondering if I can talk to Rowena? Sorry.” I turned to look at her. “Do you have a minute? It’s kind of personal.”

“Ah.” Porter’s smile didn’t dim in the least. “I can take a hint. I’ll go get us a round, I think.” He headed off toward the bar with a wink.

Rowena looked me up and down and frowned. “Is everything okay, Cali? You look upset.”

*That’s putting it mildly.*

“Yeah, definitely. Um, I need some help,” I said.

She nodded. “Why don’t we go talk outside?” She led me out of the ballroom and into the adjacent courtyard. The night air held a frosty bite, but I barely felt it on my flushed skin.

“So, what’s the matter?” Rowena asked.

“This is going to sound kind of…weird.” She gave me a look. I mustered up my courage and blurted, “How do I know if something was real or in my head?”

**Episode 5240**

**Maya**

This party was such a colossal waste of time. *Why the hell did I let Colton talk me into coming?* I had never even wanted to come in the first place, and if it wasn’t bad enough being stuck here at some idiot fancy guy’s party, Colton was nowhere to be found. He’d spent half the night running around god only knew where in this stupid palace.

I scanned the crowd for my idiotic mate. *He’s being even weirder than usual, and that’s saying something.*

In fact, all day long he’d been acting off. It was like he couldn’t even stand being in the same room as me, only he wasn’t angry. At least, he didn’t seem angry. I’d thought he’d at least stick around since he was the one who’d insisted we come to this stupid Valentine’s Day party, but no. He was too busy running off with his brothers. And when I’d asked Cali about it, all she’d said was, “Well it *is* Valentine’s Day.”

As if that meant literally anything. Absolutely useless. And then she’d flitted off somewhere only to be seen leaving the ballroom with Xavier. I wasn’t totally up to date on whatever the hell was going on there—it was impossible to keep up with all the changes, and I’d be lying if I said I cared enough to bother. *What the hell do Greyson and Xavier see in her anyway?*

I scanned the crowd for Colton again. No sign of him, or Xavier either. I took a long pull from my glass of champagne. It wasn’t my first. *What is Colton’s deal? Maybe I should just leave. He’ll get the message if his mate bails on him at the Valentine’s Day party, right?*

My mood soured at the thought. *Valentine’s Day. Ugh. Why anyone bothers to celebrate today is beyond me. It’s just some made-up holiday to make people buy shit for each other.*

*Again, just a stupid waste of time.*

“So you’re the Grimcrest Alpha.”

I turned to see a man who looked about Greyson’s age, dressed in the most over-the-top fancy suit I’d ever seen. One look at him and one word came to my mind: pompous. This must be Lucian. The Vanguard Alpha. I’d heard the others talk about him enough, and the picture they’d painted had turned out to be pretty damn accurate. If anything, they’d played him down.

“Correct,” I said, forcing a smile I didn’t feel. “And you are?”

I couldn’t resist the urge to try to dent this guy’s obviously massive ego, and something inside me purred with satisfaction as his eyes widened ever so slightly. His features smoothed out a second later, but I knew I’d made my mark.

“Your host,” he said smoothly. “Wonderful to meet you. I’ve heard things about the Grimcrests. It’s good to see you all have decided to join civilization again.”

It was my turn to raise a brow. *What the hell is* that *supposed to mean?*

Fortunately, he saved me the trouble of voicing my thoughts as he blathered on. “You know, the Vanguards and the Grimcrests have a storied history together.”

I took another long sip from my glass. “Is that so?”

“Indeed. We had a great partnership many decades ago. Perhaps it’s time to renew those old bonds.”

*I’d rather stab myself in the eye.*

“Yeah, maybe,” I said noncommittally.

Someone put a hand on my shoulder, and I turned to see Xavier standing behind me.

*My hero. For once in his life.*

“Colton got a call about the babies,” he said.

My relief dried up in an instant and Lucian was immediately forgotten. “Where is he?”

“I’ll take you to him.”

“Did he say what’s going on?” I asked as he led me across the ballroom. “Are they okay?”

“I don’t know.”

*God dammit. I knew I shouldn’t have left them with Fausto and Josephine. “We want a cozy night in” my ass. What did they do to my babies?* They were nice enough and all—and competent enough to handle two babies that spent most of their time sleeping—but I was seeing way too many downsides to Colton being so insistent that we come to this stupid party.

Rage flared inside me. Fucking shitty babysitters. Fucking Colton. Fucking useless Xavier who couldn’t answer a single one of my questions.

*That’s it. We’re getting the hell out of here.*

Xavier led me out to the terrace. It was empty.

“Xavier, where—” As I turned to look at him, I caught sight of him closing the doors to the terrace and returning to the party.

“Bye, Maya.”

“What the hell?” I looked around the terrace again. “What’s going on? Colton? What happened to Orion and Lyra?”

Movement flashed in the corner of my eye, and my racing heart nearly burst out of my chest when Colton stepped out from behind a sculpture, a wide smile on his stupid face.

“They’re fine,” he said quickly. “I just knew you’d come right away if I told Xavier to use that line.”

My eyes narrowed. This was just the icing on top of an already shitty night cake. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

His smile only widened. *What the hell? Is he on something?*

“Colton, what’s going on?” I asked. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Colton slowly approached me. “What I should’ve done a long time ago,” he said. “After everything we’ve been through together, there’s no one else I would rather have by my fucking side. No one else I would rather have boss me around when I do stupid shit. You’re the mother of my children, my Alpha…my mate. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He stopped right in front of me, and I took a step back. “Colton? What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you high?”

And then he took my breath away all over again when he dropped down onto one knee.

He looked up at me, his blue eyes so full of love and hope. “Maya Wright, will you marry me?”

The realization hit me so hard I was nearly knocked off my feet. *This* was why he’d been acting so strangely all day. Why he’d been running off with his brothers. Why he’d had Xavier bring me out here.

All so he could *propose*.

I was going to be sick.

Damn him. Why did he have to be like this? Why did he have to make me so fucking weak and get through all of my defenses? No matter how much I tried to resist Colton in the past, he always found a way through to me.

Tears burned the corners of my eyes. “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

He grinned. “Is that a yes?”

I grabbed him by the shirt and roughly pulled him upright. “Of course it is.” Then I wound my arms around his neck and kissed him.

I was still in shock. Colton Evers, whom I’d once loathed so much, was my mate. My Luna. The father of my children. And…my soon-to-be husband.

I didn’t know how it was possible we’d gotten to this point. How we hadn’t already killed each other. How I could love him *so damn much*, even though he drove me absolutely batshit. It felt surreal, being here on the terrace overlooking the Vanguard grounds, but it also felt so very right.

A rightness I’d never quite felt before.

I had never truly belonged anywhere until I met him, until he’d pushed me to go after what I wanted. Now I had so many roles. As an Alpha. As a mother. As a mate…

And it all came back to Colton. Without him, who knew where I’d be. But *with* him, I knew in my soul that I was exactly where I belonged.

We belonged together.

I broke the kiss, panting. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He pulled me in for another kiss, his hands finding my waist before they started roaming my body hungrily. Like, now that I’d agreed to marry him—to be his fucking *wife*, holy shit—all he could think about was claiming me in every way possible.

I’d claim him right back.

I snaked an arm around his neck, taking his bottom lip between my teeth to pull. When he growled and grabbed the back of my head, I let go of his lip and kissed him, running a hand down his muscled chest. The kiss grew even more heated, a race for satisfaction, a messy joining of our lips, brushing of our tongues, as our hands fumbled with each other’s clothing.

He hiked my dress up around my hips, and I made quick work of his belt, the buttons of his pants. His fingers sank into my thighs, holding on for dear life. Unable to wait any longer, I pushed him down on the nearest surface, a wrought-iron bench, and straddled him.

He grinned up at me, using his hands to make my hips rock against him. “I love when you take control.”

“You do, huh?” I asked. Reaching between us, I took his hard cock and positioned myself above it before sinking down.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his hands anchoring on my hips. “Maya.”

My entire body flashed with pleasure. “Say my name again.”

He groaned. “*Maya*.”

We found our pace together and I rode him hard and fast. His strong, unrelenting grip on my hips gave me a bite of pain that I couldn’t stop chasing. This man had become my life, my everything. And I was his. Needing his lips on mine, I kissed him, moaning as he slid his tongue in my mouth.

“I love you,” I breathed as I broke the kiss.

“I love you so fucking much.” He groaned, his voice breaking into nonsensical syllables as I pulled him over the edge with me.

In the aftermath, we lay together in a heap of wrinkled clothing. Him on the bench, and me still on top of him, my ear pressed against his chest.

He fumbled in his pocket. “Shit, I forgot something.” He pulled out a gorgeous ring, and I held out my hand for him to slide it on my finger.

It was gorgeous. The stone was blue-green and it shimmered in the night. I had never been much of a jewelry person, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even worn a ring. But this one? It looked like it had been meant for me.

“Let me see,” Colton said, taking my hand. He smiled and kissed it. “Now, you’re all mine.”

I grinned down at him, loving the way the ring sparkled in the moonlight. “And you’re mine.”

**Episode 5241**

**Artemis**

I hit the ground with a thud that resonated through my body.

“Get up,” General Magan said. “Do it again.”

Swallowing down a groan, I got to my feet. My head just wasn’t working right today. Not only did I have a raging headache from drinking the night before, but—try as I might—I couldn’t stop thinking about Kastian.

I’d pressed Aelwen about the missing girl situation, trying to figure out exactly what she knew, but she’d told me she didn’t know anything more. Then she’d told me that she couldn’t talk because she had to return to the kitchens.

She might’ve been able to run away like that, but I wasn’t so lucky. It was all I could think about now—I might’ve slept with a killer last night. Yes, it had only been in the literal *sleeping* sense, but still…

I gave my head a little shake. Really, the same thing could’ve been said of me. It wasn’t as though my hands were perfectly clean. Kastian had no idea who he’d shared a bed with last night, either.

“Ready?” General Magan asked sharply, bringing my thoughts back to the present.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

The general gave me a look, then shook her head skeptically. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“I am,” I said firmly, trying to sound convincing. I wasn’t at my best today, and I was pretty sure the general had noticed.

“Is that right?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Yeah. I was just warming up, but I’m ready now,” I said, trying not to wince at my lie.

General Magan didn’t look convinced, but she shrugged. “Well, if you’re sure—”

“I am,” I said emphatically.

“Then let’s go one more time—and this time, no holding back.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

I took a deep breath and steadied myself, watching the general closely. I wanted to prove I was ready, so this time I struck first, going on the offensive.

The general parried, then lunged toward me. I felt energy surge into my arms as I deflected and danced out of range. The clang of steel on steel was loud, but I smiled to myself. This round was going much better. Maybe I really *had* just been warming up before.

But as soon as that thought drifted across my mind, I stepped awkwardly, and my ankle rolled beneath me. I gasped at the pain, then again when General Magan thrust toward me, her sword slicing into my arm.

Dropping my sword in surprise, I yelped and slapped a hand over the cut, which was starting to gush.

The general stepped toward me, resting the tip of her sword against my chest. “You’re done.”

“Got it,” I muttered, demoralized.

The general looked down at me, then lowered her sword. She nodded at my arm. “Let’s get that cleaned up.”

I nodded and followed as the general led me to a chair. She had a small bag, from which she pulled out linen bandages, a pair of scissors, and a couple of small glass bottles.

She uncapped one of the bottles and poured the clear liquid over the gash on my arm.

I bit my lip so I wouldn’t cry out as the liquid sizzled in the wound—it stung like fire, but I tried not to wince.

I failed.

“Sorry,” the general murmured. “This stuff is pretty damn strong.”

“No problem,” I lied.

My eyes had started to tear up, but after a few long moments, the sting finally faded.

“Thank you,” I said as the general began to wrap the linen bandage around my arm.

She glanced up at me. “Something on your mind today, Artemis?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You were pretty distracted during our session,” she said. “It was a noticeable shift from the last time we sparred. You’re usually a better opponent.”

I thought for a long moment, wondering if I should say anything. I wanted to make a good impression and demonstrate that I could be the heir—if for no other reason than so that I could finally get some real answers about my father.

“I heard you were out with some of the younglings last night,” the general said evenly.

I quickly looked up at her. I must’ve looked alarmed, because she laughed.

“Don’t look so worried, Artemis,” she said. “I was young once, too. Did they have you test into the group?”

“Um, yeah,” I said warily.

She smiled. “Is it still that drinking game on the rocks in the courtyard?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“I remember doing that myself,” she said. “With Celeste, of all people.”

I stared at her, shocked. “No way. Celeste would never!”

Magan laughed again. “She did. She got so drunk that night, she stripped naked and went for a dip under the waterfall.”

“You’re kidding!” I cried, gaping at her.

“I’m not,” she said fondly. “Pulled the rest of us in after her, too.”

There was something about the general’s warm smile that loosened my tongue, and I decided to tell her what I’d been thinking about.

“I’m sorry I was distracted today,” I said. “It was kind of a crazy night, and I’m not sure, but I think I might’ve made a mistake.”

Magan took that in for a moment. “Well, I’m sure you already know that you can’t let these things cloud your judgment, Artemis. Not when your life could be on the line,” she added, nodding down at my arm, which she’d finished bandaging.

“Thank you,” I said. “And you’re right. I’ll do better next time.”

She nodded. “I expect as much.”

I smiled at her and took my leave, heading back to my chambers.

As I walked along the stone passageway, I pushed a hand through my sweaty hair. All my clothes were drenched in sweat. After I changed into something clean and dry, I was going to go find Aelwen. I wanted to talk to that Fae again. She *had* to know more than she was letting on about those missing girls, and I intended to find out what it was.

I was reaching for the handle of my bedroom door when someone grabbed my arm and spun me around, pinning me against the wood.

Instinct took over and I twisted my shoulder, wrenching my arm free from the figure’s grasp, whipping them around and slamming them against the door with a resounding—and hopefully painful—thud.

It felt good to hear it—I’d had a tough session with General Magan, but maybe I wasn’t totally off my game.

“What do you want?” I hissed, pissed off that someone had decided to attack me.

“You got to work faster than I thought,” the figure muttered, as coherently as they could with their face pressed against the door.

For one breathless moment, I struggled to place the voice, but then I realized it was Kastian. I was relieved—until I remembered that there was a chance he could be a murderer.

But even if he was, I reasoned, he wouldn’t dare do anything to me here.

I eased my grip on him and he turned around to face me, smirking up at me, seeming to enjoy the way our bodies were pressed together.

I took a step back from him. “What are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you,” Kastian said, raising his eyebrows.

I thought about this response for a moment, turning it over in my head. I wasn’t sure how to interpret his words, so I let him speak first.

“I had a good time last night,” he said. “You’re a good addition to the group.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, still wary.

“You’re fun, and you have to know that you’re very beautiful,” he said. “You do know that, don’t you? I mean, all Fae are beautiful, of course, but there’s something special about you.”

He was looking at me closely, so I forced a smile. “I bet you use that line on all the girls.”

He laughed. “In any case, I came here not to ambush you, Ari, but to invite you to meet up with me tonight.”

I had to admit I was intrigued by the invitation, but I reminded myself this wasn’t the time to be naïve. The handsome Fae in front of me might’ve been killing girls. There was a chance that he was very, very dangerous.

But in order to figure out the truth about that, I needed to get close to him. Closer than I already was. But I was worried. I was so off my game today—even when I’d been trying hard to concentrate with the general, I’d failed—and I could be putting myself in danger. Given the trouble I was having with focus, was doing something like this really a good idea right now?

I was startled out of my thoughts when Kastian put his hand on my chin and tipped it upward, so our gazes met.

“Well?” Kastian asked playfully. “What do you say, Ari?”

**Episode 5242**

Rowena gave me a strange look—given what I’d just asked her, I couldn’t say I blamed her.

“How much have you had to drink tonight, Cali?” she asked, eyeing me warily.

I shook my head. “I know how this sounds, but I’m not drunk, I swear.”

“Are you sure—”

“I’ve barely had anything to drink,” I said firmly.

Rowena took this in. “Okay, I might need a few more details to understand what you’re asking me. What’s going on?”

“Okay, so I *might* have kissed Xavier. Or I might not have,” I added. Rowena’s eyes went wide. “That’s the thing. I’m starting to wonder if it was all in my head—just imagined. And honestly, I don’t know which of those possibilities are worse. Real or imagined, neither option is ideal.”

Rowena nodded, keeping her opinions to herself—at least for the moment.

“If it really happened, Greyson would be devastated,” I said, though I was speaking more to myself than Rowena. “But if it didn’t really happen, and I just imagined it… What does that mean for me?”

“Okay,” Rowena said. “Well, now that you’ve had some time to think about what happened, what do you think?”

“What?”

Rowena’s gaze was steady. “Do you think it was real or fake?”

I cast my mind back to the moment of the kiss. I thought about how Xavier had been watching me in the coatroom mirror. He’d just appeared, and I had no idea where he’d come from.

I thought hard, trying to remember the details. I knew *why* I’d been crying: Xavier had just told me that he didn’t want to be my friend. I hadn’t been prepared for that revelation, and it had caught me very off guard. Whether that was real too…I didn’t know.

I explained this to Rowena, and she frowned, thinking hard.

“Do you think that’s what made you think it was real?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think maybe you imagined it because you were so upset? Because your emotions were heightened?”

I considered this. “Normally, I’d say yes. High tension, thinking hard about someone in particular—the brain can do all kinds of weird things, right?”

Rowena nodded. “It can.”

“But something about this felt different.” I shook my head. “It didn’t *feel* imagined. It felt almost *too* real.” I looked up at the witch. “Does that make any sense?”

She was quiet for a moment and seemed to be considering this. “Well, there is something—”

“What?” I asked quickly. I was desperate to find a way to sort this out in my head.

“There might be a way to find out.”

“Let’s do it,” I said, without hesitation. “What is it?”

“I have a spell,” she said. “We can use it to sort of…*probe* your short-term memories. We can locate the kiss in there.”

Despite my original enthusiasm, I grew a little hesitant as Rowena explained it. It wasn’t that I had anything to hide—not exactly—but who knew what Rowena might find in my head?

“I don’t know…” I said, more slowly.

Rowena smiled, clearly understanding my sudden reluctance. “I promise I won’t dig too deep, Cali. The incident—or non-incident—with Xavier was only a few minutes ago, right?”

“That’s true,” I admitted. And I *did* want to know the truth about that kiss…

I was about to say yes, but then I paused, suddenly remembering everything I’d ever learned about witchcraft. I knew it could be useful—I’d seen plenty of evidence of that—but I also knew that it was unpredictable, even for the witches who performed it. Witchcraft could often have unforeseen side effects.

“Is this spell safe?” I asked. “Should I be concerned about trying it?”

“I don’t think so,” Rowena said. “The spell’s pretty harmless. Unless you’re hiding any deep, dark secrets, of course.”

I tried to return her joking smile, then I glanced at Jay and Lola, who were still standing by the door. They were huddled together, occasionally exchanging a word or two, but mostly watching warily, making sure I had privacy for this conversation.

They were the only people within hearing range, and I figured that if I *did* have some deep, dark secret that I’d somehow forgotten, Lola would be the first person I’d tell about it anyway, so what did it matter?

“Okay.” I nodded at Rowena. “Let’s do it.”

“Okay. You ready?” she asked.

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for whatever was about to happen. “I’m ready.”

Rowena stepped toward me and rested her hands on either side of my face.

“Close your eyes, Caliana,” she said, her voice low and soothing. “And try to relive the kiss, exactly as you remember it.”

I closed my eyes and thought hard about the coatroom.

Suddenly I was back there, staring at myself in the mirror. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, and I could practically *feel* eyes on me. There was someone there.

Xavier suddenly appeared in the mirror, standing behind me, his eyes fixed on mine.

Drawing in a shocked breath, I turned to face him, startled again to find that he was now right next to me. He was standing so close, I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“W-What do you want?” I stammered, trying to breathe through the shock that was coursing through me.

“*Everything*,” he said, his voice a low growl.

In the next instant, his lips were pressed to mine.

I was floored—too surprised even to respond. My mind reeled. Was this what he’d meant when he’d said he didn’t want to be friends with me? That he wanted *more* than friendship?

If that was the case, then I had to admit that I felt the same way. Deep down, I knew that I’d never stopped wanting him back.

And in this kiss—this searing, plunging, searching kiss—we had each other again. It felt like the rest of the world stopped existing. It was only us.

I kissed him back, sliding my tongue along his, tasting his mouth and feeling his body against mine. I wanted to give him *everything*—even though I knew I shouldn’t.

Xavier pushed me back, boxing me in against the coatracks, cupping my chin with his free hand. The rack behind us fell, and when it crashed to the ground, I stumbled back.

His arm was around my waist in an instant, saving me from tumbling after the coats. The pressure of his arm around me sent shockwaves surging through my body.

Breaking the kiss, he leaned slightly away and looked down at me, his blue eyes boring into mine. He whispered my name, but when I reached to put my arms around him, he was gone. Vanished. As though he’d never been there at all.

“Cali? Cali? Can you hear me? *Cali!*”

Rowena’s voice brought me back, and I opened my eyes. I wasn’t in the coatroom—I was back in the courtyard, breathing hard, my heart racing and my cheeks flushed. My lips were still tingling with Xavier’s kiss and my body felt hot, remembering his touch.

I took a deep breath, trying to regulate my heart rate. I was embarrassed to be seen like this after what I’d just experienced, and even more embarrassed when I remembered what we were doing, and that Rowena must’ve seen everything I’d just seen.

I gave my head a hard shake, trying to clear it. “So you found the memory?”

Rowena frowned. “No.”

I frowned back at her. “*No?* What do you mean?”

“I mean that there *is* no memory, Cali.”

I tried to understand what she was saying, but it wasn’t making any sense. It was like she was speaking a different language and I was trying to translate. “Then what just happened? Because there’s definitely something there. So what is it?”

Rowena’s eyes searched my face, then her expression grew darker and more serious. “What you experienced just now wasn’t a memory, Cali.”

“Then what was it?” I pressed, feeling more crazed than ever.

“It wasn’t real,” she said. “It was a symptom of your affliction.”

“What affliction?”

“*Due destini*,” she said quietly.

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I felt breathless all over again—but for an entirely different reason, this time.

“Am I going crazy?” I asked, my thoughts going instantly to Cassandra—the only other documented case of *due destini*. Her story had had a tragic ending, and my greatest fear was following her path.

Rowena looked grave. “If you continue to refuse to choose between your mates, then I’m afraid it might get worse.”

“*Worse?*” I breathed.

“You won’t be able to discern the difference between what’s real and what isn’t, Cali.”

I felt as though all the breath had been knocked out of me. “I… I always knew this was a possibility. But why is it happening now?”

The witch chewed her lip nervously. “My understanding is that the ill-effects of *due destini* increase exponentially with time. Your symptoms can only get worse from here.”

**Episode 5243**

**Xavier**

Annoyed. Deeply, deeply annoyed. That was how I was feeling. Fucking Colton.

It was one thing to help my knuckleheaded twin brother get a little privacy to propose to his mate—that, I was happy to do. He was my brother, after all. But was it *really* necessary for me to stay out here and be forced to listen as he and Maya went at it?

I shook my head and tried not to hear anything as the bumps and moans went on beyond the closed door behind me, but that didn’t work. *Dammit.* Try as I might, I just kept hearing it. Frustrated, I shoved a hand through my hair. This shit was going to haunt me for months. I hadn’t had to hear him like this in months—blissful, quiet months.

Okay, enough was enough. I’d guarded the door long enough for Colton to propose. I figured I’d more than fulfilled my brotherly duty. Anyway, I had other things to do—I needed to find Cali, for one. I’d been terse with her when she’d asked to speak to me, and I’d seen that it had hurt her. She deserved an explanation.

But, on the other hand, maybe talking to her wasn’t the best idea. Not right now. There was a chance she was freaking out about what I’d said to her about being friends, and the last thing I wanted was to make things worse.

I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but the one thing I wasn’t second-guessing was admitting the truth of my feelings to her. I’d been living in this fucking limbo for far too long. But…

Was tonight—Valentine’s Day—really the right time to bring it all out into the open?

I pressed a hand to my head as pain pulsed in my temple. The throbbing seemed to be answering my silent question for me. It was too late to take it back though, not that I necessarily wanted to.

Behind me, Colton made a strangled sound, and I took that as my cue to stride away. I wanted to at least check on Cali—make sure she was handling everything okay.

But before I could make it three steps, the door behind me opened and Colton stepped out, Maya beside him, holding his hand.

Colton grinned at me like a fool. “She said yes!”

“Yeah, I figured,” I muttered.

Maya held up her hand, and the ring Colton had given her glittered against her skin. The ring looked better than I remembered it. Maybe it just suited Maya. Looking at it, I was hit with a strong sense of envy for their happiness, but I tried to push the feeling away.

“Congratulations, Maya,” I said, smiling at her. “I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into, here.”

Maya offered me a wide, happy smile. “Oh, I think I’ll be able to straighten him out. You know, whip him into shape.”

Colton grinned at her, but I grimaced at the mental picture that phrase conjured up.

“Great,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Well? What should we do? Grab the mic from the band?” Colton asked, looking brightly around. “I want everyone to hear the news—”

“Absolutely not,” Maya said, her smile disappearing in an instant.

“What? Why?” Colton asked, confused.

She narrowed her eyes. “You’d better not make a scene, Colton Evers. I swear to you, if there’s some dumbass formal announcement, you’ll be sorry. Don’t think I won’t be willing to make our children fatherless.”

Maya’s eyes glittered so dangerously, I almost took a step back. Colton just grinned.

He put an arm around Maya and turned to me. “God, isn’t she cute when she’s pissed?”

I groaned. “Okay, I’ve seen enough. I’ve got to get away from you two before you do anything…else.” Whether *anything else* was romantic or violent, I didn’t want to be around to see it.

I turned again to leave but stopped when Cali stepped out into the hallway. Her eyes opened wide, and she stopped in her tracks, apparently as surprised to see me as I was to see her.

The air seemed to change around me. It grew thick with an awkward tension as I looked at Cali and she looked back at me. I tried to read her expression. Did she look hurt? Confused? Angry?

I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, but something seemed…off.

In typical Colton fashion, my brother didn’t seem to notice any of this.

“Cali!” he bellowed happily. He grabbed Maya’s hand and held it up, showing off her newly ringed finger. “It’s official! She said yes!”

Cali looked away from me and refocused on Colton and Maya. Her face broke into a happy smile as she stepped toward them, admiring the ring on Maya’s finger. “Congratulations! That ring is so beautiful, Maya. It suits you perfectly. I’m so happy for both of you. This is really exciting.”

Colton was beaming at her, and I wasn’t completely sure, but I could’ve sworn Cali was deliberately avoiding eye contact with me.

If she was avoiding meeting my gaze, I understood. As happy as I was for my brother and Maya, if there was anyone who should’ve ended up engaged—committed to building a new, happy life together—it was Cali and me. That was something I’d always imagined for us. Even after I’d learned about the *due destini*, Cali had still been my endgame.

“What’s all the excitement?” a voice said, and I turned to see Ava walking into the hallway. She smiled. “Did Lucian have a stroke or something?”

The rest of the group turned, and I watched as she scanned Cali and Colton, then settled on Maya, noticing the ring on her finger.

*She’d better not be expecting the same from me…*

I stopped myself, shocked by my own thought. Where had that even come from? It was wrong of me to react that way. Ava certainly didn’t deserve that kind of scorn from me. I loved Ava… But if I was being honest with myself, I knew I didn’t want to see *her* wearing my ring—I wanted that with Cali.

Guilt surged within me. I felt sick, and then—an instant later—my head began to throb with new, powerful pain.

Other party guests seemed to have noticed the commotion, and they began to flood into the hall to see what was going on.

“*What?* I never thought you two would do it!”

“Congratulations!”

“This calls for more drinks!”

“I knew it! Lucian owes me a hundred bucks!”

“Congrats, you crazy kids!”

As the well-wishes kept rolling in, I realized that Maya was looking less enthusiastic by the second. She didn’t like the crowd, and she clearly wasn’t loving being the center of attention. But she should’ve been happy. Colton was Colton—nothing was going to change that—but he was a good guy. He was a good father, and he loved Maya. He had loved her long before he’d even noticed. They were going to be happy, and that meant Maya was lucky.

Cali had been pushed closer to me by the gathering crowd, and I shot her a glance, wondering if I could take all the commotion around Maya and Colton as an opportunity to pull Cali away without anyone noticing, but I hesitated. I didn’t want to make a scene—especially not in front of Ava.

“Is this true?” Marissa called as she edged into the hallway. She looked at Maya’s ring and gasped. “Maya, it’s beautiful. Congratulations, you two!”

I looked at Cali again, weighing my options. There weren’t many, but I could always mind link with her, ask her to make some excuse to get away and meet up with me. I would tell her the truth—that there were things we needed to discuss.

That might’ve worked, but before I could even try it, Ava stepped over and hooked her arm around mine.

“How are you going to propose to me, Xavier?” she asked in a low tone.

I looked at her, surprised. “What?” The question had caught me totally off guard.

She smiled. “I want it to be grander than this. I want everyone to know when it happens,” she said, giving my arm a gentle squeeze.

Marissa—standing close enough to overhear this—glanced at me. Then she laughed to herself. “Sure, as long as he doesn’t say Cali’s name by mistake.”

Cali looked at her, clearly thrown. “What?”

I shot Marissa a warning look, hoping my eyes were communicating the fury that was rising up in me. I thought we’d reached an understanding about what had happened at the jewelry store.

Ava didn’t seem to notice, and she laughed, as though Marissa had been joking.

“He’d better not, or I’ll…” She trailed off as she glanced between Marissa and me. Sharp as always, Ava caught the speaking look that passed between us, and the smile faded from her face. Her eyes glittered dangerously and, when she turned to face me, her expression was murderous. “Am I missing something?”

**Episode 5244**

**Greyson**

“What the hell are you talking about?” I snapped. “You thought we were being *followed*? Are you saying you’ve got a hunch, or are you certain? Because I’m not about to go running off if this is just some figment of your active imagination. I’m going to need more to go on than that, Kendall.”

Kendall’s purple eyes darted away from mine and swept the room, her expression wary. “Listen to me, Greyson—if I’m right, then talking about this out in the open is too dangerous. We can’t take that risk.”

She was maintaining her hold on me, and when I looked down at her hand on my arm, something inside me stirred to life—a mixture of distrust and the realization that I had no choice but to follow her lead, here.

Gripping onto me, she led me out of the main ballroom, and I let her. Part of me wondered if it was foolish of me to follow her. Not that I was worried about my safety—Kendall was tough as nails, but I could handle her.

Besides, whatever else Kendall was, she was smart. Too smart to try anything here, out in the open, with my friends and allies filling the ballroom.

If she was up to something—as I was inclined to believe that she was—I couldn’t figure out what it was, or what her angle was. But that was no surprise. Kendall had always been a mystery to me, from the moment she’d strolled into my life. I’d never been able to figure her out.

Anyway, wherever she was taking me, maybe I’d finally discover some useful information. Something actually tangible. Something that just might answer a few questions for me.

Leaving the overcrowded ballroom, we stepped into one of the many side rooms that surrounded the ballroom, like spokes on a wheel. I was sure Lucian had built his palace this way in order to encourage his party guests to seek out a little privacy when the mood struck.

I rolled my eyes just thinking about it.

Looking around the small space, I saw that we’d entered what looked like a small library. Shelves of books lined every wall. There was a cheery fire burning in the fireplace. It wasn’t as grand as some of the other rooms in the palace, but it was cozy. Somewhere I might actually have wanted to spend some time—under very different circumstances.

I rounded on Kendall. “Okay, we’re not out in the open anymore. So talk. I want to know everything.”

Kendall didn’t answer. She was looking out the door into the hallway, presumably making sure we hadn’t been followed. Apparently satisfied that we were alone, she closed the door and turned the lock before finally turning to look at me.

I watched warily as she moved toward me.

“I know you want more proof, and I hear what you’re saying, Greyson,” she said. Even though we were alone, she still kept her voice low. “And I wish I could offer you something more concrete, but right now, this is all I have.”

She reached into her small handbag, then pressed something into my hand. I looked down to see that she’d given me a piece of paper, folded into a small rectangle.

“Is this some kind of a joke?” I asked, looking down at it.

“What?”

I rolled my eyes. “Are we in kindergarten here, Kendall? Passing notes to each other—”

“Look at it before you decide how inconsequential it is,” she snapped, her voice tense.

I heaved a sigh, but dutifully unfolded the paper. It was blank, except for a crudely drawn “X.” But there was something about it…

I brought the paper to my nose and sniffed.

“It’s werewolf blood,” I murmured, speaking mostly to myself.

I could tell that the blood was werewolf, but it didn’t belong to anyone I recognized. I stared down at the paper, perplexed. I didn’t know what to make of this.

“Well?” Kendall pressed.

I looked up at her. “Where did you get this?”

Her purple eyes flashed in the glow of the fire. “I *found* it.”

“Where?”

“In my handbag.”

I looked down at the purse dangling from her wrist. “That one?”

She nodded. “And it wasn’t there when we left the pack house to come here.”

“Which means…” I said, thinking.

“Which means that someone put it there during this party,” she said, looking grimly triumphant. “*That* is why I’m being cautious. I’d already suspected that we were being followed, and now…” She looked down at the paper in my hands. “Now I know for sure.”

I took that in, then eyed the note again. “I assume it’s some kind of a warning.”

Kendall shook her head. “No, it’s more than that.”

“So what is it?” I asked.

“It’s a calling card from the Dark Fae mafia.” The blood had drained from Kendall’s face, leaving it pale as the sheet of paper in my hands. “It means that I’ve been marked for death.”

I took this in. “I’ve heard stories about the Dark Fae mafia using tactics like this, but…” I held up the paper. “How long have you known about this?”

“I only just found it,” she said. “I was looking through my bag a few minutes ago, trying to find some mints, and there it was.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, trying to piece all the information together. “I get that that’s when you found the note, but this doesn’t add up.”

“What doesn’t add up?” Kendall asked, sounding stressed.

“You just said you’d already suspected that we were being followed. How long have you suspected that?” I demanded. I couldn’t keep the anger out of my voice as I asked the question.

“Don’t yell at me,” she snapped.

“Did it ever cross your mind that I might’ve wanted to know something like that *before* now? When you first suspected it, perhaps?” I asked, feeling the note crumple in my fist.

“Greyson—”

“Maybe I could’ve done something about it. Before *this*,” I said, shaking the note.

Her eyes flashed. “Would you have believed me?”

This stopped me for a moment. *Would* I have believed her?

“Look at how you responded when I told you about this,” she went on. “You’re always asking for proof, for more evidence. You’re always wanting me to convince you to believe me. Before this note, I couldn’t do that. Until I got this”—she jabbed the note with her finger—“all I had was a feeling. Would that have been enough for you, Greyson?”

“I deserved a chance to figure that out for myself,” I retorted, anger burning its way up my chest. “But I never got that chance. Instead, you’ve led whoever the hell is making threats against you right to this party. They’re probably strolling around in that ballroom, eating fucking canapes.”

Kendall’s jaw worked, but she didn’t respond to this.

“I think the best thing for you to do is get the hell out of here,” I said woodenly. “Take your note and your threat with you. And get the hell away from the packs.”

It felt shitty to say this, but I didn’t feel like I had a choice. I was the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and the other packs looked to me for leadership as well. I had to do what was best for the packs in our area. I had to protect them.

Kendall’s eyes registered surprise, then betrayal, then a kind of angry resignation. She snatched the note from my hand and strode to the door.

But she stopped when she reached it, then turned back to look at me.

“You should be careful,” she warned me.

“What?”

“You’re right—whoever it was who slipped me the note is probably still here,” she said. “It could be literally anyone, Greyson—any of the guests, any of the staff. You should keep your eyes open.”

I ground my teeth. “I’ll walk you out.”

Kendall didn’t look happy about this plan, but she didn’t object, either. She opened the door, and I followed her out.

But as we stepped into the hallway, we both stopped in our tracks.

“Do you smell that?” Kendall asked.

I nodded, scenting the air. “Werewolf blood. *More* werewolf blood,” I added, looking down at the note crumpled in her hand.

“We should follow the scent,” she said quietly.

We stepped to the left, both of us silent and tense as we followed the dull, iron-like smell of blood. We traced the scent to a closed door, where we both stopped and looked at each other.

*Now or never, right?* I thought. I was deep enough in this with her already.

I shifted my right hand. Claws at the ready, I nodded to Kendall, who slowly opened the door.

We rushed inside and found…nothing that we’d been expecting.

Inside the room was one of the Vanguard staff members. He was unconscious, bleeding from the head. He’d been stripped and lay naked on the floor, bound and gagged.

**Episode 5245**

I looked at Xavier, then at Ava, then at Marissa. Some kind of unspoken conversation was happening between the three of them, but I didn’t have the faintest idea what it was about.

There were still people streaming into the hallway to admire Maya’s ring and congratulate Colton, but for me, what had begun as a joyous celebration of the happy couple had suddenly taken a weird, dark turn.

But, most of all, I was trying to make sense of what I *thought* I’d heard Marissa say—something about Xavier saying my name instead of Ava’s. But I wasn’t even sure if I’d heard her right. Marissa had sort of muttered it under her breath. Xavier and Ava had seemed to hear her just fine, but my hearing wasn’t as good as a werewolf’s.

But even if I *had* heard her right, I still couldn’t make sense of what Marissa had said. I barely knew the woman. Why had she brought me up at all?

I gave my head a minute shake. Whatever was going on, it really wasn’t anything I wanted to deal with. I had other, more important things on my mind—starting with how the *due destini* was potentially driving me mad. That really felt like something I needed to be actively dealing with.

“Marissa?” Ava said, and I barely suppressed a shudder at the frigid temperature of her voice.

“I was just joking,” Marissa said quickly, forcing a smile.

If that were the case, then neither Xavier nor Ava seemed to be in on the joke.

Marissa glanced at me, and I shook my head.

“I might suggest going with a funnier joke, next time,” I said, “and leaving me out of it.”

I turned and headed out of the hallway, back toward the ballroom.

But before I made it, I ran into Lola.

“Lola, sorry,” I said after I’d bumped into her shoulder.

“It’s fine,” she said. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I said automatically. “Have you seen Greyson?”

“Greyson?” Lola repeated. She looked over her shoulder into the ballroom, scanning the crowd. “No, I don’t see him. Why do you ask?”

“He was going to take me home, which I would *really* like.” I thought about the chilly silence I’d just escaped. “Getting out of here sounds like the best thing for me right now.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Lola repeated, looking back at me. “I’m sure we’ll run into him, but until we do, you’re stuck hanging with Jay and me, okay?”

I nodded, feeling pretty low. “Okay.”

She frowned and scanned my face. “You sure you’re okay?”

“What? Why?”

“You don’t look so good.”

“No, I’m…fine,” I lied.

She gave me an even look. “*Cali*.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’m still a little freaked out about the kissing Xavier mystery. I talked Rowena into doing a spell on me to see whether it really happened, and she looked for the moment in my short-term memory, but it wasn’t there. It didn’t really happen.” I took a shaking breath. “She thinks it has something to do with the *due destini*.”

“Are you kidding? That’s terrifying!” Lola’s eyes went wide. “God, this sucks. I mean, of all the nights, *tonight* is the night the fucking *due destini* decides to rear its ugly head? Can’t you catch a freaking break?”

“Apparently not. And, actually, it’s worse than that,” I admitted.

Lola frowned. “Worse? How could it be worse?”

“Rowena thinks this might be the beginning of the end.”

“The *end*? What does that mean?” Lola demanded, clearly alarmed.

“She says my condition is only going to get worse from now on. The *due destini* has officially started to drive me crazy. I’m going to lose touch with reality. It’s going to drive me mad,” I said, my throat tight with fear. “And unless I make the official choice between my mates, there’s nothing I can do. I’m just going to be trapped inside my own head as I gradually lose touch with reality.”

“Oh, Cali,” Lola breathed, looking horror-struck. “That would be terrible for you—I mean, that would be terrible for anyone, not just you. What are you going to—”

“Cali.”

I looked to see Rowena walking quickly toward me. “Hi, Rowena.”

“Where did you run off to?” she asked. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“I’m just trying to find a way home,” I admitted. “This is all just too much for me right now.”

Lola put a comforting arm around my shoulders. “Why would you say such a terrible thing to Cali?” she demanded, glaring at Rowena.

The witch bristled. “She asked a question, and I answered it. I’m never going to sugarcoat the answer or lie about what I see. Would you even want that?” she asked, looking at me. “I know it sucked to hear, but isn’t it better to know the truth about what you’re facing instead of being fed some comforting lie?”

A comforting lie actually sounded pretty good to me right now, but I knew Rowena had a point. “No, you’re right. I came to you for the truth. I just…I wasn’t ready for it, I guess.”

“I guess,” Rowena said quietly.

“But now that I know it, I want to go home.”

Lola looked around the ballroom. “Where *is* Greyson?”

“You haven’t seen him?” I asked. I tried to search the crowd, but it was hopeless. Lucian always invited way too many people to his parties.

“Not recently,” Lola said. “Not since he put Jay and me in charge of watching you.”

Jay walked over. “There you are, Lola. I was looking for you.”

“Well, here I am. Now go find Greyson,” Lola said.

“Greyson?” Jay looked around. “Okay, I’ll go look for him. Wish me luck.”

With that, he folded himself back into the throngs of people.

Lola steered me into the ballroom. “Maybe a drink will help.”

I shook my head. “I really don’t want—”

“I was thinking something cold and non-alcoholic,” she said. “Just something to refresh you.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “That does sound pretty good.”

With her arm hooked through mine, Lola navigated the dancing crowds and headed toward the bar. People who were reluctant to move—or simply didn’t notice us—were treated to the business end of Lola’s elbows. When we reached the lavish bar, there was a long line of people waiting, but Lola managed to get us to the front of that, too.

“Excuse me,” she said loudly. “My friend here needs a drink. *Now*.”

I rolled my eyes at Lola’s antics, but I was happy to skip the line.

“Can I get a ginger ale with a lot of ice?” I asked the bartender.

“And a Jack and coke,” Lola added with a wink. “For me.”

The uniformed bartender nodded, and while he worked on our drinks, I looked around, scanning the room for Greyson. I was deeply regretting not having taken him up on his earlier offer to take me home. I should’ve left this place when I had the chance.

As I looked out, I saw Xavier walk back into the ballroom. Ava was at his side, looking pissed.

I swallowed nervously. As much as I hated to think I was losing my grip on reality, I also knew that if the kiss between Xavier and me had actually been real, Ava would’ve been even *more* pissed.

I bit my lip nervously, still wondering if I should talk to Xavier. We definitely had things to talk about—not just the friends thing, but also this kiss that hadn’t actually happened. Xavier also had two mates, but it seemed fundamentally different than what I experienced. As unfair as that might’ve been, it was just true. I didn’t think Xavier was a *due destini*; that was, unfortunately, something unique that I experienced. Xavier’s situation was a result of Ava’s return, not some fucked-up, cosmic mate bond situation.

*I think anyway.*

A woman passed right in front of me and paused, blocking my view of Xavier and Ava. While I registered that the woman was tall and striking, I was really just annoyed that she’d chosen to stop right in my line of sight.

I huffed and started to turn back to Lola. She was engaged in an argument with a small woman with tightly curled black hair, who seemed to be very annoyed that Lola had cut to the front of the line.

Hang on.

That striking woman—I’d seen her somewhere before. I was sure of it. But *where*?

I turned around quickly, but the woman had already walked away. Standing on tiptoe, I searched the crowd, determined to find her again. She couldn’t have gone far.

*There!* I caught sight of her as she stepped out onto one of the side terraces.

I strode forward, determined to catch up with her and see her up close. There was just *something* about her…

And when I hit the terrace, I stopped short, remembering where I’d seen the woman before.

*Cassandra.*

The woman looked exactly like Cassandra!

But how was that possible?

**Episode 5246**

I blinked at the woman in disbelief. What the actual *hell* was going on?

How in the world could Cassandra possibly be here at Lucian’s Valentine’s Day party? She had died—tragically—thousands of years ago.

But, then again, this wasn’t the first time I’d seen her. I’d had actual conversations with her in the past.

Unless I *wasn’t* seeing her. Maybe this was another hallucination. Maybe this was more proof of the fact that I was losing touch with reality.

I swallowed hard—there was only one way to know for sure.

The woman had headed out onto the terrace, so I followed her out, determined to figure out exactly who she was.

Stepping out onto the terrace, I looked around. It looked empty and filled with shadows—but no Cassandra.

Dammit.

Turning, I looked back into the ballroom, scanning for her strangely familiar face. I could have sworn she’d just walked out onto the terrace, but maybe she hadn’t?

I did a quick sweep of the ballroom, but I didn’t see her there either.

Behind me, I heard a soft giggle and turned to see that the terrace wasn’t actually empty. Aysel was there, wrapped in Armin’s arms, right at the far end. Maybe they’d seen the woman.

I marched down to the end of the terrace, but Aysel and Armin must’ve been pretty wrapped up in each other, because they didn’t notice me until I cleared my throat—loudly.

“Yes?” Aysel asked, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

“Sorry to interrupt, but did you happen to see a woman walk out here just now? Tall, striking, might’ve had kind of a strange vibe,” I said, feeling more foolish by the moment.

Aysel looked at me with disbelief, arching one delicate brow. “Well, we haven’t really been paying attention, Caliana, but I do believe we’ve been alone out here. *Until now*,” she added pointedly.

I looked past them, then turned to scan the terrace again. “I could’ve sworn I saw her come out here.”

Aysel heaved a sigh and—untangling herself from Armin—gave me a long look. “Caliana, are you drunk?”

I whipped back around to stare at her. “What? No!”

“Well, you’re acting very strangely. More so than usual,” she amended.

Armin cleared his throat. “I think I’ll go get myself another drink. Excuse me, please.”

That left Aysel and me alone on the terrace.

She sighed again.

“Everything okay?” I asked warily.

“It’s just so tragic to have such a forbidden love,” she said melodramatically. “It’s so challenging—so heartbreaking.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Okay. I’m not sure what’s so forbidden about it. I mean, you’re clearly attracted to each other. That’s what matters, right?”

“Oh, Caliana, you’re showing your social rank,” Aysel said dismissively. “Of course that isn’t what *matters*. I am a princess, and Armin is a commoner. If our relationship were to be widely known, it would be a great scandal.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said vaguely. I didn’t think she was right, but I wasn’t going to argue with Aysel. I was barely paying attention to her anyway. I’d only been half-listening, distracted by my need to go look for Cassandra. “Well, best of luck with all…that,” I said, then I hurried back into the ballroom.

Back inside, I stopped in the doorway and looked around carefully, really searching the crowd for anyone who looked like Cassandra. I still wasn’t sure if that was who I’d seen.

A cold, sick feeling started to creep into my chest. I thought about what Rowena had told me—about the acceleration. She’s said that I was going to experience more and more of these *due destini* hallucinations as time went by.

Was that what was happening to me now?

I took a deep breath, trying to slow down my speeding heart rate. Even if this woman *wasn’t* actually Cassandra—and come on, how could she be?—I still wanted to find her. If for no other reason than to prove to myself that not everything I was seeing was completely fictional.

I strode into the ballroom, determined to find the woman, but my search was almost immediately interrupted when I ran into Colton and Maya. Colton was still grinning.

“Oh, hey,” I said, surprised. Looking at them, I realized I hadn’t been in the best frame of mind when they’d announced their engagement. I wanted to make up for that. “Congratulations, you two. You both look really happy.”

And it was true—they did look happy. Even Maya seemed to have a glow about her.

“Thanks, Cali,” Colton said. “Did you see the ring?”

He grabbed Maya’s hand and held it up so that the stone—a dark blue-green sapphire—was right in my eyeline. I stared into the stone. The colors were mesmerizing, and the thing sparkled like it was radiating light from within.

A strange, crawling feeling rose up inside me, and I closed my eyes, turning away from the blinding stone. But—in the darkness behind my lids—vivid images of Xavier and Greyson played across my thoughts.

“Cali?”

My head was packed with screaming thoughts, and Maya’s voice seemed to come to me across a great distance.

“Cali? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, forcing my eyes open. I was relieved to see that Maya had put her hand back down, and I couldn’t see the stone on her ring. “I really have to go.”

Colton looked confused. “Go where?”  
 I didn’t answer. I didn’t even know if I *could*. My head was spinning so quickly, it was making me feel a little dizzy, but I was still determined—I needed to find Cassandra.

“I’ll see you guys later,” I mumbled, then I backed away from Colton and Maya, who were looking at me like I’d grown an extra head.

I moved through the ballroom, elbowing my way through knots of people and accidentally stumbling between dancing couples. I was looking everywhere for Cassandra, but I didn’t see her.

My heart was starting to sink when I heard a voice that stopped me in my tracks.

“Are you looking for me?”  
 The sound of the voice shivered down my spine. I spun around, coming face-to-face with none other than Cassandra.

I’d had my doubts—wondering how in the world it could possibly be her—but they all flitted away as I looked into the woman’s face. This was Cassandra, the original *due destini*. I was looking right at her.

It wasn’t possible—I knew it wasn’t possible—and yet here she was, looking right back at me.

She gave me a slow smile. “Hello, Caliana. It’s been a while since we’ve spoken.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, unable to come up with anything more intelligent to say.

The look she gave me seemed to pierce right through me. “I assume that you failed to heed the warning I offered you, last we spoke.”

I sucked in a breath. “I—”

“And now you’re running out of time,” Cassandra added, cutting me off.

“I am?” I asked, swallowing hard.

“Of course you are,” she said, her eyes glittering as she looked down at me. “Unless you’re further along than I thought and truly believe that we are here, speaking to each other as two living, breathing people. Unless you believe that this is your reality.”

I shook my head. “No, I—”

“But maybe I can still assist you,” she said, not even bothering to listen to me.

“What can you do?” I asked, my heart pounding.

She smiled again. “I thought you’d never ask.” She reached behind her back and produced a small dagger, which she offered to me.

“What’s that for?” I asked breathlessly.

“You can settle this right now, Caliana,” she said, her voice a soft hiss.

“Settle this?” I repeated stupidly.

She nodded. “You can put an end to the *due destini* curse, once and for all.”

As she looked at me, her smiling eyes hardened until they were as cold as a shark’s.

I stumbled back in shock. Hands closed around my shoulders, and I gasped and spun around. “Lola!”

She frowned at me. “Yeah, it’s me. Where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Why are you sweating?”

I shook off Lola’s grip on my arms and turned back.

“Cassandra—” I started, but I stopped when I realized that she was gone. I looked quickly around, but there was no sign of her.

“Cali?”

I rounded on Lola. “Did you see who I was talking to just now?”

Jay had joined Lola, and she shot him a quick glance. “Um, no, Cali.”

“You didn’t see a woman?” I asked urgently.

“Well, not exactly. You weren’t talking to anyone. You were just kind of…talking to yourself,” Lola said, looking uncomfortable.

“I wasn’t talking to myself—”

“Listen,” Jay interrupted. “I know this is important and all, but I just talked to Greyson, and there’s something the two of you need to know.”

“What?” I asked, struggling to marshal my runaway thoughts.

Jay’s expression was grim. “There’s an intruder in the palace.”

**Episode 5247**

**Xavier**

I tossed back another whiskey and felt it burn all the way down. I gripped the glass savagely, still fuming over Marissa’s little *joke*. There hadn’t exactly been anything funny about it.

When I scanned the dance floor, I caught sight of her right away. She and Ravi were together, and I watched as he twirled her around the room, my annoyance built as I watched them smile at each other. *How nice for them.*

I should’ve realized that Marissa was a ticking time bomb. I *had* realized it, but instead of going with my gut, I’d stupidly believed that she’d manage to keep my secret. That massive fuck up was on me, unfortunately.

I had to talk to her.

Setting my glass down with more force than necessary, I strode across the dancefloor toward her. Ravi was leaning in to say something to her, but I tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned, and his expression told me exactly how surprised he was to see me. “Xavier? Hey, what’s up, man?”

“Mind if I cut in?” I asked.

“Um…” Ravi started uncertainly. He shot a glance at Marissa, who smiled at me.

“Of course,” she said. “I’d be honored to grant a dance to my Alpha.”

Still looking uncertain, Ravi stepped back, and I took Marissa’s hand. I held her lightly at the waist, barely touching her, as Lucian’s orchestra started a new song. It had a waltz tempo, and I began to lead Marissa across the floor.

I saw the dawning surprise in her eyes as she followed my lead.

“I had no idea you could waltz, Xavier,” she said, still smiling. “Who knew you were so light on your feet?”

“And *I* had no idea *you* were going to say anything to Ava,” I said tightly, fighting to keep my voice low.

The smile slid off Marissa’s face, and she grimaced. “I’m sorry about that. It wasn’t intentional—it kind of just slipped out.”

“I thought we had an agreement,” I said sharply, sweeping her around the edge of the lacquered ballroom floor.

“We did,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know why I said it. I guess I’d had too many glasses of champagne—”

“It can’t happen again, Marissa,” I said firmly, holding her gaze. “You can’t do anything like that again.”

She met my eyes steadily. “I won’t. I’m sorry, Xavier. You should know that Ava didn’t ask me anything about what I said, and I won’t offer her any information, but if you want to know what I think—”

“Do I?” I interrupted. “I don’t remember asking for your opinion.”

She took a steadying breath. “Well, I’m going to give it to you anyway—you need to tell Ava what happened yourself.”

“Is that what you think?” I growled. This conversation was *not* going the way I’d planned.

“Yes,” Marissa said. “And honestly, I don’t even think you’re really mad at me.”

I glowered at her, and she looked away.

“Okay, so you *are* mad at me,” she conceded, “but I still think you’re angrier with yourself. *You’re* the only reason why this is still hanging over your head.”

I ground my teeth, not about to admit that Marissa probably had a point.

Keeping hold of her hand, I gave her waist a gentle push, twirling her around as the song came to an end.

All around us, dancers clapped for the orchestra and Ravi made his way back to us, a champagne flute in either hand.

“Can I cut back in?” he asked, offering Marissa a glass.

“I think I’ve had enough of that,” she said.

When I caught her eye, she didn’t look away, and I could tell that she wasn’t lying. About any of it. That was why this whole thing was so annoying. Whether I admitted it to her or not, she was right—I was mostly angry with myself.

“Xavier? You good?” Ravi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fine,” I said shortly. “Here’s your date back. Thanks for the dance.”

I stepped away from Marissa, then turned and stormed away, threading my way through the happy dancers.

I turned over the conversation in my head as I strode across the dance floor. I was torn about what I wanted to do. Not telling Ava had been the right decision in the moment, but it obviously wasn’t sustainable in the long term. And if history had taught me anything, it was that the longer I held this back, the worse the fallout would be when everything finally came out.

“Xavier!”

I turned around to see Gabe and Mikah striding toward me.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s up?”

Gabe grinned at me. “Trying to avoid us, man?”

“What?” I frowned at him, confused. “No. I didn’t even know you were here. Why *are* you here?”

Gabe laughed. “You’re not the first person to ask me that question. I’m starting to get a complex.”

“Speaking of which, how much longer do we have to hang around before we can bail?” Mikah asked. He obviously wasn’t having as good a time as Gabe.

“It’s Valentine’s Day!” Gabe cried, giving Mikah’s arm a playful slap. He rolled his eyes at me. “Such a romantic. So, Xavier, it’s nice to find you looking as pissed off as ever.”

I ignored the jab. “Have you seen Ava?”

“No,” Gabe said, chuckling. “But now I understand why you’re pissed off. What’s she done this time?”

I glowered at Gabe, resenting the implication. “Ava didn’t do anything. I’m just looking for her.”

Mikah nodded to his left. “I just saw her talking to some of your pack members.”

I swiveled around and saw Ava standing with Donovan and Cresta, leaning in to speak to them. I sighed as I looked over—I really needed to check in with her. I had no idea what kind of trouble Marissa’s drunken remark might’ve unleashed.

Honestly, the thing that worried me most was that Ava hadn’t said anything. Not to me, and apparently not to Marissa, either. She’d just walked away.

I thought back to when I’d tried to tell her about the jewelry store mishap—she’d told me that she didn’t want to know. Was that still true?

I had no idea, but I probably needed to find out. I’d just taken a step toward her when Greyson stepped in front of me.

“Excuse me,” I growled, trying to push past him.

Maya moved to stand next to him, followed by Colton.

“We’ve got a problem,” Maya said grimly.

I eyed the three of them warily. “What’s going on?”

Colton looked at Greyson. “You should probably tell him.”

“Tell me what?”

Greyson raked a hand through his hair. “We think there’s an intruder in the palace. Someone who might be dangerous—”

“Who *might* be dangerous?” I demanded. “What the fuck does that mean? What’s going on?”

Greyson opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, Cali ran over, rushing into Greyson’s arms.

“There you are, Greyson!” she gasped out. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

I took a deep breath. This was shaping up to be one hell of a Valentine’s Day. Definitely not the night I’d been hoping for. Had what I’d confessed to Cali about not wanting to be friends made no difference at all?

I knew I should’ve been relieved, but I wasn’t. I was the opposite of relieved to see Cali wrapping herself around Greyson. I’d meant what I said, earlier—even if it was wrong on so many levels—and seeing her in Greyson’s arms only made everything worse.

I sighed and looked around, feeling guilty for how much I wanted Ava at my side right now. It would’ve been nice to hold her hand or put my arm around her waist. To use her as an anchor against the tide of emotions welling inside me.

“Intruder, you said,” I pressed, looking at Greyson. “Elaborate?”

“Right,” Greyson said. “So apparently, Kendall’s been suspecting that something like this might happen eventually—it seems like tonight’s the night.”

He kept talking, telling me about the unconscious waiter they’d found, about the threat posed to Cali and the Redwoods and the rest of the packs.

“I think we should trap the bastard in here,” Colton growled.

I understood his fury—it was a natural response when you saw your people facing this kind of a threat—but I had something else in mind. When I turned to Greyson, a look passed between us—an understanding that we *had* to make sure Cali was safe.

“Whatever else we do,” Greyson said, turning to Cali, “we’re getting you out of here first.”

“What?” Cali demanded. “No way. I can help. I’m not defenseless, you know.”

“Cali, I really think—”

“I’m going to go talk to Lucian,” Maya interrupted.

I let out a bark of laughter. “And what’s the princeling going to do about this?”

Maya’s expression darkened. “He’s going to lock down this palace so no one can leave.”

**Episode 5248**

**Greyson**

Maya looked around, her gaze fierce, like she was waiting for one of us to challenge her. I raised my eyebrows but didn’t object to her plan.

“It’s a little extreme,” I admitted. “But at the same time, if Kendall is right and someone who wants to hurt us has infiltrated the palace, then locking down is the right choice. It would be a hell of a lot easier to keep everyone locked in until we can identify the intruder.”

Xavier didn’t look completely convinced, but he and Colton both nodded in agreement.

“Let’s go,” Maya said, leading the way across the ballroom toward Lucian. Colton and Xavier followed her.

I shot a look at Cali. The idea of being locked in with an intruder didn’t exactly sound like a fun night, but it was her safety I was really worried about—whoever this intruder was.

“Cali, I’d really feel better if you went back to the pack house—”

“No, Greyson. I can fight,” she said firmly. “And I mean, this intruder is probably Fae, right? If anyone here is equipped to fight off a Fae, it’s me.”

“I know that, love. No one’s doubting you. But it’s been a weird night,” I reminded her gently, keeping my voice low. “Up until a few minutes ago, you were freaking out about hallucinations.”

“Greyson, I’m fine—”

“I’d just prefer it if you were somewhere else,” I pressed. “Somewhere safe. And preferably far away.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared up at me. “I can’t imagine there’s anywhere safer than right here with you, and every other Alpha and friendly werewolf in the territory. Plus Maya and Colton.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. I couldn’t argue with her logic, but I still didn’t feel great about it. “I just hope you’re not too distracted by the hallucinations.”  
 “I’ll be okay,” she assured me.

“The Dark Fae know who you are, love,” I pointed out. “They’ve already made two attempts to kidnap you.” I paused. “Well, two that we know of.”

“That’s a happy thought,” she noted.

I pushed a hand through my hair. Cali was determined to stay, and she did have a point about her qualifications to fight Fae…

I sighed. “Okay, so you’re staying.”

“You really could use me,” Cali pointed out. “You’re right—they know who I am, and they’ve tried to get to me before. I could be the bait that finally brings them down.”

Fear gripped me at the thought of Cali acting as bait, and I shook my head. “I appreciate the offer, love—there’s no arguing against your bravery—but I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Cali looked around. “Hey, where’s Kendall? Wasn’t she with you when you found that unconscious Vanguard guy?”

“She wanted to stay with him,” I said. “She was going to try to bring him around and ask who attacked him. Right now, that waiter is our only witness. Hopefully he comes to.”

Cali thought about that for a moment. “Do you think we should go check on her?

“On Kendall?” I asked. “I’m sure she’s okay.”

“No, it’s not that,” Cali said. “I just wonder if we should see what she’s up to. After all, we do both agree that she can’t be trusted.”

I considered that, thinking of my conversation with Kendall. I thought about recounting it to Cali, but I didn’t want to overload her. Not when we had this intruder situation to deal with.

I looked around the ballroom, where the rest of the party was still in full swing. “I need to make sure all the other Alphas know what’s going on.”

I scanned the room, then came to rest on Mace, who was standing on the far side with Maren.

Shit.

I suddenly remembered how Maren had reacted to learning about Hans and the reappearance of the Dark Fae mafia. I shook my head—I should’ve told them about this right away. They deserved to know. Besides, Maren had Fae magic, though she was reluctant to use it unless absolutely necessary—she was a lot like Torin, but way. For all I knew, this could be that “absolutely necessary” moment, but I had no idea if she was going to see it that way.

I took Cali’s hand. “Come on,” I said, then I led her across the ballroom.

As we threaded our way through the crowd, I wondered if I should just tell Mace, and let him explain the situation to Maren.

But when I mentioned that idea to Cali, she shook her head.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Why not?”

Cali gave me a hard look. “You should tell Maren what’s going on, Greyson. She deserves to know, just like everyone else.”

“Okay,” I muttered. Then I raised my hand in greeting. “Mace, Maren, hi.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, man,” Mace said, smiling at me. He looked happy—probably due to a combination of Lucian’s strong drinks and the fact that Maren was by his side.

“Yeah, you too,” I muttered, well aware that I was about to ruin his night.

And—sure enough—as I started explaining the situation, Mace’s smile faded fast. His expression hardened as I told him about the threats to Cali, the unconscious Vanguard waiter we’d found, and our certainty that it was all the work of the Dark Fae mafia.

Once I’d told them everything, Mace put a protective arm around Maren’s shoulders. That was still a little weird for me, but I was glad to see Mace demonstrating that he was going to protect Maren. She deserved to have someone like him at her side. And even though she was struggling to hide it, I knew Maren pretty well, and I could tell she was a lot more freaked out then she was letting on.

“So what are we doing?” Mace asked.

I gestured around. “For the time being, all I’m asking is that you keep an eye out for anything even remotely suspicious.”

Mace nodded. “Can do.”

“Great. Thanks, Mace.”

I led Cali back across the ballroom.

“I need to go check on Kendall,” I murmured. “See if she’s made any progress with the waiter. You stay here, okay?”

Cali nodded.

“Jay! Lola!” I waved them over. “Stick with Cali, okay?”

Jay and Lola both nodded.

“Don’t let her out of your sight,” I said quietly to Jay, who nodded again.

“You got it, man.”

As I headed out of the ballroom and toward the room where we’d found the waiter, I spotted Lucian. He and Armin seemed to be deep in conversation with a group of Vanguard soldiers, and I was glad to see it. He must’ve listened to Maya’s palace lockdown suggestion. Hopefully, that was why he was talking to his soldiers.

That would be one less thing for me to worry about.

If there was a Dark Fae here somewhere, it was just a matter of time before we found him. I just had to hope that Kendall’s interrogation of the waiter had borne fruit. A simple description of the waiter’s assailant would make looking for them a lot more efficient. As of right now, we were flying completely blind.

I headed toward the side room where Kendall and I had come upon the guard. As I approached the room, I slowed slightly. Something felt wrong.

The door was ajar, and when I stepped inside, I was startled to find the room empty. The unconscious waiter was gone, the spot on the floor where he’d laid smeared with blood. And there was a strange-looking device on the ground beside it.

I stepped closer and picked it up. I had no idea what the hell the thing was, but Kendall’s scent was all over the thing.

Looking around the room, I had to wonder—had Kendall faked all of this? Or—if not—had something happened to her?

I pulled in a deep breath, drawing in her scent, then I followed the trail of it out of the room. The scent led me into the hallway, and down a long passageway. I turned right, then left, then right again. Lucian’s palace was more like a labyrinth than anything else, and I felt like I was walking down every hallway the place possessed.

Finally, I stopped. I was still getting Kendall’s scent, but there was something else, too. It was faint, but it was definitely the scent of another person.

The hallway was silent, but as I stood there, I heard the thud of something—or some*one*—hitting the floor. Then came a muffled grunt of pain, followed by the unmistakable sound of a punch landing.

Something was going on.

I raced toward the noise, ending up at a closed door at the end of the hall. I burst through, raring for a fight—but the sight of the room’s occupants made me stop dead.

It was Kendall, all right. She was struggling to break free of a large man. And when the man turned to face me, I saw that it was none other than Hans.

**Episode 5249**

“—and I just want to help, you know?” I said to Lola, who was looking sympathetic. “And I *can* help, I know I can. I don’t want to be this constant burden. I don’t need a babysitter, and I don’t want you and Jay to have to watch over me all the time.”

“You’re not a burden, Cali,” Lola said firmly.

I gave her a small smile. Of course she’d said that. She was my best friend—she would always have my back.

I sighed as I looked absently around the ballroom. I wished I’d never said anything to anyone about the kissing Xavier hallucination.

Glancing at Lola, I couldn’t help but remember the conversation we’d had, when she’d pointed out how I was constantly being pulled back and forth by all the Xavier-Greyson drama, as well as everyone else’s problems. Did Lola think my Xavier hallucination was another example of that?

I understood why she might think that, but it wasn’t really fair in this instance. It wasn’t like Xavier or I had done anything to make the vision happen. And if Rowena was right about it, it had nothing to do with us at all. It was the fucking *due destini* at work, and that could only circle back to me. Like it always did.

I looked around, but Greyson had disappeared. I blew out an impatient breath.

“What?” Lola asked, giving me a sideways glance.

“Well, I can’t just wait around like this, doing nothing,” I said, frustrated.

Lola nodded toward one of the ballroom entrances, where Lucian was standing with Maya. They were talking, but their conversation didn’t look particularly cordial. They were leaning toward each other, looking heated, and I was pretty sure their conversation was turning into an argument.

“Think we should intervene?” Lola asked.

But I was already on the move, striding across the ballroom. I’d been feeling completely useless a moment ago, but now there was a fight to break up.

“Lucian had better be taking this threat seriously,” I muttered to myself. I could’ve sworn he *was,* a minute ago—I’d seen him speaking with Armin and members of his guard. What could’ve changed?

Lola jogged to catch up with me. “Good. I’m glad you’re going to talk to him. If anyone understands how to talk to this clown, it’s you.”

I bit my lip nervously. “It might’ve been a mistake to let Maya volunteer to talk to him about this. You know how she is. I mean, she’s an amazing Alpha, but she can be a little…” I trailed off, casting around for the right word to describe Maya’s conversational style.

“Abrasive?” Lola suggested. “Difficult? Harsh? Terrifyingly aggressive? A pain in the ass? All of the above?”

I mean, she wasn’t exactly wrong, but I shot her a stern glare. “That’s not helpful, Lola.”

Lucian looked over as Lola and I approached, and I was surprised to see a relieved look pass across his face.

“Caliana, there you, thank goodness,” he gushed. “Just the person I was hoping to see.”

“What?” I asked, so startled I stopped walking.

He closed his eyes theatrically. “I’m simply certain that you will understand my position, and then help me explain it to this…” He paused, looking at Maya with ill-concealed anger. “*Alpha*. She’s struggling to see my point of view, but I’m sure you can understand, Caliana, the need for discretion at this moment.”

Maya snorted with obvious disdain. “That’s such bullshit, man. You can talk your way around it all you want, but the fact remains that if there’s a credible threat, then we need to alert the packs.”

Lucian glanced at the ballroom, which was still packed with Valentine’s Day revelers.

“I am *not* going to ruin my party,” he said imperiously.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me right now,” Maya said, rolling her eyes.

“This is not the first threat we’ve faced,” Lucian hissed, “and it’s possible to handle this issue while still ensuring that everyone in attendance will have a meaningful Valentine’s Day that they will remember for the rest of their supernatural lives.”

I frowned as I glanced between them. I was picking up that they were at cross-purposes, but I wasn’t exactly sure what they were arguing about. Lucian wasn’t saying that he wasn’t going to deal with the threat—he just wasn’t going to deal with it exactly in the way Maya had suggested.

This nuance seemed to be lost on Maya, who looked furious. Her eyes flashed so dangerously, I had to stop myself from taking a cautious step back, and I was glad as hell she was aiming her rage at Lucian. “Who gives a shit about Valentine’s Day or some stupid party—”

“*Stupid party?*” Lucian repeated, looking aghast. “I’ll have you know that the confetti that is continuously dropping includes twenty-four carat gold flakes—”

“There could be someone here who is *actively dangerous*,” Maya snapped.

“Then it seems to me that we’d be far better off searching for this person quietly and calmly, rather than shouting our intentions from the rooftops,” Lucian said.

“How can you possibly—”

“If we do this discreetly, we can prevent the intruder from being tipped off as to our knowledge of his presence. And my guests can also continue to enjoy the party.” Lucian heaved a sigh. “My good woman, do you have any idea the lengths and great expense I went to in order to make this magic happen?”

Lola groaned. “Okay, this is ridiculous.”

Maya was expanding like a rage-filled balloon, and I was worried she was about to do something to Lucian that would reduce him to pieces the size and shape of his softly falling confetti, so I stepped between them.

“I get the issue, Maya, but maybe Lucian is right,” I said quickly. “There might not be any harm in maintaining the illusion of the party continuing as normal.”

Lucian sighed. “*Thank you*.”

“But Maya’s also right, Lucian—I think we should maintain the illusion of normalcy while still making sure everyone stays safe,” I said. “The most important thing is that the palace stays under lockdown, so no one can get in or out.”

“I’ve already done that,” Lucian said with a huff, looking offended that I’d dared to doubt him. “There are guards at all the entrances. No one leaves, and no one enters. Even if that does mean that my special order of Juliet rose petals will not be delivered.”

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, and Maya rolled her eyes again. “Oh my god, he’s actually *pouting*.”

“I am *not* pouting,” Lucian countered. “I am simply disappointed. I don’t suppose you know that the Juliet rose is one of the most expensive in the world.”

I nodded, trying to look sympathetic, but I didn’t know how well I was pulling it off. Really, I was thinking that a lack of rose petals was probably a small price to pay for the safety of all the party guests.

“Well, if we don’t have the rose petals, I shall have to make up for their lack, somehow,” Lucian said, clearly speaking to himself. “I could increase the volume of falling confetti? Maybe create a specialty cocktail?”

As Lucian mulled over his ideas, I turned to Maya.

“Greyson and the others are already spreading the word to the other Alphas,” I said. “Once they’ve all been brought up to speed, the decision about what to do will be theirs. If they decide that their packs need to leave, we’re going to let them go. Right, Lucian?” I asked, looking at him pointedly.

“What? Oh, yes. Of course,” he said absently, probably trying to remember if his kitchens had the ingredients for impromptu silk mousse tartlets.

“Fine,” Maya said, though her reluctance was obvious. She shook her head. “I’ve had enough of this bullshit. I’m going to go look for Colton.”

As she walked away, Lola grinned at me. “Way to go.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you handled that really well,” she said. “That could’ve gotten ugly, but you smoothed things out—”

“I’ve got it!” Lucian exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “I have the perfect idea!”

“What is it?” I asked curiously.

But he didn’t seem to hear me—he was already scanning the ballroom. “I must find Armin! Where is he?”

With that, he hurried away.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. “I should go find Greyson. He just wanted to check on Kendall, but he’s probably back by now.”

Lola nodded. “Let’s go see if he’s with Jay.”

I followed Lola back through the crowd, but as we made our way through the dancing couples, something caught my eye, and I looked up. For a moment, I thought it was a piece of Lucian’s gold confetti, but when I looked closer, I realized that it wasn’t confetti at all. It was a strange, small light, high up in the air.

My heart dropped—it was a wisp.

It approached me, and I heard its soft voice whispering. “*Calliope, you are needed*.”

I rubbed my eyes, making sure I wasn’t asleep, then I looked at the bright light again. Was I really seeing a wisp, or was this just another hallucination?

**Episode 5250**

**Greyson**

Hans. Fucking *Hans.*

I took a step into the room. I moved cautiously, still not sure if I was walking into some kind of a trap.

“Stop right there,” Hans growled.

I stopped. My gaze flicked down to Kendall, and I could feel the fear emanating from her—though how I was able to senseher fear, I had no idea.

Looking at her, I saw the reason for that fear—Hans had a dagger at her throat. And not just any dagger—a silver-tipped dagger, digging into her flesh. If she tried to shift to better defend herself, the silver blade would slice right through her skin. And if I made any sudden moves, Hans would slit her throat.

Eyeing me closely, Hans backed away. He walked around the still form of the waiter, who’d been dragged to the room and unceremoniously dropped. The poor guy was slumped in a bloody heap on the floor.

I kept my eyes trained on Hans, fighting to stay calm.

“Why don’t you let her go?” I suggested, nodding toward Kendall.

Hans sneered at me. “And why would I do that? Because you suggested it? I’m not particularly inclined to do anything you suggest.”

I ground my teeth. This was going to be hard. I looked down at Kendall, meeting her eyes, willing her to look at me, to focus on me. “Inclined or not, if you refuse, you’ll never make it out of this room alive.”

Hans let out a sharp bark of a laugh. “Is that right?” he asked, and—as if to prove how unconcerned he was about my warning—he pressed the dagger harder against Kendall’s throat, making her suck in a sharp breath. “I can see by the look in your eyes that you know what this is, Greyson Evers. If I draw blood, this woman will be overcome by silver poisoning in an instant.”

Yeah, like I wasn’t painfully aware of that fact. But I didn’t speak. I just kept my eyes glued to Hans, watching his every move.

“I might remind you that the last time we crossed paths, Greyson, you were able to escape not by your own powers, but because you were saved by witches,” Hans said. He looked theatrically around the room—a small, book-filled study, empty except for us. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but there aren’t any witches here now. In fact, there’s no one here but the three of us.”

Kendall was looking up at me, and I felt something begin to shift in the air. I still didn’t know how I could feel it, but Kendall’s fear was beginning to dissipate. It was changing into something else, I just knew it—she was going to make a move.

I moved closer. Whatever was about to happen, I had a feeling I was going to need just a little less space between Hans and me.

Then it happened—Kendall moved like a lightning strike, grabbing Hans’s knife hand and yanking it away from her neck. And as she did that, she spun in place, like a dancer, and kicked him hard in the kneecap.

There was a sharp crack, and Hans let out a snarl of pain. He stumbled back, swearing, and dropped the knife as he reached for his injured knee.

That was my cue. I leapt into action, shifting as I jumped. I was aiming for Hans, but Kendall was still standing close to him, so I got her too, driving all of us into the bookshelves that lined the walls. We crashed into the shelves with a thunderous amount of force, sending hundreds of stately, leather-bound volumes tumbling down onto us.

A stone sculpture of Aphrodite fell to the floor, so heavy it splintered the wood, and a marble bust of Lucian himself narrowly missed Kendall’s head.

Hans let out a cry like a wounded animal and raised his hands, aiming a blast of magic right at my chest. I didn’t have time to move before it hit me. It sent me flying across the room, straight into the door, which cracked and splintered on impact. The shock of the blast shifted me back to human.

Dazed, I struggled to my feet, but the delay cost me—and Kendall. Before I could even react or warn her, Hans turned to Kendall and raised his hands, blasting her with his magic as well. *Fuck.*

When the magic hit her, she went flying onto a desk, scattering papers everywhere. She slid off the back of the desk onto the floor, collapsing with a yelp.

The sound of her pain sent a wave of fear crashing over me. Was she okay? Had Hans seriously hurt her? But there was no immediate way for me to check—Hans was looking right at her. I had to fucking get in there.

“You fucking *viper*,” he hissed. “I should’ve done this a long time ago.”

He struggled to his feet and stepped toward her. His eyes were narrowed, and I could feel the hatred coming off him in waves, almost physical in its coldness. He stooped down and picked up the silver dagger.

Kendall moaned and struggled, trying to get to her feet, but it was no good.

Hans glowered at her, then whipped around to shoot a murderous glare at me as well.

“Please know that I could’ve killed you both with my magic, I chose not to—not out of mercy, but because this,” he said, looking down at the dagger, which glinted dangerously in the light, “will be so much more satisfying for me. Painful for you, of course. *Agonizing*, really.”

My stomach clenched as I watched him smile, truly excited about the idea of watching us suffer.

When Hans looked up at me, his smile had stretched, making him look truly deranged. “Maybe I’ll make it slow. Slow enough you’ll plead for your lives.”

I took a deep breath. I was still stunned, and my ears were ringing, I could feel shards of wood from the splintered door digging into my arm, and warm blood sliding from the spots where the wood had punctured me. I shook my head, trying to clear it, but that just made the ringing worse.

Standing in the middle of the destroyed study, Hans laughed. “I can see that you’re still fighting, Greyson Evers, but it won’t do you any good. This is one fight where you have no ability to determine the outcome.”

With a wild look in his eyes, Hans lunged, slashing the air with the dagger and forcing me back against the ruined door to avoid him.

He whipped around to look at Kendall, who was still struggling to get to her feet. “You must’ve kept your secret well, little viper. Your identity still appears to be a mystery to Greyson Evers. If he knew who you really were, my dear, I doubt he would be here.” His voice took on a note of icy menace. “I doubt he’d be willing to die fighting for you.”

I looked at Kendall, confused. “What’s he talking about?”

Hans looked at me with mock surprise. “Can it be? Do you truly not know?” He glanced at Kendall, then back at me, a terrible, satisfied smile spreading across his face. “You really don’t, do you?”

“What are you walking about?” I snarled.

He shook his head. “Greyson, Greyson, Greyson. I thought you were smarter—well, *slightly* smarter—than this. People like Kendall here—or Greta, as she is also known,” he added, glancing at her, “can never be trusted. She’s dangerous; has been since her very first breath.”

None of this was making sense to me. I had no idea what the fuck Hans was going on about, but I really didn’t care. As long as he kept talking, that worked for me. His villain monologue was preventing him from stabbing both Kendall and me, so I was fine with it.

“Is it possible you had no clue?” Hans said with a high, sharp laugh. He stared at me in disbelief. “She’s MIB.”

This stopped me. I looked up at Hans, floored. “*What?*”

Was he serious? MIB, as in the Mysterious Incidents Bureau? The human governmental force that kept tabs on the supernatural?

My head was fucking *swimming*.

“Yes. And she’s been using you, just like she uses everyone else!” he said, nearly screaming now. He rounded on Kendall. “And it’s worked for you, hasn’t it? Up until now. Because now, the clock has run out for you!”

I watched in horror as Hans raised the knife above his head.

“It’s over for you, Agent King!” he shrieked, then he brought the knife down.

I lunged at Hans, just as Kendall leapt to her feet with a growl. The study was already a mess, and a moment later, it was chaos—papers and books and paperweights and wood shards flew in every direction. Everything moved so swiftly and chaotically, I wasn’t sure what was happening.

The next instant, there was a gargled scream and a spray of hot, sticky blood. The red sheen blurred my vision as I slammed into Hans.

**Episode 5251**

Just as I began following the wisp with my eyes, Lucian stepped up to make an announcement, and the entire room went quiet.

“And now, I’d like to announce that I have a special Valentine’s Day surprise for everyone as a thank-you for bringing your beautiful faces and bodies here to celebrate with us today!” There was a smattering of applause, and Lucian basked in it while Elle stood at his side looking slightly embarrassed.

Lola groaned. “This will be good. What’s a Lucian event without some big spectacle to stroke his ego?”

I was only half listening, still too transfixed by the light hovering up near the ceiling. I looked around, wondering if anyone else was seeing what I was seeing. But from the looks of it, I was the only one.

If it really was a wisp, it was very possible that I was the only one aware of it. Wisps rarely appeared to just anyone, but that provided little comfort, because if it was nothing more than a hallucination, the same thing applied.

I was about to ask Lola if she could see it when the excited tone of Lucian’s voice pulled my attention back to the front of the room.

“I’d planned on saving this surprise for my wedding day, but since this is a day to celebrate love, I want to share this with everyone now in the spirit of Valentine’s Day!” Lucian clapped his hands and shouted, “Dim the lights!”

Once we were all shrouded in near darkness, a video began playing on a large projection screen behind him. He and Elle stepped to the side, sharing a kiss before they looked up at the screen.

Everyone *oohed* and *aahed* at the images of Lucian and Elle frolicking and kissing and dancing to sickeningly sweet music. There was another smattering of applause when the title card appeared on the screen: “The Story of Our Love.”

Lola made a loud retching sound. I elbowed her before returning my attention back to where I’d last spotted the wisp.

*Wait, where did it go? Is it gone? Does this prove I was imagining it?*

“Lola, did you see that wisp a few seconds ago?” I asked, desperate for some way to prove that I wasn’t just seeing things.

Lola looked where I was looking and shook her head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about—and I’m not Fae, remember? So why would I be able to see it?” Lola eyed me. “And are you sure you saw it? Weren’t you just saying that you’ve been…seeing things?”

I shook my head. “Honestly, I’m not sure about anything anymore. But I need to know if it’s real. Wisps appear for a reason. What if it’s important? What if it’s trying to tell me something? I can’t just ignore it.”

Lola’s attention was already back on the screen where Lucian and Elle’s video was still playing in all its glory. She was shaking her head. “Man. It’s so bad that it’s good. I wonder what this set him back? Probably a thousand dollars or more. I have to admit that the production value is top notch.”

I was about to tug on Lola’s arm to get her attention again when I saw the wisp flicker before moving toward the wall and disappearing. I turned back to Lola, but she was too fixated on the video—just like everyone else in the room. Lucian had to be beside himself with pleasure that everyone was so locked into his sappy screening.

*I’ll just follow the wisp on my own. Lola can’t see it anyway, so she wouldn’t be of much help anyway. If it leads me to something I need help with, I’ll just come back for her or Greyson. But I have to determine whether it’s real or not.*

I slipped out of the ballroom and onto the terrace and scanned for any sign of the elusive wisp. It didn’t take long for me to spot the strange flicker through the tips of the trees bordering Lucian’s expansive lawn. It looked so real. It had to be…and if it was real, what was it trying to tell me?

I was about to follow it when I heard Xavier’s voice behind me.

“Cali, where are you going?”

I spun around just as Xavier came walking out onto the terrace. He looked absolutely magnificent in the moonlight, the soft light of the ballroom framing him from behind and highlighting his perfectly styled hair. His suit fit him like a glove and even though I’d seen the man so many times before, I was enraptured by his broad chest, his tall stature—just how damn good he looked from head to toe.

I gulped as I took him in, reminded of the kiss that may not have been real, and of the proclamation he’d made to me about not wanting to be friends and wanting to be more. How was I supposed to resist him when he looked like that? When all I could think about were all the steamy moments we’d shared when he was still officially mine? I’d spent so much time trying to make peace with him being with Ava, but at times like this, I was right back at square one.

*I have to focus—can’t forget why I’m out here. I have to figure out why I’m seeing what I’m seeing.*

“I’m looking for a wisp,” I told him.

Xavier frowned at me. “A wisp? So, what you’re saying is that you’ve decided to come out here by yourself while the threat of the Dark Fae mafia has us all under lockdown?”

He laid a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I couldn’t help the sharp intake of breath at the contact.

“Cali, you can’t run around on your own like this. It’s not safe.”

Memories of the kiss hit me again, and I felt unsteady on my feet, wondering if this was real or not. It was a horrible feeling, not knowing if something that felt so authentic was nothing more than my mind playing tricks on me.

*And all because of the* due destini*. If Rowena is right and my mind is beginning to spiral because of its effects, what does that mean for me? What does that mean for Greyson and Xavier?*

But I couldn’t keep doubting everything, could I? Especially when deep down, I wanted that kiss to be real. It would mean that Xavier felt the same way about me as I did about him, no matter how hard I tried to push those emotions away for the sake of Greyson and Ava.

Xavier was giving me a questioning look, and I quickly gathered my composure.

“Both you and Greyson said that you wanted me to leave,” I said.

Xavier smirked. “And you know that this isn’t what we had in mind. We wanted to escort you back to the pack house and keep watch. You know it’s not safe for you to be out and about alone. And I thought you wanted to stay.”

I glanced down at where his hand still rested on my shoulder, unable to lock out the memories of all the things that hand had done to me, the way he used to touch me…

Xavier followed my gaze and started to move his hand away before he paused and looked me in the eye, his brow furrowed in worry. “But seriously, Cali, are you okay?”

I hesitated. That was the million-dollar question. Was I okay? Was I finally losing it like the *due destini* had promised from the beginning? And if I was really starting to lose touch, how long before I’d lose it completely and couldn’t think for myself? And what would I do then?

I was quickly growing overwhelmed and wished that there was someone I could talk to about this, someone who understood what I was going through and could give me advice about what to do next. As it stood right now, I was at a complete loss, and I hated it.

I thought about what Rowena had told me about the kiss. Then I thought about the wisp and looked back out toward the trees where I’d seen it last. But at this moment, there was nothing to suggest anything had ever been out there at all.

“Have you experienced anything…strange lately?” I asked Xavier.

Xavier stared back at me, his head cocked to the side. “What do you mean? Is something going on with you that I should know about?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I supposed I was hoping he would mention the kiss that might or might not have happened if only to prove the whole thing wasn’t in my head. But his response was all the answer I really needed. He had no idea what I was talking about, and that meant…that meant that what Cassandra had said was right…

Xavier looked concerned now as he stepped closer. “Is this about what I said about being friends?”

I gulped and nodded at him, my eyes rooted to his as I asked, “Did you mean it?”

**Episode 5252**

I watched a range of emotions play out on Xavier’s face. I was trying, but I couldn’t quite read any of them. At least I didn’t see anything negative there, and that made me happy. I wanted to believe that what he’d said was real, even if I didn’t quite know what to do with it if it was.

He smiled wistfully and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Of course I meant it. I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t. I can’t just be friends with you. I think we both know how unsuccessful we’ve been at trying to keep things friendly.”

I waited, not knowing what to say and wanting him to say more. I didn’t trust myself to speak just yet. But it was real. I hadn’t imagined the conversation—at least that part of it.

*Shit*.

“I want what we lost. No, I *need* what we lost. I think about you every single fucking day, Cali. I’ve never stopped. And you should know by now that when I’m thinking about you, it’s not as a friend,” he said, his voice low and husky.

I tensed as the truth came out. All this time I’d wanted to hear this…and now that he was saying it, I was having a hard time wrapping my head around it. It wasn’t that I didn’t feel the same way, because I did. I just didn’t know how this new information would allow us to exist within the bounds of our new reality. Not to mention that he was the Alpha of another pack with a Luna by his side who could barely stand me because she suspected exactly what he’d just admitted.

*And Greyson is understanding about the due destini and how it makes me struggle between him and Xavier, but how welcoming would he be to going back to how things were before? Is he willing to share me again? How is that possibly even fair to him?*

*Do I even want that?*

*What* do *I want?*

“Don’t you want that too?” he asked. “Because if you don’t—”

“It’s not that I don’t want it…but—” There were *so* many but’s. “—how could we go back to that after everything that’s happened? And then there’s Ava…how does she fit into all this? At least with Greyson, he understands the due destini and has been part of it since the beginning. I doubt very seriously that Ava would be as…understanding.”

Xavier sighed and looked away. “I know, it’s complicated. But I’m not going to let that come between us. Not anymore. I’ve never stopped believing that you and I belong together, Cali. I’m not about to give up on that. And pretending to be friends has only made things worse.”

“I never pretended,” I whispered, that overwhelmed feeling coming back full force. “I love you, Xavier. I never stopped. How can I love you and not want you to be my friend—is that even possible?”

Friendship was a consolation prize, and I knew that, but what other option did we really have? Xavier was admitting all this, and I appreciated it, but I couldn’t see how this would ever work given how complicated things had become.

But before Xavier could answer me, a commotion from the yard drew our attention. Someone nearby shouted, “The intruder! He’s over there!”

Xavier threw a protective arm around me and pulled me close. “Stay with me.”

I clung to Xavier, happy for his protection even as my magic surged inside me. I was ready. If someone was here to hurt me, my mates, or anyone I cared about, they were going to have to go through me.

We moved off the terrace and into the mass of people in the ballroom, everyone wondering what all the commotion was about. Confusion was mounting, but there was no fear. We were in a party full of werewolves, and I knew for that reason alone I was in the best place if the Dark Fae mafia were trying to mount an attack.

*I feel ready for anything right now—I hope I can summon my sword and shield without any problems when the time comes.*

I glanced around and was surprised when the wisp appeared briefly and shot off in the opposite direction from where we were heading.

I hesitated, feeling compelled to follow the wisp. I started to run after it, pulling away from Xavier.

“Cali, what are you doing?” Xavier shouted as he struggled to hold onto me. “We have to keep moving! Whatever’s happening is happening this way.” He gestured in the opposite direction of the wisp.

I pointed out the wisp even though I was certain now that I was the only one who could see it. “We should go this way! The wisp!”

“Cali, no, we need to—”

A trio of Vanguard came sprinting by and stopped when they saw Xavier. “Did you see him?” they asked.

“See who?” Xavier asked.

“The intruder! We saw him heading in this direction.”

With that, I broke away from Xavier and started running. I had to follow the wisp. I knew that it was the key to whatever was going on, that it would lead me to wherever I needed to be—whatever I needed to see. I just had to keep my eyes on it.

“Cali! Stop!” Xavier shouted after me, but I kept going, my eyes not daring to leave the wisp for fear of losing it, unsure of what this all meant.

As I reached the border of the trees, I lost sight of the wisp.

“Shoot!” I hissed, spinning around in place and scanning the sky for any sign of it.

I was sure it had led me here, but why would it abandon me now? Maybe this was as far as it needed me to go? Maybe this was where the trail ended?

Then I spotted something moving in the shadows. I took a step toward it, knowing that I needed to be careful. I conjured up my sword, feeling a rush of adrenaline once it was glowing bright and strong in my hands. I didn’t feel afraid, and I was proud of myself for that. I couldn’t help but think about how far I’d come, how my magic and fighting skills had developed over time.

*Even if I’m still struggling to separate reality from fantasy, I’m prepared either way. Real or imagined, I’m ready to meet any threat. If the Dark Fae mafia wants to try something, I’ll make them regret it.*

And I knew that the stakes were higher than ever. One wrong move and I could be killed by the Dark Fae mafia. They’d already snatched me up once before; I wasn’t naïve enough to think that they couldn’t do it again if I didn’t stay on my toes and keep my head on a swivel. And since I’d gotten away the last time, they would probably take every measure to keep me from escaping a second time.

I peered out into the woods, trying to get a read on where that shadow had gone. I didn’t want to be caught by surprise. My only advantage would be seeing whoever was out there before they could get close enough to strike.

Suddenly a hand grabbed me and spun me around. I was about to lash out with my sword only to connect eyes with a very concerned Xavier.

“Cali, what the hell are you doing? Why would you run off alone like that? Didn’t you listen to a word I said on the terrace about it not being safe for you to be running around out here all alone?”

I lowered my sword and pointed back toward the woods. “He’s in there. I know it. I saw him moving around in the shadows.”

Xavier and I both turned as the same three Vanguards from before came sprinting up to us. Xavier nodded at them and then turned back to me. “Stay here and keep your distance from the woods. Or better yet, go back inside and try to find Greyson.”

And then without another word, Xavier shifted and led the three Vanguards into the trees. I tried to follow him with my eyes, but it didn’t take long for me to lose sight of him in the shadows. Despite Xavier’s advice, I took a few tentative steps toward the tree line.

*I want to help him. I want to follow and be backup just in case… I can’t let anything happen to him.*

Something moved off to my side and, sword raised, I spun around just as a roguishly handsome man appeared from the trees, his odd clothes torn and streaked with dirt. His expression wasn’t dangerous or mean…but alarmed.

He raised his sword as soon as he saw mine, and it was definitely more of a defensive move than an attack.

We remained silent, our swords raised, circling each other. I didn’t know why, but I wasn’t afraid of him, and he didn’t seem particularly afraid of me, either, just cautious.

“You have to help me,” he said finally.

I took a step back, my gaze narrowed and feeling like I was ready to react if he made any unexpected moves. “Help you with what?”

He slowly lowered his sword to the ground. “Help me find someone. I’m looking for Caliana Hart.”

**Episode 5253**

**Greyson**

My vision obscured by blood, I crashed into Kendall and Hans then quickly scrambled to recover. Everything had happened so fast that my brain was still struggling to catch up. I was suddenly hit by the intense fear that I was too late, that Kendall was bleeding out and dying beneath me, gasping for breath.

I swiped my hands over my eyes and blinked away the blood. When my vision finally cleared, I was staring into Kendall’s purple eyes. She was on the ground, and there was a fair amount of blood sprayed across her fur, but I could tell by the scent that it wasn’t her blood.

Relief flooded through me, but at the same time I was annoyed at how intense a reaction I’d had over this apparent MIB agent who’d done nothing but lie to me this entire time. Why had I been so worried that she was dead? Would she even have cared if I were the one who’d been nearly murdered by Hans?

Kendall shifted back to human form, her warm, naked body still pinned under mine. We were still looking at each other, both of us breathing hard but otherwise quiet.

I looked over at Hans, who was lying face down, clearly dead, blood from his torn throat pooling around him.

*Good riddance.*

I shifted back, suddenly keenly aware of Kendall’s and my nakedness, our bodies sticky with sweat and blood. She threw a hand around my neck, wiping blood from my bare shoulder, and moved a bit so that the brunt of my weight wasn’t resting on her chest.

Hyperaware of her touch, I glanced down at her glistening body. There was blood on her stomach, and I reached down to check if she was wounded, my fingers gently prodding at the spot.

She inhaled sharply before she reached down to take my hand and gently pulled it away. Something about her touch sent a shiver through me and kicked off a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I couldn’t quite describe.

These few quiet moments had finally allowed my brain to catch up, and I could admit to myself that I was happy Kendall was okay. Despite how I felt about her and whether I could trust her, I realized that I didn’t want to see her hurt. In fact, that was why I’d gotten wrapped up in her mess in the first place—because I’d been trying to help her.

“I’m okay, Grey,” she said with a shaky voice, those strange eyes still on mine. “Just a few scrapes and scratches that’ll heal up in no time.”

Again, we were silent and just looking at each other, neither of us making a move to pull apart. She released my hand, and the silence quickly grew awkward.

*What’s she thinking right now? Hell, what am* I *thinking right now after everything that just happened?*

Kendall turned toward Hans. “He’s dead.”

The moment broke as I took another look at the man. “You think?”

Kendall pushed against my chest. “Yes, good and dead, so you can get off me now.”

I took my time, enjoying the dominant position I had over her and not wanting to draw any more attention to the awkwardness hovering between us. It was like a bad joke: Two naked werewolves and a dead Dark Fae walk into a bar…

I finally moved off her and then offered a blood-soaked hand to help her up. She took it and pulled herself to her feet, coming close to me before gesturing at Hans. “What do we do about him? What a mess.”

I pulled back and looked at her head-on. “I don’t know, Agent King, why don’t you tell me?”

Kendall gave me a long stare before saying, “You can’t tell anyone. My identity is classified.”

I snorted. “What, like you didn’t tell me? If it weren’t for dearly departed Hans here, I still wouldn’t know you’re an MIB agent. Were you ever going to tell me the truth?”

“Um…no? Kind of defeats the purpose. Tell me, do you imagine it’s okay for undercover agents to go around revealing who they are to just anyone who asks?” Kendall turned away from me and began swiping the blood off her skin.

“I don’t care; you still should have told me.”

“And if I had, would it have mattered? I helped you with Chessa, with Hans. I did my job, and now you don’t have to worry about the Dark Fae mafia. With their leader dead, they have bigger problems to worry about.” Kendall cursed under her breath as she realized she wasn’t doing much but smearing the blood around. “Everything worked out. You should be thanking me.”

I was still pissed off. All this time she’d been around us, in our house, in our lives, pretending to be something she wasn’t. “I’m not thanking you for deceiving us. It’s no wonder I knew I could never trust you.”

“Good instincts, I guess,” Kendall said dryly.

I moved past her. “I need to go get cleaned up.” This night had certainly taken a turn I hadn’t expected, but I supposed it could have gone worse. It could have been me or Kendall or even Cali lying there dead in Hans’s place.

Kendall touched my arm as I passed. “If you tell anyone who I really am, it could put me and others in danger.”

I stared down at where her hand rested on my arm and felt a conflicted desire to want to believe her, to agree, but I couldn’t do that right now. I was still too mad, still too thrown by the revelation of who she really was.

I shook her hand off. “That’s not my problem, Agent King. I’m sure the MIB trained you on how to deal with being compromised.”

I stepped out into the hallway, wanting nothing more than to get as far away from Kendall as I could. I wanted to find Cali and let her know that the danger had passed—and to hold her. I’d never felt such a strong desire before just to hold her close.

As for Kendall, I didn’t quite know yet what I was going to do about her. I needed a little time to think that through. And in the meantime, I wondered if what she said would hold true—that the Dark Fae would be scrambling without their leader and would cool off on coming after us. Or would Hans’s death make things harder for the packs?

*What if someone gets wind of exactly what happened to him and seeks revenge against us? Could it be that easy—that the Dark Fae mafia threat dies with Hans?*

I was still wiping blood from my body when I ran into Mikah and Gabriel. They both stopped in their tracks, their mouths open in shock.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Gabriel asked as Mikah stood by, staring at me in silence.

I started to tell them that Kendall killed Hans when I remembered the tense conversation I’d had with Mikah about Kendall before.

I stepped up to him. “You knew, didn’t you?”

Mikah said nothing.

Gabriel put a hand on my arm, pushed me back slightly from Mikah. “Wait a second, what’s going on here?”

Mikah turned to Gabriel. “You should go let the others know that Hans is dead. I need to speak to Greyson.”

Gabriel passed a confused look between us. “Okay…I guess?” With one final lingering glance at Mikah, he headed off.

“Not even Gabriel knows about Kendall,” Mikah said once Gabriel was well out of earshot. “So not only did I never tell you, I never told anyone. And now that you know, you need to keep it to yourself.”

“I’m not about to take orders from anyone, not you and not Kendall, who said the exact same thing,” I said. I was still processing this new information and hated that everyone was so quick to tell me what I could and couldn’t do with this knowledge.

“And I’m not surprised that she told you to keep quiet. She was right to, whether you want to ‘take orders’ or not. It’s not about that, anyway. MIB isn’t the kind of thing you want to mess with. It’s bigger than you or me. They keep us safe, maintain the balance between supernaturals and humans, but they can also do us great harm.”

“So, you’ve worked with them?” I asked. The more I learned about the MIB, the angrier I became, knowing that Kendall had come into our lives and given us any exposure to it.

“I have, but I never look forward to it.” Mikah looked pained, as if he were remembering a particular instance of unpleasantness involving the MIB. “Anyway, if you’re smart, you’ll take my advice.”

“Which is?”

“To stay as far away from Kendall as possible. Forget about her.”

“And what if I don’t?” It wasn’t about staying away from Kendall, per say, but about Mikah or anyone else thinking that they could tell me what was best for me. I made those types of decisions for myself.

Mikah shrugged. “Then you’ll be putting yourself and everyone around you in danger.”

**Episode 5254**

**Xavier**

I zeroed in on the man speaking to Cali and sprang out of the trees, slamming into him and driving him to the ground. I wasn’t about to take any chances—he hadn’t attacked Cali yet, but that didn’t mean he had no plans to. His sword flew out of his hand and slid across the ground, coming to a stop at Cali’s feet.

I bared my teeth, wondering if it was worth talking to this asshole, or if I should kill first and ask questions later. The only thing I knew was that I wasn’t about to let him hurt Cali.

“Stop, Xavier! Don’t hurt him!” Cali screamed.

I snarled at the man as I kept him pinned to the ground. Cali was always trying to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but I wasn’t feeling so generous.

*He raised his sword against you*,I mind linked to Cali. *He’s going to pay for that.*

Cali came to stand over us. *Yes, but then he lowered it and said that he was looking for me! If he wanted to attack me, he had plenty of time to do so before you tackled him! Let him go so he can explain himself!*

I shifted, but kept my arm across the man’s throat as I asked, “Did the Dark Fae mafia send you?” I pressed my forearm down harder, and he let out a choking sound. “And don’t lie.”

The man scowled in confusion. “What?” he grunted, using his hands to try and push me off.

Cali knelt beside us. “Why were you looking for me?”

“Easy,” I said. “He wants to kill you.”

“Yes, but he knows me—he used my full name.”

“That proves nothing except that this mafia guy knows more about you than he should,” I said. The mafia had been sniffing around Cali for days now. It wasn’t farfetched to think that they’d figured out her full name along the way.

The intruder struggled against me, trying to get up, but I kept him pinned to the ground. “Keep still before you piss me off!”

The man relaxed for only a second before he pushed against me again, trying to break free. But I was bigger and much stronger, so it wasn’t hard for me to keep him right where he was.

I took a moment to study the man closely and had to admit that he looked a little out of place. He kind of reminded me of the everyday, run-of-the-mill Fae I’d encountered in the Fae world, only a lot more disheveled. And when I really thought about it, Dark Fae mafia members had a different look—more polished for sure—and all of them had this wild, unhinged look in their eyes that this guy didn’t have.

*But that doesn’t mean anything. The Dark Fae mafia probably has all kinds of members—spies and scouts and scammers—this could be someone they sent to distract us, or he could be a different type of killer than the rest. All I know is he’s not going to get close enough to Cali to pull anything.*

Cali picked up the man’s sword and examined it, struggling under its weight. “I think you should let him go,” she said to me. “I don’t think he’s here to hurt anyone.”

I hesitated, wondering if that was a good idea. Someone was trying to get into the Vanguard palace—someone who didn’t belong here—and from what I could see, this was the guy. But he was outnumbered and had little chance of getting away with a palace full of werewolves. Maybe Cali was right, and it was worth backing off and talking to him to find out exactly what he was up to.

I gave him a good shove and got to my feet.

The man coughed a little, rubbed at his throat, and stood up, glaring at me as he brushed off his clothes. “I’m Marius Raistlin. Nice to meet you, too,” he said bitterly. “Somehow I’m not surprised that one of the first people I meet in the human world tried to choke me to death,” he said smugly. “No class at all.”

I smirked at him. “Consider that your welcome party.” Even with his snide remark, he didn’t seem like the brand of Dark Fae that had been coming after us. “You don’t look like any mafia guy I’ve ever encountered.”

Marius gave me the same confused look as before. “Listen, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. I came from the Fae world for a specific reason. I don’t know anything about this Dark Fae mafia you seem to be obsessed with—”

“You said you came to find me.” Cali interrupted. “Why?”

“Yeah,” I growled. “Why?” I was ready for his answer and prepared to take him out if I got even a sniff of a lie.

“I was sent by your sister Artemis,” Marius explained.

Cali gasped in shock and rushed up to the Fae, but I quickly stepped between them. There was no way I was going to trust anything this guy said, and I certainly wasn’t about to let him lay a finger on Cali. He was going to have to do a lot more than name drop Artemis to get me to believe he wasn’t up to something.

*There’s no way I’m going to let anything happen to Cali. I just opened up to her, told her how I really feel about her. I have to protect her. I have to keep her safe at all costs.*

I heard footsteps approaching and turned to see Greyson, Colton, Maya, and others running up, already hitting us with a barrage of questions, their eyes on the stranger, and all of them on high alert.

“Who the hell is this?” Greyson asked.

I looked my brother up and down. He looked like hell, was smeared from head to toe in blood. I couldn’t even count all the times I’d seen him covered in blood in our lifetime, but never at a Valentine’s Day party. I was dying to ask him what happened, but instead said, “This guy claims that he was sent by Artemis to find Cali.”

Greyson turned his attention to Marius. “Sent by Artemis? Why?”

“Because Artemis needs Cali’s help,” Marius replied.

Cali gasped again. “She needs my help? Is my sister in trouble?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Marius admitted. “I only know that Artemis was forced to make a Fae promise and can’t leave where she is without your help. She sent me here to the human world to find you, and here I am. And let me just say, it wasn’t easy.”

“And has she at least found who she’s looking for?” Cali asked.

Marius looked around uneasily. “No, she hasn’t. At least not the last time I saw her.”

“He seems like he’s hiding something,” I said, noting the man’s unease. “He’s probably lying. Most likely, he’s nothing but another one of those Dark Fae mafia fuckers trying to trick us.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Greyson said. “Their leader—Hans—he’s dead. I doubt the mafia is making any moves right now against Cali without the head of the organization giving the order.”

“Wait, he’s dead?” I said, surprised. Once again, I took in how bloody my brother was. “How? When?”

Greyson sighed. “It’s a long story that I don’t want to get into right now. I’ll fill you in later.”

I turned back to Marius. “Then who the fuck is this guy?”

“I just told you. I’m Marius, a friend of Artemis’s sent to bring Cali back to her in the Fae world. Are all werewolves this dumb?”

I took a step toward him and shifted a paw. “Dumb as we are deadly—want to see a demonstration?”

Marius shrank back.

“Xavier, calm down—and you,” Greyson said, turning a sharp gaze on Marius. “We don’t know who the hell you are, and so that means we don’t have to trust a word you say. There’s no way for us to know if you’re really who you say you are…or if you’re just a Dark Fae mafia accomplice.”

“Now I’m an *accomplice*?” Marius said. “I came here alone.”

“Everyone just stop,” Cali said, standing between Marius and me and Greyson. “Let’s take him inside. I want to talk to him one-on-one.”

“There’s no fucking way that’s happening,” I said. “We still don’t know who this guy really is, and until we do, you for damn sure aren’t going to be in a room alone with him.”

Greyson gave me a look that said he wasn’t exactly excited that I’d stepped in, but I could see that he agreed. We had never gotten along very well and certainly were never on the same page—except when it came to protecting Cali. So rather than voice whatever annoyance he felt toward me at this moment, he stepped to my side in solidarity.

“Xavier’s right, Cali. We can’t just take this guy’s word for it.” Greyson looked to me. “How in the hell do we know if this guy is who he says he is?”

**Episode 5255**

I was trying my best to not freak out. If what this Marius guy was saying was true, then my sister needed me. And if Artemis needed me, then I needed to do whatever I could to get to her. What if she was hurt, or worse?

*What kind of trouble could Artemis be in that she needs* me *to come to the Fae world to help* her*?* *Artemis has always been more than capable of taking care of herself. She’s so damn independent! If she needs me, then it must be serious.*

And if she’d been forced to make a Fae promise, then that meant things were bad. Artemis would never make a Fae promise if she wasn’t under duress—in fact—almost no Fae would.

“Can you take me to her?” I said to Marius, suddenly becoming panicked about what Artemis might be facing all on her own in the Fae world. I didn’t want to waste any more time.

Greyson touched my arm to get my attention. “Cali, no. We can’t just take this guy at his word. We need to be sure of exactly what his intentions are, first.”

“I know that, but if he isn’t who he says he is, how would he know anything about Artemis being in the Fae world in the first place? And how would he know that she’s my sister?”

Xavier and Greyson exchanged a look. They were being protective of me, but it was clear that they didn’t have an explanation either.

“I’m taking him into the palace to get to the bottom of this,” I said. “And we need to be quick about it.”

Greyson and Xavier flanked Marius as we took him inside and through the ballroom where Lucian and Elle’s video was still playing.

*Either this is the longest clip in history, or they put it on a loop. I feel bad for Elle and Lucian—their party interrupted by all this. The guests, too. They came here to spend Valentine’s Day with their loved ones, and now the entire night’s been hijacked by this whole mess.*

We took Marius into a small side room where Xavier and Greyson stood between me and Marius, blocking him from me. They were already bombarding him with questions, so many that Marius had frozen up and wasn’t answering anything.

“It’s in your best interest to answer our questions. We’re going to ask you anything we need to in order to prove that you’re who you say you are,” Greyson said.

Marius rolled his eyes. “We’re still stuck on that? I don’t even know you, so why would I lie to you?”

*He has a point. For all intents and purposes, he came here to help me help my sister, and we’ve been nothing but jerks to him the entire time.*

“Xavier, Greyson, I appreciate you guys looking out for me—I really do—but I think it would be better if I talked to Marius alone. I don’t think you’re helping,” I said.

“No, I already told you that’s not happening,” Xavier said. “We leave you alone with this guy and he attacks you, and then what? I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you.”

Greyson gave Xavier a look but said nothing. I could tell it was one of those times where he agreed with Xavier but was a little miffed that his brother was the one to say something like that to me.

Lucian came walking in and looked surprisingly chill considering the circumstances. There was a time when he would’ve been in full panic mode because his party hadn’t gone the way he’d planned.

“I heard what happened,” the princeling said. “Want to borrow my dungeon for your…um…interrogation?” He glared at Marius. “I just got the entire dungeon fitted with new iron restraints, and there’s even a deep, dark pit—”

“Fuck that!” Marius said, his eyes widening with dread. “I’ve already been through hell to get here, been tackled and choked by an overzealous wolf with a chip on his shoulder, and now you’re trying to imprison me?! Hell no! I have no intention of spending even a second in another dungeon. And the longer we waste time here while you ask your long list of unnecessary questions, the more dangerous things may get for Artemis.”

Marius turned his attention to me.

“Don’t you care that your sister sent me? I wouldn’t be in this godforsaken place at all if it wasn’t a dire situation. Does that matter to you at all? Or would you rather let your bodyguards here waste precious time?”

Now I was really concerned. There was something about Marius that made me believe what he was saying, but I knew I needed more to go on than this stranger’s word.

“There are too many people in here asking questions, sowing doubt and suspicion. If Artemis is in trouble, we’re going to need Marius’s help, and sitting around in here intimidating him isn’t going to accomplish anything,” I said.

A sheepish look passed over Greyson’s face. “I know, Cali, but we’re just trying—”

“I know, and like I said, I appreciate it. But I can take care of myself, and I’m a decent judge of character, so all of this is overkill. Let’s just bring him back to the pack house and deal with this in a more intimate and less hectic setting. Being wary of Marius is understandable, but there’s no need to be hostile.”

“Fine,” Xavier said begrudgingly.

“You have a point. And he’s just one man. If he tries anything I’ll cut him down in seconds,” Greyson said, giving Marius a pointed look.

“Awesome! More threats,” Marius grumbled.

“I’ll come with you,” Xavier said.

Greyson shook his head at his brother. “No need. We’ve got this.”

Xavier hesitated and looked at me. “What do you want, Cali? Do you want me there by your side? Just in case?”

There was a part of me that wanted to say that yes, that was all I wanted, but I couldn’t let myself get drawn into more Xavier drama right now.

*We have so much to talk about, to figure out, but right now, my priority has to be my sister. She needs me. The Xavier stuff can’t be dealt with until after I make sure that Artemis is safe.*

“Thanks, Xavier, but I’ll be okay. I promise to let you know what we find out,” I said.

“Okay, but whatever you do, don’t go to the Fae world without me.” Xavier glanced defiantly at Greyson before stepping out.

Greyson gave me a look that I couldn’t quite read, but I realized I couldn’t get drawn into whatever he was feeling right now, either. Artemis was my priority. Everything else would sort itself out—I hoped.

I took a deep breath as I turned my attention back to Marius, relieved that Xavier wouldn’t be there to distract me. But deep down, I felt disappointed that Xavier and I would have to wait to resolve our whole “friends” issue. Despite how afraid I was for Artemis, I knew that our conversation would be nagging at the back of my mind until we resolved things.

“We should get to my car,” Greyson suggested. He looked to Jay, who had come in right after Lucian. “Let everyone know that it’s time to leave. And when you see Rishika, let her know that I need to speak to her privately. I’m a little worried about how she’s going to react to this latest twist.”

Jay rushed off to follow Greyson’s directions, and then we made our way out of the palace and to Greyson’s car with Marius right behind us. He was grumbling under his breath, and I was starting to worry that he was going to say forget it and run off before we had a chance to figure out what was going on with Artemis. I wouldn’t blame him and would probably do the same in his place.

We were almost to the driveway when I heard someone running toward us, followed by Cresta screaming, “Rishika! Come back!”

I turned to see what was going on just as Rishika slammed into Marius, tackling him to the ground. She placed a partially shifted claw against Marius’s throat. “What have you done to my girlfriend?!” she snarled.

As Greyson tried to pull Rishika off, Marius sputtered, “You must be Rishika.”

Rishika was taken aback. “How does he know my name?”

Greyson pulled Rishika back. “Relax, Rishika. We need to talk.” Greyson pulled Rishika toward the car, his voice low and steady as he tried to calm her down.

Once again, Marius picked himself up off the ground and dusted himself off. “I’m really starting to regret coming here. Artemis should have warned me that the human world is full of rage-drunk werewolves who attack first and ask questions later,” he grumbled under his breath.

Marius followed Greyson to the car just as Maren came up and pulled me aside. Her voice low, her eyes swimming with fear, she whispered, “I know who Marius is, and whatever you do, don’t trust him.”

**Episode 5256**

**Xavier**

I found myself back in the ballroom, but my thoughts were still with Cali. I was doing my best to not feel hurt that she hadn’t wanted me to come with her back to the pack house. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand why she wanted to keep her distance right now and preferred to handle Marius without me. It was that I just didn’t want to be away from her. I wanted to stay close to protect her.

Lucian’s relentless video about his and Elle’s epic romance had finally come to an end, and though the mood was still a little off in the room, all the couples were back to dancing. I should’ve been dancing with my mate, too. It was probably expected of me, but I couldn’t bring myself to seek Ava out.

*I hate this. I’m a fucking Alpha. I shouldn’t have to hide away, avoid anyone—especially my Luna. But what am I supposed to do when I’m all torn up and lost in my feelings about another woman? Ava’s smart. She’ll sense something’s wrong.*

I was still so confused about what happened with Cali, or more specifically, why it had happened at all. Why had I felt so compelled to tell her that I was no longer content to just be friends? And why tonight of all nights? It was like a dam had burst and everything had come spilling out of me all at once.

It wasn’t that I’d lied about any of it—that wasn’t what was eating at me. It was just that…maybe some things were better left unsaid.

*She probably would have invited me to come along to the Redwood pack house if I hadn’t let everything out like that. I probably overwhelmed her, and how can I blame her for that? She has Greyson to think about, and she’s such a good person that she doesn’t want to step on his or Ava’s toes. If only we’d had more time to talk things out…*

I’d started to talk it through with her, and I sensed that there was something she’d wanted to tell me, too, but she’d held back from doing so. *Why?* Why couldn’t she have just told me that she felt the same way? Perhaps she’d been ready to admit it to me…but before she could, we were interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the Fae, Marius.

I looked up and spotted Ava moving through the crowd toward me.

*What am I going to do about her? I don’t think I can fake how I feel right now, give her what she needs, show her the affection that she deserves.*

Now that I’d told Cali exactly how I felt, what was I going to tell Ava? What had I really expected to happen after that revelation, when we still had Ava and Greyson to think about? Things were so complicated already, and I’d just made it all worse. With only a few words, I’d undone all the progress I’d made in accepting the way my life was now and had opened the floodgates to my real feelings: that I wanted Cali back.

I hadn’t necessarily expected an answer from Cali after my revelation, but some kind of indication that she felt the same would have done wonders for me. But that just wasn’t in the cards for me with all the confusion at the party. I was only trying to tell Cali how I felt, and it was a new and unsettling thing for me to be that open with her after everything that had torn us apart.

I hated this feeling in the pit of my stomach now—a mix of vulnerability and guilt. I’d exposed myself to Cali, and even though I was struggling now, I knew that it was the right thing to do. Isn’t holding my feelings back what had been causing the headaches? But my guilt over how Ava would feel if she knew—well, that was overwhelming, too. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

*I can’t dwell on this. I have to shake it off so I can be present for Ava. It’s Valentine’s Day, and I just made that gesture with the bracelet. I shouldn’t ruin things for her tonight by acting disconnected and distracted.*

None of this was Ava’s fault. I had to keep her from picking up on how torn up I was about Cali. I didn’t know how I was going to hide it, but I had to try. There was no other option.

I forced a smile as Ava swept into my arms, kissed me, and started slow dancing with me. She pulled back, looked me in the eyes and gave me a seductive smile. “You know, Lucian’s palace has lots of rooms…and lots of steamy pools where we could sneak off, have a little fun.” She kissed me again. “What do you say? Want to make this party one to remember?”

I knew what Ava wanted, and a few days ago, I might have been game. But tonight had taken a turn, and now the only thing I wanted was Cali. It was wrong, and I felt like shit for feeling this way, but it was the truth. But it wasn’t like I could admit that to Ava. I still loved her too, that was the fucked up thing. Telling her would be cruel and pointless.

I made a point of rubbing my temples and grimaced. “That sounds like fun, but I have such a headache.” My guilt grew since this was one of the few times when I surprisingly didn’t have a headache at all. It was a cheap excuse, but it was all I had. All I knew was that I couldn’t be with Ava that way right now. Not with Cali dominating my every thought.

Ava looked disappointed for a moment, and then something hardened in her eyes. “What were you doing outside with Cali, anyway? I’ve barely seen you all night, and every time I did, you were with her.”

I pulled away from her. “I was trying to stop her from leaving.”

Ava took a step back now, too, putting a bit of space between us. “And why were you doing that?”

I shrugged. “Because it wasn’t safe for her.”

Ava nodded, avoiding my gaze as she stepped back into my arms and we started dancing again.

She was upset. I could tell.

She tightened her hold around my neck, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the bracelet shining on her wrist. I stopped the dance, knowing that I needed to clear the air between us.

“I need to tell you what Marissa said,” I said.

Ava raised a brow at me. “I told you, I don’t care.”

“But I think you should hear it.”

Ava glared. “Fine, if it will help ease your guilty conscience, go ahead and lay it out for me. But like I said, I don’t need to hear anything. I don’t care.”

“If that’s true, then why are you acting like this?”

Ava snorted. “Acting? Me, acting? Give me a fucking break. Seems like I’m the only one who isn’t acting. I told you I don’t care, and I meant it, but if it means so much for you to tell me whatever it is, go ahead. Get it over with.”

I took a breath, my uneasiness growing. This could go very, very badly, and I knew that, but it was either tell her now or wait until it came back to haunt me sometime down the line. And Marissa was Ava’s best friend. I didn’t trust her to keep this to herself for long. And at least if I told Ava myself, I could manage her reaction. This was all my fault anyway.

“When I bought you this bracelet…Marissa was with me and…” I took another deep breath, feeling a little embarrassed by how afraid I was to tell Ava what was burning on the tip of my tongue. “Marissa was with me, and she heard me tell the clerk that it was for Cali.”

Ava’s body stiffened against mine, and her arms slackened around my neck and dropped to her sides. I kept holding her though, hoping that keeping her close might lessen the blow of what I was telling her.

“It was a stupid mistake, a slip of the tongue or whatever. Nothing more. But that was what Marissa was referencing before. I just wanted you to know…”

Ava said nothing. She pulled away from me and was busy picking at the clasp of the bracelet, her jaw set in concentration.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Ava finally pulled the bracelet free of her wrist and held it out to me. “Why don’t you give it to Cali since she was obviously the one you wanted to spend today with.”

“Ava—”

Her teeth clenched in barely contained fury and she threw the bracelet on the ground so hard that it skidded across the floor and hit my shoes.

*This honestly could not have gone any worse.*

I stood there speechless, staring at the bracelet and wondering how the fuck I was going to fix this.

**Episode 5257**

We were approaching the pack house when I suddenly shouted, “Stop, Greyson. If we keep going, we’ll trip Big Mac’s alarm, and Marius will be toast!”

“Oh, right,” Greyson said. “I almost forgot.”

I had a sneaking suspicion that Greyson wouldn’t have cared all that much if Big Mac’s traps took Marius out, but I was too concerned about Artemis to let that happen. I knew that we still couldn’t be sure of Marius’s intentions, but right now I was leaning toward believing what he was telling us. And if he was telling the truth, he might be our only link to locating Artemis in the Fae world.

“Of course you have anti-Fae traps set up around your house!” Marius exclaimed. “I should have known. Truly, this place is the worst. I don’t get how Artemis lasted so long here.”

Greyson stopped the car, and we all climbed out. After Greyson and I passed through the tripwire together, I handed Greyson my bracelet. He stepped back across the traps and handed Marius the charm so that the Fae could cross over onto the property safely.

Marius looked impressed as he examined the bracelet. “Wow. I’ve heard of things like this—little trinkets and charms imbued with spell power—but witches are a rare commodity in the Fae world. The biggest danger you face there is the end of a sword or dagger or a magic blast or two.”

Once Marius was safely through the trap, Greyson took the bracelet back from him and handed it to me. “Just know that if you try to escape, it could be fatal,” Greyson warned.

“Got it: Don’t leave or I’ll be blown to bits. Very hospitable place you’ve got here,” Marius quipped. “I hope this isn’t how you welcome everyone who comes to help you save someone you love.”

“You talk too much,” Greyson muttered as he led the way into the pack house.

A few minutes later, I was with Marius and Greyson in the basement. “I don’t know if keeping you down here is entirely necessary, but I don’t want to take any chances,” I said to Marius.

Despite Maren’s warning, Marius hadn’t done anything to raise my suspicions—but that didn’t mean I wasn’t holding Maren’s words of caution in the back of my mind.

“It’s fine. I’ve stayed in far worse accommodations,” Marius said. “I can handle it.”

I watched as he settled into the small room. He was an attractive man, much more muscular than I’d first thought. And I could see that he was handsome under the dirt, grime, and streaks of blood on his face. I wondered what his connection to Artemis was.

I had a million questions for Marius, but they would have to wait. First, I needed to make sure he didn’t bleed out before we had a chance to get to the bottom of his connection to Artemis. Xavier hadn’t roughed him up too badly, but he was covered in cuts, scratches, and bruises.

I excused myself and went to find Torin, thinking that maybe he would be able to help heal some of Marius’s wounds. I searched the usual places—the kitchen and then the den and then finally bedroom—before I remembered that he was out with Kevin. I hated to disturb him, but Artemis’s life might be in jeopardy, and I knew that he would want to help if he could.

I called him, and he answered with some surprise on the first ring. “Cali! To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I’m so sorry to bother you, Torin, but we have a Fae here who’s injured and in need of your services.”

Sounding alarmed, Torin said, “I’m on my way. Who is it?”

“His name is Marius Raistlin,” I said. There was a long pause, and I pulled the phone away to look at the screen, thinking the call had dropped. But finally, Torin spoke again.

“You mean Marius Raistlin the bounty hunter?” There was a hint of warning in his voice. “That’s…wow. I can’t believe it.”

“Wait, do you know him?”

“I know *of* him,” Torin said. “Almost every Fae does. He was famous, or should I say infamous. When Astrid and I were in the Fae world, she had a crush on him. In fact, just about everybody did. I’ll admit I thought he was handsome, but the thing about him was, he would only use his charms to manipulate people into giving him what he really wanted—which was almost always to capture one of our friends.”

“What? So…he’s a…bad person?” I asked. He hadn’t seemed all that bad in the limited interactions I’d had with him, but I supposed that was part of his game: seeming harmless when he was anything but. Now I was even more curious about how he and Artemis had come to know each other—if he was telling the truth about that.

“Yes. He shouldn’t be trusted,” Torin said. “I know too many people who let their guard down around him, and it didn’t turn out well for them. He’s dangerous.”

“Maren said the same thing,” I told him.

“And Maren’s right,” Torin replied. “Be careful, Cali. I’ll be there soon, but watch yourself until then.”

I ended the call with Torin and returned to the basement—grabbing some leftovers for Marius on the way down since he had to be hungry. I was going to heed both Maren and Torin’s warnings about being wary of him, but that didn’t mean I was going to let him starve to death. Bad Fae or not, he knew something about Artemis, and I needed him in good enough shape to lead me to her when the time came.

Even before the warnings Torin and Maren had given me about the strange Fae, I’d already been on high alert merely because of my hallucinations. I couldn’t be completely sure of anything I was seeing or hearing. Even Marius had, for a moment, seemed like a hallucination since I’d seen him only seconds after trying to track down the wisp at Lucian’s party.

*This is the worst time for me to not be able to trust what I’m seeing. What if I screw things up in the Fae world because I don’t really know what’s happening around me? But Artemis needs me, so I’m going to have to suck it up.*

When I got back down to the basement, Marius was arguing with Greyson. “You all know this is a waste of time, right? What part of ‘Artemis needs help’ don’t you guys understand?” Marius shook his head. “This is getting ridiculous, really. I didn’t come all this way to be treated like shit.”

Greyson looked at me as I set the plate of food down. “He insists he isn’t part of the mafia, but how can we be sure? It seems like such a coincidence—a sudden influx of Dark Fae and then this guy shows up claiming to know your sister without any proof.”

Marius threw up his hands in frustration. “Will somebody please tell me what the hell a mafia is?”

“It’s a group of criminals who work together,” I explained.

Marius laughed. “Well, I’ll stop you right there. I’m a bounty hunter—I work alone. Just like Artemis.” Marius sputtered a laugh. “Dark Fae mafia? Really. What a bunch of nonsense.”

*He really doesn’t seem to know what we’re talking about with the Dark Fae mafia stuff…though I suppose he might just be that good a liar.*

“And how did you find me, anyway?” I asked him. I supposed it counted for something that Marius was admitting that he was a bounty hunter, but I still wasn’t convinced that he could be trusted.

“Because I’m a bounty hunter!” Marius said. “I followed my instincts with some occasional guidance from a wisp I conjured. You have your talents—all the claws and teeth and growling and stuff,” he said to Greyson, “and I have mine. Tracking down people who don’t want to be found, and sometimes, people who have no clue I’m even looking for them.”

Again, I thought back to the wisp that had drawn me out of Lucian’s palace. Could it have been leading me to Marius?

“You’re telling me that you arrived in our world with nothing to go on but a name, and you found Cali?”

Marius looked like he was about to collapse from annoyance. “Yes! You do know what bounty hunters do, don’t you? Tracking people is our bread and butter. And when you get really good at it like I am, it’s a piece of cake. The harder someone is to find, the better. I like a challenge.”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t buy it.”

“Surprise, surprise! The wolf is skeptical.” Marius got up from his seat and got in Greyson’s face. “I’m tired of the runaround and being called a liar and a mafia member over and over again, so let’s get this cleared up once and for all—tell me what I have to do to make you believe me.”

**Episode 5258**

**Greyson**

Cali and I were in my library, and I couldn’t sit still. I was pacing back and forth and still unwilling to trust a word that had come out of Marius’s mouth. Maybe my mistrust was misguided—I was still reeling from Kendall’s lies and trying to make sense of the revelation that she was an MIB agent—though I supposed I couldn’t really blame Marius for that.

*How could she have kept that from me? From Cali? But like she said…maybe she didn’t have a choice. She doesn’t even know us all that well, so maybe I should cut her a little slack…but no. She should have told us the truth.*

And even if it turned out that everything Marius had told us was true, I wasn’t going to sign off on Cali going back to the Fae world with him. It had been a dangerous enough journey when we’d gone there seeking the moon buttercup flower. I couldn’t even imagine what dangers Artemis had gotten herself tangled up in, but it sounded to me like she might be in serious trouble.

I wanted to help Artemis, but there was no way I was going to end up losing both sisters by trusting this strange Fae who appeared out of nowhere with all his pleas for Cali to follow him back to the Fae world. The Fae world was unpredictable, and while I knew that Cali could hold her own, there was no way to guarantee that she would be able to face the types of challenges that might find her in the Fae world.

Xavier had told Cali that she couldn’t go to the Fae world without him, but that was nothing more than him overstepping yet again. Cali was *my* mate, and I was more than capable of looking out for her. Xavier had Ava, and that was who he needed to be worried about.

Still, this wasn’t the best time for me to be trucking off to the Fae world. I was still processing the hot mess with Kendall and the very real chance that Hans’s death wouldn’t stop the Dark Fae mafia from coming after us. I still wasn’t sure that I could trust Kendall’s assumption that the mafia was no longer a threat because their leader was dead.

*That seems too easy. They probably have lieutenants and other bosses just the same as any group like them. Probably someone who will come to power in Hans’s place and take over his mission. It would be just our luck for someone worse than Hans to come into power.*

But I knew next to nothing about the inner workings of the Dark Fae mafia, so there was no way for me to know for sure. For now, it was probably best for me to assume that they were dormant like Kendall assumed, so I could focus on whatever was going on with Artemis.

“I think we should speak to Adair about this,” Cali said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “He can remove a lot of the uncertainty we’re feeling about this.”

“That sounds like a good idea—it definitely couldn’t hurt to get him involved. If anyone knows about the Fae world, Marius, and everything in between, it’s Adair. That is, if he agrees to cooperate. The guy can be a little hard to read sometimes.”

“That’s an understatement,” Cali said. “He’s so moody and unpredictable that there’s a good chance he’ll tell us he’s not interested and that we’re on our own. Let’s reach out to Gabriel and Mikah, see if they can contact him for us,” Cali said. “Maybe he’ll be a little more agreeable if they’re involved.”

She started toward the door, but I grabbed her, pulled her to me and kissed her.

“What’s that for?” Cali asked with a smile on her lips.

“Just checking on you. Want to know how you’re doing. Today was a lot. Are you feeling better?”

“I’m fine. Just worried about Artemis, I guess.” She sighed. “I hate that we can’t trust Marius and just take him at his word. If we did, we would already be on our way to save her.”

“I know you’re worried and that you’re eager to rush off and help her. I feel the same as you do…but I want to know how *you’re* doing. You had me really worried at the party when you had that hallucination.”

“That was messed up for sure,” Cali agreed. “But how can I fight it? If my mind is playing tricks on me, how do I make it stop?” She sighed. “I talked to Rowena about it.”

She hesitated, and I lifted her chin so that she had to look me in the eye. “What is it? What did she say?”

Cali looked stricken as she explained, “Rowena thinks it might be the unresolved *due destini* driving me mad.”

Struck by this, I pulled Cali into a tight hug. I felt guilty for the thoughts that immediately began swirling through my mind.

*If she would just choose me, she wouldn’t even have to worry about the* due destini *anymore. Everything would be better. Her mind would be calm, she could cut Xavier off once and for all so that he can go fully into his life with the Samara pack and leave us be, and I would have her all to myself forever.*

And with those thoughts came hopes for marriage, children, a real future.

Cali clung to me and said, “And there’s something else I need to tell you, but I’m scared to.”

I pulled away from her and looked her in the eye. “Don’t be afraid to tell me anything, Cali. I’m here for you no matter what.”

Cali sighed. “Today at the party, Xavier pretty much admitted that he wants things to go back to the way they were.”

I pulled back and studied Cali’s face. “Back? What do you mean, back? Back to what?”

“You know…back to how things were before Adéluce. He doesn’t want to just be friends with me anymore. He wants…more.”

I turned away from Cali, not wanting her to see the raw emotion on my face. I cursed under my breath.

*Leave it to my brother to pull some shit like this on Valentine’s Day.*

“I’m so sorry, Greyson. I know that this isn’t what you want to hear. I’m still processing it myself. I—”

Cali cut herself off, and I wondered what else she was going to say before I decided I didn’t want to know. Not yet. If she’d stopped herself from finishing that sentence, then it was probably best that I not push her to finish.

I knew I couldn’t be angry with Cali about this, but it was hard to keep my mind on track when it came to my brother.

When I finally trusted myself to be calm, I turned back to face Cali. “Thanks for telling me. At least someone’s being honest with me.”

Cali looked at me. “What does that mean?”

Thinking about Kendall, I said, “Nothing, it’s…it’s just been a long day. Why don’t we go to bed? I can barely keep my eyes open.”

A few minutes later, Cali and I were lying in bed together. I pulled her to me, and it didn’t take long for her breathing to slow. She was asleep.

I stroked her hair, buried my nose in it and inhaled her scent. This was heaven to me. I got to sleep with Cali every night. No discussions about who she would be with, no schedules to keep. No other man to share her with.

*But that could all change if Cali and Xavier decide that they want things to be how they were before.*

I wished I could just shut my mind off and stop thinking about Xavier, the *due destini*, MIB, Kendall, Marius, Artemis—any of it. It would be so nice to just have a blank mind and enjoy being close to the woman I loved.

*Especially while you still have her all to yourself. That might not be the case soon.*

I pushed that thought away. I didn’t want to get lost in obsessing over Xavier and Cali again. Now wasn’t the time.

And on the upside, at least Hans was dead. So much had happened today that I hadn’t had time to stop and think about what a victory that was.

I was just starting to drift off to sleep when I was stirred by a purple glow. I sat up as Kendall came walking toward me, tugging at the bottom of a large T-shirt as she came closer. Her legs were bare underneath, suggesting she had nothing else on. A chill raced through me as I took her in.

It was *my* shirt.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“You fall asleep?” she asked.

Slowly, knelt on the edge of the bed. Her lips parted as she started crawling toward me. Anticipation wound tightly around me as I watched the T-shirt bunch around her waist, revealing more of her hips.

A deep, dark desire ignited within me.

“It’s just you and me.” Her eyes drifted over to the space beside me in the bed, as if she were looking for someone else.

Then in one swift motion she took the large shirt off—confirming that she had nothing on underneath—as she grabbed the sheet covering me. Arousal shot through me, almost pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

She crawled on top of me, every place her skin touched mine feeling like hot coals. Pink flushed her cheeks as she grinned slyly. “Dreaming about me, Grey?” she asked.

Then her mouth was on mine.

**Episode 5259**

**Xavier**

I was making out with Cali, her arms wrapped around me, my hands running up and down her body, enjoying every dip and curve. It had been too damn long since we’d had this chance, and finally, there was nothing stopping us. I pressed my lips against her neck and darted out my tongue to taste her skin. Every nerve ending in my body was alive and buzzing, and I never wanted this feeling to go away.

With her lips against my ear, she whispered, “Xavier, I want you. *Please*. I can’t hold back any longer… I need it.” She grabbed my head and pushed it down her body. But as I began kissing my way down, inhaling her scent and trailing my tongue against her skin along the way, I felt something hard brush against my neck.

I pulled back, realizing with shock that Cali was wearing a bracelet—and not just any bracelet—the one I’d given to Ava. The one she’d thrown back at me.

“Where the hell did that come from?” I asked, my head swirling as I tried to remember what had happened between Ava throwing it at me and Cali ending up with it on her delicate wrist.

Cali smiled darkly at me. “I took back what was mine.” She held her arm out and the light glinted on it. “Doesn’t it look better on me?”

My eyes snapped open, and the morning light made me lift a hand up to shield my eyes. I didn’t move at first, lying still to catch my breath as the dream began to fade. Already, the details of the dream were slipping away, but the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach remained.

Ava stirred beside me and turned over in her sleep to face me. I thought about last night and how I’d continued to fake my headache even after we returned from Lucian’s. Ava had been angry and had readily accepted that I didn’t feel well, and we’d both gone to sleep without saying a word to each other—which, under the circumstances, was the best-case scenario.

But I couldn’t ignore the truth, especially in the cold light of day. Things had changed. Maybe that was why Ava had responded so strongly to what I’d told her about the bracelet. Maybe she knew that things were not the way they were before.

My body still responded to Ava, and I had a feeling that it always would, but the emotional connection…it just wasn’t the same. Not after what had happened with Cali. I’d hoped that I would feel differently this morning, but I didn’t. If anything, I felt more resolved to my desire to be with Cali.

I would never be happy until I had her back—not as friends—but as my mate, my lover, as everything she was meant to be in my life.

Ava sighed and stirred, and I panicked at the thought of her waking up.

*I have to get out of here. There’s no way I can face Ava right now.*

\*\*\*

A short while later, I was sprinting through the woods, happy that this was still an activity that could make me feel better—my go-to way of self-medicating. Out here in the woods, I could think without any interruptions, without any expectations, without any pressure from anyone else.

I knew I was going to have to figure out how to move forward, how to extricate myself from the mess I’d found myself in. I couldn’t see a path through it as clearly as I would have hoped, but there was no way in hell I could keep going like this. The only thing I knew was that I had to be back with Cali.

*Can I do that and still be with Ava? Is there some kind of solution to all this, some way to make everyone happy that I can’t quite see?*

I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it.

*I bet Carlson Greene would love to dig into this hot shit show of a mess I’ve found myself in.*

My ears perked up at the sound of someone else running nearby, and not long after, a familiar scent hit my nose.

*Gabe?*

Gabe emerged from a cluster of trees, and I shifted, nodded a greeting. He and Mikah had stayed at the Samara post-Vanguard party. He took one look at me and smirked. “You look like I feel.”

I smiled. “Rough night?”

Gabe plopped down on a stump. “I guess you could say that. I never went to sleep. I was hoping that a run in the woods would help, but I still feel like death warmed over. Lucian might be an insufferable dick, but his parties are awesome.”

“Hmm. Not sure awesome is the word I’d use. Memorable might be better.”

He laughed. “Maybe you’re right. Either way, I had fun.”

“How’s Mikah? He have a rough night too?”

Gabe grinned. “Even a vampire needs a break from the Gabinator.”

I winced. “Please don’t ever call yourself that again.”

“Hey, just telling it like it is,” he said. “And what about you? You’re out here without Ava. You wear her out?”

“No, we just slept,” I said.

His eyes went wide. “You two didn’t fuck? It was Valentine’s Day! That’s what Valentine’s Day is made for!”

“No. We were tired.”

Gabe gave me a skeptical look. “Bullshit. I don’t believe it. If anything, I thought you two would have celebrated the demise of the infamous Hans.”

Eager to turn the subject to anything but my fucked-up situation with Ava, I said, “Didn’t realize that the intruder was Hans.”

Gabe shot me another look. “Really? You didn’t know?”

“No. My brother didn’t bother to tell me that…though I guess now I know whose blood he was wearing.” I sighed. “Wow. Well, that is some good news, though I wish I’d been there to see it.”

“Same. Greyson and Kendall made quick work of him from what I heard.” Then his expression changed. “Did Greyson say anything to you about that?”

“No. We had something else come up, so I’m guessing Greyson didn’t think to share much of anything. What else did Greyson keep from me?”

“I don’t know… Mikah and Greyson seem to have some weird beef with Kendall. Haven’t you noticed?”

I shrugged. “No. Greyson’s always got beef with someone. It’s hard to keep up.”

Gabe chortled. “You’re one to talk.”

“Anyway, I’m not surprised that Greyson didn’t mention anything. He’s not all that forthcoming with me even on a good day.”

Gabe shook his head. “Oh? I guess I thought you two were getting along yesterday, but then again, who can keep up? Wishful thinking on my part, I guess, that you two were on the same page for once.”

“Like you said, our relationship changes like the wind.”

*And now that I’ve told Cali how I really feel, we’ll really be on shaky ground.*

“Oh, Cali called me last night. Wants me to contact Adair and Tabitha about that Fae that popped up out of nowhere—Marius or whatever. I think Adair will be heading this way to help. But…he didn’t really give me an answer now that I think about it. You know how Adair is.”

I was only half listening. My mind was on Marius and the prospect of Cali going to the Fae world. And then I thought about how Greyson had made sure to tell me I wasn’t needed.

*Screw that. I’ll leave it up to Cali to tell me if she doesn’t want me to come along. Greyson doesn’t have any say in it.*

“I think I’m going to head to the Redwoods’, see how things are going. Why not come along and tell me about Adair on the way?” I said.

“I pretty much told you everything already,” Gabe said.

“Yeah, but I wasn’t listening.”

“What else is new? Sure, I’ll come along. But let’s make a race of it so I can kick your ass. Ready, set, go!” he said, shifting and taking off like a bullet into the trees. I was right on his heels despite his attempt to get a head start and leave me in the dust.

This was an even better way to get my mind off the mess my life had become—a little friendly competition and conversation. Things always seemed a lot simpler when I was in the woods and weaving through the trees, my mind preoccupied with avoiding smacking into a tree trunk or tripping over raised roots and fallen branches, stumps, other animals.

*But I can’t run forever, can I? At some point, I’m going to have to stop and face everything that has to be addressed.*

We thundered onto the Redwood pack house lawn just as Greyson was coming out onto the porch. He watched us approach, the expression on his face unreadable.

Gabe and I shifted while Greyson simply stared at us, not saying a word.

“So, what did you find out about this Marius guy?” I asked him.

Suddenly Greyson came charging down the steps and grabbed me. “What the hell did you say to Cali last night?”

**Episode 5260**

I was beyond exhausted, but missing crew wasn’t an option, and I was more than happy to go. It was the perfect way to put my mind and body anywhere but on the problems I was going to have to face when I got back home.

I only hoped that Greyson wasn’t upset with me. He’d seemed okay last night when we went to sleep, but I’d awoken to an empty bed this morning. Normally, that wouldn’t be a big deal, but given how things had gone yesterday, there was a good chance it meant something.

*I shouldn’t read too much into it. It’s not like I regret telling him about Xavier. He needed to know. There was no way I could keep something like that from him. He would have sensed that something was wrong, and I don’t want to keep him in the dark about anything to do with my struggles with the* due destini*. He needs to know.*

But I wished we could have talked more, worked it out. I didn’t want it to be something that he sat with and obsessed over, that festered. And I truly had no idea what he was thinking. He’d responded well enough in the moment, but things like that, they had a way of slow burning and becoming harder to stomach over time. Greyson was patient and understanding, but everyone had their limits.

As I packed up my gear, Lola came up to me.

“Hey Cali. How was practice? Did you…um…row a lot of miles or whatever?”

I smiled at her. “Something like that. Nice of you to come with me.”

Lola had come with me and watched from the stands after I’d made some excuse about not wanting to come to crew alone. But the truth was, I’d been worried about the possibility of having hallucinations in front of my teammates. At least if something like that happened and Lola was nearby, she’d be able to help.

The *due destini* and its effects were my problem. I wasn’t about to impose all my drama on my crew team members. I had to be extra vigilant until I figured out if this hallucination stuff was temporary or my new reality.

“Thanks again for coming with, but my head wasn’t in the game. At all,” I said.

“I can’t imagine why,” Lola said sarcastically. “You should have just called your coach and told him you were sick. You have a lot going on, Cali. I have to believe that he would have understood if you told him you weren’t up for it.”

“No, I couldn’t do that. I hate lying, and it was actually good to focus on something other than the state of things right now. Besides, my teammates need me here to practice, and I don’t want to let them down.”

Lola hugged me. “You’re a better teammate than I would ever be.”

I said my goodbyes to the team, and with Lola in tow, headed out.

“So, what does it feel like to have me here by your side rather than hiding with Jay in the shadows, spying on you?” Lola asked as we made our way to the car.

“I don’t know. It’s weird because I’m still not sure I can relax yet. It’s nice in theory, I guess? We know Hans is dead, and that’s good—he was the one responsible for coming after me and the others—but what if his mafia buddies are regrouping as we speak and want revenge?”

“Well, hopefully they’ll think twice about it. We killed their leader. That has to count for something. Not to mention we’ve handed their asses to them each and every time they’ve tried to attack us.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said as I threw my things into the back seat and got in the passenger seat.

We pulled out and headed toward the pack house, and I was growing more and more anxious the closer we got. I had no idea what I was going to find when we got home. Greyson might be there, or he might not be. He might be angry with me, or he might be acting perfectly normal.

And then there was the matter of Artemis. I was worried about her, and what if we were wasting valuable time raking Marius over the coals when we should be going with him back to the Fae world?

*Should I just take a chance and go with Marius? Take my chances and hope that he’s being honest? Or am I just using my sister and the possibility that she’s in trouble as an excuse to avoid my own situation?*

Lola might have criticized me before about always putting others first, but Artemis wasn’t just anybody. She was my only sister. Artemis had always had my back, and I wanted to be there for her whenever she needed me. We owed that to each other. And there was no doubt in my mind that Artemis would risk her life to help me if the roles were reversed.

But even so, I had to be smart about it. Artemis wouldn’t want me to rush into any situation that might be dangerous or deadly. Going back to the Fae world was dangerous enough without going with some stranger who I’d been warned not to trust multiple times. I didn’t want to rush this and end up in as bad a position as Artemis might be. And for all I knew, Marius was the one who had put Artemis in the dangerous situation in the first place—if any of that were even true.

Lola pointed. “What the hell is going on?”

I looked and saw Gabriel standing between Xavier and Greyson. The brothers looked like they were seconds from killing each other.

“Whoa. I wonder what the hell set them off. I haven’t seen them at each other’s throats like this in a long time,” Lola said.

A knot was growing in my stomach. I knew exactly what this was about. Even if I couldn’t hear a word they were saying, I could almost put the words together in my head. Xavier and I hadn’t even officially made any moves to get back together, and already, he and his brother were already fighting about it.

I rushed out of the car just as Greyson pointed an accusing finger at Xavier. “And what about the kiss? Was that real? You just can’t keep your fucking hands to yourself, can you? You’re pathetic.”

I was mortified. I’d never even told Xavier about the kiss—the kiss that very well could have been a hallucination. And from the look on his face, it was all too clear that the kiss hadn’t happened.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Xavier sputtered. “I didn’t kiss Cali. And even if I had, it wouldn’t be any of your fucking business.”

“How the fuck do you imagine that?” Greyson shouted, shoving Xavier. “I’m with her, not you. Of course it’s my business if you’re kissing my mate.”

“Calm down, you two!” Gabriel said, wedging himself between the two of them as they lunged at each other.

“What the hell is going on here?” I shouted. But it was no use. They weren’t listening to me.

Xavier snarled at Greyson. “If you try that again, brother—”

Greyson pushed against Gabriel, trying to get to Xavier. “If I try it again, what? What will you do? You don’t scare me. You’re a fucking joke.”

“Fucking stop it!” Gabriel shouted, trying his damnedest to keep them apart.

I was really starting to get nervous. The look in their eyes…and Gabriel wasn’t strong enough to keep them apart for much longer.

“Just calm down for a second!” Gabriel shouted as Xavier partially shifted and swung a claw at Greyson that came dangerously close to slashing both Gabriel and Greyson.

“What are you even doing here?” Greyson sneered. “Go back to your pack where you belong. Leave Cali alone!”

Before I even realized what was happening, Greyson had partially shifted, torn past Gabriel, and was charging full speed at Xavier.

“Stop!” I screamed. I ran to join Gabriel who was still trying to wedge himself between the two of them. He knew as well as I did that if they actually managed to make contact, we wouldn’t be able to tear them apart.

Xavier was almost entirely shifted, and he braced himself as Greyson plowed forward.

“Please!” I screamed, launching myself into the closing gap between them only to be knocked to the ground. I moaned and rolled over onto my back, trying to catch my breath. It took me a moment to realize that everyone was staring down at me.

“What…what’s happening?” I said as I realized that neither Greyson nor Xavier had shifted at all.

Gabriel was standing behind them, his brow knitted in confusion.

“I—I don’t understand—” I sputtered.

Lola reached down to help me up and then turned to the guys. “I think we have a problem.”

**Episode 5261**

I was trying my hardest to make sense of what had just happened. Lola was standing right beside me, looking as confused as I felt. Greyson and Xavier were standing right there, too, but they weren’t going at each other—which was strange, since I could’ve sworn they were about to fight to the death just a few moments ago. My heart was still beating like crazy from the fear and adrenaline of trying to break them apart before they did any real damage.

*If I truly imagined all that, there’s only one explanation—Rowena was right. The* due destini *is driving me mad, and I’ve started hallucinating. Why is this happening now? And what can I do to stop it?*

Greyson placed a hand on my shoulder and pulled me close. “Cali, what just happened? Are you okay?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I decided to turn the question around on him.

“What were you and Xavier arguing about?” I looked between them, waiting for one of them to answer.

Greyson glanced at Xavier, whose expression stayed blank.

“It’s nothing,” Greyson said. “Nothing worth talking about, anyway.”

It was becoming clearer that the physical fight had been nothing more than a figment of my imagination, but I could still read the room. They were obviously pissed at each other, but trying their damnedest to hide it from me.

“I can tell you’re both mad… Is it because of me?” I asked—not that there was any doubt in my mind that it was. If they were mad about literally anything else, they probably would’ve been more forthcoming about telling me. Their silence meant they were afraid of upsetting me.

Another tense look passed between the brothers before Greyson said, “We can talk about it later. Right now, I’m worried about you. You freaked out for a second there. Are you good?”

Greyson was obviously trying to change the subject, and Xavier wasn’t offering any information either. He was simply standing there watching me, like he was holding back from trying to comfort me like Greyson was.

“Why is Xavier here in the first place?” Lola asked.

“I came by to check on the Fae,” Xavier said. “What have you found out?”

His question was directed at Greyson, but he kept stealing glances at me.

*Is he telling the truth about why he’s here? Did he really come here just to ask about the Fae? He could’ve just called for that… Right?*

“Marius is sticking to his story,” Greyson replied, after a moment of hesitation. I could tell he was trying to move the conversation away from whatever he and Xavier had been fighting about before Lola and I had arrived. “He maintains that he came here on behalf of Artemis. I’m still skeptical, but I’m leaning toward believing him. Either way, we need to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.”

“But couldn’t you have called to ask about that?” Lola demanded, eyeing Xavier. “Greyson’s perfectly capable of handling the Fae on his own.”

“I was in the neighborhood,” Xavier said stiffly. “And I still don’t like that there’s no way to prove what he’s saying is true. I’m hesitant to just believe him, even if that’s where Greyson’s leaning. I thought it might make sense for me to speak to him myself.”

Greyson glanced at Xavier. “That’s not necessary, Xavier. Like Lola said, I can handle this on my own.”

I could tell that he was holding back from saying something harsher. The obvious tension between them was making me wonder what might’ve happened if I hadn’t shown up. Would their argument have escalated?

What if my hallucination hadn’t been a *due destini* symptom? What if Rowena was wrong, and the vision I’d had a few minutes ago was less hallucination and more a glimpse into what might have been? Like a window into a possible future. I’d never had the ability to see into the future before, but things could change, especially with the *due destini* in play.

I wasn’t sure what to think, and it wasn’t like there was any way for me to prove what was really going on with me and my troubled mind. Maybe I was grasping at straws, trying to convince myself that I’d become some sort of psychic overnight. But the idea of losing my mind was so unsettling, and it was making everything worse. And really, would having random glimpses into the future be any better? Probably not.

I let out a deep breath—maybe I just needed to shake this off. All I could do about this right now was make sure I stayed aware of what was real and what wasn’t. I was going to have to be hypervigilant, to make sure I kept track of any times where my mind took me out of reality. But was that even possible? The worst part about losing your grip on reality was that you had no way of realizing it was happening—seeing Greyson and Xavier at each other’s throats had felt so real in the moment.

*Not for one second did I think it wasn’t real. So how can I be sure that* anything *I’m seeing is real?*

I turned to Lola and Gabriel, who were still eyeing me with more than a little concern.

“Can I talk to Greyson and Xavier alone for a minute?” I asked.

Lola hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“I am. Thanks, Lola.”

I watched Gabriel and Lola head inside, and then turned to the guys.

“I’m not buying that nothing’s going on between you two,” I said flatly. “I want to know why you’re really here, Xavier, and I want to know why Greyson is angry.”

“Greyson’s always angry,” Xavier quipped.

“I think that’s you,” Greyson said dryly.

Xavier glared. “What *I* want to know is what happened to you just now. You came bolting out of the car screaming at us for no apparent reason.”

Greyson and I exchanged a look. It was obvious that he had an idea about what had happened.

“Stop the bullshit,” Xavier pressed. “I’m sick of being kept in the dark. What aren’t you two telling me?”

Greyson sighed, clearly annoyed. “If you would shut the fuck up for a second, maybe someone would tell you—not that it’s your place.”

I couldn’t help but flinch.

*It’s up to you, love*, Greyson said. *Whatever you want to do.*

Nervous energy shot through me. There was a heavy silence before I finally took a deep breath. Filling him in might be for the best, even if it wasn’t easy. I had a quick flash of the imagined kiss Xavier and I had shared last night, and his confusion when Greyson had mentioned it to him. For that reason alone, he deserved to know what was going on. We might not have officially gotten back together, but he’d admitted that he still cared for me and wanted me back—I hadn’t hallucinated that.

“I’ve been having *due destini* hallucinations,” I admitted. “When I got here, I think I had another one—one that made me think you two were shifted and fighting. But then I realized that it wasn’t real.”

Xavier looked alarmed. “What? Really? *Cali*. I don’t think—”

“I’m dealing with it,” I interrupted, trying to downplay it. “It just started happening, and I’m just…taking it in stride for the time being. No use getting worked up about it. We all knew that this was a possibility with the *due destini*, but I’m not worried, so you shouldn’t be, either.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but I was still processing it all, and the last thing I wanted was for Xavier and Greyson to start fussing over me and trying to fix something that I wasn’t sure was fixable—at least beyond the obvious solution of my choosing between them.

Xavier was on edge, and eyeing me with no small amount of skepticism.

“It’s my problem, and I’m handling it,” I said firmly. “But that’s not what I want to talk about. What I want to talk about right now is what you two were arguing about.”

“I was talking to Xavier about what he said to you last night,” Greyson finally admitted.

I swallowed nervously and nodded at him. “That…makes sense. But we shouldn’t be talking about that right now. We have other more pressing things on our plate, don’t you think? Like getting to the bottom of Marius’s motives.”

“Like I said, that was what I came to talk about. Cali, you and I are on the same page,” Xavier said, his eyes on Greyson, who looked like he was seconds away from doing exactly what I’d seen in my hallucination. It was obvious that they were back on bad terms—at least for now. I hated that they were at odds with each other because of me.

“If what Marius is telling us is true, then that means my sister is in trouble. And if that’s the case, why isn’t Adair here?” I said.

“Adair told Gabe that he’d try to come,” Xavier replied.

I was instantly furious. “Try to come? Seriously? His niece is in danger and that’s how he reacts?”

I pushed past them both and headed for the pack house.

“Where are you going?” Greyson called after me.

I didn’t stop. “I’m not waiting around for Adair. I need answers now, so I’m going to talk to Marius myself.”

**Episode 5262**

**Xavier**

I grabbed Cali to stop her, just as both Greyson and I said, “*No*.”

It was always kind of annoying, those rare times when Greyson and I were so completely in sync. Especially when we were obviously pissed at each other.

Cali yanked herself out of my hold and turned to me, eyes blazing. “This is my *sister* we’re talking about. I have to do what I have to do. Neither one of you has any right to stand in my way when I’m trying to protect my family!”

“I get that, and I know what’s at stake here,” Greyson said. “But you can’t let your feelings get in the way.”

“My *feelings*?” she demanded scathingly.“Really? How can either of you say that with a straight face?”

*I didn’t say it at all*, I thought to myself. *It was Greyson’s bright idea to call into question your feelings about your sister. He’s obviously not thinking straight.*

“Greyson doesn’t speak for me,” I said out loud. “I understand *your* feelings, and I don’t think they’re clouding your judgment, but I do think you need to stop and think about what the right move is with this guy. My thought on this hasn’t changed—I don’t trust that this Marius guy is who he says he is. I’ve had enough bad run-ins with Fae to know that they can’t always be taken at their word. And after the hell we went through with the Dark Fae mafia, I’m not about to let you put yourself in danger with another mysterious Fae.”

“And I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” Greyson said. “Your feelings are completely valid. I just want you to stop and think before you put yourself in harm’s way. The only thing I care about is making sure you’re *safe*, and you know that.”

As I watched Greyson try to pry his foot out of his mouth, my mind went back to what had happened last night. I wasn’t at all sorry for what I’d told Cali. I’d meant it. This friend stuff wasn’t for me. It felt unnatural. Forced.

I’d managed to keep my true emotions at bay for a long time, but now, I wanted Cali back in my arms where she belonged. And it was no surprise that Greyson was pissed off about it. I only wished that Cali wasn’t getting caught in our crossfire once again. She didn’t deserve the stress of feeling like she was coming between us.

As I watched her and Greyson talking, my mind was a million miles away. Now, I was wondering if my admission had anything to do with her alarming hallucination. I didn’t like hearing that she was having those kinds of issues. She was doing her best to downplay how serious it was and how much it was affecting her, but I knew her well enough to be sure that she was way more worried than she was letting on.

*And so she should be. It has to be an awful feeling, not being able to trust what you’re seeing with your own eyes. And what if it gets worse? What will she do? Is there anything I can do to help her? To make it better?*

Maybe talking about Marius was the diversion we needed. It wasn’t a great situation, and I wished we had a better distraction than discussing the trustworthiness of someone who may or may not have brought news of Artemis’s need for help, but it was all we had. If we got to the bottom of things with Marius, maybe it would free us both up to really figure out what to do about my revelation.

“I’m going to talk to Marius alone,” I heard Cali saying to Greyson in a low voice, though her gaze flicked to me as well. “It’s just a conversation. There’s no danger in that. It’s not like I haven’t spoken with him before, and I really don’t think he wants to hurt me. And if something does go wrong, you both just need to trust that I can take care of myself.”

She started toward the pack house and slipped inside, slamming the screen door behind her. I was so damn tempted to run after her and stop her, but I stayed where I was.

Greyson stood silently beside me, his arms crossed, his jaw set, the very picture of displeasure.

“Since she obviously doesn’t want us to go with her, I’m going to send Rishika along,” he said. “I don’t want her to think that I doubt that she can take care of herself, but Cali discounts how quickly things can get out of hand, even for someone who thinks they’re completely prepared.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said.

*I wish I could talk to Cali alone. After everything I said last night, we need to have a real conversation. But how am I supposed to do that with Greyson breathing down her neck? He clearly doesn’t want me to talk to her alone—especially about this. He’ll lose his shit if he gets even a whiff of us discussing that.*

Greyson left to go find Rishika, just as Gabe reappeared and joined me on the front lawn. “Glad to see that the Evers brothers have once again refrained from killing each other.”

“There’s still time,” I growled.

Gabe was suddenly serious. “Why did you really come here, anyway?”

“I already answered that question,” I said flatly. “I came to see what was up with Marius. I’ve been worried since he appeared out of nowhere at the party. Why is that so hard for everyone to believe?”

Gabe shook his head. “Cut the shit, Xavier. You forget that I know you and can smell a lie from a mile away. I want to know the real reason.”

“That *is* the real reason. We’ve just been fighting off the ruthless attacks of a bunch of Fae with chips on their shoulders. And then, right on the heels of that, Marius shows up, claiming to have news of Artemis. It seems fishy. I came to make sure Greyson’s handling it properly.”

Gabe still looked skeptical. “If that’s what you really think, then you’re lying to yourself. I understand that a lot has been going on over the last few days—the Dark Fae mafia, Hans, and now this rando Dark Fae showing up out of nowhere—but let’s be real. You came here because of Cali.”

I looked away. “No shit. I’m here because I don’t want that guy anywhere near her, or close enough to hurt her.”

Gabe slapped a hand on my shoulder. “You can’t keep doing this, Xavier. All this back and forth. You have to figure this out.”

I knew that Gabe was right, but I *was* figuring things out. I wanted to be back in Cali’s life—and not as her friend. How that was going to work, I hadn’t quite grasped. But I’d taken the first step toward getting Cali back, and I had no regrets about that. I just had to see it through—though that wasn’t going to be easy, with Greyson sniffing around.

I heard the pack house door open and turned to see Greyson coming toward me.

*Here we go again…*

“Cali agreed to let Rishika join her,” he said.

“Good,” I grunted.

Cali’s safety was all that mattered, and even though Greyson and I were at odds right now, I had to appreciate how devoted he was to keeping Cali safe. We both had our own ideas about what it took to shield Cali from danger, but I couldn’t deny the fact that Greyson was capable. Still, that didn’t mean I was going to take a hands-off approach to protecting her—if Greyson thought I’d be happy to keep my distance and let him handle that, he had another thing coming.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Hans?” I asked him.

“Because there was so much going on last night that I didn’t have a chance,” he said curtly. “Despite what you may think, it wasn’t intentional.”

*I wonder if that’s true. There’s a good chance he didn’t tell me simply because he doesn’t want me involved in solving whatever might be going on with Artemis. He wants to play hero for Cali.*

“That’s hard to believe, considering the fact that you outright told me I wouldn’t be needed if Cali ends up going to the Fae world. I’m starting to wonder what else you think I need to be excluded from.”

Greyson shook his head at me. “You really are a piece of work. Have you forgotten that you have your *own* pack to worry about? Not to mention your own Luna. Seems like you’ve forgotten about her. She should be your first concern, just like Cali’s mine. But it seems like you’ve thrown her to the side in favor of your renewed obsession with Cali.”

I gritted my teeth in anger. “Oh, so now you’re suddenly worried about Ava? Could it be because of what I admitted to Cali last night?”

Greyson’s anger surged, and he stepped toward me until his face was inches from mine. “This has to stop—now. Leave Cali the fuck alone.”

**Episode 5263**

I was standing at the top of the basement stairs, waiting for Rishika to join me for my talk with Marius. It annoyed me no end that Greyson was insisting that I go in with backup, even though I fully understood why. We knew next to nothing about Marius—only what he’d told us. But there was something about the man that kept me from thinking he was a threat.

*If he wanted to hurt me, he had his chance back at Lucian’s. And he’s been willing to go along with our constant questioning. That has to count for something.*

And Greyson *was* worried about my hallucinations. Hell, I was worried too. I’d tried to downplay it for Xavier’s sake, but I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I’d done it because of what he’d said last night. It had really thrown me. But right now, I needed to push all of that aside, for my sister’s sake. There would be time to fully address what Xavier had said later—once I’d figured out if what Marius was saying about my sister was true.

*One thing that’s good about Rishika coming with me is I won’t have to worry about reacting to something that Marius doesn’t actually say or do. My hallucinations could negatively affect my ability to understand what Marius is really saying, and we can’t afford that.*

I wondered if it would make sense to speak to Rowena again. Could there be some kind of spell or charm she could use to help alleviate the *due destini* symptoms? Then again, Rowena would probably have offered that as a solution already, if it were an option. And as far as I knew, the *due destini* and everything associated with it was resistant to spells, or any other kind of interference.

*If a witch could somehow take the edge of the* due destini *or stop it altogether, then Greyson, Xavier, and I probably would’ve figured that out a long time ago.*

“Hey, Cali, you okay?” Lola asked, coming up behind me.

“I wish everyone would stop asking me that,” I snapped.

“And I wish you’d realize that there’s good reason for our concern,” she retorted. “Does the word ‘hallucinations’ mean anything to you? What you’re going through isn’t normal—you know that, right? Can you really blame us for being worried about you?”

I sighed. “Yeah, sure—and I’m fine. No hallucinations at the moment.”

Lola had a point, and I knew it, but I couldn’t dwell on that right now. I had to get to the bottom of what was going on with Artemis. And at this point, I didn’t care if Maren and Torin were leery of Marius. I had to do this. And I hated that we’d already wasted so much time.

Rishika walked in, sweating and breathing hard. It looked like she’d just come in from training. She gestured toward the basement. “Let’s go talk to this Marius guy.”

Rishika and I left Lola and went down into the basement, where we found Marius sitting on his bed. He looked up hopefully as we entered. “Do you believe me now?”

“Nothing’s changed,” I said. “And it’s not that we don’t believe you—we just aren’t ready to trust you yet. We have plenty of reasons to be wary of Dark Fae.”

Marius sighed and rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s a pity, because Artemis could be in real danger. Maybe Artemis should’ve sent me to find someone a little less skittish to help her.”

Rishika looked at him closely. “We aren’t skittish. We just aren’t in the habit of trusting strangers who bring no proof that what they’re saying is true. So maybe you should start from the beginning.”

“Sure, millionth time’s a charm,” Marius said bitterly. “Artemis came to the Fae world to find someone. She asked me for help and ended up a virtual prisoner in Celeste’s palace. She asked me to find you, Caliana, and escort you to the Fae world so you can help her escape. Is that clear enough, or should I tell this story—”

“Why you?” Rishika interrupted.

Marius shrugged. “Artemis trusts me. We’ve known each other for a long time. She knows how capable I am when it comes to tracking, and she knew I wouldn’t stop until I found you, Caliana. I’m not sure she predicted that I’d be treated like some kind of criminal—or what was it you were all talking about, earlier? Mafia member?” He laughed. “Hilarious.”

I was still skeptical. I couldn’t help it. “I know my sister, and she trusts very few people. If you’re so close, then how come Artemis never mentioned you before?”

A flash of hurt appeared in Marius’s eyes. “We drifted apart and reconnected when she came back. But our reunion has been a good one, and we’ve reached an understanding—one that means she trusts me enough to do this for her.”

“Reconnected?” Rishika said. “That was fast.”

I heard a hint of something in her voice and wondered if she was a little jealous.

“Not really,” Marius said flippantly. “The Fae world feels big, but it can be a small place. I always find myself running into people at the most peculiar times, and that’s what happened with us. Besides, she and I have a…history.”

 I sensed that there was a lot more to this than he was admitting.

“And do you know who Artemis was looking for in the Fae world?” I asked him.

Marius said nothing for a moment. “I guess it’s okay to say that she was looking for her father, Kadmos. She was dogged about finding him. I was willing to help, but we didn’t get very far in that mission. The conflict between the Dark and Light Fae is everywhere. It affects everything and makes it difficult to travel freely—and it’s because of said conflict that she’s imprisoned as we speak.”

I glanced at Rishika, trying to see how she was feeling about all this.

“So far, what he’s saying makes sense,” I said.

*And Artemis isn’t exactly open with the truth about her parentage. She has to have some sort of relationship with this guy if he knows that Kadmos is her father.*

“I want to know more about why Artemis would trust you,” Rishika said.

Marius groaned. “Are you serious? I already told you! We’ve known each other for a long time.”

“How well do you know her, exactly?”

Exasperated, Marius said, “What? Do you want me to tell you how many freckles she has on her back? Sheesh.”

I gasped at the implication and snuck another glance at Rishika. A range of emotions was playing across her face.

“If it makes you feel any better, Artemis told me all about you, Rishika,” Marius added. “She still cares about you. And now that you know that, maybe you can relax and quit looking at me like you want to fight me for her love.”

Rishika didn’t even have a snide reply to throw at him. She was obviously taken aback. This was probably a lot for her to process.

“And may I add, once again, that if you really care about Artemis as much as you appear to, you should stop wasting time,” Marius said. “I have no reason to lie, and if I didn’t care about Artemis, I already would’ve escaped, simply to avoid this constant questioning. But I’m still here because Artemis needs you, and I need you to believe that she needs you. We should already be back in the Fae world by now.”

I stepped between Marius and Rishika. “You’ve said nothing that proves anything, either way.”

Marius chuckled. “You’re an interesting bunch. Maybe you should give me a potion to see if I’m lying, and then after that, call in a psychic who can tell where I’ve been or sense Artemis’s energy on me. Or better yet, don’t go to the Fae world at all! I’m beginning to lose the ability to care.”

Something Marius said struck a nerve, and I turned to Rishika. “Maybe we *should* go get Big Mac and have her give him some sort of witchy lie detector test.”

Marius snickered. “This is rich. I can’t wait to tell my friends how jumpy humans are.” Then his face grew serious. “I’m not really sure what’s going on here, especially when you consider the fact the stakes aren’t actually all that high. If I’m lying and you go to the Fae world, you’ll find out I was bullshitting you pretty quickly. And if I’m not lying, all you’re doing right now is wasting time and leaving Artemis in a tough position. If the Fae court find out who she really is, not everyone is going to be pleased.”

I sighed, feeling torn. “Marius, you swear you’re telling the truth?”

He made a frustrated noise. “What have I been *doing* this entire time? Yes, I’m telling the truth! Artemis and I are close, and I’d do anything for her.”

Finally, I felt like I’d made up my mind. “If what you’re saying is true, then we need to get to the Fae world right now.”

**Episode 5264**

**Greyson**

I thought I’d feel better after Xavier left, but I was still pretty pissed off. Xavier hadn’t responded at first when I’d told him point blank to leave Cali alone. And really, I wasn’t sure how I’d expected him to respond in the first place.

But then he’d finally broken the silence by saying, “Maybe Cali ought to have a say in that.” And then he’d left.

Which meant that absolutely nothing had been resolved.

This was the worst time to be fighting with Xavier. I had other things to focus on, like Cali’s hallucinations. So far, she’d had two in the last twenty-four hours. And if Rowena was right, that number was only going to increase.

The *due destini* legend was as fresh in my mind as ever. Cassandra had been driven mad by the *due destini*, and that was always what we’d feared would happen to Cali.

I realized that I wasn’t going to be able to solve that problem just yet, but there were plenty of other issues that needed my attention. If my brother wasn’t such an asshole, we might’ve been able to discuss the possibly ongoing Dark Fae threat. Maybe we could’ve figured out a way to join forces against them.

I wanted to talk to Rishika about what we needed to be doing as a pack, but she was with Cali and Marius. Instead, I went looking for Ravi, who, when I found him, asked the question that was on the pack’s collective mind.

“Are the Dark Fae going to come after us again?”

I sighed, suddenly feeling really tired. If it wasn’t a discussion about Cali’s hallucinations, it was a discussion about whether or not Marius could be trusted. And if it wasn’t *that*, I was fighting with my brother about his intentions toward Cali… And if all that wasn’t enough, the Dark Fae threat—real or imagined—still needed to be addressed.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Well, I know one thing—it’s pretty ballsy that we killed their leader.”

“And that was no one’s fault but Hans’s,” I said. “It was kill or be killed. Honestly, we had no choice.”

“And where’s Kendall, anyway?” Ravi asked. “She came to us for protection, right? Did she split because Hans is dead? Does that mean that there might not be anything for us to worry about?”

“Can’t answer that, either,” I said.

The dream I’d had about Kendall suddenly flashed through my mind. The strange purple glow, the way Kendall had approached me in my own shirt, naked underneath. And that kiss… Seriously, what the fuck was up with that? Was I hallucinating, too?

*No, that was just a dream. Big difference. Kendall and I have been through a lot together over the last few days, so it makes perfect sense that I’d have a dream like that… Right?*

I thought about the aftermath of killing Hans, the way we’d lain pressed together on the ground, covered in the Fae’s blood, reeling from what had just happened. Yet another reason to explain why I’d experienced such a vivid dream about her that same night.

Ravi was watching me. “So…I just asked what you want me to do?”

I snapped out of it. “Yes. Just keep up the patrols, same as before. If anything changes, I’ll be sure to let the rest of the pack know.”

“Got it,” Ravi said, then he headed off.

Alone again, I took a moment to think. That dream had shaken me—and for good reason. It wasn’t like I’d dreamed about fighting Hans with Kendall, or something similar. It had been a…romantic dream. Why?

Maybe I needed to find Kendall and have a talk with her. Hans had dropped a big bomb on me—that Kendall was in the MIB. And then there was Mikah’s warning about not having any involvement with Kendall for that exact reason. I trusted Mikah, and if he said that something was dangerous, I was going to believe that it was.

But some part of me was still pushing me to seek out Kendall and talk to her—get some more clarity.

And I still hadn’t told Cali about Kendall’s true identity. I didn’t know if that was partly because deep down, I wanted to honor Kendall’s request to keep her secret—but it was definitely because I was afraid that telling Cali might put her in danger. It might not be safe for her to know the truth just yet, and she already had enough on her plate with her mental state and Artemis’s plight—if Marius was even telling the truth about that.

Cali’s hallucinations were a big problem, and I wasn’t taking them for granted. They were a valid reason to keep her from going to the Fae world. The place was dangerous, and she needed to stay clear of any situations where her hallucinations might throw her into danger. But I could only imagine how it would go over, my asking her not to go to the Fae world. This was about Artemis, and so I was pretty sure she wasn’t going to listen to any warnings.

A moment later, Cali came stomping up the basement stairs. I knew that look on her face, so I wasn’t surprised when she said, “I’m going to the Fae world to rescue my sister.”

“What happened with Marius?” I asked. “Did you figure out if he was telling the truth, or—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Cali interrupted. “I *believe* he’s telling the truth, and that means that Artemis needs my help. He said something that made me realize there’s no real danger in taking him at his word, at least for now. I really don’t know what he has to gain from lying about something like this.”

“We don’t know him, Cali, so it could be anything,” I said carefully. “He could be luring you to the Fae world to trap you there or serve you up to some Dark Fae who wants you dead. He could be the one who has Artemis imprisoned, for all we know.”

“I’ve considered all those possibilities and I truly don’t think any of them are likely,” she said. “However, just to be safe, I’m going to ask Big Mac to give him some kind of magic lie detector test.”

I nodded. “That’s a good idea—I wish we’d thought of it sooner. Would’ve saved us a lot of time.” I paused for a moment. “But I’m not so keen on sending you to the Fae world, Cali. Not in your current state. Anything could happen, you know? And we shouldn’t be reckless right now. I think we should at least wait for Adair—”

“Assuming he even comes,” Cali retorted. “This is my sister we’re talking about, Greyson! I don’t want to wait. I want to help her.”

“I know, Cali, but we need to be smart about this,” I said. “We shouldn’t make any rash decisions. And you know as well as I do that Artemis can take care of herself—”

“That doesn’t mean she’s immune to ever needing help. Marius insists that she needs me, that she *sent* him, and all I’m doing is waiting around.”

“Cali, I promise that we’ll help Artemis—and that we haven’t wasted all that much time. Marius only just showed up. I truly believe that we can at least wait for Adair and get a little more insight into what might be going on and what the best move is here.”

Cali rolled her eyes and huffed. “Fine! In the meantime, I’m going to go talk to Big Mac.”

Cali headed off, and I went into my study. I wondered what I was going to tell Cali if Adair didn’t show. There was no way she was going to sit back and wait if he didn’t come to help. She was already pissed at him for not having committed to helping Artemis from the start, and I couldn’t blame her.

*Adair, please get your ass here so I can keep Cali from jumping headfirst into danger. I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to her, and with her hallucinations…*

And I still couldn’t help but wonder if we could really believe Marius. I supposed that once Big Mac administered her test, that problem would be solved. For now, I was going to trust that Cali believed him for a reason. If Big Mac disproved his story, we’d figure out what to do from there.

The one thing I didn’t agree with was Marius’s claim that none of this was high stakes. If we went to the Fae world and fell into a trap, our position would be weakened considerably. The Fae world wasn’t the human world, and the rules were different there.

*And if there’s any way I can avoid going back to the Fae world, I’d like to stay as far away as I can. But if Artemis is truly in danger, I know I’ll have no choice but to go.*

I wondered again about the Dark Fae mafia. I wasn’t convinced that they didn’t have a presence in the Fae world. In fact, it would be strange if they didn’t. But I knew who might be able to tell me more about that.

I grabbed my phone and called Kendall. She answered, clearly surprised.

“Greyson, wow. Didn’t expect to hear from you again.”

I ignored that. “I need you to tell me everything you know about the Dark Fae mafia.”

**Episode 5265**

I was frustrated that I kept having to compromise when my sister’s life was in danger. If I’d had more confidence in my ability to successfully find my way to Celeste’s palace and save my sister on my own, I’d already be halfway to Haystack Rock. But I knew it would be foolish to run off with Marius. I believed him—more or less—but I didn’t trust him. And Greyson was right, he could have ties to the Dark Fae mafia.

*Or maybe he’s working with Celeste as part of some plan to capture both me and Artemis. I wouldn’t put that past him—especially with Maren and Torin’s warnings.*

The idea was far-fetched, but I knew how treacherous things could be in the Fae world. In a lot of ways, it was like the Wild West. But I had contacts there—family. I wondered if my grandmother might be able to help.

*I’m sure I’d be able to locate my grandmother if I went back. I wonder if I should let Mom know about what’s going on with Artemis… But then she’d insist on coming, too, and I don’t want to put her in danger. I want to take care of this myself—and besides, if Artemis really sent Marius to find me, that means she’s confident that I can save her.*

But then there was the matter of my hallucinations. No matter how confident I was in my ability to take care of myself in the Fae world, my hallucinations put me at a disadvantage. I could get to the Fae world and mistake enemy for friend, or vice versa. For that reason alone, I couldn’t go without someone by my side to keep me rooted in reality.

The only thing I knew for sure was that Marius had a point—if Artemis was in danger, then the longer we sat around here doing nothing, the worse things could get for her. I hated the feeling of waiting around and depending on Adair, of all people. Marius had arrived with a sense of urgency, and we’d stamped that out with a bunch of questions and distrust.

And Adair was taking his sweet time coming to help—if he even planned to come at all. I was growing more frustrated by the second, but I was going to have to calm down and hope for the best. Maybe I just had to adopt Greyson’s attitude and trust that Artemis could hold her own—hopefully until I was able to make it there to save her.

Rishika came up from the basement, and I hesitated for a moment before asking, “Hey, you okay?”

Rishika shrugged. “I don’t think I’ll be okay until Artemis gets back. And talking with that Fae hasn’t made me any less worried.” She sighed and stared off into the middle distance. “Anyway, I’ll see you later—I’m going to go jump in the shower.”

I watched her go, wondering what was going through her mind. It was obvious to me that Marius and Artemis were more than friends. I knew that Rishika had picked up on that, too, and was probably trying to make sense of it. And I doubted that Marius’s assurance that Artemis still cared about Rishika had helped all that much.

But now wasn’t the time to get into that with Rishika. And it wasn’t my place, anyway. If and when we found Artemis, I was sure that she and Rishika would be able to talk this through themselves.

Needing to feel like I was doing *something*, I picked up my phone and dialed Big Mac. “Hey, I was wondering if you could come—”

Big Mac blipped in, scaring the shit out of me.

“You could’ve warned me that you were going to do that!” I gasped out, staring at the witch, who looked as unbothered as usual.

“I’m here, what difference does it make? You were going to ask me to come here and do something, right? So I’m here. And besides, I needed a breather—Colton and Maya’s twins are cute as a button, but they’re a handful. Always hungry, always biting, always growling—especially at night when I’m trying to sleep. I thought that adult werewolves were a handful, but babies are nightmares. They suck the life right out of you—almost literally. I left Sabine to watch them.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s taking it in stride,” I said.

“She is. She’s a natural. And who knows when Colton and Maya will be back… I’m sure they’re off celebrating the whole engagement thing.”

“Wait a minute—Maya left *you* to babysit?”

Big Mac glared at me. “Yeah, so what? You don’t think I’m good with kids?”

“N-No, I wasn’t saying that!” I sputtered. “That’s not what I meant—”

“Anyway, you need my help, right?” Big Mac interrupted. “That’s the bottom line?”

“I do. Obviously, it’s not the best timing.”

“It’s never the best timing, but that’s never stopped you before. So what do you need?”

“I was wondering if you could do a magical lie detector test on someone. There’s this Fae down in the basement who swears—”

Big Mac held up a hand to cut me off. “I don’t want or need to know.” She conjured up a couple of vials. “This is less lie detector and more truth serum—or maybe something in between. Either way, it should get you the result you want. All you need to do is mix these two together and make whoever it is drink it. All of it.”

I stared at the vials. “That’s it? I have them drink it and then I’ll be able to tell if they’re lying or not? How will I know if it’s working?”

“Are you doubting my magic?” Big Mac demanded. “Is that what’s happening here?”

“No, not at all,” I said quickly.

“Good. Don’t. I know what I’m doing. And a potion like this is child’s play. I learned how to charm the truth out of people when I was a baby witch. I could do it in my sleep.” Big Mac tossed me the vials. “Is that it? I was hoping to spend a few more minutes away from the twins.”

“Well… I guess there is something else.”

“Out with it,” Big Mac said.

“It’s the *due destini*. It’s starting to make me hallucinate.”

Big Mac didn’t bat an eyelash. “I suppose it’s about time. You’ve been milking this thing for a long time, even though you knew there were consequences to being under the *due destini*’s influence—it sounds like those consequences have arrived.”

I was thrown by Big Mac’s casual response… Though to be fair, it wasn’t exactly out of character for her.

“Okay, fine,” I said, “we *did* all know that this was a very real possibility, but is there anything I can do to keep it from happening? I’m starting to have a really hard time determining what’s real and what isn’t.”

Big Mac shook her head. “Unfortunately, my magic can’t solve this. The *due destini* is pretty powerful, as we all know. If there were a spell that could dissolve it, I already would’ve cast it on you.”

“But I’m desperate,” I said, realizing for the first time just how shaken I was about what was happening to me. I had a bad feeling that this was only the beginning. Maybe the hallucinations were just the start… What if things got worse? What if I lost touch with reality, like Cassandra?

“There must be something you can do, Big Mac.”

“I think the answer lies in you, Cali. The *due destini* is rearing its ugly head because of the imbalance caused by Xavier’s absence.”

“Imbalance? What do you mean?”

“The *due destini* requires the presence of two mates in order to fulfill its prophecy. It needs to be reset.”

Now I was even more confused. “So what are you suggesting? That staying torn between Greyson and Xavier is going to fix things?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Either that, or it’ll make things ten times worse.”

“But can’t I just pump the brakes somehow and stop it from getting any worse?”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “I think you know the answer to that one better than anyone else. When Xavier left and went to the Samara pack, he took away the choice that you’re destined to make. And that means the *due destini* has been suppressed. After all, it’s not Xavier who has to make the choice, it’s you.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I said, even though my head was spinning.

“And, like with anything else, when a thing is suppressed, that doesn’t mean it’s weakened or that the power of it has lessened—in fact, the *due destini* is doing everything it can to smash its way through the barrier that Xavier’s absence has created. It’s trying to break free.”

I took that in, feeling hopeful and scared at the same time. “So… If I’m understanding you correctly, the only thing that will fix my hallucinations and calm the *due destini* is getting back together with Xavier?”

**Episode 5266**

**Xavier**

Someone was driving a nail into my skull, slamming the hammer with every heartbeat. I loped through the woods, heading back to the Samara pack house, trying not to wince with every footfall. The slightest jolt made the pounding in my head worse.

Fucking headache. Fucking Greyson.

I was still seething after my encounter with my brother. How fucking dared he tell me to stay away from Cali? My mate. He had to know just how egregious that was. Where the hell did he get off, telling me what to do?

A particularly searing jolt of pain wrenched its way across my skull, and I let out a growl. The severity of my headache was probably Greyson’s fault too. It hadn’t been this bad in a long time.

And yet, even as I had this thought, I knew it was wrong. Yes, Greyson made me so pissed off that I couldn’t see straight, but he wasn’t the cause of my headaches. If Carlson Greene was to be believed, the headaches were the result of both my proximity to Cali’s and my “unresolved issues.”

But Greyson certainly wasn’t making matters any better. It was bad enough that I had to deal with the headaches and this chaotic wave of feelings and desires, wanting what I shouldn’t want, not wanting what I had—my brother inserting himself into the mix was just extremely unhelpful.

*Who the hell does he think he is, demanding that I stay away from Cali? That’s not his fucking call. He’s not her keeper. He’s her mate. Just like I am. It was bad enough when he told me I had no business going to the Fae world with her. Doesn’t he get it? Or is he just that deeply in denial?*

On some level, Greyson had to see what was happening here. He had to see that Cali and I were as drawn to each other as ever. That even though so much had changed while Adéluce had her claws in me, my feelings for Cali were immutable. And I had no reason to think that Cali’s feelings had changed, either. In all the ways that counted, we were the same as we’d always been.

I loved Cali. I couldn’t stay away from her, no matter how much I tried. No matter how much easier everything would be if we *could* find that distance. The *due destini* would never let us move past this. And hell, even if the *due destini* wasn’t a factor, I knew I’d still want Cali anyway. Of course I’d still want her. I’d always wanted her, long before Greyson came along, long before we even knew the *due destini* existed. And the more my brother tried to keep us apart, the more determined I became to find a way back to Cali. Somehow, we’d get back together. I was sure of it.

That thought sent a lightning bolt of pain through my skull—a brutal reminder that none of these fantasies would be easy to realize.

My heart lurched. *Not to mention the fact that I still have to deal with Ava.* That was a whole other minefield.

She’s said she didn’t care about what happened at the jewelry store, but then she’d revealed the truth when she’d tossed that bracelet back at me.

*Will she take it back once she’s cooled off?* I hoped so. She’d seemed to love it, before she’d learned the whole story. And, despite everything, I did want her to be happy. Which sort of made this whole situation a little worse.

I still hadn’t figured out where Ava fit into all of this, or even where to start trying to make sense of everything. The last thing I wanted was for Ava to get trampled by this mess, but I was beginning to think there was no easy way out of it—for any of us.

*Ava knew what she was getting into when she decided to come back from the spirit world*, I told myself.

This was a piss-poor justification, because there was actually no way she could’ve known what the future would hold when she’d decided to come back. Still, it was the closest thing to a comforting thought that I could come up with.

My ever-darkening thoughts were interrupted by Gabe, who was blocking the path ahead. He stood in front of me in his human form, arms crossed, eyebrows raised in an expression that had my hackles rising.

*Did he seriously need to follow? Why? And why is he getting in my way now?*

I shifted back to human. “You’re becoming predictable, I hope you know.”

He didn’t bat an eye. “And you’re becoming reckless—since when do you let *anyone* sneak past you unnoticed?”

The truth of his words hit me square in the chest, and before I could muster up a response, he kept talking.

“It’s because your head is in the clouds, dude,” he said frankly. “And if you’re not careful, it’s going to stay up there.”

I raised a brow and scoffed. “Are you threatening me? Or just talking shit, as usual? I’m not interested in whatever the hell you think you’re doing here—”

“Oh please. If anyone is talking shit right now, we both know it’s not me. Not that you’d let go of your denial long enough to admit it.”

“You have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? Did I imagine seeing you and Greyson ready to go toe to toe over the same issue as always?” His expression was smug, and it made me want to punch him. Then he added, “Colton knew it would come to this.”

I took a step back. “Wait… You were talking to Colton? About me? Since when does he give a shit about what I do?”

I knew Colton wasn’t a fan of Ava, but I honestly hadn’t thought he gave a shit, beyond sharing his dislike for her. God knew, Colton had been so caught up in the proposal lately, I’d assumed he hadn’t been able to keep anything else straight.

Gabe shrugged. “He might seem indifferent, but he’s worried about you.”

I had no fucking clue how to respond to that. Or how to feel about it.

“What do you want from me?” I demanded. “You come here and get in my way—why? To get me to pour out my feelings?”

“I don’t give a shit how you feel,” Gabe said. “But everything I’ve told you is the truth. So, what are you going to do about it?”

My teeth ground together. I’d never asked for this. And I sure as shit wasn’t just going to sit here and let Gabe of all people lecture me. He was supposed to be my best friend. He knew what I’d been through. He knew it wasn’t that easy—that none of this was easy in any way, shape, or form.

*Fuck him.*

I tried to shoulder past him, but he stepped back into my path.

“What the hell?” I snarled. “Get out of my way.”

He stood his ground. “I’m not going anywhere. Not until you agree to stop denying everything and actually, I don’t know, *talk* about this shit show you keep finding yourself stuck in?”

Like hell was I gonna talk to him about this. Especially when he was trying to browbeat me into submission.

“I have to get back to my pack house,” I snarled.

Gabe stayed exactly where he was, his feet planted firmly. “If you wanna run back to your pack house, then you’ll have to get through me.”

I snorted. “You’re joking.”

Gabe didn’t laugh.

“Seriously?” I asked.

He responded by shoving me. Hard. The guy was an Alpha werewolf, same as me—he’d give as good as he got if we actually fought. But the more he pushed me, the less I cared.

Gabe wanted to play with fire? Fine. Let him burn.

I shoved him back, and within seconds, we were rolling across the ground in our human forms, grappling, punching, and kicking any bit of each other we could reach. Gabe flipped me around, grabbed me by the back of the neck, and slammed me into a tree.

Bright blue light exploded across my vision, but I dropped into a crouch, recovering as I dodged his next blow by ducking behind the same tree.

“You can run, but you can’t hide!” he growled, tackling me.

I flipped him off my back and broke into a run. He thought he could stop me from getting back to the pack house? I’d like to see him try.

The taste of blood slid across my tongue as I sprinted through the woods. And then shock rolled through me when Gabe suddenly appeared in front of me in his wolf form and pinned me to the ground.

“You cheated,” I snapped as he shifted back to human, still pinning me.

“And you’re making a fucking mess of your life,” he retorted. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What am I *supposed* to do about it? You said once that you knew I was still in love with Cali. Well, guess what? Congratulations, you were fucking right! I am!”

Gabe paused for a beat. “Does that mean you’re breaking up with Ava?”

**Episode 5267**

Hope blossomed in my chest, even as a guilt twisted my stomach for feeling that way. The combination had heat rushing to my cheeks as I waited for Big Mac to respond. It was just that the idea of being back with Xavier… It was almost too good to be true. It sent all kinds of thoughts racing through my mind. Sent jolts up and down my body. The possibilities… They were beyond enticing.

*But is that even what Big Mac meant? Was she implying that it would be for the best if Xavier and I get back together?*

The witch raised a brow, then cleared her throat. “I’m going to suggest you rein all of this”—she gestured vaguely at me—“back in. I’m not saying you need to start sleeping with Xavier again. I only mean that it would be good to spend more time near him, physically in his space. Sex is not required.”

Shame turned my cheeks an even darker shade of red. *Wow.* Was that really all it took for me to be ready to throw myself at Xavier? The slightest implication from Big Mac that I should spend more time with him? *What is wrong with me?*

“I… Wow.” I forced a weak smile. “Sorry. I guess I got a little ahead of myself, there, huh?”

Big Mac shrugged. “I don’t see why you should feel ashamed. The *due destini* has put you in a very tough position. All the logic in the world can’t compete with how the curse draws you to both of your mates.”

Something like relief washed away some of the dark, lingering shame that was twisting and turning in my stomach. “Thanks, Big Mac. I appreciate the perspective.”

She nodded sagely. “Honestly, it’s a miracle you’ve lasted this long.”

I forced that same grimace-slash-smile. *My god. Big Mac really has a knack for hitting you when you’re down.* “Should I take that as a compliment?”

“If you want to.” She shrugged again, like she genuinely couldn’t have cared less how I felt. “I suppose you should already know this, but just in case you’re unaware, the *due destini* seeks to maintain its power by creating an equilibrium of sorts—a constant pull between two mates. I know it’s never been easy for any of you, equilibrium or not, but the magic was more or less kept in check.”

I frowned. “So what changed?”

“Xavier left, and it threw the balance off. Now you’re paying the price for it.”

I blinked, horrified by what she was saying. “So, the price is my sanity?”

“That was always a possibility, if you recall,” she said. “The curse has always been capable of taking its toll on your mind as long as you avoid making a choice. Until you do, the curse is going to continue to wreak havoc on you.”

“But it wasn’t so bad before!” I protested.

She frowned. “Haven’t you been listening? Xavier messed things up when he left, and that sped up the process. The curse is hitting you harder and faster now. And since he seems to be the reason behind it, I think the only possible solution at this point is to try to be near Xavier. Just take it in small doses to start. See if it helps.”

“Okay. Thanks for your help.”

My spirits were considerably lower now than they’d been when she’d first told me I should spend time with Xavier. At first, it had seemed like a chance to be with him again. Now, the whole thing seemed very clinical. Like being with Xavier was literally the cure for what ailed me, and that was that.

“I should probably get back, or Sabine will be upset,” Big Mac said. “Those twins are a handful.”

I nodded absently, and she was about to blip back when I blurted out, “What if spending time with Xavier doesn’t help?”

The witch frowned. “Do you really need me to answer that question?”

My heart sank, but I forced myself to nod. I had a terrible feeling that I already knew the answer to the question. It had been staring me in the face for months now. But I still needed to hear her say it.

“Well, if being close to Xavier doesn’t help slow the hallucinations, you’ll face two outcomes. Keep with the status quo—i.e. continue to avoid choosing either of your mates—and lose your mind, or choose between Greyson and Xavier. I’ve really got to get back now. Good luck.”

She blipped away before I could get another word out, and I stared at the space where she’d been standing. Somehow, even with her words still ringing in my ears, even with the memory of my hallucinations fresh in my mind, I still couldn’t imagine any scenario in which I’d be able to choose between Greyson or Xavier. I was literally losing my mind, and I still couldn’t choose. I loved them both with everything I had. They both had my heart. My soul. And simply imagining a future that didn’t have both of them in it left me feeling gutted. Bereft.

My feelings hadn’t changed. Even when he had left me for Ava, I’d still loved him.

*Maybe he wasn’t wrong to tell me he didn’t want to be friends. It’s not like I really want to be his friend, either. Not if there’s a chance for something more.*

Maybe we’d always been so much more than that, and he was just telling me what I already knew.

The thought didn’t offer much comfort, though, because it left me right back where I’d started. How was I ever going to escape this?

“Cali.”

I turned to see Rishika standing behind me.

 “Did you get the truth spell?” she asked.

I held up the bottle Big Mac had given me and shoved all my worries about Xavier and my dwindling sanity to the back of my mind. It wasn’t like any of those problems were going anywhere.

“Come on, then,” Rishika said, heading toward the basement.

“Hold on.” I caught her arm, recalling Rishika’s reaction to Marius’s insinuations about his history with my sister. “You’d better let me handle this by myself.”

She frowned. “I just want Artemis back.”

“I know,” I said. “And I believe I can make that happen. Can you trust me with this?”

A few moments later, I headed down to the basement alone, the truth potion in hand.

I stepped into the room where Marius was imprisoned and held up the bottle. “You and I are going to have an honest conversation. And in order to ensure that, I need you to drink this.”

He frowned. “A truth potion? Seriously?”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s the matter? Are you worried the truth will come out?”

He shook his head. “I’ve already told you the truth—I just don’t trust witches. I’ve never met one before, but I’ve heard plenty of horror stories. What if that potion does something to my head? What if it doesn’t wear off?”

“If you really care about my sister, you’ll take it.” I held out the potion, letting my words hang in the air between us.

He seemed to mull it over for a beat before letting out a dramatic sigh. “Fine. If it’s the only way to convince you that I’m telling the truth, let’s have it.” He took the potion and grimaced as he chugged it down, then let out a loud belch. “All right. Ask away.”

I didn’t waste any time. “Did Artemis send you here to bring me back to the Fae world so I can help her escape from Celeste?”

He nodded. “Yes. I said so before, didn’t I?”

Relief washed over me. I hadn’t been inclined to take him at his word at the time, and I wasn’t any more inclined now. But there was no beating a truth potion, was there?

*Hmm…maybe I should cover all my bases.*

Just to be sure, I asked, “Are you trying to lead me into a trap?”

“No.”

More relief. Maybe this wasn’t going to be so awful after all.

Just then, the door flew open and Rishika stomped inside. “Did you sleep with my girlfriend?”

*Dear god.* My gaze swung to Marius, and I was both curious and afraid of his answer. I wouldn’t be able to go with him to save my sister if Rishika killed him in a fit of jealousy.

Marius turned and looked Rishika dead in the eye. “I did not sleep with your girlfriend.”

She studied him for a moment, like she was trying to figure out every possible meaning from his words.

“How do we know the potion is working?” she asked. “He’s Fae. He might have some kind of resistance.”

“Come on, you.” I grabbed her arm and towed her to the door. “You need to leave.”

“But—”

I cut her off. “You’re trusting me, remember? I’ll take care of this.”

I shoved her out the door and turned back to Marius. I doubted he had any kind of resistance to the potion, but I also *knew* that he hadn’t answered Rishika’s question honestly.

He smiled. My thoughts must’ve been written all over my face, because he said, “She asked the wrong question, didn’t she? Artemis told me they broke up, which means they aren’t technically girlfriends. I was trying to be kind.”

Oh, I very much doubted that.

*So he did sleep with Artemis. God dammit.*

But all of that would have to wait.

“I don’t care what you and my sister have done,” I said. “Artemis needs our help, right? That takes precedence.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Marius said. “Let’s get a move on.”

“Hold on a second.” I held up a hand. “I’ve already had two different Fae warn me that you can’t be trusted.”

He grinned, not the least bit repentant. “If that were true, wouldn’t I have left already?”

“Maybe, but it’s kind of impossible, since you’re shackled.”

“Am I?” He held up his hands. His shackle-free hands. “I could’ve left anytime.” He stood. “Either you come voluntarily or I take you with me. Which is it going to be?”

**Episode 5268**

**Artemis**

As I checked the line of my dress in the full-length mirror in my bedroom, I let out a wistful sigh. I was about to meet Kastian—who was very possibly some sort of twisted murderer, or a member of the Order, or both—and I was doing it in a frilly dress.

*Gods, I miss bounty hunting.*

I’d armed myself to the teeth, at least. My dagger was strapped to my thigh, and I had a short blade hidden up each sleeve, and a dagger in my boot. I supposed, if push came to shove, I also had my magical bow and my power of persuasion at my disposal. I had no intention of being another of Kastian’s victims, no matter how crucial it was that I played the role of simpering court member.

Still, if only I’d been allowed to play to my strengths, to solve this mystery as a bounty hunter, and not as Kadmos’s secret heir dressed in silk, this whole thing would’ve been a hell of a lot easier. All it would take was some sneaking around, a few bribes, a handful of right questions, maybe a bit of light torture, and voila! I’d have this sorted in record time.

But no. Celeste wanted me to preserve my image. Wanted me to play by the rules and ingratiate myself to the influential families at court. She’d all but clipped my wings and then tossed me out of the nest.

I maneuvered in the dress, watching my reflection as I pulled a short blade from beneath my arm. My skirt was full enough to hide my weapons, and the bodice gave just enough to allow the movement required to reach my blades. It wasn’t the ideal outfit—I’d have far preferred a tunic or some hunting leathers—but it would do.

*If Kastian so much as looks at me funny, I’ll cut his throat*,I thought to myself.If I did, Celeste wouldn’t be pleased. There would be no hiding my identity after that—if I got caught. And if I didn’t? Well, it’d still be a fair assumption to connect my sudden appearance at court with Kastian’s untimely and gruesome end. Even the most vapid courtiers would be able to make *that* connection.

*I’d better make sure he’s the one I’m looking for if I end up killing him, then.* I slipped the blade back into its sheath up my sleeve and surveyed my reflection. *I wonder if the general would approve of my plan to engage with Kastian…*

It was a solid plan—as long as I kept my head clear. I couldn’t afford to get drunk again, like I had last night. I had to keep my eyes on the prize. If Kastian was a secret member of the Order, then I needed to confirm his identity before he discovered mine.

*And even if he’s not in the Order, then he could still be the killer…*

It wasn’t a comforting thought, but it was a real possibility nonetheless.

*Or maybe Kastian’s just a typical good-looking, privileged, arrogant aristocrat. Annoying, but ultimately harmless.*

If that were the case, I wouldn’t kill him. Probably.

I did one last series of stretches to make sure none of my weapons peeked out with the movement before I nodded in satisfaction and turned to face my bedroom door. That would be the next challenge—the one I’d have to conquer before I even met up with Kastian. Celeste had made good on her threat to put another guard on duty, which meant I now had *two* guards who were tasked with watching my every move.

Obviously, I couldn’t let that happen. Not if I didn’t want to broadcast my real identity to Kastian, along with everyone else in the court. The guards would be under strict orders to follow me, and I didn’t blame them for not wanting to disobey Celeste. I knew firsthand that the woman had a mean streak that put most others to shame.

*I’m going to have to use a bit of my magic on the guards.*

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to ready my mind for the task as I reached for the doorknob. I hated resorting to this, to using my magic to take away someone’s will, but there was just too much at stake right now.

*I just hope I don’t do any permanent damage to their minds…*

I opened the door, and both guards turned in unison to look at me with matching expressions of surprise.

“Can we help you, milady?” one of them asked.

I summoned my manipulation magic, looking from one guard’s face to the other, making eye contact.

“Yes,” I said. “You can stay exactly where you are. You are not to follow me. You are not to tell anyone I’ve left. If anyone asks when I am, even Celeste, you are to tell them that I’m sleeping and not to be disturbed. I never left the room. Do you understand?”

Once again, the duo nodded. “We understand,” they said, in matching monotones.

Satisfied with my work and feeling only the slightest pinch of nagging guilt, I moved past them, closing the door behind me. As I strode confidently down the hallway, I peeked back over my shoulder to make sure they weren’t following me.

The two guards had stayed in place, guarding my door.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. *One task down.* The next would probably be a hell of a lot harder.

After sneaking past a few more guards and ever-present court staff members, I followed Kastian’s directions: down a few hallways, up a set of winding stairs, through a hidden doorway, and up more winding stairs that led to a room high up in one of the towers.

I paused for just a beat before I reached for the doorknob. My knives were ready. *I* was ready. I could do this.

I blew out a breath, opened the door, and was immediately met by a sea of voices. Several aristocrats were clustered together in the tower room, some of whom I thought I recognized. Disappointment mingled with relief. I’d planned on being alone with Kastian, and this gathering presented a new challenge. Now, I’d have to separate him from the herd.

But there *was* safety in numbers. If Kastian was the person I was looking for, he wouldn’t dare try anything with so many witnesses.

I held my head high as I approached the group, a small, mysterious smile on my lips. Even though I’d met Kastian’s entourage when we’d all been wearing masks, I recognized their voices—Dorphus, Cadhla, and that Fae who’d basically said my uncle Adair was hot… I hadn’t caught her name. I was among friends. Well, Kastian’s friends. Hopefully that didn’t shift the balance too far out of my favor.

Cadhla jumped up when she saw me approaching. “Ari, you came!”

She threw her arms around me, and I was bathed in the scent of moon lilies and freesia. Before I could even think about returning the gesture—or not—she pulled back, a bright smile stretching her face.

“It’s so nice to see you again! And so soon! I wasn’t sure anyone would be up for this after the wild night we had.” She laughed and patted my arm. I thanked the gods that I’d had the forethought to stow my blades on their undersides. “Don’t worry,” she added. “Tonight isn’t going to be a repeat of the party. It will be different tonight. More relaxed. Come on!”

She pulled me over to the rest of the group, who seemed to be sharing court gossip. Who was sleeping with whom, who secretly owed money to whom, who was marrying whom while carrying so and so’s baby…

I listened for a moment. In my work as a bounty hunter, I’d learned that this kind of salacious information could be worth more than gold in the right hands. But none of the people mentioned were my target, and none of their myriad problems seemed in any way connected to the Order.

As I tried to think of a way to gently steer the conversation somewhere useful, I felt a pair of eyes on me.

I turned to see Kastian across the room, leaning against the wall with an amused smile on his face. When he saw me looking at him, he sauntered over with the easy gait of a man who believed he deserved everything.

“You look even prettier than before,” he told me. “How is that possible?”

I broke away from the group to meet him halfway. It wasn’t ideal, what with us all in this very small room together, but it might be the best chance I’d get.

“You don’t look so bad yourself. I thought maybe I’d imagined that jawline.” I grinned. “I’m glad to see I didn’t.”

His smile widened. “I’m pleased you came. I think tonight will be a very interesting evening.”

I took a breath, then decided to go all in. I felt the dagger against my thigh as I leaned in close, lowering my voice. “I have to admit, I’m a little disappointed.”

He raised a brow. “And why is that?”

“I’d hoped that we’d be able to spend more time together, just you and me.” I paused for a moment. “How does that sound?”

**Episode 5269**

**Greyson**

I was so painfully aware of every second that passed as I approached the bar that I might as well have had a pocket watch strapped to my head. Kendall had asked to meet me here, and though I’d been careful to scope the place out before approaching, I wasn’t terribly concerned about running into any lingering Dark Fae mafia threats. Hans was dead, and the power vacuum in the organization would likely result in chaos for a while—hopefully, they’d be too busy chasing their own tails to be much of a threat to me and mine.

And, on a far less compelling note, I trusted that Kendall wouldn’t have suggested this place if she thought it would be dangerous for me. I didn’t trust her much beyond that, to be terribly honest, but I did know that she wouldn’t put me in danger on purpose. She owed me that much, at least.

But I also knew better than to *not* be wary. Dealing with Kendall was never as straightforward as it seemed. As no-nonsense as it should’ve been. I’d never met a person who threw out more twists and turns than a mountain road—until Kendall.

I pushed open the door to the bar, and there she was, sitting in a booth near the back of the building. Her back was to the wall, of course. Even though she was sipping from a cocktail glass, her purple eyes zeroed in on me the moment I walked in.

As I strode across the room, I couldn’t help but think of the last time I looked into those eyes—namely, when she’d told me she was actually an MIB agent. I’d been so pissed off at her for lying. For dragging my pack into her troubles and not even offering her real identity in return. Admittedly, I’d said some things I probably shouldn’t have—not if I wanted her to help me in the future. And here I was, not two days later, about to ask for her help.

*She and I have got to stop meeting like this… Is this part of some grand plan she’s cooked up?* I wondered. It seemed like no matter how much I wished to keep her at arm's length, no matter how many times she pissed me off with her tendency to get involved and then bail at the least opportune moment, I always ended up back here. Needing her help.

As I slid into the booth across from her, Kendall abruptly put her drink down and almost knocked it over. My reflexes had me reaching out to steady the glass, and our fingers brushed.

Suddenly, I was sent back to the dream I’d had last night—how she’d crawled on top of me, so maddeningly sexy, and kissed me. I yanked my hand back like she’d burned me.

*Get your head on straight and get that shit out of your head.*

Why did that dream even happen in the first place? I had no real connection with Kendall, unless you counted all the times I’d wanted to wring her neck for making my life difficult. Was it because of what had happened with Xavier and Cali? Was my subconscious reaching out to… I wasn’t even sure. To search for validation or something?

Kendall’s cheeks were red, like she was flustered. But why would she be? She gestured awkwardly at the booth. “Make yourself at home, I guess.”

The booth was a little too small for our purposes, no doubt having been designed for couples who wanted to get up close and personal while they drank. But Kendall and I were pretty much the exact opposite of that. This was supposed to be a professional meeting, of sorts. And I was all too aware of all the times when my knees accidentally brushed against hers.

I tucked myself as far against my own side of the booth as I could, sitting on a slight diagonal to avoid any further contact. It was uncomfortable, but I didn’t know what else to do.

Kendall’s face flushed deeper, and she cleared her throat. “I’m surprised you wanted to see me so soon. I didn’t think I’d ever be hearing from you again, after the way you left things.”

Her voice, at least, seemed all business.

I sighed. “Well, I was pretty pissed off, and I think I was justified in feeling that way, all things considered.”

I wasn’t about to grovel or try to play nice after what she’d done. I wasn’t going to apologize for how I’d felt, either. Hell, I was still pissed at her. If I didn’t need her help, I wouldn’t have called her.

Her expression soured. “If you came here to bitch at me some more, we can forget about this. I’d rather drink alone.”

She made to leave, and I reached out and caught her hand. I immediately regretted the action. It was like a bolt of lightning where her skin met mine.

*God, that fucking dream has really done a number on me…*

“I’m not here to bitch at you,” I said quickly, knowing I needed her to cooperate. “I just want to talk.”

She nodded and sank back down into her seat. “Then let me make this easy on you—I can’t tell you everything I know. My employer wouldn't approve.”

“You can’t refuse me,” I practically snarled. “I haven’t even told you what’s going on. Someone’s life may be at stake.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help,” she said. “I just have a limit. You have to understand, given my position.”

*Right. The position she won’t tell me jack shit about.*

I kept my poker face on. “If you really want to help, here’s your chance to prove it. What do you know about the Dark Fae mafia’s presence in the Fae world?”

Her lips pursed and her brows rose. “It’s not a secret that the Dark Fae mafia operates in both worlds. Sometimes, they even use their presence in one world to hide from consequences in the other. Their ‘business’ doesn’t have any physical boundaries that I know of.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Why do you ask?”

I weighed my words carefully—something I tended to do on a regular basis around Kendall. She wasn’t the only one here with secrets to keep.

I leaned in closer, speaking softly. “I may have to help rescue someone who’s being held captive in the Fae world. I want to know if there’s a potential connection between this person needing rescuing and the Dark Fae mafia wanting revenge for Hans’s death.”

She seemed to think this over for a moment. “I doubt it. At least, I don’t think anyone will be looking for revenge. From what I’ve gathered, Hans was already in trouble with some of the other bosses long before he died. They’re probably happy we killed him—less work for them. I understand your concern, but I really don’t think the Dark Fae mafia’s going to come after you and the others.”

I frowned. “How can you be so sure?”

“I just know,” she said with a shrug. “That’s all I can tell you.”

I blew out a breath. “You have to realize that’s not going to be good enough.”

“I do.”

Still, she didn’t offer up a single bit of additional information—and I knew better than to press her for answers she didn’t want to give. I’d learned that much about her by now, if nothing else.

“Is there anything else I can help you with, Grey?” she asked.

I tensed. She’d called me that in my dream last night. I couldn’t remember her having used that nickname any other time, but maybe she had. When had that started?

She’d clearly noticed my involuntary reaction. She looked me up and down, her brows furrowing. “Did I say something wrong?”

Since I couldn’t very well say, *Actually, that’s the nickname you used in the strangely erotic dream I had last night, starring the two of us*, I ignored the question altogether. I forced myself to push my memories of the dream to the back of my mind, to focus on the situation right in front of me.

On the real-life Kendall who could evade better than anyone else I knew.

“I do have one more question, actually,” I said. “And this time, I want a real answer.”

“Okay…” she said slowly.

“Did you wipe my memory in Portland?”

To her credit, Kendall didn’t look away. “I had no choice.”

I couldn’t have disagreed more with that assessment, but I knew better than to waste time trying. “How did you do it?”

She shook her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

I didn’t push that one, either. At least now I knew the truth. That was progress.

*Barely.*

“Don’t do it again,” I said.

Kendall just sipped her drink.

I leaned back. “So, if the Dark Fae mafia isn’t a threat anymore, why are you still here?”

She met my eyes again, and this time there was an intensity there that put me on edge. Just like last night. She shifted, and her leg brushed against mine under the table. Every cell in my body lit up at the contact.

Kendall bit her lip, drawing my eyes down to her mouth. “I wasn’t assigned to this area because of the Dark Fae mafia, Greyson.”

**Episode 5270**

Immediately, I summoned my magic sword. I was willing to help Marius save my sister—more than willing—but I still knew better than to trust the guy, and letting him take control of the situation seemed like the best way to put myself at his mercy. I wasn’t about to let him try anything.

I took a single step backward, my sword raised. “You know, I’m not thrilled that you just threatened to kidnap me. That’s typically not what I like to hear from people I team up with for rescue missions.”

Marius shrugged. I was beginning to understand that regret probably wasn’t his thing. “I’ll do whatever I need to do in order to save Artemis. She sent me all this way because she trusts me, and I’m not about to let her down. You and your werewolf pack might be right—I haven’t earned your trust. And right now, in the present, Artemis needs my help. *Our* help. So whether or not you agree to come with me is irrelevant—I’m taking you with me either way because I’ll do whatever I have to for her.”

I frowned. His seemingly heroic determination to save my sister was…admirable, I supposed. And if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t actually feel all that threatened by Marius. Still, he was unpredictable. I didn’t really know him, beyond what he’d told me about himself. So, my sword stayed in my hand.

“Artemis is my sister,” I said flatly. “Of course I’m going to do everything I can to help her. You don’t have to threaten to kidnap me to make it happen.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming,” Marius said, his brows rising.

“*But*,” I conceded, “I can’t just run off with you. I’m not going to do that. At least not before I talk to Greyson.”

Marius seemed to mull this over for a moment, but then he nodded. “Okay, let’s go have a chat with him.” He gestured to the door. “Why don’t you lead the way?”

I took a step toward the door, then froze. *I can’t put my back to him. That’d be reckless. Who knows what he might do?*

Marius seemed sincere in his desire to save Artemis, but I could tell he was only humoring *my* desire to talk to Greyson. He didn’t care who or what I’d be leaving behind when I went with him. Which meant I still couldn’t trust him. Couldn’t give him an opportunity to gain the upper hand. I’d lose any little bit of control I’d managed to eke out for myself.

I stepped back. “How about I follow you instead?”

He grinned. “You *are* Artemis’s sister.”

The words felt like a compliment, and—damn him—I felt a flare of pride at his words. *He is* way *too charismatic for his own good.* I could see how it would’ve been easy for Artemis to… Well, not *fall* for him. But get involved with him.

Not for the first time, I wondered what had happened between this strange Fae and my sister. If they were a couple. If he was in love with her. Regardless, I set the questions aside for later. Artemis would have all the time in the world to spill the tea once I saved her from Celeste.

We headed upstairs and met Lola, Jay, and Rishika in the hallway.

Rishika’s eyes widened when she saw the two of us. “What the hell is going on? Who let him out?”

Marius grinned. “Perhaps I let myself out.”

I shot him a warning look. “*I* let him out. I believe him—he’s here to help Artemis. We’re going to speak with Greyson now.”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “And I think you’ve just been played.”

“Fair enough,” I said calmly. I knew jealousy was calling the shots for Rishika right now, but when it came to Artemis, I also knew Rishika would’ve done anything to ensure her safety. If push came to shove, Rishika would back me. She probably wouldn’t *enjoy* it, but she wouldn’t do anything to risk Artemis’s safety, either.

*I’ll have to talk to her later. Try to smooth things out.* Rishika was probably hurt that Artemis had rekindled an old flame, and her feelings were valid, certainly. Still, I hoped she wouldn’t hold that information against my sister. It was a little bit like the pot calling the kettle black.

*I mean, didn’t Rishika start seeing Cresta? Didn’t Artemis tell Rishika not to wait for her? If Rishika can try to move on, meet someone else, isn’t Artemis allowed to do the same?*

I looked around the hallway. “Where’s Greyson?”

“He told me to tell you he went to meet Kendall to find out more about the Dark Fae mafia,” Jay said. “Their leader might be dead, but we want to make sure there are no loose ends that might turn into problems for us. He had to track her down, since she didn’t come back to the pack house last night.”

My eyes widened. “He had to talk to her *right* *now*?”

His timing was atrocious. Obviously, the Dark Fae mafia was a big concern, but with their leader disposed of, couldn’t Greyson have waited until we’d figured out how to help Artemis before running off to take care of “loose ends”?

*And why didn’t he just tell me he was meeting with Kendall himself? Is he still mad about the Xavier stuff?*

I couldn’t hold back a grimace. There was no way he *couldn’t* still be angry. Xavier had pretty much dropped a bomb at the Valentine’s party. If I were in Greyson’s shoes, I’d have been pretty pissed off too.

*But shouldn’t Artemis come first? Besides, it’s not my fault that Xavier decided to just spring his feelings on me. Greyson is entitled to his feelings—he can be mad if he wants to—but he’d better not be mad at me.*

Marius pulled me out of my ruminations. “If your Alpha is gone, what are we supposed to do? Wait around for him to come back? What if he *doesn’t* come back?”

I glared at Marius. “Greyson knows what’s at stake. He’ll be back soon.”

Still, this turn of events was beyond frustrating. I genuinely believed Marius was telling the truth about Artemis. I believed he wanted to help her. And I honestly didn’t care if I ended up being the only one who believed him. And what was worse, I completely understood Marius’s frustration. If I’d traveled between worlds in the name of saving someone I cared about, found the people who were supposed to help me, and then had to wait around for the chain of command to be notified, I’d probably have been tearing my hair out.

I still didn’t understand what Greyson could’ve been thinking. This wasn’t some insignificant task that could be put off. This was my sister’s life. We needed to head to the Fae world right away.

“Why don’t we just go?” Marius asked.

“Believe me, I’m tempted,” I confessed. I’d been to the Fae world before, and I knew what to expect. Besides, Marius knew the lay of the land even better than I did. We wouldn’t be going in blind. But still… “I can’t. I promised Greyson I’d give Adair until the end of the day to arrive.”

Marius’s eyes widened. “*Adair?* As in, the Adair who’s Kadmos’s brother? The Adair who has a bounty on his head big enough for me to retire on? That Adair?”

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, glaring. “*Bounty?* Is that how you see Adair? Just a pathway to a quick buck?”

*How on* earth *does Artemis’s life depend on this guy?*

“You don’t understand,” Marius said. “The entire Fae world has been looking for Adair, and you’re telling me he’s just going to show up here?”

I conjured my sword again. “You’d better not try anything.”

He put his hands up. “I wouldn’t! The bounty on a man like Adair is nothing but trouble. Sure, you get the gold, but you make a lot of enemies—”

The front door swung open, and Greyson strode inside, stopping short at the sight of Marius standing in the hallway and being menaced by my sword. “Um, what the hell is going on?”

I filled him in on the truth potion. “I believe Marius is here to get help saving Artemis. Now we’re just waiting for Adair. I came upstairs to talk to you, but you weren’t here.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed, like he heard the unspoken accusation in my words. “I was meeting with Kendall. She says the Dark Fae mafia has a presence in the Fae world. I even called Maren to verify.”

I frowned. “So? What do we care about the Dark Fae mafia? We have to get to Artemis.”

“I know,” Greyson said. “It just means we have to be really careful if we do go.”

“Not if,” Marius interjected. “When.”

Before Greyson could respond to that, Violet came down the hall. “Look who’s here!”

We all turned to see Adair, Tabitha, and Dani walk in.

Immediately, Adair summoned his energy whip and marched toward Marius. “What have you done with Artemis?”

**Episode 5271**

**Xavier**

*Does that mean you’re breaking up with Ava?*

Gabe’s question reverberated through my head as I approached the pack house. The wounds I’d received during our tussle were healing fast, though Gabe had caught me in the ribs hard enough that it hurt to breathe deeply—but that wasn’t my most pressing problem. I couldn’t get his question out of my head because I didn’t know the answer.

None of it was very clear-cut in my mind. I still loved Ava, but I couldn’t ignore my feelings for Cali. No matter how hard I tried to push them away, they kept coming at me, invading my thoughts and demanding attention. It was like a fucking curse all over again, except with very different parameters.

And I couldn’t help but think of Carlson Greene. The therapist had warned me that I couldn’t keep ignoring my feelings for Cali—that if I kept pushing them down, the blinding headaches wouldn’t stop. Well, now I’d admitted my fucking messy feelings, and the headaches had stopped…

So where the hell did that leave me?

I ground my teeth as frustration sharp as knives coursed through me. I was approaching the porch, but I stopped and looked back at the open lawn and the dark trees beyond. The woods looked inviting, and running always helped clear my head. My body twitched, and I nearly shifted back into my wolf form and took off again. But then, when I turned back to the house, I saw Ava watching me from the porch.

That made sense. I was close enough to the house that she would’ve caught my scent on the wind, and now that she’d seen me, I couldn’t just leave. I needed to get in there and face whatever was waiting for me.

I kept walking and, as I drew closer, I met her eyes. I saw in an instant that her expression was grave—things *weren’t* okay. I wondered if she was still upset about the bracelet shit storm. As I walked up the porch steps, I took a deep breath. I was about to find out.

“Where have you been?” she asked, her voice low.

“I went to talk to Greyson about the Dark Fae mafia situation,” I told her, pausing on the edge of the porch. An icy winter wind blew around me, but neither of us shivered.

She nodded, though her mouth looked tight with tension.

I studied her face, wishing I knew what she was thinking and wondering if she was going to bring up Cali. But before either of us had a chance to say anything more, the front door opened and Marissa stepped out.

“Ava, I— Oh, Xavier,” she said, clearly surprised. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” I said tightly. “What’s up?”

“We’ve been looking for you.” She nodded toward the house. “The pack is getting antsy about what we’re going to do about the Dark Fae mafia situation.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll talk to them.” I looked back at Ava, but she’d looked away, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was deliberately avoiding my eyes. Regardless, I knew if there was a pack problem, Ava would want that settled first. The pack was always her top priority.

So I followed Marissa inside.

It looked like almost everyone had gathered in the living room, spilling out into the kitchen beyond.

“There you are!”

“What’s going on?”

“What does the Dark Fae mafia want?

“Are we going to war?”

“When do we fight?”

I held up my hands to stop the questions, and the pack fell silent.

“I just came back from talking to Greyson, and I have good news.” I looked around, meeting the curious eyes of the pack. “The leader of the Dark Fae mafia is dead.”

There was a beat of stunned silence, and then—all at once—the pack started shouting. There were more questions, some cheers, and a few people even triumphantly pumped their fists in the air.

The room was filled with sound, but I still heard every word when Ava spoke, her voice cutting through the chaos like a sharpened knife.

“Are you sure the leader’s dead?” she asked.

I nodded, happy that I could be totally certain. “Yeah, I’m sure. It’s over. That threat is most likely gone.”

Ava let out a long breath, and some of the tension fell from her face. “Thank god.”

“Should we keep patrolling the perimeter?” Marissa asked. “Just to be sure?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s a good idea to keep our security high for the moment. The Fae leader might be gone, but we’ll keep our patrols going.”

“What are you thinking might happen?” Josephine asked curiously.

I shrugged. “Anything, really—but I’d like to be prepared, just in case some of the mafia comes looking for revenge now that their leader’s dead. We should just stay on alert for the time being.”

“What about the Fae alarm system?” Ava asked.

“I’m not going to ask Big Mac to take it down just yet,” I said.

“Is it still necessary?” someone called.

“This is just paranoid extra security,” I assured the pack. “The Fae leader is gone, and from what I’ve heard, they’re lost without him.”

“Well, that’s good, at least,” Marissa said. She thought for a moment, then turned to the pack. “So we’ll keep the patrols going, but we’ll only run two per night. Back to the old schedule,” she said, casting a questioning glance at Ava, who nodded. “I’ll get everyone assigned to shifts,” Marissa added, wading into the pack.

I looked on, and when I was confident that Marissa had the situation in hand, I turned toward the stairs. I wanted to take a shower. I definitely needed one after my run and my run-in with Gabe—both of which had left me looking pretty ragged. I felt pretty ragged, too.

I was just pulling off my shirt when Ava walked into the bedroom.

Tossing my shirt onto the bed, I watched as she moved through the room. Her hair was down today, brushing the small of her back. Her body was slim and lithe, and she moved quietly, barely making a sound.

I watched her for a moment, waiting for her to speak, but she didn’t. She didn’t even look at me when she walked in, just walked to the dresser. She picked up a small clock, which ticked loudly in the silent room. She put that down and picked up the gold necklace she sometimes wore. She looked at the medallion, turned it over on her palm, then set that down too.

Without turning to face me, she finally spoke. “We should talk.”

I nodded, though she wasn’t looking at me to see it. I cleared my throat. “Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

Ava swung around to look at me, her blue eyes nearly electric with color.

“This,” she said, and when I looked down, I saw that she was holding the bracelet I’d given her.

“How do you have that?” I asked, confused.

She shrugged. “It’s not the bracelet’s fault, what happened. It felt wrong to lose it forever when it’s nothing but metal. *It* did nothing to hurt me.”

I took this in and nodded. “Well, I’m glad you have it.”

She looked at me closely. “Whether I have it or not, you know a bracelet doesn’t solve anything.”

I scrubbed a hand across my face. “I know we have to talk, Ava, but I really don’t want to have this conversation right now. I just want a shower.” I heaved a sigh. “I’m still so confused about what I should do—what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“But you do still love her,” Ava said. Her voice—usually so strong and certain—was quiet. The sound of it tore at my heart.

I nodded. I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing, but I did know I needed to start by telling the truth.

“I can’t help it,” I said, also quietly.

“Is it because of the *due destini*?” she asked, a hopeful note in her voice, like if we could blame the fates, it wouldn’t be so bad.

“No,” I said. “It’s not because of the *due destini*. Or not *just* because of it. It’s because of who she is. I’ve always loved her.”

Ava closed her eyes, like she was rolling with a gut punch.

My chest ached as I looked at her. Everything in me wanted to reach out to her, to take her in my arms, to feel her soft hair beneath my lips. I wanted to comfort her, but I couldn’t move. I knew I was the one who was hurting her, and that she wouldn’t want me to attempt to comfort her.

She finally pulled in a deep, shuddering breath, and opened her eyes. They were bright as stars as she looked at me. “Are you going back to her, then? What about our pack?”

**Episode 5272**

**Artemis**

Kastian lifted a curious brow as I leaned in, whispering my proposal. He looked me over, then laughed.

“Wouldn’t you like that?” he asked.

His response wasn’t what I’d expected, but I tried not to let my flirtatious smile falter. “Obviously. That’s why I suggested it.”

He shook his head. “That won’t be easy.”

“And why is that?” I asked.

He shrugged airily. “I’m used to social climbers, Ari.”

I stared at him, stunned. Did he seriously think *I* was trying to climb up the Fae society ladder? *Me?*

My mind was spinning at the thought, but I couldn’t afford to show a break in my façade. Not now. I couldn’t tell him what I was actually doing—namely, trying to manipulate him into revealing personal information so I could investigate his ties to the Order. That probably wouldn’t sound much better.

So I settled for giving an exaggerated sigh and looking disappointed.

“Well, you’ll let me know if you ever change your mind, won’t you?” I said, running a light finger suggestively down the length of his arm. I was trying to get him to imagine what else I could stroke, and it must’ve worked, because he laughed again.

“You’re *very* persuasive, Ari.”

My heart leapt. Hang on—had that actually worked? Was he going to bring me up to his rooms now? There was a promising twinkle in his eyes as he looked at me, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, Dorphus strode over to us, clumsily inserting himself into our moment.

“Wine?” he asked, grinning at each of us in turn.

Dammit.

“Thank you,” Kastian said and, casting one last glance at me, took the glass from Dorphus and strode away.

I accepted the glass from Dorphus and watched as they both walked away, leaving me alone. I gripped my glass, not drinking, but thinking hard. I needed to get Kastian alone. I needed information.

I needed to know if the general’s warning was something I actually needed to take seriously.

Taking a long, cooling sip of wine, I stepped toward another group. This one included Cadhla and Philantha. I’d barely entered their tight little circle when a titter of laughter went up—they were gossiping about something.

Still sipping my wine, I listened as the story unfolded.

It wasn’t the most outrageous story I’d ever heard: Apparently, the daughter of a noble family had been caught sleeping with someone she shouldn’t have slept with—a Fae servant. I gathered this was untoward in general, but maybe wouldn’t have been that big a deal in the long run, except that this daughter was in the process of being betrothed to the heir of another important Fae family.

Cadhla was telling the story and stopped at this point, looking around with her big eyes, making sure her audience was properly scandalized by this development.

I had to work hard not to yawn. I wasn’t scandalized in the least. The poor daughter should’ve been able to sleep with whomever she wanted. I was almost certain that the heir of the other family was doing something similar. The only person I felt *really* sorry for was the Fae servant, who’d probably been dismissed.

“Ari? What do you think?”

Cadhla was looking at me expectantly, and it occurred to me that she’d asked me a question I hadn’t caught. I blinked quickly and tried to tune back in.

“What do I think about what?” I asked, trying to look interested.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a million miles away, Ari. I was asking if you had your eye on anyone at court.”

I blinked again, this time in surprise. “Oh, well…sure. There are so many… Everyone here is so hot…”

Cadhla looked over at Philantha, and they both laughed.

“Ari, you sound so human. It’s hilarious,” Philantha said, still giggling.

I frowned, wondering what the hell *that* was supposed to mean. Was Philantha making fun of me? Was it bad to sound human? Had I just made a mistake?

Apparently not, however, because Philantha turned to Cadhla and launched into a story she’d heard about another noble Fae family. In this story, the only daughter had run off with a stable hand for an afternoon and caused quite a stir.

“I feel bad for them,” a blonde girl said, interrupting Philantha’s story.

“Why?” Cadhla asked, clearly surprised.

“You know, after their eldest died in the war,” said the girl. “Nothing was the same for them after that.”

I perked up at the mention of the war, but I felt the rest of the group tense. Philantha clearly wasn’t interested in talking about the war—she gave the blonde girl a pointed look and continued with her story.

“Wait, am I missing something?” I asked Cadhla in a low voice. “Why can’t we say anything?”

Cadhla waved an airy hand. “Oh, it’s just such an unpleasant topic, don’t you think?”

She was striving to be casual, but I saw the effort it took. I watched as her gaze flickered around, scanning the surrounding room, making sure no one was standing nearby. It was like she was afraid we’d been overheard.

That was interesting, and it turned it over in my head. Did Cadhla think someone could’ve been eavesdropping on our conversation? And if so, what was going to happen if someone *had* overheard?

I tapped my empty glass impatiently.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said quietly, backing out of the group. I needed to find someone else to talk to—this society gossip was getting me nowhere.

Dropping off my empty glass, I grabbed a fresh one from a passing waiter and wandered over to the other side of the party. There was a raucous group on this side of the room, and they were gathered around what looked like a drinking game I’d never seen before—and that was saying something, because the werewolves at that pack house *loved* drinking games.

As I approached, one of the Fae nobles stumbled away from the group, arms spinning, and hit my full glass of wine.

The wine leapt out of the glass and splashed across my chest, making me jump back.

The Fae—a young man with white-blond hair—looked at me with wine-red eyes.

“Oops. My mistake, fair lady,” he slurred.

I sighed angrily and looked down at my dress—and its rapidly spreading wine stain.

Celeste’s voice came to my mind, reminding me that I always had to be presentable—or else. The *or else* part rang in my ears. I would’ve liked to push her voice out of my head, but I didn’t want to do anything that would induce Celeste to sic her bodyguards on me again. I couldn’t handle having them watching my every move.

I needed to find a washroom to sponge out the stain.

I located a likely-looking door in a shadowy corner and headed toward it. I was just pushing the door when it was yanked open from the inside. I stepped back as Kastian stumbled out. A very *drunk* Kastian.

Reflexes moving faster than my thought process, I caught him before he went tumbling to the ground.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

In his slurred response, all I could make out were the words “the game.”

“Oh,” I said, gathering that he’d probably been part of the drinking game I’d just encountered.

His body stilled in my arms, and he squinted up at me, like he was only just recognizing me. “Wait, what are we doing?”

I opened my mouth to remind him that we were at a party, but I stopped myself just in time. This was an opportunity, and I couldn’t just let it pass me by. Thank fuck I hadn’t gotten trashed tonight—I needed my wits about me.

I smiled down at him. “You invited me back to your room.”

“I did?” Kastian asked, clearly surprised.

I nodded. “You sure did. Do you want to go now?”

He shrugged. “Sure. I guess.”

I slipped my shoulder beneath his arm and slid my arm around his waist, half supporting him as we walked. Eventually, we made it back to his room.

Pushing the door open, I stepped in, then helped Kastian over to the bed. He looked relieved to see it and flopped down. An instant later, he was snoring.

I stared down at his still form with interest. This was an interesting development.

Poking him, I eyed him closely, watching to see if he was a light sleeper. But he didn’t even flinch. He was completely out.

I smiled to myself*. Good.*

I turned toward the room and scanned it. The first thing my gaze lit on was a small wooden desk, so I walked over. I pulled open the drawers and started sifting through papers, but there didn’t seem to be anything of interest. There was nothing but stationary, wax seals, and several receipts for purchases of wine.

There was a dresser nearby, and I stepped over to it. The clothes inside were neatly folded, and I ran my hands beneath them, trying to discover anything that might’ve been hidden.

There was nothing.

I heaved a frustrated sigh and had just started on the last drawer of the dresser when something occurred to me: the room was silent.

The snoring had stopped.

*Shit.*

“What the hell are you doing?”

**Episode 5273**

I was frozen with shock as I watched Adair brandish his whip, the magic cracking through the air like fireworks. The energy in the air made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, and I had to fight to keep myself from ducking out of its way.

“I’ll only ask one more time,” Adair growled, glowering at Marius. “What have you done with my niece?”

Marius looked a little shocked himself. He held up his hands in surrender. “Whoa there! Hold on, you’ve got this all wrong. I’m not threatening anyone. I’m here to *save* Artemis.”

Adair narrowed his eyes dangerously. “I’ve heard of you, Marius. You’re a bounty hunter, and the rumor is that you’ll do anything to get paid. *Anything*.”

“No!” Marius protested. Then he paused to think for a moment. “Well, okay, yes, that is me. And it’s flattering that my reputation precedes me—but that’s not what’s happening now! Not when it comes to Artemis.”

I thought he sounded sincere, but Adair laughed.

“You expect me to take your word for that?” he asked. “Just this once, under these specific circumstances, I’m supposed to believe you?”

“Yes!” Marius insisted.

Adair shook his head, his expression dark. “Don’t assume that I’ve survived as long as I have by being a fool, boy.”

Marius lowered his hands and, when his eyes flashed, I had a vision of how this could escalate quickly. I took a step toward the two men.

“Hey, let’s just all calm down,” I said, looking between them. “Let’s try to talk—*without* weapons,” I added pointedly, looking at Adair, who was still gripping his whip.

For a long moment, I worried that neither of the men was going to listen to me. But finally, Marius took a step back and Adair put his energy whips away, though he never looked away from Marius.

“Good,” I said with a small sigh of relief. “Now, Adair, I don’t know what you’ve heard about Marius—”

“I’ve heard that he’s a shady liar who cares more about lining his own pockets than anything else in the world, and he doesn’t care who he has to screw over to do it.”

I looked at Marius, who didn’t bother trying to deny it. He just shrugged.

Okay, this was going to be harder than I’d thought. I happened to believe Marius, and I was going to do whatever it took to get to Artemis. I wanted to convince Adair to come to the Fae world with us. I knew that Adair’s knowledge of the Dark Fae would be invaluable there. But I had another reason to want his company, too—even though I was willing to believe Marius about Artemis needing me, I still didn’t fully trust him. I’d been to the Fae world before, and I knew it could be unpredictable at best, so I didn’t want to rely completely on Marius.

I turned to Adair. “I used truth serum to question him. Whatever else he is, he *is* telling the truth about wanting to save Artemis.”

Adair contemplated this for a moment, then lifted his chin. “But did you ask him what he’ll get out of it?”

I hesitated for a moment. “I never thought to ask him that,” I admitted.

Adair nodded knowingly. “You should know by now, Caliana, that Fae are skilled at bending the truth to make information suit their own purposes.”

I sighed. “I know that, but I think the important information is simple—Artemis is imprisoned in the Fae world. That’s true. And if we don’t get her away from Celeste, then who knows—”

Adair stepped forward and grabbed my arm. His grip was tight, and I looked up at him, baffled to see a shocked look on his face. I was almost sure it was the first time I’d ever seen Adair look anything less than completely collected. That made his current expression completely disturbing, in its own way.

“Did you say Celeste?” he asked slowly.

“Adair…” Tabitha said softly, and he loosened his grip a little, though his face was still severe.

I swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, she’s the one who forced Artemis to make a Fae promise to stay.” I looked at Marius for confirmation, and he nodded.

“Dammit,” Adair hissed. He let go of my arm and turned to pace fretfully.

The door opened, and Gabriel walked in, followed by Greyson. They stepped up beside Tabitha and Dani.

“Honey, I’m home!” Gabriel called out playfully, looking around for Mikah.

Tabitha rolled her eyes and walked toward Adair, while Greyson strode purposefully toward me.

“Are you okay?” he asked quickly, scanning my face. It was that protective look I knew so well. I couldn’t help but lean into his touch on my arm. He turned to look around, taking in Marius and Adair’s obvious distraction. “What’s going on here?”

“There’s kind of a—” I started, but Greyson was already frowning at Marius.

“What is *he* doing upstairs?”

I sighed as Mikah silently joined the group, slotting in next to Gabriel. “I spoke to Marius, and he says that Artemis is definitely in trouble.”

“In trouble how?” Greyson asked.

“Big trouble,” I said. “She was coerced into making a Fae promise to stay in the Fae world indefinitely.”

“*What?*” Greyson demanded, looking alarmed.

“I know. So we need to go help her—”

“Wait, *you’re* not going back, are you?” Tabitha said, looking up at Adair. When he didn’t answer, she kept talking. “If you do, you know they’ll come after you too.”

Adair’s expression was tight, but his voice was soft when he spoke to her. “What choice do I have? I have to go. It’s Celeste.”

“Who *is* Celeste, anyway?” I asked.

Tabitha looked down at the floor like she wished she could disappear into it, clearly uncomfortable.

Adair glanced at her, then cleared his throat. “She is—technically speaking—my wife.”

I stared at him, shocked for a moment. His *wife*?

But then I remembered that I knew Adair was married. A while back, I’d found out, and then I’d been worried that I’d assisted in an affair by encouraging Adair and Tabitha to be together. But Mikah had explained that Adair and his wife were still officially married but no longer in love. I vaguely remembered the name Celeste now, too.

Well. This made things interesting. And potentially worse than we’d known.

“Right…okay. So would Celeste listen to you if you asked her to release Artemis from her Fae promise?”

Adair winced, as though the question had physically hurt him. “We didn’t part on good terms.”

That was what I’d been worried about. How were we supposed to work with that? And what did that really mean for Artemis? Did Celeste have a vendetta or something?

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “Well, I’m going to go get my sister no matter what. Whoever’s willing to come, I’d appreciate the help.”

“I’m in,” Marius said unnecessarily. I rolled my eyes. Of course he was coming, but I supposed I should appreciate his lack of hesitation.

“I’ll come,” Adair said stoutly.

Tabitha’s expression looked pained, but she nodded. Obviously, she was on Adair’s side, come what may. “Then I’m coming too.”

Adair turned to her, clearly about to object, but she shook her head and smiled.

“Don’t. I won’t ask you not to go, but I’m coming too.” She took his hand in both of hers, and he smiled down at her, his gaze more loving that I would’ve thought possible.

“I’m coming,” Greyson said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. He nodded when I looked up at him. “Of course I’m coming.”

I smiled up at him, grateful—as I always was—for my mate. He was always by my side, and he was right—I knew I could count on him.

Then I thought of something and felt the smile slide off my face.

Greyson looked worried. “Cali? What’s wrong? What is it?”

I bit my bottom lip. My stomach was twisting with nerves, but I knew what I had to do. I gave his hand a squeeze. “I need to tell you something.”

“Of course. What is it?” he asked.

I glanced around at the crowd of people. Marius was leaning forward, speaking quietly to Adair, who looked faintly thunderous. Gabriel and Mikah looked tense, but were listening in. What I needed to tell Greyson needed to be said in private, so I pulled him away from the crowd and into the study.

Shutting the door behind us, I turned to look at him.

“Cali? What is it?” Greyson asked. His grey eyes flashed with concern. “Is something wrong?”  
 I thought about what I needed to say, and how best to say it. The room was growing crowded with the silence, and Greyson was looking more and more concerned, so I figured I might as well just come out and say it.

I took a deep breath. “Xavier has to come, too.”

**Episode 5274**

**Greyson**

Standing in the small, quiet office, Cali was looking up at me with wide, nervous eyes. I stared back at her, baffled. I had no idea why the hell she was bringing Xavier up right now.

I shook my head. “No, we’ll be fine without him. We don’t need to bring an entire group—we’d be more likely to get noticed. We need to think about this tactically. Adair needs to come because he knows the place best, and Tabitha’s coming because of him, but we don’t need to turn this into a party.”

“No, it’s not about numbers,” Cali said, shaking her head.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s about the *due destini*.”

I ground my teeth. If I went the rest of my fucking life without ever hearing the words *due* *destini* again, it would still be too soon.

“I thought the threat was gone,” I said tightly. “You don’t have to choose right now, right? We’re okay.”

Cali winced, almost like I’d yelled at her, and I immediately realized that there was something else going on that I didn’t know about.

I reached for her hand. “What’s going on, love? You can tell me.”

She took a deep breath. “You know the hallucinations I’ve been having?”

I nodded. “Of course. I was worried about you last night. I’ve never seen you like that before.”

“I talked to Big Mac about it,” she said. “I knew going to the Fae world was a possibility, and I didn’t want to go in there like this and have something happen to me—not when Artemis’s life might be in danger—”

“What did Big Mac say?” I interrupted.

“Apparently, spending too much time away from one of my mates is affecting me.”

Taking this in, I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Big Mac says that I just need to be around Xavier,” Cali said. “As friends, nothing more. But he needs to be physically close to me in order to stave off the worst of the hallucinations. And if I want to go into the Fae world and be able to help Artemis…” She took a deep breath. “Well, then I think it means that Xavier needs to come too.”

I could see the anxiety in Cali’s face. I hated the sight of it, so I stepped toward her and cupped her face between my hands. My own emotions were rioting—why couldn’t *I* be the one with the ability to solve everything for her?I also wondered if Xavier knew anything about this. How *convenient* that he’d said that he didn’t want to be friends with Cali the night before.

I thought all of this, but all I said was, “I’m so sorry, love. I don’t want you to be hurt, and I know you want to help your sister. If Xavier coming means that we can accomplish both of those things, then okay.”

Cali’s eyes filled with tears, and she wrapped her arms around me, holding me tightly.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice muffled against my chest. “I wish I didn’t have to hurt you all the time like this, Greyson. I wish there was a way…”

I nodded. “It’s okay. I can handle it.”

But that was a lie. Inside, I was aching and angry. This damn *due destini* kept getting in the way of the life I was trying to build with Cali. Things should’vebeen fine by now. They *should’ve* been. Xavier had Ava, and the Samara pack. He was an Alpha. It was what he’d always wanted, and I knew the Samaras respected him, looked up to him. It felt like a life my brother could genuinely be happy with.

And that made me happy. For a while there, it had felt like he and I might actually get a chance to be brothers without all the friction that came with sharing a mate.

But—of course—now, the *due destini* had decided to play one of its twisted games with us.

“Call Xavier,” I said stiffly. “Tell him to come.”

Cali looked up at me, tears on her cheeks. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded, already backing toward the door. I needed to get out of the office before I accidentally let her see exactly how *not* okay I really was. “I just need to check in with Rishika about something for the pack. For before we leave.”

Cali nodded, looking worried. “Okay…”

Shit. Could she see that I was upset?

I turned so she couldn’t see my face and hurried out of the room.

I had made up the thing about checking with Rishika in order to escape the conversation, but it actually wasn’t a bad idea. I looked around for her as I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

She was on the back porch when I found her. She was leaning against the railing, looking out at the winter-grey grass and the sky, which was heavy with clouds. She was holding a bottle of wine and, as I walked toward her, she took a long pull, straight from the bottle.

“You okay?” I asked, lifting a brow.

She looked over at me. “Great. Really fantastic.”

“You sure about that?” I asked warily.

“Absolutely. Why shouldn’t I be? I’ve just realized I’m still ridiculously in love with my ex, which is great, because I’m also fairly certain she slept with that stupid hot dude in there,” she said, jerking her chin toward the house and—presumably—Marius.

“Got it,” I said, nodding. “You should come with me.”

Rishika gave me an uncharacteristic scowl. “Can’t you see that I’m wallowing here, Greyson? Respect the wallow. I’m not really in the mood to talk pack business right now.”

“Yeah, well, me neither,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” she asked, clearly surprised.

“We’re going to a bar. I think we both need to let off some steam.”

Her brows shot up. “You? What’s up?”

I shook my head. I really didn’t want to get into it. “You in or out?”

“I’m in,” she said, plunking down her wine bottle and following me through the house.

I grabbed my keys and we got into my car, riding silently to a little dive bar I knew about, just off the highway.

\*\*\*

I looked down at the tequila shots I’d just ordered, lined up in front of me.

“Cheers,” I said, lifting the first.

Rishika laughed and clinked her shot glass against mine. And—without waiting for me—she downed her shot.

Laughing, I did the same.

We made our way down the line of tiny glasses, and I felt the alcohol working its way through my body. I was getting a nice little buzz. Rishika was looking slightly happier than she had before, but I noticed that she was making quick work of the shots. She was definitely moving faster than me, and I wondered if that was because of the Marius situation. If so, I understood—he’d surprised me plenty, too.

Drink after drink went down easy. I knew it would’ve been better if I went slowly—we were about to leave for the Fae world, after all—but it felt nice to let loose a little and forget all the things that were stressing me out, even just for a little while.

“You know what the most fucked-up thing is?” I demanded, slamming a tiny glass down onto the bar top.

“What’s that?” Rishika asked.

“The fucking *due destini* had to go and choose the *one* guy I’d hesitate to kill for touching my mate.” I shook my head.

Rishika slammed down her own shot glass, and the tiny drop she’d left behind sloshed onto her fingers. “So basically, you’re saying I should kill Marius.”

I laughed. “I don’t think that would be such a good idea. We need him to help rescue Artemis.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. But *after* the rescue, it’s on, right? We can take him.”

“Yeah, we probably could,” I agreed.

Rishika gave me a sloppy grin and looked down at the empty glasses in front of her. The grin faded as she surveyed them, clearly dismayed. “Greyson, someone drank all our shots! Don’t worry, I’ll order some more until we find the culprit—”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” I said. “Maybe hold off for a second.” I pushed myself to my feet. “I’m going to hit the bathroom.”

As I shuffled across the room, I wondered if Rishika was actually drunk, or if she was just finally unwinding a little. I’d been so busy thinking about it that I hadn’t noticed the footsteps behind me. Not at first.

But as I crossed the bar, I belatedly realized that someone was following me. I slowed a little, giving my head a little shake, trying to clear it and force myself to think straight. I took a breath and picked up a scent I hadn’t yet noticed—and I recognized it in an instant.

I spun around and lunged, grabbing Kendall’s arm before she had a chance to slink away into the shadows. I glared down at her. “Why are you following me?”

**Episode 5275**

**Xavier**

I looked at Ava’s pale face. “I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do.”

“So you’re going to leave us.” She didn’t phrase it as a question.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to do that. You know I don’t. Really, I don’t think this is a choice that needs to be made right now.”

She stared back at me, like I’d just started speaking a foreign language. “I need to know, Xavier. So I can take care of my pack.”

*My* pack.

“It’s still my pack too,” I said defensively. “And no matter what, I’m going to make sure the Samaras are taken care of.”

Her eyes stayed steady on me, but I’d known Ava for a long time, and I could read the message in their blue depths. She didn’t believe me, and that killed me.

I stepped toward her. “Please, Ava, just give me some time. I know it’s selfish as hell for me to ask this of you, but I don’t want to make this choice lightly.”  
 I was leaning toward her, but she looked a million miles away as she nodded.

“Yes,” she said flatly. “You make your choice, Xavier, and I’ll make mine.”

Her voice cut through the quiet of the room, slicing through me like a knife. My head spun like gravity was shifting around me. I’d never imagined that Ava would reject me. She’d always been so clear about her feelings for me. She’d never wavered… But what had I given her in return?

Choosing a life without me was her right. But being honest about my feelings was my right, too. I wasn’t trying to hurt her—I didn’t want to hurt her—but I was. I knew what it was like to watch the person you loved moving toward someone else. I couldn’t blame Ava for the barrier she was constructing between us. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to protect her heart.

I took a deep breath. “Let’s both take some time to figure out what’s best for us. And for the pack.”

Her blue eyes were steady on me. I felt like she could see right through me.

She nodded. “Yeah. Fine.”

She turned and dropped the bracelet into a jewelry box on the dresser, then she shut the box with a click, which echoed through the still room. The sound hit me like a punch. It just felt so final.

She kept her back to me, and I took a step away. I was capable of reading the room, and she wanted space, so I was going to give it to her. Grabbing my shirt from the bed, I headed downstairs and out of the house. I figured I’d go on another run—there was nothing better for clearing my head.

But before I could shift, a car approached and I stopped, watching it pull into the driveway in front of the house. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and even before the driver of the car climbed out, I knew it was Cali.

On instinct, I looked back at the house and saw movement in an upstairs window. It was Ava, and if I was seeing her, she was definitely seeing Cali.

*Dammit.*

I stepped toward Cali as she left the car. I needed to tell her that now wasn’t a good time, but then I realized that she looked upset.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She heaved a deep sigh. “I need to go to the Fae world to help Artemis.”

“Right, okay,” I said, nodding. “Is Greyson going? Do you need us to help keep an eye on the Redwood territory while you’re gone?”

I wasn’t sure why she’d driven over to tell me this. Greyson could have called.

Cali hesitated. “Actually, I kind of need you to come with me.”

I stared at her, taken aback. “What? Does Greyson know you’re asking me?”  
 She nodded. “He’s fine with it.”

I doubted that.

“Cali, I meant what I said before,” I said. “I don’t want to just be your friend. I can’t hide how I feel about you anymore. You know that, and you’re asking me to go with you to the Fae world?”

I could feel my head buzzing as I spoke. She wanted me to come with her. No—she *needed* me to come.

She sighed again. “That doesn’t mean I want us to get back together, Xavier. I’m sorry, I just can’t make that decision right now. Artemis is in danger, and I have to focus on that.”

I frowned. “I don’t understand. If this isn’t about us being together, what *is* it about?”

“No, it *is* about us being together,” Cali said, as though that cleared everything up.

“Wait, what? I’m confused. What are you talking about?”

A cool wind blew up, swirling around us as Cali shook her head, looking frazzled. “No, it’s—I know this is confusing. It’s not about us being *together*-together. It’s about us being physically close—”

“*What?*” I demanded, floored.

As though she’d only just realized what she’d said, Cali’s eyes grew wide with shock, and she shook her head emphatically. “No! Not like that!”

“Okay, then like what?” I asked.

I was starting to feel a little frazzled myself. I could feel the pressure of Ava’s eyes on my back, and it felt as though Cali was talking nonsense. I tried to focus as she began to explain.

“Okay, so I’ve been having these hallucinations,” she said. “They’ve gotten pretty bad, and it was getting harder and harder to tell fiction from reality. I was getting worried about going into the Fae world with this still happening, so I asked Big Mac about what was causing the hallucinations, and what I could do to stop them.”

“That’s good,” I said slowly. I didn’t like the sound of these hallucinations. “What did she say?”

Cali looked anxious. “She said that I’m having the hallucinations because of the *due destini*—because I’ve been keeping myself so far away from you, physically speaking.”

“Like, geographically?” I asked, feeling a certain need for clarity.

She nodded. “Yeah. The *due destini* got mad and made me start hallucinating. So I need to be physically close to you to get the visions to stop. And they *really* have to stop if I’m going into the Fae world. You know that it’s like in there—I need to be at the top of my game. So I need you to come along and just…be close to me.”

“Really?” I blinked. She’d explained everything, but I was still trying to get my head around most of it. “You think that will help the hallucinations?”

I hated that she was having them at all—they sounded terrifying—but I couldn’t deny that part of me felt good about the idea that I could help her with them. It was strangely empowering.

“I think so,” Cali said. Then she shook her head. “But I don’t want you to misconstrue this.”

I felt myself bristle. “What do you mean?”

“I just need your help to save my sister—that’s all I’m asking.” She took a step forward, and I could see the fear in her eyes. “Xavier, please. Will you help?”

I reached for her and pulled her into a hug. “Of course I’ll help. I’m always here for you, Cali. Always.”

I felt her sigh with relief. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

She didn’t move away, and neither did I. I held her close for a long moment, the feeling of her against me sweet and familiar. It felt so good, I wished I didn’t have to let her go. I loved the feel of her, the way her hair brushed against my arms, her scent filling my senses, the curves of her body, pressing against mine…

I knew it couldn’t last forever, but when she finally pulled away, I had to fight to hold back a protest.

She took a step toward her car. “I need to get back to the pack house. We’re leaving soon, and I need to get ready.”

I nodded. “When are we leaving?”

“Come by later tonight.”

I nodded and watched as she climbed back into the car. Then I stayed exactly where I was, watching as she drove away.

Once she’d disappeared, I ran a hand through my hair, thinking over what had just happened—and what I’d just agreed to.

“What did she want?”

I didn’t flinch at the sound of Ava’s voice. I wasn’t surprised that she was there, or that I hadn’t heard her approach.

I turned to look at her, taking in the strange, emotionless look on her face. In a strange way, it made her look more beautiful than ever. More remote.

“Ava, I’m sorry,” I said. My thoughts were a blur, my emotions a minefield.

Her expression stayed empty, as distant as a star. “Why?”

I took a breath. There was no good way to say what I had to, so I needed to just rip off the Band-Aid. “I’m leaving.”

**Episode 5276**

**Ava**

*I’m leaving.*

I didn’t want to be surprised by Xavier’s words—I’d tried really hard to prepare myself for this moment—but they still slammed into me like a freight train. I fought through the aching pain of them, then nodded. “I see. So you’ve made your choice.”

Xavier looked confused for a moment, then his eyes widened. “Oh, no, not like that! I meant—shit—I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “Ava, let me start over.”

I frowned. Everything hurt, and now I was confused, too.

“Artemis is in trouble,” he said. “We have to go get her.”

*We have to go get her.*

“Of course,” I said quietly. “Of course you do. You have to go because it’s Cali.”

A frown creased his forehead. “Well, yes and no. It’s complicated.”

“It always is, when it comes to her,” I said, more sharply than I’d intended. I was trying to stay neutral, trying to breathe through the riot of feelings currently rampaging through me—anger and fear and so, so, so much pain.

“I can explain—”

I shook my head, cutting Xavier off. “Don’t bother.”

Anguish flashed across his eyes. “Ava—”

“Will the explanation make me feel any better?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, though his expression grew more grave.

“I didn’t think so,” I said, and I could hear that my voice sounded hollow and distant. “I’m sure you could offer an explanation, X, but I’m also sure it’d be more *due destini* bullshit, or some other magical, unexpected reason that all comes down to the same thing—you have to go be with Cali right now or else the world will end. So just go.” I shook my head, feeling tears welling up in my eyes. Xavier was standing in front of me, the most beautiful man I’d ever known, the only man I had ever loved, and I was telling him to go. “Go help her.”

“Ava—”

“We’ll talk when you get home,” I said quietly.

He hesitated for a moment, like he wanted to say more, but then he nodded. He stepped toward me, wrapping me in his arms. He still had his shirt in his hands, and his skin was warm as he pulled me close. I could still smell her on him, but I tried to ignore that, tried to breathe in nothing but the scent of Xavier—the scent of the man I loved.

“I *will* come home,” he said quietly. I could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest. “This is my home.”

*Yes, but for how much longer?* I wondered. The thought made me cold.

I took a step back, disentangling myself from his grasp.

“You should get packed,” I said, trying to sound brisk.

He looked at me for a moment. “I guess so.”

It felt like the silence between us was going to swallow me up. “The Fae world is no joke. And if you die out there, I’ll kill you.”

The joke earned a ghost of a smile from Xavier. He nodded. “Okay, I’ll go grab a few things.”

He walked past me, hesitating for just a moment as his shoulder brushed mine, then headed into the house. So he could get ready to leave me.

When I heard the door close behind him, I stopped fighting and let the tears fall down my face. I covered my eyes and sobbed, letting out the worst of my fears. It felt like I kept making the same mistakes, over and over. I was furious and betrayed, but who did I have to blame more than myself? I kept letting Xavier go to Cali—again and again—and I kept waiting for him to come back. Whatever fury I was feeling toward Xavier and Cali, I felt the same measure of it for myself.

I slid my fingers into my hair, clawing at my scalp, letting that anger wash over me. I just wished I could stop loving him. Everything would’ve been so much easier if I didn’t feel the way I did. If I just could’ve moved on from him.

But the idea of moving on felt like staring into a bottomless abyss. I’d literally come back from the spirit world for Xavier. I’d clawed my way back to mortality for him. These days, I felt lost when I wasn’t with him. There was a part of me that was scared that I would change—that without him, I’d revert to the old version of myself. Someone who’d done so much damage, I was ashamed to have been her.

The memory of that Ava—the one who’d hurt Xavier so badly, he hadn’t even been able to look at her—filled me with fear and shame.

I took a deep breath. I knew that I would do whatever it took to hold on to him. I would be understanding of all this damn *due destini* shit. I’d even let him go into the Fae world with Cali. And I would just have to hope that our mate bond would be enough to bring him back to me. That the bond that connected us would be strong enough to hold us together, even as it stretched into another world.

With a sigh, I shook my head, frustrated with myself. I was well aware that I was thinking like some lovesick little girl, but what could I do? I had nothing else to hold on to.

Except the Samaras. And I *had* to think of the Samaras. My pack meant more to me than almost anything—almost more than Xavier. My responsibility toward the pack drove me, forcing me into action when sometimes all I wanted was to curl up under the covers and cry. When I was capable of separating my feelings about Xavier from my feelings about the pack, I knew he was an Alpha the Samaras could trust. And I knew I couldn’t let him leave the pack leaderless. Not now, when we’d moved back into a house and started rebuilding the pack. We’d just barely found our way back to solid ground.

I took a deep, cleansing breath, pulling the frosty February air into my lungs, feeling it burn. I wiped my eyes and waited for a moment. When I was sure I wasn’t going to cry again, I turned on my heel and headed into the house.

Inside, I went upstairs, and when I got to our room, I found Xavier stepping out of the shower.

I looked quickly away from him and saw a backpack on the bed. It had a few things in it and—more to distract myself from his towel-clad body than anything else—I turned my attention to it. I opened the dresser and grabbed a couple of pairs of jeans, lobbing them in. Then I pulled a pair of brass knuckles from my own drawer. I’d bought them as kind of a joke, but I’d heard the Fae world was lawless, so I threw them into Xavier’s bag.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said softly, moving to stand behind me.

“It’s fine,” I said tightly. I could feel the heat of him now that he was closer, and I struggled to focus. “You’re almost packed, anyway.”

“You sure you won’t need those?”  he asked, and when I glanced at him, I saw he was nodding at the brass knuckles with a small smile.

I cleared my throat. “I think I can spare them. For a little while. But I’m going to need them back.”

Pain flashed across his eyes, and he grabbed my hip, turning me to face him. “Thank you, Ava,” he said, his voice low. “I know this can’t be easy for you.”

I considered this, and then remembered everything I’d thought about down on the driveway. I nodded. “I want us to work, Xavier.”

He nodded back. “I know it’s hard for you to fully believe me when I say this, but I love you, Ava.”

The pain those words carried was intense, but I felt their truth. I lifted up onto my toes and kissed him lightly on the lips, then he slid his arm around my back and pulled me close, crushing my lips with his. My mouth opened—half out of surprise, half in invitation—and his tongue plunged in.

It felt like kissing him for the first time, and a fire raced through me, hot and searing. I didn’t just want Xavier—I was *desperate* for him. My hands went into his hair, my fingernails digging into his scalp. My hips moved against him of their own accord, seeking more pressure, more friction. Still holding me tight, he spun me around so I could feel the bed against the back of my knees, then he picked me up and tossed me onto the bed. He looked down at me, his eyes burning with desire, and ripped off his towel. I’d already felt his arousal while we were kissing, but now I saw it, and my mouth fell open.

“Oh god, Xavier,” I moaned, reaching for his cock as he climbed onto the bed after me. “I need you, I need you so bad. Please.”

“*Ava*,” he breathed, growling as my hand closed around him. He closed his eyes as I stroked him, feeling the velvety softness of his skin beneath my hand.

Hands on either side of my head, he leaned down to kiss me, consuming me, his tongue plundering my mouth.

I wriggled out of my jeans, and when my panties went flying, Xavier came up for air long enough to pull my shirt off. He grabbed my breasts, squeezing hard as he drove his cock into me.

“Oh fuck,” I moaned, realizing my sex was molten wet for him.

“*Fuck*,” he moaned in agreement, clearly having realized the same thing.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, driving him further into me.

“God, you feel good,” he breathed. He rode me hard, his desire making him rough with me, though I didn’t mind. I liked it, and I wanted—

“*More!*” I panted. “Harder!”

He smiled wolfishly and obeyed, driving into me with so much force, my head slammed into the headboard.

“*Yes!* Fuck, yes!” I moaned. I wanted this. I wanted him. I wanted Xavier to remember what would be waiting for him when he got back.

“Ava,” he growled, gripping me so hard his fingers dug into my breasts, twisting my nipples, making them burn.

“Xavier…”

He drove into me, harder and harder with each stroke. I felt his body tense as he got closer to climax, and I was starting to shake.

I screamed as I came, hard and fast.

**Episode 5277**

**Greyson**

Kendall’s hypnotic purple eyes flashed as she pulled her wrist from my grasp. She gave me an assessing look. “You’re drunk, Greyson.”

My head felt blurry, but I still heard the surprise in her voice. She shook her head, but as she started to turn away from me, I reached for her again, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m not that drunk,” I said. “I’m definitely not drunk enough to think seeing you here is just a coincidence. Why are you following me, Kendall?”

She sighed. “It’s for your own good.”

I scoffed. “What the hell does that mean?”

She didn’t respond, and I rolled my eyes.

“Come on,” I said. “You can’t just say that kind of shit without explaining yourself.”

She sighed. “Fine, but telling you this goes against protocol.”

I folded my arms, waiting for her to answer me.

“Whenever a civilian comes into contact with an enemy organization, it’s protocol for them to be monitored in case of threats,” she said.

I stared at her. “Hang on, you think I’m a *threat*?”

She stared back. “No, Greyson, Threats *against* you.”

I frowned. “Threats against me? What the hell are you talking about?” She was looking at me like I was an idiot, and then it hit me: she was here to protect me. I laughed. “Kendall, I’m fine protecting myself. You can take my word for it.”

She shrugged. “I believe you, Greyson, but it’s not my call. It’s protocol.”

I looked at her curiously. The lighting in the bar was low, and one of the lightbulbs above us flickered, so it was tough to be sure, but I thought she was blushing. She was definitely trying to avoid meeting my eyes, which was strange for Kendall, who was usually so certain.

I cleared my throat. “Let me remind you that the leader of the Dark Fae mafia is gone, and the rest of the organization is in chaos without him. So really, I don’t think we have much to worry about.”

“You’re right about the chaos,” she admitted. “But you never know what can happen. Especially at moments like this. So we have to stick around to monitor our targets.”

I nodded. “And then there’s the *other* mission you’re on, right?”

Her expression darkened, and a frown creased her forehead. “I should never have told you that.”

The light above us flickered off, but when I hit the wall with the side of my fist, it flicked back on. “Why don’t you just tell me the details, then?”

“Greyson—”

“Why did you come here if it wasn’t for the Dark Fae mafia?” I pressed.

Kendall crossed her arms over her chest and didn’t answer. It was clear she was still committed to being tight-lipped as always.

I sighed. “Fine, don’t tell me. Whatever. Do whatever your protocol requires. Just don’t get in my way.”

I turned and headed into the men’s room, where she couldn’t follow me. As I shut and locked the door behind me, I looked into the cracked and spotted mirror over the sink. Kendall had been able to tell that I was drunk, but it probably hadn’t been that hard to guess. The mirror was shit, but even I could see that I looked a little rough.

Running my hand along my jaw and feeling the scratch of stubble, I wondered if I should’ve told her about our planned trip to the Fae world—if I should have told her about going in to rescue Artemis.

Then I shook my head. No. I’d been right not to say anything. It was no one’s business but ours. We were going to help out Artemis. Kendall and the MIB didn’t need to know anything about it. They probably knew too much of our business already.

Besides, what if Kendall decided that she didn’t think I should go? For all I knew, she’d try to use one of her MIB gadgets to stop me, and I couldn’t have that. Cali was counting on me, and I wasn’t going to send her off into the Fae world with just Xavier by her side.

Fuming at the thought, I used the bathroom, then washed my hands. There were—predictably—no towels, so I wiped my hands on my jeans and unlocked the door. And as soon as I took a step out the door, I found Kendall where I’d left her, leaning against the wall, clearly waiting for me.

I blew out a frustrated breath. “Fucking really, Kendall? Does your protocol demand that you stay this close, or is this just your interpretation?”

She shrugged casually. “Well, since you blew my cover, I figured why not? I might as well relax a little, since I’ve already been rumbled.”

I shoved a hand through my hair. “Whatever.”

I headed back toward the bar, and Kendall fell into step next to me. I’d just opened my mouth to comment on how annoying that was, but then a commotion at the bar caught my attention enough to distract me.

“What was that?” I muttered.

Someone was shouting, and I heard a loud thump, followed by the crash of breaking glass.

“Someone’s fighting,” Kendall said, and as I approached, I groaned when I saw that it looked like someone *was* fighting, and Rishika was right in the middle of it.

“—and why don’t you say that to my face, you lousy-ass drunk!” she was screaming, leaning toward a rough looking guy. “You caught me on a bad night, my dude, and I am *not* a woman you want to mess with. Not tonight, man. Not tonight!”

She was probably right about that, but the guy she was shouting at was *massive*. He was hulking, round as a steel barrel, and tall—maybe even taller than me.

“Holy fuck,” I breathed, looking around, assessing the situation. This wasn’t good. Rishika was drunk, and clearly lacking judgment. What if she forgot where she was and shifted in the middle of the bar?

I couldn’t let that happen, so I hurried toward her, making it to her just as the guy threw his first punch.

Rishika ducked easily, but I’d just thrown myself into the middle of things, so I caught the guy’s roundhouse in the shoulder.

“Fuck!” I yelled as the momentum of the punch sent me careening backward, until I slammed into the guy sitting on the next stool over.

“Hey!” The guy, who’d been determinedly minding his own business up until that moment, looked up angrily. “Watch where the hell you’re falling, pretty boy!” And then he shoved me back.

He threw me off, but managed to elbow *his* neighbor in the process, who swore and got angrily to his feet. It was a chain reaction, and the end result was that everyone sitting at the bar was now on their feet, throwing drunken punches and smashing glasses.

“Hey! Knock it off! All of you!” the bartender yelled from behind the counter. But he was helpless to stop anyone as the rest of the bar’s patrons got up from their tables and shuffled over to join  the drunken brawl.

I dodged a slow-moving right hook as I made my way toward Rishika. I needed to get her out of the bar and away from this chaos, but that was easier said than done. The bar had felt quiet when everyone had been minding their own business, but now it was packed with people, all of whom were yelling and swearing and fighting hard. Badly, but hard.

I’d just managed to make it to Rishika when she let out a scream of rage and jumped onto the hulking guy’s back. She wrapped one arm tightly around his neck, though that didn’t seem to bother him. What *did* appear to bother him, however, was her other hand, which was in his hair and pulling hard. He didn’t have much of it, and he screamed with shock and pain.

He grabbed for Rishika but couldn’t reach around his back to get at her, so his arms just flailed around dangerously. One of his fists caught me right in the temple, and I stumbled a step as stars exploded in my field of vision. An instant later everything went black, and I felt myself falling.

Someone yelled in shock as I collided with them. Whoever it was tried—and failed—to catch me, and we both went down, hitting the floor hard.

I blinked, and when my vision returned, I saw that I’d landed on Kendall and was now lying on top of her. She looked up at me with her startling eyes, and I felt my body react in that involuntary way it always did when I was near her. I felt her pressed beneath me, her body flush against mine, and thought I wasn’t looking for it, but my thoughts went to the dream I’d had, where we’d hooked up.

I felt my body grow hot.

I tried to push the thoughts away and cleared my throat. “Sorry,” I muttered as I started to stand.

But Kendall’s arms came quickly around my neck, pulling me so close that it felt like she was about to kiss me. “Greyson, wait.”

**Episode 5278**

**Artemis**

I stared at Kastian, who was sitting straight up in bed and watching me through bleary, drunk eyes.

“Oh…nothing!” I stammered. “I’m doing nothing at all!”

*Definitely not going through your drawers to find out if you’re part of the Order…*

Kastian scowled at me. “Why are you going through my dresser?”

*Shit!*

I slowly closed the last drawer and said, “I was looking for some paper. To write you a note.”

Kastian arched his eyebrows in disbelief. “Paper? In my dresser?”

“Yeah, I always keep paper in mine. I thought everyone did.” A nervous laugh shot out of my mouth. “But since you’re awake, I don’t need to write you a note anymore!”

Kastian nodded slowly. “Oh, uh, okay.” He looked confused, and I thanked my lucky stars for his drunken state. “But wait—”

I hurried over to the bed to distract him from asking any more questions.

“I was so worried that we were going to have to cut our fun night short! I’m so glad you woke up!” I ran a finger down his cheek and cupped his chin in my hand.

He blinked at me. “You are?”

I flashed him a flirtatious smile. “Yes, I am. I came back here to be with you, but then you passed out, and I was so disappointed.”

Kastian grinned, obviously into it. “Then I’m glad I woke up, too. And I have to admit, I do find you very attractive.”

I nodded. “I also find you…objectively handsome.”

I winced at the wording, but I wouldn’t lie. I did objectively find him handsome—there was no denying that he was really good-looking—I just had no desire to sleep with him.

Kastian leaned forward, and I smelled the alcohol on his breath. “Well, why don’t we just see where the night takes us?”

He suddenly smashed his mouth into mine, and it was sloppy—so much tongue, so much slobber all over my face…

*Oh gods, this is awful!*

Scowling in disgust, I went with it, hoping that this would be enough to make him forget that he’d just caught me rummaging through his things.

He pulled back with a dopey smile on his face. “That was nice.”

“Sure,” I said, using every bit of willpower I possessed to keep myself from wiping his spit off my face.

Kastian leaned back against his pillows and opened his arms. “Come here. I want to hold you.”

I reared back. “I really don’t want to do that right now.”

*He’s probably a fine lover when he isn’t sloppy drunk, but I have no desire to find out either way. At this point, I just want to get out of here and pretend that none of this ever happened.*

“But let’s set the mood and see how it goes?” I added weakly. “Maybe we should light some candles first?”

I started hurrying around the room and lighting candles, dragging the task out for as long as humanly possible. I was about to light the fourth candle when I heard the gentle sound of Kastian’s snoring.

I let out a huge breath of relief, beyond grateful that he’d fallen asleep again. Without looking back, I snuck out of his room.

\*\*\*

The next morning, I was a little out of it and having a hard time getting myself in gear. I was annoyed that I hadn’t found anything of note in Kastian’s room the night before.

*I need to get better at gathering intel if I’m going to learn what I need to learn about the Order.*

Feeling a little hopeless and a lot overwhelmed, I got dressed and went downstairs to find Aelwen. After everything that had happened last night, I needed to talk to her. And while I was in the kitchens, I’d grab something to eat, too. I was starving.

As I walked through the large courtyard, I passed by a group of Fae who were huddled in a circle, whispering about something. One of them spotted me and then quickly shushed the others, giving me a strange and slightly unfriendly look. The entire group went quiet as they watched me walk by.

*Okay, that’s creepy. What the hell is going on? Are they looking at me, or am I just imagining it? Why are they acting so weird?*

I hurried into the kitchens and grabbed a plate of eggs and bacon. I scanned the mass of busy Fae workers for any sign of Aelwen, and finally spotted her at one of the wash basins. Shoveling the food into my mouth, I rushed over.

“Oh, hi,” Aelwen said before turning her back to me and getting back to washing dishes.

*That was a cold greeting. Did I do something wrong the last time we spoke? I don’t think I did…*

“You okay?” I asked. “You seem upset.”

“Did you and Kastian really hook up last night?” she asked me.

I was shocked. “*What?*”

“Cadhla’s going around telling everyone that she saw you leaving his room last night.”

“What? No, that wasn’t me. She must’ve mistaken me for someone else,” I blurted out.

“I don’t believe you,” Aelwen said evenly, not even bothering to look at me. “I tell you that Kastian may be to blame for all these disappearing girls, and then you go and sleep with him? Gross! And stupid, too! I thought you were smarter than that.”

I was too horrified to speak. I thought I’d been discreet, but obviously I hadn’t. And I knew how fast the gossip mill worked around here—which meant I now knew why those Fae had acted so strange, out in the courtyard.

*Oh no, this is going to spread like wildfire! And what if Celeste finds out?*

“See you later,” I said to Aelwen before rushing out of the kitchen to go train.

I was embarrassed, not to mention even less confident in my ability to navigate the Dark Fae court. I felt exposed and tense, wondering how many people had already heard the gossip.

Attempting to keep a low profile, I walked toward the training grounds, where General Magan would be waiting for me. On the way, I passed a few more Fae—including a handful that I knew from the castle. I lifted a hand in a friendly wave, wanting to keep up appearances and figuring it would be way worse to scuttle by like I had something to hide.

They responded with a few half-assed waves and hellos, but then immediately started whispering when I passed by, just like the group before.

*Maybe it’s all in my head. Maybe they’re* not *all gossiping about me hooking up with Kastian. But if they aren’t talking about me, then why are they all being so weird around me?*

Up ahead, I spotted Cadhla and Philantha.

“Hey, you two. What’s going on?” I said, as cheerily as I could manage.

They looked shocked to see me, and were staring at me like they expected me to suddenly sprout horns.

“Um…any idea why everyone’s acting so weird?” I asked.

Cadhla threw back her head and let out a harsh laugh. “Oh please, Ari. Don’t act like you don’t know.”

“I’m surprised you pulled it off,” Philantha added. “You must have skills.”

I was confused. “Skills? Pulled what off? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, stop pretending! We all know about your little…tryst,” Cadhla said. “A newbie like you ending up with Kastian? It’s practically unheard of.”

I groaned and shook my head, the horror I’d felt after hearing Aelwen’s accusations deepening. “That’s not true. Kastian and I didn’t do anything.”

 “Then why were you in his room?” Philantha wasn’t buying it.

“We were just talking.”

Philantha and Cadhla exchanged a look and then started snickering.

“Oh, sure. You two were just *talking*!”Philantha threw up air quotes.

“It’s true!” I said, almost harshly. I was tired of their tone, and I was starting to get annoyed. “I only just met Kastian. I would never rush to jump into bed with someone I barely know. And if I *had* done anything with him, I’d just admit it. I’m not ashamed of anything I do.”

“Ari, you protest too much. Just admit it. You don’t want to earn yourself a reputation as a liar, too, do you?” Cadhla said.

“I’m telling the damn truth!” I shouted.

Cadhla’s smug smile fell away. “Okay, fine. If you insist, then maybe it *isn’t* true.”

I let out a relieved breath. “It’s not—and thank you for believing me.”

*Cadhla seems to hold a lot of sway with the Fae. I wonder if she might be able to help me put a stop to the rumor mill before the lie reaches Celeste.*

But before I could say a word, a heavy arm dropped around my shoulder, and Philantha and Cadhla’s eyes widened in shock.

I looked up to see Kastian grinning down at me. “Been looking everywhere for you, Ari. You left before we could finish our business last night.”

**Episode 5279**

**Greyson**

My eyes moved to Kendall’s lips, so full and so close, slightly parted. I snapped my gaze back up to her eyes. “What are you—”

“On the count of three,” she said, “grab Rishika and haul ass to the door. Ready?”

I was thrown off, but I was also ready, and I nodded to let her know I would move when the time came.

Kendall nodded, and then began to count. “One…two…THREE!”

We both jumped up, Kendall launching herself at a giant guy and sending him stumbling back. I pulled Rishika off the guy’s back as Kendall kept him distracted, then slung her over my shoulder, kicking and punching my way through the crush of flailing bodies and out of the bar.

I raced to the car and threw Rishika inside.

“I wasn’t finished!” she shouted, trying to wrestle her way past me and out of the car so that she could get back into the bar and continue the fight.

“You’re definitely finished!” I shouted, shoving her back into the seat.

Rishika frowned and crossed her arms, muttering angrily under her breath. I climbed into the driver’s seat, started the car, and then glanced back at the bar.

*Is Kendall okay? Should I go back in and get her?*

But no sooner had the thought formed than Kendall came sauntering out of the bar, as calm and easy as if she were on an evening stroll. She spotted me and threw me a wink before climbing onto her motorcycle and speeding off without a backwards glance.

*Guess she didn’t need my help after all…*

“That bastard!” Rishika hissed from the back seat, punching her first into her palm. “I could’ve taken him if you hadn’t dragged me out of there! Why did you do that?”

I said nothing, busy wondering how the fight had started so quickly. I hadn’t even been gone five minutes, and yet all hell had broken loose. But that didn’t matter. We were out of there and on our way home, and that was all that counted.

Though I supposed I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to learn that Rishika had started the fight. She’d had a lot to drink tonight, and was clearly struggling with some feelings about the Artemis Marius thing. She’d obviously needed to blow off a little steam, and hadn’t chosen the best way to do it.

“Cold shower, lots of coffee,” I said to Rishika as we pulled up in front of the pack house.

“But, Greyson—”

“Go, now!” I snapped. “Sober up!”

She was scowling, but she nodded and got out of the car. I was glad to see that she was a lot steadier on her feet than she’d been back at the bar. She was probably already half sober by now, and likely beginning to recognize the series of bad decisions she’d just made. If that fight had continued, Rishika could’ve been thrown in jail—or worse—and then she’d have missed out on helping Artemis.

I followed her into the house and immediately made my way to Cali’s room. I needed to talk to her. If tonight had taught me anything, it was that I couldn’t let this Xavier thing get between the two of us. It wasn’t like this was my first go round with having to share Cali with my brother. The *due destini*, as fucked as it was, was here to stay, and my bad attitude wasn’t going to change that.

*And as for that moment of weirdness between me and Kendall, that only happened because of the alcohol and the fight. It was nothing.*

I was right where I needed to be—back home with Cali. She was my mate no matter what, and I loved her more than anything in this world. So much so that I was willing to do whatever it took to make her newfound need to be close to Xavier as easy on her as possible.

I found Cali in her room. It took a few beats before she finally looked up and realized I was there.

“Greyson! Oh good, you’re back. Where were you?”

In answer, I stalked over to her and kissed her hard, allowing my hands to explore every soft curve of her body. I wanted nothing more than to erase my memories of that weird moment with Kendall. Thankfully, having Cali this close and in my arms instantly wiped away all thoughts of anything else.

Cali pulled away and smiled. “Okay, that was nice.” She linked her arms around my waist and though she was smiling, I could feel how tense she was. “We’re going to leave for the Fae world soon.” She hesitated before adding, “Xavier is on his way.”

I nodded, trying to let that roll off my back. Xavier was coming, and I was going to have to make peace with it.

“So, my brother said yes,” I said carefully.

“He did.” Cali winced. “I’m sorry it’s happening like this.”

“Don’t apologize, and don’t worry about it,” I said firmly. “I said I’m fine, and that’s the truth.”

“I know you keep saying that, Greyson, but I still worry that this is hurting you,” she said stubbornly. “And you know that’s the last thing I want. If I could make things better—”

“Cali, I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t sting a little, but this isn’t your fault. None of us chose the *due destini*.”

She nodded. “I know, but I want you to know how much I love you—and that doesn’t change just because things might shift a bit between me and Xavier.”

“I know that,” I said. “And I love you, too, Cali.”

She pulled me into an embrace and spoke against my chest. “Thank you for helping me save my sister.”

I tilted her chin up so that she could look me in the eye.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, love,” I said. And then I kissed her.

At first, it was a slow, thoughtful, careful kiss, but it became much more as I deepened it. Cali’s moans vibrated through me as I plundered her mouth with my tongue, tasting her, claiming her, taking what I needed to make me feel like nothing was going to change between us.

In a rush of emotion and a flurry of eager, searching hands, we collapsed onto the bed. I kept kissing Cali, wanting to prolong this period of slow yet keen exploration of each other’s mouths. I took a moment to enjoy the press of her breasts against my chest, the warmth radiating from between her thighs, and every delicious instant of this prelude to what was to come.

Still wanting to take my time and conduct a slow, reverent exploration of Cali’s body, I worked a hand under her shirt to palm one of her breasts. I hefted it in my hand, testing the weight of it, my heartbeat speeding up as I bent down to kiss her again. She moaned, arching into my touch, spreading her legs wider in invitation.

Hungry to see her beautiful naked body laid out before me, I began to peel her out of her clothes, kissing each section of her soft, sweet-smelling skin as I went. Once I had her completely undressed, I finally accepted her invitation, spreading her legs wider and then dipping my head between her thighs to taste her.

“Greyson,” Cali whispered, her hands fluttering down to hold my head in place, her fingers raking slowly through my hair. “Yes, that feels so good.”

I was only getting started.

I suckled and flicked and swirled the tip of my tongue around her clit, then slipped a finger inside and rotated it, exploring the searing heat of her depths, enjoying the way her body vaulted off the bed when I stimulated a particularly pleasing spot.

When she started to shake and pulse around my fingers, I rose onto my knees, clumsily pushed my jeans down my hips, and entered her in one hard, smooth, thrust. Her entire body went soft beneath me, her hips rocking against mine as I thrust and rolled and pistoned into her, driving in deep, her moans urging me on.

I maneuvered her legs so that her knees were nearly brushing against her ears and let out my own moan of pleasure. It was the first sound I’d allowed to escape my lips since we’d begun, teased out by the shift in sensation and how delicious it felt to be pressed up against her gorgeous body.

Cali’s eyes were closed, and I watched her bite at her bottom lip, her breasts shaking with every thrust, her fingernails raking across my chest and down my back before digging into my back to pull me closer.

“I love you, Cali,” I whispered in her ear before running the tip of my tongue along the delicate shell of her ear. With a moan of pleasure, I rocked in deep and stayed there, swirling my hips, claiming every single inch of her sweet sex as mine.

I hated to think it, but everything I was doing was by design—a way to show her how good I could make her feel, how perfect we were for each other. A way to set myself apart from my brother. Because Cali was *mine*. It didn’t matter if Xavier came with us to the Fae world, or even if he decided to leave the Samara pack and come back to the Redwoods—I was never going to let Cali go.

“Greyson, I’m so happy to have you,” Cali said, when I pulled away to look her in the eyes.

“And you’ll never, ever lose me, love,” I said. “Nothing will ever come between us.”

**Episode 5280**

Greyson was looking right into my eyes, a sly smile playing across his lips as he thrusted in and out of me, his weight pinning me to the mattress, his gentle kisses driving me wild.

I felt so vulnerable, so exposed—like a live wire. I kissed the side of his face, his lips, his cheeks, anything I could reach. I was trying to prove the depths of my love for him. He’d insisted that he was fine, but I wanted to convince him that I really wanted to be with him.

Because that was what I wanted. I couldn’t imagine my life without him, and I had to admit that the way he made love to me was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Of course, sex with Xavier was just as mind blowing, but it was so different—and in that moment, as Greyson rolled me over onto my stomach and then gently entered me from behind, I wasn’t thinking about anything else.

“Oh, Greyson…” The words escaped my lips before I knew what was happening. It just felt so good, his heavy body pressing down on mine, his hard warmth diving inside me over and over again until I could hardly catch my breath. This was pure bliss, and I didn’t want it to end.

I reached around to palm Greyson’s neck, and he curved an arm around my stomach, holding me still while he rocked against me. I loved how his lips felt against the back of my neck.

“Do that again,” I ordered breathlessly. “Keep kissing me there.”

With a satisfied sigh, Greyson obliged. “You like how that feels?” he whispered in my ear, his voice low and harsh.

“Yes.”

“Do you like having me inside you?”

A flash of heat burst to life in the pit of my stomach. “Yes, I love having you inside me.”

I rotated my hips and drove back against him, meeting his thrusts until he was panting. I was proud that I could bring him so much pleasure, and when I felt him grow even harder inside me, I knew he was close.

“Love, you’re perfect,” Greyson said, and then he went rigid, his body tensing on top of mine as he came.

I concentrated on the feel of him pulsing deep inside me, and that was all I needed to grab hold of my own climax. While he pitched and sighed, I screamed into the pillows, enjoying how Greyson kept pumping into me until we both were too depleted to move.

We lay that way for a while before I moved to get dressed. I pulled on my bra and panties first, then set about looking for my shirt.

Greyson seemed lost in thought as he pulled on his underwear.

“We should probably bring a few things with us, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, just the essentials,” Greyson said.

A second later, there was a knock on the door, and before I could call out for whoever it was to wait, Lola opened the door and came bolting in.

“Hey! Xavier’s here…”

I stared in horror as Xavier and Lola froze in place in the doorway, both clearly having realized what they’d just walked in on.

“Um, okay, hi, Xavier,” I said lamely. “We’ll be right down, if you could give us a second.”

I flashed Lola look that really should’ve killed her where she stood.

Lola did her best to recover. “Um, right, yes, take your time. I mean, we’ll see you downstairs.”

She slammed the door shut. Moments later, I heard her talking way too loudly to Xavier in the hallway, obviously trying to lessen the blow.

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “I can’t believe that just happened. What was Lola thinking, barging in like that?”

Greyson came to me. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, you know. We can be together. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“I know that, but it’s still weird to be caught half-dressed right after the act! What a buzzkill.”

“Yeah, that definitely sucked,” Greyson agreed.

“It did. And yes, I know we’re together, and Xavier knows that, but let’s just…not rub it in his face the whole trip, okay?”

Greyson frowned and looked like he was seconds from objecting, but then he just nodded and said, “Yeah, okay. Sure. Whatever you think is best.”

We made our way downstairs, where Adair, Marius, Tabitha, and a hungover Rishika were waiting for us. Adair was still clearly on edge, and was giving Marius the evil eye. Even though Marius seemed unfazed, Tabitha had positioned herself between the two men, obviously trying to play mediator. Or human blockade.

Xavier was hovering near the front door, looking like he wished he were literally anywhere else. He didn’t even bother to look up as we came downstairs.

“Lola, Jay, are you two good to drop us off at Haystack Rock?” I asked. Haystack Rock would drop us closer to where my grandmother, Hera, lived, and not right smack in the middle of an active warzone.

Lola nodded, shooting me an apologetic look.

*That was really a bad move for her to come barging in like that with Xavier no less, but I know she didn’t do it on purpose, so I suppose I’ll cut her a little slack.*

I nodded to let her know that I was okay, and that all was forgiven.

“Thanks,” I said, out loud. “So I guess we’ll split up between two cars? Adair and Tabitha, you can go with Jay.”

That seemed like the best option. I was pretty sure that if Adair was forced into a tight space with Marius, the bounty hunter wouldn’t make it out alive.

“I gotta go in Jay’s car,” Rishika announced. “I can’t be in a cramped sedan right now. I’ll vomit.”

We all made our way outside, and Rishika wasted no time climbing into the passenger seat of Jay’s SUV. Next to the car, Tabitha hugged her sister. She was going to stay behind, which I understood. Tabitha and Dani had searched so long for each other, they didn’t want to lose the other. This way, Tabitha knew exactly where Dani was with the Redwoods.

But with Rishika in Jay’s car, that left Marius, Greyson, Xavier, and me to ride with Lola.

*Oh joy. This should be loads of not-awkward-at-all fun.*

I climbed into the passenger seat and immediately regretted it as Xavier and Greyson sat in the back seat and then proceeded to shuffle as far away from each other as they possibly could.

Marius, who was in the middle, looked back and forth between them with his eyebrows raised. “So, um… Is there anything I should know about what’s going on here? Artemis didn’t tell me much about… Well, any of you.”

No one said a word.

“How about some tunes?” Lola suggested, then she cranked up the volume on the radio as high as it could go.

I felt so damn bad. I couldn’t believe that the trip had started out so horribly. It was already bad enough that Greyson had realized that there were potential changes on the horizon, but then for Xavier to catch us like that… It just made everything so awkward, and took us back to the worst aspect of what it had been like to have the three of us living in the same house.

I almost cheered with relief when we arrived at Haystack Rock. Xavier and Greyson left the car so quickly, it was like they’d teleported.

“Thanks, Lola,” I said.

“Don’t mention it.” Lola hugged me. “And please be careful, okay? I don’t want to have to come in there and get you, but I will if I have to.”

“Right now, the only danger I can see is Xavier and Greyson stink eyeing each other to death,” I muttered.

Lola chuckled as I climbed out of the car and went to join the others in front of Haystack Rock.

“Before we go, I should mention the issue of the blood signal that the Dark Fae applied to me,” Adair said. “That means that they might show up once we’re in the Fae world.”

Marius frowned. “Ah, yes. I remember hearing that about you.”

I cast a questioning look at Adair. “Does that mean you can’t come?”

“Oh, no worries,” Marius said. “I’ll just tell everyone he’s my bounty—hands off!”

Adair shot him a wary look, but I had to admit, it kind of seemed like a perfect “pull in case of emergency” explanation.

“If it comes to that, we’ll just play along with Marius,” I said. “I don’t want to go in there without you, Adair.”

Adair gave a stiff nod of agreement, but he didn’t look happy.

“So…let’s do this!” I said. “Is everyone ready?”

I took a look around. Everyone looked ready to go, but I could sense the anxiety in the air. And it was totally justified—the Fae world was dangerously unpredictable.

Greyson rested a supportive hand on my shoulder. “We’ve got this.”

I nodded. “Okay, then let’s go.”

And then, without another word, I pricked my finger and smeared it on the stone, holding my mother’s necklace in my hand. We watched in wonder as the portal opened in front of us, and then we all stepped through.

**Episode 5281**

I couldn’t believe I was really back in the Fae world. The moment I stepped through the portal to the other side, I felt the magic of it, like it was rejuvenating me. Maybe it was a good thing for me to come back every once in a while, to remember my roots and reconnect with my Fae side—and not just use my Fae magic to fight our enemies.

Once the others arrived, Greyson looked around, his face calm but his posture cautious. “So, where to?” he asked. “I want to get in and out of this place as quickly as possible if we can.”

Everyone looked to Adair for guidance, but he was still looking around as if trying to determine exactly where we were. After a few quiet moments passed it became obvious that Adair was a bit disoriented and in no position to act as our guide.

Marius stepped forward. “May I? I know this place like the back of my hand, and I can get us where we need to go in no time flat.”

Adair scowled at Marius, making it clear that he wasn’t interested in letting him lead the way.  But it wasn’t up to him. Marius was the one who’d come to us in the first place to tell us that Artemis was in trouble, so I didn’t see the problem with allowing him to lead us to her.

“Yes, Marius,” I said. “Please lead us to Artemis.”

Marius bowed to me, “Of course.”

I rolled my eyes at the over-the-top gesture, but I couldn’t help but smile a bit. He was growing on me. I could kind of see why Artemis was hanging out with the guy.

“We’re not far now, just this way.” Marius gestured ahead and we followed him into the thick, strange woods.

Like the woods back home, there were lots of trees, but that was where the similarities ended. The brightly colored, strangely shaped leaves and vibrant flowers that stood almost as tall as Xavier and Greyson were a stark reminder that we weren’t in the human world anymore. The soft grass beneath our feet seemed to shrink away from our footsteps and it sparkled in the sunlight. Intricate vines hung from branches overhead and gave off a sweet scent as we threaded our way through them.

Birds and insects and small animals scurried at our feet, watching us with interest before dashing off into the thick foliage. The place gave me a sense of calm, helped take the edge off my nervousness about being here again and not knowing what the hell to expect.

Greyson and Xavier flanked me as we walked, both sticking very close and their eyes scanning the woods like they expected someone to jump out of the thickets at any second.

They were intending to guard me, and I knew that, but I was worried about them, too. Werewolves weren’t particularly respected in the Fae world, and there was a good chance that some Fae might not take well to their presence. And that wasn’t even considering the possibility of running into any members of the Dark Fae mafia.

Up ahead, I could hear Adair complaining to Tabitha about Marius. “This guy doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing. This doesn’t seem like the right way at all. I wouldn’t be surprised if—”

“What do you mean?” I called ahead to him. “Is this not the right way?”

Adair shook his head. “It’s not that…but there should be a better way to go. There aren’t even any roads or paths to follow. Seems shady that he would take us this way,” Adair explained.

Marius zeroed in on Adair. “I’d think that a man with a price on his head would understand the need to take a covert path. Roads mean other Fae, and other Fae would spell danger for us with the state of things here. I mean, look at us! Do you really think we should be traipsing around out in the open with three werewolves and a witch?” Marius dissolved into hearty laughter.

“Hey!” Tabitha complained.

“What? Is that not what you are?”

Tabitha frowned. “Well, yeah, but the way you said it makes it sound bad.”

Marius grinned at her and kissed her hand in apology. “Sorry, my dear!”

Adair immediately shoved Tabitha behind him and brandished one of his energy whips in warning. “You touch her again, and I’ll turn you into a bloody smear on the grass.”

Marius lifted both hands and took a step back. “Apologies, Adair, I got carried away. Merely meant to apologize.”

“Yeah, well keep your apologies, and your lips, to yourself, okay?” Adair hissed.

Greyson stepped between them. “Okay, everyone. Calm down. This is not what we’re here for.”

“Exactly, we’re here to save my girlfr—Artemis. So quit wasting time with this petty fighting, and let’s get going,” Rishika said. Then she pushed past us and stalked off in the direction we were heading.

 I hurried to catch up with her. We didn’t say anything at first, simply walked side by side in companionable silence for a beat or two.

“I’m sure Artemis is going to be so happy to see you,” I finally said.

Rishika sighed. “We’ll see. We didn’t leave on bad terms, but we didn’t leave on great terms, either. And so much has happened since she left.” She shot a sharp glance back at Marius who was busy chattering away to Greyson and Xavier. They looked annoyed with him and interested in what he was saying at the same time.

“I know you still love her,” I said.

Rishika frowned. “That’s not what’s important here. And let’s not forget, she was the one who left me, not the other way around, so that complicates things.”

“True,” I said. I wondered if I should mention that I’d noticed Rishika’s mistake back there—almost calling Artemis her girlfriend. It was a slip-up that said more than Rishika ever could about her lingering feelings for Artemis, but if I were Rishika, I would hate to have that thrown in my face, so I decided against it.

I turned around to make sure that everyone was keeping up and couldn’t help the way my eyes kept being drawn to Xavier. My body flushed with heat as I remembered the look on his face when he and Lola burst in on me and Greyson in my bedroom earlier. We hadn’t spoken much since then, but I wanted to talk to him just to make sure he was okay.

*It’s not that I did anything wrong or that I should be ashamed about what happened, but it was still super uncomfortable to be caught like that. And now I don’t know what to say to him. What if seeing me and Greyson in post-sex bliss made him rethink what he said to me the other day about not wanting to be just friends anymore?*

Wait, why was I thinking about Xavier right now? This wasn’t about our weird undefined relationship—this was about Rishika and Artemis and how they obviously still belonged together.

“I know this is all a lot,” I said to her. “So don’t hesitate to let me know if you ever want to talk.”

Rishika nodded but said nothing.

Marius, who’d moved ahead of us again, came to a sudden stop. Then he turned around and said, “Okay, showtime!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

But before Marius could reply, a group of Fae emerged from the woods in front of us.

I immediately summoned my sword, and Greyson and Xavier flanked me, both of them in low protective stances and ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

Marius didn’t seem fazed and flashed a congenial grin at the approaching Fae. “Hello, may we help you?”

One of them nodded to Adair. “We’re here for him.”

“Ah, I see!” Marius said cheerfully. “Unfortunately, this bounty is already spoken for. I’m sorry, but you’re a tad too late.” Marius’s tone darkened slightly as he added, “He’s mine. Now, if we can just move past—”

The Fae moved to block Marius, their eyes still on Adair. “We’re not bounty hunters.”

Marius frowned. “Excuse me? Then why do you want him?”

Another Fae spoke up. “We’re guards sent by the Dark Fae court. You will hand your bounty over to us, and we’ll make sure you get paid.” The Fae leered at Marius in a way that suggested he didn’t think very much of bounty hunters.

Shocked and not sure what the next move should be, I stared at Marius, hoping that he would give some indication as to what this was all about.

Marius shook his head as he stared back at me. “Well, this was…unexpected.”

“Wait, what?” I said just as a half dozen more guards appeared and surrounded us on all sides.

The first guard stepped out from the rest. “This is official Dark Fae business, and we will not tolerate interference. Hand over Adair, now!”

**Episode 5282**

**Xavier**

I half shifted and vaulted forward to guard Cali. I wasn’t about to let anyone lay a finger on her.

“I understand that you feel strongly about this, but I’d love to bring him all the way to court and meet Celeste myself,” Marius insisted. “Why don’t we all go together? Is that a fair compromise?”

The Fae guard scoffed at that. “I said hand him over. Or else.”

Marius looked back at us, his expression unreadable as he said, “Well, then, I guess we have no choice!”

*Is this guy about to betray us? After all that? I’m going to kill him and then I’ll take out each and every one of these guards!*

But then Marius conjured an energy sword and slashed the head guard across the chest, sending him crashing back against a tree. The fight broke out before the Fae guard even hit the ground, flashes of bright blue light illuminating the forest as the Fae conjured up their weapons.

I kept close to Cali as she summoned her own sword and held it out in front of her, daring any of the Fae to come close. Greyson and I stayed close by Cali.

The Fae were out for blood, their war cries filling the forest as they rushed us.

Adair had his energy whips at the ready, and he windmilled them out in front of us, holding off the Fae guards’ approach and dissolving some of their weapons in an explosion of clashing magical forces. The three guards flew backward from the force of the blast, hitting the ground hard. Adair held his ground, his feet kicking up dirt as he was pushed back, Tabitha holding onto him for dear life.

The Fae weren’t down for long, and their weapons were back and brighter than ever as they all got to their feet and came at us—all ten of them now.

Rishika had already shifted, and I watched as she lunged at one of the guards, yanking them down to the ground and knocking them out. She immediately turned around and rushed another, tossing the Fae against a tree and tearing at her until she screamed for Rishika to stop. But Rishika didn’t let up for even a second. It was obvious that Rishika was taking out all her anger, frustration, and fear over Artemis on the Fae.

“You ready?” Greyson said. “Because this is getting really intense really fast.”

“I’m ready,” I replied.

Greyson and I were back-to-back, slowly rotating, waiting for the next wave of Fae who were heading right for us, their shimmering weapons at the ready. One caught me from behind and slashed me with his sword, slicing into my arm. Ignoring the searing pain, I countered with a chop to the Fae’s wrist that made his sword flicker and disappear. Still only half shifted and with my claws extended, I drove him back, swiping and tearing at his flesh until he retreated.

“Fuck you, werewolf!” one of the Fae screamed, a dagger raised over her head as she ran at me. Greyson clotheslined her before she could get close, and I raked her across the back as she hit the ground, her mouth open in agony and her dagger falling out of her hands and disappearing in a burst of white light.

Greyson and I both stopped to search the jumble of fighting bodies for Cali. We moved toward where we spotted her going up against a Fae with a sword that was nearly identical to hers. Sparks of magic energy crackled as their weapons clashed. Cali was holding her own and had the upper hand, so I knew she wouldn’t want me to interfere.

I was just about to turn and help Rishika take down another Fae when Cali let out a cry.

Greyson and I ran toward her, but then Greyson was accosted by two Fae brandishing long shimmering blades that they used to swipe at him, one of them catching him off guard and drawing blood. Greyson reacted immediately and threw one of the attacking Fae against a tree.

*My brother can take care of himself; I have to get to Cali.*

I rushed to her side. “Cali, are you okay?”

Cali nodded, but I saw she was bleeding from the arm, and the Fae she had managed to fight off for the time being was picking herself up off the ground and only had eyes for Cali. I looked around and realized that while we were holding our own, we weren’t exactly winning the fight. The Dark Fae guards had lots of powerful magic at their disposal and knew exactly how to use it, and I wasn’t about to let Cali get hurt again in the confusion.

“We gotta get out of here,” I said. I shifted fully and Cali climbed onto my back. I raced away through the thick hanging vines with a couple of Dark Fae on my heels. There was no way I was going to engage them with Cali on my back, but I knew I wouldn’t have to. I was way faster than them, and before long, I’d lost them.

*Greyson, are you good? I had to get Cali out of there*, I mind linked to my brother.

It took a minute, but he finally replied.

*I wouldn’t say good. We managed to escape too and are hiding behind a huge boulder a few yards away from where you left us. But hurry—Adair is hurt.*

I circled around and raced back, my nose to the air so I could pick up Greyson’s scent. After a few painstaking minutes, I finally caught Rishika and Greyson’s scent and the smell of blood—a lot of it.

I finally spotted the large rock and made a beeline for it. Cali slid off my back when she saw Greyson and the others huddled there, and I shifted back to human.

“Adair, oh no!” Cali cried as she knelt beside him. “Are you okay?”

Adair was lying on the ground, his breathing harsh, his head cradled in Tabitha’s lap. He had his hands pressed against a huge gash in his stomach and there was blood everywhere.

“What, you worried about this little thing?” Adair said, but he was wincing in pain, and he was pale as a ghost.

Cali looked between me and Greyson. “What are we going to do?”

Tabitha was crying quietly as she stroked Adair’s hair. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll get you help. Just hang on!”

Marius got up and looked around before cursing under his breath and muttering, “This isn’t good. I don’t think we’re in Dark Fae territory anymore. That must be why the Dark Fae had to stop pursuing us when we ran. They can’t come here.”

I was confused. “So what? That’s good, right?”

“Right, but it means that I have almost no access to contacts or resources here. I’m not very welcome on this side of the Fae world.”

Tabitha was crying harder now. “I don’t care about any of that! He needs help! Somebody please help him!”

“I think I know someone who can help,” Cali said. “Do you think you guys can carry him?”

“I can,” Greyson volunteered. He shifted to wolf form, and we all worked together to gently lift Adair onto his back. Tabitha climbed on after him to hold Adair in place.

Rishika and I shifted too so we could travel faster. From the looks of Adair’s wound, he didn’t have long. We needed to get him help quickly or he wasn’t going to make it.

*Rishika, you carry Marius, and I’ll carry Cali*, I mind linked.

*What? No way! You carry that creep! I don’t want to be anywhere near him.*

*Rishika, now is not the time for this. I don’t know if you noticed, but Adair isn’t looking very good, so your hangups about Marius don’t mean a thing right now!*

Rishika seemed to roll her eyes at me before finally saying, *Fine. Whatever. But he better hold on tight because if he falls off, I’m not stopping.*

*And if he falls off and you leave him, we might not be able to find Artemis.*

Rishika gave me a long look before she finally went over to Marius and gave him a hard nudge, indicating that he should climb onto her back.

“Under different circumstances, this would be exciting. I’ve never ridden on a werewolf before,” Marius remarked as he made himself comfortable on Rishika’s back.

*Climb on*, I mind linked to Cali.

As soon as she was on, I had a dozen flashes of all the times I’d carried her through the woods. The feel of her on my back made me ache for her in ways I hadn’t allowed myself for so long. I had to work hard to ignore it as I followed her directions through the forest toward help for Adair.

A short time later, we emerged from the trees. Cali took a moment to scan the land before saying, “Okay, good, we’re closer than I thought. Xavier, follow that road!”

I obeyed, running as fast as I could and leading the charge until we reached a sweeping palace with breathtaking stonework and red brick spires. The property was all rolling hills and shimmering blue pools contained by a golden fence that extended as far as the eye could see. It was what Lucian’s palace wished it was.

Cali jumped off my back as we sped through the gate and ran to the front door, calling out for her grandmother. A detail of guards appeared and tried to stop her.

“Please, you have to let me in, I need to talk to Hera!” Cali pleaded.

The guards didn’t seem convinced and were already getting into a defensive stance. The hairs along my spine raised as I prepared to lunge if any of them so much as laid a finger on her.

Then a commanding voice shouted, “Stop!”

The guards immediately stepped away from Cali and fell into formation as a beautiful and regal Fae woman stepped through the front door.

Cali’s eyes lit up. “Grandma Hera!”

“Caliana, wonderful to see you.” Hera pulled Cali into a hug. “My dear, this is such a pleasant surprise! You returned just like you promised.”

“I did, but I need your help.”

Hera smiled kindly. “Of course. Anything.”

“We need a doctor quickly. My friend is hurt.” Cali started to hurry down the front steps to join us when Hera suddenly reached out and grabbed her arm.

Hera’s eyes were hard as she raised a hand and pointed it right at Adair. “Guards! Seize that man and throw him off my property!”

**Episode 5283**

**Artemis**

The massive amount of gossip swirling around Kastian and me was horrifying. I’d managed to escape it all for a while at training, but now that I was back at the fortress, I was hyper aware of all the stares and whispering that seemed to only grow worse as the day wore on.

I was absolutely mortified. The Fae were merciless, the gossip relentless. Some people didn’t even bother to whisper their snide remarks as I passed by, and rather, said things fully intending for me to hear. And no matter how many times I protested and tried to correct them, they still believed I was Kastian’s latest conquest.

It didn’t help that I was the new girl in town, which meant no one knew me well enough to see me as anything other than the stranger who’d blown into the fortress and started banging the most infamous bachelor around.

I’d never been caught up in a sex scandal before, but I knew how intense this kind of thing could get in the Dark Fae court. I was going to have to find a way to put a stop to this before it got any worse.

I searched the castle high and low for any sign of Kastian and eventually found him having a drink with some friends in one of the common spaces. He was laughing and talking and looking completely relaxed, like he didn’t have a care in the world. The sight of him sitting there all unbothered immediately pissed me off. Here I was fighting off the judgment of an entire palace and feeling like I had the world on my shoulders, and he couldn’t be any less inconvenienced.

*What an entitled asshole! Why am I not surprised that he’s completely unfazed and out here laughing it up with his friends while I’m skulking around here like a pariah?*

I thought about how he’d spewed innuendo in front of Cadhla and Philantha just as I was starting to convince them that everything they thought had happened was nothing more than idle gossip. The moment he’d made his little remark about us not “finishing our business” last night, he’d proved them right.

*I just want to walk up and smack him! How dare he spend his day walking around all free and easy while everyone’s whispering about me and making me feel like shit?*

But as much as I wanted to slap him, I knew I couldn’t. I had to stay calm. Any hysterics or public displays would only drive the gossip to a fever pitch.

I stalked over and plucked his glass from his hand. “You don’t mind, do you?” I downed it in one gulp.

Kastian looked up at me, surprised. Then a wicked grin spread across his face as he prepared to have fun at my expense yet again. “Oh, dear, there you are. I was just starting to miss you.”

I let out a laugh that I hoped sounded amused and unbothered and not shrill and totally perturbed. “Of course you missed me, seeing as you admitted how much you pine after me.”

That won some chuckles from his friends.

Kastian’s brows shot up at the challenge, and it was like I could see the gears moving in his head as he worked to craft a worthy comeback. “Ah, well, you know how pillow talk goes.”

*Pillow talk? Is he serious right now? Is he really going to keep pushing this narrative?*

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Pillow talk, eh? Is that what you call being so wasted that you can’t stop drooling all over yourself?”

His friends collapsed into loud guffaws, falling all over each other. Kastian looked from them to me, and a frown finally broke through his façade of calm. I’d hit a nerve. Served him right.

He forced an easy chuckle. “You’re exaggerating. I knocked a few back last night, but I wouldn’t say I was *that* drunk.”

“Oh yeah? You couldn’t even walk, which is why I had to carry your ass to your room. Otherwise, you might have passed out in the hallways or worse.”

Kastian scowled and ground out, “Your kindness is noted, Lady Ari.”

I grinned as I scanned the faces of the other Fae at the table. They were still doing their best to contain their laughter—and doing an awful job of it. It was clear that a new line of gossip would be spread soon, and I couldn’t be happier about that.

I dropped into a deep bow and said, “And should you ever get that drunk again, be sure to do it closer to your own bed so you don’t embarrass yourself again.”

I was very pleased with myself as I walked away, even though I could feel Kastian’s gaze boring into my back.

As I made my way back to my room, I couldn’t help how excited I was to have given the gossip mill something else to chew on—something far more accurate than the assumption that I’d slept with Kastian.

Even if I’d been out of my mind and wanted to take things to that level—which would have absolutely been my prerogative—Kastian had been in no state to do so. It was only right that my version of events gained traction since it was so much closer to the truth and a lot less damaging to me—which was all I cared about.

When I opened the door to my room, I was surprised to see that it wasn’t empty. Celeste was there, and she looked pissed.

“Um, hi?” I squeaked out.

Celeste stormed right over to me. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!”

I backed up a step, a little scared of the anger splashed across Celeste’s face.

“These rumors going around about you and Kastian are undermining everything!”

“Yes, but Celeste, I fixed it, it’s not a problem—”

“You fixed nothing,” Celeste interrupted.

“But I’m telling you—”

“I don’t care what you have to say, because *I* know how things really work in this world.”

I thought about protesting again but there was no use. Celeste was on a roll, pacing the room, so mad that she wasn’t about to hear a word I had to say. I’d expected this as soon as I learned the rumors were spreading, but somehow, I hadn’t predicted just how angry Celeste would be.

“Your reputation *matters* here, Artemis. In fact, it’s the only thing that matters. And if people think you’re just some flighty sex playmate for Kastian to toy with, they will not take you seriously! And I’m sorry to say, if they don’t respect you, your claim to the court will not be supported.”

Celeste turned away from me, her anger palpable. Now I had more than idle gossip to contend with; I had Celeste’s disappointment staring me in the face. I was surprised how affected I was by the idea of her being disenchanted with me—especially over something like this.

*If I’d actually* slept *with Kastian, all the gossip and Celeste’s rage might be a little easier to swallow, but I haven’t even* done *anything!*

“Everything depends on the respect of the court, Artemis. Everything. This isn’t the human world or human politics; this is a lot more complicated than that. You going around philandering with a playboy like Kastian does not look good.”

“But it’s not like that. I didn’t sleep with him!” I snorted. “Actually, I wouldn’t sleep with him if he were the last man alive.”

Celeste spun around at that and stormed over, then slapped me hard across the face. I was shocked into silence and overcome with fighting the natural instinct to strike back. Nobody did that to me and lived to talk about it, but I remained quiet as Celeste went on.

“I don’t care whether you slept with him or not! What I care about is that people *think* you did. In this world, the truth always means less than what things appear to be, and as far as everyone is concerned, you’re just another one of Kastian’s conquests without enough sense to choose better.”

I was embarrassed. I’d mistakenly thought that the gossiping Fae were my biggest problem. It was clear now that even though I’d suspected Celeste would be upset if word got back to her, the worst part was that my carelessness with Kastian could blow my chances with the Dark Fae court. Somehow, that hadn’t occurred to me in all this.

Celeste’s voice grew low and threatening as she said, “You are not to find yourself embroiled in a scandal again, Artemis. Do you understand me?”

Too shocked to speak, I simply nodded and hoped that she was almost done giving me this thorough tongue-lashing.

Celeste let out a deep breath, seeming to calm herself a little before she said, “This means we’re going to have to speed up our timeline. We can’t afford to let your reputation fall any further.”

“What do you mean?” I choked out.

“It means it doesn’t serve us to wait any longer. I’m going to announce who you are. Tonight.”

**Episode 5284**

I looked at Hera in shock. “Grandma, you can’t just throw him out on the street! He’s dying!”

“Good,” Hera said. “One less Dark Fae to worry about!”

For a second, I thought she was joking—even though I didn’t know why anyone would joke about something like that. I was just so surprised at how strongly she felt about this.

“Grandma, please, just tell the guards to stand down!”

Hera hesitated for a moment before finally raising a hand to call back her guards. Adair was watching them like he was seconds from conjuring his whip, injured or not.

“This isn’t right. Adair is my friend, and he’s helping me save my sister.”

Hera laughed in disbelief. “Cali, you cannot be *friends* with a Dark Fae, especially not someone like Adair Mauvais.” She sniffed, lifted her nose in the air. “It’s only a matter of time before he betrays you, and I implore you not to get involved in his…mess.”

I shook my head at her, unable to believe she could be this cold. “If you don’t help him, I’ll find someone else who will!” I started to walk away.

“Stop!” Hera shouted.

The guards reacted immediately and moved to block my path. I saw Xavier and Greyson take a step forward. I held up a hand to stop them before things got any worse. I turned back to my grandmother. “Please. At least give us some bandages or something. I’ll help him myself.”

*I must have picked up something from watching Torin heal so many people over the last few months. I just can’t let Adair die. I have to do something!*

Hera sighed. “Fine. But he’s not to step foot in my house. There’s a shed over there that you can use for now. Keep him out of sight. I don’t want it getting around that I allowed a Dark Fae on my land.” Her eyes moved to take in Marius, too. “Bold of you to show your face here again.”

Marius frowned. “Trust me, it wasn’t my choice.”

Hera scowled and then spun around to go back inside. I hurried over to Tabitha and Adair. “Come on, I’ll help you get him to the shed.”

“We’ll help,” Xavier said as he and Greyson rushed over.

Gently, we all carried Adair into the shed, which was filled with old jars and pots. We had to push them all aside to make enough room for Adair to be set down comfortably, but the place was pretty clean for a shed. Tabitha found a pile of drop cloths and used them to make a pallet on the floor for Adair to lie on.

“This will have to make do for now, okay?” Tabitha said to Adair.

“Thank you,” Adair hissed through clenched teeth. “At least I won’t die on the bare floor.”

“Don’t say that!” Tabitha snapped. “You’re not going to die.”

There was a knock on the door. “Lady Caliana?”

I rushed over to open the door, revealing a young Fae who looked a little familiar. The Fae smiled kindly at me, and I was relieved to see a friendly face after the unfortunate interaction with my grandmother.

“Hi, Caliana, my name is Irene. We met last time you were here. I cleaned your room.”

“Oh, yes, Irene,” I said once the memory came flooding back. “Good to see you again.”

“You too. I brought some supplies,” she announced as I stepped aside to let her in.

“Thank you.” I took them and handed them to Tabitha before turning back to Irene. “Do you think we could have some water?”

“Of course,” Irene said before hurrying off.

Together, Tabitha and I worked to staunch the bleeding from Adair’s wound and cleaned it the best we could. It was nothing compared to Torin’s ability to simply mend a wound with magic, but it would have to do for now.

We wrapped the wound the best we could and then pressed the wrap gently to see if he was still bleeding through the bandage. Tabitha and I exchanged a hopeful glance when the bandage remained white.

“Well, at least we stopped the bleeding,” I said.

“Thanks—and I’ll be fine. I’ve suffered worse wounds than this. But we should leave before your grandmother gets any angrier at you,” Adair said.

I frowned. “I don’t even know if that’s possible.”

The moment Hera had laid eyes on Adair, things had taken such a sharp turn. The warmth of her greeting had evaporated in the blink of an eye. I knew she had mixed feelings about the family of my mother’s first husband, so I hadn’t exactly expected a warm welcome. Besides, Adair was somewhat of a fugitive all over the Fae world, and me bringing him here was probably a liability.

*We’re lucky she even allowed us to stay in this shed.*

“How’s the pain?” Tabitha asked Adair, who had risen to a seated position.

“It’s not so bad when I don’t think about it,” Adair said.

He looked so pale and had lost so much blood. Even though we’d stopped the bleeding, I knew we weren’t out of the woods just yet.

“Don’t even try to downplay your injury, Adair. We’re not going anywhere until you get some rest,” Tabitha said.

Adair reached out and took Tabitha’s hand in his. “You don’t know how bad it can be for me, staying here on Light Fae land. I wish we were anywhere else but here.”

“But you’re safe for now,” Tabitha interrupted. “Forget all of that. Cali’s grandmother won’t give you up. Will she, Cali?”

I frowned and shook my head. “Honestly, Tabitha, I truly don’t know the answer to that. I already misjudged the reception we would get, and now I don’t know what to expect.” I stood up and dusted myself off. “But I’ll go talk to her again. Make sure she’s willing to keep Adair a secret.”

I started to go, and Greyson and Xavier began to follow me. I stopped them. “No, I can do this alone.”

“None of us should do anything alone while we’re here. I haven’t felt right about this place since we stepped foot in here,” Xavier said. “It’s not safe. I can feel it. And look at Adair—he’s proof that we’re in a hostile environment.”

Greyson nodded in agreement.

*Okay, if they’re agreeing on something, that means it’s serious. No use arguing with them about this. If they want to come, I’m not going to be able to convince them otherwise.*

Without another word, I turned and headed toward the house, Xavier and Greyson right on my heels. Without Adair, the guards let me pass when I got to the front door. We went inside, and immediately, I was reminded of how huge the place was. The word “grand” came to mind. While the palace was impressive from the outside, the inside upped the ante in a big way and was absolutely breathtaking.

I vaguely remembered where my grandmother’s sitting room was, but I took a wrong turn or two and quickly got lost. I stopped a passing maid, and the girl looked absolutely horrified to see me and my mates.

“Excuse me, can you tell me where I can find Hera’s sitting room?”

“I—it’s that way,” she stammered, pointing back the way we’d come from. She looked like she was about to run away at any second.

*Why is she reacting like this? It’s not like Xavier and Greyson are shifted…*

Then I caught a glimpse of myself in one of the many mirrors on the walls, and I realized that I still looked like a hot mess from the battle. I was covered in dirt and blood, my clothes were torn, and I looked like I needed a good rest. I tried to brush my fingers through my hair, knowing that my grandmother liked people to look presentable.

I glanced at Xavier and Greyson who looked about as bedraggled as I did. There wasn’t much I could do for them, but at least they’d remembered an extra change of clothes and weren’t walking around naked.

I took the girl’s directions and finally located Hera’s sitting room. I knocked and waited, hoping that this next interaction would go better than the first.

“Come in!” Hera called out.

I went inside and stopped short when I saw that Hera was not alone. There were three other Fae in the room. Hera lifted a brow in surprise when she saw me.

“Caliana, do you need something?”

I nodded but was unsure of what to say in front of these other Fae, who were obviously important—they had an air about them. I knew I couldn’t mention Adair without getting us in more hot water, and Hera had made it clear that no one was to know he was here.

One of the other Fae—an older man with greying hair and shrewd eyes—gave me an appraising look before saying, “Caliana?” He threw a shocked glance at Hera before training his gaze on me once again. “Don’t tell me that the Wrenthorn heir has returned home!”

**Episode 5285**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t help bristling at the Light Fae’s decree about Cali. I didn’t know why, but hearing Cali, *my* Cali, referred to as the “Wrenthorn heir” felt wrong. No, more than wrong. Dangerous. Despite her connections to both the Light and Dark Fae living in the Fae world, Cali had always seemed like a guest in this world. Would that change if the Fae courts considered her the heir to the Light Fae throne? Would she be able to leave again?

My hackles rose at the mere thought of someone taking Cali away from me. Of not letting her go back home to the human world, where she truly belonged. *Fuck that.* I’d tear the Fae world apart brick by brick if I had to, but nobody was taking my mate away from me.

Before my imagination could run any wilder, Hera stood up. “Caliana, why don’t you and your escorts get cleaned up? You must be weary from your journey.”

The dismissal couldn’t be any clearer as the elderly Fae snapped her fingers to summon a butler. One seemingly appeared out of nowhere, bowing and ready to receive their assignment. “Please show our guests to some rooms and draw them baths.

“Grandma, I don’t think—” Cali began.

Hera silenced her with a reproving look. That message was pretty damn clear, too. Hera turned to me and gave me a regal nod. “Greyson, as handsome as I remember. Please accept this hospitality. We will talk later.”

I nodded, understanding her loud and clear. She wanted us out of here before any other Fae started asking hard questions about Cali or our purpose in being here.

“Thank you,” I said and gestured for Cali and my brother to follow the butler out of the room. The second the doors closed behind us, the voices inside resumed, too soft for me to make out, even with my enhanced hearing. *The door must be charmed to prevent eavesdroppers. How very Fae.*

Though, come to think of it, it was a pretty damn good idea. More than a few issues could have been avoided if we’d had something similar at the Redwood pack house.

The butler showed Xavier and me to two rooms adjacent to each other and then led Cali off, farther down the hallway. I wanted to follow after them, to find out exactly where Cali’s room would be, but I also knew—deep in my bones—that Hera would never hurt her own granddaughter. Nor would she allow Cali to be harmed while in her care.

So, for now, I played nice and went into my room. A steaming bath was waiting for me in an ornate, clawfoot tub.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed in with a groan of relief. I hadn’t realized just how much my body was aching from the fight and the travel. I’d been so focused on keeping Cali safe as our situation rapidly changed. Now, it was all catching up with me. I was tempted to linger in the bath for a long while, but I knew I didn’t have that luxury. We were in a strange place, a hostile place. Adair, Marius, and Tabitha were still outside the palace, in god only knew what sort of condition, and I needed to check in with Cali and make sure she was okay. We were far from finished with our task.

After I finished washing off, I found a pile of neat clothing laid out for me. I grimaced as I picked up the clothes and inspected them with a long-suffering sigh. These were fancy Fae court clothes. *Very* fancy Fae court clothes. Pretty much the exact opposite of anything I’d ever picked for myself, especially considering I was about to enter into Dark Fae territory again. One wrong move and I’d tear this entire outfit to pieces. It didn’t exactly allow much in terms of range of motion.

But turning down the clothing—a gift from Hera—didn’t seem wise either. We were so reliant on her good will right now. I didn’t want to accidentally piss her off and give her a reason to stop helping. So I pulled on the clothes, as tight and scratchy as they were, and stepped out of my room.

At the same time, Xavier’s door swung open. I couldn’t hide my smirk as I looked him up and down. “You look like you’re in an episode of *Downton Abbey.*”

Xavier’s brows rose. “You actually watch that show?”

*Shit.* That didn’t go at all how I planned.

“What? No.” I scowled.

Xavier chuckled. “Sure, you don’t.”

This was a waste of time. I huffed. “Where’s Cali? Since you’re here to stay close to her and all.”

I spat out the words like they were laced with poison and immediately regretted it. Especially when my brother’s smirk only grew wider. Fuck. I was giving him ammunition left and right. I needed to get my shit together before Xavier and I started rumbling in the goddamn hallway. Not exactly the kind of example I wanted to set in the Fae court.

Fortunately for both of us, Xavier glanced down the hallway. “I think she went that way. I didn’t follow after the butler either.”

I nodded and hurried down the hall in the direction Xavier had indicated without waiting for him to catch up. Still, Alpha werewolf that he was, he hauled ass and caught up with me effortlessly in a few steps.

“So, what was this place like last time? Anything I should know?”

I shrugged, not pausing. “Hera clearly loves Cali, so we have that on our side. But I don’t trust a single one of the other Fae here. They’re always playing games, especially with the war going on.”

*If I never hear another person call Cali the Wrenthorn heir, it’ll be too soon.* I had a sinking feeling that those words would haunt me until we were out of this godforsaken world, with Artemis in tow.

Xavier nodded. “I’ll be on high alert.”

“Good.”

As we made our way down the hall in search of Cali, I spotted the Fae from the sitting room step out into our path. *Goddamn it.* It was the guy who’d asked if Cali was the Wrenthorn heir. I really just didn’t like the look of him, or the way he’d seemed all too happy to insert himself into a situation that had absolutely nothing to do with him. The whole thing rubbed me the wrong way.

But before I could grab Xavier’s arm and duck into the first random room we came across, the guy spotted us, and a delighted grin split his face. “Oh, how wonderful! We meet again!”

I stopped short with Xavier right behind me. *Fuck.* There was no getting out of this now.

“I wasn’t able to formally introduce myself earlier,” the Fae continued. “I am Cenwyn.” He held out his hand for me to shake, but I simply nodded in response. I didn’t offer my name, or Xavier’s.

“And you are both werewolves!” he continued without missing a beat. “How fascinating!”

“Fascinating,” Xavier deadpanned. He and I exchanged a glance. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“And are there any more from your…from your pack here?” Cenwyn pressed, looking at us like he was expecting a prize for using the right word.

Xavier frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just friendly curiosity,” Cenwyn said.

*Right. Friendly. This guy looks like the friendliest Fae who’ll ever stick a knife in your back.*

“I’ve always had a fascination for oddities,” he added, looking from my face to Xavier’s.

“Oddities?” I couldn’t help repeating. Suddenly, I felt like some kind of freak to be ogled.

“Excuse me! Sirs!” a butler called out as he strode toward us. *Thank god.* “I’ve been instructed to take you to the dining room.”

“Ah!” Cenwyn smiled like he was in on some secret plan. “Enjoy! Lady Hera sets a grand table.”

I strode past Cenwyn like he was a bug on the wall, with Xavier close behind me. We followed the butler to the dining room, where Cali was waiting for us, dressed as fancily as Xavier and I were. She looked absolutely gorgeous. She stood from her place at the table and met us near the doorway.

I rushed over to her and took her hand. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I think I’ve calmed my grandmother down a bit about Adair.” She kept her voice low, clearly trying to keep the conversation just between the three of us.

“Well, that’s something, at least,” Xavier said.

Hera beckoned us over to the table. “Caliana, you were just going to tell me why you’ve returned. I have to admit, I am a bit upset that it’s not merely to visit your grandmother.”

Cali nodded and took her seat at the table. Xavier and I took our seats on either side of her.

“I’m actually here because of your other granddaughter,” Cali confessed.

Hera frowned. “You mean the daughter of Kadmos?”

“Artemis. She’s here,” Cali said. “Will you help me save her?”

**Episode 5286**

Hera seemed confused by my question.

“Save Artemis?” she repeated, her brows knitting together. “I already did.”

No combination of words could have surprised me more. “Wait, what? How? So, she’s free now?” My mind raced with the possibilities. Had I come all the way here, and put Adair at risk, over nothing? Was this some sort of trap of Marius’s gone awry?

*He’d seemed so worried about Artemis. His worry looked genuine… Am I really that easily tricked?*

Or maybe he just…didn’t know? It probably took him some time to find me in the human world. It was entirely possible my grandmother could have saved Artemis while he was searching for me. I wasn’t prepared for the huge wave of relief that crashed over me.

*Everything’s okay… We’ll just meet up with Artemis and we can go back to our lives—*

“I am not sure what you’re referring to,” Hera said with a slight frown, “but when she came to me some days ago, I told her that her father was rumored to be alive. I told her to seek out a Fae named Erimentha, and I sent her on her way. I haven’t heard a peep from her since.” She sniffed. “You know, you two really ought to take more care. Would it kill you to reach out or visit a little more often? And not just to ask me for something.” She narrowed her gaze on me.

My stomach plummeted so fast I swayed in my seat. Greyson gripped my hand, anchoring me through the shock and disappointment. “Oh. That must have been before…” I was so upset to learn Artemis was still very much in danger after all, that nothing had meaningfully changed, that Hera’s attempt to guilt-trip me almost didn’t register.

*I wish Marius was here to help me understand what happened with Artemis.* There were so many gaps—big gaps—in my knowledge of what happened. Maybe if I’d gotten the whole story from Marius, or better yet, if Hera had allowed him to be in here with us, we could paint a clearer picture of what had happened to Artemis and when.

Guilt rushed in alongside the disappointment and worry. *What kinds of dangers has Artemis been forced to face? Maybe I never should have let her come here alone?*

Honestly, I didn’t know what I was thinking, letting her come here all by herself to seek out her dad. I should have come with her. I shouldn’t have let her undertake such a huge and dangerous task all by herself. She probably never would have ended up a prisoner in the Dark Fae court if I had accompanied her.

“Caliana,” Hera said, worry now threaded through her tone and etched into the lines of her face. “Tell me what happened to Artemis.”

I gulped. Under the weight of my grandmother’s expectant gaze, the guilt suddenly tripled. How was I supposed to explain this to her? “She’s, um… She’s been captured,” I managed to say with a dry mouth and my heart in my throat. “By Celeste. Of the Dark Fae court.”

My grandmother’s eyes widened—and in a brief flash, I saw fear and despair and a truly tremendous sense of loss—and then she schooled her expression and shook her head. “Then she’s truly beyond my reach.”

“Sorry—what?” *I must have misheard her…*

Hera shook her head. “I can’t help your sister—or you. Not this time.”

My jaw dropped. “What?! You can’t mean that!”

“But I do. I’m sorry, Caliana. I wish I could help Artemis, but she’s crossed too far out of my reach.”

I stood, my chair screeching against the flooring as I pushed it back. “But you’re the ruler of the Light Fae! You’re Hera Wrenthorn! You can do anything in this world, if you want to!”

“Not this time. I will not—I *cannot*—interfere with the Dark Fae court. It is far too dangerous.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Hera was ready to abandon her own granddaughter? Why? Because she didn’t want to get her hands dirty with Fae politics? Anger sparked in my blood at the thought.

“I never realized your love for your granddaughters was so conditional,” I said coldly.

My grandmother went very still then, but when she looked at me, I saw no anger on her face. If anything, she just looked sad, and very, very tired. “I love you both more than the moon and stars. That will never change.”

“But—”

She held up a hand to silence me. “Caliana, I have allowed your friends into my house. Including *two* Dark Fae. That alone could be cause for the opposing court to find new reasons to fight against my people. *Your* people. And as such, I refuse to be caught up in more complications that could kindle further conflict. I cannot help you get to your sister, and I cannot attempt to retrieve her myself. It’s not safe for anyone involved—least of all Artemis.”

I swallowed back the argument creeping up my throat. Maybe my grandmother’s hands were tied, like she said. Maybe even one of the strongest, most connected Fae in the world still had people to answer to. But I wasn’t going to give up on my sister. I’d figure out how to save her without our grandmother’s help, if that was what it took.

I cleared my fine. “Fine. Then at least let us stay until Adair is fully healed.”

Hera pursed her lips in a frown. “The longer he stays on my property, the greater the chance that someone will recognize him.”

“Can’t you do a spell for that, or something? Like a glamour?” I asked. Of all the problems I was facing, disguising Adair seemed like the simplest one to solve.

She scoffed. “You want me to waste a glamour on the likes of him? Give him access to my property? Shall I also unfurl the welcome banners and throw him a parade?”

My teeth ground together. “I will vouch for him. He won’t hurt anyone. I’ll make a Fae promise with you, if that’s what it will take for you to agree.”

“Cali, no!” Xavier gasped, pushing back his own seat to stand.

I shot him a look and shook my head. I’d meant every word I’d just said. I needed my grandmother to help us somehow. I couldn’t do this all on my own. At the rate we were going, we would never even get close to Dark Fae territory. We needed help. Desperately.

Hera frowned. “Fine. I will let them into the house, but *only* the servants’ quarters. And I will be sending my most trusted man to glamour Adair first.”

*Relieved* didn’t even begin to cover the emotion that rushed over me. I took her hand. “Thank you so much, Grandma. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

She seemed to soften a little at the contact, and she squeezed my hand in return. *Maybe I should push a little harder for her to help Artemis? Maybe she’s not quite so set in her ways…*

But no. I’d already gotten my grandmother to bend much further than she was comfortable with. I didn’t want to push my luck.

With that, my grandmother stood, pushing her own seat back from the table. “I seem to have lost my appetite, and I still have other guests I need to attend to. Please, eat as much as you like. Make yourselves comfortable.”

She left the room without another word.

I blew out a breath and sank back into my seat. *At least we have a place to stay and recoup.* If only we actually had any sort of meaningful plan for how to get to Artemis. And even if we did have a plan for *that*, we still had no idea how to get home safely from the Dark Fae lands. I had to assume Celeste and her court wouldn’t be escorting us to the nearest portal after we’d come to take Artemis from her.

I thought back to my last journey through the Fae world. There had been tons of active battlefields between the Light and Dark Fae territories. I had no idea how we’d cross to the other side alive.

*Hopefully Marius knows a way.*

So, essentially, now we were back at square one. No, even less than that, because we had to wait for Adair to heal, and I was sure word would get out about him being back in the Fae world in no time.

I slammed my fists down on the table, shaking the cutlery on either side of my plate. “This is ridiculous! Why can’t she help?!”

Greyson reached over to take one of my hands in his. “Cali, I’m so sorry.”

I sighed, all the fight rushing out of me. “We’ll figure it out. It’s not like we have any other choice.”

Suddenly, the door swung open and Irene, the maid from earlier, rushed in. “Lady Caliana! We need you! Your friend is causing a huge problem!”

I jumped up, along with Greyson and Xavier, and Irene led us through the castle and down a small back corridor and out into the yard. I heard shouts before we even reached the shed where they were keeping Adair.

Other Fae were bustling around the courtyard, staring at the shed in horror.

*Is this going to expose us?!*

I rushed to the shed and wrenched open the door. I gasped. “No!”

Adair had his energy whips wrapped around one of Hera’s servants. “I won’t let them curse me!” Adair screamed.

**Episode 5287**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s declaration had stunned me into a silence that lasted long after she’d left my room. I knew better than to try to argue with her, to even try to suggest going against her wishes for tonight. No, I didn’t feel like getting slapped again. Celeste was clearly on the warpath, hell-bent and determined to position me in the court to the utmost advantage.

It was funny. For a while there, amidst all the court intrigue and rumors of a sex scandal and trying to suss out the identities of the Order, I’d forgotten that I was Celeste’s prisoner here. Not her guest. It was a mistake I wouldn’t be making again.

*I wonder what will happen when Celeste announces that I’m Kadmos’s daughter.* Surely, the news would send ripples through the court. After all, I was supposed to be dead. Just like Kadmos. At minimum, the declaration had the potential to throw the court’s current power structure out of balance. Kadmos was supposed to be the leader of the Dark Fae. The head of the ruling bloodline.

And I was his heir…

*Yeah, things are about to get messy.*

Not everything would change, of course. I’d still be under Celeste’s thumb. I’d still have to find out everything I could about the Order, which could become an even trickier task once the court learned my true identity. Would the members of court be *more* or *less* inclined to speak with me once the news was out?

*Maybe this is a good thing…*

*Maybe I can leverage this. Surely there will be members of the court who will want to endear themselves to me. Celeste’s announcement might just gain me a few allies.*

Of course, there was always the chance that the Order would only try even harder to kill me once the court knew I was the heir. So maybe, all things considered, it’d be a wash…

A knock sounded at the door, pulling me from my ruminations. I opened it to find a group of six Fae standing at my door, their arms weighed down with dresses and combs and pots of what looked like cosmetics.

“Um…can I help you?”

One of the Fae maids curtsied. “Lady Celeste has sent us to help you prepare for the banquet tonight.”

*Great. Another party I’ll be forced to attend. She certainly doesn’t waste any time.*

I forced a smile. “Come on in.”

Nerves bubbled in my belly as the Fae got to work. Tonight was the night. The night when everything would change. When, for the first time, I’d be acknowledged as Kadmos’s daughter. Maybe the banquet wouldn’t be all bad. I couldn’t imagine Celeste shaking hands at the door and telling each guest the news one by one. No, she’d make a grand announcement. Which meant I might even have some time before she shared the truth to try to suss out any more information while I was still considered a nobody in the court.

“Oh, I do love a party,” one of the Fae maids who was twisting my hair into an elaborate braid said. “They’re so exciting. You never know what might happen!”

*Now that’s an understatement*, I thought wryly.

The maid who was carefully applying my makeup grinned. “Kastian will probably be there.”

I gave her a blank stare. “Why should I care about that?”

The Fae’s brows rose, but she wisely didn’t say anything more. The rest of the group quieted down too. Clearly, they were fishing for gossip. Too bad I wasn’t going to give them any ammunition. It had been tricky enough navigating the sex scandal without adding further Kastian drama to the announcement about my lineage.

After what felt like hours, the maids finally completed their work.

One of them had me turn to face the full-length mirror. “What do you think?”

My breath caught in my throat. I looked gorgeous. My hair and makeup were impeccable. My dress was like something out of a fairy tale.

*I actually look like a princess.*

The thought jerked me out of my reverie, and I bit back a snort. All the cosmetics and lace in the world couldn’t turn me into princess material.

“You’ve outdone yourselves,” I said, smiling. “Now, I think it’s time for the party.”

I descended the stairs into the grand hall where the other Fae courtiers were already mingling. It was easy to pick out Dorphus, Cadhla, and Philantha among the crowd. I caught myself scanning the room for Kastian, but he was nowhere in sight.

*Not that I care. At least, not outside his potential involvement with the Order.*

Maybe it’d be for the best if he didn’t show. It’d probably give a break to any lingering sex scandal rumors if we weren’t seen together.

People in the room turned to watch me descend the staircase into the grand hall, and I suddenly felt like that poor human girl, Cinderella, I think it was. Torin had made me watch the movie once. It was ridiculous, of course, and made more ridiculous by the fact that the movie featured a “fairy godmother” and another Fae was the one making me watch the whole stupid tale.

I quickly made my way over to Cadhla and Philantha, grabbing a glass of wine on the way.

“I heard you spoke with Kastian this afternoon,” Cadhla said with a grin.

I nodded. “Yes, I thought it best to clear things up.”

She looked impressed, and I tucked that reaction away to consider later. If Cadhla’s response was to be believed, it didn’t seem like the people of the court often pushed back against Kastian’s behavior. That was something to keep in mind.

Cadhla held out her glass to clink with mine. “It sounded like it was very entertaining. Well done, you.”

After that, Cadhla and Philantha descended into more gossip and I glanced around the room, looking for literally anyone in the court who was interested in talking about something other than who was sleeping with whom or what hideous outfit so-and-so was wearing.

“I’m going to look for Celeste,” I told them before bowing out of the conversation altogether.

I drifted through the small crowd, pausing to listen in on conversations. This might be the last time people at a party would speak freely around me, and I wanted to take advantage of it.

There seemed to be quite a lot of chatter about the war with the Light Fae. Something about someone new arriving at the Light Fae court. None of that interested me. I couldn’t be bothered to keep up with the gossip in *this* court, much less one on the other side of the world.

As I moved through the crowd, I finally spotted Kastian.

*When did he get here?*

He was speaking with a Fae I’d never seen before. And it looked like the other Fae was upset with whatever Kastian was saying. For his part, Kastian looked far more serious than usual.

*What’s going on?* *Is this about the Order of the Winding Thorn?*

I ducked behind a passing waiter to get within listening distance of their conversation, but even then, there was so much chatter around me, it was hard to make out the words.

“Almost got caught with the last girl…” I heard Kastian say.

“It’s done though. She’s gone,” the other Fae said. He sounded anxious.

Shock hit me somewhere between my chest and my stomach. *Did Kastian really make those girls disappear?* It was then that I realized however much Kastian annoyed me, I hadn’t actually wanted him to be connected to the Order. But it sounded like Aelwen was right after all. He *was* directly responsible for those girls disappearing.

Just then, the waiter moved on to the next group and completely blew my cover. The Fae speaking with Kastian looked up, and our eyes met. His eyes widened in fear, and Kastian started to turn around.

*Shit!* I looked around for another hiding place, hoping a line of dancers or something might appear out of thin air and give me some cover, but I was on my own.

*Maybe it’s time to go on the offensive.*

As Kastian turned, I moved over to him and looped my arm through his. I gave him my best, brightest smile. “There you are! I was looking for you.”

Kastian looked absolutely shocked to find me cozying up to him. “Why? I thought you were mad at me.”

I nodded. “Oh, I’m furious. But that’s why I was looking for you,” I lied. “I wanted to call a truce between us. What do you think?”

He frowned down at me, his eyes searching my face. I kept my expression blithe, careless even, the same expression I’d seen him use so many times. But beneath the bodice of my dress, my heart was racing.

*Is he going to call my bluff?*

Then, before he could say anything, a high-pitched ringing sound echoed through the room. I found Celeste standing at the top of the staircase, clinking a small fork against her wine glass.

Everyone turned to face her, and my heart skipped into a whole new rhythm.

This was it.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said. “Tonight is going to be a very joyous occasion once I’ve made my announcement. Some of you may have met my new guest in the fortress. And some have wanted to know more about her. I’m excited to let you know that she is the daughter and heir of Kadmos Mauvais!”

**Episode 5288**

**Xavier**

Cali immediately jumped into the fray to try to calm Adair down. Tabitha stood on his other side, grabbing his arm and trying to physically pull him away from Hera’s servant. The energy whip pulsed like it was losing power in the arm that she touched. *Is she using her power on him? To try to snuff out his energy whips?*

“Please!” Cali begged. “I asked my grandmother to help you! He’s not here to hurt you. You’re a guest here! We’re all guests here!” She grabbed Adair’s other arm and tried to pull him back.

“Cali, be careful!” Greyson said, following after her. I couldn’t blame him. It was taking every ounce of self-control in my body to not throw Cali over my shoulder and let this shit show play itself out.

Adair was having none of it. Or maybe Cali’s words just weren’t getting through to him. He was in a pretty bad way after our fight. I’d seen tough guys like him die from lesser wounds, and he’d still managed to make it all the way here. He had to be delirious from pain and blood loss.

Adair gritted his teeth. His face was flushed, and his pupils had shrunk to mere pinpricks, but he showed no sign of backing down. “What kind of magic did you try to work on me?!” he demanded of the Fae who was still caught in his whips.

“It’s just a glamour!” Cali shrieked. “Just a glamour! I swear! We’re trying to protect you!”

“Protect me?” He laughed, his sharp and very white teeth flashing. “I see the Light Fae are still committed to their pretty little lies.”

Suddenly, the shed door was wrenched open behind us, and Hera stormed in. “Everyone, stop!” she bellowed.

I didn’t know if it was some kind of special power Hera had, or if the old bird just had the gravitas required to command a room—being a queen and all. But her command finally did the trick, and Adair released the guy from the energy whip. His weapons sputtered out and disappeared altogether, and he stumbled back. From what I could tell, Tabitha and Cali’s grip on his arms was the only thing keeping him from collapsing to the floor. His head lolled around on his neck, and he seemed to be struggling to stay conscious.

None of this was lost on Hera, but she didn’t seem particularly sympathetic to Adair’s cause either.

She stepped forward until she and Adair were practically nose to nose, her brows furrowing as she glared at him like he was nothing more than a disgusting bug she would have liked to crush under her boot.

“I told my granddaughter you could all stay here until your injuries are healed, but if you make more problems for me, I *will* have to have you all thrown out. Is that what you want? Or can you control yourselves long enough to accept the help I’m offering?”

Everyone seemed to lower their heads in contrition. Well, everyone except Adair. He didn’t look sorry in the least bit, despite the fact that he also looked like he had a foot in the grave.

Hera didn’t back down. “Is. That. What. You. Want?”

Tabitha elbowed Adair, her expression pleading. He turned his gaze back to Hera.

“No.”

Hera nodded, seemingly satisfied. “Then you will let my man perform a glamour on you and the other Dark Fae in your group to hide your identities. Additionally, you will make *no more* problems for me. Is that understood?”

Silence answered back, no one sure if she was expecting an answer or not, and Hera blew out a breath. “For the gods’ sake, say something. *Do you understand?*”

Then everyone was tripping over themselves to respond in the affirmative.

With that, Hera left.

“Oh my god.” Cali’s shoulders sank. “That was so humiliating.”

Greyson rubbed her arm. “We’re making progress. If one step at a time.”

“One agonizing step at a time,” she muttered to him.

That mean, green monster roared in my chest at the moment the two were sharing, but I forced myself to ignore it. I wasn’t here to connect with Cali, no matter how much I wished that were the case.

Finally, Adair allowed Hera’s servant to glamour him. His form shifted into that of an older, shorter Fae.

Tabitha stepped back, her eyes widening. “Wow. Um, that’s pretty weird.”

“It’ll wear off eventually,” Adair said in his normal voice. She nodded, seeming encouraged by this news.

Marius, on the other hand, was refusing to be glamoured. “No, Hera will want revenge for the last time I was here.”

“You can’t look like yourself,” Cali insisted. “You’re an infamous bounty hunter. Someone will definitely recognize you.”

Marius sighed. “Fine. But I better still be good-looking, that’s nonnegotiable.”

“Whatever,” Cali said, waving a hand.

Hera’s Fae obliged, making Marius look more or less like himself, but a different face.

Once the glamour was finished, Cali spoke up. “Come on. We’ve got a place to stay in the servants’ quarters.”

Hera’s servant showed us the way to our accommodations. Or, at least, where Rishika, Adair, Tabitha, and Marius would be staying—I assumed Cali, Greyson, and I would keep our rooms in the main palace.

On the way there, I fell into step beside Cali. “Are you okay? Do you think your grandmother is going to be angry with you?” I knew firsthand that being related to someone didn’t mean jack shit as to whether or not they’d lash out if you made life difficult for them, and Hera seemed like the kind of person you really didn’t want to piss off.

Greyson was the one to reply. “Hera would never hurt Cali.”

I scowled. *I didn’t ask you*, I wanted to say. I kind of hated that Greyson had already met Hera before. That he and Cali had had their own little adventure in the Fae world. That they’d made memories I couldn’t compete with. I was at a huge disadvantage here.

*That’s not the point*, I reminded myself. *I’m not here to be with Cali. At least, not in that sense.* It’d be incredibly shitty of me to have that mindset while Ava was still waiting for me back in the human world, along with our pack. I’d promised Ava I’d come home to her, and I had no intention of breaking that promise.

But the longer I was around Cali, the harder it was for me to remember my other commitments. The harder it was for me to keep my feelings under lock and key. Not that I’d be telling her anything she didn’t already know if I did let my feelings show. I’d made it more than clear to her that my heart wanted her back. All I could do now was go at her pace…

Once we were all settled in our rooms, I just about collapsed onto my bed, barely noticing how perfectly soft the sheets were. It had been a hell of a day. Just one long, exhausting disaster after the next. Mentally. Physically. Emotionally.

*Things will be clearer once I get some sleep. And if they’re not, at least I’ll be better equipped to hold back my urges.*

*I hope.*

\*\*\*

The next morning, I woke to the delicious scent of bread baking. I dressed and followed the scent down to the kitchen, where a half-dozen Fae were bustling about, preparing the morning meal. Cali was seated at the counter, barefoot, eating a piece of toast. More than once, I caught the other Fae in the room doing a double take at the sight of her.

“Good morning,” I said, taking a seat next to her. “What’s going on here? They look like they’re waiting for you to whip out your sword or something.”

She smiled. “They know I’m Hera’s granddaughter, and they think it’s weird I’d rather eat in here than in the grand dining hall.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.” I suddenly had an overwhelming urge to reach out and take Cali’s hand. I fought it back. Apparently, sleep didn’t do jack shit for helping me control my need for Cali.

Just then, Irene sauntered in. “Good morning, Caliana!”

Cali relaxed a bit, clearly friendly with the Fae woman. “Good morning, Irene.”

Irene grabbed a tray and moved around the kitchen efficiently.

“On breakfast duty again?” one of the kitchen Fae asked.

Irene nodded. “For Cenwyn.”

I frowned at the mention of that weird-ass Fae. The guy had bad vibes through and through. *Maybe I should talk to Rishika and Greyson about him…*

“I’m sorry you got stuck with Cenwyn duty,” the Fae said.

Irene shrugged. “It’s not that bad during the day. He just gets handsy at night.”

One of the Fae maids rolled her eyes. “He made me stand by his chair while he ate a seven-course meal. My feet were aching, and I was *so bored* ’cause he kept talking to that other court Fae about getting Hera to agree to some treaty summit with the Dark Fae.”

Irene shook her head. “Lady Hera would never.”

“Wait, what?” Cali piped up. “A treaty summit? When? Where?”

Irene’s eyes widened, like she’d forgotten Cali was in here. “Oh, it’s just a rumor. It happens every few years, but nothing ever comes of it.”

“Why not?” Cali asked.

“Because all the big Light Fae families have to agree, and Lady Hera never does.”

The other maid piped up. “Well, she did once.”

“Hush,” Irene said. “That was a different time.”

Cali jumped up. “That’s it!”

**Episode 5289**

“What are you talking about?” Xavier asked. “What do you mean by ‘it?’”

But I was already racing out of the room. Excitement pulsed in my veins, and anticipation fluttered in my stomach. For the first time since Marius had shown up on my doorstep to tell me my sister was in danger and needed my help, I felt in control. Finally, a real chance to save Artemis. A proper plan that didn’t involve muddling our way through one dangerous battlefield after another, hoping our luck would hold out long enough to make it to the Dark Fae court and that, once there, we’d find some way to help free my sister.

This treaty meeting was the obvious solution to our problems. This could be our chance to have a face-to-face meeting with the Dark Fae, to resolve this situation with Artemis being Celeste’s prisoner. Maybe even to find a way to put a stop to the war for good!

My mind filled with possibilities, each one better than the last. Even if all we managed to agree to was a ceasefire, or diplomatic immunity, that’d be enough to peacefully travel through the Fae world and into Dark Fae territory and find Artemis. And considering how badly banged up we already were when we’d hardly even begun, any bit of help was more than welcome.

I practically sprinted into the dining hall, where my grandmother was eating breakfast with several other Fae courtiers, including that guy who asked if I was the Wrenthorn heir. *I think Greyson said his name was Cenwyn?*

My grandmother’s brows rose as I dashed into the dining room, still barefoot and generally not at all prepared for a fine breakfast with fancy Fae.

“Caliana, what are you doing here?” she asked. “Would you like some breakfast?”

She started to signal for a servant to set another place at the table, but I shook my head. In my excitement, my appetite had completely disappeared.

“I heard there will be a treaty summit with the Dark Fae court,” I blurted out. “Can I go?”

Hera’s expression darkened. “Where did you hear that ridiculous rumor?”

“Is there going to be one?” I pressed. This was the first lifeline I’d been thrown since finding out Artemis was a prisoner of the Dark Fae court. I wasn’t about to release it so easily. This was my sister’s life we were talking about. And hadn’t Hera made a big deal about not wanting to cause further harm by getting involved in Dark Fae affairs? Hadn’t she said that was why Artemis was beyond her help? Wouldn’t using a treaty summit, a proper, political way to negotiate these sorts of things, be the exact solution to our problems? Grandmother was going to have to wrestle the idea away from me.

Cenwyn laughed and turned his gaze on my grandmother. “Your granddaughter asks a very good question.”

Hera’s scowl deepened. “I’ve already said no.”

My heart dropped. “Why not? Won’t this fix all our problems?”

Several of the Fae courtiers laughed under their breath, like my naivete amused them. I ignored them. I didn’t know them, and they didn’t know me. And I’d faced bigger and meaner adversaries than some uppity Fae royals.

I kept my focus on my grandmother. “This can help—”

She cut me off. “I don’t want to discuss this.”

One of the Light Fae courtiers set down their fork. “Hera, why don’t we talk about it? I know it’s a hard topic after the results of the last summit—”

“I said it’s done!” Hera barked.

Cenwyn steepled his hands together as he stared at my grandmother. Unlike the other Fae, he didn’t seem at all bothered by her outburst. “I understand that you are put out by the last summit. But that doesn’t mean all chances of peaceful negotiations are lost.”

“Put out?” Hera practically snarled. “How dare you! This isn’t some minor slight. I lost a daughter! That marriage could have resulted in ruining my entire family line!”

“But it didn’t,” Cenwyn said, not to be dissuaded. “As is apparent given your lovely granddaughter here.”

“Half human, though,” I thought I heard another Light Fae mutter under their breath. “A shame.”

When I looked around to find the source, I couldn’t tell who had said it. All of their faces were focused on the row between my grandmother and Cenwyn. Still, I noticed Xavier stiffen beside me. Clearly, he’d heard it too. He was practically vibrating in place, anger rolling off him in waves.

I put a hand on his arm to calm him, and he jerked away like my touch had set him on fire.

*Crap.* I shouldn’t have touched him. Not when things were still so awkward between us. It was kind of him to come with us to find Artemis, to support me and help me stay sane while the *due destini* curse continued to wreak havoc on our lives, but I didn’t have the first idea what to do with the other things hanging between us. His feelings. My own feelings. I didn’t have room for anything in my mind, my heart, or my life except for freeing my sister.

Hera shot me a pained smile. “I am, of course, grateful for my granddaughter. But my daughter has exiled herself to the human world as a result of how that marriage treaty ended. I am forced to grieve her absence each and every day. I will not make that mistake again.”

“But—” I began.

“That is final!” she snapped. She sat back down and turned her entire focus on eating the food on her plate, clearly dismissing me.

Xavier nudged my shoulder. “Come on, Cali,” he said quietly. “Let’s give your grandma some space, okay?”

I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to give in to Hera’s baggage and prejudices. All the things that were keeping her from using the full arsenal of power available to her to bring Artemis back safely from the Dark Fae court. But I could practically see the tension rippling through the room, especially with Cenwyn and the other Fae watching things play out.

Now truly wasn’t the time. So, I did the only thing I could do. I left. Hell, I stormed out, slamming the dining room door behind me. Xavier was hot on my heels coming down the hallway, but I ignored him. Tears blurred my vision, but I forced myself to keep moving. I didn’t know what to do. How to move past this.

*This was our best chance, and Hera won’t even listen!*

“Cali.” Xavier followed me into my room, closing the door behind him. “We’ll find another way.”

I stopped in my tracks and spun to face him. “What way?! I was up all night trying to think of a way, and I can’t! My sister is in danger from god only knows what, and I can’t do a damn thing to help her!”

A few stray tears slipped out, and Xavier froze when he saw them tracking down my cheeks. Then, he did the unthinkable. He closed the distance between us and put a hand on my shoulder. It was the barest, most platonic touch possible, and I still leaned into it, trying to soak up every ounce of comfort he was offering.

After a beat, his arms tentatively wrapped around me. One beat later, mine wrapped around him too. I sank into the heat of his embrace, just letting him hug me. God, I didn’t know how badly I’d needed this.

“I’m just so exhausted,” I found myself saying. “And I’m so…so angry. I don’t know what to do. It feels like everything we try ends up failing. At this rate, we’re never going to get Artemis out of there. We won’t even make it past the border.”

“I know things seem bleak right now, but you’re the strongest and bravest person I know,” Xavier said. “If anyone can figure out a way to get to the Dark Fae court and rescue Artemis, it’s you. And Artemis obviously knows that too, because she sent for your help.”

I looked up at him, tears still spilling over my lashes. “That’s why I’m so afraid I’ll let her down. She believes in me. What if I can’t do it? What if she’s stuck there because I’m not strong enough?”

Xavier gently cupped my face, wiping my tears away with his thumbs. “That’s impossible. You always find a way. I know that from personal experience. You went to the *demon world*. You got rid of Adéluce. Only you could have done all that.”

I nodded. “But I lost so much in the process.” Then I froze. So did Xavier.

*Shit. I really shouldn’t have said that.*

The confession had just slipped out of me. I hadn’t intended to say it, hadn’t planned to bring up all our old baggage, all the things we’d lost along the way.

Xavier watched me carefully, and I could tell from the pensive look in his eyes that he knew exactly what I’d meant. That, in fighting Adéluce, I’d lost him.

He lowered his head slightly, his eyes dipping down to glance at my mouth before lifting back up to meet my gaze. “Cali, I…”

I didn’t know what he was going to say, and he didn’t seem to know either.

*Is he going to kiss me?* Unwittingly, I began to tilt my lips up to meet his.

A knock sounded at the door, followed by Greyson’s voice. “Cali, are you in there?”

**Episode 5290**

**Artemis**

Celeste’s words hung in the air for about eight seconds before the room dissolved into total chaos. Suddenly, everyone was talking at once.

“How is that possible?!”

“Kadmos is dead, and so is his family!”

“What kind of trick are you trying to play here, Celeste?”

“Is it true? The heir of Kadmos’s line is truly alive? And here?!”

Everyone who wasn’t calling out questions and concerns was searching the room for me. I did my best to hold my head high, to not waver under their scrutiny. I knew by now that the courtiers of the Dark Fae court were sharks. Once they smelled blood in the water, they’d go in for the kill. I wasn’t about to give them the chance.

Suddenly, the team that Celeste had sent to prepare me, and the level of elegance with which they’d dressed me, held a new meaning. I’d known Celeste was going to make her announcement and knew that she’d arranged for me to be prepared accordingly. But now I understood her decision on a deeper level. This dress, this finery, my perfectly braided hair and contoured makeup—it was all armor. A defense against everyone who would look at me and see anything less than Kadmos’s heir.

Celeste held up a hand, not slipping even the slightest bit in her role as gracious hostess. “I’m sure you all have a lot of questions, but I think this is, first and foremost, a thing to celebrate. Let’s not forget that, amidst all our questions and concerns, the daughter of Kadmos was thought dead for all this time. And now, that dark era in our history is over. Now, the future has never looked brighter!”

*Okay, now you’re laying it on a little thick.* I kept my courtier’s mask in place, but even I wanted to gag at the hyperbolic language.

And I wasn’t the only one who thought Celeste might be overplaying her hand. Someone called out from the crowd, “How do we know you’re telling the truth? How do we know that she’s”—I saw the Fae jab a finger in my direction—“who you say she is?!”

I felt Kastian’s gaze on me, heavy and expectant, but I kept my focus on Celeste. He and I would have plenty of time to talk later.

“Yeah!” someone else shouted. “Prove it!”

Celeste let out a long-suffering sigh. “I had hoped we could celebrate, but I see now some assurance is needed. Fortunately, I’ve prepared for this. Artemis, will you please come up here?”

I felt every set of eyes in the room on me as I slowly made my way to the grand staircase where Celeste waited for me.

*Don’t trip, don’t trip.*

I’d never had a problem with being clumsy before. Grace was the kind of thing bounty hunters needed to master if they wanted to be any good at their jobs, but with the weight of the entire room’s eyes on me, I felt more than a little weak in the knees. I still wasn’t used to all this attention, after all. I hadn’t lived the life of a courtier, of a Fae royal. I’d been a nobody in every way that counted—at least, until now.

*This is way worse than when everyone thought I’d slept with Kastian.* Then, I was the butt of everyone’s joke. Now, I could practically feel everyone in the room sizing me up, trying to decide if I measured up to my lineage. Trying to figure out my place in their plans.

When I finally made it to the staircase, Ingrid, the priestess who had verified my identity before, was waiting there, that same heavy, bloodstained wooden bowl clutched in her hands. Celeste had pulled a small blade out of god only knew where. I didn’t want to think about that part.

“We’re going to do the test again?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Celeste gave me a tight nod, then raised her voice for the benefit of the room. “Now, Artemis and I will prove her heritage beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

I held out my hand for Celeste to cut, then, along with everyone else in the room, I watched my own blood drip into the bowl. Then Ingrid held out a small length of cloth for me to wrap around my palm and pulled out that same shimmering cloth to wrap around the bowl. Now that I knew what to expect, I turned my gaze away from the bowl, from the ritual, and looked out at the crowd. Which of these people would become my allies? And which of them would be my enemies?

I caught Kastian’s gaze from across the hall. He gave me that same devil-may-care smirk, and my stomach flip-flopped. I had no idea how to interpret it.

Ingrid pulled the cloth away and revealed the empty bowl. “The heir of Kadmos has been found!”

Shock rippled through the room again, faster this time, and from my vantage point I could see the emotions playing out on the courtiers’ faces before they thought to school their expressions.

*There sure are a lot of pissed-off people in this room. So much for celebrating.*

My stomach dropped again. *Maybe this was a bad idea after all…*

There must have been a reason that Celeste was so reluctant to tell people who I was from the beginning.

*Shit. Did I accidentally fuck things up for myself by being so relaxed about those sex scandal rumors?* I thought through the sequence of events with the glaring eyes of so many Fae on me, and I suddenly wished very much that I could go hide in my room. Or, you know, get the hell out of this court all together.

“Now that matters have been attended to,” Celeste called out, seemingly unaffected by the raw emotion radiating through the room, “the celebration can begin!”

The musicians took that as their cue, and the music started up in earnest. The joyful soundtrack to a celebration that not everyone wanted to attend.

*What the hell am I supposed to do now?*

“Go on, Artemis,” Celeste said under her breath. “Go mingle with your people.”

I stiffly made my way down the staircase and was rushed by several Fae bowing and introducing themselves. The sycophants had arrived.

“Princess, it’s such an honor to have you back home!” one of the courtiers gushed.

I shook my head. “Please, I’m not a princess.”

That didn’t dissuade them from pressing in on me, complimenting my clever ruse, my dress, my beauty, asking for favors I didn’t even remotely have the ability to grant. Suddenly, there didn’t seem to be enough air in the room.

“Excuse me.”

I ventured farther into the crowd, away from the Artemis fan club. Several courtiers watched me go, seemingly taking my measure. Others stared at me with unmasked hate.

I stopped short in front of Kastian, whose smirk seemed awfully bitter up close.

Dorphus and Philantha flanked him on either side.

“So, this is your secret?” he asked. His lips curled up into a grimace, like I disgusted him. After all the flirting and teasing, his obvious hatred left me feeling a little breathless.

“Is Ari not your real nickname?” Philantha asked.

I frowned. “It was a cover that Celeste asked me to use.”

Kastian huffed, shaking his head. “You’re such a bitch.”

My jaw dropped.

Dorphus gasped. “Whoa, whoa, you can’t be serious, right?”

“Obviously, she’s been playing her little games this whole time to manipulate us all,” Kastian snapped.

“Won’t this help, though?” Dorphus asked. “If you two are together, you’d be a power couple.”

“We’re *not* together!” I said automatically.

Kastian looked repulsed. “I’d never touch a woman like her!”

That brought me up short. Not that I’d ever actually wanted to hook up with him, but it was more than a little offensive that he was acting like I was some kind of disgusting monster. “Well, I’d never sleep with you either!”

He snorted. “Oh, please. You were in my bed once; you’ll be back there again.”

That was it. I was so done with this party. This night. This entire fucking court full of vipers. “Good night.” I turned on my heel and stormed out of the hall. Halfway to my journey back to my room, though, my anger turned to dread.

*Everyone knows the truth. Kastian knows the truth.*

I was vulnerable now. Hell, I probably had a shiny new target on my back. Would I be Kastian’s next victim?

I took the long way back to my room, trying to figure out what the hell to do next. If Kastian was even a true threat. *Should I tell Celeste about my theory?*

Despite our antagonism toward one another, I knew I could at least trust Celeste to want to keep me alive. If Kastian made any more threats, I’d definitely tell Celeste. But for now, I’d continue with my plan. Tonight’s announcement hadn’t changed everything—I still had to find out more information about the Order and why they wanted me dead.

*Which might be trickier now that my list of enemies seems to be growing.*

I finally made it back to my room. First things first, I was going to sleep and sleep and sleep. Maybe when I woke up, the world wouldn’t feel quite so heavy.

I opened my bedroom door and found it dark. I hadn’t realized how late it had gotten. I headed for the candle on my bedside table when someone suddenly grabbed me from behind.

**Episode 5291**

*Cali? Are you in there?*

Greyson’s voice rang through the room, and I jerked away from Xavier, severing the moment between us.

“Cali? Are you okay?” Greyson called again.

*Am I?* I cleared my throat and tried to gather my wits. “Yes. I’m fine.” With one last look at Xavier, I strode over to the door and pulled it open.

“Cali, where did you—” Greyson stopped when he looked past me and saw Xavier over my shoulder. His brows went up, and he looked back down at me. “What’s going on?”

“We just…ran into each other,” I said, though even I could hear how suspicious that sounded.

Greyson hesitated for a moment, then nodded, apparently willing to accept this explanation.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Why were you looking for me?”

“Hera had a message for you. She told me we’re invited to a dinner banquet tonight,” he said. “She wants to formally introduce you to the Light Fae that are here at the fortress.”

I nodded. “Oh, okay. I’ll be ready.”

Greyson shot at glance at Xavier, then looked back at me. “Do you need help with anything?”

“Thank you,” I said, giving him a grateful smile, “but I’m fine.” I turned to Xavier. “You should probably leave too. I need to get ready for this dinner banquet.”

Xavier nodded, but as he stepped toward the door, he and Greyson eyed each other. Neither said anything, but I could feel the tension radiating from both of them.

I resisted the urge to groan, but it was a struggle. This was *so* awkward.

“Okay, I need to get ready,” I said, trying to sound brisk. I put a hand on each of their shoulders and pushed them out the door. Then I closed it and leaned against it with a sigh.

I was glad to be alone, but what the hell had just happened between Xavier and me? I wasn’t sure, but whatever it had been had felt so *intense.*

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. I felt like my emotions were all over the place. This wouldn’t do—not now. I needed to get myself together. I hadn’t come to the Fae world to work out my mate problems. I was on a mission to save my sister, not to get even more confused about this stupid *due destini* situation.

Besides, there were other concerns to worry about. The last thing I needed to do was provoke the *due destini* by running around and doing foolish things with both of my mates.

I heard the chiming of the bells from the tower of the fortress and stepped away from the door. If my grandmother was expecting me at her banquet, then I needed to get ready. I had the feeling she would not look kindly upon me showing up looking anything less than perfect.

On an earlier inspection of the room, I’d discovered the tall wooden wardrobe was filled with long dresses, all in jeweled shades of silk. They were beautiful and elaborate, but when I’d first seen them, I’d been baffled, certain I’d have no use for them.

But a situation had arisen, and now was the time. I had to look right if Hera was going to use this dinner to formally present me to the other Fae.

I opened the doors of the wardrobe and looked inside. There were dresses of poppy red, bright pink, and ocean blue. I ran my hand across them, feeling the delicate silk beneath my palm. I thought for a moment, then decided on one in sapphire blue. The gown had a deep, plunging neckline and laced up the back, like a corset, so it fit like a glove.

When the dress was on, I stepped to the mirror and swept up my hair, using the bejeweled hair pins in a small porcelain dish on the table. I stepped back and looked at my reflection. I looked…*regal*. It was a strange feeling, but not unpleasant, and I gave myself a small smile, trying to look more confident than I felt.

Finished, I stepped to my door and pulled it open, only to find Xavier on the other side, his hand raised as though he were about to knock.

He had changed too and was dressed formally in black, with a snowy white shirt beneath the curved lapels of the jacket. The color made his eyes look bluer than ever, and they flashed down at me, surprised.

I could feel myself leaning toward him—my body yearning for his—but I pulled back, reminding myself not to be swayed.

“What do you want?” I asked, my voice harsher than I was intending.

“I was going to ask if you needed an escort down to dinner,” he said, lowering his hand.

“Oh, um…okay,” I said. I shut my door behind me, and we set off down the passageway.

We were quiet for a moment, but when we turned a corner, Xavier cleared his throat.

“Cali, listen, about earlier—”

“Let’s just forget about it,” I said quickly. “Nothing happened. So I think it’s for the best if we just move on and not talk about it. Ever. Okay?”

When I glanced up Xavier looked shocked, but he nodded.

“Okay.”

We made it to the top of the stairs just as Greyson and Rishika entered the landing from another hallway.

“How is Adair doing?” I asked Rishika.

“He’s doing okay,” she said. “Tabitha and Marius are both staying with him.”

“But how—” I started.

“They’re being treated well,” Rishika assured me, guessing what I was going to ask.

“Good,” I breathed, feeling relieved.

We walked down the stairs and into the hallway. The dining room door was open, and we walked in to see the table had been set for a dozen people.

I looked at it, surprised, and wondered what I had actually agreed to.

Before I had a chance to answer that question for myself, a door on the opposite side of the room opened, and Hera walked in. She was accompanied by Cenwyn and the other Light Fae. All of whom eyed me curiously.

“Take your seats,” Hera said in a commanding voice.

As if from nowhere, servants appeared, pulling out chairs and discreetly directing us to sit.

When everyone had taken their seats, Hera looked around. “I’d like you all to meet my granddaughter, Caliana. She made a promise to return to me, and you see that she has kept that promise.”

I felt my face flush hot, but I smiled around at the Fae around the table. Most of them looked kindly back at me, though I couldn’t help but notice a few pairs of eyes looked sharply curious.

My heart began to beat hard, and Greyson—like he could sense it—reached for my hand and covered it with his, giving me a squeeze for support. I flipped my hand and squeezed his back, grateful for him.

The first course—a thin, clear broth flavored with herbs—was served by the silent servants.

For a moment there was no sound but the clinking of silver against china, then one of the older Fae looked around.

“I heard some interesting gossip today. About the Dark Fae court, of all things.”

I looked up quickly. Artemis was in the Dark Fae court—was that what the gossip was?  
 “Yes, I heard that Celeste is making power moves,” Cenwyn said. “Again,” she added.

“Poor dear,” sighed another woman. “She’s always trying so hard. Think she’s got a stance after marrying Kadmos’s brother.”

I looked at the woman, surprised by her candor. They were talking about Adair.

Sliding my eyes over to Greyson, I saw that he looked on to be on high alert too, and was listening closely.

“Is that what you were hearing?” Cenwyn asked the first Fae—an older man.

The man shook his head. “No, it’s not about Celeste—well, not directly. But it seems that the heir to Kadmos’s bloodline has returned to their court. Can you imagine?”

I froze, my soup spoon stopped halfway between my bowl and my mouth. The heir to Kadmos’s bloodline? Did they know that Adair was here, at the palace?

But then another thought occurred to me, and my stomach dropped. They weren’t talking about Adair. They were talking about Artemis.

*Shit.*

Cenwyn’s face turned beet red, and he slammed his fist onto the table with an angry roar. “I told you we should have taken care of that damned child years ago. Now this! What could she be capable of? She could unite the Dark Fae against us!”

“Now hold on,” Hera said. She raised her hand for silence, but no one heeded it. The other Light Fae looked scandalized and leaned together, some whispering, some shouting—all arguing.

“It’s clear we need to get rid of the source of this issue,” Cenwyn snapped, slapping the table again so hard the crystal rattled.

“Get rid of?” I asked, startled. “What do you mean?”

“What do you *think* I mean?” Cenwyn asked, bristling. “We should send an assassin after the heir!”

**Episode 5292**

**Artemis**

The arms around me felt skinny and sinewy, but when I tried to break away, they were strong as steel bands. For a wild, terrifying moment, fear completely overtook me, flooding my senses. The room was dark, and I couldn’t see who was there or even how many of them there were—I only knew that I was being held too tightly to pull free.

I gave a grunt of effort and broke the attacker’s hold on one of my arms. It wasn’t much, but it allowed me just enough space to turn around to see who it was. But even standing face-to-face, I still didn’t know.  In the darkness of the room, I could see that the attacker was wearing a mask that covered their entire face.

Shit.

In my moment of confusion, this stranger had gotten ahold of my arm again, and they started pulling, trying to drag me down to the ground. I *couldn’t* let that happen. I could only imagine what would come next if I allowed that. I had been taken by surprise, so I was already vulnerable, but being at my attacker’s feet was as vulnerable as a person could get in a fight. No fucking way. I gritted my teeth as I fought to stay on my feet.

The person’s hands slid from my upper arms down to my wrists—maybe they were going to tie me up—but that moment of transition was a window of opportunity, and I took it. I pulled one hand away, then stepped toward them, the heel of my hand outstretched. I punched up as hard as I could and heard a satisfying crunch of nasal bone, along with a groan of pain.

But they recovered quickly and grabbed my hand, bending back my wrist until I was sure my arm was going to break. I brought my knee up, hoping to do some damage, and nearly smiled when I made contact. The attacker doubled over, and I tried the move again, kneeing them in the face this time.

I was starting to get the upper hand and had just given a silent thanks that they weren’t armed when pain exploded in my side. Shit—they had a knife, and they’d just slashed the blade across my ribs. I screamed as the agony burned white-hot.

Stumbling back, I grasped my side, which already felt hot and sticky with blood. The attacker lunged for me, grabbing me around the middle and dragging me toward the window. We stumbled into it and crashed through, but at the very last moment, instinct made me stick out my hands, grasping onto the edge of the window frame. The wind whipped around me as the top half of my body hung out into the night air. I could feel my hands slipping, and when I shot a look down, I saw the ground was *very* far below. I did a quick calculation on how I might survive a multi-story fall, and decided I’d rather not test my theory.

I *had* to get out of this. The pain in my side was nearly blinding, but with a huge grunt of effort, I kicked the attacker and pulled myself up, wrapping my arms around their neck and reversing our positions, so *they* were hanging out the window.

“Who are you?!” I demanded as their hands scrabbled at the broken glass around the window frame.

The attacker didn’t answer.

In a position of control now, I pushed the attacker so their body inched out the window, hanging more precariously in the air. “Who are you?!”

The windowsill splintered beneath our combined weight. The attacker gave an almighty yell as the frame gave way. They reached out for me as they began to fall, but I grabbed hold of the stone wall and yanked myself back, managing to escape the grasping hands.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, my heart beating hard. I chanced a look out the window—expecting to see a dead body on the ground below—but my mouth fell open. The attacker *hadn’t* fallen to the ground but had somehow caught hold of a jutting corbel two stories below. I watched—baffled—as they pulled themselves through a window and back into the fortress.

That wasn’t good. Whoever had attacked me was going to escape.

I leaned back against the stone wall as the wound in my side gave a powerful throb. My heart was beating fast, and I was losing blood too quickly. I grabbed a sheet from the bed and ripped it, making a bandage to wrap around my ribs.

As my adrenaline began to ebb, I could feel my anger rising. I used to be a better fighter than this. When I was a bounty hunter, there was no way I’d just stroll into a dark room and let myself get blindsided like I had tonight. I was completely off my game. I hadn’t been training enough. I had gotten too comfortable, and now I was paying the price.

I ran a hand through my mussed hair. Who was that assassin? And why had they come after me? It couldn’t just be a coincidence that it had happened right after Celeste’s announcement. There had to be a connection between the attack and the now public knowledge that I was the daughter of Kadmos. I was sure it was related. And I was just as sure that it did not bode well.

The number of people who wanted me dead had likely just multiplied now that my real identity had been revealed. Now wasn’t the time to let my guard down.

I fought to slow my racing thoughts. I wondered if I should tell Celeste what had happened. It might make sense to let her know. If there was anyone in the court who was committed to my survival, it was her.

There was a big part of me that didn’t like the idea of depending on Celeste for anything, but I knew I had no choice. Who else could I turn to? I had literally no other allies in the Dark Fae court.

Pressing the bandage to my side, I opened my door and looked out into the passageway.

When I was satisfied it was empty, I ventured out. I kept my wits about me and hugged the wall, keeping only to darkened corridors. I didn’t want anyone knowing where I was in case there were others in this palace on the side of the assassin.

My side was throbbing, but I tried to ignore it. I had lost a lot of blood, and my vision was growing unreliable. It was wavering, and I knew I needed to rest. I was sweaty from the fight and the struggle to keep conscious, but I shook my head, fighting to keep myself together. I needed to figure out who it was who wanted me dead. And I needed to make sure they weren’t going to succeed.

I turned when I heard someone calling my name, worried for one anxious moment that I was starting to imagine things.

But I needn’t have worried—not about *that* anyway. Kastian was striding toward me.

I frowned at him. “What are you doing here?” I asked, trying to sound strident.

“What are *you* doing here?” he countered.

“I asked you first,” I said, unable to think of anything better. My speech was starting to slur. “Have you come to yell at me again?

The ground beneath me seemed to be slanting, but I saw when Kastian’s eyes traveled down, then widened.

“What the hell happened to you? Is that *blood*?”

I scowled at him. I wanted to ask him what he knew about the assassin, and if he had been involved in the attempt on my life, but my tongue felt so thick and heavy, I was sure I’d never get the words out. I wanted to raise my hand, maybe poke him accusingly in the chest, but all I ended up doing was stumbling toward him.

He reached out automatically and caught my arm, holding tight to keep me upright, though I swayed on my feet.

Everything felt strange and blurred, like I was feeling everything underwater, but I remembered I was angry at him and tried to pull my arm from his grasp. I wanted to push him away, but I was too weak to do either of those things. Blood was still gushing from the wound in my side. I could feel it seeping into the sheet bandage, which was soaking wet and sticking to my torn dress. I moved my hand to it, but I stopped and hissed in agony as pain tore through me like fire.

“Gods, Ari, you’re hurt.”

“No,” I slurred, shaking my head, trying to deny what was patently obvious. I opened my mouth to tell him to leave me alone, but nothing came out. The last thing I remembered was Kastian holding out his arms as I fell into them.

Then everything went black.

**Episode 5293**

I stared around the table. An *assassin*? I was horrified at the thought that they might send someone to kill Artemis—if that’s who the rumors were about. But how could they not be?

“You can’t do that!” I burst out.

I looked over at my grandmother, expecting her support. Expecting her to say no, of course they couldn’t do that. But Hera didn’t say that. She didn’t say anything.

“Grandma!” I cried. “Tell them! Tell them they can’t do that!”

“This isn’t just Hera’s decision to make,” Cenwyn piped in.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “She’s—”

“This war is bigger than any one Fae,” Cenwyn snapped. “We all need to think of the Fae people. We must think of the greater consequences of our inaction!”

“But this isn’t just some faceless Fae! This is my sis—”

“We will hold a council meeting,” Hera said firmly, cutting me off mid sentence. “We will discuss this new development.”

“We don’t have the time to call a meeting,” Cenwyn said angrily. “We must act—”

“Half the council is already here,” she said, her voice even, though her eyes flashed dangerously. She gestured at the Fae around the table. “We can surely wait one more day while we call the remainder to come as well.”

Cenwyn looked as though he surely could not, but he—like the rest of us—saw the other Fae nodding and realized he was outnumbered. He finally nodded himself, deferring to Hera’s greater influence.

My shoulders relaxed a little, now that the talk of assassination was over. I looked over at Rishika to see that she looked panicked. I knew how she felt.

I looked over at my grandmother, angry and confused about her response. Why hadn’t she just rejected the idea of assassinating her granddaughter right away? Why hadn’t she told Cenwyn to stuff it?

The bowls were taken from us, and the second course was served, some kind of fish I didn’t recognize, but everything felt like sawdust in my mouth. There was little conversation after that, and everything felt awkward and tense.

When dessert—a berry mousse light as puffs of air—was finally taken away, I pushed my chair back from the table. I needed to speak to my grandmother about what had just happened, but just as I stepped toward her, she rose and looked around.

“I must excuse myself early. I find I am a bit under the weather tonight. I will take my leave for now.” And without another word, she turned and strode from the room, before I could say anything to her.

I stared after her, shocked. What the hell was going on? Hera was our *grandmother.* Why was she just abandoning Artemis like this?

The Fae rose, and I saw the old man step over to Xavier and engage him in conversation. Rishika was leaning across the table to talk to Greyson, so I simply turned on my heel and walked out.

I headed back upstairs to my room and slammed the door. I pulled the jeweled pins of my hair and threw them onto the dressing table as tears filled my eyes.

Behind me, there was a knock on my door. “Cali? Can I come in?”

“Yes,” I managed.

Greyson pushed open the door and stepped into the room, his grey eyes worried. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay?” I repeated. “Am I *okay*? No! Of course I’m not okay. You heard what happened at dinner. The Light Fae court is going to try to kill my sister, and my grandmother is just going to sit by and let it happen! No! I am *not* okay!”

Greyson took a step toward me. “Cali, that’s not what happened. I’m sure Hera isn’t going to let that happen. You saw her down there—she defused the situation without having to make a decree one way or the other. I’m sure she’s got a shit-ton of politics to wade through first, but I’m sure she won’t send an assassin after Artemis.”

I shook my head. “I wish I could be as sure as you are, Greyson, but I’m not. I really don’t trust my grandmother to stand up for Artemis.”

“Why do you say that?” Greyson wondered.

“It feels like because Artemis has half of Kadmos’s blood, Hera doesn’t see her as her real granddaughter. And that just sucks,” I said, flopping down on the bed.

Greyson sat at my side and rubbed my back. “I’m sure that’s not true,” he said soothingly. “It can’t be.”

I shook my head, feeling utterly dejected. “But I think it is. And what if this council decides to kill Artemis? What if the Light Fae get to her—*kill* her—before I can get to her?”

“We won’t let that happen,” he said softly. “But we should make a plan. We should try to get Hera to agree to the peace summit. At least then we’d have a chance to meet up with the Dark Fae court—and Artemis. Then we can figure out what the true dangers are.”

I took a shaking breath and nodded. “Yeah, that sounds right.” I sat up and wiped my eyes. “I should go talk to my grandmother now. It’s better than just sitting here, doing nothing.”

Greyson looked anxious, but he nodded. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said ruefully. “I might need it.”

I headed out of my room and down the passageway toward where I knew my grandmother’s suite was. My stomach churned when I stepped in front of the oak door, but I reminded myself that Artemis’s life was on the line and forced myself to knock.

“Enter,” came her regal voice.

I pushed open the door into a small sitting room. There were no candles lit, and the only light came from the crackling fire in the hearth. My grandmother sat before it. She had changed from her dinner gown and was now wearing a red robe, beneath which I could see the snowy white folds of her nightgown.

There was something about the firelight that made Hera look older than she usually did. The fire’s shadows deepened her wrinkles and the hollows of her cheeks. Maybe she hadn’t been making excuses at dinner. Maybe she really was sick.

“Are you feeling okay, Grandma?” I asked quietly.

“Fine, child. Fine. It’s been a long day,” she said.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I’m sorry for bringing such chaos to your doorstep.”

She looked at me for a moment, then patted the couch next to her. When I sat, she took my hands in hers. “I am happy you are here, Caliana. I am happy to see you.”

I nodded slowly. “Thank you. But I wanted to talk to you about your other granddaughter.”

Hera tensed and began to pull her hands from mine, but I gripped tighter, not letting her go.

“If you love me, then you must love Artemis at least as much, right?”

Hera turned her face from mine. “That is an unfair question.”

“Can’t you at least agree to the peace summit?” I asked fervently. “That could delay any talk of assassination attempts, and we could see Artemis. Just to make sure she’s okay.”

My grandmother shook her head. “No, I think not. I’m quite finished with failed attempts at treaties and peace with the Dark Fae—”

“How can you say you’re finished? If you’ve tried them before, you must have believed in them at some point.”

Hera laughed bitterly. “Oh yes. And my attempt to broker a treaty for my daughter’s marriage to Kadmos is how I lost her to the human world.” She shook her head. “All that work, all that effort, and look what I earned. I lost Orla, and we never got the peace that we were promised. All I got for my troubles was a broken family. I’ll never make a mistake like that again,” she said, her voice hard.

I looked up at my grandmother. I could see the severity in her eyes, but—behind that—I could see the fear, too. I needed to remind her of who she used to be, and why she had once yearned for peace.

“If you reject Artemis now, you’ll never get your daughter back.”

Hera looked quickly at me.

“My mother will never forgive you if you let her daughter die. You must know that,” I said, my eyes filling with tears.

Hera glared at me, but when I didn’t falter under her angry stare, she sighed.

“You know, Caliana, you are so much like your mother. So passionate and so stubborn.”

I nodded. “I am. So you should know better than anyone that I won’t stop until I rescue my sister. The only question now is what part you’ll play in that. Will you help me or not?”  
 My grandmother looked at me, her expression grave. I could see the wise woman was thinking hard, weighing her options and her risks. Finally she nodded, just once.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” I repeated, unsure what that meant.

“Yes. Fine.” She heaved a weary sigh. “I will at least be open to discussing a peace summit.”

**Episode 5294**

**Artemis**

Huge, horrifying monsters galloped past me, snorting and braying and snarling in turn. Rishika was there. Where had she come from? I didn’t know, but she was at my side. I could smell the scent of her hair. We were fighting—trying to keep the monsters at bay. We were side by side, until she was pulled away.

I called out to her, spinning around. Where had she gone?

I fought my way forward, kicking and punching and pushing the monsters away. I was screaming her name. Then, suddenly, I could see her in the distance.

“Rishika! Rishika! Can you hear me?!”

But she didn’t turn. She couldn’t hear me.

A monster charged toward her. “Watch out!” I screamed, terror filling me. But still she didn’t hear. She didn’t even turn until the monster—a huge, scaly beast, half dragon, half alligator—raised its front leg, talons glinting. I watched in horror as it swiped at Rishika.

I screamed and lurched forward, lunging for her. “Rishika!” I panted. “Please!”

My eyes flew open, and pain lanced down my side. I rolled over, panting, and slowly it dawned on me that I had been dreaming. It had just been a dream. A dream that had left me drenched in sweat and twisted in the sheets.

Wait—*sheets*? Where the hell was I?

Looking around, I realized I was in a bedroom, but it wasn’t mine.

So whose was it?

I looked around, frowning. It looked familiar, like somewhere I might have been—

Hang on. My stomach sank as I realized it was Kastian’s room. What the actual hell?

I sat up with a groan, wincing in pain. My hand went to my side—then I looked down. The blood-soaked sheet I’d wrapped around myself was gone, replaced with clean linen bandages, wrapped around my torso in a way that looked neat and professional.

Thoroughly confused now, I stared down, trying to put the pieces together, but I was struggling. Who had cleaned and bandaged my wound? What was going on? I fought to remember what had happened just before I passed out, but the last thing I remembered was trying to get away from Kastian.

So how the hell did I get into his room?

The door opened, and I looked quickly over, tensing to spring out of bed to defend myself. My fists went up, and Kastian rolled his eyes.

“Gods. Are you going to fight me off from bed?”

I glowered at him before I noticed he was carrying a tray. On it was a basin of water and a pile of fresh linen bandages.

Now I was more confused than ever. “What do you think you’re doing?” I asked, my voice a rasp.

“I am making sure you don’t bleed out all over my bed,” he snapped. “And you’re very welcome, by the way.”

My frown deepened. “Okay, but why am I even in your bed?”

He looked annoyed. “Well, it wasn’t as though there were a lot of choices afforded to me when you collapsed on me in the hallway. It was either bring you here or leave you in the middle of the hallway.”

I nodded slowly. “I guess I would have thought you’d have picked the latter.”

His eyes narrowed at me, and as he turned to put the tray down, I thought I heard him mutter, “I’m not that big of a monster.”

But I couldn’t be sure that’s what he really said. My head felt like it was filled with cotton, and I was still reeling from the nightmares. I wasn’t completely sure what was real and what wasn’t.

“What did you say?” I asked, rubbing my eyes.

He heaved an irritated sigh as he turned to look at me. “I won’t say I didn’t consider it, *Artemis*”—he said my name pointedly—“but there’s really no use in letting the heir to Kadmos die.”

I stared at him, shocked. Of all the weird things that had happened this night, this was up there. Why was he saying this now, after getting so angry with me at the party? I opened my mouth to ask that question, but he—maybe sensing this—picked up the tray and carried it over to me.

“Let’s just get you healed up,” he said.

“Healed?” I asked.

“I already called for Celeste.”

“Celeste?” I repeated stupidly. “You did?” I looked at him, completely stumped. I’d had my eye on Kastian since I’d arrived in the Dark Fae court, trying to figure him out. He’d always made a sort of sense to me, but now I couldn’t figure out what his game was.

Why was he caring for me? Why had he brought me here and wrapped my wound? Why was he being so nice to me and reaching out to Celeste, when I had appeared as a competitor for the throne?

I thought about it until my brain hurt, but I couldn’t wrap my mind around what his motives could be.

“Well, thank you,” I finally said, my voice quiet.

He looked over at me. “What’s that?”

I rolled my eyes.

He leaned toward me. “What did you say? I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I said *thank you*,” I snapped, a little too loud, feeling annoyed now.

Surprised at being yelled at, Kastian winced and leaned away. But I couldn’t help but notice that a small smile curled his lips as he turned to the basin.

I sighed. “I do mean it, Kastian. Thank you. I would have been in big trouble if it hadn’t been for you.”

He nodded without looking at me.

We were quiet for a moment, then I asked the question buzzing in my head. “So why?”

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why did you help me?”

He looked up at me, his eyes flashing. He had just opened his mouth to answer when the door burst open and Celeste sailed into the room, her long skirts trailing after her. Behind her came a maid and a tall, wizened man I recognized as the court healer.

Celeste strode powerfully into the room, but she stopped when she saw the state of me, her mouth falling open.

“Who did this to you?” she demanded.

I shook my head. “That is a good question.”

“What does that mean?”

“I couldn’t see the attacker,” I admitted.

“Whyever not?”

“They were wearing a black mask that covered their face.” As I spoke, Kastian tensed, and I glanced quickly up at him, wondering what his problem was. But before I could ask, Celeste stepped to my side, her hands moving across the bandages, which I could see had become stained with blood.

She looked at my face and the bruises purpling around my wrists, then went back to my side. She pressed too hard, and I hissed with pain.

“Stop that,” I snapped, swatting her hands away. “Calm down. I’m fine.”

Celeste stood straight again, a grim look on her face. “Yes, well, we’ll see about that. Once my trusted personal healer has a look at you, we’ll know for sure. Now let’s get you back to your room. You need to recuperate.”

She clapped her hands, and the healer and the maid stepped forward, each taking a side, and helped me out of Kastian’s bed.

He had stepped back when Celeste had entered, and now she turned to look at him. Her eyes were a strange mix of emotions. She looked suspicious, but also like she was fighting with herself. Finally she nodded toward him, just once. “Thank you for alerting me of the situation.”

Kastian nodded. “Of course.”

The maid and the healer were holding my arms, making it possible for me to walk on what felt like very unsteady legs, but I turned to look back at him. I wanted to tell him thank you once more, but when I turned, something caught my eye, stealing the words from my mouth.

There, under the bed I had just been lying in, was a scrap of black cloth. I stared at it, trying to make sense of what I was seeing, but it was clear. It was the edge of a black mask that someone had hastily tried to push under the bed. It was the same kind of mask the assassin in my room had been wearing. I was sure of it.

“Come now,” the maid said quietly, giving me a gentle push toward the door.

It was painful as hell as my skin strained, but I twisted, trying to make eye contact with Kastian before I was led out. It felt as though the floor had dropped out beneath me, and I felt cold, like my body was going into shock.

But Kastian didn’t look at me. He had already turned away, moving toward the wardrobe. He didn’t look back, but I kept my eyes on him until we’d walked into the hallway and I could no longer see him.

What the hell did this mean? My head pounded, but the same thought kept repeating itself, over and over:

*Is Kastian the assassin?*

**Episode 5295**

**Xavier**

My eyes felt like sandpaper as I blinked into the sunlight filtering in through the window. The sunshine was turning the floor of the room gold, and when I looked out the window, I was surprised to see that it looked so late in the morning. I’d been awake since dawn, when the sky was still inky black and only the faintest trails of light showed on the horizon. Before that, I’d slept like shit, tossing and turning. Even when I did manage to drift off for a few moments, I’d jerk myself awake, my heart pounding in my chest.

I had tried to relax, but every time I tried to close my eyes, I just kept replaying that moment with Cali. It was like a movie my brain was forcing me to watch, again and again. I thought of Cali in my arms, and the way she had tilted her head slightly up, like she was waiting for me to kiss her. Like she wanted me to kiss her.

Pushing my hands through my hair, I gave my head a rough shake. I couldn’t do this. I needed to get it together and stop thinking about that. Cali had been clear when I’d tried to bring it up again—she wanted me to forget it ever happened.

And she had told me before we’d left the human world that the only reason she needed me to come was that the *due destini* required that I stay closer to her. That was for her own safety, and to stop those damn hallucinations.

We still hadn’t figured out what the hell our relationship was, or our feelings for each other. Even though I’d already told Cali that I still loved her, she hadn’t said the same thing back. I had my suspicions about how she felt, but she hadn’t committed her heart to me again.

Not that I blamed her. She’d gone through so much because of everything that happened with Adéluce. And because of me. I still felt a residual guilt for everything she’d been through, and because I had been the one who hurt her.

Of course, I never intended to hurt her, as I tried to remind myself, but I had. And I’d known what I was doing at the time. Magical explanation or not, I knew that it was still hard for Cali to get over what had happened.

I heaved a sigh as I looked out at the sky, which was bright blue outside the window. At least my headaches were gone for now. I supposed Greene had been right—I had to be honest about how I felt about both of my mates.

Dammit. As I thought about both of my mates, Ava’s face appeared in my thoughts. I thought of how she’d told me that she’d wait for me to come back.

Another wave of guilt washed over me.

I needed to remember that this—all of this—wasn’t just about Cali and me. I had Ava and the whole Samara pack to think about, too. I couldn’t make any rash decisions before I was able to figure out how I felt about that too.

There was a knock on my door, and I rose to answer it, hoping it was Cali.

It wasn’t. Rishika stood in the doorway. My face must have fallen when I saw who it was, because she rolled her eyes.

“What a welcome,” she said wryly. “Try to contain your excitement about seeing me, Xavier.”

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “I feel kind of shitty—I didn’t sleep well. What’s up?”

“We’re going down to the council meeting now. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I said, pushing my hair back and trying not to look like a person who had just slept—badly—in their clothes.

She nodded. “I guess it’s time to find out whether Cali’s grandma is going to help us or not,” she went on.

“Let’s go,” I said. And as I followed Rishika into the passageway, I was grateful for a distraction from my own inner turmoil.

Downstairs, Rishika and I walked into the room to see that Cali and Greyson were already there. They looked up at us as we walked in, and I felt a wave of irritation. They were seated next to each other, like a unit. Like a couple.

I took the seat on the other side of Cali, and Rishika sat next to me.

Looking around, I saw that there were more Light Fae present. At least double the number we had dinner with last night.

One of them, a woman with straight blonde hair, looked us over, her eyes contemptuous. “What are the *wolves* doing here?” she asked imperiously.

“I invited them,” Hera said, striding into the room. “As my guests. They are important to my granddaughter.”

The blonde Fae scowled but didn’t say anything more.

I glanced around the room, wondering where Adair, Marius, and Tabitha were this morning. I hoped they were still safe. Though I guessed they must have been, otherwise I would have heard something. Right?

Next to me, Cali shifted in her chair, and I looked over at her. I wanted to ask her about the others, but she looked like she was trying to focus, and I didn’t want to distract her from the meeting.

“Well, now we’re gathered, so we should put plans in place to act,” Cenwyn said loudly. “We should discuss plans to assassinate the Mauvais heir.”

Cali drew in a sharp breath, and—instinctively—I reached for her. But when I looked over, I saw that Greyson had reached her first.

I pulled my hand back and looked at Hera as she spoke.

“A peace summit would negate any immediate plans for assassination, would it not?”

Cenwyn nodded, but it was clear he wasn’t happy about the fact.

“What would a peace summit entail, exactly?” another Fae asked, leaning forward to see Hera.

“I propose that we agree to speak to the Dark Fae. This, of course, would require us to call for a temporary truce. We can hear where they stand and give them our terms so that we can—”

“That’s the same thing we tried a decade ago!” A Fae with curly black hair shook his head. “It didn’t work then either. It never sticks.”

“The Dark Fae have committed too many atrocities against us to consider peace!” another woman called out, looking angry.

“They killed my cousin. I don’t want peace! I want revenge on the Dark Fae responsible!” This one was a man, and his face was flushed red. “Will we still be able to try the Dark Fae for their war crimes?”

Hera stood and raised her hands. She was trying to quiet the rumblings, but it didn’t seem to be working. Everyone gathered here apparently had some beef with the Dark Fae, and they wanted to talk about it. I’d been in enough meetings like this to see that these Fae were not interested in talking about peace—they wanted blood.

“Enough!”

Cenwyn’s voice echoed through the stone room, sharp and angry. The Fae stopped bickering and looked at him.

“You are all right,” he said slowly. “The last few attempts at peace with the Dark Fae were failures.” This was met with a hum of discussion from the gathered Fae, but he spoke over it. “But there was one attempt that *almost* succeeded.”

He looked at Hera, who frowned at him. It was obvious that she was annoyed with him, and I wondered if it was because Cenwyn was trying to control her council meeting.

But Cenwyn pressed on. “Wouldn’t you say our best bet for peace is to find a way to join the Dark Fae and the Light Fae?” he asked Hera.

She shook her head. “No. I wouldn’t say that. It failed the last time we tried,” she said sharply. “As you well know.”

“Of course I know,” Cenwyn said. “But that was due to *extenuating* circumstances.”  
 Hera made a noise of disgust and shook her head.

“We chose the wrong Dark Fae to trust,” Cenwyn continued doggedly. “But that does not need to be our fate going forward. We won’t make that mistake again.”

Cali leaned forward and looked over at Cenwyn, then Hera. “Are you talking about my mother’s marriage to Kadmos?”

Cenwyn nodded. “Yes, exactly. The structure of the plan was flawless, it was just the chess pieces that need to be revised.”

“Revised?” Cali asked, her eyebrows furrowing.

“If this plan is to be tried again, which Light Fae will we get to marry for the peace treaty?” the man with black curls asked, looking dubious.

Cenwyn was starting to beam. He looked thrilled that his plan was coming together. “The perfect candidate has just fallen into our laps.”

“Who?” the Light Fae asked.

Cenwyn turned his blazing eyes on Cali and smiled. “What better choice for the marriage treaty than the daughter of the Wrenthorns?”