TORN BETWEEN ALPHAS

Season 42

**Episode 5296**

**Greyson**

*What better choice for the marriage treaty than the daughter of the Wrenthorns?*

Cenwyn’s words rang around the stone room, echoing in my head. What the *fuck*?

But before I could say anything, Xavier stood.

“Absolutely not. Cali is *my* mate.”

I stared at him, shocked. I couldn’t believe he’d just said that. What the hell was wrong with him? Why had he blurted that out before I could say anything? What was he thinking? We were in a council meeting surrounded by Fae. Didn’t he remember that the Fae didn’t love the werewolf kind, and disliked our culture even more, and now he was shouting about being *mated* to a Fae?

“Xavier.” Cali’s voice was low, and when Xavier looked over at her, his own face was a shielded mask.

Cenwyn heaved a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t know why they’re even here, but as long as they are—Hera, will you please get control of your *pets*?”

Xavier’s face flushed with anger, and he moved toward Cenwyn like he was going to go after him, but—luckily—Rishika was there to grab his arm, holding him back.

“Let’s all calm down,” Hera said. Her gaze was mild as she looked around, until it landed on Xavier, where it turned hard and pointed. “I am agreeing to meet at a peace summit. That is what I am willing to do. I am not agreeing to marrying off my granddaughter as some kind of sacrifice to the cause. The Wrenthorns have already offered up one of our daughters in pursuit of peace, and that is more than enough. If we all believe that marriage is the answer again, then I must ask another of our noble families to step into the breach.”

This sparked another round of debate among the Fae, though the discussions sounded more agitated this time, and I spotted some dark looks exchanged.

“Lady Hera, think of what you are saying,” Cenwyn said smoothly. “The Wrenthorns are the most revered family of our people. No other family name commands the same level of respect. A peace accord would only have a chance if it was your granddaughter.”

Hera pressed her lips into a tight line, looking annoyed. I could understand why. The compliment Cenwyn offered was nothing but pretense. It sounded more like a threat to me, and from the look on her face, it was clear Hera felt the same.

When she answered, she spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. “I appreciate that you hold the Wrenthorns in such high esteem, of course, but I insist we table any talk of marriage until we have explored the other options available to us.”

Cenwyn looked like he didn’t appreciate being dismissed and opened his mouth to argue, but Hera spoke over him.

“I suggest we pause for a meal. We have begun so early, and I’m sure we’re all in need of sustenance by now.” Without waiting for anyone to agree, she stood and walked out. “This way toward the dining room.”

She might have been right about everyone being hungry, because quite a few Fae immediately followed her out.

Cenwyn wasn’t one of them. Still looking disgruntled, he stood and began speaking to the Fae who quickly gathered around him.

I turned to Cali. “Are you okay, love?”

She nodded, though I could see that she looked pale.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “Cenwyn is deranged. We won’t let them force you to play apart in whatever political game they’re playing.”

Rishika walked over. “I really don’t like some of these Fae,” she said darkly, shooting a glance at Cenwyn.

“Yeah, wonder why?” I said wryly.

“I think we all need to make sure that Cali’s never left alone,” she added.

I nodded. “I’m glad we’re on the same page, because I’m not planning on ever letting her out of my sight.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Cali said.

“Cali—” Rishika started, but Cali shook her head.

“This is still my grandmother’s house, and she is powerful. No one here would dare offend her by making moves against her wishes.”

I thought Cali was being too optimistic, though I didn’t say anything.

Rishika looked tense. “That’s the problem—we really don’t know what kind of politics we’re dealing with here. We need someone to ask. Someone with more insight on how this all works. Someone we can trust.”

“Adair,” I said suddenly. “He would know more about all this Fae court stuff, right?”

Cali nodded. “Yeah, of course. Yeah, let’s go find him. I wanted to check on him anyway.”

She led Rishika, Xavier, and me through the fortress to the servants’ quarters. Once there, we looked around until we found Irene. When we explained what we were doing, she nodded and led us to a large open kitchen, where Adair, Marius, and Tabitha were all leaning against a square wooden table, eating a meal of bread, cheese, and fruit.

“Hello there,” Marius said, shooting us a bright smile.

“Adair,” I said, looking at the man, “how are you feeling?”

He looked much better than the last time I’d seen him. His color had returned, and he nodded, confirming this. “Fine, fine. I should be able to travel soon.”

“That’s good to know, just in case we need to get the hell out of this place. Plus—Artemis.” I ran a tense hand through my hair. I didn’t like how Cenwyn kept making threats against her. However, much Hera was resisting, Cenwyn just wouldn’t let it go.

“What’s been going on?” Adair asked.

I explained the situation—what we’d just heard in the council meeting and Cenwyn’s insistence on Cali being used in the peace offer.

Adair frowned. “Well, even if Hera were to agree to such a thing, the Dark Fae would have to agree to it too.”

“And what if they did agree?” Xavier asked.

I could hear the anger in my brother’s voice. I understood it—it mirrored my own—but I was disturbed when I thought of his decree in front of all those Fae—that Cali was *his* mate.

Adair was shaking his head. “Hera is powerful here. Don’t underestimate her. Even the Dark Fae know and respect that. If she refuses to marry Cali off, then I doubt there are any Light Fae who would try to act against her wishes.”

Cali breathed a sigh of relief at that. “See?” she said, looking up at me. “I’m fine. I told you. My grandmother will protect me.”

I still wasn’t convinced of this, but I kept that to myself, letting it go for the moment.

“Are you hungry?” Tabitha asked. She pushed a loaf of bread toward us and a bowl of fruit. “Would you like something to eat?”

Xavier shook his head, taking a step back. “I’m not hungry. I’m going to head back to my room for now.”

He turned, and as he walked toward the door, I followed him out.

“Hey, can we talk?” I said, stepping into the hallway with him. I glanced back into the kitchen. “In private?”

Xavier looked less than thrilled with the question, but he nodded. “Fine.”

“Hey.” Cali stepped into the hall and looked between us. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. We just need to talk,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll come, too.”

“Alone,” I said. “Just the two of us.” I nodded at Xavier.

Cali looked hurt, which made me feel guilty, but I didn’t back down. I needed to talk to my brother alone.

Seeming to sense that this was important to me, Cali nodded.

“Let’s go to my room,” I said to Xavier, and he followed me through the passageways until we reached the room I was staying in. I shut the door and turned to my brother.

I needed to think about how to say what I wanted to say and try to phrase it diplomatically. I needed to say it without sounding like a jealous lover. But as it turned out, I didn’t get the chance. Xavier spoke before I could.

“What I did was wrong. I shouldn’t have blurted that out about Cali being my mate.”

I stared at him, shocked into silence. I was *not* expecting Xavier to own up to his mistake like that. “So why did you say it? Is there something going on that I need to be aware of?”

“I’m not trying to steal Cali away from you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You’re not?” I asked doubtfully.

He sighed. “I still love her, but I’m also still with Ava and the Alpha of the Samara pack right now. I wouldn’t break those promises so easily. I want to be a good Alpha, man.”

I could see that he meant what he said, and I nodded. “Okay. I believe you. But there is something I need to know.”

“What?” Xavier asked, already looking a little defensive.

“I want to ask you something as a brother, and not as Cali’s other mate.”

He still looked wary. “Okay. What is it?”

I took a deep breath. “If Cali were to tell you that she wanted to be with you, would you say yes?”

**Episode 5297**

Back in my own room—alone—I paced back and forth in front of the window. The day was turning out to be lovely—bright and sunny—but I wasn’t paying attention to it. I couldn’t. I was too stressed about Greyson and Xavier’s private conversation, and what they could be talking about. Though I was sure at least part of it was about what Xavier had said at the council meeting.

*Cali is my mate.*

I shook my head. Why had he said that? Didn’t he know where we were, and under what circumstances? Hadn’t he realized it would be dangerous to claim me as his mate in front of the whole Fae council?

*Cali is my mate.*

I couldn’t stop hearing the possession in his words, and my heart seemed to contract as I remembered them again. There was a part of me that truly felt what he did all the way down to my core. A part that wanted to go to him. To soothe him and reassure him that I wasn’t going anywhere.

But I pushed those thoughts away. I *couldn’t* go to him. That’s not what our relationship was. Not anymore. We were friends—if even. That’s as far as it could go right now.

He might technically still be my mate, but there was so much standing between us now. So many obstacles in our way. I couldn’t just be with him in the way that I used to be. The only reason he was even here with me in the Fae world was because of the hallucinations. I just had no choice. The *due destini* demanded that he be close to me.

Truthfully, I wasn’t even sure if it was working. I couldn’t be certain that the hallucinations were gone for good. I hadn’t had one since I’d arrived in the Fae world, but that didn’t mean much. They didn’t keep a schedule, and there had been long stretches without one before. In any case, I’d learned to not let myself get too comfortable. Just as a rule, it tended to be an unwise choice in the supernatural world. It lulled you into a false sense of security, so you weren’t fully prepared for the next weird thing.

Tired from pacing, I dropped onto the edge of my bed with a sigh and rubbed my eyes. I thought of Greyson and Xavier speaking privately, and my stomach twisted again. I wondered if I should go find them. They were probably in Greyson’s room, since he was the one who had seemed insistent that they talk. Xavier had looked less than thrilled about the idea. Maybe I should go make sure things were okay between them. It had been hard to miss the tension between them, and I might be able to keep everyone calm.

I thought of Greyson—he didn’t deserve any of the pain I knew I was causing him. I could see it written across his face, and I knew that it was hard for him that Xavier was on this trip with us. It had been hard for him when I’d told him Xavier was coming. But Greyson had been—and continued to be—so kind and supportive about it.

I was still trying to decide what to do, and if me showing up would make matters better or worse between the brothers, when there was a knock on my door.

Jumping up, I hurried over to open it and was relieved to find Greyson standing there, his wide shoulders filling the doorway.

I glanced behind him, half-expecting to see Xavier with him.

“I’m alone,” Greyson said, and I could hear a note of pain in his voice.

I winced, guilt washing over me. I hated that he had seen me checking behind him. “Is everything okay?” I asked, trying to shake it off.

“Yeah.” He nodded.

I stepped back and motioned for him to come in, and he stepped into the room.

“Everything’s fine.”

I nodded slowly. “Fine,” I repeated, though I wasn’t convinced this was true.

“Yeah, fine.”  
 “So what did you two need to talk about? Privately?” I wondered.

He turned to look at me. “We just needed to air some things out.”

“And did you?” I asked.

“Yeah, we did. We figured it all out.”

I looked over his face. He looked tired and tense, despite the fact that he’d just assured me everything was fine. Guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry, Greyson,” I said quietly.

He frowned. “Why are you sorry, love?”

“For just…” I gestured vaguely. “Everything, I guess.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Things are always so complicated, and I feel like it’s all my fault,” I said, feeling my eyes fill with tears.

“Come on, love,” he said gently, “that’s not true.”

“It is,” I insisted.

He shook his head. “We’re here because we need to rescue Artemis. That’s still our priority. There’s nothing complicated about that.”

I took a shaky breath. “I just wonder if this peace summit is a mistake. What if something happens?”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like what if they try to get me to promise to get engaged there?”

Greyson stepped toward me and pulled me close, wrapping his strong arms around me. “If you trust Hera, then I do too. The peace summit is a good idea. It’s our best chance to get close to Artemis. It was our plan, and it’s the best we’ve got. We need to focus and stay the course.”

“But what if—” I started, but Greyson shushed me.

“And we’ll handle everything else as it comes. Together.” His grey eyes looked dark and sincere. “This was our plan, and we’re going to keep going for Artemis’s sake, right?”

“Right.” I nodded and let myself melt against him. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked.

I shrugged. “For all the support and the advice. But mostly for just…being you. For being Greyson.”

I felt him chuckle. “You’re welcome, love. And thank you for being Cali.”

I smiled as I held him tightly. This was right. This was perfect. Greyson was my rock. He always had my back and kept a clear head when I felt myself spinning out of control. He was the partner I had always imagined when I was a little girl.

I balled my fists as I held him a little harder. I could feel frustration welling up in me. I had wasted so much time being confused about my mates, but I was sick of it. I refused to let myself be confused by the whole Xavier factor. Greyson was here, and he was my mate.

Rising up on tiptoe, I kissed him, pressing my lips to his.

He kissed me back, but when I pulled back, I could see he looked surprised.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess,” I said with a smile. “I’m just grateful to have you in my life.” Tears welled in my eyes again. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” he said, his voice low and husky.

This was what I wanted. This was the relationship I needed to focus on.

A strange surge of energy washed over me, and I pushed Greyson toward the bed. He wasn’t prepared for this and took a surprised step back, sitting down as the backs of his knees hit the bed behind him.

“Cali—” he started, but I was already crawling into his lap, kissing him hard.

He didn’t hesitate to respond. One hand went into my hair, the other hand went around my waist, dipping down to squeeze my ass.

He kissed me hard, his tongue entering my mouth, and I opened to him, glad for it. I wanted this. I wanted him to consume me. I wanted to show him that I was his.

So I didn’t offer any resistance when he flipped me over, tossing me down on the bed.

The dress I’d worn to the council meeting was a little different than I was used to, but Greyson didn’t have any problem with it. Still kissing me, his hands slid under the skirt, feeling their way up my thigh.

“Oh god,” I moaned, breaking away from the kiss as he slipped a finger into me. I panted as another finger followed.

He captured my mouth again, making me moan against his lips as he circled his fingers against my clit. I was starting to see stars, but I wanted so much more. I wanted to give *him* more.

My hands went to the buttons at his waist. I was fumbling—clumsy with desire—but somehow managed to get the buttons undone and slid his pants off.

I felt his whole body tense when I took his shaft in my hand.

“Cali,” he warned, breaking away from the kiss as I started to stroke him. “You better be careful.”

“Oh,” I whispered, climbing out from under him and hiking up my skirts to straddle him, “I’m going to be very, *very* careful.”

**Episode 5298**

**Artemis**

I pushed myself up to sitting and took a deep breath. I was feeling a lot better after being able to rest all night. I was still achy, but it was bearable. Looking around, I saw that the room was a mess. It was cold, too, because of the broken window, but it wasn’t the wind that made me shiver.

Seeing my room in such a state reminded me of what had happened the night before—and what had *almost* happened. My life was in imminent danger.

Celeste had been furious when she found out there had been an intruder, and she’d promised to investigate, but that wasn’t enough. Not for me. I couldn’t just sit around and do nothing while someone trying to kill me might still be walking the halls of the palace.

And I couldn’t stop thinking about that mask I’d seen beneath Kastian’s bed. I’d only caught a quick glance, but it had looked *exactly* the same as the mask the assassin had worn.

I needed to know more. Why was Kastian the one who had found me? Was that just a coincidence?

Then I shook my head. No, that didn’t make any sense. If he wanted me dead, why did he bother to help me? I’d fainted into his arms, so I wasn’t really in a position to fight back when he found me in the hallway. If he wanted me out of the picture, why not finish me off while we were alone? Why call for Celeste?

None of it made any sense, which meant that I needed to get more information.

I put my hand to my stomach as it rumbled. I didn’t know how long I’d been asleep, but outside my window the sun was high in the sky, so I got out of bed, stretched carefully, and dressed. Then I headed downstairs to find some food.

When I reached the formal dining room, I found it occupied. A lively conversation seemed to be taking place, but it ceased the moment I walked into the room.

I hesitated at the door, then walked on, heading toward where Cadhla and Philantha were sitting.

“Hello,” I said quietly as I sat down.

They looked at me for just a moment, then turned away, completely ignoring me.

I stared at them, shocked. I had figured they’d be upset that I hadn’t told them who I really was, but I wasn’t expecting to be completely iced out.

Dorphus was sitting down the table a bit with a few other Fae, so I got up and walked over to them. But I had barely reached them when they all got up and walked away, dispersing as quickly as a spooked school of fish.

I rolled my eyes. This was getting ridiculous. When I looked around, I saw that no one would even make eye contact with me.

*Dammit.*

Grabbing a bread roll from a platter on the table, I stormed out of the dining room. This was not good. I didn’t care about any of those people being mad at me, but how the hell was I going to get any information at this rate? I was so used to being able to blend into a crowd and look unassuming, but that wasn’t going to work for me. Not anymore. Not now that everyone here knew that I was the daughter of Kadmos.

Feeling dejected—and still hungry—I headed toward the kitchens, figuring I could find Aelwen.

The kitchens were large and airy and smelled of baking bread. It was a pleasant place, but when Aelwen saw me, she shook her head at me.

“Oh no,” she said, waving her floury hands to keep me back, “do not come down here to talk to me.”

For some reason, this rejection was the one that really stung. It hurt more to be rejected by Aelwen than it had to be cold-shouldered by Cadhla and the other Fae nobility.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She pursed her lips. “I get why you hid who you really are, but now that I know you’re the daughter of Kadmos, that changes things.”

“Ugh,” I moaned. “Why? I’m still the same person I was before.”

“If I’m seen with you, I’ll get pulled into some kind of complicated political faction,” she told me. “There are powerful people here who would love to take you and your whole bloodline down. And they won’t just go after you—they’ll take down everyone around you. Anyone they have to. And guess who’s completely expendable? A maid like me, who no one will even miss.”

“I’ll tell them not to touch you—”

“No!” Aelwen shouted. “Don’t tell anyone anything. I don’t want anyone to know we know each other.” There was a hunted look in her eyes. “Do you really want me to be a target?”

I heaved a heavy sigh, feeling more guilty than ever. The thing was, I knew Aelwen was right. I was in danger, but I was also dangerous. That was clear, especially after the attack the night before. “I’m just trying to figure out more about the Order. Can you tell me about the missing girls?”

“Why do you even care about a few missing maids anymore? Don’t you have to—I don’t know—go be noble?” she asked tartly.

I gritted my teeth. “I’m asking because I want to know. I don’t think what is happening is right. And if it’s Kastian, then I want to know.”

Aelwen looked surprised by my answer, like she hadn’t expected that. And after a moment, she looked like she was considering it.

“Please,” I pushed. “I can’t get any more information from the people in the Fae court because they won’t talk to me anymore. Hell, they won’t even look at me now that they know who I am, and that I kept it from them. Please, Aelwen, you’re my only hope.”

She hesitated for just a moment more, then heaved a heavy sigh. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to sound too excited.

“Don’t thank me too soon. I don’t know if I have much for you. All I know is that three maids have disappeared. They’re not important enough around here for anyone to make a big stink about it. I don’t even know if anyone else has noticed. But what I do know is that there’s something fishy going on around here.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

Aelwen looked down at the bread she’d been kneading. “One of the girls—Selia—was my friend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, feeling a little awkward.

The Fae woman nodded. “Selia was an older girl. She took me under her wing when I first entered the fortress. Answered all my questions, looked out for me.”

I nodded. “I get it,” I said softly. I knew what it was like to care about someone and to feel indebted to them for their kindness. That was how I sometimes felt about Cali and our mother. “Okay, I want to hear everything. Tell me about Selia.”

Aelwen traced her finger through the flour on the worktable as she spoke. “Selia had been acting weird for weeks before she disappeared. I didn’t know what was going on with her. And then Kastian came looking for her one day. Selia went with him, but she looked nervous. And then I never saw her again. The next day she was just gone. No word at all, which was very weird, because Selia never would have left without telling me why.”

I thought this through. “Okay. Can you get more information on the other maids—the ones who also disappeared? Who were they friends with? How often did they talk to Kastian? Where were they last seen? Stuff like that.”

Aelwen didn’t look thrilled with the request, but she nodded. “Yes, I will ask around. I will try to find out.”

“Thank you,” I said. Satisfied that I had done all I could with the maid, I left the kitchens and headed back upstairs to find Kastian.  
 I had some questions I wanted to ask him, but I wondered what I could do to figure out if he was the assassin. I thought hard, trying to remember the details of the attack. I had kicked the attacker in the ribs. Hard. If I had managed to crack a rib, that would take time to heal, even for a Fae. If I could figure out how to test my theory, I might be able to tell if he was the attacker.

As I entered the main entrance hall, I heard his voice. I followed it back to the formal dining room, where he was sitting with the others.

Dammit. I had been hoping to find him alone, but here he was, so I was just going to have to wing it.

I walked over to him, sidling up to him. “I’d like to talk to you,” I said quietly.

“I’m busy,” he said dismissively, barely glancing my way.

I could feel the angry eyes of the other Fae on me, and I suspected Kastian could too. I stayed next to him as he moved around the room. I was trying to be subtle as I tested my theory—elbowing or poking him in the ribs—but I wasn’t able to get close enough to really tell. Not without looking very weird.

“What are you doing?” he snapped, rounding on me.

Fuck it. “Thank you for saving my life!” I cried, then threw my arms around him. I hugged him, *hard*—and right in front of everyone.

**Episode 5299**

**Greyson**

I preferred Cali naked, but there was something about seeing her on top of me with the skirts of her court gown hiked up around her waist that really did it for me. A wildfire of heat seared through me. I ran my hands up her legs, feeling her satiny skin and toned thighs beneath my palms. This was heaven, I was sure. I was feeling particularly good after my conversation with Xavier too. It was good to know where each of us stood.

And having Cali like this? It made everything that much better.

Cali lowered herself down, and when I entered her, I stopped thinking about anything else. Her whole body felt hot and wet, and I grabbed onto her hips as she rode me. Her wide, hazel eyes were on mine, and there was something almost desperate about them. She wanted this, and I wanted to give it to her just as badly.

She whimpered and bit her lip. “God, yes,” she whispered. “Like that. *Please*.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” I said, grinning up at her. I moved my hands up to tease her breasts over the fabric of the dress, keeping up my pace beneath her. Her skirts were everywhere, but I pushed them away impatiently as I slid one hand between us to find her center. As my fingers began circling around her skin, she reached up and grabbed onto the headboard.

“Yes, Greyson.”

She was starting to shake, so I increased my speed. I could feel her tightening around me, and my own orgasm built.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, feeling the pressure. I wanted this to last longer—she felt too good. She *was* too good.

Cali moaned, coming apart above me just as I climaxed. My eyes closed as pleasure intense as pain coursed through me, wracking my whole body, leaving me breathless.

“Greyson,” Cali breathed. She down up at me, her eyelids heavy, as though she was about to fall asleep. “That was…”

“I know,” I panted, pulling her down to the bed beside me.

I nuzzled my face into her hair. She put her arms around me, holding me close, and we lay still for a long moment, letting our heart rates return to normal.

It was silent enough that I could hear when Cali’s stomach rumbled.

She giggled and looked up at me. “Did you hear that?”

“Did you get anything to eat?” I asked. I glanced out the window. It had to be close to midday. “Have you had any food?”

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “I was too anxious, I guess. I couldn’t eat.”

I shook my head. “You need to eat. I know you’re tense, but you can’t starve yourself.” I pushed the coverlet off of me. “I’ll go find some food and bring it back up.”

“Thank you,” Cali said, smiling as she curled up under the sheets. “Hurry back, okay?”

I nodded and pulled my clothes back on and headed out of Cali’s room. In the passageway, I turned toward the kitchens. When I got there, I was surprised to see Cenwyn, of all people. He was the last person I expected to run into in the bright, sprawling Fae kitchens. He just didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who liked to hang out with the servant Fae class.

“Hi,” I said slowly, eyeing him warily. “What are you doing here?”

Cenwyn gave me a cool look. “Actually, I am here ordering food to be sent up to your rooms.”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

“I didn’t see you at luncheon, and I wanted to ensure you and your*…friends* had something to eat.”

I took this in, a little baffled. I wasn’t sure how to interpret this. On paper it seemed like a kind and thoughtful gesture, but I had my doubts. Taking into account everything I knew about Cenwyn, I was reluctant to believe he was doing something for the werewolf delegation out of the goodness of his heart. The whole thing felt suspicious.

“Care for a biscuit?” he asked, offering me a plate of pale cookies. They looked a little like shortbread and were baked into beautiful shapes—flowers and fans. “I had my personal cook bake these for me. Ever seen anything like them?”

I shook my head, and he smirked.

“No, you wouldn’t, of course. You could only have tasted these honey biscuits in my household. No one else has a recipe or even comes close to replicating them. It’s famous across the land. Try one,” he said, pushing the plate a little closer.

“No, thanks, I think I need to eat some actual food before I start on dessert,” I said, trying to dodge the plate.

“Come now,” he said, practically pushing the plate under my nose now. “A big strong man like you, a biscuit isn’t going to ruin your appetite, is it?”

He was smiling, but there was something very tight about his expression, and I considered my next move. Hera was powerful, but it was clear that Cenwyn had influence in the Fae court as well, and I needed to be aware of that. I didn’t want to offend the guy by saying no and have him take out his anger on Cali.

“Thanks,” I finally said, accepting a cookie, figuring it was probably the easiest course.

“Try it,” Cenwyn pushed.

I took a bite. It was a little like shortbread, and it crumbled in my mouth. The taste was overwhelmingly sweet, but I nodded approvingly. “It’s delicious.”

“Oh, well,” Cenwyn said with false modesty. “Take the plate. Share it with your friends.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I said, reluctantly accepting the plate. Again, it just felt like the easiest move.

He smiled at me, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I have ordered food for you all. One of the servants will bring it up to you. You needn’t wait.”

“Thanks…again,” I said. I held up the cookies. “I’ll share these while we’re waiting.”

“Excellent,” Cenwyn said with a smile.

I turned and headed back out of the kitchens, but as soon as I’d passed out of Cenwyn’s line of vision, I ditched the plate behind a heavy curtain closed over a window. I tossed the cookie I’d taken a bite of after the others. I wasn’t going to give those to anyone—I didn’t trust Cenwyn.

As I turned a corner toward Cali’s room, I almost bumped into Rishika, who was striding purposefully down the hallway.

“Whoa,” I said, putting my arms out to prevent a crash. When I looked at Rishika, I saw that her dark eyes were flashing with frustration. “What are you going wandering the hallways? You should be in your room.”

She shook her head. “I just don’t want to be around Marius.”

“Marius?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I hate seeing him and thinking about him and Artemis… It’s not fair and, I don’t know… I don’t know if I’m allowed to feel this way, so better to just stay away.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I get that.”

She looked surprised. “Yeah? Because it’s not completely logical or fair—”

“Screw that,” I snapped, getting more and more annoyed on Rishika’s behalf. “You love Artemis, don’t you? Don’t let Marius rub his past relationship with her in your face. What you and Artemis have is true love, and that fucking *means* something. It means something to me, anyway. Marius is just a fucking interloper, and he—”

“Hey!” Rishika shouted, holding up her hands. She looked a little freaked out as she scanned my face. “Greyson, are you okay?”

“What? Why?” I scrubbed my hand over my face. “What do you mean?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I mean, you’re getting pretty worked up. That’s not like you. You were shouting, and your eyes looked…almost red,” she finished, looking at me closely.

I took a deep breath, feeling how tense my shoulders were. I ran a hand through my hair and tried to breathe normally again. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. I don’t…” I shook my head. “I don’t know what came over me just then. I was just thinking about what it must be like for you, and I just got so angry all of a sudden.”

She nodded. “Okay. Well, that’s okay.” She smiled. “I mean, I am grateful you’re on my side on this one. It’s nice to have such a loyal friend.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Maybe I’m just hungry or something.”’

“Maybe,” she said slowly, though she didn’t look convinced. “Maybe you need to go lie down.”

“That’s a good idea,” I agreed, and I walked on, heading toward Cali’s room with Rishika at my side.

As I drew near, I saw Cali standing outside the door, talking to Xavier. Fury clawed at my chest.

Then—as I watched—Xavier reached up and put his hand on Cali’s shoulder. On *my* Cali—*my* mate—*my* love.

A red haze misted over my vision, and rage like I had never before known engulfed me. There was the sound of the cracking of bones as I half-shifted, then—with a roar—lunged at Xavier’s throat.

**Episode 5300**

I screamed as Greyson lunged toward Xavier, tackling him to the ground. “*Greyson!* What are you doing?!”

Though the attack had surprised Xavier, he wasted no time in fighting back, trying to push Greyson away. Greyson’s hands were shifted into wolf paws, and he used one to swing at Xavier. The blow landed on Xavier’s jaw, but he gritted his teeth and tried to grab Greyson’s arms, stopping him from doing it again.

The most terrifying thing of all wasn’t the fight—it was Greyson’s eyes. They didn’t even look human now, they looked wild, almost feral.

Xavier kneed Greyson in the stomach, making him groan with pain. Then Xavier used Greyson’s moment of distraction to shove him back. Greyson stumbled back a step, then growled and surged forward again.

But my own shock had worn off enough that this time I stepped in front of Xavier and put up my Fae shield, blocking Greyson’s advance. He hit the shield hard and fell backward onto his back, rolling across the ground.

“Holy shit,” Rishika breathed, hurrying toward him. He tried to get back to his feet, but she held him down, keeping a knee on his ribs and a hand on each of his shoulders. He was fighting hard, but Rishika gritted her teeth and fought harder. “Greyson! Calm down! Stop! Breathe!”

Xavier stepped forward, an angry look in his eyes, like he was going to go after Greyson, but I put a hand on his arm. “Xavier, don’t. Look at him. I think something’s wrong with him.”

“Something’s going to be wrong with him,” Xavier snapped, wiping blood from his nose.

“Look at his eyes,” I said, pointing at Greyson.

He was snarling and spitting with rage, fighting so hard that finally Rishika—with a sigh—reared back and punched him, hard. That seemed to stun him for a moment, but then he roared again, fighting even hard.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Rishika muttered, and punched again.

That finally seemed to do it, and Greyson’s eyes closed, his head rolling to the side. And—finally—his body went limp.

I gasped. “Oh my god.” I rushed to his side and dropped down beside him. “What the hell just happened?”

Rishika looked pale and shaken as she stood, shaking her head. “I have no idea. And I don’t know why he passed out. I didn’t even hit him that hard. I was just trying to get him to listen to me.”

“What started this?” I asked, but Rishika just shrugged.

“Absolutely no idea,” she said, looking down at Greyson like he was a ghost.

I felt Greyson’s neck, my fingers sliding on his sweat-damp skin, looking for his pulse. For a terrifying moment I couldn’t find it, but then I found its steady beat just under his jaw. It felt strong, though it was going too fast.

Mine was too, though, so maybe that wasn’t that unusual.

I pulled up one of his eyelids to look at his eyes, haunted by the image of them while he was fighting Xavier. I loved Greyson’s grey eyes—they always made me feel safe, despite looking like a stormy sky. Until now. When he was going after Xavier, he’d had the eyes of a stranger.

Now, unconscious, his eyes looked horrifyingly bloodshot. The vessels stood out blood-red against the whites of his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I cried. Then I looked up at Xavier. “You need to help me get him to the bed.”

Xavier didn’t look thrilled to be asked, but he bent and yanked his brother upright. He pulled him into my room and pushed him down onto the bed.

As soon as he hit the mattress, Greyson groaned and rolled over, opening his eyes.

Xavier tensed, ready to defend himself again, but it was a familiar Greyson who blinked up at him, then at me.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

I looked at him carefully. He looked disoriented, but normal.

“You went wild, Greyson,” I told him.

“What?”

“You attacked Xavier.”

He shook his head, frowning. “What are you talking about? Why would I do that?”

“That’s a great question,” Xavier asked sardonically. “I thought we had an understanding after our talk.”

I shot Xavier a glance, wondering what that talk had entailed.

Greyson sat up. “I remember the talk, and yeah, I agree. We’re fine.”

Xavier crossed his arms in front of his chest and glowered. “Greyson, if you’re pissed about something, just tell me now. I don’t want to have to keep wondering if you’re going to attack me when my back is turned—”

“Enough!” I cried. “I told you, Xavier, something was off. I saw his eyes. They were—”

“Red,” Rishika said darkly. “I saw it too.”

I turned back to Greyson. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking pale. “I don’t really remember.”

That freaked me out. What the hell was going on? “What’s the last thing you remember?”

He frowned, thinking hard. “I remember going down to the kitchens…”

“Did you talk to anyone down there?” I pressed.

His frown deepened. “Cenwyn. He was down there. He gave me these biscuits he had.”

“Biscuits?” I shook my head. “Why is it that everything weird is connected to Cenwyn?”

“Another good question,” Xavier muttered.

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed.

“Maybe we should all just avoid that Fae for the time being,” Rishika said.

“Fine by me,” Greyson said.

“Yeah, me too,” Xavier nodded.

Greyson was still looking pale. “I’m going to go get you some water, okay?” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

He still seemed discombobulated, and all he could do was nod.

I stepped out of my room but hadn’t gone two steps before I spotted Cenwyn, walking down the passageway toward me.

My heart thudded in my chest, and I almost turned and walked back into my room, but before I could, he spotted me.

“Caliana! Ah! There you are. Just the person I was looking for,” he said, striding toward me.

I frowned at him, wondering what his game was.

“I was just wondering if you enjoyed the food I sent up,” he said, drawing near.

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but something in me told me it might be smart to play along for a moment, just to see what he was up to.

“Oh, I’m sure it was delicious, but I’m actually not hungry,” I said.

Cenwyn nodded. “Ah, I see. Well, can we have some tea together at least? I have something to discuss with you.”

I thought fast. “Yes, of course. Let me just go get my friends—”

Cenwyn took my arm tightly and practically yanked me down the hall. “Oh, no, we don’t want to disturb them, do we?

“It’s really fine—” I said, trying to delicately remove my arm from his grasp.

“No, no, this really is more of a private conversation anyway,” he said, tightening his grip.

We turned a corner and went down a short flight of stairs, then he steered me into a sitting room with a fire burning in the grate. Wherever we were, he certainly seemed to know his way around the fortress.

There was already a tea service set up on a small table in front of the fire, as though he knew I’d agree to speak to him.

He gestured toward a wing chair and sat in the other. Then he began to pour the tea. “There you go, my dear,” he said, handing me a cup and saucer.

I took the tea but didn’t drink. I was a woman in the world, and I knew enough not to trust a drink of unknown origin. I could have no idea if he’d doctored it before handing it to me.

“Do you know that I knew your mother?” he asked, pouring another cup for himself.

“I…didn’t know that,” I admitted.

He smiled up at my frown. “Well, that is understandable. I imagine it is all quite overwhelming. There is much to adjust to in the Fae court. I could help you, if you’d like.”

I forced a false smile. “That is too kind, but I couldn’t impose on you.”

“I don’t mind,” he said smoothly. “I was actually quite involved in the arrangements surrounding the betrothal of your mother to Kadmos.”

“Is that right?” I said, starting to feel cold, despite the warmth of the fire and hot tea in my hands.

“It is,” he said. “And that is why I think I can be of help to you now, in anticipation of the peace summit.

I swallowed hard. It felt as though I was being pushed into a corner. “I really don’t think that will be necessary. After all, my grandmother already said that a betrothal will not be happening.”

Cenwyn stirred his tea. It was obvious he was trying to look casual, but I didn’t miss the sharp look in his eyes as he turned them on me. “Well, you never know what could end up happening, especially when both Light and Dark Fae are involved. It’s best to get your alliances in order ahead of time.”

His tone was light, but I could feel the threat laced through every one.

It was time to leave. I put my cup down and got to my feet. “Thank you for the advice. I’ll think about it. But now I need to go check on my friends.”

I started for the door, but just as I reached for it, the lock clicked.

Cenwyn was behind me, and when he spoke, his voice was so menacing the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“Won’t you stay for a bit longer?”

**Episode 5301**

I reached for the door and tried to turn the knob, but it was locked.

Whipping around, I glared at Cenwyn. He had used magic—most likely telekinetic magic—to turn the lock, and I was furious that he’d used it against me. I summoned my shield for protection and stepped toward him.

If I expected him to exhibit any fear, I was disappointed. Cenwyn looked perfectly calm, and even smiled as I approached.

That made me stop in my tracks. What the hell was his game?

“If I ever possessed any doubt that you had Wrenthorn blood coursing through your veins, Caliana, that doubt has officially been erased.”

“What does that mean?” I snapped. I wasn’t in the mood to chat.

He nodded toward my shield. “Your grandfather was known for his shield, and I can see the Wrenthorn crest on yours.”

Surprised, I glanced down and saw the pattern he’d indicated. It was a complicated crest that glowed faintly on the front of my shield. I’d never noticed it before—maybe it just didn’t show itself in the human world.

Cenwyn let out an irritated sigh. “Do put the shield away, Caliana. There’s really no need for it.”

“Oh, I very much disagree,” I said quietly, gripping the shield tightly. “I think there’s an urgent need for it, considering the fact that you just locked me in this room and are holding me against my will.”

Cenwyn made a show of looking offended. “Lock you in? Against your will? Do be serious.”

“You locked the door!” I retorted.

He raised an eyebrow. “Did I? I believe you’re mistaken. Perhaps you should try the door again.”

I was certain the door was still locked and Cenwyn was still dangerous, so I kept my shield up as I reached behind me to try the knob.

And—to my enormous surprise—the door opened. I spun around to confirm it, and saw that I hadn’t imagined it. Had it always been unlocked? Had I imagined hearing the clicking of the lock sliding into place?

Whatever. Either way, I wanted to get the hell out of here—and away from Cenwyn.

I let my shield disappear and had just started for the door when Cenwyn appeared beside me.

“I really think you’re making a mistake, Caliana,” he said.

“A mistake?” I repeated, floored by his audacity.

He nodded gravely. “I think you should at least stay and listen to my proposal. Aren’t you even willing to listen to what I have to say?”

I hesitated. I knew I couldn’t trust the guy, but I had to admit that I was curious. I wondered what he had in mind. Hoping his words might give me some insight into what was going on, I finally nodded.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll listen to you,” I said reluctantly.

Cenwyn smiled again, looking pleased. “Wonderful. I was hoping you’d come around. It’s clear that you’ve inherited your mother’s intelligence and gift for rational thinking.”

I frowned. “You seem to know a lot about my family.”

“Yes, I did mention earlier that I knew your mother. I’ve been around for a long time,” he said. “Which is why I have a better understanding of this world than…well, really most anyone. And I certainly have a better understanding than you, my dear. After all, your dear mother, Orla, did choose to raise you in the moral world.” He shook his head. “And what a mistake that was.”

“A *mistake*?” I repeated incredulously. “Why would you say that?”

Cenwyn looked at me incredulously. “You cannot be serious, Caliana. You have Fae blood. By rights, you should’ve been raised in the Fae world.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m not going to stand here and listen to you questioning the decisions my mother made for me. And anyway, I’m half Fae. My father is a human. Or he was,” I amended hesitantly. “Before he became a werewolf.”

Cenwyn gave me a cool look. “A werewolf, you say?” He shook his head, tutting quietly. “What a shame.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, whatever. Werewolf or not, what does it matter? My dad is a good person.” I crossed my arms. “Do you actually have anything to tell me? Because if all you’re going to do is stand there and insult my family members one by one, I’m leaving. I don’t need to listen to this.”

“Of course not,” Cenwyn said, bowing his head. “Please accept my apologies. I did not mean to insult you, Caliana. That’s the last thing I want to do. I only meant to point out that even a half-Fae, you belong here, in the Fae world, with your own kind—and not only for your own benefit, though it *would* be beneficial. The Fae world itself would benefit from the presence of someone like you. Especially now, at this most *difficult* time.”

I kept my eyes on Cenwyn, watching for sudden movements. We were standing in the hallway, and he leaned casually against the stone wall. But I wasn’t buying his act—not for a single moment. I had the very distinct impression that Cenwyn didn’t do anything casually, and I had a feeling I knew what he’d meant by “this most difficult time.”

He did believe I could be a benefit to the Fae world, but not in the way he wanted me to think. He wasn’t interested in my talent or my intelligence—he saw me as a commodity to be traded on the open market.

“Listen up,” I said flatly. “I will not be indulging your little plan to have me marry some random Dark Fae.”

Cenwyn’s eyes flashed as he took this in, then he moved closer to me. “You realize, Caliana, that you are not in the best position to be making demands.”

My heart pounded, but I wasn’t going to let myself get pushed around by the likes of him. “I think you should know that not only do I have a shield, but I also have a sword. I know how to use it, and I’m more than willing to demonstrate. It’s been too long since I had the chance.”  
 Cenwyn smiled again, like he found my threat amusing. “You must understand how much this matter means to me, my dear.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

He sighed. “If I thought sacrificing my own life would result in peace between the Light Fae and the Dark Fae, then I would encourage you to use your sword to slay me right here and now. I would not hesitate to offer my own life in exchange for the peace we have sought for so many generations.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed him, but he looked sincere, and I was curious, so I kept listening.

“But the sad truth is that my death wouldn’t make a bit of difference. No one cares about the fate of an old man like me. But a marriage, on the other hand…” he said, eyeing me closely. “*That* would be different. A marriage uniting the two rival factions of the Fae world would matter more than you could possibly imagine. It could change everything.”

I thought about this for a moment, wondering if he was right. He hadn’t been the most forthright person I’d met in the Fae world, but I knew some of what he’d said was true. The war between the two factions *did* go back generations, and it had become clear to me that the animosity between the two groups was far more bitter than I could ever have imagined.

“What makes you so sure another marriage would work?” I asked. I thought of Artemis being kidnapped as a baby. She’d been torn away from our mother, and her father had disappeared, assumed dead—not exactly an indication of a productive peace deal. “It’s not like the last attempt worked out all that well.”

Cenwyn sighed. “Our last attempt had its flaws, I’ll admit. Even this time, there’s a chance that a marriage might not bring forth the peace we’re seeking, but at this moment in time, it remains our most promising option.”

I took that in, then shook my head. “No. No way. Why the hell should I believe anything you say, Cenwyn? You drugged my mate.”

Cenwyn didn’t deny this, but he did look confused. “Your mate? I thought the other werewolf was your mate. The one with the dark hair who claimed you during the meeting.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t about to explain the complexities of the *due destini* to this creep.

“Did you or did you not drug Greyson?” I demanded.

“I’m sorry if your friend had a bad reaction to something he ate.” Cenwyn smiled smoothly. “We’re not accustomed to serving werewolves here.”

I’d heard enough. I wasn’t going to stand here listening to this guy lie to my face. But when I turned to walk away, Cenwyn put a hand on my shoulder. I turned to find him smiling down at me.

“Don’t you want to know who you’ll be marrying?”

**Episode 5302**

**Xavier**

I paced Greyson’s room nervously, shooting frequent looks at the door. Where was Cali? She’d left to get some water, but how long could that possibly take?

Pushing a hand through my hair, I let out a frustrated groan. I hated this whole damn setup. I hated that we were in this palace that ran on politics we didn’t understand. I hated that we were surrounded by people we couldn’t trust, and I hated that Cali was in danger. This wasn’t what any of us had planned on when we’d decided to come here. We’d come to the Fae world to rescue Artemis from the Dark Fae—if Marius was telling the truth about her, that was—but instead, we were being drawn into some complicated political bullshit that we couldn’t control and wanted no part in. Like I fucking cared who was Dark and who was Light. Let the Fae work out their own problems—preferably without us.

That was it—I was over all this Fae bullshit. I started toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Greyson asked, frowning at me.

“Cali went to get water, but she’s been gone way too long. I’m going to go look for her,” I said, my hand on the doorknob.

Greyson struggled to swing his legs over the side of the bed. “Yeah, okay. I’ll come with you—”

“Hang on, big guy,” Rishika said, putting her hand on Greyson’s chest. It seemed that was all that was required to keep him down. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Greyson demanded, struggling to his feet.

Rishika gave his chest a gentle push with her fingertip, and Greyson plopped back down onto the bed. “That’s why not.”

“I’m fine,” Greyson insisted.

“You will be, but you’re still weak from whatever the hell Cenwyn used to drug you. I don’t think roaming around this place is a good idea in your condition.”

Greyson looked annoyed. “What condition? I just have to walk this off—whatever it is. I’m fine!”

“I’m just going to go look around for her,” I cut in. “I’m not mounting a rescue mission or anything, I’m just going to go check the kitchens. And since I announced that I’m her mate and surely everyone knows it by now, my looking for her won’t raise any suspicions.”

Greyson glowered at me, clearly not pleased to be reminded of my announcement during the council meeting. “Fine,” he said, with poor grace. “Just be careful out there.”

“You got it,” I said, rolling my eyes as I stepped out the door.

The first thing I did was look around, taking in the long passages stretching out in either direction. I tried to think of where Cali might’ve gone to get water.

But, as it turned out, I didn’t need to figure that out, because closing the door behind me had stirred up the air, and I caught her scent.

I followed it down the hall, almost running into someone as I turned the corner.

“Excuse me,” the person said, taking a step back.

I looked over and saw that it was one of the Light Fae who’d been present at the council meeting that morning.

“Yeah, whatever,” I muttered. I hadn’t forgotten that when Cenwyn had come up with his crazy plan to marry Cali off to some Dark Fae, no one present at the meeting had objected.

I’d already started walking again when the person turned toward me.

“I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself, earlier,” they said. “I’m Zenas.”

“Great,” I said. “Good for you, Zenas, but I really don’t have the time to stop for a chat—”

“This will only take a moment,” they said, stepping in front of me. They weren’t blocking my path—not exactly—but I couldn’t move past them without pushing.

“What?” I snapped.

“Are you planning to join Miss Wrenthorn in the treaty talks with the Dark Fae?” they asked, a curious look on their face.

I hesitated for just a moment. Why was this Fae interested in something like that? It also bugged me to hear Cali being called a Wrenthorn. “Why do you care?”

The Fae shrugged. “I was simply curious. I assumed you were planning to attend. After all, you are her mate.”

“That’s right,” I said. I wanted to make sure the people here knew that Cali’s mate was with her. It felt important that everyone in this place—in this whole damn *world*—knew that Cali had people who would fight for her. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” I said, striding away.

“Just a moment,” they called after me.

“What?” I demanded. I was starting to get really frustrated now.

“You will have noticed by now that most Fae have no experience with werewolves,” Zenas began, and I snorted.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that I’ve noticed,” I muttered.

“*But* I do know a thing or two about mates,” Zenas continued. “And while I assume you are planning to attend the talks with your mate, I would advise you to forget about the idea.”

I growled, low in my throat. “I don’t really give a fuck what you advise.”

“I really think—”

“If you really do know anything about werewolves and our mates, then you should realize that we’re loyal like you couldn’t even begin to imagine, and your advice is not going to change a thing about that.”

“If you would just—”

“I’ve wasted enough time,” I said coldly. “I need to get going.”

What I *needed* was to find Cali, and fast. I took a deep breath, drawing in her scent again, and had just taken a step down the passageway when Zenas spoke again.

“Don’t assume that they’ll even let you into the meetings.”

I turned back. “What are you talking about?”

They shrugged. “Chances are, they won’t even allow you to go in with Mistress Wrenthorn at all. No matter your wishes.”

“And who’s going to stop me?” I snarled.

My tone was effective enough that Zenas took a startled step back, their face shadowed by sudden fear. It looked like they’d finally realized what they were dealing with, and they said nothing more as I finally walked away down the long passage.

I gritted my teeth as anger coursed through me. I’d wasted too much time entertaining that Fae, but now I focused on finding Cali.

I was angry, but part of me wondered if I’d just made a mistake. I’d made it clear to the Fae what I was capable of, but I still didn’t know what *they* were capable of. Maybe it had been a mistake to turn my back on Zenas. I would never have done that in battle. This wasn’t battle, but I certainly didn’t trust anyone in this world.

Picking up my pace, I started running down the passageway, but I stopped in my tracks when I heard Cali’s voice. Looking down the hallway, I finally spotted her. Cenwyn was standing in a doorway, listening as she spoke. What the fuck did that asshole want with Cali?

I needed to find out, so I hurried over to her.

“Cali,” I murmured, as I stepped to her side.

She looked up, surprised, but Cenwyn gave no sign that he’d seen me at all.

“Caliana, you and I can continue this conversation later, at a more convenient time,” he said smoothly, giving her an oily smile.

Cali didn’t respond, only nodded and turned toward me.

“How’s Greyson?” she asked as we started off down the hallway together. “I still need to get him some water. I was…” She glanced back the way we’d come. “Waylaid.”

“Greyson’s fine,” I said shortly. “What did that Fae want with you?”

She shook her head, looking tense. “He wanted to keep talking about what he suggested at the meeting this morning.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. He wanted to discuss my potential marriage.”

Marriage? That hadn’t been what I was expecting. What business did Cenwyn have asking Cali about a marriage? Was it to *him*? Or to someone else? To one of us? Just the idea of that creep bringing it up to her had my blood beginning to boil.

I bristled. “What the fuck does he think he’s—”

“It’s fine.”

I looked down at her. “What do you mean? How can it be fine? What did you say to him?”  
 “I basically told him to shove it.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh, okay. How did he take that?”

Her mouth quirked up in a smile. “Would you believe that he didn’t seem to like it all that much?”

I nearly grinned at her. I nearly hugged her, too, but I refrained. Though, as I looked at her, I thought about Greyson’s question to me earlier. If Cali asked me to be with her again, would I say yes?

In the moment, I’d deflected. Reminded both him and myself that that wasn’t happening, and pivoted the conversation. But deep down, I knew I had an answer to that question.

Deep down, I knew the answer was yes.

**Episode 5303**

I felt frustrated and scared as I strode down the hall away from Cenwyn’s study. I was deeply annoyed that he was acting like he had any kind of power over me, and it freaked me out that he was trying to threaten me into going along with his crazy marriage-in-the-name-of-peace idea.

But when I looked over at Xavier, I saw he was smiling at me. I let myself feel encouraged by that.

“What?” I asked, nearly smiling back.

“It just sounds like you handled yourself pretty well with Cenwyn,” he said. “Though I wouldn’t have minded if you’d used your sword, too.”

“I thought about it,” I admitted, “but it didn’t seem like the right moment. Still, I think I made it pretty clear to him that I’m not going to be forced into marriage. And that I’m not going to be some kind of pawn to be used in his political schemes.”

“Absolutely not,” Xavier said forcefully, his expression darkening. “There’s no way I’d let that happen. And I know you wouldn’t either.”

I nodded. “Good, I’m glad you realize that I’m not exactly a fan of this either.”

I was not surprised that he was reacting with so much venom. I could still hear him telling the Fae council that I was his mate. Whatever had changed between us since he said he didn’t want to be only my friend was creating…tension.

And how I felt about his *announcement* was complicated—though I hadn’t hated hearing him say it, I did wish he hadn’t chosen to make that particular announcement in front of the whole Fae council. Or in front of Greyson.

“Anyway, now that we’re clear on your feelings about this whole diplomatic marriage idea, I think we should wrap things up,” Xavier said. “We need to get to the Dark Fae court, get Artemis, and get the hell out of here.”

“I think you’re right,” I said hesitantly, “but somehow, I doubt it’s going to be quite as simple as you’re making it sound.” We’d reached Greyson’s door, and I stopped and looked up at Xavier. “Are you sure Greyson’s recovering?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Xavier said. “I mean, he was pretty weak when I left, I guess, but he was talking, which is an improvement. Why?”

I bit my lip nervously. “I asked Cenwyn about the poison.”

Xavier frowned. “What did he say?”

“Not much,” I said. “He didn’t admit that he drugged Greyson, but he didn’t exactly deny it, either.”

“So what was his explanation for what happened to Greyson?”

I shrugged. “Some BS excuse about werewolves having a problem with Fae food.”

Xavier scoffed. “Yeah, right. It wasn’t a bad oyster—Greyson was definitely drugged. I’m sure about that much.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said, reaching for the door.

“Cali, hang on a second,” Xavier said. “I wanted to say something about what happened at the meeting. What I said, about you being my mate. I—”

“Stop,” I interrupted, closing my eyes. I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I really can’t deal with that right now.”

“Cali, I—”

Before Xavier could mount an argument, I swung the door open and stepped into the room.

I was relieved to see that Greyson was sitting up, talking to Rishika. All the same, my heart was beating fast. Maybe I’d chickened out by not wanting to listen to what Xavier had to say, but I really *didn’t* feel like I could deal with that at the moment. There was too much going on, and my sister’s life was at stake.

I stepped toward Greyson, and he got out of bed, pulling me into a hug.

“There you are,” he murmured, kissing my hair. “I was getting worried about you.”

I leaned back to smile up at him. I knew Xavier was watching—I could feel his eyes on me—but I tried to focus on how glad I was to see that Greyson looked better. He looked more like himself, if not completely back to normal. His eyes were still bloodshot.

“What took you so long?” he asked.

“Well, I had a little conversation with Cenwyn,” I said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“A conversation? What kind of conversation?” Greyson asked, frowning.

“He sort of cornered me to talk about his idea of having me marry a Dark Fae to bring peace to the Fae world,” I said. “He was pleading his case.”

“*What?*” Greyson looked stunned—and angry.

“Like I said, we need to get the hell out of here,” Xavier growled.

“No objections here,” Greyson said darkly.

“Yeah, that might be our best option,” I admitted. “After that conversation with Cenwyn, I’m starting to suspect that he’s determined to make this marriage treaty happen—with or without my consent.”

“The hell he will,” Greyson snarled. “Who the fuck does this guy think he is?”

“No idea,” Xavier said darkly, “but he’s definitely a dick.”

“If he ever tries to force you to do anything like that, I’ll kill him,” Greyson said, his jaw set.

I strode to the door and quickly closed it, worried that someone might’ve overheard us talking. Even if Greyson was kidding—though I doubted he was—I didn’t think Cenwyn was the type to take threats against his person lightly. He clearly wanted to come across as civil, but he’d already drugged Greyson and locked me in a room, so I wasn’t about to put anything past him—especially if he felt threatened.

“Hera’s still opposed to the marriage plan,” Rishika reminded us. “I know Cenwyn’s got some of the other Fae on his side, but your grandmother’s opinion seems to carry a lot of weight around here.”

I shook my head, my stomach a tight knot. “I’m not so sure we can bank on that.”

“What do you mean?” Rishika asked.

“I mean that Cenwyn seems dead set on the idea, and he seems to have a lot of influence too.” I hesitated. “But I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to talk to my grandmother.”

“Let’s go together,” Greyson said. “I don’t like the idea of you walking around this place alone. The last thing we need is for you to be snatched into another private conversation.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

A few minutes later, we found ourselves assembled in front of the door to my grandmother’s study.

“You need to keep your emotions in check while we’re in there,” I warned the other three. “As we’ve all seen, my grandmother can be a little…prickly.”

“That’s one way to describe it,” Rishika muttered.

“Especially when she feels her authority is being threatened,” I continued, ignoring that little comment. “And we need to get her firmly on our side if we want to have any chance of bringing Artemis home, so everyone needs to promise to keep it together in there.” I glared at them all in turn. “Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Rishika said.

“Agreed,” Greyson said with a nod.

“Fine,” Xavier said, though he looked annoyed.

This was as much of a consensus as I could’ve hoped for, so I turned to knock on the study door.

“Enter,” my grandmother called.

We walked into a cozy room with a fire crackling in the grate.

“Yes?” my grandmother said, looking up at us.

I took a deep breath. “Hi, Grandma. I wanted to speak to you about what was said in the meeting this morning.”

“The meeting?”

“Yes. I’m worried that the Fae here are going to keep pushing this marriage scheme as a means of brokering a true peace between the Light Fae and the Dark Fae.”

Hera sighed deeply. “You’re certainly right about that, Caliana.”

My eyes went wide. “I am?” I hadn’t expected her to agree with me so readily.

She looked grave. “I wish I could say that you were wrong, my dear, but I’m afraid that I agree with you. I share your worries about the plans of some of the Fae.”

“So what are we going to do?” I asked slowly. My stomach was tight with nerves, and I had to concentrate to keep breathing normally.

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if the Fae who believe in this scheme propose such a thing to the Dark Fae, and then you refuse to play your part, I don’t know how Cenwyn and his cronies might react.”

I swallowed hard as fear prickled at my skin. “So what do you think we should do?”

Hera looked thoughtful for a moment. “The meeting with the Dark Fae—I wouldn’t normally suggest this, but I think your mate should go with you, Caliana.”

I nodded in agreement. “I can see how that would be better, but Cenwyn drugged Greyson, and he hasn’t fully recovered.”

“I’m fine,” Greyson insisted. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be there, right by your side, love—”

“No,” Hera said firmly. “Not that mate. The other.”

I turned to stare at her. “*What?*”

Hera pointed at Xavier. “That one. Bring him.”

**Episode 5304**

**Artemis**

I stared at Aelwen, trying to figure out how to determine if Kastian was the would-be killer. I figured Aelwen was the key, and I knew she could be useful. It was just a matter of getting her to agree to help me.

I’d been staring long enough that Aelwen pulled back, eyeing me warily. “What? Don’t stare at me like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Marius gets a particular look in his eyes when he’s plotting something dangerous. Or stupid. Or both.” She shrugged. “It’s usually both. But it always means that he’s up to something, and you have the same look in your eyes right now.”

“I…don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

She looked dubious. “I’m sure you don’t. Well, whatever you’re plotting, I want nothing to do with it. At all. All I want is to stay in the kitchens and make my breads and pastries in peace. Is that so much to ask? Do I really need to get involved in political intrigue in which I have no interest? No!”

I gave the baker a curious once over. She was a pretty Fae. I understood why she’d caught Marius’s eye. I circled the woman appraisingly.

“What are you doing now?” she demanded.

“Kastian isn’t interested in me anymore, now that he knows who I am. *You*, on the other hand, might be exactly his type…”

“What?” Aelwen wheeled around to glare at me. “No!”

“If I can’t get him interested in me, I think he could be interested in you,” I said, ignoring her.

“Absolutely not. Stop looking at me. Don’t even *think* about it,” she said vehemently.

“Aelwen, listen to me,” I said, crossing my arms. “We need to know who he is. Think about it. You’re the one who told me about the missing girls—”

“Yeah, I told you about them. I didn’t tell you I wanted to *become* one,” she snapped.

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” I assured her. “The truth is that we need answers, and if I can’t get them, we need to try something else.” I thought for a moment. “I might have another idea, too, but if you want him to stop whatever he’s doing, then I still might need your help.”  
 “What kind of help?” she asked warily.

“We need to get closer to Kastian—that’s the key,” I said decisively. I was sure on this point. “And please know that I would never let anything happen to you. I swear it, on Marius’s friendship.”

This didn’t seem to reassure Aelwen, who continued to look skeptical.

I sighed. “Just think about it, okay? You don’t have to agree to anything right this minute. But I have a feeling you could help me unravel this.”

I gave her a long look, then turned and walked away.

Aelwen didn’t say anything as I left the kitchens.

As I headed back toward my rooms, I passed through the marketplace, which was bustling. I felt every eye in the space turn toward me as I walked, the crowd parting to let me through. This was unsettling, for sure, but not exactly unexpected.

Automatically, I glanced around to see if I recognized any of the staring faces, but no one seemed willing to meet my eyes. It was clear that most everyone was making a real effort to steer clear of me.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes as I considered the other idea I’d come up with to figure out the truth about Kastian. I had to admit, it wasn’t the best idea I’d ever had. It came with a lot of risks, and would likely be very hard to pull off—having to find Kastian and convince him to have a private conversation with him wouldn’t be easy. This felt particularly challenging now that everyone knew who I was.

As I stepped into the fortress’s central corridor, I heard whispering. Then I heard my name and slowed my step so I could hear what was being said.

“She looks nothing like Kadmos,” someone muttered.

“Does she favor her Light Fae side, do you think?” someone else asked.

“Is she even Dark Fae?” a third gossipmonger asked. “How could we know for sure?”

I bristled at this. How dared these people question me? They—

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I needed to get ahold of myself. Besides, I knew perfectly well who I was—I was both Light and Dark Fae, whatever form that took. I knew I looked like my mother, Orla, and like Cali, my sister. We all shared the same cheekbones and mouth shape. No one had ever looked at Cali and me and not guessed that we were related. And I also knew that I’d inherited a lot of Kadmos’s magic.

So whatever these strangers believed or didn’t believe about me was totally irrelevant. And maybe it was possible that with all this new focus on my father, I’d be able to find out some actual useful information on his whereabouts.

That seemed possible, but I had to wonder if my new, more visible status would help or hinder me in that search.

I kept walking, thinking back on a conversation I’d had with my grandmother when she’d mentioned the Dark Fae Erimentha. I wondered if that was someone I’d be able to find now. I’d barely had a chance to look for information about my father, and now I was confined to the fortress anyway, thanks to my Fae promise to Celeste.

I decided not to go straight to my rooms but get started on my Kastian plan instead, so I veered left in the entrance hall and walked into the main banquet hall. It was a cavernous room, and currently filled with people, but when I walked in, the conversations quieted. I stiffened and tried not to look around, though I hardly needed to. Just like at the marketplace, there were whispers and stares. Some of them were less than kind.

I didn’t see Celeste anywhere nearby, which was good. I figured that if she saw me, she’d probably make me go back to my room or demand to know why I wasn’t working on my studies.

After a moment, the ambient chatter started up again, and—distantly—I heard a voice that made me pause.

It was Kastian.

I looked around until I spotted him at the far end of the hall. He was talking with Cadhla, Philantha, Dorphus, and a few other Fae I’d seen hanging around. I watched him for a moment and saw that he was speaking in an animated way, gesturing with wide, surprised eyes. It occurred to me that it was possible he was describing what had happened the day before—namely how he’d found me bleeding and half-dead in the hallway.

As I watched, Kastian finished his story. And—as if proving my theory about its content—his audience all turned to look at me.

I fought the impulse to roll my eyes. But I knew I was going to have to play the game, so I walked over, trying to look unconcerned.

“Hi,” I said, trying to sound casual.

Gazes skittered away from me.

“Hello,” Dorphus muttered, though he was clearly reluctant to acknowledge me.

It was awkward as hell to stand there in front of them—especially considering that just yesterday, they’d all been yelling at me for lying to them.

I turned to Kastian. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

He gave me a cool look. “I’m busy.”

I gritted my teeth. I should’ve guessed that this was going to happen. Well, whatever—I was just going to go for it and put it all out there, right in front of everywhere. If he wouldn’t talk to me, then I wasn’t going to give him anywhere to hide.

“I just wanted to thank you for yesterday,” I said loudly.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Cadhla’s head whip around, her interest clearly piqued.

I took a step toward Kastian. “I know you’re upset with me because I wasn’t as up front with you as I wanted to be, but that wasn’t my decision. I hope you can all forgive me.”

No one said anything for a long time, and I experienced a fearful moment where I wondered if I’d just overplayed my hand.

“Are you really Kadmos’s daughter?” Dorphus finally asked, breaking the silence.

Philantha elbowed him in the ribs, and he groaned.

I looked at Kastian when I spoke, hoping his expression would give me some clue as to what he was thinking. “Yes, I am. And I hope we can be friends.”

Kastian’s face gave nothing away, but I decided to throw caution to the wind. I threw my arms around him.

“Thank you, Kastian, for forgiving me,” I gushed. “It means everything.”

I tightened my arms around him, trying to see if he reacted in any way. I wanted to know if he was nursing a broken rib from the attack.

His arms went around me too and he hugged me back—just as hard.

“Don’t misinterpret my helping you, earlier,” he whispered, his mouth right next to my ear. “Make no mistake—we are not on the same side, Ari.”

**Episode 5305**

**Greyson**

*Bring him.*

I stared at Xavier, then at Hera. I wanted to assume that the woman was joking, but Cali’s grandmother didn’t exactly strike me as the lighthearted type.

Which could only mean that she was being serious.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” I demanded. “Why should he go with Cali and not me?”

Hera stared at me in obvious surprise. “Must I really explain this to you? You were there when this one announced that he and my granddaughter are mates,” she said, pointing again at Xavier.

“I don’t care what he said,” I growled. “*I’m* Cali’s mate.”

I gritted my teeth as anger pounded through my veins. I hated that I even had to say that—that it wasn’t just an accepted fact.

Hera nodded and looked at me, not unkindly. “Yes, I understand that. I am sensitive to your…” She shot a glance at Cali. “To your *unique situation*.”

“Great,” I ground out. “So you understand why I should be the one who—”

“But the truth is that Fae neither like nor trust werewolves,” Hera went on, as though I hadn’t spoken. “So there is no possible way that the council will allow *two* werewolves to attend this meeting. It will be difficult enough for them to tolerate one.”

“I don’t fucking believe this,” I snarled.

I looked at Xavier, but he didn’t say a damn word about this ridiculous situation. It occurred to me that he also hadn’t answered the question I’d asked him earlier, about being with Cali. Was this his way of answering? By presenting himself as Cali’s one and only mate?

I was tempted to ask how Ava fit into this wild scheme of his, but I backed off. I was angry as hell, but I needed to focus. I needed to think of Cali right now. And Cali had made it very clear that her sister was her current top priority.

“Fine,” I said begrudgingly. “Fine. Xavier goes with Cali to the meeting.”

I didn’t like it, but I figured it would be better for one of us to be there—even if it was Xavier—rather than neither of us. Would I rather I were the one who went with Cali? Yeah, of course. But that didn’t seem like an option.

Hera nodded. “Good, now that that’s all settled—”

“I do want to make something clear, however,” I interrupted.

Hera sighed, looking annoyed. “And what might that be?”

“While I might not be able to be by Cali’s side during these meetings, I absolutely will be watching on. I’ll stay in the shadows if I have to, but I intend to keep an eye on things.”

This idea did not appear to please Hera. She looked frustrated, but one look at my face and she threw up her hands, apparently understanding that I hadn’t been making a request, simply informing her of my plans.

“As you will,” she said with a sigh.

I looked around. “Now, first things first, I think we should discuss the situation with Adair.”

“What situation is that?” Hera asked, looking affronted.

“Listen, while we all appreciate your insight when it comes to the Dark Fae,” I said, nodding to Hera, “you’re no more Dark Fae than I am, whereas Adair is the real deal. If anyone understands the Dark Fae and can help *us* understand them, it’s him.”

Hera’s mouth was pressed into a tight line as she shook her head. “He might know of the Dark Fae, but since he fled his responsibilities, his standing in the Dark Fae court is questionable at best.”

“Okay, that’s fair, but I still think he’d be helpful to us,” I countered.

Hera didn’t agree, but she didn’t argue any further, or stop us when I suggested that we go talk to Adair.

But as we all walked out of the study, Cali moved to my side and took my arm, pulling it gently. “Can I talk to you, Greyson?”

I was still running hot after my conversation with Hera, but I softened when she looked up at me. “Of course. You never have to ask me that, love.”

Xavier looked back at us and glared. “Rishika and I will head upstairs. We’ll meet you in Adair’s quarters,” he said through gritted teeth.

My brother was obviously unhappy to see Cali and me together like this, but I didn’t give a fuck. When I looked at Cali and she looked back at me, all I could think about was how much I loved her, and how much I wished I could fix everything for her. She looked so worried and anxious, and I hated that.

She reached up and touched my cheek. “We didn’t really get a chance to talk about the whole mate thing before, did we?”

“Not really,” I said, leaning against the stone wall of the passageway. It felt nice to stand there with her, and it occurred to me how rarely we’d been alone together since we’d come to the Fae world.

“Well, I wanted to talk about it—I was just waiting for the right moment.” She looked up at me, her eyes wide. “I think Xavier spoke out of turn, and I’m sorry.”

“Hey,” I said, my voice gently chiding. “You don’t need to do that. I don’t want or need you to apologize for Xavier’s actions, love. I could’ve spoken up when I had the chance, but I was just so thrown by what happened. I didn’t expect that at all. But I don’t even want you to think about it. You’re here to find Artemis, and I don’t want you to feel distracted by this.”

“Greyson,” Cali started, looking anxious. “You—”

“It is what it is,” I said firmly. “Let’s move on.”

She chewed her lip. “Are you sure you’re okay with Xavier coming with me to the Dark Fae meeting?”

I hesitated for a moment. I couldn’t lie to Cali. “No, I’m not okay with it.”

She looked stricken, and I quickly kept talking.

“But if I can’t be with you in there, I know that Xavier will die to protect you if the need arises.”

I hated to admit it, but regardless of Xavier’s fucked up feelings and his loyalty to the Samara pack and to Ava, I knew that was true. He’d die before he let any harm come to Cali.

“*Greyson*,” Cali breathed, and I wrapped her in a hug.

“I love you, and I don’t want you to worry about me,” I said firmly. “I’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d completely sold her, but I tried my best to convince her that I was going to be fine. Finally Cali nodded and—hand in hand—we walked toward Adair’s quarters in search of the others.

We walked into the room, and Xavier looked over at us.

“Just in time,” he said curtly. “I’ve just finished filling them in.” He nodded toward Adair, Marius, and Tabitha.

“Good,” Cali said, stepping toward Adair. “And what do you think?”

Adair didn’t answer right away. He’d clearly just been given a lot of information to digest, and he took his time.

“Any day now,” Xavier finally muttered, looking annoyed.

Adair ignored him. He frowned, the lines in his forehead creasing deeply. “I think that despite Hera’s expressed reluctance toward this marriage scheme, wheels within the Light Fae court are turning.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that I don’t think Hera is going to be able to prevent this from happening,” Adair said simply.

I looked over just in time to see Cali’s hopeful expression disappear. Suddenly, she looked devastated and scared.

“Hey,” I said, giving her hand a supportive squeeze. “Don’t give up, love. I’m not about to throw in the towel on this, and I hope you aren’t, either. We just have to think.”

She nodded, then her expression turned thoughtful. “You know, there might actually be one advantage to playing along with all of this.”

“What’s that?” Rishika asked curiously.

Cali shrugged. “It could get us exactly what we’ve been hoping for—access to the Dark Fae court.” She turned to Marius. “Isn’t that where Artemis is?”

“Yes,” Marius said thoughtfully, nodding. “Last I saw her, anyway—and it didn’t seem like Celeste was going to let her go wandering about anytime soon.”

Cali took a deep breath. “Then I say we play along for a while. I don’t know if we actually have much choice, but if we do this right, we might just be able to gain access to the Dark Fae court and rescue my sister.”

“But how?” Rishika asked.

“What do you mean?” Cali asked her, frowning. “How what?”

“How are we going to rescue Artemis?” Rishika asked. “They’re not going to allow the rest of us to attend this meeting, so what are we supposed to do?”

The only immediate response to Rishika’s question was a heavy, worried silence. Reality seemed to sink in for everyone, and I saw Cali’s shoulders drooping.

Then Marius got to his feet, looking determined.

“I know a way.” He looked around at all of us. “I can get you in.”

**Episode 5306**

Rishika snorted derisively, rolling her eyes at Marius.

“What?” he asked, looking at her in surprise.

“Nothing,” she said, though she was clearly lying. “You just seem to have all the answers, don’t you?”

I couldn’t help but notice the hard edge to her voice. I figured she was feeling angry and jealous and anxious, and I understood why—but I also knew she couldn’t let those feelings cloud her judgment. Not now. There was too much at stake.

Marius narrowed his eyes at her. “Other than Adair, I’m the only one here who’s actually *been* to the Dark Fae palace, who knows the place, and who has the slightest idea of where Artemis is being held. So yes, I suppose I *do* have a few answers.”

Rishika’s face flushed and she opened her mouth to shoot back an angry reply, but I stepped in before she could speak.

“Marius is right,” I said quickly. “He’s the only one of us who has any inside knowledge here, so I don’t think we have any choice but to trust him.”

Rishika crossed her arms and glowered at Marius.

“There’s one thing we’re all just accepting as fact here, and I don’t think we can assume anything,” Adair pointed out.

“What’s that?” Marius asked.

“We’re all assuming that this heir the Fae have been talking about is Artemis.” Adair shrugged. “What if it isn’t her?”  
 I took this in.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” I admitted slowly. “But if it’s not Artemis they’re talking about, then who else could it be? I mean, is there some other heir that we don’t know about?”

“Truthfully, I doubt it,” Adair said. “But the point is that the Dark Fae have a long history of deception—”

“Don’t all Fae?” Xavier quipped.

I shot him a glare. “Do I need to remind you that *I’m* part Fae?”

“You don’t need to remind me,” he said.

“So then—”

“I’m just saying that the last time we were in the Fae world, we encountered our fair share of deception,” Xavier said.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, and you *never* get that in the mortal world—”

“Marius had to leave Artemis to come and find us,” Adair interrupted loudly, “so there’s a good chance that she might not be exactly where he left her. He’s been gone for a while. And, myself aside, he’s the only one of us who knows the palace well enough to lead a search and a rescue mission. I say we follow his lead.”

“Why don’t you take the lead?” Rishika asked. “You’ve been glamoured—it’s not like anyone would recognize you.”

Adair shook his head, looking grave. “No, that would not be wise.”

“But you look completely different!” Rishika protested.

“I wish I could take that chance, but doing so would be foolhardy,” Adair said. “Glamour magic is impressive, but it is not foolproof. Especially around other Fae, some of whom have the ability to see through it. No, if something were to happen and I were to be found out, it would be disastrous for everyone. Including Artemis.” He gave Rishika a long look, as though he knew why she was reluctant to let Marius take the lead. “I doubt you would want to take that chance.”

Rishika looked back at him for a moment, then nodded. She dropped her gaze to the ground.

“Then it’s all settled,” Marius said, clapping his hands together. “I’ll lead the rest of the party to find Artemis while Cali and Xavier go to the meeting. We’ll start as one group with the option of breaking into smaller clusters if we need to fan out, and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, holding up my hand. “Slow down, Marius.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, looking confused.

“I get that you’re eager to rescue Artemis, and you’re probably pretty good at sneaking around—”

“I’m actually pretty *great* at sneaking around,” Marius said with a winning smile.

“—but we need to be strategic, here. I don’t want you going into this feeling overconfident.”

Rishika snorted again at this.

“I’m not going to let any mistakes threaten Artemis’s safety,” I continued. “We need a really well thought-out approach. And we need as much information as possible. Adair.” I turned to him. “Do you have any idea which of the Dark Fae they’d want me to marry for this peace treaty scheme?”

Adair looked thoughtful. “Tell me what you know of this plan.”

“I don’t know much,” I admitted.

“What have people said to you about it?” he pressed. “You must’ve heard something.”

I thought hard, trying to remember what Cenwyn had said during the council meeting, and our little personal rendezvous. “All I know is that it’s going to be some noble. But I didn’t stick around long enough to hear any names, so that’s all I know.”

Adair considered this. “Well, that does actually narrow it down quite a bit.”

“It does?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “There are only a handful of Dark Fae families with enough of a pedigree to generate a viable truce through marriage.”

“How many people are we talking, then?” Greyson asked.

“Off the top of my head, I think we can narrow it down to either the eldest son of the Graybender family, or Kastian Haseneau.”

“Well, neither one of them is going to marry Cali,” Xavier snarled, taking a menacing step forward.

I shot him a look. I knew how he felt, of course, but I was sure everyone here felt the same way.

“I’m just trying to get information,” I said. “I’m trying to be sensible, here. Of course I’m not going to go through with any kind of arranged marriage.”

“What else can you tell us about these two?” Greyson asked, dropping into a chair and leaning toward Adair. “Graybender and Casper.”

“It’s Kastian,” Adair corrected. He rubbed a hand along his jaw, clearly thinking. “The Graybender heir is a possibility, of course, but I don’t know…”

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t think he has enough experience at court to be the ideal choice,” Adair said. “He’s got a wandering soul and has spent much of his life traveling and reveling, living a life of luxury away from court.”

“What about the other guy?” Greyson asked,

“Kastian.” Adair leaned back in his chair. “Yes, he checks all the boxes. Prominent family in the Dark Fae court, with many connections and even more allies. Not to mention the fact that he has made his ambition to rise to the top of the Dark Fae hierarchy very clear.”

“He sounds great,” Tabitha muttered.

I shot her a small smile. There wasn’t much to be happy about, but it was nice to know I had my friends’ support.

“The only point against Kastian as a potential suitor is the fact that neither he nor his family has ever expressed any interest in ending the war,” Adair added. His gaze was far away, like he was accessing information he hadn’t thought about in a long, long time. “Some of the Fae are quite passionate in their pursuit of peace, but not Kastian or his family.”

“What’s this guy like?” Greyson asked.

Adair glanced quickly at me, then back to Greyson. “I know him mostly by reputation…”

“What kind of reputation?” I asked warily, slightly afraid of the answer.

Adair shook his head, his expression dark. “He can’t be trusted. And if he really is involved in this alleged truce, then there’s a good chance that not everything is as it seems.”

I swallowed hard. “Oh god.”

Adair had lost a few shades of color. “This meeting with the Dark Fae could be dangerous.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that impression,” I said, dropping into a chair as the floor began to sway under my feet.

“Cali, you’re going to have to be really, really careful,” Rishika said.

“I really don’t need to be reminded,” I said softly.

My hands were starting to sweat, and I balled them into fists. I felt like I was about to take a stroll across a minefield. Every step threatened to end in catastrophe, no matter how much planning I did. It was a hard realization, but it was becoming clear that I wasn’t going to be able to strategize my way out of danger this time.

“I wish we knew more about Kastian,” I murmured, thinking out loud. “I know you said he has a lot of allies, but who are they? I feel like if we had more information, I wouldn’t be so vulnerable and we could—”

The door swung open, and we all turned toward it. At least five servants bustled into the room.

One of them—a tall woman with iron grey hair twisted into a bun on top of her head—stepped forward. She scanned the room quickly, like she was doing reconnaissance, then her gaze landed on me. I had to fight not to shrink away.

“Caliana?” she said stiffly.

“Yes?” I said.

“You and your mate are required. You must come with us—immediately.”

**Episode 5307**

I drew in a sharp, scared breath. As if on cue, Greyson, Xavier, and Rishika stepped forward and closed ranks, forming a wall between me and the servants.

“What is this all about?” Greyson demanded.

Another servant, this one a man with a bald head, stepped up next to the tall woman. “Caliana’s grandmother is insisting that she be made presentable.”

“*Presentable?*” I demanded. Just like that, my fear had been replaced with irritation. “What’s wrong with me now? How am I not presentable?”

The tall woman bowed her head. “We are simply obeying your grandmother’s orders. Any questions can be brought to Lady Wrenthorn, but we do have to go. Now.”

“I *will* take this up with Lady Wrenthorn,” I muttered, still stinging from the inference that I wasn’t already presentable.

“Come along,” the tall woman said, waving me forward.

But when I took a step toward the door, both Greyson and Xavier fell in beside me.

The tall woman frowned as she glanced between them. “Pardon me, but I was instructed by Lady Wrenthorn to bring Caliana and her mate.”

I held my breath, and there was a strange, tense moment. I couldn’t bring myself to meet Greyson’s eyes, though I felt his entire body tense. Then, finally, he stepped back.

I winced, but then the woman waved at us again, and Xavier and I followed the servants out of the room and into the hallway.

It was quiet for a moment, except for all our footsteps on the stone floor. Then I cleared my throat.

“Can anyone tell me how you’re planning on making me *presentable*?” I asked.

I saw the servants exchange glances, but no one answered my question as we kept walking down the long hallway.

“This is a waste of time,” Xavier said. “Cali doesn’t need a freaking makeover. She’s perfect just as she is.”

“Tell that to my grandmother,” I muttered when no one else responded. “She obviously doesn’t agree with you.”

We walked on, winding our way down a long flight of stairs before the servants stopped in front of a set of doors.

“In here,” the bald man said, looking at Xavier.

Xavier looked surprised. “Me? Why?”

The servant opened the wooden door and nodded inside. “You are also in need of…preparation,” he said delicately.

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “And where will Cali be?”

“Just down the hall there,” the tall woman said, pointing farther down the passage.

It looked like Xavier wanted to keep arguing, but finally, he just sighed. “Fine. Whatever.”

As he stepped through the doors, he looked back at me. *If you need me, just reach out.*

I didn’t answer as he disappeared into the room, and the door was closed behind him. I told myself that I wasn’t going to let this freak me out. I trusted my grandmother. She’d never given me any reason not to trust her, and I had to believe that she wouldn’t do anything to hurt either of my mates.

This thought comforted me a little, but I had to keep repeating it in my head as the woman with the grey hair led me down the hallway, toward another set of doors.

She stopped and pushed the door open. “You’re in here, mistress.”

I took a steadying breath and stepped over the threshold.

I was surprised to find myself in a large, comfortable room. The walls were oak paneled, and there was a soft carpet on the floor. I didn’t know what I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

The room was currently occupied by a group of Fae women who’d apparently been waiting for me, because they all got to their feet.

A small woman with brown hair and a sharp-featured face walked toward me. “Hello, Mistress Caliana.”

“Hello,” I said bemusedly.

“I am Lady Wrenthorn’s personal seamstress,” she went on. “I am called Fern.”

I nodded. I had no idea what a *modiste* was—I’d never even heard the word before—but I had no time to ask any more questions. Fern put her hand on my back and steered me toward a set of paneled mirrors.

Suddenly, I could see myself from all possible angles. Fern pushed me up onto a small platform, and the rest of the Fae—who’d been hanging back a bit—surged forward. They gathered around me, forming a tight circle. It was a little intimidating. It became *very* intimidating when I realized they were all eyeing me closely, clearly assessing everything they saw.

Fern clapped her hands. “Bring the silks.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but the other Fae seemed to understand. A small knot of them disappeared, then reappeared a moment later weighed down by what looked like a hundred dresses.

“That’s too many—” I started, but then I stopped talking when I realized that no one was paying me any attention. They stripped me quickly. Then, one after the other, the gowns were pulled over my head or slid up my ribs, and I was buttoned and laced into dress after dress. Ruby red, sapphire blue, emerald green—every one of them was more beautiful than the one before.

At one point, a Fae appeared behind me with a comb and a pair of scissors.

“What are you doing?” I asked, but again, no one answered.

The scissor-wielding Fae moved gracefully around the dressers as she worked, giving me a haircut that—when she was finished—somehow made my hair look longer than it had been before. Was that Fae magic? Had she used a glamour?

I stared at myself, baffled.

“Close your eyes,” someone commanded.

Another Fae moved to stand in front of me with a cloth that smelled like lilacs. I closed my eyes, and she cleaned my face, then began to apply makeup with the softest of touches.

The whole experience felt like a complete blur, but when the Fae all stepped away from me and I opened my eyes, my jaw dropped.

I stared at the woman in the mirror, barely able to recognize my own reflection.

“Do you… Do you not like it, mistress?” one of the Fae asked quietly, clearly noticing the shock on my face. “If you’re unhappy with any part of it, we’d be happy to change whatever it is you don’t like.”

“No, no,” I breathed. “That’s not it at all. I’m just…blown away.”

And I was. I couldn’t take my eyes off myself, and I couldn’t believe how completely different I looked. How different I *felt*.

I knew I was still Caliana Hart, but I’d had no idea I could look this… My cheekbones were high, flushed with just the right amount of pink, my waist perfectly accentuated by the dress. My skin was clear, like I’d never even suffered from acne…ever. There was this ethereal, otherworldly look to me, almost like I wasn’t looking at myself. I felt embarrassed just thinking it, but the word was *beautiful*.

The Fae relaxed, and a few even smiled.

Fern stepped forward. “Lady Wrenthorn will need to be notified that we are finished. She will come and appraise our work.”

With a wave of her hand, she sent a younger Fae scurrying out the door.

“I don’t see how she could have any objections,” I said, turning a little so I could see the back of my dress. It hugged my waist and hips, pulled just tight enough to accentuate my cleavage.

A moment later, there was a knock at the door. That had to be my grandmother.

I turned, ready to greet Hera, but it was Xavier who stepped into the room.

I stared again—at him, this time.

He looked incredible, dressed in head to toe black. His pants and jacket were made with rich, dark velvet and leather. Everything fit him like a glove, from the slim cut pants to the perfectly tailored waistcoat. It seemed impossible that the outfit had been made for him in so short a time, but everything he wore fit him so well, it looked like it could’ve been a natural part of him. I was so busy looking at him that it took me a moment to realize he was staring at me, too, his mouth open with amazement.

“Cali,” he whispered, and when his eyes met mine, they were blazing bright.

Suddenly, I remembered that a group of Fae were watching us, and I pulled myself together. I thought of my grandmother and affected her superior attitude.

“That will be all,” I said loftily, waving my hand. “I wish to speak to my mate alone.”

This was all that was needed, and the Fae retreated quickly.

Xavier walked toward me. “I’m sorry for staring, Cali, but you look…” He shook his head. “I meant what I said earlier. I didn’t think it was possible for you to look any more beautiful than you already were, but I was wrong.”

I swallowed hard, thinking the same thing about Xavier himself. He’d always been hot, but this version of him was something else. He made my chest ache with want.

“Well, don’t get used to it,” I said, fighting hard to sound normal. “I don’t have a team of Fae stylists at home.”

Xavier took another step toward me. “You don’t need one.”

Heat flooded me and I stepped back, closer to the mirrors. Xavier watched me carefully, tracking my every move.

I cleared my throat. “Why did you tell everyone that you were my mate?”

**Episode 5308**

**Artemis**

I was trying to figure out what Kastian had meant when he’d said that we weren’t on the same side. The same side of what? Was it a not-so-subtle way of indicating that he was part of the Order? That he’d tried to kill me? I couldn’t figure it out, but that was only making me want to learn more.

I pretended not to have heard him and smiled as I addressed the others. “I hope we can all continue to get to know each other better.”

With that, I excused myself. I needed to get out from under their judgmental stares, and Kastian was giving me the creeps more than ever before.

Kastian had saved my life—at least it seemed that way—but I still didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, which wasn’t very far. I just needed to get my head straight and figure out what my next move was going to be, and to do that, I needed time alone to think.

I made my way back to my room, wondering whether I should break into Kastian’s room to find the proof I needed—ideally the mask, too. If I found *that*,I’d be able to confront him with it and easily implicate him in the attempt to kill me. He hadn’t reacted when I’d touched his ribs, but he could’ve been a good actor with a decent pain tolerance.

*And if I can get into Kastian’s room to find the proof I need, I won’t need Aelwen at all. She’s afraid to get involved—and for good reason—but maybe she doesn’t have to. Perhaps there’s another way.*

All I needed was an event that would get Kastian out of his room long enough for me to go in and take a good look around. It had to be something that would keep him occupied, and would provide no chance for him to return and catch me in the act. I’d already had to explain away one incident of being caught red-handed snooping around in his room—I doubted he would be convinced of my innocence a second time.

I needed to talk to Celeste—maybe she’d be able to give me some idea of how to make this happen.

I was halfway to Celeste’s chambers when Celeste herself intercepted me in the hallway.

“Where have you been? What have you been doing?” she demanded, her voice a low hiss.

Confused, I replied, “Um…I was just out for a walk.”

Without a word, Celeste grabbed me by the arm and steered me to my room.

I was baffled. “What did I do wrong this time? I thought you said I was free to move around the palace grounds?”

Celeste didn’t speak again until we were back in my room and the door was shut. “Yes, but you can’t just go anywhere you please! Have you forgotten that you were attacked only yesterday? And things have been a little…tense…since my announcement. It’s best if you keep a low profile. I thought you would’ve realized that.”

“I know things are dicey right now, and believe me, I remember the attack, but I came out on top, didn’t I? I can hold my own better than you realize. You shouldn’t underestimate me—”

“None of that matters!” Celeste snapped. “You think you avoided death because of skill, but it could very well have been a matter of luck. And if there’s a next time, you might find that your luck has run out, and I can’t afford that! The Dark Fae need you, Artemis!”

Celeste was pacing back and forth, looking at me with a mix of concern and anger.

“Since you don’t seem to understand the danger you’re in, I’m assigning a guard to watch over you for the time being,” she said. “I can’t take any chances—especially when you’re not interested in being careful.”

I groaned. “Really? A guard? Again? I thought we were past that!”

The idea of having to sneak around a guard again really annoyed me. I hated using my mind manipulation magic, but if it was my only option, then I’d do what I had to in order to get the answers I needed. I wasn’t about to let Celeste keep me imprisoned in my room for who knew how long. I had to take back control of my life, not give up even more control by allowing her to monitor me around the clock.

I still had no idea whether or not Kastian was the one who’d attacked me, but I was going to find out—no matter how many restrictions Celeste decided to put in place. And when I did find the person who’d tried to kill me—whether or not that person turned out to be Kastian—I was sure that Celeste would appreciate my initiative.

*This is all getting more complicated by the minute. Celeste wants to treat me like a caged animal, but if she hadn’t told everyone who I really am, then I wouldn’t even need to be so careful—or under constant guard!*

“None of this makes any sense,” I said. “Why did you announce my existence to the court if it was going to put you on edge like this? Seems like you should’ve kept it under wraps.”

“This isn’t about you,” Celeste snapped. “It’s about the future of our kingdom. You’re so self-centered, you’re incapable of seeing what’s at stake here.”

“And you’re so concerned about the fate of the Dark Fae, you’re forgetting that I never asked for any of this.”

The only reason I was back in the Fae world at all was to find the father I’d never had the opportunity to meet. I’d never intended to get wrapped up in the Fae politics, to be turned into a pawn in the Fae war.

Celeste was using me for her own political machinations, and I wasn’t about to sit back and wait for her to manipulate me until she was finished with me. I had my own agenda, and I was tired of pushing it to the side.

*I wonder if sending Marius back to the human world for help was a big mistake. Shouldn’t he be back with Cali by now? What’s taking him so long? Granted, he’s never visited the human world before, but he’s the best tracker I’ve ever met. He should’ve found her by now.*

Maybe he wasn’t back yet because something bad had happened. I hated to think that my little errand could’ve gotten him killed. It was a dangerous mission, and I’d known that when I’d given it to him, but Marius was strong and sly and crafty and more than up for the challenge. He was a capable guy—and smart, and self-preserving—so I’d assumed it would be a piece of cake for him.

*But if he failed…*

If Marius didn’t make it to the human world to find Cali, then there was a good chance that I’d be trapped here for good, bound by my Fae promise. That thought truly troubled me—but then it dawned on me that my concerns were less about being trapped here and more about my worries for what I might’ve gotten Marius into.

*That’s a surprise. Why am I so concerned about what happens to him? Does that mean I have feelings for him? That I actually* care *about him?*

I pushed that idea away as quickly as it formed. There was no way in hell I was going to allow myself to fall for that bozo. He was fun and a good time and all that, and useful sometimes… And he was hot as hell, I could admit that. But he was still *Marius*.

I heard a commotion somewhere nearby, and Celeste was instantly on high alert. A guard rushed into my room, out of breath and focused on Celeste.

“We’ve captured an enemy spy who claims to be a messenger,” the guard told her.

“A spy? Bring him to me, now!” Celeste commanded.

I quickly did the math. An “enemy spy” had to be Light Fae, but was this person *actually* a spy, or just an unfortunate, legitimate messenger?

The guard returned with the Fae in question, who began pleading with Celeste as soon as he laid eyes on her. “I’m not a spy—that’s what I’ve been trying to tell your people. I’m a messenger. I would never—”

Celeste silenced him with a wave of her hand. “What is your message?”

“It’s for the Dark Fae court,” the messenger said. “It’s an invitation to meet with Light Fae leadership to discuss a possible treaty.”

*A treaty?* I thought. *That’s good, right? A possible end to the war? And if the war ends, then that means the heat will be off me, right?*

And if the heat was off me, then that meant I’d finally be free to do what I’d come here to do—look for my father.

“Do you wish to reply?” the messenger asked Celeste.

Celeste’s voice was cold. “No, we will not be attending.”

**Episode 5309**

**Xavier**

Cali had just asked me something, but her words hadn’t quite registered. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. My brain was short-circuiting, busy trying to process what I was seeing while simultaneously working overtime to keep my self-control in check.

Hera had asked her attendants to make Cali presentable—which I’d assumed meant to clean her up and put her in a dress or something—but this was way more than that. They’d somehow managed to magnify every perfect, breathtaking feature Cali possessed, and I was struggling to catch my breath—she looked that damn good.

I tore my gaze away from Cali and looked down at myself. I was dressed to the nines—not my style, but very well made and fancy—so I should’ve known that they’d do the same for Cali. But I knew that I didn’t look as good as she did—she was absolutely stunning. The curve of her waist in that dress was begging for my hands.

I let my gaze drag from Cali’s head all the way down to the sparkling shoes on her feet, and a familiar warm feeling bloomed in the pit of my stomach.

*I can’t believe how beautiful she looks. Am I imagining this? She looks otherworldly. Did one of the Fae drug me like they did Greyson, and this is all an illusion? Cali’s always beautiful, but this… This is mind-blowing.*

Except I knew that this wasn’t an illusion. This was Cali, standing right here in front of me—I could smell her, feel the heat of her skin. This was real. She really looked this fucking gorgeous.

Cali’s voice finally tore me out of my trance. “Why?”

I was lost. “Why? Why what?”

Cali nailed me with a critical look. “Did you listen to a single word I just said?”

“Honestly, no,” I admitted. “I was distracted. How could I not be?”

It was a wonder I was even able to form complete sentences with her looking like that.

Cali’s cheeks reddened, and I could tell she was flustered. “Stop that, Xavier. I asked you why you told everyone—including Greyson—that you’re my mate.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know… Because I am?”

It was strange to hear her question me about that. Yet another indicator of how things had changed between us—and not for the better.

“We all know that, but it wasn’t any of those Fae’s business, now was it?” Cali retorted. “All you did was open us up to scrutiny, especially since we have the *due destini* to deal with. Not to mention the fact that it was just…*awkward*.”

I sighed, wishing that things were different. Not long ago, it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d made that proclamation. Cali might even have made it herself, even in that room full of Fae. But I couldn’t dwell on the past. Things were different now, and there wasn’t much I could do about that.

“I guess I didn’t really think about it, Cali,” I said. “It just sort of came out. I’m sorry if you were hurt.”

“Are you actually sorry? Or are you just saying that?” Cali pressed.

I shrugged again. “The jury’s still out on that.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Xavier—”

“But I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone, really,” I said firmly. “I’m just tired of covering up the truth, burying my feelings all the time. Sure, it’s uncomfortable to hear it, but it’s the truth and you know it.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling stressed but trying to push it down. “On the plus side, I haven’t had any headaches lately. That has to mean something.”

Cali looked skeptical. “I’m glad to hear that, but that doesn’t change what happened, Xavier. Why did you have to do that in such a public forum? Why bring it up now?”

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset about this,” I said. “We both know that even with everything that’s happened, my being your mate is the one thing that hasn’t changed. And in addition to it being the truth, *you’re* the one who asked me to come with you to help save Artemis.”

“And that’s my point,” Cali shot back. “I’m not here so that we can work ourselves out of this strange limbo we’re in. I’m here to rescue my sister. Everything else has to take a back seat. And besides, what about your *other* mate?”

I paused, but I wasn’t surprised that Cali was bringing Ava into this.

“Yeah, what about her?” I asked.

Cali just stared at me.

I was starting to feel backed into a corner. If I’d thought for a second that my saying she was my mate would cause this much of an issue, I would’ve exercised a bit more self-control and kept the comment to myself.

“I’m well aware of how Ava complicates things, Cali,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I have any answers for you about her. All I know is that I’m being honest with you, and with myself. And that means that what I said about not wanting to be just your friend is true. I don’t want that—I want more. I’m not going to hide it and deep down, I don’t think you want me to.”

Cali said nothing, but I pressed on.

“I’m doing exactly what Carlson Greene told me to do—I’m being honest. Isn’t that what you want? Or do you think I should lie to protect you and Greyson from the truth? From reality? Should I just go on pretending that I don’t have feelings for you? Would that be better?”

“That’s not what I’m asking, Xavier, and you know it,” Cali retorted. “What I need is for you to consider other people’s feelings. There’s a time and place for everything, and that wasn’t it. You know that.”

“*This* is the time and the place!” I pushed back. “I’ve already put it out there, so now we have to deal with it. And look at us—how many times have you risked your life for mine? How many times have I risked mine for yours? Doesn’t that say more than my words ever could? Why deny what we have? Why should I have to pretend that we aren’t still connected?”

Cali turned away from me and immediately, I missed the sight of her beauty, her face, her striking eyes. I had to hold myself back from reaching out and turning her back around to face me, just so I could see her again.

When she finally did turn back around, she looked as stressed as I felt. “Xavier, all of that may be true, but it doesn’t change the fact that I brought you here to help me with Artemis so I don’t go *mad*. Not so you could make a proclamation like that in front of everyone—including your brother, who didn’t deserve that! We’re not here in the Fae world to fix our fucked-up relationship, and that’s all there is to it.”

I studied her face. I wasn’t buying this at all. “You know what I think? I think you weren’t upset at all when I called you my mate. I think you *liked* it. So much so that you just said the same damn thing to those Fae servants, just now. You’re raking me over the coals for something you just did—you told them the truth, just like I did. I’m your mate, Cali.”

“But that was different!” Cali shouted. “I only said that to get rid of them.”

I smiled at her. “To get rid of them? Why? So that we could be alone?”

Cali was flustered again, and she took a couple steps away from me. “Don’t do that.”

I took two steps forward, crowding her. “Don’t do what? What am I doing, Cali?”

Cali took a deep breath and looked up at me, and I immediately saw regret spreading across her face. Looking at me was dangerous for her right now, and we both knew it. She was so close, so close I could touch her, pull her to me and kiss her so easily. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she was thinking all of that and more. I knew her.

*We’re in a strange spot right now, and I know that more than she seems to realize, but I know that look in her eye. She wants me. Maybe that’s why she’s so upset about what I said—because it’ll force her to admit that she wants me, too. That she misses this, misses* us*.*

“You know exactly what you’re doing,” Cali squeaked. “You always do.”

I moved closer, my eyes on hers. Now more than ever, I knew she was lying. I could see it—her face was flushed and she’d averted her gaze, trying to avoid looking me in the eye because she knew exactly what was about to happen. Her breathing was ragged, as ragged as mine. My heart was racing, and there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that hers was racing, too.

“I’m not going to apologize for a damn thing when I can feel the truth radiating from you, Cali,” I said. “So if that’s what you want, then you can forget it.”

I lifted her chin, forcing her to make eye contact. I immediately heard her breath catch in her throat. I’d never wanted her more.

*Why am I denying myself? What will it hurt?*

Unable to hold back any longer, I took one more step and closed the distance between us.

**Episode 5310**

I was lost in Xavier’s eyes, and I wasn’t in any hurry to find my way out of them. I knew that none of this should’ve been happening. There were so many more important things for me to worry about, but I hadn’t been prepared for any of this—for seeing him looking like *that* in this strange, magical, dangerous world only seemed to amplify everything tenfold.

It was like we were both moving in slow motion, but were still unable to stop what was coming.

But we *had* to stop it.

This couldn’t happen. It was like I’d told him—now wasn’t the time or place. I loved and appreciated that he was no longer hiding his true feelings, but the fact remained that they were dangerous feelings to acknowledge, and came with so many questions and uncertainties and fears. I wasn’t ready to face any of that, not yet, not when there was so much on the line and we were in this unfamiliar place, struggling to keep ahead of all sorts of Fae conflicts and political schemes.

There was no doubt that I loved Xavier—that had never been in question. But things between us were so complicated—especially when I was in love with Greyson, too. And to make things even more twisted, Xavier was in love with Ava, and that had nothing at all to do with the *due destini*.

*I should be used to this by now, this push and pull between Xavier and Greyson. We spent so much time dealing with this dynamic before, but since Xavier left to join the Samaras, it’s like I’m out of practice. Almost like I’ve forgotten what it’s like to devote myself to two men at the same time. And now Xavier’s upped the ante by going off and becoming Alpha of another pack and getting involved with another woman.*

Xavier’s warm breath tickled my ear, pulling me back to the present moment and sending a shiver through me. I was drifting toward him, like my body was completely under his control. He knew me so damn well. It would’ve been so easy to close that narrow divide between us completely, kiss his lips, and dive headfirst into the love we shared. Maybe we could do it. Maybe this was inevitable, and it was stupid to resist.

But then I remembered why we were here—what I’d just *explained*—and that gave me a much-needed moment of clarity. I hated myself for what I was about to do, and every nerve ending in my body was screaming at me to do the opposite, but I planted a hand on Xavier’s chest.

“Wait,” I said.

Xavier looked down at me, and I knew it was time to pull my hand away. But the feeling of his warm flesh against the palm of my hand, his chest rising and falling with every breath… It brought back memories of the two of us that I was trying my hardest not to recall.

Xavier wrapped his hand around mine, and the electricity of the contact radiated throughout my body. And that was what made it hurt so badly when I pulled my hand free of his hold. I saw a flash of disappointment in his eyes and felt weak in the knees at the knowledge that I could just as easily have kissed him instead of stopping him.

“What now?” he asked.

A loaded question.

I was still trying to regain my composure. How easy it would’ve been, to give in to all the emotions I was trying my hardest to bury. And now that I had a perfect opportunity to let them lead me straight to him—straight to a place where I wanted to be—I couldn’t take it.

*There’s too much at stake. I can’t let my emotions and my desires climb into the driver’s seat. I have to keep my head on straight, even if it’s one of the hardest things I’ll ever have to do.*

Artemis’s fate was in my hands, and that had to take precedence over everything else. Once my sister was safe, I’d be able to give this issue the attention it needed, but not before. I owed Artemis my complete attention, and that was what I was going to give her.

Xavier was looking at me expectantly, but I looked away before his eyes could lock with mine. I couldn’t meet his eyes right now—my resolve was paper thin, and every fiber of my being was desperate to give in. To let him touch me wherever he wanted. He looked so good and smelled so good, and I knew that it wouldn’t take much for me to change my mind.

I forced myself to turn away. “Now, we need to set some boundaries.”

“Boundaries?” Xavier repeated. “What kind of boundaries?”

“I mean we need to put some rules in place for when we go to the meeting with the Dark Fae,” I said.

*I know that he can tell how hard this is for me. He knows that I don’t want to put rules and boundaries in place any more than he does. But none of that matters now. I have to focus.*

Xavier was quiet, and I risked turning back around to look at him. Both his eyebrows were raised, and he looked confused, like he’d expected me to say something else.

“Okay, boundaries,” he said slowly. “Rules. What do you have in mind?”

I took a deep breath. “I think we need to stay on our toes, no matter what. We can’t be distracted—”

“Just tell me what you want me to do,” Xavier interrupted.

“What I want is for you to keep your distance,” I said. “No kissing, no holding hands, no nothing. We need to keep everything above board and focus all our energy on doing whatever it takes to get Artemis back.”

Xavier chuckled. “Damn. You’ve really thought this through.”

“We both know what almost happened just now—and that can’t happen at the meeting,” I said firmly. “We need to be taken seriously, and I don’t want any of the Fae to think that we’re distracted or easily dismissible.”

Xavier nodded. “I get it. I assure you that I will do—or rather, not do—anything you want.”

I nodded, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. It wasn’t like I’d thought he wouldn’t agree… But a small part of me wished he’d decide to ignore everything I’d just said and sweep me into his arms. Heat spread through my body at the thought. God, it had been so long. How had I managed all this time? To go from having Xavier whenever I wanted to not having him at all? How did we get here? Sharing moments like this where I had to actively erect walls between us so that things didn’t get out of hand?

*Giving in to Xavier is a horrible, dangerous idea. I can’t allow myself to lose control. I have to be strong, for Artemis’s sake and my own. Not to mention respecting Greyson. What would he think if he learned that Xavier and I had used this time away to rekindle things?*

Even though I’d convinced myself to resist Xavier, I already felt so guilty, wondering what I was going to say to Greyson. I could choose to say nothing—which wouldn’t be keeping anything from Greyson since technically, nothing had happened. Going out of my way to tell Greyson about this little thing that had almost happened between me and Xavier would cause him unnecessary pain and distress, even though I knew he’d be understanding, like always.

*And that’s why I have to stick to the rules. I have to be good to Greyson. He deserves my loyalty.*

Before I could think about it any further, Hera walked into the room. I hoped that my blazing cheeks and our collective jumpiness wouldn’t give us away.

But if Hera had any suspicions about what had almost happened between me and Xavier, she didn’t let on. She just started circling us, plying us both with a critical eye.

“Straighten your collar, Xavier,” she said. “Yes, that’s it. Cali, that hair is out of place—near your ear. Fix it.”

We both did as we were told and then stood ramrod straight, waiting for her final appraisal.

“Cali, you look absolutely stunning,” she finally said. Then she turned her attention to Xavier. “You’ll do.”

Xavier rolled his eyes but said nothing.

*I wonder why Hera can’t appreciate how incredible Xavier is. He looks like something out of a gothic fairy tale—a bad boy with perfect fashion sense.*

But of course *I* thought that—I was still tingling from our almost kiss, still wishing that I was in a position to give in to it. I gave myself a mental slap.

*Think about Artemis. Pull yourself together!*

“Now that you’re presentable, that’s one less thing to worry about,” Hera said, before turning to leave.

I stopped her. “Grandma, is there a way I could try to get in touch with my sister? Just to let her know that we’re here in the Fae world?”

**Episode 5311**

**Greyson**

Adair, Marius, and Rishika were still in my room trying to put together a game plan for saving Artemis, but I was having trouble focusing on anything the three of us were discussing. All I could think about was Xavier and Cali leaving together, and how everyone was going to treat Xavier like he was Cali’s mate. It was almost too much to take.

*And if he ends up saving the day, I’ll be left out in the cold. I’ll feel like dead weight and nothing more. I know I should only be concerned with Cali and Artemis coming out of this unscathed, regardless of who’s responsible for making it happen, but I know that I can help. I just need the opportunity to do it.*

How had it turned out like this, anyway? Xavier standing at Cali’s side, in the very spot I should be in. A big part of me knew I shouldn’t be as angry as I was. When I really stopped and thought about it, there was no reason for me to be so worked up. I knew that Cali wouldn’t do anything to hurt me—at least not intentionally—but still, my anger was there and churning stronger by the second.

The rational part of me knew that this had to be the aftereffects of whatever it was that Cenwyn asshole fed me, but the irrational part didn’t care and only wanted to pound Xavier’s face in along with Cenwyn’s for putting me in this position.

“Greyson?” Rishika said.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I’d missed everything they were saying, and I hadn’t the slightest clue what Rishika wanted.

“Sorry, could you say that again?”

Giving me a strange look, Rishika said, “What do you think about Adair and Marius taking us via a shorter route? It’ll be a lot more dangerous than the long way around, but we’ve already wasted enough time, so maybe it makes sense to take the risk?”

I shrugged. “Agreed, getting there faster sounds good to me. And the less time we have to spend here, the better.”

All I could think was that my luck had suddenly gone to shit the moment we stepped foot in the Fae world. Not only had we been attacked after barely being here an hour, but my mate had been claimed by another man—my brother—and now they were off somewhere together and looking for all intents and purposes like a couple.

Rishika nodded at me but I could see by the look on her face that I wasn’t fooling her. I clearly wasn’t in any position to be strategizing. I could barely keep my attention on the matter at hand and she knew it.

Even now I could feel the anger bubbling up in the center of my chest at the mere thought of Xavier and Cali heading into that place alone. And where did Xavier get off, anyway, staking his claim on *my* mate like that?

The *due destini* was still in effect, and things were as complicated as ever, but the lines between where his relationship with Cali ended and where his relationship with Ava began had been clear for months. Cali was with me, now. He had no right to act like anything had changed.

*Come on, Greyson, get it together. You can’t be flipping out like this* and *pay attention to Marius and Adair’s plan.*

“Can we pick this up in an hour after I’ve gotten some rest?” I asked. They knew I was still recovering from being drugged, so I might as well fall back on that and give myself some time to clear my head.

“Fine. I’ll go get you something to eat; maybe it’ll help soak up whatever’s still in your stomach from the asshole Fae,” Rishika said.

She and Adair left together, but Marius hung back.

“You need something?” I asked him.

“No, it’s just that I’ve been on the receiving end of more than a few Fae potions. Gnarly stuff. I was once dosed with a potion that made me dance without stopping for hours on end. It sounds like fun, but let me tell you, by hour six you start to wonder if your feet will ever be the same again.”

I arched an eyebrow at him.

“I was given the potion as punishment for crossing the wrong guy—but my point is, the fact that you’re not dead is good, so the effects will probably pass soon. However…since you’re a werewolf there’s a chance that there might be some…latent effects.”

I sat up in bed, not liking the sound of that. “Latent effects? What do you mean?”

Anger surged in me again, but this time it was anger at Cenwyn for daring to poison me. What had he expected to happen? Had he wanted me to get angry enough to kill my brother? Kill someone else? I’d never really liked the Fae world much, but this trip was making it so that I was growing to hate the place—which was a little unfortunate since it was essentially a part of Cali.

“I mean latent effects, things that might not affect a Fae the same as they could affect you. My advice is to be hyper vigilant over these next few hours. Pay attention to your body and anything it might be telling you.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “It’s not like I’m not hyper aware of dealing with this Fae bullshit already.”

Marius lifted his hands. “Sorry for overstepping. Next time, no warnings,” he said before leaving.

Alone, I fell back into the bed, seething. I shouldn’t have been this mad—Marius was only trying to help, and his warning was appreciated even if unwelcome. It was probably just misdirected anger because this wasn’t how things were supposed to go. The plan had been to come here to help Cali get Artemis back and then go back home.

It wasn’t that I expected any of this to be straightforward, but I also hadn’t expected to be laid up in Cali’s grandmother’s palace fighting off Fae poison, while my mate and my brother were off playing power couple.

And it didn’t help that even without having eaten that thing, I was feeling pretty useless. I hadn’t been able to do a damn thing to help Cali and Artemis out of this world, and now I was sidelined and unable to focus on the one thing that would help me feel useful, helping Adair and Rishika and Marius get to Artemis.

I forced myself to take a bunch of deep breaths and tried to think rationally. Xavier wasn’t going to just try and steal Cali right from under my nose, right? And more than that, it’s not like Cali *could* bestolen, or that the *due destini* would even allow it since she would have to make a choice for any attempt like that of Xavier’s to succeed. But in this case, his insinuating himself back into our relationship was the equivalent of stealing her away, because up until now, it was just Cali and me, and I’d had her all to myself.

I started to wonder what I would do if the situation was reversed. If I’d lost Cali, what would I do if I had a chance to get her back? What lengths would I go to? What risks would I take? And who would I step on to get her back?

Before I could answer my own questions, the door opened and Rishika came walking in with a plate of food from the kitchens. She had a strange look on her face that I couldn’t quite read.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Rishika shook her head. “I just can’t stop myself from disliking Marius. I just want to tell him to fuck off even though I know we can use his help.”

“I get it. That’s exactly how I’m feeling about Xavier, but you and I both know that it’s not really about Xavier *or* Marius. The problem is that we know we can both be more effective in this whole thing, that we can and should be the ones Artemis and Cali rely on to get them out of this mess.”

Rishika nodded, and I could see the excitement building in her eyes. “Yeah. We should be the ones to fix this—we don’t need to rely on Hera or Marius or Xavier to get Artemis back.”

Rishika’s excitement was spreading to me, and my anger began to subside. If I could be useful and be a part of solving our problems here, then we could get out of the Fae world and back home before we even know it.

“No, we don’t need them,” I said. “We’ve got this. You and I have faced a lot harder stuff than this before. We’ll save both Cali and Artemis all on our own, and then get the hell out of here and back home before anyone in the Fae world knows what hit them.”

**Episode 5312**

Hera paused, and I could tell she was deciding how to answer. However, I didn’t want any answer but the truth. I didn’t want a political response from my grandmother when it came to something like this. Artemis’s life might be on the line, and I wasn’t about to take any chances.

“Please, Grandma, I just want my sister to know that we’re here and that we’re working on coming to save her. That we’ve heard her,” I said. “There has to be a way to do it without blowing our cover.”

Hera’s face softened, and she nodded. “Yes, there might be a way to get a message to her. We have a Wind Messenger on the premises who might be able to help.”

“That sounds perfect—whatever that means!” I said, barely able to contain my excitement. If Artemis knew that Marius had reached us and that we were in the Fae world, maybe it would give her the courage to deal with whatever was happening to her just a little while longer, until we could get to her. I had no idea what state she was in or even what brand of danger she was experiencing, but regardless, I knew a message from us would be a welcome boon.

“I know that the messenger birds flying in and out of the castle are being monitored right now—they have been since this godforsaken war started—but the wind will be more discreet. The only downside is that Wind Messengers can be a bit…unreliable.”

“What does that mean? Could someone else intercept the message?” Xavier asked. “Is there a risk of the message being found by someone other than Artemis?”

Hera nodded. “Yes, there’s always a risk with this sort of thing. Times are tense here, and the enemy will do whatever they can to get the advantage. There are spies everywhere waiting to thwart our maneuvers at every step, so yes, there is a risk. We could scrap the idea if the risk is too much for you?” Hera said pointedly, her eyes on Xavier.

“No, it’s worth it if there’s even a chance that we can let Artemis know we’re here,” I said. “Besides, I could always come up with a message that only Artemis will understand, right?”

“Yes, clever,” Hera said proudly, already moving to the door. “I’ll call the Wind Messenger now. No reason to delay.” With that, Hera left, leaving Xavier and me alone once again.

Xavier stepped close and his heightened werewolf body heat washed over me. The longing to bathe in his warmth cropped up before I pushed it down, only to find myself drowning in memories of the kiss Xavier and I nearly shared. My heart began to race, but I forced myself to keep my focus on Artemis.

“Are you sure about this?” Xavier asked. “I don’t know if sending a message is the best idea.”

A flash of irritation cut through my nerves. It was a slap in the face that Xavier thought he had a right to question my decisions when he had chosen not to be a part of them for so long. I’d gotten along fine while he was off playing house with Ava, so why did he think I needed him to protect me now?

*And besides, Hera said that there was a risk, not that the message would immediately fly into the wrong hands. He’s being overcautious, and I’m not in the mood for it. I need to let Artemis know we’re here; I know my sister, and she needs this.*

I supposed I was being a little hard on Xavier, considering that much of what had driven us apart was due to Adéluce’s manipulations, but it wasn’t like the confusion and craziness had ended with Adéluce’s death. She was long gone, and Xavier was still cozying up to Ava in the Samara pack house—while still openly pining for me. He was more confusing than ever.

He’d done so much to save me, but there was plenty he’d done to keep his distance from me—things that were all in his control. Adéluce was partially responsible for the state of things between us, but Xavier had played his part, too.

*Why do things have to be so darn confusing and complicated? Why can’t anything just be straightforward?*

As far as I was concerned, all the uncertainty I was feeling was yet another reminder that keeping our boundaries firmly in place was the way to go. We weren’t going to just fast forward past what happened because of Adéluce.

I took a step back from Xavier and gave him a short nod. There was a part of me that wanted to unload all my thoughts on him, even my feelings about how he’d stayed with Ava even after Adéluce was gone, but once again I had to remind myself that now wasn’t the time.

“I think this is our best bet. Then Artemis will know we’re here and we can rely on her working things on her end to be in tandem with us—if she isn’t already. I can’t imagine my sister is just taking whatever’s happening to her lying down, but maybe proof of our presence here in the Fae world will give her the boost she needs.”

Xavier was quiet for a beat and had obviously noticed the distance that I put between us, but he didn’t say anything. And what was there to say, anyway? I’d told him that I thought it best to put boundaries between us, and that was what I was going to do. I couldn’t let the complicated nature of our relationship overshadow why we were here, and that meant I was going to have to actively fortify those boundaries every chance I got.

Xavier shrugged. “Sounds okay to me. As long as you’re sure.”

“I am,” I said. “Like I told Hera, the message I send will be one that only Artemis will really understand. It’s not like I’m going to send, ‘Hey Artemis, we’re all here in Grandma’s castle, waiting for the opportunity to come break you out!’”

Hera appeared a few moments later with a Fae I’d never seen before at her side. “Cali, Xavier, I’d like you to meet Maxime, the Wind Messenger.”

Xavier started to say something, but I jumped in to speak before he could.

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you,” I said quickly. “I just wanted to ask something before we get started… I want to know how we can trust Maxime with the message. Who’s to say that they won’t sell the message to the highest bidder the moment they leave the palace walls?”

“Because our messengers are a trusted part of the palace’s ecosystem. They all have a strict agreement in place when they enter the palace, and not one of them has broken it since the formation of the guild.” Hera turned a pointed gaze on Maxime. “And like all messengers, Maxime knows that there are *dire* repercussions should she renege on that agreement.”

I nodded at Hera, and then at Maxime. “Fine, that’s enough for me. And Maxime, how does the process work, exactly?”

Maxime cleared her throat and took a step toward me, her bearing almost like that of a soldier. “You’ll share the message with me by writing it on a scroll, a scroll I will burn to ash before using my magic to direct it into a wind stream that will go directly to the recipient.”

Xavier mulled this over for a moment before asking, “And how could a message like that get intercepted? There aren’t any words to read, nothing physical to take.”

“Easily,” Maxime said breezily. “There are many difficult and hard-to-master skills involved in wind magic. There are few who know how to encrypt a message properly in the wind, which means that an astute Fae spy could find it and interpret it if it’s not done right. But I will do it right, so I’m not worried.”

Without any more explanation, she pulled a scroll from a pack on her back and handed it to me. “Write your message.”

I nodded at Maxime, realizing that despite my resolve to get the message to Artemis by any means necessary, I was starting to feel a little nervous. Maxime seemed confident, and I still had no idea how someone could actually intercept the message, but the Fae world was a place filled with intrigue and wonder and powers that I didn’t fully understand yet, so I was going to have to take Maxime’s word for it.

*Grandma would never endorse Maxime if she didn’t trust her, and aside from that, she’s already warned me that there are risks. Let’s just hope that the risks don’t screw us over today.*

All I needed to do was tell Artemis that we were here, and that we would be attending peace talks so that my sister knew to join if she could. With a deep breath, I put the pen to paper and began to write.

**Episode 5313**

**Artemis**

I was absolutely furious and not afraid to show it—how could Celeste simply decide something like this all on her own? Weren't the peace talks good for everyone? Didn’t she have to consult other Dark Fae about choices like this?

I wasn’t well-versed in Fae politics, but peace talks were pretty self-explanatory and seemed like the right move for Fae who’d been locked in a war for so long. Why wouldn't the Dark Fae attend? How did that make any sense at all? What was stopping Celeste from wanting peace between the Dark and Light Fae?

*Am I missing something? Is Celeste getting something out of keeping this war going? That’s the only reason I can see for why she wouldn’t want to attend. Every time I think that Celeste might be someone I can rely on, she does something that proves she’s not the person I think she is.*

My anger was boiling over, and even though I knew I was speaking out of turn, my words spilled out anyway.

“I can’t believe you, Celeste! Why wouldn’t the Dark Fae attend the peace talks? Are the Dark Fae so enamored with war that they aren’t even interested in discussing how to put an end to it? Is your side even winning? Or are you just pleased to keep throwing your people at the Light Fae until there are no more of them left?”

Celeste was taken aback. “Calm yourself Artemis, that’s not what I meant. What I’m saying is that *you and I* won’t be going, but of course we’ll send a delegation to handle our side of the talks.” Celeste shook her head at me. “You speak as if you have the slightest idea about how things work here. It’s maddening.”

That didn’t do much to soothe my frustration.

“This place isn’t as complicated as you would make it seem,” I shot back. “And I don’t understand, why wouldn’t I go, too? Why wouldn’t you? You’re a key member of the Dark Fae court, and I’m the perfect representation of both Dark and Light Fae. I’m a living example of why both sides should put all this endless fighting to rest. My entire existence was meant to create peace between the two factions. Won’t that mean anything to them?”

Celeste nodded. “Under normal circumstances, that would make perfect sense, and I would be the first to agree that your attendance is imperative to the success of the peace talks, but there’s so much at stake, Artemis. You seem to think this is all fun and games, but you are not understanding the risk you expose yourself to if you show your face there. There’ve been not one, but *two* assassination attempts on your life since coming to my home.”

“I know that, but I’m not one to live in fear. Especially since we should give ourselves *some* credit for thwarting them. Attempts are just that—attempts. No one has been able to take me out, and no one will.”

“Artemis, I appreciate your confidence in yourself, but it means nothing—remember what I said about luck? The Fae world is dangerous for you now, extremely dangerous, especially since I’ve announced who you really are. Things are only going to get worse from here.”

*Wow, she’s really worked up about this. This may be the most emotion I’ve ever seen her show—and it’s even more surprising that this display is all about my safety.*

I reached out and put a hand on Celeste’s arm, moved by her concern.

“I understand, Celeste, and I promise I’ll take your warnings more seriously. But I still think that we should both go. Like you said, the attempts on my life happened here in your palace, under your watch. Who’s to say there won’t be more if I stick around?”

Celeste seemed to be considering what I was saying, but the set of her jaw told me she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Celeste, I know I’m new here and that I don’t know everything yet—I get it. But I know violence, I know assassins, and I know how Fae think. I’ve chased enough of them around the Fae world to learn a lot—a whole lot.”

Celeste cocked her head to the side. “Artemis, being a bounty hunter isn’t a proxy for navigating the Dark Fae court or Fae politics. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“It’s not, but let’s not pretend I’m new to the Fae world altogether, either. I know how people are here, and for all we know, the peace talks will inspire more assassins to come out of the woodwork if I stay behind. I think going to the talks will put me in a place so visible that no one would try it for fear of being found out as the perpetrator.”

*Though if more assassins come out of the woodwork, that could be a good thing. It’ll help me figure out what’s really going on, and who’s behind all the other attempts on my life. I should probably switch tactics, though, and approach this another way if I want Celeste to agree.*

“And, since you did announce that I’m Kadmos’s heir, shouldn’t I play the role? What’s the use of announcing something like that if I’m not going to act like the heir? There are already rumors that this is all a lie. Staying away from the peace talks would only fuel that fire.”

Celeste rolled her eyes and waved that away. “I’m not worried about any of those silly rumors. We’ve already proved your claim using the one ritual recognized by all. The denials are nothing but pathetic attempts by the losing side to create discord in the court.”

I didn’t agree, but before I could say a word, a strong breeze came out of nowhere and swirled around me. I could almost hear someone speaking, the whispers getting louder as the wind continued to swirl. And then I heard it, the unmistakable sound of Cali’s voice on the breeze.

*The Redwoods intend to keep the peace.*

I held in my surprise at hearing my sister’s voice, and I held in my excitement, too, resisting the urge to spin around. I eyed Celeste, who wasn’t reacting at all, which meant she hadn’t heard it.

But I wanted nothing more than to shout, *Cali’s here! Marius did it! He really did it, and he’s alive!*

He’d gotten through to them after all, and now that I really thought about it, despite my earlier worries, he’d done it faster than I would have thought possible.

I couldn’t believe it. Cali was here with other Redwood members. Probably Greyson. Maybe even Rishika.

*Rishika*.

I wanted to believe that she would come with the others, but I couldn’t be sure. I’d left her behind despite her protests, and Rishika might still be pissed about that, so I wouldn’t blame her for remaining in the human world.

*But if she’s here…wow. I want to see her. I* have *to see her.*

Cali was here, but things were different now. When I’d initially asked for help, I’d thought things were a lot more dire, that I was in immediate danger of being killed or imprisoned, but that wasn’t quite what the situation was any longer. I had a role to fill now, a true place here in the Fae world—not on the fringes, tracking people for money for the Kollector.

*I can’t even believe it myself, but I’m a key player in the Dark and Light Fae conflict, now. I’m important, and I can’t just leave Celeste hanging, as strange as it is to think that I feel any allegiance or obligation to her.*

And then there was the matter of the disappearing girls. I needed to find out what was happening to them. I owed that to Aelwen and the missing women themselves. Finding those women was the crux of my entire situation with Kastian, and I wasn’t prepared to just leave it behind and return to the human world…or even to continue on my journey to find my father elsewhere.

I’d been thoroughly sidetracked from my mission to find Kadmos, but part of me believed that staying here and seeing this through would lead me to the answers I was searching for in due time. And even if it didn’t, the desire to learn more about the world my father had been a part of was intoxicating in its own way.

No, now wasn’t the time to leave or to be saved. I was way more involved than I’d ever anticipated being. Beyond the binding powers of the Fae promise I’d made to Celeste, I didn’t know if I even would choose to leave before this was all over.

Right now, all I really knew was that I had to make sure we attended those peace talks—I had to see Cali so I could explain all of this to her. She would understand. And maybe Cali and whoever she’d brought along would be able to help me with everything that was going on. I needed people I could trust, after all.

I had to convince Celeste that we had to go to the peace talks, and I was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen.

**Episode 5314**

**Xavier**

I watched the ashes flow into the air in a streaming burst before disappearing. Then there was a beat of silence. I’d never seen anything like the Wind Messenger’s smoke message, and I was still kind of skeptical about whether sending a message in smoke was the right thing to do.

“How will we even know if the message reaches Artemis?” I asked Maxime. “For all we know, it dissolved the moment it filtered out the window.”

Maxime didn’t answer at first. She was quiet for a moment, her head cocked to the side before she suddenly brightened and said, “The intended recipient has received the message and heard everything you wrote down, Cali.”

I noticed that Maxime didn’t bother addressing me, but I didn’t care. I was suspicious and I didn’t feel the need to hide it. I snickered. “It can’t possibly be that easy.”

Hera glared at me. “Do you have an issue with how the Fae do things, Xavier? Because if you do, you can feel free to leave anytime you want. No one will stop you. Just be sure to exchange the outfit I provided you for the tattered clothing you arrived in and lock the front door on your way out.”

Cali looked between us, biting her lip and obviously hoping we weren’t about to descend into an argument. I had no plans to argue with her grandmother, but I was trying really hard not to roll my eyes in her face. I was over being around this part of Cali’s family. I just wanted to get back to the real world so Cali and I could spend some time figuring out our shit without all these other people interfering.

Cali elbowed me lightly in the side as if she could tell what I was thinking.

“I was just asking for some confirmation, that’s all,” I bit out. “Seems like you should understand that someone from another realm might have a few questions about how you do things here.”

Hera plied me with a long look but didn’t bother offering another reply. After a few beats, she turned her attention to Maxime. “Thank you again for your time and services, Maxime. Shall we go discuss other matters over a glass of wine?”

I watched them walk out together, and Cali didn’t waste a second before whirling on me. She opened her mouth like she was about to say something, but then snapped it closed and turned away, moving toward the door.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked, reaching for her and pulling her back. “What was that all about? Are you mad or something? I didn’t mean to question your grandmother, it’s just that—”

“It’s nothing,” she snapped, shaking her head. “I just want to get back to the others.”

I could tell she was lying. “Don’t do that, Cali. Don’t push me away. Even if you’re mad at me, you at least have to tell me what’s going on so I can fix it.”

Cali frowned at me. “That isn’t what this is about. I’m not pushing you away.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her, but I had no idea how to get her to tell me the truth without making things worse. I stepped toward her, but Cali took a step back at the same time, making sure to keep her distance.

“So…what? Is this about the boundaries?” I asked. “Because I can promise that I’m not trying anything. I’m just trying to figure out what I did wrong.”

Cali shook her head. “No. This isn’t about our boundaries, though I suppose in a way, it is. It’s really about you constantly questioning my decisions. You’re making me seem weak, and I’m not weak. I’ve been taking care of myself just fine since you’ve been gone. If you want to boss people around, I’m sure the Samaras and Ava will be more than happy for you to do that when you get back home.”

I was shocked. “Cali—that’s not at all what I was trying to do. I was just—”

“Whatever you intended, the end result is the same,” Cali said bitterly. “And I can’t help but think it’s because it’s what you’re used to. I get it, you’re the Alpha of your own pack now and used to being the one in charge, so that makes you think you’re the one who gets to make *all* the decisions for the both of us.”

“Cali, I—”

“Stop, I’m talking now,” Cali snapped. “You’ve said enough, don’t you think? You’ve second-guessed everything I’ve said or done since we arrived. And now you’re borderline insulting my family. We may not agree with how my grandmother does things, but that doesn’t mean you can challenge her like that.”

She wasn’t about to let me get a word in edgewise, and even if I could, I wasn’t sure what I would say in response because she wasn’t wrong.

“Even when we weren’t together, you still got to make your choices, whatever ones you wanted. But right now, we’re in the Fae world—*my* world—and I’m the one who knows the best calls to make.”

Then, before I could say a word, she spun around and left me in the room all alone.

*That went well. I was only trying to help. If things were like they used to be, she would realize that.*

I was shocked by the argument, caught off guard. I hadn’t realized that I would strike such a nerve by being cautious.

A few minutes later, I left the room as well. I wasn’t sure where I was going and was surprised when I found myself facing Greyson’s door.

*What am I thinking? Am I really here to cry to my older brother? This is ridiculous. I can’t be that desperate.*

I started to walk away just as the door clicked open and Greyson was standing before me.

“What are you doing out here?” Greyson asked.

*Shit. There’s no way I can tell him the truth. Not about this. He’d probably rejoice to think that I’ve just screwed things up with Cali, and there’s no way in hell I’ll give him the satisfaction.*

“Nothing,” I said after too long of a pause. “I was just checking in. Seeing how you’re doing after your little poisoning. You should really be more careful about eating things that strangers give you. I think that’s one of the first things kids are taught, don’t take things—especially sweets—from people you don’t know.”

Greyson’s mouth twitched like he was holding back from shouting at me, so I was impressed by how even his voice was when he asked, “Where’s Cali?”

*I’m surprised she’s not here with you, brother. I would have bet anything that she ran right to you after our little fight.*

But I knew that wasn’t fair. Cali was perfectly capable of getting her own head together without needing me or Greyson to help her do it.

“Oh, I think she just went back to her room to get ready and head out.”

Greyson muttered something under his breath.

Still frustrated by my tense conversation with Cali and not in the mood for any of Greyson’s shit, I asked, “What did you just say?”

Greyson narrowed his eyes at me. “I said, I hope that you and Cali have a great trip together.” His voice was dripping with anger.

*Wow. He’s so mad, he can’t even hide it.*

“And just so we’re clear, I know you were deflecting earlier. I know the truth. I’d be stupid not to. You’ll take Cali back the second you have the chance and not look back. Ava, me, everyone else be damned.”

An unrecognizable current of fury laced Greyson’s tone. I knew that both Greyson and I could be irrational when it came to Cali, but there was something off about the way Greyson sounded.

“Are you sure you’re okay, man? You sound a little…off.”

“Don’t change the subject!” Greyson shouted, clearly freaking out. “This isn’t about me being okay or not. This is about you telling the truth about your motives!”

I took a step back, shocked. This wasn’t how Greyson usually yelled at me. “Listen, why don’t I let you get some more rest? You’re clearly not in a good spot right now—you’re being weird.”

This appeared to get through to Greyson, and his anger seemed to break for a moment. He rubbed at his eyes, shook his head. “I am feeling a little strangely, I’ll admit it. But that doesn’t change what I’m worried about—Cali.”

I paused, wondering if it would be best for me to leave before things took a turn. Greyson had already yelled in my face and who knew when that anger would flare again. I wasn’t about to stand here and let him browbeat me, so maybe it was best if I left before things got out of hand.

“I’m worried about you, too,” Greyson was saying, his eyes narrowed again. “And don’t you try to deflect this time. I want a goddamn answer.”

# **Episode 5315**

**Artemis**

I tried to argue my point with Celeste again. “I just don’t think—”

Celeste raised a hand for me to stop. “That’s right. You’re not thinking. Not about your own safety. Not about the potential fallout if these peace talks don’t go well—and historically, they never have.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t mean we should just give up.”

“I’m not giving up.”

“It sure sounds like you are. The peace talks haven’t even begun, and already you’re planning for them to fail.”

Celeste released a long-suffering sigh, like I was an unruly child that needed to be managed. Like I couldn’t possibly understand her myriad of reasons for doing what she did. I gritted my teeth together and released my own slow breath. I wasn’t a child. I wasn’t a fool. And I knew better than most what was at stake here, what it was like to have your life destroyed by the war.

“I get that there’s a long history here,” I said, trying to rein in my urge to throttle her senseless. “That it must be frustrating to have tried so many times to broker peace. But here’s the thing: You’ve never had me at these peace talks. Me, a child of both the Light and Dark Fae courts. I know it sounds naive, but I truly believe we can do this.”

I hoped that the empathetic approach might sway her, but she just slumped into a chair, looking even more defeated than before. “I need to be honest with you, Artemis.”

I frowned. “What is it?” *And is this going to be the real truth or another constructed partial truth to get me to fall into line?*

“I’m actually worried,” she confessed. “I suspected the announcement wouldn’t go over well with everyone in the court, but I never anticipated this much pushback. The rumors, the violence. It never even occurred to me that the assassins would strike so quickly. I want my family in a position of strength, but I don’t want to sacrifice your safety or well-being to get there.”

My brows rose. *Wow. Maybe she really does care about me.* “Celeste… I appreciate that you worry about me—”

In a flash, her face shifted to that cold and shrewd expression I’d come to know so well. “I am encouraged to hear that you’re taking your role in this court seriously, however, and that, more than anything, assures me that you very well may be right. You and I will both attend the peace talks—together—and make sure that the House of Mauvais comes out ahead.”

I fought back my dismay. “Um, right. I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

It wasn’t exactly how I’d wanted it to happen, and I would never put the Mauvais legacy above the well-being of the Fae world (probably to Celeste’s disgust), but if I went along with this, the end result would be the same. I’d get to go to the talks and see Cali and the other Redwood pack members. It was more than worth it.

“So, what’s next then?” I asked. “How does all of this work?”

“There’s a specific process for things like this. A small contingent of Fae from each of the courts will travel to a neutral territory for the summit—Briarkeep. It’s a keep situated between both territories on a hill. For centuries now, Briarkeep has been used for conversations like this one. Tradition and magic dictate that no blood is shed while in residence at the keep. By entering, an implicit agreement is made between the parties. No one will use magic against one another. Only words.”

She stopped suddenly, frowning. “I shouldn’t have to explain all this to you, Artemis. All of it should have been in your reading.”

*Classic Celeste. Never misses an opportunity to lecture.*

I shrugged awkwardly. “I guess I missed that chapter?”

Her eyes narrowed, seeing right through me. “I refuse to take an uninformed girl with me to the summit, so know that I fully expect you to have a thorough understanding of the protocol before we leave. This is an important place for the Fae—it was the site of one of our most horrific and violent disasters. Nearly an entire generation of Fae was lost. It decimated our people, our cultures, and it was only through great effort that our world wasn’t completely destroyed. But in the aftermath, the Briarkeep was rewon and reused as a sacred place with which to build new connections—a sort of reparation for the misuse of the land so long ago.”

“And here I thought you wanted me to get informed all on my own,” I said, a smirk tugging at my lips.

She rolled her eyes. “That certainly would be ideal, but I’ve learned in the time I’ve known you that it’s best to lower my expectations.”

My smirk disappeared. *Ouch. Tell me how you really feel.*

Before I could summon a response, any kind of attempt to defend the remaining shreds of my dignity, she continued, “We don’t have the luxury of time. I do expect you to do what you can to prepare for the summit on your own, but unfortunately, we won’t be able to make up for all the time lost when you should have been studying. We’ll be departing soon; we need to arrive at Briarkeep by a certain hour.”

My brows rose. “I didn’t realize the Light Fae court were such sticklers for punctuality.”

Celeste frowned, clearly disappointed. “Our time constraints have nothing to do with them—another thing you would know if you’d bothered to pay attention during all those study sessions.”

“I did pay attention,” I said. “It was just *a lot* of information! You practically expected me to learn a lifetime of lore and history and court etiquette lessons in just a few weeks. It was impossible. So I stuck to focusing on the stuff that would be more beneficial in the short run.”

“Clearly,” she said dryly.

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. *I don’t know why I even bother arguing with her. I should know by now that she’ll always have the last word.*

“The briar barrier around the keep only opens during the apex of the full or new moon, which will swiftly be upon us. These peace talks—the need is urgent, what with assassins trying to kill you every time I turn around and the growing insurrection in our court. We don’t want to be locked out of the keep. Who knows how things will have changed a fortnight from now?”

“Wait,” I said slowly, processing her words. “Does that mean once we’re inside the keep, we’ll be locked in with the Light court for a full two weeks?” My head spun with the possibilities. It would be good to see Cali again…and whichever Redwoods had accompanied her. *Like Rishika…*

But being cooped up in some magical keep for a fortnight with our supposed enemies didn’t exactly sound like a recipe for peace either.

Celeste shook her head. “We can leave whenever we please, but once we’re outside, we cannot return until the new moon phase. We don’t have any time to waste.”

And because I was going with Celeste—the proprietor of my promise—did that mean I would have no issues going? That’s what it seemed like. I couldn’t escape *her* alone. Right?

A loud knock sounded at the door, stalling the questions spooling through my mind.

“Enter,” Celeste called, her expression as stony and emotionless as ever.

A servant stepped in and bowed. “My ladies.”

“What is it?” Celeste asked.

“General Magan has arrived and wishes to speak with you, my lady,” the servant said, her gaze pointed in Celeste’s direction, though not quite making eye contact. The words had barely left the servant’s mouth when General Magan stepped into the room.

Magan bowed to Celeste, shooting me a small smile as she straightened.

“I’ve heard that peace talks are upon us,” Magan said to Celeste. “I hope you will allow me to attend. If there is finally an end in sight for this disagreement between the Light and Dark courts, I wish to see it happen.” Her gaze shifted to me. “Especially now that Kadmos’s heir has returned. Maybe there is hope after all.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest. After all of Celeste’s dark ruminations, Magan’s optimism was a welcome change.

“Of course you’ll be attending,” Celeste said. “In fact, I would like you to work with me to create the full contingent list.”

Magan nodded and started listing off names. “All of them will surely want to attend. They all have a stake in the war ending.”

Each name Magan rattled off was some noble or another that I’d heard of but hadn’t met. *Great. I’m going into the peace talks with a bunch of strangers.*

“And since Alekos Haseneau is too unwell to attend,” Magan added, “his health is in decline, you know—I think it best if his son, Kastian, attends in his stead.”

My heart dropped.

*How am I supposed to work toward peace if I’m too busy watching for a knife in my back?*

# **Episode 5316**

**Greyson**

I was so pissed off, I felt ready to burst out of my fucking skin. And there my brother was, standing there like an asshole, looking put out. Like *I* was the one creating a problem for *him*.

*He’s just gonna have to fucking deal. I’m not letting him wriggle his way out of this one. Not again. And if he tries to lie to me or deflect, I will* make *him tell me the truth. In whatever way it takes.*

The thought was so satisfying, I almost wished he’d lie to me. Then I could beat the truth out of him. Cali’s “mate” wouldn’t be such pretty arm candy after I was done with him. And honestly, even if I didn’t want to rearrange his face, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stop myself if he wasn’t real with me.

What he’d done wasn’t okay. Not one single part of this goddamn farce was okay. And he had to know that just as well as I did.

I half-expected him to keep playing dumb, but he apparently had an ounce of sense—or maybe it was just self-preservation—because he sighed and pushed past me into my room.

I turned, closing the door behind him, while I waited for him to speak. To answer for his behavior.

Finally, Xavier turned to look at me.

“You’re right.” He shrugged. “I didn’t answer you before because I wanted to avoid this. I wanted to avoid adding extra stress to everything else that was going on. I wanted one piece of this trip to not be a fucking nightmare dialed up to eleven.” He huffed, sounding genuinely pissed off. “Why does this even matter right now?”

Rage nearly blinded me. How fucking dare he act like *I* was the bad guy here. Like *I* was inconveniencing *him*.

My hands curled into tight fists. “It’s relevant because it’s always been relevant. You’re about to go off as Cali’s mate, in Cali’s world, in front of her people. And it should have been me. And you fucking know it. *I’m* the one who’s been here for her all this time. *I’m* the one who came to the Fae world with her the first time around. You took that from me the moment you called her your mate in front of everyone. There was a reason you spoke up. What is it?”

He seemed to be mulling over his answer, and with every second that slogged between us, my heart sped up, my blood boiling in my veins. *How could he do this to me? How could he fucking do this?*

This was worse than when he’d left me for dead in the Kollector’s zoo. Because at least back then, we didn’t have the understanding we did now. The bare minimum trust my brother and I had spent months working toward building.

And he’d thrown that all away the moment he’d claimed Cali as his.

“Fine,” he snapped. “I’ll say it. If Cali asked me to be with her, do you really think I’d ever deny her? Hell, if you were in my position, and the tables were turned, do you think you’d be able to deny her?”

I looked away. He and I both knew the answer to that one.

“This is complicated,” Xavier continued, letting out a harsh laugh. “Does it make you happy hearing this? Knowing that I’m as torn up as you are? Is that what you wanted to know? You wanted to see for yourself how hard it is for me to answer these questions in my own head, let alone outside of it. I hope you’re fucking happy.”

I glowered at him. “Do I look fucking happy?”

He shook his head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to go that far.” He sighed. “Listen, Greyson, I swear I’m not here for any of that. I’m only here to make sure Cali stays safe. And I know that’s all you want too.”

“It is,” I said, “but the thing is, I remember having to watch Cali walk away with you in the Fae world before.”

Xavier flinched, like he knew what was coming next.

“When you left me in that damn zoo,” I continued. “A hell of a dick move, by the way. I used to think nothing would ever top you leaving me for dead in some twisted Fae zoo, but you know what? I think recent events take the cake. And now here we are again, you walking away with Cali to be somewhere I can’t.”

He let out a ragged breath. “We don’t need to rehash the past. We’ve gone through this already, Greyson. You already know why I did that. I thought you were working with Silas. You would have done the exact same thing if you were in my shoes.”

I shook my head, savoring the moral high ground I had over my brother. “I don’t know what I’ve ever done to make you think I would ever leave you behind. Because I wouldn’t. Not like that. No matter how bad things were between us.”

Xavier just scoffed.

The sound had a catalytic effect—just like that, I could feel my rage boiling toward the surface, but before I could say anything else, Xavier shoved past me.

“Good talk.”

And just like that, he stormed out of my room and headed down the hall. I watched him go, fury mixing with disbelief.

*Fucking unbelievable.*

“Greyson?”

I turned to see Cali coming down the opposite end of the hall, heading toward me. She frowned at Xavier’s retreating back.

“Xavier was here?” she asked when she reached me.

“Yup.”

“Why? What were you two talking about?”

I pulled her toward me. I didn’t want her looking at Xavier, worrying about Xavier. Not when I was here, right in front of her.

“We weren’t talking about anything,” I murmured into her hair. “Just some last-minute stuff we needed to take care of before we leave.”

Cali nodded, wrapping her arms around me and burrowing her face in my chest. I couldn’t tell if she actually believed me, but either way she seemed content to not question things further. I tried not to read deeper into that. Tried not to think about her taking on this dangerous task with Xavier—as her *official* mate—while I was stuck in the shadows.

*It should have been me. It should have been me.* The pathetic, fury-laced words played on a goddamn loop in my mind. I just couldn’t seem to get past it—the disappointment, the hurt and anger, the sense that my brother had taken something important from me.

*Get a grip*, I told myself. *It’s not like this is the first time you and Xavier have been at odds over Cali. Leave the jealousy behind and focus on how you can continue to protect her.*

One thing was certain: I might not be her mate while she was in the spotlight, but hell would freeze over before I’d let her go on this dangerous journey with only Xavier as her protector. I’d be there every step of the way, watching her back, protecting her in whatever small way I could.

“You won’t forget I’m waiting for you while you’re doing the whole Fae thing, right?” The words slipped out before I could reel them back in. *What the hell is wrong with me?* It was like my emotions had taken control of my brain, my entire goddamn body.

Cali pulled back and looked up at me in shock. “How could I ever forget you?” She tilted her head up to kiss me, and I possessively wrapped my arms around her, drinking in every second of the kiss. I was a man possessed by a single need: to protect what was mine.

And Cali was mine. That was certain. And I wouldn’t let Xavier take her away from me.

The kiss heated up, fueled by my desperation, but Cali met me beat for beat, holding onto me just as tightly. Like she needed this just as much as I did.

I’d give her everything she wanted—and then some. I’d take everything she was willing to give me.

Someone behind me cleared their throat, and Cali froze in my arms. I stepped back to turn and look at whoever the fuck had interrupted us. If we were back in the human world, I’d have ignored them. But here was yet another reminder that we weren’t in my world. That I wasn’t calling the shots here.

A servant was standing behind me.

“I’m sorry to, um, interrupt,” the servant said delicately. “I’ve come to collect Lady Caliana. It’s time for her to depart. The carriage is ready, and the rest of the household is waiting.”

Cali turned to me, a pained smile stretching her kiss-swollen lips. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

I nodded and watched her walk away. With each step, the distance between us grew, and my stomach coiled with unease. Deep in my gut, I couldn’t help feeling like something was about to go terribly wrong.

# **Episode 5317**

I hated to leave Greyson in his room. It felt wrong to be doing this without him. To be embarking upon this journey without my mate at my side.

*But you will have your mate at your side*, I reminded myself. *Just not the one you were expecting.*

My belly flipped at the thought. Something like excitement bubbled up inside me, along with a healthy dose of guilt for feeling that way. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I knew that truth deep in my bones. Greyson was supposed to be the one who came with me. And Xavier… Well, thanks to the *due destini* curse wreaking its usual brand of havoc, it was probably for the best that Xavier was my “official” mate—if only so I didn’t have to add literally losing my mind to the list of concerns at the peace summit. But it didn’t change the fact that it felt wrong to not have Greyson here beside me, even if being with Xavier felt right in its own, different way.

*Glad to know things are as confusing as ever!*

I blew out a breath as I followed the servant to the outer court, where I found most of the delegation waiting for me, including Xavier. The delegation from the Light Fae court wasn’t large, but I recognized representatives from each of the prominent families.

My traitorous heart skipped a beat when Xavier’s eyes met mine. *He looks amazing.* I never would have guessed that the fancy court clothing of the Light Fae would fit him so well. It was in stark contrast to his usual way of dressing—he’d never have opted for something so tight-fitting when he knew he might have to fight. And yet, he *almost* fit in perfectly among the Fae delegation. He even had the same look of mild irritation I saw on the faces around him.

*What’s he got to be so pissy about?* As frustrated as I was with him, I couldn’t deny he looked damn good, and that only made me even more frustrated.

My grandmother stood at the head of the group and gestured for me to join her there. Once I was at her side, she turned to face the rest of the delegation. “Everyone here has been given permission to join the delegation for peace talks between the Light and Dark Fae courts—”

“Even the wolf?” someone called out. I tried to tell who it was, but even though the group was small, I couldn’t make out who’d spoken.

Hera glared at the crowd. “Yes, even the wolf has been permitted to join.”

*The wolf has a name*, I thought bitterly. I glanced over at Xavier, who still had that look of mild irritation plastered across his face. Like nobody had said anything. And certainly not anything that maligned him based entirely on his species.

“Come, Caliana,” my grandmother said as she began walking away. “The carriage awaits us.” She didn’t give anyone else a chance to speak or to voice their complaints, which was probably for the best, all things considered.

I turned, intending to call out to Xavier to follow after us, but he’d already made his way over to me. When we reached the carriage my grandmother paused, like she was considering telling Xavier he couldn’t join us.

Then she gave him a tight smile and a nod. “Let’s be off.”

And, with that, the three of us climbed into the carriage.

A long carriage ride with my grandmother and Xavier. I couldn’t imagine the pieces of my life clashing in a more awkward way. *I hope this carriage ride doesn’t take too long.* We were going to run out of things to talk about in two minutes or less.

The minutes passed in an increasingly tense silence before the carriage finally started to move. Still, nobody spoke, and I didn’t feel like being the one to force a conversation that nobody wanted to have.

Instead, I mind linked to Greyson. *Are you close?*

His answer was immediate. *We’re bringing up the rear. Don’t worry, love. I’ll see you soon. I don’t think the journey to the keep is a long one.*

I let out a quiet sigh of relief. There was one thing going right. Finally. And the look on Greyson’s face when I’d left him earlier haunted me a little less now that I knew for sure he’d be with me during the peace summit, whether or not he was deemed my “official” mate.

I glanced at Xavier, who was staring out the carriage window, presumably watching for any incoming threats. Or maybe he was just dissociating from the tension of being front and center under my grandmother’s scrutiny.

He hadn’t said a word to me, verbally or through the mind link. And that was fine. I was still pretty upset about our fight. Upset at him, for continuing to make choices for me. And upset at myself, for allowing my boundaries to slip around him again and again.

And from the look of things, I wasn’t going to be getting much space from Xavier for the near future. As my mate and protector, he’d want to stick by my side whenever possible, and since he’d blurted out our bond, he pretty much had a free pass to be glued to me.

*Which is just great.*

I pulled in a deep breath and turned to my grandmother. I needed a distraction, or I’d keep ruminating on Xavier the whole way there.

“So, what can we expect during the peace summit?” I asked.

“The Dark Fae court will be sending a delegation just as we have, representatives from the more prominent families. Once we’re settled into our respective areas of the keep, we’ll likely spend a few days talking through terms.” Hera’s expression tightened. “And those terms *will not* involve any kind of marriage. I was serious. We’ve already given up a generation of our family to this war, and disastrous consequences followed. I won’t give up another one.” She gave me a stiff smile. “All you need to do is hold your head high as a Wrenthorn.”

My answering smile was weak. *Right. The marriage contract.* I’d almost forgotten about *that* particular term amidst all the tension between Xavier and Greyson. *There so much to look forward to at this peace summit*, I thought glumly.

*But it’s worth it. If it gives us a chance to free Artemis, then all this bullshit will be worth it.*

“Do you know anything about the Dark Fae delegation?” I asked Hera.

I had to assume Artemis would be in attendance if she was able. Even if Artemis wasn’t the alleged heir—which seemed pretty unlikely—I knew she got my message, so she’d see me soon. One way or another, I would get my sister out of there.

“Celeste will attend, naturally. She’s the current leader of the Dark Fae court. She and I have not historically gotten along, nor have the Mauvaises and the Wrenthorns, but Celeste and I have always been similar in our support of our families.”

My brows rose at the respect coloring my grandmother’s tone. From everything I’d heard about Celeste, I assumed she was nothing more than a cunning, coldhearted bitch. Maybe there was more to her than that.

“I do think Celeste would be very interested to learn about your companions, one in particular,” Hera added. “Please take care not to call any attention to her husband.”

I nodded. From what I’d gathered, Celeste had been trying to get Adair back under her thumb for a very long time now. I had to wonder if these peace talks would go up in flames if she found out he was traveling with us, trying to get Artemis back.

Another silence settled over the carriage, but it didn’t last long. Soon, the carriage rolled to a stop. *That definitely wasn’t a long journey at all.* I pulled back the curtains on the window and peered outside to take in our surroundings. I couldn’t even see the keep itself—it was surrounded by a massive wall of thorny briars.

*It’s like something out of a fairy tale.*

I turned back to Hera. “Are you sure we’ll be able to get out once we go in?”

She nodded. “We will. Don’t worry about that.”

We disembarked from the carriage, and I mind linked with Greyson. *Are you close?* The journey hadn’t been long at all, but that didn’t mean that his travels would have been as smooth as mine.

*We’re right behind you*, he replied. *We’ll follow you inside the barrier once it’s open.*

Anticipation coiled tight in my belly. This was it. This was what we’d come here for. What all the bloodshed and mate drama and playing games with courtiers had led to. We couldn’t mess this up. We had to pull this off.

I pulled in a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

Once we stepped through this gate, I’d finally be able to find my sister.

# **Episode 5318**

**Artemis**

I stepped out of the carriage I’d shared with Celeste and looked up at the massive briar walls surrounding the keep. I couldn’t even see the building within through the thick barrier. I couldn’t believe how quickly this was all happening. The whole thing made my head spin.

Just a few hours ago, we were still at the Dark Fae court arguing over whether or not I’d get to attend the peace summit, and now we were here, at Briarkeep.

*It’s happening. I’m about to see my sister.* A million other variables nagged at my mind. Trying to broker peace. Presenting myself to both courts at Kadmos’s heir, a child of both Light and Dark, proof of the possibilities of peace. And then there were the assassins. Had they followed me here? Kastian was here. If he was truly one of them, then what better time to try to finish the job and finally kill me? It would be a hell of a symbolic win and a literal win for the Order. Killing Kadmos’s heir. Stopping the peace talks using my blood.

My stomach twisted in anticipation—dread, excitement, or fear, I wasn’t sure. All three were tangled up inside me, fighting for dominance.

I didn’t realize I’d been standing stiffly, staring up at the massive wall of briar in front of me until Celeste nudged me from behind. “You have to move forward. The way is open.”

It was then that I saw a gap was indeed open in the wall, just large enough for a full grown Fae to enter through. It was cleverly disguised—if Celeste hadn’t pointed it out, I might not have seen it at all.

I pulled in a deep breath, summoned up my courage, and stepped through the briar wall and onto the grounds of the keep.

Despite the looming presence of the briar wall from the outside, it took only a few steps through the dense and dark barrier to make it through to the other side. The keep itself was just up ahead, beyond a copse of trees.

We were here. Through the barrier and about to embark on peace talks with the Light Fae. *I’m about to see Cali again.*

I glanced at Celeste, who was at my side now that we’d made it through the wall. The rest of the delegation from the Dark Fae court was coming in behind us.

“Have the Light Fae arrived yet?”

“That seems to be the case.” Celeste nodded toward the horses tied up in front of the keep.

I forced my boldest smile and strode toward the keep. “Then what are we waiting for?”

Celeste rolled her eyes, keeping pace with me. “Your commitment to decorum is inspiring, as always.”

As we walked inside the keep, which was surprisingly well lit with strategically placed torches and long, narrow windows, Celeste guided us toward the great hall, where the delegation from the Light Fae court were waiting for us.

I stopped short, my eyes scanning the group. I recognized Hera, my grandmother, at the head of the delegation, which wasn’t surprising. Our eyes met, and she looked at me blankly, as if she’d never seen me before in her life.

*It’s good to see you too, Grandma*. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Court politics seemed to be alive and well. As I scanned the rest of the delegation, my gaze landed on Cali and Xavier, both dressed in the fine clothing of the court. It took all my years of keeping my true feelings locked beneath the surface to stop myself from striding forward, a grin splitting my face, and pulling Cali into my arms.

Still, my body betrayed me the slightest bit, and I swayed forward. A hand on my arm pulled me back, and Kastian’s voice whispered low in my ear, “Do you see her? The alleged heir to the Wrenthorn family? What do you know of her?”

I resisted the urge to shove him away, to threaten to gut him if he so much as looked at my sister the wrong way. But, protective instincts aside, his question gave me pause. Cali was an unknown quantity here. Nobody but Hera and Xavier knew that she was my sister.

*And it’s best if I keep it that way.* At least half the people here would probably want me dead, Order affiliations aside, and if any of them knew how important Cali was to me, that’d just put a target on her back.

*I need to be careful. Cali came here to free me. I can’t put her in any further danger to make that happen.*

“Lady Wrenthorn.” Celeste stepped forward with a bow. “It is an honor to be in your presence today, and to discuss how our peoples might move forward into a place of peace.”

Hera stepped forward as well, curtseying. “Lady Mauvais. What a pleasure to see you. The years have been kind—you don’t seem to have aged a day since last we met. I look forward to conferring together on what kind of hopeful future our people may have.”

My brows rose at the greetings. Despite everything I’d learned about court appearances and playing the game, these two sounded genuine in their kind greetings. Still, it was impossible to ignore the tension simmering in the air, if not between Hera and Celeste, then between the members of the two delegations. We were on opposite sides of a long and storied conflict, and there was no forgetting that for even a second.

But I couldn’t focus on that right now. The only thing that mattered was getting a few minutes alone with Cali. Away from prying eyes.

Low voices behind me cut into my thoughts, and I thought I heard my mother’s name.

I casually shifted so I could glance over my shoulder without drawing attention to myself. Near the back, at the edge of our delegation, a couple Dark Fae I didn’t recognize were whispering together.

“That Light Fae, Orla Wrenthorn, never honored her marriage,” one of them hissed. “She barely waited two ticks after Kadmos died to sully herself with a human.”

“It’s disgusting,” the other said. “A slap in the face of every member of the Dark Fae court. That’s what that girl represents.”

I followed their gazes to Cali, standing near the front of the Light Fae delegation with Xavier by her side.

*Shit.* Cali and I would have to be extra careful, and not just to avoid tipping off Celeste or the Order. It seemed at least some of the attendees here at the peace summit had their own reasons for hating Cali. The last thing we wanted to do was give them any extra ammunition.

Suddenly, people started moving around me, and I realized I’d missed the rest of the greeting. Celeste was back at my side, pushing me toward the east wing of the keep along with the rest of the Dark Fae.

Celeste deposited me into an empty guest room. “This will be yours for the duration of the talks,” she said. “It would be in your best interest to stay here as much as possible for your own safety. You’ll attend the talks, of course,” she added, clearly anticipating my arguing. “But outside of negotiations, it would likely be best to keep a low profile.”

I frowned, only half-listening. “Okay. Sounds good.”

Celeste raised a brow. Clearly, she’d been expecting more of a battle. She sighed and headed to the door. “I need to see to the other members of our delegation. Just…don’t do anything stupid, Artemis. Remember, we’re here to broker peace.”

And with that fun little warning, she was gone.

I didn’t give much thought to Celeste’s words, though. I was too caught up worrying about Cali.

*Did I make a mistake in asking her to come?* It had never occurred to me how dangerous it might be for Cali, the half-Fae daughter of Orla Wrenthorn, to return to the Fae world.

I’d have to deal with that too, as Orla’s other daughter. The one who was supposed to fix the war.

But, for now, I was finally alone. Maybe this was my chance to find Cali so we could have an actual conversation. If only I knew where the hell to go.

*Godsdammit. Fae sisters should have their own version of mind linking. It’s really unfair.*

I stepped lightly into the hallway, peering up and down the corridor before continuing toward the west wing.

A pair of voices carried from around a corner, and I stepped into a shallow niche, hoping to avoid being noticed when they passed by.

Two members of the Light Fae delegation turned the corner.

“…there are too many of the Fae against the human part of this halfling,” one of them was saying.

*They’re talking about Cali!* I strained to hear more.

“Plus, she’s tainted herself by being with that wolf. It’s disgusting. But that’s all the more reason we need to act quickly. If we can get this done and over with, everything will work out. The people will have no choice but to follow once it’s finished.”

That was all I needed to hear. I stepped forward, ready to demand those two tell me exactly what the hell they were planning for my sister.

A voice at my ear stopped me in my tracks. “I thought you would have learned to watch your back by now.”

# **Episode 5319**

**Xavier**

I walked through the halls of the keep, following the directions of the servant who had pointed me toward the guest room I’d be staying in during the peace talks. I had the impression it was his job to escort me to my room, but based on the way he hadn’t even managed to make eye contact with me, I had to assume he was too freaked out about being left alone with “the werewolf.”

I sighed. *It’s gonna be a long few days.*

Peace would be hard-won, if the tension in the great hall had been any indication. As pleasant as Hera and Celeste had been in their greetings, I was a little shocked the meeting hadn’t come to blows. You could cut the tension in that room with a knife, and there was so much of it that I couldn’t tell what was the age-old enmity between the two courts, what was directed at me, and what was directed at Artemis and Cali.

It went without saying that anyone who had an issue with Cali was going to also have an issue with me. A very painful one.

I’d tried to speak with Cali after the meet and greet was over, but Hera had whisked her away before I’d even gotten a word in.

I pulled at my sleeve for the hundredth time since the servants at Hera’s palace had laced me into my ridiculous court clothes. The fabric was soft enough, but it was tight. Restrictive. A constant reminder that I was so far out of my comfort zone it was a fucking joke.

I hated being here. Every damn second I’d spent in the Fae world so far had been one nightmare after another, whether it was fighting Dark Fae or torturing myself over my feelings for Cali.

I was going to stick around, of course. Cali needed me, and I wasn’t going to bail on her. Even if I wasn’t on the hook to present myself to the courts as her one and only mate, I still needed to stay close to her so the *due destini* wouldn’t drive her literally insane.

Still, I couldn’t wait to get back to the regular world. The world I had an iota of control over. Even if I had my own problems waiting for me there. Everything had gone upside down since we’d arrived here. I was fighting with Cali, and who knew what the hell was going on with Greyson. Nothing about this felt right. Nothing about this was comfortable or easy. It felt like every time I turned around, there was some new problem rearing its head.

I was just around the corner from my room when two members of the Light Fae delegation stepped into my path.

I pulled in a deep breath, keeping my expression neutral. *What fresh hell are these two about to dish out?*

One of the Fae stepped up and got in my face. “Animals aren’t allowed to walk the halls of Briarkeep,” he hissed. “Or, they shouldn’t be.”

The other Fae laughed.

“Are you practicing your comedy routine or something?” I asked. “If so, I’m gonna pass on the show.”

I tried to step around the duo, but they moved so that, once again, they were in my way. Fucking idiots apparently had no clue that they were in one of the most dangerous places a person could be.

Clearly, they needed a hint.

I grabbed one by the collar and partially shifted so my razor-sharp claws dug into the Fae’s chest. His blood was hot as it streamed down his front around my fingertips.

He cried out, but I clapped my other hand—also partially shifted, my claws glinting in the torchlight—over his mouth.

My voice dropped to a whisper. “I know a fun game. How about we see how fast I can rip you apart?”

The guy tugged at my hand, but he seemed too scared to speak again, so I shifted my hand back, wiped my fingertips on his shirt, and then dropped him to the ground. The two Fae scrambled off, and I watched them go, shaking my head. Once they were gone, I continued on to my room.

*Hopefully that’s not going to bite me in the ass in the future.*

I knew what those two were up to—they’d been trying to get a rise out of me so I’d fuck up and ruin the peace summit by going on some wild rampage. Acting like the feral animal they obviously thought I was.

I’d never do that to Cali. If shit went wrong while we were here—and I had a sinking feeling that it might—at least it wouldn’t be my fault.

I’d barely arrived at my room—a nondescript guest room—when a knock sounded at the door. I opened it, surprised to find Cali standing there.

“You could have mind linked,” I said. “I would have come to see you. You didn’t have to come all this way.”

I actually had no idea how far away her room was, which was more than a little annoying. How the hell was I supposed to protect her if I didn’t know where to find her?

Cali shook her head. “I’d rather do it this way. Mind linking doesn’t seem appropriate with everything that’s going on between us right now.”

My brows rose. “Wow. Let me guess: This is another one of your shiny new boundaries, huh?”

She frowned. “Xavier—”

“*Cali*, mind linking is part of our connection. We should be using it if it’s convenient to do so. Who cares about what’s appropriate or not when there’re all these Fae running around with their own agendas, and I’m practically your only ally? Not to mention, we’re mates.” The reminder was probably unnecessary, but it seemed more and more like she wanted to forget that little fact. “Mind linking is what mates do.”

“Not us,” she said simply. Like everything I’d just said meant jack shit to her. “Not right now. You’re right—this is a boundary I’m setting, and you should honor it.”

“Do I get to have any kind of say in this stuff at all?” I asked. “Come on, Cali. I know you’re feeling the same thing I am. How the hell does setting up all these arbitrary boundaries help with anything?”

“It’s helping me focus on what’s important!” she snapped. “I’m here to bring Artemis home. Are you going to help me with that or not?”

Guilt nagged at me, but probably not as much as Cali hoped it would. “Of course I’m here to help you. It’s the only reason I’m here at all.” I wished she could bring herself to remember that. It seemed like all she wanted to do was put up walls between us when we were supposed to be working as a team. As mates. The whole damn delegation knew why I was here—so how the hell did keeping me at arm’s length help her focus anyway?

I sucked in a deep breath. Cali was just standing there, looking unconvinced. Like she was waiting for me to give her a reason to put up another new boundary.

*Fine. If that’s how she wants to play this.*

I cleared my throat. “I did hear that the Dark Fae delegation is staying in the east wing, so that’s probably the best place for us to start our search, right?”

*See? I can help. I’m not totally useless.*

She nodded. “That’s good to know. We should inform the others since they’re here on the inside too. I want to see Artemis, but I want to set them up as advantageously as possible so they can help her too. We can’t forget them.”

*Translation, she can’t forget Greyson.* I ground my teeth together. *I wonder how many boundaries my brother has to deal with?*

We headed down the hall, presumably to arrange a meet-up with the others. Another silence settled between us, and it grated as much as all of Cali’s rules did. Since when did my mate not even want to talk to me?

I had to break the silence.

“What did Hera want to talk about?”

She shrugged. “There’s just a lot of unexpected pressure that I wasn’t really prepared for but now I’ll have to deal with.”

“Oh.” I wished I had a better response. Wished that I could help her feel better about all of this, but I had no idea what would break one of her new rules.

“Just the person I was looking for!”

We turned to see a member of the Dark Fae delegation striding down the hall toward us.

Cali glanced at me, a question in her eyes, but I just shrugged. I’d never seen this guy in my life.

The Fae stopped in front of us and bowed. “Hello, Lady Caliana. I am Kastian Haseneau. It’s such a pleasure to meet my bride-to-be.”

My body tensed, and it took every ounce of self-control I had not to deck the guy right then and there. *Who the hell does this guy think he is? Cali’s not marrying anyone. At least, not any smug Dark Fae.*

Cali’s voice slipped through my mind. *Calm down. It’s not like I’m actually going to marry him.*

*Oh, so now we can mind link?* I snarked. *Stay next to me. This guy won’t do shit if I’m here.*

She stepped closer to me, a detail that Kastian didn’t miss. He looked from Cali’s face to mine, clearly doing the mental math. Then he shrugged, smiling.

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand me, my lady. I don’t care if you keep your wolf on the side. This is a political marriage, after all.”

**Episode 5320**

*Kastian? As in the Kastian who is really a marriage candidate Kastian?*

Maybe there were a bunch of Fae named Kastian, for all I knew. It could’ve been possible. But based on the way he was dressed, it was clear he was from the Dark Fae delegation. And based on the way he didn’t seem at all worried about the possibility of Xavier literally ripping his face off, he didn’t seem to be the kind of guy who was accustomed to hearing the word *no*. It reeked of privilege.

*He has to be who Adair mentioned…unless he’s just some other prick.*

Xavier’s arm slipped around me, holding me just a little too tight. I leaned into the possessive gesture. Whether Kastian was capable of accepting the truth or not, he wasn’t going to be my…well, my *anything*. Certainly not my husband.

*It feels good to be in Xavier’s arms again.* In this moment, with Kastian staring us down, I could admit that to myself. *It feels right.* It wasn’t like I was breaking a boundary. Xavier was protecting me. He was doing his job, fulfilling the reason he’d come here in the first place. And I was letting him. That was all this was.

But rather than taking the not-so-subtle hint, Kastian just raised a brow. “As I said before, keep the wolf. I really don’t care. The marriage would be for show. We’ll both have our fun on the side.”

Before I could react to just how gross that was, Kastian turned on his heel and started walking away. “I’ll see you both at the peace talks!” he called over his shoulder. And then he rounded the corner and was gone just as abruptly as he’d arrived.

I stared at the place where he’d been standing, rather dumbfounded by the whole thing. *Is he really that oblivious? Or is he just that stubborn?*

Either way, Kastian was nothing like what I’d expected when those Light Fae had told me I’d have to get married. I’d barely even clocked the fact that he was young and handsome, the kind of guy who had to have plenty of options. And his demeanor was totally disarming—although, not in the charismatic, winning-me-over kind of way. More like the *I think he’s a sociopath who couldn’t care less about me, for better or worse*, kind of way.

His sheer apathy was what shocked me the most, I realized. That anyone could so casually talk about marriage and infidelity in the same sentence. That I’d be the means to an end. That our marriage would be nothing more than a box to be checked. And not because he hated me. Hatred, revenge—I could understand those motivations.

But political motivation? Cold, calculating bids for power? That was something I could never understand.

And suddenly, I felt in over my head for a whole new reason.

Next to me, I could practically see the wheels spinning in Xavier’s head. He was trying to hold himself back from going after Kastian, but I knew that look. He was fighting a losing battle.

I pushed my worries about Kastian away and focused on Xavier. He needed to get a hold of himself before he did something we’d all regret.

I put a hand on his arm. “Take a breath.”

He pulled my hand down so it was enveloped between both of his and squeezed it once. “I’m not going to make this worse. But I really wish I could go kick that guy’s ass.”

I pulled my hand out of Xavier’s and stepped back. Kastian was gone, so we didn’t need to put on an act. I couldn’t allow myself to get used to being this close to Xavier, no matter how much I’d enjoyed it in the moment. I had Artemis to think about. And Greyson.

I tried to rekindle my frustration with Xavier, all the resentment I’d felt during the journey to Briarkeep, or earlier, when I’d stopped by his room. It had been easy enough to focus on the distance then. But now?

Now, all I wanted to do was slip back into his arms and forget about everything else.

I cleared my throat. “We should go find Greyson and the others.”

To my surprise, Xavier didn’t push back. He shuttered his expression and nodded. “Let’s go.”

We continued down the hall, and I mind linked with Greyson.

*Where are you?* I knew he’d made it through the barrier earlier, but I wasn’t sure where he’d ended up. The keep itself and the surrounding grounds weren’t *that* large, were they? Hopefully, Greyson, Rishika, and the rest of the group had managed to find a decent place to hide.

*We’ve set up camp in a space in the forest near the entrance to the briar wall. Can you come to us?*

I visualized the layout of the keep and its surrounding grounds. *We’re on our way.*

I relayed their location to Xavier, and we made our way out of the keep and onto the grounds. This place was utterly surreal. The magic in the air was so thick, you could practically taste it. The keep itself was a constant reminder of what we were doing here. What was at stake if we failed.

That was what Hera had wanted to talk to me about. She’d wanted to make sure I understood just how important this meeting would be. How many lives could be saved if I played my role well. It was so much more pressure than I knew how to deal with. I’d come here to save my sister. And hey, if we managed to broker peace for the Fae world along the way, then all the better.

I should have known better than to think I wouldn’t get caught up in something so much bigger than bringing Artemis home. Since when did anything ever go smoothly and according to plan? Only now, instead of just getting in and saving my sister, now I was somehow responsible for a cease-fire while keeping Xavier in line, making sure Greyson and the others didn’t get caught, saving Artemis, *and* staying out of a marriage contract?

*What even is my life?*

We made it to the encampment in the forest and found Greyson waiting for us alongside Rishika and Tabitha.

“Where are Adair and Marius?” Xavier asked.

“They’re scoping out the interior and making sure everything is fine on the Dark Fae side,” Greyson said. “How’s the general feeling in the keep? The delegations met up, right? Does it feel like this summit is actually going to lead to anything?”

I’d tried to keep Greyson updated as once we’d entered the keep, so he knew about the meet and greet. I sighed. “I hope so—”

“I don’t think so,” Xavier cut in.

I glared at him. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “Come on, you could feel the tension in there just as much as I could. That is not a group that wants to get along. Hell, even if they wanted to, with all the years of fighting, they probably don’t even know *how* to create peace.”

Greyson nodded, like he’d suspected as much. “That sucks, but it’s only our problem insofar as it could get in the way of getting out of here. Are there any threats in particular that you’ve picked up on? Anything or anyone that could become a problem for us specifically?”

“Well, I did meet the guy some of the delegation wants to marry me off to. Kastian.” I shrugged. “I’m not worried about him.”

“That fucker.” Greyson’s growl made goosebumps rise on my skin, and my eyes widened. He sounded absolutely livid.

“Obviously I’m not actually going to marry him,” I added. “Really, he doesn’t even care. Just ask Xavier.”

Greyson looked to his brother, and Xavier shrugged. “He’s an asshole, but I can handle him.”

Greyson nodded and then pulled me in for a hug. I savored the embrace as much as I could while we were in the middle of a strategy meeting.

When I pulled back, Greyson had his game face on again. “We should try to keep meeting once or twice a day to make sure everyone’s on the same page. If you can’t meet up, for whatever reason, Cali, then mind link with me and keep me updated that way.”

We all agreed to this new plan, and Xavier and I headed back to the keep before someone missed us. Again, silence settled between us. It was thick and awkward, and I was getting sick of it. But, more than that, I didn’t want to fight with him anymore. And I had no idea what he was thinking.

As we stepped inside the keep, Xavier broke the silence. “I think I need to apologize. I didn’t mean to overstep earlier. I promise to respect the boundaries you’ve set.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. It was what I’d told him I wanted, and yet…

It wasn’t really what I wanted at all.

I opened my mouth to speak when a pained howl echoed through the air. *That sounds like Greyson!*

**Episode 5321**

**Greyson**

I woke up slowly, with a groan of pain. My head was throbbing, and my body ached. It took me a moment to realize why—I had slept scrunched a tight ball. The pain pounding in my temples made it hard to think, but I tried to recall where I was.

Nothing came to me.

I opened my eyes, but even that didn’t help, because it was dark as night, and I could barely see where I was.

Pushing myself to a sitting position, I heard a sudden clunk of metal hitting metal.

I stopped, my heart thudding.

What the hell was going on?

I felt suddenly alert and clear-headed, and when I tried to shift my body, I felt a sharp pain shooting up my arms.

Hissing, I looked down, peering into the dark, and when my eyes finally adjusted, I saw what was causing the pain—manacles around my wrists and ankles. Silver manacles. They were rubbing against my skin, making it burn like fire.

Dammit. Wherever the hell I was, this meant that I wasn’t going to be able to shift. So, I was going to have to figure out where I was and get my bearings.

The space around me was so cramped I was barely able to sit up, but I managed it. I ran my hands over the walls, which felt cold and smooth. It was iron, or some other kind of metal. Maybe a shipping container?

No, it couldn’t be that. This was the Fae world.

I kept exploring the walls until the texture changed beneath my hand. There was something carved into the metal. I squinted; there were runes of some kind, soldered into the walls.

I didn’t know what, but I was sure the runes meant something. I looked around, trying to piece it all together—I had to be in some kind of prison, but then why…

Suddenly I realized that while I was sitting still, the space around me was tilting back and forth. No, not tilting—rocking. I was moving.

*Shit*.

Okay, I had to think. If I was in transit, where was I going?

I tried to shift to the other side of the small space to see if the walls there held more clues, but as I moved along the floor, I bumped into something soft and warm.

What the hell was that?

Reaching out, I felt hair, and drew my hand quickly back. It was a person.

Someone groaned, then muttered. The words didn’t mean anything, but I recognized the voice.

“Rishika!” I hissed, reaching out to shake her awake.

She groaned again and pushed herself to sitting, her own manacles clanking as she moved.

“What happened?” she murmured. She tried to put her hand to her head but stopped when the manacles caught. She looked at them in confusion, then in horror. “Greyson?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I said into the dark. I could see her eyes darting around, trying to figure understand what the fuck was happening. Just like I’d been trying to do since I opened my eyes.

“Where are we?” she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Hell if I know,” I muttered to myself.

“Greyson?”

“I don’t know where we are,” I said honestly, “but I do know that we’re being moved somewhere else.”

Rishika gasped. “Those Fae! They attacked us?”

I frowned. “What Fae? What are you talking about?”

“You don’t remember?” she asked, her voice higher than usual.

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. I shook my head, though it made the pain worse. “I remember I was leaving Cali, and then there was a fight, but then…nothing.” A blank space like that was rare for me, and I didn’t like that I couldn’t remember. “What the fuck happened?”

“You were attacked,” she said.

“*What?* What happened?”

Rishika took a shaking breath. “Two Fae attacked you. They knocked you out. You just fell…almost instantly. And then I ran over to help you…” She shook her head. “They must have overpowered me, too.”

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath. I rubbed my temples, not that it helped with the pain. “Who was it, though? Who would do this to us?”  
 Rishika was quiet for a moment. “It has to be the Dark Fae, right? We were at the peace talks with Hera and the Light Fae, so we must have looked aligned with them. Maybe the Dark Fae are trying to make some kind of political move?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly.

“You don’t think so?” Rishika asked.

I tried to think it through. I understood why Rishika might assume kidnapping us was a political move—the Fae world was powered by grudges, betrayals, and political agendas—but she was right, I didn’t think so. “What would the Dark Fae gain by kidnapping two werewolves? You know how the Fae feel about wolves. We were at the peace talks, but anyone could see we had nothing to do with them. And everyone has to know that Hera doesn’t give a shit about us. So she couldn’t be blackmailed.”

“But Cali could.”

I looked quickly over at Rishika. “Shit,” I breathed. She was right. Cali *could* be blackmailed. My heart sank. Was that the plan? Had we been kidnapped so someone could blackmail my mate?

Before I could even come close to answering that question, we stopped moving. Rishika and I braced ourselves as best we could as whatever conveyance we were in came to a stop.

We listened hard and heard the sound of people jumping to the ground. There was a rumble of voices and then a metallic screech as the door to our prison opened.

Rishika and I blinked into the sudden light and saw two muscley Fae standing in the tiny opening. They didn’t speak but gestured roughly for me to come out.

I didn’t move.

One of them made an angry noise and reached in, grabbing my arm.

“Get off!” I snarled, jerking my arm away. My range of motion was limited, but when the Fae came close again, I brought my clasped hands up and clocked him under the chin, making his head snap back.

He roared with pain and lunged at me, and in a split second I saw that he was holding a knife, and it was silver. Not wanting to get cut, I pulled quickly back.

*Don’t fight*, I mind linked to Rishika, gritting my teeth with rage. *It’s not worth us losing our lives.*

*Greyson—*

*I’ll figure it out*, I assured her. *I’ll figure out how to get us free. Just don’t fight. They’ve got silver, and there’s no way these assholes would use their blood to save us.*

*Okay.*

Before I could say anything else, I felt a pair of hands grasp me around the neck, holding me still, and another pair shove something onto my head. Instantly, it burned a circle around the crown of my head, and I screamed again. It felt like every nerve in my body was on fire.

*Rishika—*

Fuck. Trying to mind link made pain shoot through my skull like a thousand silver knives.

I carefully lifted a hand to touch whatever was on my head, but I jerked my hand away as it burned my fingers. Whatever the fuck it was, it was silver. I was lucky as hell it hadn’t cut me, but it was stopping me from mind linking.

Damn these Fae bastards.

I closed my eyes as pain ricocheted through me. Hands grabbed me and pulled me roughly to my feet. I felt my clothes being stripped off me, but I couldn’t even think of fighting back. The pain was overwhelming.

Someone shoved me, and I hit a rough wall—brick. I opened my eyes to see a spray of water shooting at me. When it hit me, my body went into shock—it was freezing cold, and the spray had the force of a fucking firehose.

I let out a ferocious roar and raised my hands to protect my face, but it was over as fast as it started.

The muscle-bound Fae stepped forward and shoved something into my hands. When I looked down, I only had time to register that it was a set of clothes before he dragged me toward a metal door and threw me into another room.

I stood for a moment, breathing hard, trying to order my thoughts.

The next moment the door opened again, and Rishika stumbled in. She was naked and dripping wet, also holding some wrinkled clothes.

She was also wearing what looked like a laurel crown on her head, only it was made of glinting metal. Silver. I must be wearing her crown’s twin on my own head.

The threat of silver was primal, so I didn’t even think before I reached up to pull it from her head, but I stopped myself from touching it, worried that trying to move it would cut her. She must have felt the same fear, because she wrenched away from me, and I pulled my hand back.

“I’m sorry, Rishika,” I gasped. “I’m sorry.”

She was shaking now, maybe with cold, maybe with fear, maybe with pain. “Let’s just leave them where they are for now,” she said quietly.

“Fine,” I said, nodding.

I pulled on my clothes and looked around.

Rishika did the same. “Where the fuck are we?”

I didn’t know the answer to that question, but I didn’t even have time to tell her that much before the metal door opened again.

“*I* am happy to answer that question.”

**Episode 5322**

I spun around, my heart thudding hard in my chest. “Did you hear that? That was Greyson. I heard his howl—I’d know it anywhere. Did you hear it?” I demanded, looking up at Xavier.

When he didn’t answer, I started back, running the way we’d come.

Xavier followed me. “Cali, my brother can handle himself.”

I shot him an angry look. “And?”

He didn’t answer.

My heart was pounding hard in my chest. *Greyson?! Greyson? Can you hear me? Answer me, please!*

There was no answer through the mind link.

“Caliana.”

I spun around as my grandmother appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.

She strode toward us. “Where are you going?”

Xavier frowned. “I’m going to find my brother.”

“No, there’s no time for that,” Hera said briskly.

“What does that—” Xavier started, but Hera cut him off.

“You’ll have to wait to talk to your brother until after the meeting.”

I stared at her, confused. My head was spinning, and I couldn’t seem to think of anything but Greyson at the moment. “What meeting?”

Hera sighed. “The Dark Fae have called a meeting with the Light Fae to begin the peace talks.”  
 “*What?*” I asked, surprised.

“It’s likely that they’re doing this so suddenly as a power play, but it’s not going to work. I refuse to be ruffled by this,” she said in a determined voice. “So come now. We must go.”

I hesitated. My heart was still pounding, and I could hear the echoes of Greyson’s howl in my head. I looked over at Xavier, wondering if he was as worried about Greyson as I was.

*Greyson!* I called desperately. *Can you hear me?*

There was still no response.

I turned to my grandmother. “But Greyson—he might be in trouble—”

Hera made a small noise of annoyance. “I will give you five minutes before you must meet me in the central courtyard. Five minutes,” she repeated, then swept imperiously away, in classic Hera fashion.

When she was gone, I turned to Xavier. “If we’re late, we’re late. I need to find Greyson.”

“I’ll handle my brother,” Xavier said. “You need to go to this meeting. For your sister.”

I took this in. I knew it was true, but my heart felt torn.

“Trust me, okay?” he said.

I sighed, staring into his eyes. “Fine,” I said reluctantly.

I sprinted up to my room in the Light Fae area to change into another gown, this one a purple so dark it was almost black. I figured Hera wouldn’t want me to wear my casual clothing to a meeting this important. I was still lacing my dress up the back as I hurried out to the courtyard.

Xavier walked into the courtyard just as I did, and I gave him a worried smile.

*Did you see Greyson?* I asked through the mind link. I was hoping for good news, but I felt terrible that I wasn’t out there looking for him myself.

*No, not yet, but Marius is going to go look for him.*

I nodded. I was still unsettled, but it was better than nothing.

“You’re late!” Hera announced as she swept into the courtyard. She took a look at me, then nodded, gesturing for me to follow her.

Xavier and I hurried behind her as she led us into a large receiving room with a huge fireplace at the far side of the room. The fireplace was big enough for me to stand in. In front of it were two rows of chairs, set up to face each other, with a wide space of cold stone between them.

The room was filled with people, all seated on only one side of the room. The Dark Fae were already here. I scanned the faces, but Artemis wasn’t among them. I wondered where she could be.

I followed my grandmother to the seats in the center of the row. She sat, and I took the seat to her right. Xavier didn’t sit, but he stood directly behind my chair.

Kastian Haseneau—the Dark Fae—was seated just across from me, and Celeste sat opposite Hera.

The rest of the Light Fae were drifting in. Zenas was there, though I noticed I still hadn’t seen Cenwyn. That surprised me. He had been so invested in the idea of this political marriage, I would have thought he would want to be part of these talks.

Celeste stood. “I would call this meeting to order,” she said in a loud, commanding voice. Everyone in the room quieted and looked at her, but I could feel Hera tense. It was clear she resented that Celeste had taken charge and that the Dark Fae appeared to be taking the lead. But her face stayed stoic and calm.

Celeste went on. “It is against my better judgment that we’ve agreed to this meeting.”

“I am glad that you have agreed to discuss peace,” Hera said coolly. “As it would be mutually beneficial to both sides to see the end of this war.”

A Dark Fae woman made a grunting noise, obviously disagreeing with her. She was an older Fae and looked distinguished.

Celeste looked over at her. “General Magan? Would you like to speak?”

The Dark Fae shook her head, though she glared at the row of Light Fae.

Celeste turned to look at all the Fae. “What makes any of you believe that a marriage alliance would work this time around, given the results the last time it was tried?” She raised an eyebrow. “I would think that you, Hera, of all Fae, would not wish to enter into such an agreement ever again.”

Hera frowned, and I could see her whole face darken. She didn’t like Celeste reminding her of past mistakes. “Yes, I agree. Therefore, we should discuss alternative pathways to peace—”

“There’s no way to ensure that the Light Fae won’t go back on a treaty if blood ties are not involved!” one of the Dark Fae said. She was a woman and spoke loudly and firmly. She was clearly someone with power.

A Light Fae sitting a few seats away from me scoffed at this. “As if the Dark Fae are any more trustworthy.”

“That’s uncalled for!”

“Is it, if it’s true?”

“Who’s the liar now?”

“There’s no need to—”

“Silence!” Celeste said, her voice ringing off the cold stone floor and walls.

The tense fighting stopped suddenly, and all eyes turned to her once again. She took a deep breath. “Then it seems as though our pathway is clear. We must consider a marriage treaty as neither side appears to have enough goodwill or trust without it.”

Hera—already tense—stiffened even more. This was obviously not what she wanted to hear.

For the first time since we sat down, Celeste turned her full attention to me, looking me over. Then she turned to Hera. “Your granddaughter is as beautiful as her mother was. I’m sure Kastian would not mind such a bride.”

I winced and felt Xavier gripping the back of my chair. I couldn’t see it, but I knew that his knuckles would have turned white with the effort he was exerting to stay in control.

But I knew that losing it was not an option—not in front of this audience, where the tension was so thick.

I looked over at Kastian to see how he was taking this news, but his face was completely blank. His expression was bland and neutral, as though he had heard nothing more shocking than the weather report.

For half a second, I almost thought I’d seen his lips quirk up in a smile, but it was gone before I could be sure.

Hera nodded slowly. “You also have this supposed heir to the Mauvais family. Is that Fae not an option?”

“*No*,” Celeste said shortly. “Who would she marry to produce an heir? There is no viable Light Fae family.”

Hera looked pained. “We will consider the marriage treaty. But this is not the final decision.”

“We didn’t expect it to be,” Celeste said coolly.

Hera nodded once more and got to her feet. This was a cue, and the rest of the Fae stood and began to file out of the room.

I jumped to my feet and turned to Hera. “Grandma! You’re not really considering letting this happen, are you?”

Hera caught my hand and patted it in what I suspected she thought was a reassuring way. “Don’t worry, Caliana. As I have said before, I will figure this out.”

How exactly she was going to figure it out, she didn’t say. She only turned and strode out of the room, murmuring something about meeting with her advisors.

I turned to look at Xavier, who hadn’t moved from my side.

He must have seen the look of fear in my eyes, because he took a step closer. “We won’t let them force this on you, Cali.” He reached out a hand for me, but stopped himself.

I nearly cried when he hesitated. I yearned for his touch, but I also knew it was better for us to keep our distance. I didn’t want to give him false hope.

“Caliana Wrenthorn,” a cold voice said.

I turned to see Celeste standing before me.

“What do you want?” I demanded. “The peace talks are paused. My grandmother is—”

“That’s not why I’m here,” she said, cutting me off.

“Then why *are* you here?” I wondered.

She raised an eyebrow. “I think you and I have a common goal.”

“We do?” I asked, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

She gave me an appraising look. “We should work together to sabotage this marriage alliance.”

**Episode 5323**

**Artemis**

*I thought you would have learned to watch your back by now.*

I didn’t even hesitate before I brought my elbow back as hard as I could, catching the intruder right in the gut. He groaned, and I spun around, pulling out my knives.

But he was ready for me, and when I slashed, he dodged expertly, like it wasn’t his first time evading death.

So that meant this assassin was more skilled than the last one sent after me. That wasn’t good news.

I swung again and missed once more, which gave my attacker an opportunity to hit me hard in the ribs, sending a spike of pain into my chest and belly. Another punch to the kidney made me groan in agony, but I swiveled around and slashed again, catching him in the arm. This knocked him off-balance enough that I was able to get him into a stranglehold. The guy made a couple of strained, choking sounds, but I ignored them. I had every intention of dispatching this assassin just as I had the last one. Maybe that would stop whoever was sending them after me.

I had every intention of killing him, that is, until he managed to get one word out that stopped me in my tracks—

“Adair!”

Wait—what? This surprised me enough that I loosened my hold.

That might have been a mistake, because the assassin used this break in my concentration as an opportunity to pull himself out of my grasp, headbutt me in the stomach, then dip down and crouch and flip me over his shoulder.

“Ugh!” I hit the ground with a thud that knocked all the air from my lungs. Head spinning like a top, I pulled in a breath and braced myself for the killing blow as he kneeled over me. My heart thudded in my chest, but I wasn’t going to fucking beg for my life.

But the blow never came. Nothing happened.

Baffled, I looked up at the face that hovered over mine. It was a stranger’s face, but there was something oddly familiar about the eyes. It wasn’t the shape of them, or even the color. There was something else—the look in them.

“I know I’m glamoured, but you have to listen to me. I’m Adair!” the guy breathed, sounding winded from the fight.

I frowned up at the stranger. What the hell was this guy talking about? He wasn’t Adair…although, I had to admit there was *something* familiar about him.

I kept my eyes on him as I pushed myself to sitting. I didn’t know what to believe, and I didn’t want to let my guard down in case he struck.

But he didn’t do anything as I sat up then got to my feet.

I turned to face him. “How do I know if you’re telling me the truth?”

“Ask me anything,” the man said.

I thought for a moment. “Tell me what happened one of the last times we saw each other.”

The attacker smiled grimly. “You mean when you, me, and Torin almost got skewered in the Fae world over some herbs he needed? And I set off a blood signal? That time?”

I burst out laughing. “It’s you!” I cried, then threw my arms around my uncle. I couldn’t believe it was really him. “What are you doing here?”

Adair pulled back a little to look at me. “I got your message, and I came with Cali to rescue you. What do you think I’m doing here?”

Tears sprang to my eyes. “I can’t believe you came. I know how dangerous it is for you to be here.”

Something dark crossed his expression. He wore the face of a stranger, so it took me a moment to realize he looked guilty. “I know that your predicament here is partially my fault.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I left Celeste alone here. I know that played a part in what—”

“I don’t blame you for that. Celeste is difficult to deal with—at best,” I cut in. “*I’d* hate to be married to her, too.”

He chuckled at this, but then the smile slid from his face. “Give me a breakdown of the danger here. We need to be prepared for the fallout after we escape.”

I hesitated—the word *escape* gave me pause.

He noticed. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Didn’t you call on Cali to rescue you from this place?”  
 “Yeah, I did, but only from Celeste. Not the whole Fae world,” I said.

Adair frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would you want to stay here?”

“To find my father,” I said slowly.

Adair looked solemn. “Artemis, we’ve talked about this. You know where I stand, and I was open to you searching for your father, but enough is enough. Your father is dead.”

“Yes, we have discussed this, and I’m not talking about it again,” I said. “You need to trust me. I’ve gotten clues that suggest that he could be alive and in hiding.”

“What clues?”  
 I started to answer, but I stopped. I found myself strangely tongue-tied. The reality was that I didn’t really have anything to tell him.

He sighed. “You need to let this go and let us get you back to the human world.”

My heart dropped, and I had to wonder if Adair was right. After all, he knew his brother better than anyone else in the world. This journey I was on hadn’t gotten me any closer to finding my father, and I wondered if what I was doing was nothing but a fool’s errand, and that I’d managed to put everyone else in danger because I’d wanted to chase smoke.

“We are going to get you out of here, Artemis. Just be ready to leave when we give the signal, okay?”

Something stubborn and determined flared up in my chest, and I shook my head. “No.”

He looked at me. “What?”

“No. I don’t care what you say. I’m not giving up just like that.”

Adair shook his head adamantly. “It’s no use. It won’t lead to anything. And the longer we stay, the more likely you or Cali will get pulled into the political machinations of this forever war. It’s bound to happen—you’re both too valuable to just linger in this world without some consequences. As someone who was a part of that machine for too long, I should know.”

His points were valid, which only made me feel more frustrated when a knock on the door stopped me. I looked quickly at the door, then at Adair. “Hide,” I hissed at him.

He nodded and stepped behind one of the long draperies by the window, completely obscuring himself from view.

When I was sure he was hidden, I walked to the door, then swung it wide open to find Celeste waiting on the other side.

It took everything I had, but I resisted the urge to look behind me at Adair. I knew I couldn’t. Acting too freaked out would make Celeste suspicious, so I tried to keep it together.

“Why are you just standing around?” she demanded. “You were supposed to be at the meeting.”

Before I could answer, Celeste shook her head.

“On second thought, I don’t want to know what you’ve been doing. Just behave while you’re here, Artemis. I don’t want the heir to Kadmos making a scene during the peace talks.”

“I’ll be good,” I promised.

Celeste nodded. “You have a message. From the Wrenthorns.”

“A message?” I repeated, confused, wondering who in the world could have sent me a message. Then Celeste stepped aside, and Cali walked into the room, her face shining.

I stood still for a moment—completely shocked. “What is going on?” Celeste had to know that Cali was my sister based on her being Orla’s daughter—like me—so what in the world could this be about?

“Ten minutes,” Celeste said, looking at Cali. “That’s all I can give you.” Then she strode out.

“How in the world did you get Celeste to agree to this?” I asked Cali, completely astonished.

“Celeste wants something from me, so I negotiated this visit with Kadmos’s heir,” Cali explained. She smiled. “And that’s you.”

I hugged her tightly, so relieved to see my sister. Then I turned to Adair. “Did you do reconnaissance?”  
 “As soon as we’re ready to go, we should be able to sneak out,” Adair said. “We just need to find a way past the barrier.”

Cali nodded, but there was another knock on the door before she could add anything. She frowned and looked over. “But it hasn’t been ten minutes yet.”

When I opened the door, it wasn’t Celeste coming to tell Cali she had to go, it was Xavier with Tabitha.

“What’s going on? How did you find us?” Cali asked.

“Ask him,” Tabitha said.

Xavier was monotone. “I followed your scent.”

“And what’s going on?” Cali asked.

“I heard back from Marius,” Xavier said.

“Wait, what? Marius?” I gasped. “Marius is here? He’s here? Like, *here* here?”

Before Xavier could answer my questions, Cali spoke again, more insistently. “What did Marius say? Does he know what happened to Greyson? Where is he?”

**Episode 5324**

**Xavier**

I looked over at the door as I heard footsteps in the hallway. “Not here,” I said, shaking my head.

“Where is Marius?” Artemis asked.

“It was too risky to bring him in here.”  
“What did he say?” Cali asked.

I shrugged. “Hard to say. He was cagey, wouldn’t say shit.” I ground my teeth. The truth

was, I was pissed at the guy.

Artemis looked worried but shook her head. “I’m not sure what’s going on right now, but we should leave before Celeste comes back here.”

She looked at Adair, who was standing by the window. He nodded, and the five of us—Cali, Artemis, Adair, Tabitha, and I—walked out of the room. We sneaked through the passageway to a gateway out of the Dark Fae area and headed quickly into the woods.

“This way,” I said, pointing, and as we rounded a copse of trees, Marius appeared, standing in a clearing, waiting for us.

His mouth dropped open when he saw Artemis. “Ari. You’re here.”

“Wait, Marius?”

He nodded. “Your grandmother glamoured me.”

The expression on her face was strangely closed when she looked at him, taking in the information. “What’s going on with Greyson?”

Marius grimaced. “It’s not good news. He and Rishika were taken.”

I moved on instinct, grabbing the guy by the collar. “What do you mean, taken?”

Marius pulled himself from my grasp, an annoyed look on his face. “I mean what I just said. Two werewolves were snuck past the barrier. They’re no longer in Briarkeep.”

Cali looked terrified. “But that makes no sense. Who would want to take Greyson and Rishika?”

“Why was Rishika even here to begin with?” Artemis demanded. She ran a hand through her hair, looking distraught. “Why would you bring her here? And why would she come? It’s so dangerous in the Fae world for werewolves! You know that! What were you thinking bringing her with you?!”  
 “She insisted on coming,” Cali snapped back.

This information seemed to hit Artemis like a punch to the gut. She even stumbled back a step, her face going pale as a sheet.

I shook my head as I looked back at the group. “I’m going to get them back.”

Adair stepped forward, putting his hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Hold on there, Xavier,” he said, his voice low. “Remember that there’s a barrier in place. No one can leave. Not if they want to get back in.”

“I don’t give a fuck about these peace talks. I’m going to get my brother back and rip out any throats I need to in the process.”

“You *could* do that.”

I looked over at Marius, who was leaning against a tree, his arms crossed over his chest, looking wildly unconcerned. “What?” I spat.

He shrugged. “You could do that. With the ripping and stuff. And if you did, you would just magnify a centuries-old war between the Dark Fae and the Light Fae. Both sides will interpret it as the other making moves against them. And then—” He made a sound like a bomb exploding.

I rolled my eyes, frustration coursing through me. “So what?”

“Xavier—” Cali started.

“No, I’m serious. So what?” I shot. “Why should we care about a war that doesn’t have anything to do with us? Think about it—Marius said it himself—this war’s been going on for ages, and it doesn’t have anything to do with us. It doesn’t involve us—”

“*I’m* involved,” Cali snapped back, her expression hardening.

This stopped me. “I didn’t mean—”

She narrowed her eyes. “*I’m* involved. And so is my sister. These are our people, and we can’t just turn our backs. We especially can’t do anything that would make this situation worse.” She looked over at Marius. “There must be something we can do to get them back. Something that won’t trigger a whole war.”

“I doubt that,” I said, snorting derisively. “The only way they could have been able to take Greyson and Rishika is through force, and force is probably the only thing that’s going to get them back.”

Cali looked agonized. I knew she was conflicted. She probably wanted to go running after Greyson. That was just a fact. But I also knew she had just been reunited with her sister—the whole reason we’d come to the Fae world to begin with. And she and Artemis were involved with all this Fae bullshit.

It almost pained me to realize how well I knew her. How well I could interpret her silence.

I sighed. “Don’t worry,” I said to the group. “You can all deal with this fake peace that isn’t even going to happen.” When I turned to look at Cali, I spoke more earnestly. “And you shouldn’t worry about anything. I’ll go get him.”

I started through the woods without waiting for anyone else to say a word. As I stomped through the trees, I tried not to think too much. I didn’t want to think too deeply about how I was going after Greyson for Cali. And I wanted to think even less about how I was going after Greyson just for Greyson’s sake.

Probably better than anyone else, I knew that Cali wanted to leave this place and go on her own little rescue mission, but I also knew that she couldn’t. She was torn between two worlds, and I was willing to take this burden on myself for her. The Fae world made me feel insane—I hated how wolves were treated, I hated that I had no power, and I hated that people were always telling me to stay back and stay quiet. I didn’t have much control, but this was *something* I could do for her.

If I wanted to show her that she could trust me—trust me completely—then I had to do this. If I wanted to show her that I wanted to earn her trust back, then I would do this. No question.

And honestly, even if that wasn’t my motive, I was freaked out that Greyson and Rishika had both been taken. They were strong wolves who I had seen drop big, scary enemies. If they could be taken in this place, what the hell did that mean? Did that mean it was only a matter of time before I disappeared, too?

These were the dark thoughts running through my head as I made my way through the woods where I remembered entering. But I stopped when I heard my name.

I turned around to see Cali running toward me.

She was breathless when she reached me, and her face was flushed. “Xavier, stop. I’m not letting you go alone.”

“Cali, no. Stop talking like that. You can’t go anywhere. We both know you need to stay here for the peace talks.”

“But I—” she started, but I shook my head, stopping her.

“Listen to me. Not going doesn’t mean you love him any less.” It hurt like hell to say the words, but I knew she needed to hear them.

Cali looked shocked, but then she frowned again. “They could be hurting him, Xavier.”

“Cali, I know, but—”

“I’ll do everything I possibly can to save them.” She gave me a long look. “I did the same for you, didn’t I?”

I didn’t know what I had expected her to say, but it sure as hell wasn’t that. The words landed hard, almost like a slap to the face. The answer was yes—she had done everything she possibly could to save me when I needed her. She had put herself in danger again and again to save me, even though I probably hadn’t deserved that devotion at the time.

I sighed, and it felt like the last of my anger and frustration and fear drained away. Without it, I felt tired and wrung-out. I leaned forward and rested my forehead against Cali’s. She wrapped her arms around me, holding me tightly.

“We’ll find a way to get them back,” she said.

“I know,” I answered, nodding. It suddenly occurred to me how close I was standing to Cali. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d been so close—the last time we’d stood like this, arms around each other, heads together. My body responded to this knowledge as my brain computed it, and I felt heat travel through me like a wildfire.

I pulled my head back to look down at her, then reached up and gently cupped her cheeks. Her eyes were so dark they looked liquid as she gazed back up at me, staring into my eyes.

Without fully realizing what I was doing, I leaned down, my gazing shifting to her lips. Her own eyes were half-lidded, and as I watched, her lips parted invitingly. Part of me wondered what the hell was happening. Another part of me knew exactly what was happening. It was as natural as breathing as I began closing the distance between us.

**Episode 5325**

**Greyson**

Fury boiled up in me at the sight of Cenwyn, and I lunged toward him. “You fucking snake—” But something stopped me. It was a barrier of some kind just in front of the Fae. Of course.

So instead of wrapping my hands around his filthy throat the way I wanted to, I went flying backward, landing hard and sliding across the dirt ground. Rishika rushed to my side and grabbed my arm, hauling me back to my feet. We had to be ready for anything. As I looked at his smug face, something finally clicked into place. That food Cenwyn had given me had been laced with something. Had that been a test? Did it factor into what was going on now, or was it just another of his sick moves?

I didn’t know the answers to these questions—I only knew that I wanted to tear the guy apart.

Cenwyn just smiled at us. “Oh, you’ll be fun to watch in the arena, wolf. I can’t wait for the show to begin.”

Rishika gave him a hard look. “Where are we?” she demanded.

“Oh, has no one told you?” Cenwyn looked bright and cheerful, but his eyes were still cold. “You’re in my special arena! Do you like it?”

“We’d actually prefer our old accommodations,” I said through gritted teeth.

Cenwyn laughed lightly. “Oh, sorry, that’s no longer possible. But if you don’t like it here, you’ll be moved soon.”

“Moved where?” Rishika asked.

Cenwyn ignored her. “In the meantime, I’ll leave you to meet your potential opponents. And be sure you rest up for tonight. I want you at your best!”

We watched him as he left, then I turned to Rishika. “What the hell was that about?”  
 “I don’t know, but I really hate that kind of Fae double-talk,” she said.

“Yeah, same here.” I shook my head. “Well, let’s see if we can find a way out of this fucking place.”

We looked around, investigating our cell, but it turned out that it wasn’t just a single cell, as I’d thought. It was actually an entryway to a larger space. We gave each other hesitant looks, then walked through the archway and into a kind of arena.

It looked like a giant, round pit. The walls surrounding the pit were tall and completely smooth, so it would be impossible to climb them. Though, as I looked carefully at the walls, I saw they weren’t perfectly smooth. There were scars on them—claw marks, from the looks of them—that made me think that someone *had* tried to climb them. And they hadn’t succeeded.

In the pit there were about a dozen other people and a few creatures. They’d been moving and speaking, but they all stopped when we walked in. Some of the looks were curious, some suspicious, some outright hostile. Everyone was wearing the same clothing Rishika and I had been given—a beige tunic, shapeless and made of a rough fabric similar to burlap. They were also wearing the silver crowns.

I looked over at the nearest creature, something that looked suspiciously like a minotaur. The creature didn’t move as I eyed him, but another man broke away from the group and walked over.

This guy gave me an assessing look, sweeping his eyes up and down. “What’s your other form?” he asked without preamble.

I stared at him, shocked at the question. “How could you tell?” I managed to get out.

The guy shrugged. “Just guessed. They would never capture some boring old human or a weak-ass Fae for the fights. So I just figured. They like beasts.”

Next to me, Rishika stiffened. “What the hell did you just call us?”  
 The guy laughed lightly. “Relax. I’m not throwing insults. I’m a bear.”

I nodded, figuring the guy wasn’t referring to just his hefty human size, though he probably could have been. But if he was telling the truth, that meant he was a bear shifter.

“So what are you?” the guy asked again.

“Wolves.”

The bear shifter nodded. “Cool. I’m Clarence.”

“Greyson,” I said, introducing myself. “This is Rishika. So what is this place?”

Clarence threw his arms wide. “This is the pit.”

“The pit.” Rishika snorted. “Very cozy.”

Clarence laughed again. “The pit is definitely the preferable place to be for us.”

I frowned in confusion. “Why?”

“’Cause the other option is the arena. And most that go in, don’t come back, if you know what I mean,” he said.

“What’s the arena?” Rishika asked.

Clarence’s smile was gone now. “That’s the fighting ground where Fae come for entertainment. And to bet on the outcome, of course.”

“The outcome?” I repeated. “What outcome?”

Clarence gave me a long look, like he wasn’t sure if I was being serious. “You know, the *outcome*,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

I looked around at the group of creatures and people in the pit. They were probably shifters like us, and there was only one reason to assemble a group like this—one reason Cenwyn would be involved in.

I felt my stomach clench. “The outcome being which creature doesn’t die?”

Clarence nodded, though there was no trace of a smile now. “Yeah, Greyson. Now you’re starting to get the picture.”

“So what are the—” Rishika started, but she stopped when the creature that looked like a minotaur suddenly turned and galloped toward us.

It stuck its face in mine, close enough I could feel its hot breath.

“This thing’s puny,” the minotaur roared, the voice garbled and barely understandable. “This thing won’t last five minutes with me!”

The creatures the minotaur had been standing with—his friends, maybe?—stood watching this interaction, including a phoenix and a naga. The naga laughed, the sound braying and high-pitched.

“He wouldn’t last five minutes with you? Wouldn’t last five seconds!” it went on, the voice similarly high-pitched.

I frowned at the minotaur, then at the naga. This was a shit situation, and I wasn’t happy with this additional animosity. I didn’t want to fight these creatures for the Fae, and I didn’t want to have to fight them because they got in my face either.

“Hey, calm down, guys. You’ll get your chance at him!” Clarence said. “Everyone, just take a breath.”

The minotaur half turned, as though to walk back, then turned back and hit my shoulder. It was hard to keep my balance while I was still wearing the shackles, so it sent me stumbling back a step. “You better hope you’re not up against me, pretty boy.”

I snarled, ready to tear into the minotaur, but Rishika laid a hand on my arm, keeping me in check.

The minotaur held my gaze for a moment longer. Then he scoffed and moved away.

Rishika looked around, her eyes darting nervously from creature to creature. “Wow, this place is great, Clarence. Everyone is so friendly here.”

Clarence nodded gravely. “Yeah, it’s a lot of that. Just watch your back, even in the pit. It’s not their fault—not really. You have to understand—it’s every creature for itself.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I muttered, looking around.

“And if you cross the wrong creature, you’re dead even before you hit the arena,” Clarence said, keeping his voice low.

Somewhere in the distance a bell rang. The sound echoed through the air, and the effect was instant. Every creature perked up, then moved across the pit toward the far side, where there was a small space at the bottom of the wall. As I watched, the space widened. It wasn’t big enough for anyone to get through, and I was confused for a moment, but then trays slid into the pit, and I understood. It was food.

The creatures cried out, pushing and shoving to get to it. Creatures roared and squawked, the humans yelled and cursed, and as I watched, punches started flying.

“If you want some, you better move,” Clarence said, and he stepped into the fray.

Neither Rishika nor I took a step forward.

“So,” I said, turning to her, “this is some kind of archaic Fae gladiator thing?”

She nodded. “I guess so. It’s a good thing I watched that movie like a dozen times.”

“Why’d you watch it so much?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Artemis liked it. We used to make out during it.”

I groaned. “I’m sorry I even asked.”

I looked around again, thinking about how this place reminded me of my last trip to the Fae world, when I encountered the Kollector and his fucked-up zoo. That almost hadn’t worked out so well for me. I wasn’t interested in reliving any of that shit, so we needed to make some moves. “Okay, we have to find a way to get the hell out of here. We need to get back to Cali and the others.”

“Yeah, okay, sounds great, Greyson. But how the hell are we going to do that?” she asked.

“Any ideas?” I asked, looking around.

She shook her head, her eyes scanning the space as well. “I’ve been looking around, and it looks inescapable. Whoever built this knew what they were doing. Unfortunately.”

I thought for a moment. “Okay, we might have to wait for them to move us to the arena.”

“The arena?” Rishika asked, startled.

I nodded. “Yeah, then we make a run for it.”

She thought this over for a moment. “Okay, say that would work. How will we know when that’s going to be?”

I opened my mouth to answer but stopped when I heard the unmistakable sound of marching feet. We looked over to see an entryway slide open. Through it a flank of Fae guards poured into the pit, all marching in step and holding glowing energy spears at their sides.

“Shit,” Rishika muttered under her breath.

The guards marched toward us, creating a circle surrounding us.

Cenwyn must have come in just after them, because he stepped forward, his evil little smile in place.

“You two, come with me.”

“Where?” I demanded.

His eyes narrowed. “We’re going to the arena.”

**Episode 5326**

Xavier was leaning toward me, his eyes closing, and I felt myself leaning toward him, too. Somewhere, in the back of my head, I knew this wasn’t right, but it was like I couldn’t stop myself. My body wanted Xavier so badly I could barely breathe as he came closer and closer.

My own eyes closed, and then they shot open again. I took a step back, thinking of Greyson and everything else that was going on. I shook my head, trying to shake some of the most intense feelings out of it. “I’m sorry, Xavier.”

“Cali,” he said softly, “there’s no need to apologize—”

“Cali, Xavier!”

We both looked around just in time to see Tabitha running toward us, her hair flying behind her. She panted, slowing to a stop. “If you guys aren’t leaving, we should all talk. We need to come up with a plan.”

I looked over at Xavier and tipped my head, indicating that we should follow her. He looked a little reluctant, but he followed as Tabitha led the way back toward the wooded area where we’d left the group waiting.

“Finally,” Artemis said as we walked toward her.

“How long do we have to talk?” I asked. “Will Celeste come looking for you?”

Artemis shrugged. “I’m sure she will. But I guess as long as it takes her to find me, so we might have a little time.”

“Okay,” I said, turning to the group, “then we need to think quickly. We need to find out who took Greyson and Rishika. Anyone got any ideas?”

Artemis frowned. “It could have been Kastian.”

I turned to look at her. “Why do you think that? Why would he have anything to do with it? I thought he was just some Fae noble.”

“Yeah,” Artemis said slowly, “he is. But he’s also bad news.”

I frowned. “You’ve interacted with him? What kind of bad news?”

“Really bad. There are rumors that he’s made Fae women disappear.”

“What?” I gasped. “How do you know that?”

Artemis looked meaningfully over at Marius. “My friend Aelwen told me about the rumors.”

I swallowed and looked fearfully at Xavier.

He nodded. “I’m not surprised to hear it.”

“You’re not?” I asked, shocked.

“No,” he said shortly. “I hated that guy from the minute I set eyes on him.”

I looked back at Artemis. “Okay, so you’ve heard rumors, and Xavier has a bad vibe. That’s not a lot to go on. How can we find out if he was involved? And also, why would he bother taking them in the first place?”

Artemis thought for a moment. “I guess I don’t know for sure, but I can do some spying. I’ve already been on his trail, so I can try to hurry up the investigation.”

“Be safe,” I said, chewing my lip nervously.

She nodded. “I will. I promise.” She glanced toward the keep. “I need to hurry back before Celeste thinks I’ve gone missing, too, and I don’t think it would be good for anyone to find us all talking like this.” She stepped forward and pulled me into a close hug, then hurried out of the way.

I watched her leave, then turned to the rest of the group. “We can’t just sit around, waiting for Artemis to look into Kastian and then report back to us. And we can’t just wait for news about Greyson without doing something. We have to be doing something else.”

Adair looked thoughtful. “You two can’t leave,” he said pointing to Xavier and me. “But we can.”

“Really?” I asked. “You’d go after Greyson for me?”

Adair nodded. “I would. We’ve been allies before, and this is my domain.”

“Yeah, but there’s just a little issue of the barrier being uncrossable,” Marius pointed out.

“What?” I asked, turning to him.

“Once you go out, you can’t get back in,” he reminded us.

Tabitha smiled. “Well, that’s not a problem for me.”

“Tabitha, of course! You can negate magic!” I said, my eyes widening. “You can get back through the barrier with Greyson and Rishika after you find them.” I felt better, now that we had a plan. But it still ripped my heart apart, knowing that I couldn’t be the one to go after Greyson. I could feel the weight of that guilt heavy on my shoulders.

Tabitha nodded. “And I think I should be able to take at least one person with me.”

“Okay, that works, but how will you get back in with more than one person?” Xavier asked.

Adair frowned. “Tabitha’s magic will let us in—it should let her come and go as she pleases. It should be as easy as holding her hand,” he said, and I noticed Tabitha blush. He continued, “But who knows what’s waiting for us out there. If this person is involved with the courts, this could just be getting started.”

Xavier shook his head. “Okay, but if you’re gone for too long, how will we navigate the politics of this place without your help, Adair? We need an insider, or we’re completely screwed.”

“Um, hello?” Marius said.

Xavier looked over at him. “What?”

“I’m here. I’m an insider. I know about the politics around here,” Marius went on with a smile. “I don’t get to be a bounty hunter for nothing. I know every inner working that they don’t want me to. It’s my business to know.”

I frowned at the guy. “Listen, Marius, I know you’ve helped us a lot so far, and we really appreciate that. But—”

“But?” Marius asked, raising an eyebrow.

“But I’m not completely sure I’m ready to put my life—and the peace of the entire Fae world—into your hands.”

Marius crossed his arms over his chest.

“Cali, this is your choice,” Adair said evenly, looking me right in the eye. “I can go after Greyson and Rishika, or I can stay here and help you and Xavier navigate the very intricate political system of the Fae world, but I can’t do both. So, you have to make the call. What should I do?”

My stomach was one big knot. I could barely breathe with the pressure weighing down my shoulders. I looked over at Xavier, who looked pale and grim. I was scared out of my mind, but I knew what I wanted Adair to do for me.

“We still have Artemis and my grandmother to help us in here, along with Marius. Go after Greyson and Rishika. Find them, please.”

Adair nodded once. “Yes. I will. I’ll leave tonight.”

Tabitha stepped forward and hugged me close. “I promise we’ll do everything we can to find them.”

I hugged her back tightly. I didn’t know why, but I had a bad feeling about this. It was a sick feeling in my stomach, sucking energy from me, though I tried to push it away. I just couldn’t help but feel that I was hugging Tabitha goodbye, like I wasn’t going to see her for a while.

“You be safe,” I said, taking a step back and looking at her and Adair together.

They nodded.

“I’m going to go see what else I can find out about Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance here inside the keep. There has to be someone who knows more around here. I just need to find them,” Marius said.

“Thank you, but try to be safe, okay?” I said.

Marius nodded. “I always am,” he said with a wink. Then he took off.

Which left me alone with Xavier. Again.

My stomach felt tight, but this time it wasn’t with fear. I thought of the last time we had been alone, when he was leaning down, his lips almost brushing mine, before we were interrupted.

My face flushed hot at the memory, and when I looked over at Xavier, he was giving me the kind of blazing look that made me think he was remembering that moment, too.

I looked away. I felt awkward now, like I wasn’t sure where I was supposed to be looking or what I should be doing with my hands.

Finally, I cleared my throat. “Um…”

“Yeah?” Xavier asked when I didn’t go on.

“Well, I heard that there’s a kind of banquet tonight, so maybe we should…go get ready for that. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, right,” Xavier nodded. “The banquet. Yeah, we should get ready. I guess I’ll be escorting you to that.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.” I paused. “I feel horrible about not being able to go after Greyson. But I want you to know that I appreciate that you were willing to go after him, even if you weren’t going to let me come with you.”

Xavier looked a little surprised, but he nodded. “Don’t worry about it.”

That hit me hard, and I suddenly felt the weight of that decision. I knew Xavier hated the Fae world, but he had been willing to go out into it—a place he’d only been once—to help Greyson and me. I shifted between my feet, feeling like I should say something. Like I should do something.

Looking up at him, I took a step forward, reaching out to him, when suddenly, we heard footsteps coming toward us

Xavier and I reeled around to see Kastian walking toward us, smiling.

“Caliana, just the Fae I was looking for.”

I stared at him. “You were looking for me? Why?”

He laughed coolly. “Why? Why do you think, Caliana?” He took a step toward me. “I’d love to get to know my future wife far more…” His eyes flashed. “…*intimately*.”

**Episode 5327**

**Greyson**

*We’re going to the arena.*

Rishika growled, like she was going to fight back, or try to resist Cenwyn, but I put my hand on her shoulder, stopping her from lunging. My shackles clanked as I moved, reminding both of us that now was not the time to fight. Not only were we still shackled in deadly silver, but we were completely outnumbered by the guards that followed Cenwyn like shadows.

I nodded to Cenwyn, who smiled broadly.

“Wonderful. Come right this way.” He waved us out of the pit, and we started through the gateway from which he had entered. I looked around, taking everything in. We needed to get out of here, and I needed to know where the hell we were and what our options were.

As we moved through the sealed door out of the pit, we walked through a low tunnel. It didn’t slope up, which meant it still must have been underground. That realization was disappointing. If we were underground, it was going to make it even harder to escape.

Cenwyn led us into something that looked like a holding cell. It was empty but for a collection of crudely made metal chairs. They were heavy and had chains attached to the legs and locks attached to the arms. The place smelled strongly of old blood, and as I looked around, I wondered what kind of torture must have happened in this cell.

Next to me, Rishika was holding her nose, clearly smelling the stench of blood as well. She looked like she was going to be sick.

Cenwyn led us past an area with caged lockers, where I could see weapons stored away behind heavy locks.

“Those chairs were specially made for the arena,” he said mildly. He pointed toward the weapons. “And those are for the fighters to use. When it comes time, you may pick any weapon you wish to use. Though most of our fighters choose to go in with only their claws and teeth.”

I stared at him, floored. He was giving us a tour of the place like it was his summer house on the coast, instead of the nightmarish palace of torture that it was. It was bizarre to listen to.

Rishika narrowed her eyes. “So, you only capture shifters and non-human magical beings for this?”

He turned to look at her, a sharp grin on his face. “Of course. It’s more fun that way.”

“*Fun?*” she repeated.

“The more animal-like the fighter, the more my clients enjoy the show.”

Cenwyn made my stomach turn, and I wanted nothing more than to rip his throat out, but until I could get out of the silver shackles, I had no choice but to continue to follow him.

He led us toward a platform. He waved us onto it, and after a moment it began to rise up slowly, like an elevator with no sides.

We entered a dark shaft way, and I could hear the deafening cheers of the crowd long before I could see them, but eventually the lift entered a brightly lit space again, then stopped in some kind of a viewing box. We were high above the ground of the arena, and the crowd was spread out in stands below us.

I walked to the edge, and when I looked down, I saw that it would be too far to simply jump to freedom. And even if I tried, I probably wouldn’t make it past any security Cenwyn had in place.

And as if to confirm that suspicion, when I turned, I saw that three guards had followed me to the platform edge and were watching me closely, their spears pointed at me.

I backed up, raising my hands as much as I could in the silver shackles to show I had no intention of doing anything drastic.

Cenwyn stepped forward, to the edge of the box, and looked down, surveying the crowd below. He nodded in a satisfied way. “It’s a good showing today. It will be a good fight.”

It didn’t seem like he was expecting an answer, and I wouldn’t have had a chance to say anything anyway, because a loud voice began to speak. It was an announcer, his voice strangely amplified, maybe by magic.

“Welcome to the arena!” the voice bellowed. “Today we will see the pitched battle between our two fighters, Urth Duan and Blackeyes Omana!”

The crowd went nuts at Blackeyes’s name, so whoever it was must have been a fan favorite.

On the floor of the arena, two doors opened and Urth Duan slithered out of one. Urth turned out to be the naga—a cobra with a human head—I had seen earlier in the pit. The weird thing was, Urth was foaming at the mouth, looking crazed and rabid. When I had seen him in the pit, he was an asshole, but definitely not rabid. So what the hell had happened to him?

“And give it up for BLACKEYES!” the announcer screeched.

I turned my eyes toward the other door, expecting to see a terrifying creature walk through. What I was *not* expecting was the petite faun that stepped through the door into the arena. She looked around, and when she turned her face upward, I saw that it was covered in red warpaint, and her light brown hair was slicked back, showing off the two sharpened horns beneath it. But even with a costume that was supposed to inspire terror, I was shocked. *This* was Blackeyes? This was the big champion of the arena? This was the fan favorite?

“BEGIN!” the announcer yelled, and the crowd went wild, screaming and cheering and banging their feet against the stands so the whole arena seemed to vibrate.

The naga started the fight, slithering forward and striking at the faun. Even from a distance I could see that Urth’s eyes were angry and intense, and the strike was fast and hard. But the faun jumped nimbly away, dodging the first blow, and the second.

I watched her, baffled, wondering what she could possibly have up her sleeve that would make this slight figure the reigning champion of the arena.

And then she struck.

She moved so fast I barely saw it when it happened. She charged the naga in a blur of motion, stopping behind Urth. She was still, and for a millisecond I frowned, wondering if she had done anything at all.

Then a long gash opened up down the center of the naga’s body. There was a sudden rush of the parts of the naga’s body that—until a second ago—had been inside, keeping Urth alive. And then it was all spilling out—blood, intestines, organs. It was repulsive, but the crowd went ballistic.

When I looked again at the faun, wondering what weapon she had used, I saw that there was blood dripping down her horns. I gaped at her. She had literally sliced open the thick skin of the naga in one strike.

The crowd was on their feet, screaming and stomping and baying for more blood. Behind him, Cenwyn and the rest of his guests in the box were clapping, looking pleased.

I rounded on Cenwyn. “What did you do to them? They were fighting like animals!”

One of the Fae in the box, a man with a long neck and startled eyes looked over at me in surprise. “They *are* animals.”

My hands curled into fists. I wanted to tear the guy apart, but I felt the weight of the shackles on my wrist and knew I wasn’t exactly in a position to fight at the moment. But I clenched my teeth, vowing to myself that I would not forget this. I was an Alpha, and I had developed a taste for vengeance.

Cenwyn shrugged unconcernedly. “I gave them a little booster in their meal tonight.”

I stared at him, shocked, my mind spinning. I had been right. My suspicion about the food Cenwyn had given me earlier had been right. He was drugging the fighters with some kind of performance-enhancing drug. But why?

“That’s what you did to me the other day. You gave me that drug,” I said pointing down to the arena.

Cenwyn didn’t look the least bit ashamed as he smiled. “Think of it as a little test, Greyson. And you passed! With flying colors! You should be pleased—you could even be one of the new favorite fighters if you do well down there—”

I lunged for him. My patience was spent, and I wasn’t even thinking of my shackles or the silver crown or the guards or the box filled with Fae. I just wanted to rip that smug little smile off his fucking face.

A guard stepped forward and extended his spear, hitting me with a shot of energy that rattled through my body like a lightning strike, electrocuting me and stopping me in my tracks. I went down, hard, and the guard stepped forward and kicked me in the stomach.

I curled in, groaning, and the guard braced to do it again.

But Cenwyn stopped him. “Be careful!” he snapped at the guard. “That wolf is valuable to us alive. He has to be in tip-top shape. He’s going to be fighting tomorrow.”

**Episode 5328**

“What did you say?” Xavier barked at Kastian, his lips curved into a sneer.

Kastian laughed and said, “I only meant that Caliana and I should get to know each other. Calm down, pup.”

Xavier’s jaw pulsed, and he took a step forward as if to go after Kastian, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him in his tracks. Then I moved a little in front of him, putting myself between Xavier and Kastian.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said to the Fae.

Kastian flashed a congenial grin. “No? But why not? I’m thinking that it might be easier for us if we truly got to know each other better.” Clearly unfazed by Xavier champing at the bit behind me, he took another step closer. “After all, if we’re to marry, we shouldn’t be strangers, right?”

I watched him closely, unsure of how to take his smile. It seemed friendly enough, but I knew better than to take any Fae at face value, and Kastian definitely seemed like the type to play games. Besides, he’d been slimy earlier, and I wasn’t interested in getting to know him.

*But I suppose I should play nice. It can’t hurt to talk to him more, especially if he might know something about what happened to Greyson and Rishika.*

I forced a smile onto my face. “Why don’t we grab a drink before the banquet?”

I felt Xavier tense behind me, and I quickly reached out to him via mind link.

*Just play along. We may need him. He could have information about Greyson and Rishika.*

Xavier wasn’t relaxing. *No, you don’t need to go anywhere alone with this guy. He’s Fae, and he’s a tricky one at that.*

I took Xavier’s hand and squeezed it. *Trust me, okay? I’ll be fine.*

I turned to catch Xavier’s eye and could tell he was about to protest, but then I said aloud, “I’ll meet you back at the banquet, Xavier, okay?”

In response to the pained expression that spread across his face, I added privately, *I’ll be okay, I promise. And if anything seems even the least bit off, I’ll mind link, I promise.*

Xavier still didn’t look convinced, but he took a step back. *Fine. You can go, but you have thirty minutes and that’s all. If you’re not at the banquet by then, I’m coming after you.*

I nodded, knowing full well that Xavier was most likely planning to follow…but as long as he kept his distance…

Kastian offered his arm with an easy smile, and I took it. I tried to keep as much distance between us as possible as I let him guide me to another area of the keep. He took me to a nicely decorated seating area already set up with a bottle of wine and two sparkling goblets.

Kastian smiled and bowed, and I couldn’t help but notice how ridiculously handsome he was.

*He may be good-looking, but I won’t let my guard down. I have to keep my wits about me and not let him throw me off.*

I lifted a brow at him just as he said, “I’ve never had a pretty lady refuse my offer of a drink before. If I weren’t so secure in myself, I might have really taken it hard.”

I shrugged. “We only just met. I was being cautious. I’m sure you understand.”

Kastian nodded and tipped heavy pours of wine into the two goblets before offering me one. I hesitated for a split second before nodding and accepting the drink. I lifted the glass to my nose and took a subtle sniff.

*For all I know, this is poisoned…though I suppose that doesn’t quite line up with what Kastian seems to want, which is this marriage alliance. Poisoning me would only get in the way of that. Still, there’s no way in hell I’m going to actually drink this.*

“So, you want to marry me?” I said bluntly. “Don’t you have some other guy or girl on deck already pining after you?”

Kastian laughed. “I’ll admit that many are in love with me, but it’s a question of whether I love them back.”

I frowned, wondering if he was the type of guy who only loved himself. It sure seemed like it. He was handsome enough to have his pick of anyone to be with, and it was clear he knew that and was proud of it.

“But I’ll answer your question honestly,” he continued. “Especially since you were direct enough to ask it. I like a woman who doesn’t beat around the bush.”

Before I knew it, I’d rolled my eyes, but Kastian didn’t seem to notice.

“I want to marry you because I want power,” he said simply. “I want to rule the Dark Fae, and marrying you and forming this alliance will give me that power. Is that honest enough for you?”

I lifted a brow, acknowledging that it was. I could see the truth in what he’d said.

“So, does that mean you’ll be upset if the marriage doesn’t happen?”

*Or rather* when *the marriage doesn’t happen? I don’t have to shoot him down just yet, and it’s probably not smart to do so for a number of reasons. But there’s no way I’m marrying this guy. Even if he* is *willing to let me “keep my wolf lover on the side.”*

Kastian frowned at me. “*If* the marriage doesn’t happen? Are you trying to tell me something, Caliana? Or is this just another one of your questions?”

I just shrugged.

Kastian took a long drink from his glass and then said, “Let me put it plainly. This marriage is all that stands between peace and continued war. So, think carefully about whether you care more about what *you* want or more about the safety of an entire kingdom. The fate of the Fae world rests in your hands, I’m afraid.”

I took that in, and my hands began to shake. I lowered my wine glass a little so that Kastian couldn’t tell that he’d gotten to me. I knew from the beginning that these peace talks were important, but to have someone so bluntly say it to me like this made me feel beyond anxious.

Kastian grinned wide, obviously trying to break the tension. “But enough with all the serious political talk. We should really try to get to know each other. I like sword fighting, archery, and lovemaking.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again and just smiled. “How nice for you.”

Kastian laughed. “I do like your human humor. It’s so…refreshing. Entertaining, too. You tickle me.”

“I’m glad I amuse you,” I said dryly, refusing to be pulled in by his charms.

Kastian set down his wine glass. “The banquet has probably started by now. Should we go down together? The council will be pleased to see us come in side by side. It’ll give them hope that resolution is on the horizon. Won’t that be grand?”

I kept my expression neutral and didn’t reject his suggestion, but on the inside, I was more than unsure about making that sort of statement. I regretted that I’d allowed him to control the entire conversation and had learned next to nothing useful about him other than that he was quick and charismatic.

“That sounds like a great idea,” I finally said, unable to come up with a good way to turn him down without insulting him. Besides, I knew what was really going on between us—nothing—and it didn’t matter what the council thought.

I took Kastian’s arm again and let him lead me into the banquet hall. As soon as we stepped in, all eyes were on us. Kastian nodded and smiled as we passed through the groups of staring Fae and led us to a small group of Dark Fae and immediately launched into introducing me.

“Hello, all. This beautiful woman on my arm is Caliana Hart. Caliana, allow me to introduce you to Cadhla, Philanthra, and Dorphus, my closest friends.”

The two women nodded at me, and Dorphus kissed my hand. Then he grinned at Kastian and said, “Such luck that your intended happens to be absolutely gorgeous.”

I had to hold back from scowling at him. Instead, I smiled and said, “Thank you, you’re too kind.”

I was relieved when Kastian offered me an arm again, and we continued moving through the crowd.

A Light Fae I recognized from the council caught my eye and hurried over. “Caliana, how good of you to take the initiative and spend some quality time with Kastian. This will help guide us all to a long-awaited peace!”

The Light Fae leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I’d barely reacted when another Light Fae came over.

“Caliana, we truly appreciate what you’re doing for our people. I know it’s a lot to ask, but you have no idea the good it will do! Your willingness to do what’s necessary proves that you are truly one of us, even though you were raised in the human world!”

With each Fae who came over to kindly greet and thank me, I felt the pressure grow. I quickly searched the crowd for Hera but saw no sign of my grandmother. Xavier, however, was a little ways behind us, his expression serious. We locked eyes, and I reached out to him via mind link.

*You were following me.*

Xavier’s expression didn’t change as he responded, *And?*

*Let’s find somewhere to talk*, I replied.

Xavier nodded, and I turned my attention to Kastian.

“Kastian, if you’ll excuse me for a bit, I’ll be sure to find you later.”

Kastian nodded. “Sounds good. Don’t be gone too long.” He winked.

I rushed over to Xavier, and together we pushed through a pair of large double doors and out into a beautiful garden. It was lush with a beautiful sparkling pond and Fae flowers so vibrant they seemed to glow.

“What happened?” Xavier asked, wasting no time.

I gave him a look. “You already know the answer to that, don’t you?”

He didn’t reply.

“Nothing, we just talked. Didn’t learn anything useful, unfortunately. He kept going on and on about how good the marriage will be for the Fae world, and I just…couldn’t say anything to shoot him down.”

Xavier nodded. “It’s probably best that he believes it will actually happen. At least for now. But there’s no way in hell I’m going to let the Light Fae marry you off to some Fae asshole like you’re their property.”

I felt a surge of emotion at his words, but I was still feeling the pressure of what both the Dark and Light Fae were expecting of me. Could something as out-of-left-field as me marrying Kastian really put an end to the war?

*How can I say no with stakes like this? What if I have to make a sacrifice for the Light Fae? What if this is my destiny?*

Before I could say another word, someone emerged from the bushes. It took me a split second to recognize that it was Kastian.

“Caliana, should I be the one to tell the Light and Dark Fae councils that you’re wasting their time, or should you?”

**Episode 5329**

**Xavier**

I stepped in front of Cali and looked Kastian right in the eye. “What was that, Fae? I don’t think I heard you very well.”

Kastian smiled. “It can be whatever you’d like it to be, wolf. A comment, a threat, makes no difference to me.” Kastian shrugged. “I said what I said.”

I knew it was the latter. I was no fool and knew a threat when I heard one. I took a step toward the Fae, ready to finally give the smug bastard what was coming to him, but Cali spoke up. “I don’t know what you heard—”

“I heard your wolf lover say that he won’t marry you off to me, but we both know I’m not about to let him stand in my way,” Kastian interrupted her. “There’s too much at stake for me to let a glorified dog interfere.”

I gritted my teeth, deciding to ignore his sorry insults for Cali’s sake. I had to assume that Kastian was referring to the little power play he’d just mentioned to Cali—marrying her to gain control over the Dark Fae. I’d followed them and heard every single word they’d said. There was no way in hell I ever would have left Cali to deal with this guy on her own.

Cali nodded. “So, you’re threatening to tell both sides of the Fae court that I’m not sincere about the marriage to you. But what would that do? Are you using that to force me into the marriage?”

Kastian’s amiable expression dropped. “I shouldn’t have to force you either way. If we marry, it will bring peace between the Light and Dark Fae for the first time in a long time. It will end bloodshed and death. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Cali nodded and said, “Yes, I believe you. I know that it will change everything.”

My mouth dropped and I stared at Cali in shock. What the hell was she saying? Was she…*agreeing* to marry this guy right in front of my face?

*Cali, what’s going on here?* I mind linked.

I could feel my composure slipping. I’d lost Cali already, was in the middle of trying to get her back, and now I was about to lose her again to an arranged marriage with a Fae?!

*Xavier, please, just let me do this*,Cali mind linked back. *Trust me.*

I bit my tongue, literally, and forced myself to let her do it. I had to trust that she had a plan of some sort and that she really wasn’t agreeing to marry this douchebag. And even if she had lost it and she had no plan and really was going to move forward with marrying Kastian for the sake of the Fae, I wasn’t going to let it happen.

*She’ll marry this asshole over my dead body. And I’m sure Greyson would agree with me.*

“I do see your point. Everyone on the court has made it very clear what this union would mean for the relationship between the Dark and Light Fae,” Cali said to Kastian. “And I want peace for the Fae as much as anyone. But I need time. As you know I do have, um…” Cali’s eyes flickered to me. “…a werewolf lover to consider.”

Cali put her hand on my forearm, and it took everything in me to resist pulling her against me, or even behind me so that I could wedge myself between her and Kastian again and put an end to him right here and now.

“A marriage, even if I’m allowed to have my wolf love on the side, is still a lot to consider. I’m sure you understand that,” Cali continued.

Kastian said nothing, simply looked between Cali and me with that maddening expression of his.

“Can you give me the time I need?” Cali pressed.

Kastian frowned. “I’ll give you as much time as I can allow. But I’m sure in time you will see that our marriage is the best course.” He cast a bored glance at me before training his eyes back on Cali. “Don’t take too long, Caliana.” Then he bowed and left.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Cali let out a relieved breath.

“Did you mean all that?” I asked her. “You can’t get married to that Fae, Cali. It would change everything—your life is in the human world.” I almost added “with me,” but decided that now wasn’t the time. Besides, Cali was smart, and it was implied that my concern was directly linked to my fears of losing her.

“There’s no way Greyson or I or your sister or Rishika or anyone else would ever just leave you here. I understand that the Fae have this war going on, but I don’t see how you marrying that asshat will magically change years of conflict.”

*And didn’t they try that already with Kadmos and Orla? Why would it suddenly work now when it didn’t work all those years ago? Surely Cali sees this?*

But I kept that thought to myself. I understood why Cali was considering it—but *was* she really considering it? She wasn’t rushing to tell me that it was all a ruse, so maybe that meant she was seriously thinking about doing whatever it took to help the Fae—even marrying Kastian.

“Listen, Cali, I understand that you’re half Fae and you feel some connection to this world because your mother grew up here. And I know that it would be well within your rights to choose to live here, to be here…but I can’t help but think of myself and even Greyson and how your doing this could affect the *due destini*. If you stay here, then what? We all go mad?”

Cali seemed to consider that for a few moments before sighing and saying, “I have to admit that I see his point. This is his world, and he would do anything to save it—”

“And to gain control of the Dark Fae—don’t forget that,” I added sourly.

“And that…but you have to know that I don’t have any actual intention of marrying him.”

“Okay…so why are you leading him on and making him even think it’s a possibility?”

Cali hesitated, and my stomach dropped.

“Wait, Cali, tell me that you would never marry that asshole. You’re starting to scare me.”

Cali’s gaze dropped to her feet. “I would never *want* to.”

I almost pushed for a better denial than that, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good, so I let it go at that.

*She’s stressed. I can see it all over her face. And why wouldn’t she be? This jackass and the rest of the Fae are putting loads of pressure on her. My questioning her is only making it worse. I just have to believe that this won’t happen and that everything will work out. It has to.*

I took her hands in mine. “Maybe you should get some rest? You seem tired.”

Cali shook her head. “No, I need to go back to the banquet and find my grandmother. It’s what’s expected of me, and I don’t want to step on any toes.”

I wanted to tell her to screw that shit and come with me, but again, I knew the pressure had to be overwhelming. No matter how much I wanted to ignore it because I wanted to protect her, she was connected to the Fae, and I couldn’t just act like that wasn’t the reality. Cali was a part of all this, a part of events that were setting something into motion that would affect so many lives, and I wanted to support her the best way I could.

I took Cali’s hand, and we made our way back to the banquet. I spotted Hera almost immediately, and when Cali did too, she rushed over to greet her grandmother.

“Where’ve you been, Caliana?” Hera asked. “You were supposed to be here at my side, not off with one of your wolves.”

But before Cali could say a word, Kastian appeared and clinked his glass to get everyone’s attention so that he could make a toast.

“Hello, all. So glad to see you here tonight. I want to offer up a toast in honor of my potential bride in the spirit of these all-important peace talks.” Kastian flashed his too-bright smile around the room.

Cali frowned.

“What the hell is he doing?” I whispered to Cali. It seemed to me that Kastian was quickly making good on his threat.

“I know that this peace would mean so much to so many here. And I’m happy to say that after speaking with Caliana, it seems like this marriage is one step closer to becoming a reality.” He lifted his glass to Cali as his smile grew almost impossibly wider. “To my blushing future bride.”

Everyone raised their glasses in toast, and murmurs of excitement whipped through the room.

I scowled, my hand tightening around my own glass. Kastian was trying to force Cali’s hand. Making all these claims in public so that Cali felt pressured to go through with it.

“What exactly did you and Kastian talk about?” Hera asked.

“Nothing,” Cali replied, her voice quaking. “We were just getting to know each other. I never agreed to marry him.”

Hera sighed and shook her head. “More Dark Fae manipulation, then. I should have known. I must talk to the others about this.” Hera rushed off to find her council, leaving Cali and me standing there bewildered.

Cali turned to me, her stress and fear written across her face. “What do we do now?”

I wanted to tell Cali that I was going to go kick that guy’s ass for lying, but I knew what Cali’s response would be to that. Nor would I get away with it in this nest of Fae. But before I could think of something, anything to say that would make Cali feel better, Celeste came storming over.

Her voice was a harsh whisper in Cali’s ear that I couldn’t help but overhear. “What the hell are you doing, Caliana? Do you not remember our deal?”

**Episode 5330**

**Greyson**

A burly Fae shoved Rishika and me into the pit, and we fell back and hit the ground hard. Both of us stunned, it took us a second to regain our composure.

“There’s no way you’re fighting,” Rishika said through a hiss of pain. “They’re going to drug you, and you won’t be in your right mind. Cali would kill me if I let you go into this thing without your wits about you.”

I nodded my agreement, still trying to get my head on straight. It was like my mind was still trying to catch up with how quickly things had gone from bad to worse. It was one thing to be kidnapped by a bunch of wolf-hating Fae and quite another to be thrown into what could quickly end up being a fight to the death. And even in this awful place, my thoughts were of Cali and hoping that she was safe.

*I can’t believe I let myself get in this situation. Cali needs me, and now I’m trapped here and under the thumb of a bunch of sadistic Fae who like to watch people kill each other for sport.*

“True, there’s no way I can let myself get drawn into their fights under the influence of their drugs. I have to figure out a way to get us out of here before then,” I said to Rishika. “If I don’t, I doubt either of us will have much of a choice about fighting or not.”

Clarence came over to us. “I heard the news. You’re next up to fight?”

I nodded. “Looks that way.” I was already distracted, thinking about ways to get out of this. Nothing was coming to me, and I was starting to wonder if the only way through this was to fight.

Clarence shook his head and whistled through his teeth. “That’s tough luck; I can’t say I’m not surprised. Usually, they give newbies a couple of days to acclimate. A small mercy. You’re either very special or very hated.”

“Lucky me,” I grumbled, thinking that it was probably the latter. There was no love lost between Fae and wolves. I’d had a bad feeling about coming here, and now it was all being realized. The Fae world was full of unexpected pitfalls, and I couldn’t help but think about how eerily familiar this felt to when I was trapped in the zoo here what felt like a lifetime ago.

“I saved you some food,” Clarence said, producing a bowl of cold grey mush. “It doesn’t taste like much, but it’ll hold you over.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I have no intention of eating that stuff. It could be drugged, and I’m not about to make my potential defeat any easier on these people.”

“Suit yourself,” Clarence said, making quick work of eating the rest of it.

I heard some commotion and noticed a crowd of fighters on the other side of the pit. They were closing in around the female faun that had claimed the impressive victory earlier, giving her lots of congratulations like she was a celebrity.

I nodded in her direction and asked Clarence, “What’s her deal?”

Clarence followed my gaze, and his expression brightened. “Oh, the champion? She’s been here the longest. And that’s a huge deal because it means that no one’s managed to beat her yet. None of the fights have even been close. She’s the best fighter they have.”

*And in that fight, she didn’t seem to be rabid like the others. What could that mean? How has she avoided being drugged like the others?*

“Has she been given whatever drug it is that makes all the fighters go wild?” I asked Clarence.

“Not anymore. She’s bought into the whole thing. She likes the fighting, so they see no use in drugging her. The Fae that run the fights love her, and so does the audience. She doesn’t even seem bothered by being trapped down here between fights. I don’t know if she’s just given up or if she just likes fighting that much.”

I was intrigued.

*I wonder if I can use that to my advantage somehow. I need to talk to her. Pick her brain.*

I got up and started toward the faun, but Clarence stopped me. “You shouldn’t approach her first—that’s an awful idea.”

“I don’t have time to wait,” I said.

If I was going to get Rishika and myself out of this, I was going to have to take whatever risks there were to take. I couldn’t sit around and wait to be thrown into a fight all drugged up and out of sorts, especially since that fight could potentially be against this faun, who would be completely lucid and very deadly. I had to do whatever it took to get back to Cali.

I continued over to the faun, doing my best to keep a diplomatic expression on my face. She looked up as I approached but then quickly looked away as if I weren’t nearly enough to hold her interest for long.

“Hi, have we met?” I asked.

She didn’t even look at me.

“I’m Greyson. Nice to meet you. And you are?”

She said nothing, still ignoring me.

Undeterred, I tried again. “I was just wondering—”

The minotaur from before got in my face. “Can’t you take a hint, man? She doesn’t want to talk to you. Take a walk!”

I didn’t even look at the minotaur and stepped around him to speak to the faun again. “I understand that you don’t know me, but I’m thinking that we might be able to help each other. We shouldn’t just roll over and let these Fae do whatever they want with us.”

Finally, the faun reacted with a deep laugh. “And just what can a dead man do for me? Huh?” She shook her head. “Get lost.”

Now I was confused. “What? I’m not dead.”

The faun snickered to herself and got up to face me, her eyes shining with amusement. I realized that her hair was matted with dried blood that she hadn’t bothered to wash out. She smelled like what she had been bringing to her opponents in the arena—death.

“Don’t you get it, wolf? You’re about to die, either by my hand or one of theirs,” she remarked as she pointed around the room. “So, you better just relax, stop and smell the roses, as it were, enjoy what little time you have left. Lean into your destiny. And if you go against me, I promise I’ll make it a quick death. Those are my favorite kind.”

With that, she turned and walked away. I started after her, but the minotaur cut me off and shoved me back. “Didn’t you hear her, man? She said back off!” Before I knew it, he punched me hard in the face, and, not prepared for it, I went down.

Rishika was on her feet in seconds and raced over to join the fight. With a quick movement that my eyes barely followed, she drop-kicked the minotaur, and he crumpled to the floor. The rest of the fighters reacted, jumping in to land their own blows and kicks to the minotaur before turning on each other, fighting just to fight. I couldn’t tell which side they were on, or if there even was a side to be on in the first place.

*Everyone here is just desperate to survive by any means necessary, and if that means weakening their potential opponents before they get to the main event, so be it. I suppose I’m as desperate as they are. I have to figure out a way to get the upper hand, and the faun is the key to that. I know it.*

I pulled out of the confusion and scanned the pit for the faun. I spotted her across the way, far from the fray of flailing bodies.

I caught her eye and shouted, “Please, stop this! We should all be working together to get out of here.”

The faun shook her head and laughed again. “You wolves are so damn foolish, thinking you can turn any situation into anything like your packs. But you’re not the first werewolf I’ve met, and I doubt you’ll be the last.”

And then, moving faster than I thought possible, she crossed over to me and struck me in the throat. I went down again in shock and pain. The faun was on me in an instant, grabbed me by the hair, and pulled my head back.

“And you’re not the first wolf I’ve killed, either.” She lowered her sharp, terrifying horns, caked in blood just like her hair.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rishika break free of the massive brawl and run at the faun with an angry scream.

“Stop! No!” I shouted at her, but it was too late. I pushed myself, even though I knew I wasn’t going to be fast enough.

I watched in horror as the faun skewered Rishika right through the chest.

**Episode 5331**

**Artemis**

I was feeling a mixed bag of pissed and scared and frustrated all at the same time.

*I can’t believe they took Rishika! How could they? I didn’t even get a chance to lay eyes on her first. I didn’t even know she was here.*

I was kicking myself, wishing that I’d never sent Marius to the human world for help. And now that I had, I’d put Cali, Rishika, and everyone else I cared about directly in harm’s way. I knew the Redwood pack and my sister well, and there was no doubt in my mind that they hadn’t hesitated to come help me—that was why I’d sent Marius after them in the first place. And for their trouble, I’d drawn them right into the dangerous web of Fae politics.

*I have to stop! The self-pity and regret aren’t helping. I have to snap out of it. I should be grateful they came at all, and that Marius braved going to the human world to find them. This is just a minor setback. I’m going to fix this and get everything back on track.*

I took a slow look around, realizing that Kastian might be the key to everything. I had to figure out what the hell he was up to, and then everything else would fall into place.

I hadn’t lied to Cali about him, after all. I could easily see how he might be involved. Missing people all over the place, Kastian with an axe to grind…it was plausible that he had a hand in all this. And I still didn’t know where the Order of the Winding Thorn fell into all of this. After all, there were so many rumors surrounding him about making all those girls disappear…or worse.

Deciding that I had to do *something*, I found my way to where they’d set up the cooking area to prepare food for the peace talks. I knew Aelwen was here somewhere—part of the Fae servants tasked with cooking for the Light and Dark Fae here. I wanted to run my theory about Kastian by Aelwen, see if I was totally off base, or if this could fit Kastian’s MO.

I spotted Aelwen fairly quickly and pulled her into the hallway without a word, walking quickly with her by my side until we were in a remote area where we wouldn’t be overheard.

“We have to talk, now,” I said.

“I gathered that when you yanked me away from my workstation,” Aelwen said. “What now?”

“There’s something going on, and I need your help figuring it out.”

“Of course there is. Isn’t there always something going on?” Aelwen cursed under her breath and looked away. “I knew I never should have agreed to come with the retinue to this summit. I knew it was trouble, and I just ignored my gut feeling. I’ll never do that again.”

“As far as I know, you’re safe, and for what it’s worth, I’m glad you came,” I said.

*It’s my sister and Rishika who could be in trouble now.*

Aelwen scowled. “With all due respect, it’s not worth much. So, what is it now?”

“Do you have any more information about the missing girls? Anything you haven’t told me?”

Aelwen sighed but seemed to be trying to think. “There might be one thing I haven’t mentioned. One of the missing servant girls is from Brychan’s estate, and he happens to be here as part of the peace talks. Brychan’s wife’s handmaid is the sister of the second girl who went missing.”

I took that in, trying to follow. “Okay, I think I got it. So, the handmaid is who I should talk to?”

Aelwen nodded. “Yes. Find Maira.”

“Thanks for the info, Aelwen,” I said. “And if you could, please keep your eyes and ears open for any more information.”

“Of course, that’s what I’m here for,” Aelwen grumbled after me as I hurried across the keep to find the lady’s maid. But I ran into Adair first, who stepped into my path to stop me.

“What are you doing, Adair? You may be glamoured, but shouldn’t you be lying low? Anyone here has the power to discover who you really are.”

“That won’t be a problem for much longer,” Adair responded. “I’m leaving.”

I did a double take. “What? I don’t understand. Where are you going?”

“Tabitha and I are going to try and find Greyson and Rishika. We were worried at first that we might not be able to get back in through the briars if we left, but Tabitha thinks her negation magic should allow us reentry once we find the two of them.”

I was shocked by their plan, but I realized it made perfect sense. Unlike Cali and me, no one would miss Tabitha and Adair if they slipped away.

*I want more than anything to go with them. See Rishika with my own eyes to make sure she’s safe, but that’s impossible, so I might as well not even consider it. I can’t go anywhere without Celeste because of the Fae promise. I have to stay put and see this thing through, for now.*

Adair gave me a knowing look. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of things, and we’ll be quick about it. I know you’re bound by the Fae promise you were forced to make to my wife—a ramification of the choices I made so long ago.” Adair shook his head and winced. “But don’t worry, we’ll find Rishika for you. Everything will be okay.”

I nodded at him, wondering if Adair could somehow sense my unresolved feelings for Rishika. It wasn’t like I was hiding how I still felt about her, and it wasn’t like Adair was the emotional type, either, but it was clear he knew how important it was for Rishika to come back safe. And for Greyson to come back in one piece, too, for Cali’s sake. I was thankful that Adair was here helping us.

“Thank you,” I said, hugging Adair and catching him by surprise. He stiffened.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “Now, I’d better go. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I watched Adair hurry away, grateful that someone was going after Rishika—and Adair wasn’t just anyone. He was strong and a good fighter who knew the Fae world well. Adair going to save Greyson and Rishika was the next best thing to going myself.

Aelwen’s information still top of mind, I resumed my search for Maira. I made my way to the Dark Fae quarters and stopped a servant walking down the hall. “Could you tell me where I might find Brychan’s suite?”

The servant nodded and pointed in a vague direction toward a bank of rooms. “One of those,” he said. “I think the one on the left.”

I nodded and thanked him and then went to knock on the door. Only a second later, a maid answered. “May I help you?”

I looked her up and down and asked, “Are you Maira?”

She nodded, confused. “I am. And you are? Are you looking for my—”

I cut her off and ushered her inside. “We need to talk.”

Maira stumbled back, and I closed the door behind us. I took a quick look around to make sure we were alone. “Where’s Brychan? His wife?”

“They’re both at the banquet,” Maira said after a moment of hesitation. “Who are you and why do you want to know?”

*Makes sense that they’re at the banquet, and I should be there, too. I’m sure Celeste is fuming at my tardiness.*

Without answering her, I said, “I have a few questions for you.”

“I’m sorry, but until I know who you are, I’m not sure I can—”

“It’s about your sister,” I said.

The maid’s expression shut down.

“I have to know why your sister disappeared and how.”

The maid shook her head, and her voice was hard when she spoke again. “Not only is that none of your business, it’s old news. I’m not talking about it with a stranger—nothing good will come of it, nor am I interested in sullying my dead sister’s reputation.”

I was shocked. “So, your sister is dead?”

The maid sighed. “That’s what I said, isn’t it? We were close, and she would never just up and leave without telling me where she was going unless something bad happened. Especially when she was preg—” The maid cut herself off.

“Wait, what were you about to say?”

The maid’s expression was closed off again. “I didn’t say anything. Please leave. If you’re not going to state your business, you can’t be in here.”

“I know you don’t know me, but I may be able to help. Tell me what it was that you were about to say!”

The maid’s hard look turned to fear, and I realized that she thought whatever information she had might get her hurt if she shared it.

“Listen, I’ll make a Fae promise with you that I will not give this information to anyone who would harm you. I can’t tell you why, but I need this information. It could help a lot of people. Maybe even your sister.”

“I told you, my sister is dead. But since you made a Fae promise, I’ll trust you. No one takes those lightly. My sister was pregnant when she disappeared.”

“And do you know who the father was?” I pressed.

The maid laughed bitterly. “Of course I do. It was her lover, Kastian.”

**Episode 5332**

“I didn’t say a thing to Kastian to encourage the marriage!” I said to Celeste. “And why would I? I don’t want this marriage even a little! He’s just twisting my words to fit what he wants the outcome to be. Hoping that I’ll be under too much pressure to turn him down.”

Celeste didn’t seem convinced. “I put a lot on the line to approach you and make that deal. If you backstab me, you’ll regret it.”

Celeste was intense, and I was thoroughly intimidated, but I wasn’t about to show it. I held my ground. “I merely talked to Kastian and acknowledged that marriage would be one way to achieve peace. I never officially agreed to do it, though.”

Celeste eyed me. “So am I to believe you’re actually considering the offer?”

I was surprised at how direct Celeste was. We barely knew each other, and she was taking a lot of liberties. “That’s not important,” I replied. “All that matters is that I haven’t accepted it.”

Celeste frowned. “When you’ve lived as long as I have, you learn to read the undercurrents of what a Fae is saying to you. I can tell that there’s a lot more to this than what you’re admitting, and that troubles me.”

Celeste was looking me right in the eye, and I met her gaze, wanting to prove that she wasn’t putting me on edge even though it was starting to feel like Celeste could read my every intention—and I didn’t like that at all.

*Is this who Artemis has been dealing with all this time? It’s a wonder she’s even still standing after being under this woman’s control for even a short time.*

“I have no intention of breaking our deal.”

Celeste nodded slightly. “For now. But I demand that you tell me that moment your heart is swayed to the other side.”

I frowned, wondering how Celeste actually felt about all this. On the surface, she seemed totally against the idea of me marrying Kastian, but I couldn’t read the woman at all, not truly. And once again I was reminded of how silly it would be for me to take what she was saying at face value. She wanted to prevent the wedding, but to what end? I had no idea what her true motives were.

I was pretty sure that I wanted the wedding to happen even less than Celeste did, only because I had no intention of marrying anyone here—after all, I loved Xavier and Greyson, and marrying Kastian, no matter the benefits to the Fae world—would mean that I would have to live here in the Fae world far away from them, my friends, my parents, and everything I’d ever known.

*And there’s no way to know if marrying him will even bring the peace the Fae world needs. But the way Kastian presents it, so sure that it’s the answer—it’s confusing. What could he know that I don’t?*

It occurred to me that he didn’t know anything at all. At least no more than I or anyone else did about whether this marriage would actually achieve anything. For all I knew, it was just a power play for him, a way for him to make a play for control over the Dark Fae that involved an easy mark—me.

Celeste’s eyes narrowed at me in the extended silence. “I can almost see the gears moving in that pretty head of yours. You’re wavering, and I have to warn you that wavering is a mistake. Do *not* betray my trust, Wrenthorn. If you cross me, you won’t have an opportunity to make it right.”

And with that, she swept away.

As I watched the Dark Fae cut her way through the crowd and disappear, fear welled up inside of me at her open threat.

Xavier came over to me, and his closeness immediately took the edge off the sting of Celeste’s words. “You shouldn’t have allied with her,” he said.

I shook my head. “Please, Xavier. I already have a headache; can you skip the part where you voice your disapproval of every decision I make? I’m doing the best I can, okay? I don’t know the first thing about any of these people, and I’m just trying to navigate this minefield of Fae politics.”

“Cali, I—”

“Just trust that everything you want to say to me, I already know, okay? I’m stressed enough as it is.”

Xavier frowned. “I’m not trying to start a fight. I just want you to be careful, that’s all. All this political stuff is so dicey, especially here in the Fae world. Part of me wishes that we’d never gone to see Hera. Things have gone from bad to worse—she’s pulled you into so many problems that aren’t yours to fix.”

I was getting more frustrated by the second. “She’s my grandmother; what would you have me do? Leave her out in the cold? Ignore her? Let her down?”

Xavier’s expression softened. “I’m sorry, I just hate to see you being pulled in so many directions.”

“Don’t you think I hate it, too? But ignoring it isn’t going to just make it go away. We’re in this now, and I have to find a way to get out of it. I’m trying, and I need to handle this my own way, okay?”

Xavier nodded. “Got it. And I’ll be here to support you and be here for whatever you need.”

I sighed and found that I’d leaned into him, craving his warmth and touch so much that I’d barely noticed the moment I pressed my body against his.

Neither of us spoke for a long moment, and the silence was just what I needed. I sighed as his strong arms encircled me, and I relaxed even more. I just needed a moment to let it all go, to not feel like I was a pawn in some war that had been raging for so long without me only to have its outcome drop into my lap like a ton of lead.

*I feel so safe and protected in his arms. Like nothing can touch me. Even after all this time, he can take away my worries and make it so I can finally breathe and not feel like I have to watch my back.*

After a while, I forced myself to pull away. “I have to get back to Kastian. I want to ask him why he gave that toast…even though I can guess why.”

“No use asking what you already know. I know why he did it, too. He’s trying to force your hand. Simple as that.”

“Maybe so, but I want to hear it from his own mouth. And don’t follow me, okay? I can handle this on my own. I’ll be fine.”

Xavier’s expression turned serious. “Cali, you know my answer to that.”

I gave him a long look but said nothing and hurried away, knowing that he would probably be two steps behind me in no time, but there was nothing I could really do to stop him. If Xavier wanted to keep an eye on me, he would.

The banquet was over now and most of the Fae had retired to their rooms. I left the banquet hall and headed toward Kastian’s room on the Dark Fae side of the keep. I was weary, but I wanted to make sure I kept a low profile—although that would be hard, now that Kastian had pretty much announced me to everyone in attendance.

But still, I was going to keep my head on a swivel and not let anyone sneak up on me. I was a Wrenthorn heir, apparently, and that meant I needed to remain cautious. I had no idea what a Dark Fae might try to pull if they caught me alone.

I found Kastian’s quarters and knocked. When the door opened, I was surprised to see not Kastian but Dorphus standing on the other side.

“Oh, sorry, I’m looking for Kastian,” I sputtered.

Dorphus grinned. “You’ve come to the right place.” He opened the door wider. “Kastian, looks like your future wife is here to get a head start.”

Kastian grinned, and I scowled at him, not bothering to hide my distaste. All the innuendo was aggravating, and I was starting to regret coming here. I took a quick look behind me but didn’t see Xavier—but that didn’t mean he wasn’t close by.

“Excuse me, I’ll leave you two to it,” Dorphus said before sliding by me and leaving.

As soon as he was gone, I whirled on Kastian. “Why would you make a toast like that? We didn’t agree to anything, and I thought you said you would give me time to think!”

Kastian was as cool as ever. “I said, ‘potential’ future bride, so I’m not sure why you’re so worked up.”

“I’m worked up because you made it sound like I said yes to the marriage, and you know it! That was clearly your goal, and you achieved it.”

Kastian affected an innocent look. “I can’t possibly be responsible for how people interpret my speech. I made it clear that nothing had been set in stone, and if they don’t get that, it’s not on me.” He sighed and added, “Though I suppose it was a *tad* irresponsible of me.”

I was suddenly at a loss for words, surprised that he’d actually admitted it. “Okay, so why did you do it, then?”

Kastian’s innocent look morphed back into his normal smug expression, and a sly grin spread across his lips. “Would you believe that I just got a little overexcited?”

I scowled. “Sure, I’d believe that if you were six.”

Kastian laughed. “There’s that delightful human humor again.”

“You will *not* put me in a position like that again,” I sneered. “If the Light Fae think either of us is moving forward with this and I’m making promises to you without talking to them first, then you’ll have to kiss that peace you’re so excited about goodbye.”

Kastian nodded. “Fair enough. For the sake of our potential future alliance, I won’t do anything to put you in a bad position, Caliana.”

I stared him down, wondering if he was just misleading me again, but then I realized that I couldn’t find a double meaning in his words. I was going to have to take his word for it—for now.

I nodded. “Good. Thank you.”

I left his room feeling relieved and had only made it two steps through the door when someone grabbed me.

**Episode 5333**

**Greyson**

I slowly opened my eyes, realizing at that moment that I was waking up from a state I didn’t remember falling into. I had a splitting headache, and my entire body was sore from head to toe. I blinked a few times and looked around, confused about where I was before I finally realized I was lying on the cold floor of the pit.

*Still here. So I guess it wasn’t all some awful nightmare.*

I reached back to rub my head and felt a huge, painful bump there, and a second later, my memory came flooding back—the fight. And trying to reason with the faun.

And then the faun skewering Rishika.

My heart raced as it all came back almost too quickly for me to process—me lunging at the faun after her attack on Rishika only moments before being hit over the head by someone. That was the last thing I remembered before waking up in a fetal position on the floor.

*Fuck. How did I let myself get bested like that? I don’t know why I would allow myself to get caught off guard in a place like this where everyone’s out to get me.*

I jumped up to my feet. “Rishika! Rishika! Where are you?” My head was pounding and spinning, but I didn’t care. I had to find her.

I spotted some of the other fighters huddled at the far end of the pit. They ignored me as I began looking around, searching for my friend. Then I saw it: a dark red circle on the ground beside me. Blood. The smell was strong, and it was definitely Rishika’s blood.

The circle of blood led off a in a smear, and I followed the trail, which led to the exit, but I stopped short. It wasn’t like I could follow the trail out of the pit.

*It’s like someone dragged her bleeding body somewhere. But where would they have taken her? And is she still alive?*

I winced as the image of watching the faun impale Rishika flashed through my mind. For anyone other than Rishika—a strong werewolf—that could have been a killing blow. I was hoping to hell that it hadn’t been. Rishika was my pack member. My friend. My second. If they’d killed her or hurt her…I would bring hell raining down on this place.

I followed the blood trail to where it ended and found Clarence there. “Don’t look at me like that, man, I had nothing to do with it,” he muttered.

“But you saw who took her?” I pressed, backing him against the wall.

Clarence raised his hands in surrender. “Cool it, man, or the guards will come in and make you calm down. They’re on edge after breaking up that brawl.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the guards, you, or anyone else in here. I need to find Rishika.”

Clarence shook his head. “And I’m sure you’ve pieced together that she’s gone? Do you see her anywhere?”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t believe you.” I made my way toward the exit, a metal padlocked door that the guards used to come and go. I didn’t know how I was going to get through it, but I would find a way. I had to.

“Do you really think you’re going to break out of here? Better men than you have tried, no offense,” Clarence said.

I slammed a hand against the door. It didn’t even shake. He was right. There was no way I was going to be able to bust through this, even with my strength. I turned back to Clarence. “Tell me what happened. Now.”

“It all happened so fast. Right after the minotaur bonked you over the head, the guards came pouring in. They broke up the fight and warned everyone that you weren’t to be messed with before your fight or there would be consequences. That’s why everyone’s staying clear of you.”

I looked around and realized that everyone was even avoiding meeting my gaze.

“You’ve been picked as the favorite, seems like,” Clarence explained.

I didn’t like the sound of that, but it seemed to match up with exactly what Cenwyn had already told me to my face. He had plans for me. I was going to do everything in my power to ruin those plans. But I had to find Rishika first. There was no way I could leave without her.

“And Rishika, what about her?” I asked Clarence. “Any idea where they took her?”

Clarence looked sad. “No, man, I’m sorry. I’m in the pit, not walking around with the guards. I’m in the same position as you. Once they go through that door, I don’t know shit.”

I grabbed Clarence by the collar. “Tell me what happened now, or I’ll fucking break your neck!”

Clarence flashed a defeated smile. “Go ahead. Probably more merciful than what will happen to me in the arena. And besides, I told you everything I know. They took her body after the faun gored her. I know she’s a werewolf and all, but it’s not likely she survived that. Honestly, they’ve probably thrown her in the incinerator by now. They’re not sentimental folks, if you haven’t noticed. I’m sorry you didn’t get to say goodbye.”

My world began to spin, and I let Clarence go, unsure of whether I was going to even be able to stay upright.

*Rishika’s gone? Thrown in the incinerator? Dead? That can’t be. This can’t be happening. This isn’t where her story was supposed to end…no…I can’t believe it. I won’t. She’s not dead. There’s no way.*

The guilt started flooding in fast and hard, so much so that I leaned against the wall of the pit, the only thing keeping me on my feet.

*I should have protected her. She’s given so much to keep Cali and the pack and me safe, and then, when she needed me, I didn’t do anything, and she’s gone. Killed by that fucking faun and her body burned. I never should have brought her to the Fae world with us.*

I was Rishika’s Alpha; it was my responsibility to protect her, and I hadn’t done it. I failed her.

I left Clarence behind and ran to the exit door again, desperate. I banged on the door and yelled, “Rishika! Rishika! Where’s Cenwyn? Bring him to me *now*. Now!”

This couldn’t be the end. I had to know what was going on. I had to get proof that the worst hadn’t happened, that Rishika wasn’t dead. This couldn’t be real. I would give anything just to know she was alive, that Clarence was wrong, and they hadn’t already disposed of her body in such a horrible way.

I banged on the door until my fists were bloody, but no one came. I turned and slammed my back against the door, then slid down to the ground. Despair overtook me like a riptide. How had everything spiraled so completely out of control so fast?

I’d come to the Fae world to help protect Cali while she searched for Artemis, and I wasn’t doing that either. I was trapped in some stupid pit about to be forced into a fight like a gladiator. I was going to be forced to kill someone while my friend’s death was still fresh on my mind. How was I going to do that?

*Cali has to be wondering where I am, and I know she’ll come looking for me. But she has no clue I’m here. Will she ever find me? Will anyone?*

A part of me hoped that she never found out what happened to me. I didn’t want to worry her, or to make her think that her need to come here and for me to accompany her had somehow led to my bad luck.

Then, I began to get pissed. This wasn’t right. This shouldn’t be happening to me. I didn’t deserve it, and Rishika shouldn’t be dead—that was for damn sure.

*I’m going to make them pay for what they did to her. I’ll get revenge on them if it’s the last thing I do, even if I’m killed in the process. It’ll be well worth it.*

Just then the door creaked open, and I scuttled away from it just as a half dozen guards stepped through and rushed in, pointing energy spears at my neck. The biggest guard stepped forward and held out a bowl of a strangely colored, bitter-smelling liquid.

“Drink,” the guard grunted, shoving it at me.

I frowned. “What is it?”

“Drink,” the guard repeated.

*This must be whatever makes them all go rabid.*

I looked up at the guards, weighing my options. I could knock the bowl out of his hands and spill it, but that would probably only win me an ass-kicking and a fresh bowl of liquid to drink—and they’d probably force feed it to me the second time around.

With a grim determination, I held my breath and gulped the whole thing down. Why fight it now? I wanted the rage. Needed it. I was ready to show them what true anger looked like.

**Episode 5334**

**Artemis**

Cali let out a little scream, and I let her go, lifting my hands up in front of me so that she would see I wasn’t a threat. “It’s me, Cali.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded, still shaking. “You scared the hell out of me!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to. Were you just with Kastian?”

Cali nodded.

“*Alone?*”

Cali nodded again.

“That’s not a good idea, Cali. Don’t be alone with him again.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“He’s dangerous. The reason I suspected him in the first place with Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance is because there’s a chance he’s behind the disappearance of a bunch of girls. There’s also this organization I don’t know if he’s tied to… But even if he’s not, he’s dangerous. I really think he’s connected to the girls going missing.”

Cali gave me a bewildered look. “But how?”

“For starters, I just found out that one of the missing girls was pregnant with Kastian’s baby, and then *poof*, she disappeared. That can’t be a coincidence. I think Kastian had something to do with it. He had the motive to make that girl disappear. And because she was a servant, he probably thought no one would notice.”

“Okay…but what if the girl just ran away because she was ashamed of the pregnancy?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not that. The girl’s sister is the one who told me, and she also said that there was no way her sister would just up and leave without a trace. It’s way too suspicious! Kastian’s behind it. I know it!”

“I—I don’t know what to say,” Cali stammered. She looked shell-shocked.

“I know. It’s a lot to take in, but he has the power to do it—to make anyone he wants disappear.”

Cali nodded slowly, as if processing it all. “I don’t know Kastian enough to trust him, but he doesn’t strike me as a murderer. Especially over something like an unwanted pregnancy. And even if that’s true, how does that connect to Rishika or Greyson? Neither of them hooked up with him and got pregnant by him,” Cali said with an attempt at levity. “What would his motive be there? He shouldn’t even have known they were here.”

“I don’t know what the connection is, and that’s what I’m working to find out. But what I do know is that Fae are very tricky and can be extremely vicious. Believe me, I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Cali nodded. “I won’t argue with you there.”

“It’s possible that ever since the marriage treaty was even breathed into existence, Kastian’s been watching you. There’s a chance he’s had eyes on all of you—even Marius, Adair, and Tabitha. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“I guess not if he’s as powerful as you say he is,” Cali said. “So, what—do you think he’s trying to isolate me or something? Because if he were, wouldn’t he have made his move while I was alone with him?”

“Not necessarily. It might not be the right time for him to make his move, but it’s entirely possible that it’s his end game. Maybe he went after Greyson and Rishika to leave you exposed—to get rid of any werewolves around you who might protect you or stand in the way of whatever his plan may be.”

“I suppose that’s a motive,” Cali said. She wrapped her arms around herself and threw a frightened glance at Kastian’s closed door in the distance.

“Exactly. He gets what he wants, and you’re left alone with no one on your side to help you.” I sighed, following Cali’s gaze to Kastian’s door. Like I’d mentioned to Cali, I didn’t know what he was up to, but something was off. I was only happy that I’d gotten to Cali before Kastian could pull off any part of his plan.

“I don’t like any of this, Cali. I brought you here, and I want to keep you safe.”

“You didn’t bring me here, Artemis. I came on my own. And you know I’m not some wilting flower. I can protect myself.”

I nodded, not wanting to argue with her. She had no idea what Kastian was capable of. Hell, neither did I. I only wanted to protect my sister, and that meant I couldn’t let Cali get in any deeper with Kastian than she had already.

“Let me escort you back to your room,” I offered.

She grinned. “I guess you’re not taking my whole ‘not a wilting flower’ statement to heart. I’m sure I can make it back to my room okay. Though I do appreciate your concern.”

“I know it seems like overkill, but I’m worried about you. I love you, and no matter what you say, this is all my fault.”

Cali waved that off. “No, it isn’t, Artemis. Don’t think that way. This isn’t your fault, so stop saying it.”

I nodded, but I didn’t agree. This was definitely all my fault, and that meant it was up to me to fix it before any more damage was done. Greyson and Rishika were already who knew where and could be in some kind of danger. I wasn’t about to let the same thing happen to my sister.

We’d almost reached Cali’s room when we spotted Marius and Xavier coming down the hall toward us.

Xavier wasted no time rushing to Cali’s side. I watched him closely, wondering where things stood between them. I hadn’t seen them interact in so long, and their relationship was so complicated that anything could be going on.

“How did it go with Kastian?” he asked. “As you can see, I followed your wishes and let you handle it on your own. Though I can’t say I wasn’t on my way to check on you.”

Cali shot me a look before answering Xavier. “It went fine, I guess. I convinced him not to make any more wild announcements like that. He was more amenable to that than I thought he would be. I was shocked.”

I connected eyes with Marius, my stomach flipping. I hadn’t really had a chance to talk to him since he’d returned from the human world, hadn’t even thanked him. It was strange. He didn’t really look like himself because of the glamour, but his mannerisms were all still so…*Marius*.

“Any updates?” I asked him, my voice thick in my throat. It was a surprise the effect Marius had on me, even when he wasn’t exactly Marius. It did remind me of how I felt about Rishika, the attraction—and then I had a flash of worry as I thought about where Rishika might be right now.

*I hope she’s okay. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself if anything happens to her. If it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t even be here in the first place.*

“No updates,” Marius replied. “But it’s important that we stall the peace talks. I have a feeling the culprit is here, and we don’t want the talks to adjourn before we can track them down.”

“I agree,” Cali cut in. “And I want the peace talks stalled for other reasons. I don’t want to have to commit to marrying Kastian.”

“And you won’t,” Xavier added gravely.

“Marius, I want to thank you for all your help. I know that we were skeptical of you at first, but you’ve proven yourself to be on the up and up, and you can’t imagine how much of a relief that is,” Cali said.

Marius simply bowed his head in thanks.

“I guess we’ll have to call it a night and see what tomorrow brings,” Cali said.

“See you in the morning?” I said to Cali and Xavier, who nodded before they headed off together.

When Marius and I were alone, I couldn’t help but feel awkward. My feelings for Marius were strange enough without factoring in how little this glamoured version looked like him.

“Thanks for all your help,” I said.

“It’s my pleasure, Ari, really. I know you probably still don’t believe me, but there’s nothing I want more than to help you.”

I nodded. “I believe you, Marius. You’ve more than proven that.” I continued looking straight ahead, not making eye contact. It was easier to talk to him this way and feel connected to him since his voice was the same. “Thank you so much for going to get Cali from the human world. I know it was a lot to ask and that it wasn’t easy.”

Marius grabbed my hand, and I finally turned to face him.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get Rishika back. Mark my words.”

Before I could reply, he turned and walked away.

Teeming with mixed emotions, I went to my room only to find that I had a surprise guest. Celeste.

“Where have you been?” Celeste asked, giving me a once over as if she thought she might find a sign of what I’d been up to. “You didn’t even come to the banquet. Do you know how bad that looked? The heir to House Mauvais not bothering to show up to the peace talks *or* the banquet?”

I shrugged. “What are you going to do?”

Celeste’s expression didn’t change. “I didn’t claim to have a plan to do anything. I simply asked if you have any concept of what’s appropriate at an event like this, and it’s obvious that you don’t and never will, so I suppose the point is moot.”

I sighed, tired of feeling like a chastised child around her. “Obviously you came here to do more than lecture me. What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is Kastian’s making moves. We can’t let him gain more power by marrying Cali. It would be a disaster for the Dark Fae.”

I lifted a brow, surprised that our goals were in alignment for once. “I agree, but what can we do about it?”

“I’m trying to figure that out now. I’m worried about Cali’s commitment to the deal. She’s Hera’s granddaughter.”

“And I am, too,” I said. Privately, I was confused. Cali didn’t mention Celeste or making a deal with her. What was going on?

“What I need from you is to make sure your sister falls in line with my plans. Or else.”

I frowned at Celeste. “Or else what?”

“If Cali doesn’t work with us to sabotage this ridiculous marriage treaty, then Cali will have to be eliminated.”

# **Episode 5335**

“…Cali?”

I turned to Xavier, realizing belatedly that he must have been speaking to me for longer than I’d realized. I hadn’t been paying attention. After Celeste and Artemis left, it was like the whole world had landed on my shoulders, and all I could do was try to stay upright. To not let everything fall to shambles.

“Sorry, what?” I asked, still only half paying attention. How was I going to be able to pull this off? How could I possibly keep everyone safe?

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, not meeting his eyes. “Of course.”

Suddenly, his hands were firm on my shoulders. The heat of him sank through my court clothes, and I wanted to curl up in it. Xavier’s eyes searched my face before our gazes locked. The look on his face was as intimate as it was disarming. “Are you okay?” he asked again, a bit more force in his voice this time. There would be no more evading the truth. Not with him.

I sighed. “No, I’m not all right. Of course I’m not all right. But that doesn’t matter.”

He frowned. “What? Why?”

“Because I have no choice but to be all right!” I wanted to scream, but instead I pulled in a deep breath. It was far too early for me to fall apart. And if I allowed myself to break, how much time would I waste trying to put myself back together?

“I have to keep it together,” I continued. “I have to make sure everyone is protected and safe and that no further war breaks out.” If, after all the effort it took to make this peace summit happen, the war only worsened, I’d never forgive myself.

Xavier released me, shaking his head. “This is what I’ve been worried about this whole time. You’re running on fumes. Did you even eat anything at the banquet?”

I thought back, my stomach tightening, and shook my head. “No. I…I haven’t eaten all day, I don’t think.”

He nodded. “I’ll be right back.” He left, seemingly hell-bent on seeing through one way he could help me, and so I took the opportunity to change out of my banquet clothes. I breathed a little easier as I slipped into something more comfortable. It felt good to be out of that restrictive dress. There was one bit of silver lining.

I sat on the edge of my bed, sinking into the mattress that called my name, but I couldn’t relax. My mind was still spinning with everything that was going on. Greyson and Rishika were missing. We still hadn’t freed Artemis. And it seemed more and more like the mere possibility of peace was just a fairy tale.

*Oh, and apparently the best thing I can do to keep the Fae world from dissolving into further violence is to marry a guy I just met? I’ve seen enough Disney movies to know how well that one works out.*

I blew out a breath and pressed the heels of my hands against my forehead. I didn’t want the Dark Fae to think the peace talks were some kind of ruse—even though they sort of were, as a voice in my head that sounded suspiciously like Xavier’s loved to remind me—but the very last thing I wanted in the entire universe was to marry this Kastian guy.

*I wish Mom were here. What went through her mind before she was married off to Kadmos? Had she loved him yet? Or had she thought she could learn to love him? Or was she just doing her duty to her people?*

I let myself fall back onto my bed with a groan. I knew I couldn’t bring my mom into this mess. That might be the one way this shit show would level up to a full-on clusterfuck. She wouldn’t be safe here—not after leaving her world, her people. Not after marrying my dad. Not after having me.

No, this was all on my shoulders, and mine alone. I had to make sure that Kastian didn’t force me into this marriage. I had to make sure that Celeste believed I was on her side—if only so she didn’t truly become my enemy. I had to find out who took Greyson and Rishika, and then how to get them back safely. I had to ensure I wasn’t leading my grandmother into any danger with these peace talks. And, oh yes, I still had to keep Artemis safe and get her out of here.

*You know, the whole reason I came here in the first place.*

A dull throb pulsed behind my eyes. I didn’t know how to pull off even one of my responsibilities, much less all of them.

*What am I going to do?*

The door opened again, and Xavier stepped inside with a plate of food. I’d sort of forgotten he’d even left, and guilt nagged at me for that too.

He set the plate down on the bed next to me. “There wasn’t much in the kitchen, just some cheese, fruit, and bread.”

“It’s great,” I said, more for his benefit than anything else. I’d never been less hungry in my life.

I picked up a piece of bread but couldn’t bring myself to take a bite. It felt too hard, somehow.

“Cali, come on,” Xavier said gently. Too gently. Like he was afraid I was going to break. “You have to eat if you want to keep up your energy.”

I sighed and forced myself to take a bite. The bread was soft and still warm, with a slight sweetness to it, like it was baked with honey. But it could have been ash in my mouth for all the pleasure it brought. I managed to choke down half a piece before giving up. I dropped the remainder back on the plate.

Xavier shook his head. “You’re taking on too much.”

“I already told you I have to deal with this my own way.”

“And that’s fine. But however you choose to deal with this, you have to allow yourself a few breaks now and then. Because, from what I can tell, you haven’t taken a single one since we set foot in this world.”

I sighed. “I *am* pretty tired.”

Xavier set the plate on my bedside table and perched himself on the edge of the mattress next to me.

“You look really tense,” he said, hovering. “Um, can I?”

His hand traced my back, barely touching me. I could just feel the heat of his skin through my dress. It felt like a dangerous question, yet another worry to add to my list, but I couldn’t deny how grateful I was for him to be here.

I nodded, and his hand slid up and down my back in smooth, soothing strokes. Then, slowly and gently, he began to massage my shoulders. And god, it felt so good. It was exactly what I needed, even if I didn’t realize it when he’d asked.

I couldn’t remember the last time his hands were on me like this. “That feels really good,” I murmured.

His thumb dug into a particularly tense knot in my right shoulder, and I couldn’t hold back the moan that rattled its way out of my throat. My head fell back, and heat rushed into my face.

“Just tell me what you need,” Xavier said, his voice just this side of breathless. “What can I do to make this easier on you?”

I cleared my throat, trying to force my thoughts to platonic places. “Just being here with me is helping.”

And I wasn’t lying. Whatever bad stuff had happened between us in the past, I was grateful that Xavier was with me now during all of this.

*I don’t know what I’d do without him.*

The thought sent cold water over my senses, and I scooted away, breaking our connection.

“Thank you for coming here with me,” I said. “I know it’s been dangerous, and there were a million reasons for you to stay back in your world, but I’m really grateful you’re here.”

His brow creased. “Of course I had to come. I want to be here to protect you. I don’t know what I’d do if something bad happened to you here.”

I shook my head. “I can take care of myself.”

“I never doubted that.”

“You…” I tried to summon up the right combination of words. “You shouldn’t worry about me so much. It confuses things between us.”

*I mean, how can I ever forget his little speech about not wanting to be my friend?*

Then, Xavier’s hand slipped into mine, his fingertips barely grazing my own, almost as if he was testing the waters. And for a moment, we sat in silence, watching our hands move together.

He pulled in a breath, and I dragged my gaze up to look at him, only to find him staring back at me.

“Cali,” he said, his voice full of quiet urgency.

*I’m starting to trust him again*, I realized. Things were almost beginning to feel the way they used to before Adéluce ruined everything.

But things hadn’t changed. And that was exactly why I needed to protect my head.

I pulled my hand away. “We should probably rest.”

He let out a quiet sigh, but got up and headed to his own room, which was connected to mine.

Once I was finally alone again, I let myself fall back onto my bed with a quiet sob. But before I could completely lose myself to my emotions, a knock sounded at my door. The one that led to the hallway.

*What now?*

I got up to open the door and found Kastian on the other side. He gave me an easy grin, holding up a bottle of wine. “I’m here with a peace offering. Will you let me in?”

# **Episode 5336**

**Greyson**

The potion moved through my veins like lava flowing down the side of a volcano, searing my senses, intensifying every scent, every sound, every brush of the air over my skin as I moved. But I couldn’t focus on my heightened perception, because amidst all those sensations was a deep, unending rage. It filled the depths of me, coloring every thought, every sight, every sound, every breath.

I’d thought—and, if I was being honest with myself, I’d *hoped*—that the potion would make me mindless. A feral beast with one motive: killing everything in sight. That it would numb me to everything else, make me forget everything else. Make me forget being trapped as a warrior-slave for Fae entertainment. Make me forget my grief and despair over losing Rishika.

But I hadn’t forgotten. That soul-deep ache was just as present as it had been the moment I’d woken up and realized what had happened to her. What that faun had done. But that pain fed my rage, stoked the flames so high I half-expected myself to combust at any moment.

It wasn’t quite the same way I’d felt when I was given that biscuit, but the sensation was similar enough that I recognized it. A different concentration, maybe? It didn’t matter either way.

*That fucking Fae had been planning this all along.*

The moment I got the chance, he was going to die a very long and painful death.

The guards used a long pole to attach a collar around my neck—they were clearly afraid of getting too close—and then led me into another area. *Cowards. They’ll abduct me. Drug me. And put me in a fucking gladiator match, but they won’t chance facing me two-on-one.*

These two were on my list too.

I was so caught up in my rage that, when they removed my silver manacles and the silver laurel from my head, I was too slow. Before I could shift or attack them, they’d shoved me into the room and closed and locked the door behind me.

“Fuck!” I bared my teeth at the closed door. That could have been my only chance, and it had passed me by.

A small window slid open in the door, so small I couldn’t even put an entire hand through it.

“Take whatever weapon you want,” one of the guards said. “The fight starts soon.”

I glanced around the room. The lockers that had been filled with various kinds of weapons were open now. I strode over and grabbed the first weapon my hand reached—a giant axe. It didn’t really matter what weapon I had. My wolf was the most dangerous and powerful weapon in this arsenal. I just wanted something that I could use to burn off some of this rage. Of course, that was exactly what they wanted me to do, and it grated that I was playing into their hands in any way, but there was exactly jack shit I could do about that right now. My best bet was learning the lay of the land and then figuring out how to get the fuck out.

Axe in hand, I strode over to the door leading to the arena and started hacking at it. I didn’t give a fuck about some stupid gladiator fight—I just wanted to rip this place apart.

*Let’s see if those guards will take issue with me fucking up their shit.* I’d love nothing more than to show them exactly what I was capable of without the silver cuffs.

I’d only been hacking at the door for a few moments when a rumbling sound echoed through the weapons room. Then the door leading to the arena swung open, and an announcer’s voice echoed, “And introducing our newest fighter: the Wolf King!”

A snarl rippled through my chest. They wanted to see an animal? I’d give them a fucking animal.

I raced through the tunnel leading into the arena, bursting out mid-shift, and the crowd roared in excitement. The sound was so overwhelming, so overstimulating, that I barely registered my opponent: the asshole minotaur from before.

Another wave of rage slammed into me. Hadn’t Clarence said that the minotaur was the one who knocked me out cold? If that fucker hadn’t interfered, I might have been able to save Rishika. But now we’d never know.

A roar ripped out of my chest, and I finished shifting and pounced on the minotaur without a second thought. I tore into its shoulder with my teeth, savoring the cry of pain it let out. The crowd let out another cheer as I drew first blood. Bright pain lanced up my side, and I glanced down to see the minotaur’s spear embedded a couple inches deep in my skin. Then he pushed me off him and backed away; the spear tip came out coated in my blood, and within seconds I could feel the wound beginning to knit itself closed.

Not that I could focus on my injury, even if I wanted to. That same bloodthirsty rage barreled through me and all I could do was prepare for another attack. This asshole wasn’t walking away. Not today.

Loud voices broke through the din, and I glanced over to see that the other fighters were clustered together in what looked like a viewing cage of sorts, banging at the bars, egging us on.

*How many of them would love to see me die tonight?* Surely, they’d known the minotaur longer. Maybe some of them were his friends. Like that faun who had ruthlessly killed Rishika.

Red filled my vision.

Once I was done with the minotaur, she’d be my next target. These monsters—and that was truly what they were, regardless of their species—weren’t going to get away with this.

The minotaur charged straight at me, and I dodged with barely any effort. The anger fueling me felt like it had supercharged my abilities somehow, made me faster, stronger. A more effective killing machine than I’d ever been before. It was a heady feeling, and the urge to just lean into it was strong. I could just let it take me over, enjoy being powerful, and not worry about the consequences. This guy deserved to die. Even in my right mind, I’d agree with that.

But I couldn’t let myself go. Because, even with the rage and power rippling through my body, I knew, instinctively, that I couldn’t control my wolf. It felt like he was going to attack anything that moved, foe or otherwise.

But part of me didn’t care about any of that. Part of me *wanted* to hurt people. Wanted to take my anger out on something. *Someone.* The urge was even stronger than when I’d attacked Xavier—dangerously so.

And this fucking minotaur was the perfect target.

I caught the minotaur across the belly with my claws, digging deep and relishing the hot blood that slipped down around my paws. The minotaur fell to his knees with a breathy scream, and I went after him again. This time, he speared my flank, and I had to back off to regain the upper hand.

He was a worthy opponent, rage potion or not. I could see how he’d lasted this long.

But I was stronger, and a hell of a lot more pissed off. I didn’t know what motivated this guy to stay alive in this hellmouth of a gladiator pit, but I knew what fueled my own fight. Rishika.

I gained the upper hand, pummeling the minotaur and tearing into him more and more with each assault. Blood slipped down his body from the wounds I’d inflicted, and the crowd was going fucking wild with it. Their voices echoed and boomed through the arena, calling for the minotaur’s death.

He looked scared now. So scared I could practically taste his fear.

I fucking loved it.

I leapt at the minotaur, my teeth aiming for this throat.

Suddenly, Cali’s face flashed through my mind, and at the last second, I tore into his shoulder instead before backing off. My instincts warred with my heart, which felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. Everything inside me screamed at me to finish him. But I couldn’t do it. Not with my mate’s face fresh in my mind.

Slowly, I regained control and stepped back. I shifted back to my human form.

“I’m not going to kill him!” I called out. “Not for your games.”

My rage still simmered just beneath the surface. I wanted nothing more than to kill this guy, but I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t let these Fae bastards debase me like this, even if it meant I lost my life in the process.

“Oh no!” the announcer called out. “It seems the newest fighter doesn’t understand the rules.”

The crowd booed, and I ignored them, turning on my heel and heading back to the door to the pit.

A roar burst out from behind me, and on pure instinct, I spun around, my hands shifting to claws as I slashed the minotaur across the throat. He’d been moments from stabbing his spear through my back.

But now he crumpled to the ground, gurgling on his own blood before stilling.

The crowd absolutely lost it.

“Now *that* is a killing blow!” the announcer cheered.

A deafening chant echoed through the arena, “Wolf King! Wolf King!”

# **Episode 5337**

**Artemis**

Worry gnawed at my stomach as I strode down the hallways of Briarkeep, heading to Cali’s room. I needed to find out exactly what had gone down between her and Celeste, and whether or not they truly had some sort of agreement.

*What kind of terms would Cali even agree to?* I knew the answer immediately. Anything. She’d agree to just about anything Celeste asked of her. Not because she and Celeste were on such agreeable terms, but because Cali just *cared* too much. And Celeste would no doubt pick up on that weakness—and Celeste would definitely view it as a weakness—and use it to her advantage.

And gods, there were so many ways for her to do that. She could have made a deal with Cali on my behalf. Or she could be leveraging Cali’s love and sense of duty for the Light Fae court. Which, in my opinion, seemed kind of silly. Based on what I’d heard, they certainly didn’t see Cali as one of them, so why on earth would she put herself out for their welfare?

Regardless, I needed to get a handle on this situation. And gods forbid that Cali made a Fae promise with Celeste. That would make everything irreparably worse. And Celeste certainly had a knack for getting people to make Fae promises, didn’t she?

I had to find out the truth.

I turned the corner and stopped short for a brief second before ducking back behind it. Cali’s room was just down the hall—and Kastian was at her door.

*What the hell is he doing? Why is he going to my sister’s room at this hour?* A wave of protectiveness washed over me, and it took all my self-control to not march over there and tell him to stay the hell away from my sister. I’d sooner gut him here and now with both Fae delegations at stake than let him hurt Cali.

And one thing was for certain—he *would* hurt her. Kastian was a snake, after all. It was just a matter of putting the final nail in the coffin.

*Take a breath, Artemis*. I gulped down air till the red in my vision receded. *Okay, I won’t kill him. There will be no gutting in the hallway tonight. But that doesn’t mean I can’t chew him out for bothering her.*

I was about to storm over and tell him to fuck off when Kastian suddenly bowed to Cali, turned, and left. My brows rose.

*What was that all about?*

I waited till Kastian was farther down the hall before I started toward Cali’s door myself, determined to ask her what the hell that was all about. But as I reached Cali’s door, I saw Kastian turn sharply and disappear down one of the servants’ side exits.

*Where is he going now?*

I hesitated at my sister’s door. I really needed to talk to her, to make sure we were on the same page with all the different agendas flying around, but could I really turn down a chance to observe Kastian when he didn’t know he was being watched?

*What if I can catch him in the act? Finally figure out what the hell he’s been up to all this time? What if he shows me something that will lead me to finding Rishika and Greyson?*

I hurried after him as silently as possible. I could talk to Cali later. I might not get another chance to finally gain the upper hand on Kastian.

The door he’d disappeared down led to a narrow servants’ stairwell. The Dark Fae court had countless passages just like this one—pathways to allow the servants to move between floors and tend to their duties without being seen by the nobles and guests.

I rolled my eyes as I crept down the stairwell after Kastian, carefully testing the floor for any creaky spots. *Gods forbid the nobles see anyone at work. Do they think dirtying their hands with labor is contagious?*

I hurried down the spiraling stairs until I reached the bottom and pushed open the door. Immediately, I was met with the clink of dishes being loaded away and bodies rushing around. The passageway had led me to the banquet room, where the servants were scurrying about, cleaning things up after the dinner. I bit back a gasp at the well-choreographed affair. Though I knew each court had brought their own reticule for support during the peace talks, I hadn’t realized Briarkeep could house so many servants, and they worked with such efficiency to clean the banquet hall, like they’d been doing this for years, not just a few days.

I scanned the room for Kastian. A couple of servants eyed me curiously, but none of them stopped to ask questions. There were so many bodies moving through the room it was difficult to find any sign of Kastian in the chaos.

*There!*

I caught sight of him. It looked like he was heading for the kitchens.

I wove through the servants, earning dirty looks when I interrupted a few of them on their way to clean the dirty dishes, and ducked into the kitchens. Immediately, I lost sight of him. The kitchens seemed even busier than the banquet hall, with bodies pressed in close, washing dishes, and others still cooking, no doubt at the request of their employers. The kitchen was smaller than the banquet hall, and amidst the din and crowding, it seemed impossible to find Kastian.

*Shit! Where did he go? I wasn’t that far behind him…*

I scanned the room again, jolting when a servant shouldered past me with a large basin full of dirty dishes. Across the room, a large door was slowly swinging shut. I didn’t hesitate—I scampered to it and caught the door just before it clicked shut.

I hadn’t seen Kastian head inside, but it seemed like the best lead I was going to get for now. I slipped through the doorway and was met with darkness and cool air. It was a root cellar. Shelves hugged the walls and took up most of the space, filled with wheels of cheese, fruits, vegetables, and jars. Along the wall or against the shelves were several barrels, filled to the brim with nuts, potatoes, and other cold-hardy foods.

I squinted through the dimly lit cellar, not daring to even breathe too loudly. The root cellar was even smaller than the kitchen, and with only the darkness and a few well-placed shelves to hide me, I had to play this carefully, or Kastian would catch me in the act.

I peered around a shelf to where Kastian was standing at the far wall talking to someone. The sounds of the kitchen echoed behind me, and from here, I couldn’t make out what they were saying or who he was speaking to.

I crept closer, hiding behind a large barrel.

Kastian was speaking to a girl in a low voice. I squinted, trying to make out her features, and when she tucked her loose hair behind her ear, I bit back a gasp.

*It’s Maira!* The maid I’d spoken to before about her sister. *What is going on?!*

I strained, trying to make out what they were saying to one another. From what I’d gathered, Maira hated Kastian. I’d thought Maira believed Kastian was her sister’s former lover and that he’d possibly killed her.

*What reason could Maira have to meet in secret with Kastian like this?*

Maira had a bundle of carrots clutched in her arms, and I realized Kastian must have caught her in the middle of working.

*So this wasn’t a planned meeting. At least, not on Maira’s end.*

I could barely make out what they were saying over the sounds of the kitchen behind me.

“…shouldn’t be here!” Maira whispered angrily.

“Trust me, I don’t want to be,” Kastian said. “I just…didn’t you?”

I frowned. *What are they talking about?*

Maira shook her head. “It’s not…tell me what to do anymore!”

*Gods dammit. This is pointless. It’d take werewolf hearing to understand them!*

I leaned forward, desperate to hear them, and knocked a jar of pickled eggs off the barrel. I caught it just before it hit the ground, my heart beating so fast I was sure Maira and Kastian could hear it.

*Careful, Artemis…*

Maira had moved to a different part of the cellar and was scooping nuts into a small bowl. I ducked lower to hide behind the barrel, the jar clutched against my chest.

“…don’t think I don’t know what actually happened to my sister!” Maira hissed.

My eyes widened. This was the information I was looking for. I leaned in, closing my eyes, focusing all of my senses on trying to hear them—

What sounded like a gigantic pot hit the floor in the kitchen, covering up Kastian’s reply. My eyes shot open, and I bit back a groan of frustration.

*Fucking fuck!* I ground my teeth together. This was absolutely maddening. How was I going to be able to protect Cali, defend myself against the Order, or hell, even figure out where Rishika and Greyson were if I couldn’t fucking hear anything?!

“Admit that you talked to—” Kastian’s words were cut off by more banging pots.

*What the hell is going on in there?*

“—of your business anymore!” Maira spat.

Suddenly, Kastian closed the distance between himself and Maira, knocking the food in her arms to the floor. The bowl clattered across the dirt floor, sending nuts flying everywhere.

Kastian’s hand wrapped around Maira’s throat, and for the first time I heard him clearly. “You know what will happen if you cross me.”

**Episode 5338**

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

I shot upright in my bed with a gasp, the covers pooling around my waist. Someone was pounding on my door. Blinking, trying to get my bearings, I glanced at the window. The sun was barely up.

*Who is this desperate to speak to me right now? What on earth is going on?*

Before I could sort my thoughts enough to decide what to do, the door connecting Xavier’s room to mine swung open, and he appeared, shirtless, striding to the door. My cheeks went hot instantly. Our eyes met for a brief second, and then I couldn’t stop my gaze from traveling down, down, over the chiseled muscles wrapping around his arms, his chest, his abs…

*Nope. Look somewhere—anywhere else—Cali.*

I threw back my covers, looking everywhere but at him, and stood. “It’s fine! I’ve got it!”

He raised a brow, stopping suddenly, and then I was face-to-face with his chest. Which looked every bit as amazing as I remembered.

*God dammit, Cali!*

“Gods dammit, Cali!”

I blinked. *Did I just hear my thoughts in stereo?*

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“Open the door!”

*Oh*. Flushing, I turned away from ogling Xavier and opened the door. A very pissed-off Artemis stormed in.

I frowned in confusion, looking to Xavier for an answer. He just shook his head. I turned back to my sister.

“Um, what’s going on?”

“Oh, don’t act coy!” Artemis snapped. “I told you to stay away from Kastian, and then I find him at your door in the dead of night? What did you two even have to talk about?”

My brow rose. *Well…that’s a lot to unpack.* I turned to Xavier. “Can you give us a moment?”

He eyed each of us in turn and then stepped back. “I’m going to find a way to rinse off. I’ll be back soon.”

Artemis watched him disappear back into his room, and when the door connecting our bedrooms closed behind him, she turned to me, a question in her eyes. It didn’t escape me the way she looked between me and where Xavier had just stood. I flushed, forgetting the whole Kastian debacle for a moment. It really looked like something had happened between Xavier and me last night.

And then a little voice whispered, *Well, it kind of did, didn’t it?*

I shoved the thought away and cleared my throat. “Don’t look at me like that. Nothing happened.”

My sister rolled her eyes. “Whatever, I don’t care what you do or don’t do with Xavier. I saw Kastian at your door last night. What were you thinking? I told you he’s dangerous. He could even be some kind of Fae serial killer! And you’re meeting with him privately late at night?”

“Do we need to talk about you watching my room at night?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “You know, I expect this kind of thing from Xavier and Greyson, but I thought you of all people would trust me to protect myself.”

“I was only outside your room because I was coming to talk to you. And you’re avoiding the question: What did he say to you? What did he want?”

I shrugged, throwing myself down into a chair. “Nothing. He came to apologize. And then he left.”

“Oh.” Some of her anger seemed to deflate, and she shook her head. “I followed him last night after he left your room. He met up with Mair, the maid I got my information from. I couldn’t quite overhear everything they were saying, but it was all *very* suspicious. And then, when I went to speak with Mair first thing this morning, she was gone! Cali, you have to be careful around him.”

I sat up at that, my brows furrowing as I eyed Artemis. She seemed so convinced that Kastian was some kind of awful, evil mastermind. Me? I wasn’t so sure. I mean, he was definitely an asshole, but that didn’t mean he was killing people.

“Are you sure she’s actually missing?” I asked carefully. “Maybe she was sent on an errand. It’s early, after all.”

She shook her head. “I’m not so sure about that. I just…I have a bad feeling. Mair had a tense conversation with Kastian, and then she’s gone the next day? Doesn’t that seem suspicious to you?”

“That does fit with what you told me before,” I said, thinking aloud. “And the timing is pretty uncanny for it to all be a coincidence…” My mind spun as I considered the implications of this new information. We weren’t at the Dark Fae court, or at Kastian’s family estate. We were in a neutral location that was practically warded against violence and the like. “Shit. If he managed to make someone else disappear so quickly—while at Briarkeep—he must be either very powerful, very dangerous, or he has friends who are.”

Artemis nodded, her expression saying, *See?*

“Cali, I know I’ve said this a hundred times now, but I *need* you to be careful around him. He comes off as some spoiled, harmless, rich guy, but I think there’s much more to him than that. And not in a good way.”

I nodded. “I get it. I’ll be more careful around him. Do you have any other information about the maid?”

Artemis shook her head. “Just what I already told you. She’s the lady’s maid of Lord Brychan’s wife. She came here with the retinue for the peace talks, but she’s not a political player. She’s just a maid. She doesn’t have any power or anyone high up protecting her.” Artemis’s face fell. “Which means the reason she disappeared might be my fault because I talked to her in the first place.”

I stood, taking Artemis’s hand. *Is this where the intensity is coming from? It’s more than worry for me—she’s blaming herself for what might have happened to Mair?* “If Kastian did something to her, then the blame is all on him. You haven’t done anything wrong, and you haven’t made him do anything either. I’ll be more careful around him. We’ll figure this out. Together. It’ll be okay.”

All Artemis could do was smile weakly.

Another knock sounded at the door, and I hurried to answer it. A servant Fae I didn’t recognize stood at the door, holding out an invitation. “For you, milady.”

“Um, thank you.” I uncreased the note and skimmed it. I’d been invited to tea with the most powerful Fae courtiers currently in attendance at the summit.

Internally, I sighed. I wanted more than anything to say I was too busy for something so dull and frivolous, but I couldn’t shirk my duties. My grandmother was counting on me to play my part and to help lead our people into a new era of peace. How selfish would I be to turn that down just because parts of it weren’t my cup of tea? Literally.

Besides, there was nothing I could do right now to help Artemis anyway.

“Thank you,” I told the servant. “Please relay to the host that I’ll be there.”

The servant bowed and hurried away, and I closed the door and pulled on yet another uncomfortable dress.

“Who was that?” Artemis asked.

“I’ve been invited to tea.” I shrugged. “Anyway, we’ll have to do more digging into Kastian, to see how he’s getting people out of the Briarkeep without anyone noticing. He can’t be doing this alone.”

She nodded. “I’ll go find Marius and see what his plan of action is.”

“Wait, aren’t you going to the tea too?”

It was her turn to shrug. “I don’t care. It’s Celeste’s problem. I’ve got more important things to focus on.”

She left, and soon after, I headed to the tea. It was set in a smaller dining room, and about half a dozen other Fae were there. The attendees seemed equally spread between the Light and Dark Fae courts.

Hera was there, unsurprisingly, and I took a seat next to her.

“Oh, you’re here,” she said. “Good. These ladies have gathered to give you some advice.”

I tried not to wince, but the truth was I’d rather be anywhere than here.

A Fae I’d never seen before offered me a cup of tea, and I smiled as brightly as I could. “Thank you so much.”

Hera introduced each of the Fae to me, and their names blurred together almost instantly. It was like I couldn’t even force myself to care about this, no matter how much I tried.

*Come on, Caliana. Focus. You can do this. Even if the tea is too strong and all these ladies look like they’d slit your throat if it meant a chance for social advancement.*

“…and this is Lady Brychan,” Hera said.

I perked up at the name. *This is the woman Mair works for. Maybe this won’t be such a waste of time after all. Can I somehow get her to confirm Mair’s disappearance from inside Briarkeep?*

I smiled. For the first time since arriving, I was ready to play politics, like all the other Fae here.

# **Episode 5339**

I pulled in a deep breath. *You can do this, Cali. You’ve gone up against much bigger challenges than playing political games, and you’ve succeeded. This will be easy by comparison.*

The tightening in my stomach told me I might not quite believe that claim, but I was willing to try. If I was going to be here at Briarkeep, trying to broker peace and free my sister, then I needed to *be here*. I couldn’t just phone it in. I wasn’t going to do Greyson or Rishika any favors if I didn’t do my absolute best to play the game. I needed information, and I needed to be sly about it or these Fae would catch onto my agenda in a heartbeat.

I focused my attention on Lady Brychan, who was embroidering something on a handkerchief. She didn’t seem terribly interested in meeting me, and I glanced at my grandmother for help. She nodded toward the Fae woman, her eyes telling me to give it a go.

I approached the woman and nodded at the empty place next to her. “Hello, I’m Caliana Wrenthorn. May I sit?”

“Of course.” The woman nodded, and once I took my place next to her, she ducked her head in the slightest hint at a bow. “I’m Catrin. It’s certainly…something to meet the Wrenthorn heir.” Her smile was colder than the ice over Crater Lake.

I forced my own smile to stay strong, even though the vibes I was getting from this lady were anything but friendly. “What are you embroidering?”

Catrin held it out for me to inspect. “It’s the Byrchan family crest. I embroider it on handkerchiefs for everyone in the household, including the help. That way every member of my household can show pride in the family they work for.”

I had a sneaking suspicion that *not* using the handkerchiefs was not an option.

“That’s, uh, so kind of you,” I managed. “You’re clearly very talented at it.”

“Why, thank you.”

Silence settled between us again. Catrin didn’t seem inclined to make small talk with me. I’d have to be the one to push things along.

I cleared my throat. “With such, um, care and pride for the household, you must have very loyal staff, huh? Not much turnaround?”

The woman frowned, blinking in confusion. “Turn…around? Am I to assume that’s a phrase from the human realm?” She sniffed.

Heat rushed into my face. “Uh, yes. What I mean to say is, you must not have many staff members who leave because they’re unhappy.”

She shook her head. “Oh, no. No, not at all. Our staff are very loyal and are treated extremely well, with the utmost respect. Although I see why a Light Fae like you would think otherwise.”

*Shit.* If I wasn’t damned for being half human, I was damned for being Light Fae. I could tell now that there would be no winning with this woman. No matter what I said or did, I’d fall short in her estimation. Either way, she wasn’t biting. I had no way of knowing if Maira had actually left, but even if she had, it didn’t seem like Catrin would tell me anyway.

*I’ll have to try another tactic.*

“I’d love to see more of your embroidery,” I said. “Could I stop by your chambers later to see it?”

“Of course,” she said blithely. “And what skills do you have, Caliana?”

I froze. *Double shit.* “Um…well, I can mostly not burn pancakes, and I make a better cup of coffee than my best friend.”

Catrin blinked at me again, her nose wrinkling like she’d just smelled something foul. She probably hadn’t gotten any of that, but clearly, she was unimpressed either way.

“Don’t worry, love,” another Fae piped up from a nearby settee. “You don’t need to be skilled at anything but fertility.”

It was my turn to frown. “What do you mean?”

The woman laughed, and there was a sharpness to the sound that made my hackles rise. “Well, you’ll have to produce an heir immediately. After all, that’s how peace will truly be found. Right, Hera?”

I felt my grandmother’s eyes on me, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to look at her. I wasn’t ready to see the confirmation of the woman’s words in my own grandmother’s face. My stomach twisted, and I gulped down some tea, mostly to give myself something to do.

*Is this what things were like for Mom? Did people just treat her like an object? Like a means to an end? Just talking about what her body was good for?*

My heartstrings tugged at the thought. My mother was so amazing in so many ways that had nothing to do with being a mother. She was her own person. Not just some vessel in which to grow a child.

“That’s not for us to discuss here,” my grandmother finally said once the titters had calmed down.

I turned to her then, my eyes narrowing. “There is no discussion. In fact, having a baby isn’t something that’s been discussed at all.”

Maybe it was naive to be so surprised. Having a child was exactly what my mother and Kadmos had had to do. That was why Artemis was here. Still, it was just so…clinical. So cold to talk about bringing a child into the world for any purpose other than the love and joy I had to share with it.

Hera took a prim sip of tea. “None of this is decided yet.”

Her words knocked the air out of my lungs. She’d told me I wouldn’t have to marry Kastian, that she’d make sure it never came to that, but apparently me having his child was still “undecided”?

“Don’t tell me you’re actually considering this,” I said, all pretenses gone. If forcing me to marry and get pregnant was part of the game, I was no longer interested in playing. “You were against it.”

My grandmother didn’t reply right away. Instead, she took a sip of her tea. She was acting like she hadn’t heard me.

Fine. I’d *make* her hear me. “You made my mother do the exact same thing, and look what happened. She hasn’t been back here in years—she almost died because of it. She still carries with her all the horrible things that happened because of this court. Are you seriously going to let the same thing happen to me? I don’t even live here!”

“Caliana, keep your voice down,” she said sharply.

“No, I won’t. Not when it’s my life that everyone is making choices about without even asking me.” I downed my tea and set it on the nearest side table with a clatter. “Excuse me.”

I strode out of the room, ignoring my grandmother’s voice calling me to come back.

This was the most asinine turn of events yet. Me? Having a baby with Kastian? Hell would freeze over before I’d let that happen. I’d seen what all these political machinations had done to my mother—I’d die before I’d let it happen to me.

Fury fueled my steps, as I tried to figure out where Xavier or Artemis might be, I turned a corner and literally ran into Kastian.

He caught me by the arms before I could go tumbling to the floor. “Whoa, careful there.”

I jerked my arms out of his grip. “I don’t have time to talk to you.”

“Are you still mad at me, little sprite?”

I scowled at the nickname. “No, I’m just—” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Did you know about this?”

He raised a brow. “About…what?”

“Did you know that part of this alleged marriage alliance involves producing an heir?”

“Ah.” He chuckled. “That. It looks like you need a drink. Come with me.”

I froze in place. Artemis had *just* reiterated why I shouldn’t be alone with him.

“Come on. I know a little outdoor alcove we can go to.”

I ground my teeth together. *Well, it’s not* not *a public place…*

Begrudgingly, I followed him to the alcove, where a little sitting area had been set up along with a small tray of bottles and glasses. I let him pour me a drink before he sat down. He took off his jacket and leaned forward to clink his glass against mine.

I took a sip from my glass while Kastian sat back and surveyed me. “Forgive me. I kind of assumed you’d know about the heir since most alliance marriages require a child to seal the peace. That’s how your sister was conceived, wasn’t it?”

There was no missing the note of distaste in his voice when he talked about Artemis. Even then, his words left me cold. I didn’t like him talking about Artemis like that. Like the sister I loved was just a tool to consolidate power.

And our situation wasn’t even comparable to my mother’s. At least she and Kadmos were in love.

I eyed Kastian. *Does he look like an evil murderer?*

Finally, I set my glass down. “Where did you go last night after we talked?”

He laughed. “To my room.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, who else would I be with? I’m practically betrothed.”

I didn’t bother trying to hide my grimace. “You really didn’t go anywhere else?”

He laughed, crossing his legs casually. “Your questions are very odd. Is this how humans talk to one another? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were investigating me.”

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye as Dorphus ducked his head into the alcove. “Kastian, could I speak to you in private? It’ll only take a moment.”

“Certainly.” He stood and bowed. “Excuse me, my lady.”

Once he was out of the alcove, I didn’t hesitate to start digging through his jacket. It was a shot in the dark, but maybe I’d find some clues? In one of the pockets, I found a handkerchief with the crest that Lord Brychan’s wife was embroidering.

I froze, the handkerchief in my hand. *Oh god. Could this be Maira’s?*

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned to see Kastian. His eyes narrowed when he saw the handkerchief in my hand. “What are you doing with that?”

# **Episode 5340**

**Xavier**

*I might actually die before I find a single fucking shower in this place.*

It felt like it’d been hours that I’d been wandering the halls of Briarkeep, poking my head into random doors trying to find a shower. At this point, I’d even settle for a bath. I felt like I hadn’t washed off in a long time, and even *I* was starting to notice.

But I couldn’t seem to find a single place to clean up. How was that possible? This place had magical enchantments and a million meeting rooms and dining rooms. It was built to house scores of people, and yet it didn’t come equipped with baths?

*No, that’s impossible. There has to be one somewhere.*

Except, I was going in circles. And not just physically. I couldn’t stop thinking of the way Cali had bitten her bottom lip when she’d seen me come out of my bedroom this morning. The way her eyes had roved over my bare chest and lingered. The sight of her desire had affected me. How could it not have?

Maybe a shower—a cold shower—would help me get a fucking grip.

I rounded a corner, nearly colliding with Cenwyn.

“Oh. Hello. Are you looking for someone?” Cenwyn asked.

I shook my head. “Just the baths. Do you know where they are?”

He nodded and pointed farther down the hallway. “You can find them just down that stairwell.”

“Thanks.” I strode past him, determined to get cleaned up. My nose wrinkled at a bitter scent Cenwyn had left in his wake. *That guy could probably do with a bath himself.* I tried to identify the scent, but it wasn’t something I’d smelled before. And it was *way* too strong for my sensitive nose.

But who the hell cared what Cenwyn did in his downtime? I sure as hell didn’t.

I headed down the stairwell he’d pointed to and found a long, tiled room with several steaming baths. *Does magic keep the water so warm, or is it connected to a hot spring?* I wondered.

Not that it mattered. I wasn’t going to pass up a chance to scrub the grime off myself—or to have some much-needed alone time.

Like a fucking junkie, my mind traveled back to Cali. To the way she was eye-fucking me this morning. There was no missing the desire written across her face, or the way her pupils dilated, her breathing sped up. I knew all the signs, and they’d been staring me in the face.

Not that I could do a damn thing about any of that.

*What the fuck am I supposed to do with her?* Every time I thought we were making progress, that she might finally be letting me in, she pushed me back to arm’s length. I knew she wanted me. I wanted her too. I just didn’t know how to get her to accept her own feelings, and waiting around for it was fucking maddening.

I blew out a breath. I just needed to recenter myself, along with my resolve. The ball was in Cali’s court. I’d have to learn to live with it.

As I lowered myself into one of the steaming baths, three Fae maids appeared, their arms filled with baskets and towels.

“Um, can I help you?” I asked.

One of the maids curtseyed. “Lord Cenwyn sent us to help you bathe.”

*That fucking Fae…*

“Oh, I don’t need—”

“Can you believe it?” one of the maids said to the others as they gathered around my tub. “Helping a wolf bathe! Never in my life did I think this would happen!”

One of them pulled out a gigantic comb, like something you’d use to comb out a horse’s mane. “What the hell is that for?” I asked.

“Oh…for your fur?” the maid said.

I growled. “Do I look like I have fucking fur right now?!”

The maid jumped back in shock.

“Just please…get out,” I said, fighting back my fury.

They didn’t need to be told twice. I grabbed a hunk of soap from one of the baskets they’d left behind and scrubbed myself off as quickly as possible.

*What would it take for a single goddamn Fae in this fucking hellhole to treat me like a person?* I thought I’d gotten used to being a spectacle at Briarkeep and in the Fae world in general, but I also hadn’t thought that status would keep me from even bathing in peace.

My mistake.

I was still pissed off when I climbed out of the bath. I pulled on my pants, not even bothering to towel off first. All I wanted to do was get the hell out of here.

As I reached for my shirt, Cali’s voice slipped through my mind.

*Xavier, can you hear me? I need you.*

My heart leapt, then plummeted. Any joy I felt at her willingly mind linking with me was shattered by the fear in her voice. I dropped everything and raced out of the baths. Still dripping and half-naked, I hightailed it up the stairwell and back down the winding hallways. It took me only a moment to catch her scent and follow it.

“Cali?” I called out.

She didn’t answer, and as I sprinted down a hallway leading to the great hall, I found Cali crumpled at the bottom of the staircase.

“Cali!” I raced over to her as she was pushing herself up into a sitting position. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I…fell,” she managed with a wince.

Footsteps sounded above us, and I caught Kastian hurrying down the stairs toward us. Red filled my vision.

I grabbed him by the collar and lifted him off the ground even though he was standing on the step above me. “What the fuck did you do to her? You’re going to regret it.”

Kastian tugged at my grip. “I didn’t do anything. Cali just took off with no explanation, and I ran after her to ask what was going on. She fell down the stairs on her own.”

I raised him higher. “Like hell she did!”

“Xavier, he’s right,” Cali said weakly from behind me. “I wasn’t looking where I was going, and I fell. Just let him go.”

That was the absolute last thing I wanted to do right now, but I dropped him and turned back to Cali. As I gathered her in my arms, Kastian stumbled a bit on his landing and quickly straightened.

“Please, just let me explain myself,” he said.

I shoved past him. “Maybe some other time. Just do us both a favor and fuck off.”

I carried her back to her room and carefully set her down on her bed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, avoiding my gaze. “I didn’t mean to cause a scene.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you from that asshole.” I shook my head with a growl. “I should have been there.”

Cali shook her head, pressing a soothing hand against my chest. “No, I think…I think Kastian was telling the truth. I panicked and ran off without giving him a chance to explain himself. I just sort of excused myself and then booked it. I guess I can see why he’d chase after me.”

I frowned. “Walk me through it. What happened between you two?”

Cali sighed. “I thought I found evidence that he killed another girl, but I can’t be totally sure. And he caught me with the evidence in my hand and asked what I was doing…I sort of just panicked and ran off.”

I took her hand, my need to protect her taking over completely. “You should trust your instincts. I’d rather you be safe than sorry. You know we can’t trust that guy. Hell, we can’t trust anyone here with either of the courts except Artemis. You made the right call getting away from him.”

Cali looked up at me, and I swore I heard her breath catch. Her hand was still spread across my bare chest. And fuck if that one simple touch didn’t feel amazing.

Her hand flexed against my chest, like she was suddenly just as aware of the touch as I was. Then she winced.

“What hurts?” I asked.

She turned her hand to show a long scrape down her arm.

I grabbed the water basin and towel and returned to her side. As gently as possible, I washed the cut, but she still hissed in pain.

“I can…do that myself.”

“Sit still,” I said gently. I hadn’t been there to protect her before. Nothing would keep me from doing any small thing I could to help her now.

Slowly, I ran the towel over her skin, following the path with my own fingers. Her skin was the softest thing I’d ever felt.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, her voice just this side of breathless. “I wasn’t sure you’d hear my mind link.”

Our eyes met, and I felt trapped by her gaze. “I’ll always come when you call.”

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in, even though I half-expected Cali to lean away. Instead, she leaned closer too. Her hands brushed my thighs, sending sparks across my skin. Running purely on instinct, my free hand went to the nape of her neck, pulling her closer until she was just a breath away.

**Episode 5341**

I felt the muscles flex in Xavier’s powerful thighs as my hands slid over them. There was a voice in my head screaming, *WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?* It was loud I could barely think.

But every part of my mind and body was ready, anticipating the kiss that was clearly about to happen. It felt like being perched on the very edge of a cliff—my toes were hanging off the edge, and I was looking down at the drop, but the rational part of my brain wasn’t working properly, and I wasn’t even thinking about what would happen if I fell.

Xavier was here with me right now, and he was so close. His lips parted, but he stopped just short of my mouth.

He didn’t move. I didn’t move. We stared at each other, both of us completely still.

The tension was mounting, becoming so thick I could practically feel it.

Xavier’s hand was gripping the back of my neck, massaging it gently. “You have no idea how you make me feel, Cali,” he said, his voice low and sensual.

My whole body was suddenly flushed with heat, but before I could say anything in reply, he’d released me and taken a step back.

“Wh-What are you doing?” I stammered. I felt thrown off balance, like when I’d slipped down that first stair.

Xavier ran a hand through his hair. “Your hesitation. It was enough,” he said, looking determined.

“What does that mean?” I asked, baffled.

“It means I’m going to wait for you to ask me,” he said.

I finally understood what he was saying. He was going to wait until I asked him to kiss me.

My cheeks flushed hot, and I nodded, not quite knowing how to feel.

“I’ll give you some space,” he said quietly, and I was grateful. Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

With a sigh, I dropped down onto the bed again. My body was a mass of conflicting emotions. Part of me wanted very much to go after him, but a stronger part knew that would create too much of a mess. No matter how much I wanted Xavier back, there was no way to erase what had happened between us. And longing for him didn’t change what was waiting for each of us back home.

Xavier was the Alpha of the Samaras, and he was with Ava. She was his Luna.

And then there was Greyson, my Redwood Alpha. My boyfriend. I didn’t even know where he was. I couldn’t betray him like this, especially now, when he’d been captured. When he was possibly injured, or being tortured, or maybe even…

*No*. I gave my head a firm shake. I wasn’t even going to *think* it. I wouldn’t let myself go to that dark place, even in my thoughts.

I took a deep breath, certain of one thing: I was not going to be asking Xavier to kiss me—period.

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Night was falling. I hadn’t seen Xavier since our non-fight that morning. I was sitting on my bed, watching as the sky grew dark outside the window when there was a knock at my door.

When I told the visitor to come in, a servant opened the door.

“Pardon me, but your presence is required at a gathering, at the request of Lady Hera,” she said, dropping her gaze as she spoke.

I sighed. Going to another peace talk event was the last thing I wanted to do, but I got to my feet and headed to the closet to get dressed. Or course I was going to go. That was my duty here. I just had to hope that all the talk of babies, marriage, and the “grand Fae destiny” we had the power to shape would slow down a little.

There *had* to be some other pathway to peace that didn’t involve my marrying a stranger—a potentially murderous stranger—and having a dozen Fae babies.

I thought about how I’d walked out on my grandmother the night before, and knew I wanted to speak to her anyway. Despite everything, I didn’t want to let her down. I didn’t want to let the Light Fae down, either. I knew they were counting on me, and I wanted to do everything I could to help—everything *short* of being forced into a political marriage orchestrated by two warring Fae factions.

Dressed in another gown—emerald green this time—I headed downstairs and into the large room we’d been using for the meetings. I wasn’t keen to sit through any more boring political discussion, but when I realized that all the relevant Fae were already there, I figured I wasn’t going to be able to escape it.

As I took my own seat, I was surprised to see that Artemis was there, sitting at Celeste’s side. One look at her face told me that she was in a foul mood as well. I wished I could’ve asked her what was going on, but then Hera stood and called the meeting to order, and everyone fell silent.

A Dark Fae man got to his feet. “We’ve been discussing potential terms, and the Dark Fae all agree that we wish to know more about the details of this proposed peace agreement—”

“You’re not the only ones,” a Light Fae woman interjected angrily. “We want to know the same thing. What terms are the Dark Fae suggesting?’

The old man cleared his throat. “We want to make it perfectly clear that the Dark Fae nobility would never agree to combining our lands with yours—”

The Light Fae woman snorted, shaking her black hair off her face. “The Light Fae have no interest in that, either. We are proposing that our two territories remain separate in every respect. Leadership and resources would not mix. The only change would be an end to the war.”

A Dark Fae woman stood next to the old man, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And what’s to stop the Light Fae from stabbing us in the back and betraying any treaty we agreed to?”

“What’s to stop the Dark Fae from doing the same?” the Light Fae woman shot back.

“And please let it be known that Kastian”—another Light Fae woman stood next to the first and gestured toward the Dark Fae—“would never be accepted as a noble in our court. Only Caliana Wrenthorn would have any power over the Light Fae.”

“That is unacceptable!” the Dark Fae woman said sharply. “If this marriage is to be the basis for an alliance, then both parties must have equal power in both lands.”

“What about the eventual issue of their heirs?”

I turned to look at Cenwyn, who had stood to speak, his voice cutting through the Fae’s mutterings. I winced at the mention of children as a result of this marriage, but at least this time, I was prepared for it.

“That should play no role in the treaty,” Hera said firmly.

“And why not?” Celeste asked. “A child born of both bloodlines would help promote a true peace, no?” Her gaze moved slyly to Artemis.

That glance made my stomach clench. I didn’t know what it meant, but I didn’t think I liked it.

An older Dark Fae woman stood. “There is already a confirmed heir of Kadmos Mauvais and Orla Wrenthorn. So why is there any need for another marriage and another child of the two courts when we already have both?”

I wasn’t sure I liked that, either, and I frowned. If everyone agreed on that, would that mean that Artemis—the heir they were discussing—would have to stay here in the Fae world for good?

“Yes, what of that?” someone else called.

“We already have an heir!”

“What will we do when—”

Hera stood, raising her hands for silence. “Talk of a new child is off the table—at least for the moment. The last time this matter was discussed, it tore my family apart.”

“With all due respect, my lady,” Cenwyn said witheringly, “the honor of your family is not more important than the pursuit of peace. I do not care that you lost your daughter to the human world, or that this other heir we believed dead has in fact survived. The fact is that Kadmos is dead, and Orla is not here. Their child serves no purpose, other than as an example of a failed attempt at peace.”

Artemis leapt to her feet, so suddenly that her chair crashed loudly to the stone floor. She glowered at Cenwyn, then turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

I hurried after her. “Artemis!” I called as she strode down the hallway. “Hang on.”

She didn’t stop, but I ran fast enough that I caught up with her, stopping her. Her face was flushed, and she was breathing hard. She turned to me but wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“What Cenwyn said isn’t true,” I said. “You know that, right?”

She shook her head, looking anguished. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

She met my eyes. “I mean that I don’t know. It might be true. He was right—my father is dead, and Mom isn’t here. What good am I to anyone but as a reminder of a dream that died a long time ago?”

“That’s not true!” I cried. “And you know that your father might be alive.”

Artemis shook her head. “Celeste told me about your deal, Cali. She said if you don’t go along with it, she’ll hurt you.”

I wasn’t expecting this. I looked at her, shocked, as a wave of guilt broke over me. I hadn’t meant to keep it from her, but I realized that I’d never gotten around to telling Artemis about my deal with Celeste.

“I meant to fill you in,” I said.

“It’s fine,” she said quickly. “I just can’t help you if you don’t tell me things.”  
 “I know that,” I said, nodding emphatically. Then I sighed. “Should we go back in?”

But before she could answer, Xavier appeared in the hallway, striding toward us with Marius at his side. His face was drawn and tense.

“What is it?” I asked.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “We have something on Greyson.”

**Episode 5342**

I was surprised to see Xavier—especially when he’d gone radio silent with me all day. The fact that he’d actually sought me out—and in order to talk about Greyson—surprised me even more. But it did the trick. With that one phrase, *We have something on Greyson*, all thoughts of the peace talks were wiped from my mind.

“What is it?” I asked. “What did you find?”

“I have a lead on who took Greyson and Rishika,” Marius said.

Artemis and I exchanged a shocked look. When I looked back at Marius, my heart was beating hard, but I felt hope rising in my chest as I waited for him to go on. At least we had *some* information to go on, now. Without thinking about it, I reached out and grabbed Xavier’s hand, giving it a hopeful squeeze.

“Well?” I asked when Marius didn’t elaborate. “What is it?” I frowned. “Is it something to do with Kastian?”

Marius looked uncomfortable and shifted on his feet before he finally spoke. “Before I say this, let me remind you that I’m just the messenger, here. I’ve done nothing wrong. It’s important to me that you know that.”

The hope began to dissipate, and a creeping dread took its place.

I swallowed hard. “Just say it, Marius.”

He sighed, looking grim and resigned. “I found a guard who witnessed two suspicious Fae dragging large bundles.”

“Bundles?” I repeated.

Marius nodded. “Bundles big enough they could’ve been people.”

I felt my heartbeat in my throat. I hated the idea of Greyson and Rishika being treated like that—dragged around like nothing more than luggage. “*And?*”

“It took me a while to identify the two suspicious Fae, but I did find out that they’re in the employ of a fairly important Fae. High up in the Light Fae court—”

“No.” Artemis shook her head. “No, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“What doesn’t?” I asked.

“Kastian is Dark Fae,” Artemis said.

“I know.” Marius hesitated for a moment, looking uncharacteristically unsure. “And I’m sorry to say this, but it looks like the Fae who took Greyson and Rishika work for Hera.”

Stunned into silence, I stared at Marius, my eyes wide. My mind was reeling, trying to force this information to make some kind of sense, but I just couldn’t. The pieces were refusing to match up. Why would Marius be saying this? What was his game?

“No,” I rasped. “That’s not true. It can’t be.”

Xavier squeezed my hand, silently communicating his support.

“Marius, how sure are you?” he asked.

Marius shrugged. “I’m getting this secondhand, but my source seemed very sure.”

“Who is your source?” I demanded. “Because they’re wrong. I’ll talk to them myself.”

“Um, I don’t think that would work—”

“Why not?” I shot back.

“Because I doubt he’ll talk to you,” Marius said. “You should’ve seen him. He was already super skittish just talking to me.”

I shook my head. “No, you’re wrong. Your source is wrong. This is impossible. She’s my grandmother, for god’s sake. Hera would never do this to me. Why would she?”

But Artemis was taking this news a little differently.

“Fuck this!” she snarled, punching the stone wall with enough force that it vibrated.

I stared at her. “Artemis—”

“She’s trying to manipulate us!” Artemis snapped. She shook her head. “She wants us to do whatever she wants, and damn the consequences for whoever might get caught in the crossfire.”

“No, Artemis, I’m sure you’re wrong,” I said, fighting to sound reasonable. “Come on, she’s our grandmother—”

“And we barely know her. She’s barely ever shown me any kind of grandmotherly affection. And”—her eyes flashed—“she’s *Fae*.”

“What does that mean?” I asked quietly.

Artemis shook her head. “You haven’t figured it out yet, Cali.”

“What haven’t I figured out?”

“You haven’t lived here. You don’t realize how far the Fae will truly go to get what they want,” Artemis said darkly. Her eyes flashed. “They’ll do whatever it takes—even if they have to ruin their own family in the process.”

I shook my head, more emphatically this is time. I didn’t like what I was hearing, and I wanted Artemis to listen to reason. “No. You’re wrong. This is wrong. She is our *grandmother*. She loves us. We’re her grandchildren. I know we haven’t always been close with her, but she’s always been protective of me—”

“Yes—of *you*,” Artemis spat.

I took a deep breath. Artemis looked furious, and I wondered if there was anything I could say that would get through to her. But I had to try, and I laid what I hoped was a calming hand on her arm. “Artemis, you can’t actually believe something so horrific about our grandmother—”

Artemis jerked her arm away, and there was rage and hurt on her face.

“I need time to think,” she said shortly, then she turned and stormed away.

Marius sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, that went about as well as I thought it would.”

I rounded on him. “Tell me who your source is, Marius. Now.”

“What?” Marius took a step back, clearly wary of my sudden intensity.

“I have to talk to them myself,” I insisted.

He sighed again. “It was a guard.”

“What was their name?” I demanded.

Marius looked at me like I was crazy. “I don’t know.”

“How can you not know—”

“He was giving me privileged information—information he could potentially be executed for revealing,” Marius said. “We didn’t go out for a drink beforehand. I don’t know his name. I don’t know how many sisters he has or how often he changes his drawers, either. I was lucky to get a single sentence of information out of him.”

I could’ve growled with frustration. “What do you know about him? How can I find him?”

Marius shrugged. “He was stationed at the towers by the back wall when I saw him. Tall guy, goggly eyes. You can’t miss him.”

“Great,” I said, and marched off.

“Cali, wait!”

I turned to see Xavier, jogging to catch up. “What?”

“You can’t go alone,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“He’s not going to talk to you!” Marius called after me. “This is useless!”

I ignored him as I hurried down the passageway. It led to the back courtyard, and I ran toward the towers that overlooked the back wall.

There was a small shack at the base of each of the towers, and I found a tall guard in the first one. At least I assumed he was tall. He was folded into a chair with his feet propped up on the wall, and he looked asleep. His head was tipped back, and his eyes were closed.

“Hey,” I barked without hesitation, kicking one of the legs of his chair.

“What are you doing?” Xavier asked, looking a little alarmed.

“Uh, waking him up so I can hear from him directly whether Marius told us the truth. And then try to figure out whether *he’s* telling the truth,” I said, gesturing to the guard.

“You might not want to startle awake a probably *armed* Fae guard,” he countered, eyebrows raised.

I rolled my eyes, but I knew he was right, so I gently shook the guard’s arm and, in a softer voice, said, “Hey, wake up.”

Turned out that my method didn’t matter much, because the guy’s eyes flew open, and he jerked in his chair, gasping out, “What?!” But he didn’t move to kill us, so that was a good sign.

I glared at him. “I need to ask you some questions.”

Barely managing not to fall, the guard got his chair back underneath him and his wits about him. He blinked up at Xavier and me, looking surprised, then annoyed.

“Excuse me, but I’m on duty,” he said imperiously.

“Don’t get smart,” Xavier said quietly.

The guy looked at him for a moment, then back to me. “You shouldn’t even be here.” He glanced down at my emerald green dress. “Don’t fancy Fae like you belong at fancy-schmancy banquets or balls or coronations or whatever? You belong at court, not in a guard tower with a poor man who’s just trying to do his job.”

I rolled my eyes. “Listen, I happen to know that you told another Fae that Hera’s guards snuck some people out of the keep. I want to know why you said that.”

The guard scowled. “Dammit.”

“What?” I demanded.

He shook his head. “I knew I shouldn’t have talked to that guy. He swore he’d keep it quiet—just between us. I should’ve known he was full of it.”

“Forget about that guy. I want to know why you lied!”

The guard sneered at me. “I didn’t lie, and you can’t make me say that I did.”

He was wrong about that, and I was about to create an energy ball to hurl at him when Xavier grabbed my hand.

“Cali. Enough. Let’s go,” he said, dragging me away from the tower.

“Xavier!” I protested, but he didn’t stop until we’d reached the back courtyard.

He pulled me into a corner. “This isn’t the right way to go about this,” he said. “We need to talk to your grandmother—”

“No!” I cried, shaking my head. I couldn’t even imagine confronting Hera with this. If Marius and the guard really were wrong, then my grandmother would feel completely betrayed. The last thing I wanted was to ruin our relationship. I thought hard. “I know—I can make sure it wasn’t her by proving it was someone else.”

Xavier frowned. “How?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I think it’s time to have a chat with Kastian.”

**Episode 5343**

**Greyson**

I was shoved back into the pit, and I stumbled a couple of steps until I got my feet underneath me again. My heart was racing, and my mind felt fuzzy—the residual rage effects from the drug. As my mind slowly cleared, I looked down to see that I was covered in blood from the fight.

“I can’t believe you won!” Clarence burst out. He looked both impressed and scared, like he didn’t want to get too close, and when he looked at me, I saw a flash of fear in his eyes.

That was probably for the best.

He held out a metal bucket filled with water. “You want?”

“What’s that for?” I growled.

“If you want to wash up,” he said carefully.

I grunted and took the bucket, dumping it over my head and scrubbing my face.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “That’s one way to do it.”

“HEY!”

Clarence and I both looked over at the faun, who’d shouted at us from across the courtyard. She was marching toward us, flanked by a motley assortment of creatures—a centaur, a harpy, and a creature who looked to be half-woman, half-frog. They all looked pissed.

“I don’t have time for this,” I growled as they approached.

The faun ignored this and sneered at me. “You might be the favorite of the moment, wolf, but let me tell you this—I’ve seen favorites like you come and go. More than you can even imagine. And I’m still the reigning champion. Soon, you’ll disappear, just like the others. You’ll just be a fading memory.”

“I’m not fighting again,” I snapped. “I’m not going to be a part of this.”

The faun looked genuinely surprised for a moment. Then she laughed. “You’ll have no choice. Everyone here has to fight, and eventually, everyone has to face me. And that will be your end, wolf. Just like dozens of fighters before you.”

Shaking my head with disgust, I tried to turn away, but the centaur reached out and grabbed a fistful of my hair.

“You will not turn your back on her!” she shrieked.

Without thinking, I half-shifted and lashed out—and that was when I realized the guards had put me back in the pit without manacles. I’d been so out of it after leaving the arena that I hadn’t even noticed, but the lack of restraints meant I had some real options here.

I shifted more and let out an enraged howl. Clarence practically leapt backward at this, and he wasn’t alone, but the faun held her ground, glaring at me.

Then she turned and nodded at the frog lady.

The frog lady, who looked almost completely like a woman, but with green tinged skin, webbed fingers and feet, and strangely bugged-out eyes, nodded back. Her throat—which had looked completely normal a moment earlier—expanded like a frog’s. But instead of the croak I’d been expecting, she let out a siren scream so loud, it felt like it was going to shatter my eardrums.

I clapped my hands to my ears, trying to block out some of the sound as I tipped my head back, giving an answering roar. But the frog shriek still penetrated. I was about to lash out again—to see how well she could scream after I slashed her throat with my claws—but stopped when I saw movement at the opening to the pit.

The faun saw it too and held up a hand. The frog lady shut up, and the rest of her allies beat a quick retreat, as though they all hadn’t just been threatening me.

The faun stayed where she was, looking passively on as the guards sprinted straight toward me, surrounding me in a tight circle.

“Shift back and hold out your hands!” the head guard barked.

I didn’t want to, but they were all holding energy spears, and I was vastly outnumbered. Finally, I shifted back to human and held out my hands. The head guard stepped forward and slid the shackles back onto my wrists. The silver seemed to sizzle against my skin, and pain shot up my arms and legs. Though I couldn’t help but notice that they didn’t put the crown back on.

Two guards grabbed my arms and marched me out of the pit. I figured they were going to take me to some kind of solitary isolation cell, so I was surprised when they threw me back onto the lift and I was carried up to the owner’s box.

When the lift stopped, I stepped off and looked around. The arena below me was empty, and so was the box… Or so I thought. But when I turned, Cenwyn emerged from the shadows.

He was standing like a man who knew that everything he looked upon was his, and he surveyed me with that same proprietary look. After a long moment, he smiled and clapped his hands.

“I just *knew* you’d be a great fighter,” he said, sounding delighted. “And did you hear how the crowd responded to you? You’re a natural! Such a wonderful new addition to our roster. You’ve made a lot of Fae very happy today, and the next time you enter the area—”

“Don’t you have more important things to be doing?” I said through gritted teeth. “Like the peace talks?”

My mind couldn’t help but go to Cali. How was she doing? There was no possible way to know—even if Cenwyn told me something, I wouldn’t believe him. I knew Xavier was with Cali, and that she was probably fighting like hell to find me. But I didn’t want her to get involved in any of this.

Had Cali and Xavier realized that Cenwyn wasn’t around? Or was he somehow splitting his time between here and the keep? How was he getting back in?

Cenwyn ignored my comments. He turned to the bar and reached for a bottle. He uncorked it and poured a drink into one of the heavy crystal glasses.

“Would you like one?” he asked, holding up the glass. “You’ve certainly earned it.”

I ignored him, peering over the edge of the arena and considering the drop from the box to the ground below. It was a long way down—at least a hundred feet. It might injure me, but maybe that wasn’t the worst possible outcome. It was a dark thought, but a large part of me thought that death was preferable to being forced to fight in that arena for Cenwyn’s pleasure.

I had to make my way back to Cali before she got any more involved than I knew she probably was.

One of the guards who’d ridden up with me stepped forward, poking me with the tip of his energy spear. “Back, wolf.”

The jab hurt like hell. Being touched with an energy spear felt like being electrocuted, but I gritted my teeth against the pain and refused to move.

The guard scowled and prodded me again, harder this time. “I said *back*, wolf.”’

The pain was intense, and I took a reluctant step back.

Cenwyn took a long pull of his drink. “Now,” he said, his expression twisting into something resembling sympathy, “I know you’re a bit upset about what happened earlier—”

“Do you mean when you *murdered* *my friend?*” I bit out, the pain of it hitting me all over again. The energy spear was absolutely nothing compared to the wave of grief that broke over me. I was Rishika’s Alpha. I should’ve protected her. But I hadn’t been there, and now she was dead, and I would have to live with that forever.

Cenwyn was nodding, his face a twisted mask of sorrow. “Yes, such a shame… To lose her as a fighter. I had high hopes for her, too. Female werewolves are so rare around these parts.”

I growled. This guy was an absolute fucking asshole. He had no regard for Rishika’s life—no regard for anyone’s, apart from his own. That was clear.

“Yes, well, what if I told you I could make it up to you?” he asked with a roguish grin.

I didn’t answer—just stood and glowered at him, certain that if I hadn’t been shackled with silver, I would’ve been in the process of ripping this guy’s throat out and watching him bleed to death on the floor of his owner’s box.

“You’ve met our champion,” he said, waving vaguely down toward the arena. “The faun has been unbeatable for weeks. That was good, at first—I encouraged it. But now…” He shrugged. “It’s just a tad predictable. This sport is all about moving quickly and keeping people on their toes, and the people are getting bored. I can feel it—can’t you? The enthusiasm is lagging, and I need to shake things up.”

Looking at the guy filled me with disgust. I’d never encountered anyone so soulless and craven. The way he spoke about the creatures he forced to fight for him made my stomach turn.

“What’s your game?” I demanded.

He gave me a hard look. “I see greatness in you.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, almost laughing at the absurdity of it all.

He leaned toward me, his eyes flashing with madness. “You’re perfect. You know that, don’t you? An Alpha werewolf with rage to spare.” He smiled. “I couldn’t have wished for a better fighter.”

“Leave me the fuck alone.”

“What if we made a deal?”

I looked over at him and saw that his eyes looked hungry and slightly wild. “What kind of deal?”

“What if I told you that if you beat the faun, I’ll give you your freedom?”

**Episode 5344**

Xavier looked at me, clearly astonished. “You’re not going to talk to anyone.”

“Why not?” I asked with a huff.

“Because regardless of whether or not Kastian has done anything to Greyson or Rishika, your sister has made it very clear that he’s dangerous,” he said, looking frustrated.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on. Kastian can’t hurt me. At least not here. We’re too closely watched.”

“I don’t believe that,” Xavier said darkly. “If that asshole decides he wants to hurt you, I don’t think he’s going to meet much resistance. People defer to him here, Cali. Besides, the last time you talked to him, you ran away from him.”

“That was because—”

“Because you thought you found evidence that he made someone disappear.”

Shit. Xavier was right, and I knew it. But what else was I supposed to do?

“Do you want me to just ignore this?” I asked. “I’m not that person.”

“Maybe you should be, sometimes,” he grumbled.

I thought about that for a moment. “You can stay close,” I told him. “That way, I can mind link if there are any issues.”

Xavier frowned, clearly not pleased with this plan. “Cali, I really don’t think—”

“*Please*,” I said, almost desperately. I thought of Greyson and Rishika, out in the Fae world where we couldn’t reach them, and my heart raced with fear. “Please, Xavier. I have to do this.”

Xavier set his jaw. “Okay. But mind link with me at the first sign of trouble. If I sense for even a second that you’re feeling uncomfortable with Kastian, I’m coming to get you. That’s just how it’s going to be. Got it?”

He leaned in and wrapped his arms around me—and we both froze. From the easy way he’d touched me, it was clear he’d been about to kiss me. An instinctive movement, like muscle memory. And for a moment, I’d responded the same way.

I could feel my cheeks flush. I cleared my throat and leaned away from him. “Um, okay… So yeah, I’ll do that. First sign of trouble.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I hurried away.

As I strode out of the courtyard and into the passageway, I hugged myself, my body still tingling where he’d touched me.

I gave my head a hard shake. I couldn’t think about Xavier right now. I needed to stay focused. Now was not the time to get distracted.

When I reached Kastian’s room, I raised my hand, but before I could knock, the door swung open.

Kastian himself was standing in the doorway, and when he saw me, his eyes widened—and so did his smile. “Ah, Caliana. What a coincidence. You’re just the Fae I was heading out to see.”

“Oh really?” I said, my eyes narrowing. “Then you won’t mind having a little talk.”

“Of course not!” he said, stepping out into the passageway. “But we’ll have to do it on the way.”

I frowned. “On the way where?”

He didn’t answer, but smile turned into a mischievous grin. He obviously had something up his sleeve but wasn’t going to share.

Taking my elbow, he led me down the passageway. I didn’t know Briarkeep all that well, but he certainly seemed to. He led us through the compound, taking turn after turn, until we reached a door I’d never seen before. He opened it, and we stepped into an ornately decorated room. There was a soft rug covering the stone floor, and deep couches and large, comfortable chairs scattered throughout the room. Pillows were strewn across the couches and chairs, and on the floors as well, as though people in the room often lounged on the floor in front of the large hearth, which was burning with a cheerful fire.

“Sit,” Kastian said, gesturing toward a wing chair near the fireplace.

I hesitated for a moment, then sat. I didn’t like being told what to do, but I didn’t want to start the conversation with an argument, either. Not when I needed something so urgently.

I looked up at him. “Kastian, I have to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me.”

“Of course,” he said with a bland smile. He didn’t seem to be listening to me.

He walked across the room and opened a second door that I hadn’t noticed until that moment. He clapped his hands, and servants began to file into the room. I stared at them in shock. There had to be a dozen people, some of them holding sparkling dresses, some holding silk pillows upon which were laid jeweled necklaces and rings and bracelets. And two servants at the end of the line were carrying trays filled with tea and assorted cakes.

“What is all this?” I managed through my surprise.

He stared at me like I was an idiot. “Preparations for the wedding, obviously.”

“Okay, hang on right there!” I burst out, shaking my head. “I don’t think we should start cake tasting, considering the fact that I haven’t even agreed to a wedding. Are you doing that thing where you get carried away again?”

He clasped his hands behind his back and stood in front of the fire, where he was framed by the dancing flames. “If this wedding ends up happening, it will take place directly after these peace talks. It’s what makes the most sense.”

My stomach clenched tightly at these words, and I wondered how much longer the peace talks were going to last. A countdown clock started ticking in the back of my head, and it filled me with fear.

“If we are to be wed, we must have a wedding worthy of each of our stations,” Kastian went on. “So I took the liberty of pulling some things together for you to approve.” He smiled. “I want your opinion, Caliana.”

I gritted my teeth. “I haven’t agreed to anything, and I don’t want to play at planning a wedding that we don’t even know will happen.”

“You did agree to at least *consider* the marriage,” he reminded me. He narrowed his eyes. “And given how many Fae are invested in the idea, I can’t help but think that if you refuse, everyone will wonder if your purpose all along was to sabotage these peace talks.”

Shit. He was probably right. If—*when*—I refused, that was definitely what the Fae on both sides were going to say.

*Shit shit shit…*

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll try on a couple of dresses.”

“Wonderful,” Kastian said with a smile. “I felt sure you could be persuaded.”

“Just give me one,” I muttered, grabbing the first gown I saw. It was a light sky-blue, with a corseted top and a very full skirt.

“You can change just over there,” the attendant said in a small voice, pointing to a changing screen in the corner of the room.

I hauled the huge dress behind the screen and started undressing.

“Anyway,” I called to Kastian, “I wanted to ask if you happened to know a way to get back inside the briar wall if you leave it.”

Kastian hesitated for a moment before he answered. “And why would you want to know that?”

“Oh, I’m just curious,” I said, trying to sound casual. “I thought I heard someone say that only the strongest Fae could find a way back inside while the summit was going on.”

He laughed. “Caliana, are you trying to flatter me by calling me strong?”

I yanked at the dress, getting it into place, and stepped out from behind the screen.

“Well? Aren’t you strong?” I asked, plastering my fakest smile onto my face.

Kastian looked at me, his gaze roving down and up and then down again. “You look beautiful. Just like a bride.”

“Great,” I said. “But what about my question?”

He laughed. “Do I know of a way back inside? No. Could I find a way? Probably,” he said with a wink. He’d apparently been pouring tea while I was changing, because he handed me a warm cup. “Now let’s try the cake, shall we?”

“I don’t know if—”

He was already forking up a big bite, which he held out to me. “Just try it.”

I sighed and reluctantly took a bite. The cake was chocolate, and very delicious. It was so rich it made me thirsty, so I lifted the teacup to my lips. But I stopped just before I took a drink. The tea smelled strange. It gave off a bitter scent that upset my stomach, which was already an anxious mess.

As Kastian turned to look at another cake sample, I discreetly poured the cup into a vase that held sample wedding bouquets.

“Kastian,” I said flatly, “I’m asking you a question, and you’re not answering me seriously.”

“Well, your questions are strange,” he said with a shrug.

He was right. I wasn’t being straightforward in my questions, so how could I expect him to be straightforward in his answers?

So I just came out with it. “I need to know if you’ve helped anyone leave the keep since the summit started.”

Kastian stilled. He turned to look at me, and this time it was without even a trace of his teasing smile. “And why would you need to know that? Planning a little escapade with your werewolf lover?” he asked quietly. “If you leave, I’ll find you. You know how seriously I take our wedding.”

I bit my lip, wondering if I should just come out and accuse him. I took a deep breath, but when I looked up at Kastian, he was frowning, looking at something behind me.

“What in the world?”

I turned to see the vase of bouquets I’d poured my tea into. A moment earlier, the flowers had been full and lush, and now they were wilted, and every one of them had turned black.

“What happened to those?” he asked.

When I looked down at the empty teacup, my hands started to shake. I looked accusingly at Kastian, fear coursing through me. “You just tried to poison me!”

**Episode 5345**

**Xavier**

I was standing at the ready just outside the room where Kastian and Cali were talking. The door was thick oak, but thanks to my sensitive hearing, I had no problem catching every word they said. I’d been here since she’d gone off to talk to the Dark Fae. If she insisted on doing this reckless shit, then I was going to keep following her. Which meant I clearly heard Cali’s horrified exclamation.

“You just tried to poison me!”

That was all I needed to hear, and I burst into the room.

The space was filled with servants, and one screamed as I strode over to Cali. Three more scurried away, leaving through a far door. I hurried to Cali’s side and pulled her close, trying to tuck her behind me. Then I grabbed Kastian by the collar of his fancy Fae shirt and gave him a rough jerk.

“What the fuck did you just do?” I snarled. “You have five seconds to explain before I rip your fucking throat out.”

Kastian’s eyes were wide with shock as he looked at Cali, then at me. “I didn’t do anything! It wasn’t me!”

I sneered at him. “Sure.”

“I swear it wasn’t,” he insisted. “Why would I try to kill her? I want this marriage to happen!”

The guy was putting on a good show, but I wasn’t buying it.

“You should know that I won’t be believing a word you say,” I growled. “I thought you were shady from the second I met you, and I’m going to—”

“Xavier, wait!” Cali said quickly, stepping between us. “Hang on. Let’s think about this.”

“Think about what?” I demanded. “This guy just tried to poison you!”

She shook her head. “I don’t think he did. What he’s saying makes sense. He *doesn’t* have any reason to want me dead.”

“But you said—”

“I think I was wrong,” she admitted. “It must’ve been someone else.”

I heard what she was saying, but I was still reluctant to let Kastian go.

“Let him go so we can talk about it,” she urged me.

Finally, I nodded and released Kastian, who took a quick step back.

“Just know that I’m ready to take you down if I have to,” I said, pointing at him.

Cali turned to him. “Okay, we need to think. Something was up with that tea. Who would want to poison me?”

Kastian thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I’m not sure.” He eyed the other cup of tea on the tray, the one that presumably was meant for him. “It’s possible that you weren’t the target. Or that you weren’t the *only* target. If it was both of us, then we can probably assume it was someone who doesn’t want this marriage to happen. And there are certainly plenty of Fae on either side who feel that way.”

I gritted my teeth. I hated that he was making sense. I could see the logic in this deduction, but it meant that Kastian was off the hook.

“I have someone in mind who might’ve done it,” Cali said.

“Who?” Kastian demanded.

She shook her head. “No, I’m not going to say. I won’t accuse anyone of a crime without evidence.” She picked up the teapot. “Kastian, can I take this for now?”

“Sure.” He still looked pissed. “I have my own ways of finding out who did this—evidence be damned.”

*Maybe he can lead us to himself, then*, I thought bitterly.

Cali gave Kastian an appraising look. “It seems that you and I might actually be on the same side, for once.”

He smiled wryly. “So it seems.”

“I’ll see you later,” Cali said, and headed for the door.

I was right behind her, and as soon as we were far enough down the passageway to be out of earshot, I stopped Cali and led her into a small alcove.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pulling her into a hug.

This close, I could feel that she was shaking. It was probably the shock setting in, now that she didn’t have to put on a brave face for Kastian.

“You’re safe now, Cali. You’re with me,” I said.

She relaxed into my body at my words, and relief rushed through me. It felt like she trusted me to protect her, at least in this moment. It had been a long time since I’d felt sure of that.

“I can’t believe this. Someone tried to *poison* me—or *us*,” she said softly. “Did you see those flowers?”

“I saw them, but who cares? Some dead flowers don’t tell us anything,” I said grimly. “And I’m still not convinced that Kastian isn’t the perpetrator.”

“Xavier—”

“Did he even sip his tea?” I asked. “He’s a good actor—he could be faking his outrage.”

“Maybe,” Cali conceded. “But we need to find out more before we accuse anyone.”

“Or we could just leave,” I pointed out.

Cali looked up at me, shocked. “I can’t leave,” she said. “You know that. If I do, the peace talks will completely fall apart.”

“Can’t you see that they’re already disintegrating?” I said.

“What are you—”

“If someone’s trying to poison you or Kastian, then that means there’s someone here who really doesn’t want peace to happen.”

“Yes,” Cali said grimly. “And we know exactly who she is.”

I frowned at her. “Are you talking about Celeste? You think she tried to poison you?”

Cali nodded determinedly. “Yes, I do. Celeste was pissed at me at the banquet—she thought I was abandoning her plan to call off the wedding. Who’s to say she didn’t take things a step further to ensure that it doesn’t happen?”

“Okay, so say Celeste is responsible,” Xavier said. “All the more reason to get out of here before she actually kills you.”

“Celeste is only one Fae,” Cali said. “Think about it. There are so many more—not just here at the talks, but out in the Fae world—who want peace, or maybe don’t. Either way, if I leave the keep, people will come after me. I’m the Wrenthorn heir. The only people who can leave without consequences are you and our friends.”

I took her by the shoulders. I almost wanted to shake her—maybe that would jar loose some kind of sense of self preservation. She didn’t need to be a part of this world, “Wrenthorn heir” or not. There was no reason for her to stay here. And the fact that she kept clinging to this wedding idea had my wolf running in circles. It was taking everything I had not to let my possessive side win out.

“Cali, can’t you see that this whole effort is doomed?” I demanded. “It’s not going to happen. These peace talks were never going to work out. We only started them so that we could find Artemis. And we did! So let’s grab her and go find my brother.”

“Xavier—”

“Don’t you see that once we leave this world, you’ll be safe?” I asked, fear rising up in my chest. “That’s all I want right now, Cali. I just want to make sure that you’re safe. And you’re not safe here. There are too many people in this world who want to use you for what you can offer them and manipulate you in the process. And I can’t keep you safe. I have no power here. I’m not used to this,” I said, my frustration boiling over. “I’m not used to being powerless. I’m an Alpha—in the real world, I have resources and power and a pack of wolves who follow my orders. I have none of that here. And I fucking *hate* it.”

Cali took my hand. “I know this is hard for you, Xavier. I know you’re worried, but I can’t leave. I just can’t. There are so many people counting on a truce. All the Fae I’ve been speaking to are so hopeful about what this summit could mean. Even if there are players on the Light and Dark Fae sides who don’t want peace, I don’t think they’re the majority. The majority of the Fae want this war to end, I just know it. I know there’s a lot stacked against us, but I have to at least *try* to help find peace for the Fae.”

“Cali, you have to think about what’s best for *you*,” I insisted.

She nodded. “I am. But that’s not just about keeping myself safe. I don’t know if I could live with myself, knowing I’d betrayed the Fae. We were the ones who gave them hope in the first place by insisting on these peace talks. We can’t just walk away now.”

I was frustrated to hear Cali talking like this, but not surprised. This was Cali up and down—always concerned about others.

She shook her head. “I’m going to go talk to some people, see if I can figure out who added the poison to the tea. Alone.”

For a moment, my words caught in my throat. Then I said, “Fine. I’ll catch up soon.”

As I watched her head off down the hallway, my wolf howled. All I could think about was that I had to protect her. She was about to be forced into a political marriage, her grandmother might’ve betrayed her, and now someone was actively trying to murder her.

I sighed and scrubbed at my face. Things had taken a very dark turn. My stomach tightened with worry as I turned away, heading out to the woods.

Marius looked up when I approached him.

“Xavier, what are you doing here?” he asked, looking a little surprised.

“I need to talk to you,” I said briskly.

He shook his head. “I’ve been asking around, but I haven’t found out any more information about Greyson or Rishika—”

“That’s fine,” I said. “We’ll be able to follow more clues once we get on the road.”

Now Marius looked completely confused. “Get on the road? What are you saying?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” I said. “We’re leaving Briarkeep. Tonight.”

**Episode 5346**

**Artemis**

For all its many faults, Briarkeep had a hell of a lot of gardens, one of which I was currently using to try and pace the edge off my anger. It wasn’t really working, and I was pretty sure I was killing the flowers as I stomped back and forth, but I didn’t care. I was thinking about my grandmother, and I was so confused, I could barely see straight.

I just didn’t know what to think. I didn’t know if I believed Marius’s story—if I believed that Hera could’ve done this to Cali and me. I knew that Cali didn’t want to believe our grandmother had been involved in Rishika and Greyson’s disappearance, but I couldn’t help but entertain the theory. How could I not? The Wrenthorns had an infamously intense family history. Innes Wrenthorn himself had been a powerful Fae general, and the idea of Hera doing something completely in her own self-interest was entirely possible.

And the reality was that I didn’t know where I stood with Hera, or where she stood with me. She *had* given me the advice on where I could look for my father, that much was true. Erimentha.

I shook my head, almost laughing at the memory of that conversation. It had been so long since I’d started on that path to find my father. Thinking back on it, it felt like another lifetime. Things had been so different, then. *I* had been so different. Now, I was the Mauvais heir—did that change things between my grandmother and me? Was Hera my enemy now? Did she still care that she was my grandmother, or was I just in the way now? In *her* way?

I pushed a frustrated hand through my hair. I wasn’t sure, but I knew I wanted some answers. And—nearly more than anything else—I wanted Rishika back.

My heart ached as I thought of her. The pain of her being missing was excruciating.

So really, there was only one thing to do—I was going to have to talk to Hera.

Decided, I turned and headed out of the garden. It was time to find my grandmother.

I gritted my teeth as I hurried through stone passageways. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. Hera wasn’t exactly forthcoming under any circumstances, and if she really was involved in the kidnapping, she likely wouldn’t want to confide in me.

My heart was beating fast by the time I reached Hera’s rooms. I raised my hand to knock, but stopped myself, hesitating. My head was spinning—was this really the right thing to do? Accusing my own grandmother of something so awful? What if she *was* involved in some way, but not in the way I was thinking? What if there were other Fae involved, and they’d roped her into some kind of perverse game? There were plenty of reasons why someone might have a bone to pick with the Wrenthorns. I could think of at least half a dozen of those reasons myself.

I shook my head. It was like I’d told myself before—no matter what, I needed answers. And to get those answers, I was going to have to ask some hard questions.

I took a deep breath and knocked firmly.

There was no answer. After a moment, I knocked again. And then again, growing more impatient with every passing moment.

The door finally swung open, and Hera appeared, framed in the doorway, looking a bit bewildered. “Artemis, what are you doing here? This is the Light Fae part of the compound. Did anyone see you come here?”

When she looked out the door and down the hall in both directions, I felt my resolve falter. She looked and sounded genuinely concerned about my safety and welfare. Though… Well, maybe that was only what I wanted to hear from her.

I cleared my throat. “No, I don’t think so. No one saw me.” I nodded into her room. “May I come in?”

She hesitated for only a moment, then opened the door wider. “Yes, of course. Come in.” She glanced down the hallway in each direction again before she closed the door behind me. Then she turned to me. “Did you need something?”

“You know, technically, I can be on both sides of the compound if I want to be,” I said.

She frowned slightly. “I beg your pardon?”

“You know, since I am Light Fae and all,” I added.

She clicked her tongue. “Yes, of course. I didn’t mean it like that—I wasn’t trying to suggest that you aren’t welcome, Artemis. It’s simply that being a Mauvais and walking around on this side is a different thing entirely. And you must understand that no one here knows you well enough to simply assume good intentions.”

“No,” I said, able to concede this particular point. “I suppose they don’t.”

“And you know the Fae,” she went on. “Always so suspicious of each other.”

Her words hit me like a slap across the face.

“Yes, I do know,” I said quietly. She was right, and it was especially true of me. I was always suspicious of everyone. Look at me now—suspicious of my own grandmother.

Hera gave me a curious look. “There must be something you wish to speak to me about, since you came all the way here to find me. What is it?”

Clasping my hands in front of me, I twisted my fingers nervously. But I’d come here for a reason, so I turned to her and took a deep breath, steeling myself. “I’m not staying long. I just came here because I needed to look you in the face to try and understand how you could do something so underhanded.”

This caught Hera completely by surprise, and she stared back at me, floored. After a moment, she regained her composure and lifted her chin haughtily. “You would do well to watch your tone when you speak to me, Artemis. Now, tell me, whatever are you talking about?”

My palms were sweating, and my head spun as fear and frustration crashed over me. “I want you to admit to what you did!”

Her eyes narrowed. “Artemis, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I will tell you, girl, that my patience has been sorely tested this week and is already very thin. Now, I ask you again—what are you talking about? You want me to admit that I did what? What did I do? Come to the peace talks? Suffer through the antics of both my granddaughters in front of a large audience of Light and Dark Fae alike?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

Her mouth tightened. “You and Caliana are meant to be part of these conversations, you know, but you keep finding reasons to not be where you are required. Neither one of you was at the banquet last night, and—though I continue to request it—neither of you seem interested in showing any effort here!” Color rushed to her face as she spoke, as though she’d been waiting for a chance to say these words. “I’ve been fielding complaints about the two of you from both Light and Dark Fae. I’ve been trying to explain to these interested parties that you’re both new to this. I believe that myself, though I do think you could both be putting in a little more effort!”

I stared at her, surprised. I’d come to ask her some tough questions—I hadn’t been expecting a…*scolding*.

“I’m sorry we’re letting you down, but it isn’t that weren’t not interested. It’s just that there are more important things going on that we’ve had to pay attention to.”

Hera let out an uncharacteristic, derisive snort. “Oh yes, I’m sure there are many things more important than brokering a peace between two warring lands. But Artemis, you knew from the very beginning that finding your father would be difficult. If you’ve been waylaid on your quest, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

My mouth fell open with surprise, and I felt my anger flare. “It wasn’t my choice to stop searching for my father.”

“Then whose choice was it?” Hera asked keenly.

I shook my head, feeling frustrated. “No one! I mean, it was just the shitty card I was dealt—”

“Artemis, please,” she snapped. “Watch your language.”

I looked pointedly around the empty room. “There’s no one here but us.”

“Still,” she said haughtily.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves again. This conversation had gone completely off the rails, and I needed to get it back on track.

“None of this is what I actually came to talk to you about,” I said.

“Then what *did* you want to talk about?” Hera asked, starting to look exasperated herself.

I gave her a hard look. “I know you did something, and I want you to admit it.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

I set my jaw, determined to see this through to the end. “And while you’re at it, you can admit that you went behind my back—and Cali’s—to do it, too.”

Hera frowned, then something finally seemed to crack, and her mask of outraged innocence fell away.

She shook her head with a sigh. “How did you find out?”

**Episode 5347**

Teapot in hand, I wove through the huge kitchens of the compound, looking for anyone I could talk to about the poisoned tea. I’d already spoken to three maids and two cooks, asking if they knew who’d prepared the tea and cakes for Kastian and me. They’d all been able to point out someone else to ask, but it had been a different person every time.

The kitchens were hot as hell. Pots were steaming, and the smell of baking bread was everywhere. I was starting to sweat, both from the temperature and my own building frustrations.

“Hi, are you Bracken?” I asked, walking over to an older Fae man who was stirring a huge pot over the fire.

“Yeah, who’s asking?” he said, eyeing my dress warily. I was still wearing the sky-blue wedding dress Kastian had pressured me to try on, and it was earning me some odd looks in the kitchens.

I cleared my throat, pointing to a serving girl wearing a trim white apron. “That Fae said I should talk to you. I was wondering if you knew who prepared the tea and cakes sent up at Kastian’s request.”

Bracken looked annoyed. “Are you kidding me? How would I know who prepared anything? Do you have any idea how many Fae nobles there are running around this place, demanding things?”

I sighed. This was pointless—I wasn’t getting anywhere with this kind of random questioning. Besides, I had a feeling that even if any of these Fae *did* know something about the tea, they likely wouldn’t admit it to me for fear of getting fired. Or worse.

What I needed was Artemis. She was so much better at this kind of thing than me, but she wasn’t exactly available at the moment.

I blew out an irritated breath. This had been a bust, but I needed to find my grandmother. I needed to talk to her—to reassure myself that I was right, and that Hera would never have gotten involved with something so horrible. That she would never have hurt her own family deliberately.

So I tucked the teapot under my arm, left the kitchens, and walked through the compound to her quarters.

I knocked lightly on the door, but there was no answer. I waited for a moment, then gave the door a gentle push. It opened, and when I peeked inside, I saw that the rooms were empty. I looked around, but when I was satisfied she wasn’t here, I went to her desk, figuring I should leave her a note to let her know I’d stopped by.

The desk was neat and tidy, and as I reached for a piece of thick, cream-colored paper, I looked over the collection of small objects she kept on the wooden surface. There was a handful of little perfume bottles, pens and inks, and a jeweled hairbrush. It was all so lovely, and reminded me so much of Hera, who always seemed so powerful, yet so human. I just couldn’t imagine my grandmother being involved in Greyson and Rishika’s kidnapping.

I shook my head and scribbled a message onto the piece of paper.

*Grandma, I stopped by to speak to you. I hope we can find a moment later.*

*Caliana*

I slipped the note beneath one of the small china flowerpots on the desk—one that contained a blue, mushroom-y kind of plant—then I turned and walked out, shutting the door behind me. When I got back to my own room, I stopped in the doorway, stunned at what I found.

The whole room had been upended. Clothes had been thrown to the floor, and the sheets had been ripped from the bed. It looked like a tornado had just passed through.

I was scared as hell at the sight of it, and I was about to send up a distress signal through the mind link when Xavier stepped out of the walk-in closet. His arms were filled with clothes, and—regarding me calmly—he stepped over and dropped them onto the bed.

Calming down as I realized that no one had actually ransacked my room, I finally noticed that my pack was on the bed. Xavier must’ve pulled that out of the closet too, and almost filled it with clothes. As I watched, he grabbed the clothes he’d just dropped and started to stuff those in, too.

“Xavier! What are you doing?” I demanded. I grabbed my pack and started pulling things out.

“What does it look like?” he asked, pulling the pack from my hands again.

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking,” I shot back.

“I’m packing for you,” he said evenly.

“Why?”

“Because we’re leaving tonight.”

“Xavier—”

“It’s not safe here anymore, Cali,” he interrupted. “You know that. It was already dangerous to start with, and it’s only getting worse.”

I took a deep, hopefully calming breath. “Xavier, I already told you that I’m not going anywhere yet.”

With that, I went back to pulling my clothes from my bag. The first thing I grabbed was one of the dresses that Kastian had commissioned for me. I didn’t know why Xavier even packed it. It was delicate as a cobweb, made with whisper-thin lace and chiffon, all in the palest pink. It was less cupcake-like than the dress I was currently wearing—which was the only reason why it fit in the bag at all—but it was still a crazy thing to pack. To be fair, though, the neckline *was* studded with jewels—maybe Xavier had hoped we’d be able to trade it for information on Greyson and Rishika.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. He snatched the dress from my hands and tried to stuff it into the bag. Then he stopped himself and looked down at it. “You don’t really need this, I guess. It can stay.”

I grabbed the skirt and held on tight. “Xavier, I’m not leaving! Stop it!”

“*You* stop it,” he retorted. “The dress can stay, but we’re leaving.”

“Xavier—”

“Caliana, listen to me,” he said. “You’re putting yourself in harm’s way for absolutely no reason. You are in no way responsible for the failure of these peace talks.”

Hearing him use my full name like that threw me off. I couldn’t actually remember the last time he’d called me “Caliana.” But I wasn’t about to give up, and I gave the dress a tug. But when I marched forward, I stepped on the slick fabric and slipped. The momentum was too much for the delicate fabric, and it ripped apart at the seams as I fell.

Xavier tried to catch me, but instead, we both fell to the ground in a shower of lace and jewels.

I had landed first, so I was pinned underneath Xavier, and the weight of his body on top of mine was somehow both ecstasy and torture, all at once. My pulse was racing, and—this close to him—I could feel his heart, which was beating fast and hard.

He let out a low groan, then pushed himself up onto one elbow to look down at me.

“Cali, I need to protect you. I can’t lose you,” he said quietly, not moving off me.

I stared up at him, mesmerized by his deep blue eyes, by his voice, his touch, his closeness to me…

“You won’t,” I whispered back. “I’m right here.”

I wasn’t sure what I meant by that—if I meant that I would try to be safe, or if I was trying to say something more. That I still held him in my heart.

He looked down at me, and the look in his eyes told me that he’d picked up on my double meaning. His hand drifted up, cradling my cheek.

“Cali…” He shook his head. “We can’t keep doing this.”

My head spun. I didn’t know what to say to that, but my body was thrumming, just having him so close. Looking up at him, I wanted nothing more than to lift up my head and press my lips to his.

“You know how I feel,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to be just friends with you.”

There was a tight whirlwind of emotion in my chest, as chaotic as a tornado. My body was screaming at me to kiss him, my heart was asking if I could bear to lose him again, and my brain kept wondering if this was all happening too soon.

My breath caught, but before I could say anything, the door burst open and Marius charged into the room, saving me from responding to a question I had no answer for.

If Marius thought the sight of Xavier and me twisted up on the floor was odd, he didn’t mention it. “You both need to come with me, right now.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, struggling to untangle myself from Xavier and the ripped dress and get to my feet.

“It’s Artemis.”

“*What?*”

Seemingly too impatient to wait for us, Marius started out of the room. I followed quickly behind him, and Xavier trailed after me.

“What’s going on?” I asked urgently.

Marius shook his head, his expression dark. “I’m not sure, but I do know that your sister has just gotten herself into a world of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble—” I stopped talking when we burst into a courtyard just in time to see two Light Fae I recognized as Hera’s guards dragging a kicking and screaming Artemis toward the outer barrier. Hera walked calmly behind the group as Artemis struggled and swore.

“STOP!” I shouted.

Hera turned as I sprinted over. Marius and Xavier were right on my heels, and I watched as Hera gave Marius a cool look.

“What is going on?” I demanded.

Hera turned her cold gaze on me. “I am having Artemis removed from this summit.”

**Episode 5348**

I stared at my grandmother, completely stunned. I felt like the ground was shifting beneath my feet. I couldn’t conceive of any reason to explain why Hera would be doing this to her own granddaughter.

“You have to stop!” I burst out.

Hera’s eyes narrowed until she was glaring at me. “Pardon me?”

I thought fast. I needed to come up with something to distract her. “Someone just tried to poison me.”

Her eyes opened wide. “What? *Poison?* What are you talking about?”

“Just what I said: Someone tried to poison me just now.”

“Where?” she asked urgently.

“I was with Kastian, and he poured me tea, and there was poison in it,” I said.

Both Hera and Marius gasped at this.

“*What?*” Hera looked shocked. “That wasn’t supposed to happen!”

What in the actual hell did *that* mean? “What *was* supposed to happen? And by the way, you can’t just kick Artemis out as though she’s not the Mauvais heir! Couldn’t that have some pretty serious consequences with the Dark Fae?”

She didn’t answer me. There was no explanation or apology. She only shook her head and turned on her heel, hurrying back into the compound, muttering under her breath.

“Grandma!” I called, “Wait! Stop! *Hera!*”

But she didn’t stop. I turned around, back toward the guards. They were still holding Artemis, but they looked a little lost now that their boss had bailed.

I didn’t hesitate. “Let go of my sister.”

The guards hesitated, glancing nervously at each other.

“Um, do you gents know who this is?” Marius asked. His tone was breezy and conversational, but I could see that his face was flushed and his eyes were flashing dangerously. There was no doubt he was on edge, just like me.

Taking his cue, I whipped around to face the guards. “I am Caliana Wrenthorn, and I command you to let her go. Now!”

The guards still didn’t look completely certain, but they loosened their grip enough that Artemis yanked herself free and rushed over to my side.

She was shaking with fear and anger as she threw her arms around me.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Thank Marius,” I said, nodding toward him. “He’s the one who told us this was happening.”

Artemis shot him a look, but he didn’t meet her eyes. Rather, he was looking at me.

“I gotta say, Cali,” he said, his tone teasing again, “I could get used to that imperious Wrenthorn tone. Have you been practicing, or does it just come naturally when you’re born a Fae noble?”

Artemis shook her head. “What a fucking nightmare. I just want to forget that ever happened. Tell me more about that thing you said, about being poisoned. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. “I’m scared, but I didn’t drink any of the poisoned tea. I thought it smelled funny.”

“Thank gods,” she breathed.

I glanced over to see that the guards were still standing in the courtyard, watching us.

I shot them a cool, haughty look. “You are dismissed.”

That seemed to be what they were waiting for, and they left without hesitation.

“Okay, now you’re going to tell me what the hell happened between you and Hera,” I said, looking back at Artemis.

My sister’s expression darkened. “Nothing, except that I now know with absolute certainty that our grandmother is a cold, brutal woman.”

“Artemis, what happened?” I pressed.

“I went to confront her over Rishika and Greyson’s disappearance, and I—

“Hang on,” I said, cutting her off. “You confronted her? Without any proof?”

Artemis’s eyes went wide. “Are you fucking kidding me? *This* is our proof!” she shouted, gesturing in the direction Hera had disappeared. “Cali, are you listening to me? The moment I confronted her, she tried to have me forcibly removed from Briarkeep to silence me! She didn’t care about the consequences! How much more proof do you need?”

I shook my head, which had started to ache. “Tell me what exactly you said.”

“*Wow*.” Artemis looked shocked and hurt. “You really don’t believe me, do you?”

“Artemis—”

She held up a hand to stop me. “You would rather believe our grandmother—a woman you barely know—than the sister you’ve lived and trained with for months now? The sister who’s *literally* stood beside you in battle?”

“That’s really harsh,” I said. My throat felt tight, like I was about to cry. “I’m completely baffled by what happened just now, and how weirdly Hera’s acting, and I’m just trying to gather all the facts. Maybe we’re missing something, here.”

Artemis’s eyes flashed. “The only thing I’m missing is someone I can actually trust.”

Anger rose in my chest. “That’s not fair, Artemis. It’s not fair for you to take this out on me. I came all the way to the Fae world because you asked me to!”  
 “Oh my gods! Thank you *so much*!” Artemis yelled, her face going red. “How long are you going to use that against me?”

“*What?*” I gasped out, stunned. I knew I couldn’t understand the particular kind of pressure that Artemis was feeling, but I also couldn’t understand where all this resentment was coming from.

She shook her head, her expression filled with anger. “I don’t know why I’m so surprised. I really shouldn’t be. This is how it’s always been for me. Nothing comes for free, and I’ve been reminded of that plenty of times since I returned to the Fae world.”

And, with that, she stormed away. I started after her, but Marius put a hand on my arm, stopping me.

“You should let me go after her,” he said quietly. “I’ll try to talk to her.”

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I sat on my bed, looking glumly out the window. There was a dinner tonight that I was supposed to be getting ready for. It was nothing formal—no gowns required—but the other Fae would be there, and I was expected.

I flopped down onto my bed with a sigh. But only for a moment. Far too soon, I forced myself to my feet. I’d changed out of the sky-blue wedding dress already, and I put on a simpler, flowing green dress before I headed downstairs.

When I reached the large dining hall, I quickly scanned the room. I saw at a glance that Hera hadn’t arrived yet, and neither had Artemis. Oh, wonderful. The two people I most needed to speak to.

Taking my seat, I nodded in acknowledgment of Kastian, who was sitting at the far end of the table.

He nodded back, then leaned over to whisper something to Dorphus, who was sitting next to him.

I watched Dorphus’s reaction closely. He listened intently to Kastian, then nodded and pushed his chair out. He got to his feet and excused himself, striding away from the table and out of the hall.

My curiosity bit at me. I was dying to go and ask Kastian if he’d found out anything new, but before I could think of an excuse, the servants appeared and the first course—soup—was served.

Hera and Artemis still hadn’t arrived.

The soup was tasteless, as food always was when I was nervous, but I forced myself to eat it. I was just finishing it when Marius appeared at my side.

I knew better than to ask how he’d managed to get into the dining hall. “What’s up?”

He gave his head a tiny shake. “I need to talk to you. Not here,” he said quietly.

I glanced at the Fae on either side of me. “Will you excuse me for a moment?”

Marius led the way out of the hall and into a tiny study.

“What is it?” I asked when he’d closed the door.

“I found out what the poison was.”

I gaped at him. “You did?”

“It was a mix of a certain kind of mushroom and some strong Fae magic. That’s why it was so fast acting.”

“What kind of mushroom?” I asked.

“It actually only grows in the Fae world, so you might not have encountered it before. It’s blue, which makes it really stand out, and it’s tiny—no bigger than your thumbnail.”

My stomach clenched painfully. “I actually *have* encountered it before.”

“Have you? That’s surprising. Anyway, that’s what the poison was,” Marius said.

I nodded, though it felt like I was falling through space. My head spun fast, but I was certain of what I knew—the mushroom that had nearly poisoned me was the same kind of mushroom my grandmother had brought with her to Briarkeep.

I kept this information to myself. I was grateful to Marius for finding out, but I needed to think about this for a moment before I acted.

Dread oozed through me like wet cement. Was it possible that Hera had poisoned me—her own granddaughter? That was crazy… Right?

And if it wasn’t crazy—if that really was what had happened—I still didn’t understand why.

“Cali?” Marius gave me a curious look. “*How* exactly have you seen this mushroom before? Do you know something?”

Biting my lip, I shook my head. “I’m…I’m not sure. I need to confirm something. I’ll be right back.”

“Cali, wait!” he called after me, but I didn’t stop. And I didn’t go back to the dinner, either. Instead, I hurried down the passageway to my grandmother’s room. I needed to ask her who else had access to the mushrooms she’d brought. There *had* to be someone else. There just had to be. It couldn’t have been Hera.

When I reached it, the door was slightly ajar. I’d just raised my hand to knock when I realized there were people inside, and I could hear them. I peeked inside and saw my grandmother standing with a Fae woman who was dressed in a scullery maid’s uniform. Hera looked mad and was gesturing angrily as she spoke.  
 “—and then I hear that you gave the poison to the *wrong person*!”

**Episode 5349**

**Greyson**

“What if I told you that if you beat the faun, I’ll give you your freedom?”

I eyed Cenwyn skeptically. The offer had caught me off guard, but the real question was whether or not I believed he would actually make good on it.

And the answer was no. I wasn’t going to believe a word this Fae said—and why should I? He had kidnapped Rishika and me and forced us to fight in his gladiator arena. What *wouldn’t* he say or do to get what he wanted?

I shook my head. “I won’t be making any shady deals with the Fae.” I recalled my own disastrous experience with that in the human world. “I know how that kind of thing can end up going sideways.”

Cenwyn was silent for a moment, then he burst out laughing. “You know, you really are *endlessly* entertaining, Greyson. That’s why you’re so valuable to me.” He shook his head, pulling a long face. “I really am the one losing out on this deal, because in losing you, I’d be losing a truly amazing champion. But…” He sighed. “I’m willing to grant you your freedom in exchange for one amazing fight. That way, I’ll be able to place a few side bets and win big.”

I scowled at him. I still wasn’t buying any of this. “And that’s really well worth it to you? Some petty cash?”

He stared back at me. “Oh, Greyson, isn’t it obvious?” He smiled. “It all adds up. I get rich.”

This didn’t clear anything up for me. If anything, it left me even more confused. “Rich? What are you talking about? Aren’t you on the Light Fae council? Aren’t you already rich? And besides, aren’t you trying to broker a peace deal?”

“Ah, yes, the council.” Cenwyn looked amused. “A wonderful place for me to be, you know—such a position affords so much power and influence. Not *quite* as nice as money, but still very useful to have. But no, I have no real desire for peace.”

“*What?*” I demanded, astonished. “How can you say that, after everything you said in those meetings?”

Cenwyn looked at me like I was an idiot. “Greyson, I’m surprised. You seem so much more worldly than this. Surely you don’t believe *everything* people say?”

“So what is all this?” I asked. “What’s your game?”

“Well, it’s evolving, to be honest,” Cenwyn said candidly. “The Kollector’s death freed up a space in the market for others to make a profit collecting and selling black market items and weapons. It was a new venture for me, but I think the risk paid off, and I happened to find a very comfortable niche in the void he left behind. You know what they say, Greyson,” he added with a smile, “nature abhors a vacuum. And I *adore* the money.”

“And how were you making money?” I asked. I was struggling to wrap my mind around these new developments. “Selling shit on the black market?”

“That’s right,” he said encouragingly, like he was a teacher who’d just elicited a correct answer from a student. “And most of the money I make comes from brokering weapons deals, and I’m sure you can understand why those deals would dwindle to a trickle if the war should come to an end.”

I was horrified. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“You can’t be serious. You’d really rather make money from this forever war between the Light Fae and the Dark than save the lives of your own people? You’re despicable,” I spat.

Cenwyn narrowed his eyes. “What I am, Greyson, is a realist.”

“What does that mean?”

He looked at me for a long moment, then paced across the private box, past me, so he could look out at the arena below. He was still looking down when he spoke. “You know, I used to be a believer.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“I was,” he said. His voice had grown quieter and lost some of its smugness. “I was a true idealogue. I believed it was possible for the Dark Fae to stop fighting the Light. That the two sides could find a way to come together. I sat on the council when we betrothed Orla to Kadmos. There were such high hopes for what that union might bring to all the Fae. But it fell apart so easily—turned out to be nothing but smoke. We’d been fooling ourselves. *I* had been fooling myself.”

“Is that why you’re so eager to push Cali into this marriage, then?” I demanded. “Because it worked so well last time?”

Cenwyn laughs. “It’ll never happen, anyway. They’ll never accept a half-human.”

*So it’s just his way of fucking with everyone, then.*

When he turned back to me, his gaze had hardened once again. “But the experience was useful and taught me many lessons.”

I sneered. “Like what?”

“Like the fact that the only sure bet is the one you make on yourself. And the fact that one must survive at all costs.” He raised an eyebrow. “You’d do well to absorb that lesson yourself, boy.”

I shook my head. “I still don’t trust you. Why the hell should I?”

“What if I made you a Fae promise? Your freedom in exchange for beating the faun.” Cenwyn must’ve seen that I still looked unconvinced, because he pressed on. “Besides, don’t you yearn for revenge, Greyson? I’m told the faun was responsible for the death of your friend.”

Thinking of Rishika made my anger swell, followed by a wave of grief so sharp it was like being stabbed. I gritted my teeth against it.

“You’d really make me a Fae promise?” I asked, knowing how seriously the Fae took them.

Cenwyn nodded. “If you kill the faun with your own hands down there,” he said, nodding toward the arena, “I will allow you to walk out of that arena a free man.”

I thought quickly, going over every word he’d just said, trying to see if he’d built in any loopholes designed to trick me. But the wording seemed straightforward. Even if there *were* loopholes, it was clear that if I won, I’d be free. Even if I didn’t win, I wouldn’t be agreeing to stay forever, or anything. I’d still be able to work on getting the fuck out.

I finally nodded. “Okay. You have yourself a deal.”

Cenwyn clapped his hands, looking elated. “Wonderful!” He turned to a guard, beaming. “Get this man a good meal! He needs to fuel up.” He turned back to me. “See you tomorrow.”

The guard nodded and stepped to my side, escorting me back to the lift. Cenwyn and the private box disappeared as we were slowly lowered down.

The guard led me to the holding area. “You can wash up here.”

I looked around the bare cell. “With what?”

The guard jerked his chin toward a bucket of water in the corner. He disappeared for a moment, then returned with what turned out to be a torn towel and another set of clothes, both apparently made from the same rough burlap.

It wasn’t ideal, but the blood from the arena was drying on my skin and starting to itch, so I pulled the bucket toward me and went to work. It was difficult to manage with the manacles, but I figured it out.

I took my time washing the blood off. Now that the drug Cenwyn had given me had fully worn off, I was left alone with my thoughts—and my grief. My chest felt tight enough to explode as I thought about Rishika and what she meant to me. She’d always been such a loyal friend. I couldn’t imagine anyone taking her place in our pack—or in my life.

I dropped my head and squeezed the towel over the back of my neck, letting the cold water run over my skin.

“Hurry up!” the guard yelled from outside the door. “We don’t have all night!”

I dropped the towel into the bucket and stood, scrubbing my face with my newly clean hands. As much as I wanted to spiral, I knew I didn’t have that luxury. My life was still on the line, and I needed to focus.

When I walked out of the cell, the guard was waiting for me.

He shoved a small loaf of rock-hard bread into my hands.

“Dinner,” he grunted. Then he grabbed my arm and towed me forward.

I knew where I was going, so I wasn’t surprised when he shoved me back into the pit. Everyone else seemed to be there as well, and the whispers started as soon as I stumbled in. A few creatures were shooting me furtive glances, but most of them were just openly staring in wonder.

Clarence ambled over. “Greyson,” he said with a nod.

“Hey,” I muttered, taking a bite of the stale bread.

“You might be wondering why everyone’s all…like this,” Clarence said, gesturing toward the others in the pit.

“Not really,” I grunted.

He cleared his throat. “We all know you’re going up against the faun tomorrow. It’s causing a lot of…tension in the pit.”

I stared up at him. “Whatever,” I grumbled.

I didn’t care if I was causing tension in the pit. I had my Fae promise, I’d eaten my bread, and now I needed to rest. I went over to the most isolated corner I could find and laid down with a sigh.

Curled up on my side, my back to the others in the pit, I tried to close my eyes, but I could still hear the conversations.

“He’s going to lose,” someone said.

“Of course he’s going to lose.”

“What we’re looking at right now is the next victim of the faun.”

I heard a burst of harsh laughter, and from the sound of it, it had come from the weird frog siren. I’d seen her and the Centaur sitting with the faun when I’d come in.

“Whatever,” I repeated to myself. The rest of the creatures could think whatever the fuck they wanted. I’d rather have everyone here underestimate me. And that was exactly what they were doing, of course, because they had no idea what I was capable of when I was pushed.

Right now, I only wanted two things in the world: revenge for Rishika, and the freedom to return to Cali. And the way to both of those things was through the faun, so she was going down.

The conversations continued for a while, but after an hour or so, everyone else had settled down to sleep as well. It was mostly quiet in the pit, though I still heard soft voices every now and then.

I was finally drifting off to sleep when a sound jolted me awake. Quiet footsteps, and they were coming toward me. I opened one eye very slowly and watched as a shadow approached. The shadow lifted a hand, and I saw claws glinting in the moonlight.

With that, I leapt to my feet and grabbed the would-be killer by the throat.

“The fuck do you want?” I snarled.

**Episode 5350**

Stunned, and immediately forgetting the need to stay hidden, I pushed the heavy door open.

“You put the poison in the tea?” I burst out.

Hera turned slowly, and when she saw me, horror spread across her face “Caliana! What are you doing here?”

The maid looked terrified and lowered herself into a defensive crouch, but Hera’s regal posture didn’t falter. Even panicking, her chin was up, and after a moment, she regained control and her expression took on its characteristic cool neutrality.

“Go,” she said to the maid, giving her a dismissive wave.

Carefully avoiding my gaze, the maid scuttled away. She looked happy to go.

Hera refocused on me. “Whatever you think you heard, my dear,” she said slowly, “I want to assure you that you are mistaken.”

I shook my head, hot, angry tears threatening to spring from my eyes. “Stop, Grandma. Just stop. I don’t want to listen to your lies. I was standing right there,” I said, jabbing an angry finger toward the door. “Right there, so don’t tell me I didn’t hear what I know I heard—”

“And exactly what did you hear?” she started carefully, but I cut her off.

“What I heard was you all but admitting that the poison in the tea was *your* doing!” I snapped.

She inhaled sharply. “And did you not also hear me say that the tea was given to you by mistake? That you should never have been at risk?”

I stared at my grandmother, momentarily shocked into silence.

“Do—do you think that makes me feel any better?” I finally stammered. “That you *accidentally* almost murdered me?”

“Caliana, you must—”

“No, I mustn’t!” I shot back. “Whether you’d killed me deliberately or by mistake, the result would’ve been exactly the same. And my blood would’ve been on *your* hands!”

“I was trying to protect you!” she snapped.

I let out a bark of angry laughter. “You’ve got to be kidding me! Do you even believe yourself when you say things like that? How was *that* protecting me?”

Hera’s lips pressed into a thin line, and she took a shaking breath before she spoke. “With Kastian out of the way, then you would not have been forced into this marriage treaty.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been begging me to do?” she asked, her eyes flashing. “To ensure this marriage never has to happen?”

I felt like the floor had dropped out from underneath me. “I cannot *believe* you would try to pin this on me! I never asked you to *kill* someone to get me out of this.”

Hera let out a bark of laughter, sounding harsher than I’d ever heard her. “It would be no great loss, I can assure you.”

“How can you—”

“That Kastian is a monstrous man. Everyone knows the rumors about the girls—and that’s not even the worst of what they say about him.”

“As you say, those are just rumors. We haven’t confirmed any of that,” I said tightly. I didn’t like being put into a position where I had to defend Kastian.

But Hera gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “I cannot wait for confirmation, Caliana. This is war! And we must do whatever is necessary to survive it.”

My heart felt as though it was going to beat out of my chest. I swallowed hard and asked the most pressing question in my mind. “So it was you who took Greyson and Rishika?”

Some of Hera’s sharp coldness seemed to crack at my words, and through the cracks I saw that she was confused. “Take… What are you babbling about, Caliana?”

I wasn’t babbling, and anger surged within me at her words. “Greyson and Rishika. My mate and my friend. Did you kidnap them or not?”

She looked genuinely baffled, now. “What? *Kidnap* them? Of course I didn’t! Why would I do that? I allowed all of your friends into my home—why would I get rid of them?”

“Because this is war, and we must do whatever is necessary to survive!” I quoted, tears filling my eyes. “I don’t know why you’d do it, but when Artemis confronted you about it, you tried to have her kicked out, remember?”

Hera shook her head. “That was because I thought she knew about the poison—and I was using it as an excuse to get her out of here, too. She’s at risk, you know. She’s the Mauvais heir, and that means so much more than either one of you truly understands.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but stopped, my head spinning. There were so many moving pieces to all of this, and I struggled to put them together, trying to figure out what we were really talking about. Perhaps Hera hadn’t been involved in the kidnapping of Greyson and Rishika after all… But I found that even that realization gave me no comfort.

My grandmother was many things, and had apparently done questionable things to protect us, her granddaughters. But did that apparent goodness outweigh what she’d done?

I didn’t know what to do next.

My grandmother studied my face, and, perhaps seeing the evidence of some of my thoughts, took a step toward me. “Caliana—”

“No, please don’t.” I shook my head and turned to leave.

“Caliana! Caliana, I am speaking to you!”

But even with Hera calling after me, I hurried away.

Tears were still threatening as I hurried down the passageway. I felt so overwhelmed. It felt silly to want to cry, but…this was too much. My vision started blurring enough that I almost ran straight into someone.

“Xavier?” I gasped out, pulling myself up short. I quickly wiped my eyes.

Xavier’s expression clouded as he looked down at me. “Cali? What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

The questions—and the thought of answering them—was too much, and I fell into his waiting arms.

“Cali,” he said quietly, stroking my hair. “I’m here, it’s okay.”

His comfort was both a blessing and a torment. I knew it was wrong of me to be leaning on him like this, and that I should probably just stay away from him. But what could I do? I was in a strange place, surrounded by people I didn’t know and couldn’t trust. There were so few people I could really count on, and I just needed to be able to be with Xavier without any of my usual walls in place. I needed to feel safe for a moment, and so I held on tightly.

I let his smell envelop me. For a moment, it was just the two of us. It felt like time had stopped.

Finally, Xavier pulled away enough to look down at me.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asked.

I nodded. “It’s about the poisoning.”

“The tea?”

I licked my lips. “Hera was behind it, though she says it was meant for Kastian. She said she was just trying to protect Artemis and me, but I’m not sure she’s helping anyone right now. Everything’s so fucked up.”

Saying it all out loud made me realize how crazy it all was. My own grandmother had organized trying to kill someone. For *me.*

“Shit,” he said quietly.

“Yeah.”

“This is bad,” he said. “Really bad, Cali. You’re getting all tangled up in this political bullshit, and you’re ending up in danger even when you’re not the target. I understand that you want to help the Fae, but don’t you see that we need to leave this place?”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, not yet.”

“*Why?*” he asked, looking a little crazed by my answer. He ran a hand through his hair, huffing. “Why would you care about finding peace for a people who’ve shown you that they’re willing to use you as a pawn, Cali?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I countered.

“Then what are you—”

“Greyson and Rishika are still missing, and I’m not going anywhere until I find out who took them. They’re somewhere here—I know it. And you heard Marius. If we leave, we lose any potential leads about who did it.” I dashed away one more rogue tear, feeling a renewed sense of determination.

“Cali, I understand all that,” Xavier said. His frustration was clearly mounting, but he was holding it at bay. “But I’m not going to compromise your safety in order to achieve any of these things. You were almost poisoned—what’s going to happen next? I don’t think we should stay to find out.”

“I know, but we’re so close,” I said. “I can feel it, Xavier. Please, just do this with me.”

He sighed, running a hand over his face. He looked down at me, searching my face for something. A way to talk me out of this? Fat chance.

“Fine,” he said.

It was more of a grumbling concession than an actual agreement, but I would take it.

I nodded. “Good. I know exactly where to start.”

**Episode 5351**

**Xavier**

“What do you have in mind?” I asked Cali, knowing that I wasn’t going to like her answer.

“Just follow me,” she replied, already moving off. “I think I know what to do.”

I resisted the urge to groan. All I wanted was to keep packing her things and do whatever it took to get to the border and pass through the briar, then get Cali the hell out of this place without looking back. But obviously, she had other plans.

*We came here to find Artemis and we’ve done that. So, why the hell is Cali so hell-bent on staying here and getting wrapped up in this Fae drama?*

I wiped a hand down my face and followed her, not liking any of this. I wished she would just listen to me for once and leave. All these Fae politics weren’t her problem, and I didn’t understand why she couldn’t see that.

If things were different between us and we were still together, I wondered if she’d be more open to listening to me. I didn’t know, but it was clear that right now, nothing I said had any bearing on her decisions here.

We made our way back to the banquet hall, and almost predictably, Cali made a beeline for Kastian. I watched her, annoyed all over again that she kept dealing with this guy. “Cali, what are you doing?”

She ignored me and trained her attention right on Kastian. “We need to talk.”

He grinned. “Of course, Caliana. If you’ll excuse me,” he said to the group of Fae he’d been talking to.

Getting angrier by the second, I reached out to Cali though mind link. *Cali, answer me! What are you doing? Why do you keep interacting with this guy? He’s bad news, can’t you see that?*

But she kept ignoring me and pulled Kastian away from the others. “You were the intended target for the poison,” she confessed to Kastian.

I shook my head, wondering if she was really about to throw her grandmother under the bus like this for Kastian’s sake. What was she thinking??

Kastian’s eyes flashed at the news. “Who’s responsible? Tell me and they’ll pay.”

Cali shook her head. “I can’t tell you that, but I will tell you that I can stop them from making any more attempts on your life.”

Kastian scowled. “And why would you do that for me? As far as I can tell, you’ve only been tolerating me this entire time.”

“I’ll do this for you because I want to make sure you live to see the end of these peace talks.”

Kastian processed that, looking intrigued.

I wondered if this was really going to work. Cali was promising something that I wasn’t sure she could deliver. It wasn’t like she was the one pulling Hera’s strings. Her grandmother wasn’t the type to take orders from anyone.

*But damn does she look sexy, all strong and self-assured like that. Fierce and beautiful and confident like always.* So *damn sexy.*

It was a struggle, but I forced my thoughts out of the gutter and away from what I would give to have Cali pressed against me right now. This wasn’t the time to get distracted by how much I wanted her and how hard I’d been working this entire time in the Fae world to keep things platonic and not act on my feelings toward her.

Kastian finally nodded at Cali and said, “If that’s true, then you have a deal. What do you need from me?”

“I’ll come to you when I need something from you, and you better be ready to cooperate.”

Kastian nodded, and then without another word, Cali turned and left.

I followed behind her, wondering where she was going with this. “So, what’s your plan here?” I asked once we were out of Kastian’s sight.

“I just need to finish collecting the pieces of the puzzle. I know we’re close. Then we can put it all together, and things will go smoothly from there. But first, I need to find Artemis.”

I followed her to her sister’s room, but before she could knock, I stopped her.

“She’s not in there,” I said.

“What? Where is she then?”

I pointed down the hallway. “Her scent leads that way. And it’s fresh.” I nodded at the garden entrance.

Cali ran that way, calling Artemis’s name. I joined her and we saw Artemis as soon as we made our way out into the garden. Artemis was seated on a bench near a pond, looking morose. Marius was seated next to her, but neither of them was talking.

They both looked up as we came running over. Artemis’s face flashed like she wanted to say something but decided against it at the last second.

“Artemis, I’m sorry,” Cali said as we approached. She wrapped her arms around her sister, and I saw Artemis’s arms start to rise before she stubbornly let them drop to her sides again.

I almost sighed at the sight. But who was I to judge how Artemis was feeling? I knew firsthand how difficult it was to forgive someone when you felt betrayed by them. It had happened so many times with me and Greyson. But Cali wasn’t giving up.

“We were both wrong, Artemis. I can admit my part…”

I knew that Cali wanted to add *why can’t you?* but didn’t want to spin out into another sparring match with her sister.

“…and I know Hera’s being shady—I admit that—but she’s doing it for the both of us. She doesn’t want me to have to marry Kastian, and she doesn’t want you to bear the pressure of being the Mauvais heir.”

Artemis finally spoke. “And did she admit that she took Greyson and Rishika?”

Cali shook her head. “No, she told me she had nothing to do with that, and I believe her. Hera poisoned the tea, that’s what she was being so skittish about. She thought you knew and was trying to get rid of you because of that.”

“Oh, what a relief,” Artemis said sarcastically.

“I know hearing that doesn’t bring you much relief, but I don’t think we should fight about the mistakes Hera’s making. We need to focus on finding out the truth about everything going on. I no longer want to play their games. I want to be the one making the moves, and I know I can’t do that without your help.”

Artemis frowned. “It’ll be hard for you to outmaneuver them, Cali. You’re smart, but this isn’t your world. It’s more complicated than you know.”

A look of determination spread across Cali’s face. “I know that, but I don’t care. I’ll do whatever I have to do to find Greyson and Rishika, and I’m not about to let anything stand in my way.”

Artemis nodded and sighed. “So that means that Kastian’s our main suspect again, right?”

Cali nodded. “Yes, and I’ve got Kastian in my back pocket over the poison thing. I told him that I’ll keep the person who wants him dead off his back, but if I’m being honest, I don’t one hundred percent know how to play that card.”

Artemis cocked her head to the side in thought. “I don’t know, but I think I can probably come up with a few ways. And if we put our heads together, I know we can figure it out.”

I was grateful that the sisters finally seemed to be moving past whatever was going on. It was better for Cali, and that made me glad.

I turned at the sudden sound of rustling behind me. I frowned. “Cali, I just heard something. I’m going to go check it out.”

I turned and left the small garden, walking along the wall toward the outer rim of the grounds. I didn’t make it far before I nearly collided with Cenwyn, who was hurrying along the same path.

“What are you doing on this side of the grounds?” I asked.

Since we’d arrived, I rarely saw any of the Dark or Light Fae cross over to the opposite sides and right now we were very close to the Dark Fae side.

Cenwyn looked surprised by my directness. “It’s not really any of your business, werewolf, but if you must know, I was running an errand.”

I frowned, not liking the idea of Cenwyn lurking around out here. What if he was trying to spy on Cali and Artemis? I knew that Cenwyn was a fan of the marriage plot, and if he’d gotten wind that Hera wasn’t too keen on it…

But all of that was speculation. The only evidence I had that Cenwyn was up to anything at all was how strangely the man was acting. Granted, I didn’t know the guy well, but he was obviously on edge and looked like he’d just been caught red handed doing something—though not necessarily eavesdropping.

“Well, you should be careful out here. It’s getting late,” I said, hoping that Cenwyn heard the threat in my words.

“You should do the same, wolf,” Cenwyn threw back before hurrying off.

As the Fae passed by me, I caught the faintest hint of something on the wind. I spun around to watch him hurry away, taking another large inhale of a scent that was unmistakably Greyson’s.

**Episode 5352**

I was relieved that Artemis and I were back on good terms. I hated fighting with my sister, especially at a time like this, when we needed each other. We still had differences simmering beneath the surface, but they weren’t enough to keep us on the outs. We needed to work together if we were going to get through this.

“So…are you doing okay with everything?” Artemis asked. “I know that this is all a lot, and things have been so hectic that I haven’t been as supportive as I could have been.”

I was grateful that Artemis was going the extra mile to smooth things out between us. “I don’t know. It’s all been a lot,” I admitted. “And fighting with you didn’t make things any easier. You’re the only person here other than Xavier that I know I can trust.”

“Same, and you should know that no matter what—even if we’re fighting—I’ll always have your back. Always.”

I hugged Artemis, overcome by how good it felt to hear that. It wasn’t that I ever doubted that, but after our fight, I’d felt so alone and lost.

We both broke out of our hug just as Xavier came rushing back looking really angry.

“Xavier, what’s wrong?” I asked, rushing up to him.

“I just ran into Cenwyn.” Xavier paused as if he were unsure about sharing what was on his mind. “I think I caught a faint scent of Greyson when he passed me by.”

“What?” I was shocked. “You smelled Greyson’s scent on Cenwyn?”

“What are you talking about?” Artemis said, shooting up from her seat.

“Yeah, what do you mean?” I asked again.

“I mean that I smelled my brother on Cenwyn. But I can’t be sure…it was so faint that I might have imagined it. But if it *was* his scent, then that means there’s a chance Cenwyn has been around Greyson at some point today.”

“Wow, that’s a big deal,” I said, wondering at the implications. “We have to figure out what that means.”

“I’m going to follow him and find out. Which way did he go?” Artemis asked Xavier.

“He was heading east,” Xavier replied, jutting his thumb in that direction. “He wasn’t moving particularly fast, I’m sure you can catch up with him.”

“I plan on it,” Artemis said darkly.

“Do you want me to come with?” Marius asked Artemis.

She shook her head. “No, I’ve got this. But if you hear anything meaningful, come find me.”

Marius nodded as Artemis took off.

“Be careful!” I called after her.

Artemis turned back to look at me as she rushed away. “I always am.”

When she was gone, Xavier said, “We should probably head back to your room. We can regroup, talk about next steps.”

Xavier and I left the gardens and started back toward my room. I turned a corner and almost collided with a maid Fae hurrying in the opposite direction.

“I’m sorry,” I said, but the Fae barely looked at me and scuttled away.

“What’s with her?” I asked Xavier as we both watched her speed off. “She looks like she’s seen a ghost.”

“Who knows? Everyone around here is acting weird.”

As soon as we were back in the room, I noticed a small note on my dresser. I picked it up and saw that it was an invitation to the next round of peace talks. “Another peace talk meeting,” I said to Xavier. “And, great—it starts in ten minutes.”

“Not much time for us to talk,” Xavier said.

“What do you think it means, anyway? Smelling Greyson on Cenwyn? Is he involved in Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance?”

Xavier shook his head. “I mean, we can’t discount that, right? Like you just reminded us, whoever took them is here somewhere. But we have to be careful throwing wild accusations around. This place is like a powder keg as is.”

Xavier suddenly grabbed my arm, taking me by surprise.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, looking around like I expected someone to jump out at us.

“Did you hear that?” Xavier asked, his voice low.

“Hear what? What are you talking about?”

“There’s like a high-pitched energy sound coming from somewhere nearby.”

Xavier went and started looking around the room, opening nightstand drawers, peeking into the closets, even looking under the comforter. And then he stooped down to look under the bed and let out a curse that drew me to his side to look, too.

I saw it immediately—just under the bed was a floating ball of Fae energy. It was a red, angry color and even gave off a radiating heat. It was pulsing like a ticking clock…or a bomb.

“Get away from it!” Xavier shouted. He grabbed me and rushed me to the other side of the room. He pushed a credenza on its side and pushed me down to hide behind it. He dove on top of me just as the squealing sound of building energy grew so loud that I was forced to slap my hands over my ears.

And then it exploded.

The credenza pushed back against us from the force of it, pinning us against the wall. When the rattling and shaking finally stopped, we both stood to see that the bed and nightstand were completely roasted.

“We could have gotten really hurt,” I said. I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling a renewed sense of fear. “Who would do this?”

Xavier was shaking his head slowly, looking as shocked as I felt. “Kastian maybe? He may be pissed about you basically blackmailing him. He doesn’t seem like the type to accept losing control.”

Cali shook her head. “I don’t know…but we’ll figure it out. We’re due at the peace talks anyway. We’ll have to tell Hera what happened.”

I went for the door and Xavier pressed himself against it to block me from leaving. “Wait, Cali, do you think going to the peace talks is a good idea? Sitting in a room with the very people who just tried to kill you? What if they see that their little plan didn’t work and try it again out in the open? We don’t know what these people are capable of.”

I winced. “I’m not looking forward to it, but what choice do I have? If I don’t go, they might think something’s up.”

“Yeah, they’ll think their plan worked and they succeeded in blowing you to smithereens.”

“Maybe, but we don’t know for sure that whoever did this is at the peace talks. We have no idea who’s behind this.”

Xavier scowled. “Are you even listening to yourself?” He shook his head at me. “This place is so unpredictable. We have no idea what any of these people are capable of or the lengths they’ll go to to get what they want.”

“Like I’ve been telling you this entire time, Xavier, I know what I’m doing. I have to play the game whether I like it or not. I can’t just cower in here and hide out until the end of the talks. It doesn’t work that way. I’m going to see this through.”

Xavier said nothing as I pushed past him and led the way to the room where the talks were to be held. As soon as we entered, we were immediately greeted by a butler who offered us wine. I was hesitant to even accept it with all the poisonings and attempts on my life, but I accepted the last glass on the tray. Might as well keep up the ruse that I wasn’t shaken.

Another waiter came up to Xavier. “Sir? Wine?”

Xavier scowled at the man but took a glass anyway.

I glanced around at the other Fae and watched them sipping away at their wine with no hesitation, so I took a small sip, too. A part of me worried that they’d slipped something in the wine, but I had to think they weren’t so crafty that they knew exactly which glass of wine I was going to take.

We made our way to our seats, and I tried to get my grandmother’s attention, but before I could, Celeste stood up near the head of the table.

“Now that we’re all here, I’m calling this meeting to order.” The quiet murmurs of conversation dissolved to silence as Celeste glanced around the table, her authority evident. “We’ve come together here today to finalize the marriage agreement.”

I tensed when I heard what sounded like Xavier growling in anger. I reached out to take his hand only to meet the sharp points of his claws.

*What the hell? He’s half shifted!*

I turned to look at him to tell him that this wasn’t the time or place, but he wasn’t even looking at me. He only had eyes for Kastian, and his face was screwed into a mask of rage that surprised me.

At this point, the other Fae were staring, too, obviously well aware that Xavier was half wolf. I stood up to stop him, but before I could, Xavier leapt across the room, his claws aimed at Kastian’s throat.

**Episode 5353**

**Xavier**

I let out a roar as I leapt at Kastian. Just before I made contact, two guards seemingly came out of nowhere and raised their shields to block me. I roared again in wild frustration. I wanted nothing more than to kill Kastian. I hated the Fae’s smug face, how he leered at Cali and talked about marrying her right in front of me like I wasn’t even there.

*No one is marrying Cali, least of all that asshole Kastian.*

Blinded by rage, I lunged again. The guards stepped forward, thrusting out their shields this time so that I crashed into them and went sprawling across the floor. I was on my feet immediately and started to fully shift to go after him again, but Cali raced forward and threw herself between Kastian and me, putting out her arms to stop me.

“Xavier, no! Don’t do this!” Then she mind linked, *Xavier, please, whatever’s come over you, you have to fight it.* *This isn’t you!*

I wanted to listen to her, I wanted to calm down, but even as she said the words, I felt the rage filling me up until I felt like I might burst. A harsh, violent voice in my head sprang to life, telling me to go after my target.

*I want to spill Kastian’s blood. It’s all I can think about. Cali doesn’t think this is me, but what if it is? Maybe it always has been. But if I want to get to Kastian, I’ll have to rip Cali aside to get to him, and I can’t do that. I can’t put Cali in danger just because I want revenge.*

I wasn’t in my right mind, but the thought of hurting Cali or even scaring her any more than I already had put a damper on my anger. I slowly shifted fully back to human. My head was pounding like crazy, like I was going against my nature by suppressing my wolf.

I let out a howl of pain and anger, frustration filling me as the rage spiked again and clashed against my need to calm down and do what Cali wanted. Angry voices rose all around me, only making my headache worse. I fell to my knees, grabbing my head.

“It’s going to be okay, Xavier, I promise,” Cali said. She was kneeling beside me, stroking my back.

“He’s a monster! Why was he ever allowed in here?” someone was shouting.

“It was the Light Fae! They brought him here! Probably trying to intimidate us!” another Fae shouted.

“They wanted to cause strife, and they’ve done it! How could they allow this to happen?! He almost ripped Kastian’s throat out!” screamed another Fae.

All hell was breaking loose around me. I heard chairs scraping back from the table, the sound of people rushing toward the exits as if they thought I might shift and attack anyone within my reach.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to shut out all the shouting and the anger. I still felt so out of control, and there was no guarantee that I wouldn’t shift again and go for Kastian a third time—that was how out of sorts I felt.

*What the hell is wrong with me? I can’t stand the guy, but all this anger, all this rage…*

“Can’t you see that something’s wrong with him?” Cali was shouting.

But no one was listening to her. They were still too busy shouting at the Light Fae, blaming them for my outburst and demanding that I be restrained and thrown out before I could hurt anyone.

Cali leaned close to me, her lips grazing my ear as she spoke in hushed tones. “Are you okay? What can I do to help?”

But I couldn’t answer her. The pain in my head was too great, and I was doing my best to keep it together, but I was slowly losing control. It wasn’t long before the anger won out and I started to shift again as it took over.

“Get away from me, Cali,” I growled. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Suddenly, Artemis was by our side.

“Come on, let’s get him out of here,” she said calmly.

She grabbed my left arm, and Cali grabbed my right, and they lifted me up and helped me out of the room. The bright sunlight streaming in through the hallway windows hurt my head, and I let out a moan of pain as I tried to squeeze my eyes shut to block it out.

It was almost like two parts of my being were at war for control over my body and I couldn’t figure out which side to take. The one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to break out of Cali and Artemis’s hold and run back into that room and tear Kastian’s throat out. And after I did that, I would be more than ready to take out as many of the Dark Fae as I could.

But I couldn’t hurt Cali like that. I’d already done enough damage.

I didn’t even realize I was fighting to escape Cali and Artemis’s hold until Cali said, “Xavier, it’s me, it’s okay! Calm down!”

I wanted to tell her that I couldn’t help it, that I’d lost it, but I couldn’t get the words out. Instead, I just let out an angry growl as my hands shifted into claws again.

By the time they’d gotten me back to my room, I was growling and snarling while the logical part of me fought to keep my wolf side in check.

Cali and Artemis deposited me on the bed. Free from their hold, I immediately started to scramble up so I could rush out and attack, but Artemis pushed me down again and held me there. That was when I saw the blood running down her arm.

*Oh no, I’ve been digging my claws into her this entire time.*

The sight of what I’d done to her horrified me, and I cringed away in shame.

“Don’t worry, Xavier,” Cali said. “We’ll fix this, I promise.”

“Cali, the only way you can fix this is to get as far away from me as you can!”

The door slammed open, and I winced at the sound. Marius came hurrying in carrying bowls and baskets of fragrant herbs. The Fae took one look at me and frowned. “This looks bad. We better get to work.”

Marius took a step toward me, and I let out a deep growl.

He hesitated and smirked at me. “Yup, I get that a lot. Be a good werewolf and drink this down!”

Without any fear, Marius pried my mouth open and poured the most bitter thing I’d ever tasted over my tongue. It burned like a fire in my throat. I let out a howl and lashed out with my claws, but Marius expertly dodged and told Cali and Artemis, “Tie him down.”

“Is that really necessary?” Cali asked Marius.

“Of course it is, do you want him to kill you? He’s champing at the bit to attack someone and almost ripped our acquaintance Kastian to shreds out there. This is for the best. Now tie him up, quickly!”

Cali and Artemis got to work tying me down, and I didn’t resist. It wasn’t long before the headache overwhelmed me. I groaned and went slack on the bed, hoping that unconsciousness would come soon and put me out of my misery.

My eyes fell closed as the anger finally drained out of my body, leaving me completely weak. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that the room was empty except for Cali, who was wiping my brow with a cool rag.

“How long was I out?”

“A little over a half hour,” Cali replied. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m still in a lot of pain,” I admitted. I tried to lower my hands to my side, but they were still tied up.

“Here, let me help you,” Cali said. She began to untie me.

“Wait, are you sure? What if I attack again?”

Cali smiled down at me. “I trust you.”

Those words… I’d longed to hear them, but right now, I didn’t feel very worthy of them. Cali and I both jumped in surprise when someone knocked on the door.

“That’s probably Marius,” Cali said. Cali got up and hurried to the door, but it wasn’t Marius. It was Hera.

The older woman stared imperiously at me before her cold eyes drifted back to Cali. “I am quite disappointed,” Hera said.

“Grandma, I know what it looked like, but it wasn’t Xavier’s fault—”

Hera held up a hand, silencing Cali. “I’ve been chosen to deliver the news.”

Cali looked back at me, a worried expression on her face before she turned back to her grandmother. “News? What news?”

Her grandmother’s expression was grim as she spoke. “It’s been decided that the werewolf is not welcome at any more peace talks. And I’ve decided that it’s best you no longer see each other.”

**Episode 5354**

**Greyson**

I growled at the would-be killer, closing my hands tight around his neck and choking him. I was ready to take out every bit of anger and frustration I felt about Rishika being killed, about being trapped in here in the first place. If they wanted a killer, I’d give them one.

The creature was struggling to break free and choked out, “It’s me! C-Clarence!”

“Clarence?!” I said, letting him go. “What the hell?”

Clarence began coughing as he gasped in air. “Whoa, you have quite a grip on you, my friend,” he sputtered.

“Why would you sneak up on me like that?” I asked harshly, still shaking with adrenaline. “I could have killed you!”

“You’re a werewolf! I guess I thought you would smell that it was me!”

“You were the one who told me to watch my back. That’s what I was doing,” I said.

Clarence gave a sheepish smile and said, “Oh yeah, I did tell you that. Well, good job, I guess. Anyway, I need to talk to you. Actually, *we* need to talk to you.” He gestured behind him to where a small group of fighters were standing.

I sat up and looked at them, on high alert again. “What the hell do all of you want? I’m trying to sleep.”

“Everyone was impressed with how you beat the minotaur in the arena. He was the faun’s right-hand man for a long time and probably the second strongest fighter in this place, but you beat him so easily,” Clarence said. “It was a sight to behold.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t remind me. I tried to show that guy mercy, but he wouldn’t let up.”

Clarence nodded. “That’s because his entire circle is super brutal, and the faun is the worst of all.”

“Who are you telling? She killed my friend,” I spat. “I know how awful she is.” I squeezed my eyes shut as memories of watching the faun impale Rishika with her horns ripped through my mind.

“I know, yet another reason why she’s so awful. She makes it so hard for us to survive in here. She keeps some of the weaker fighters from ever getting food. She terrorizes them. Sometimes she comes at them in the middle of the night just for fun. We can barely sleep with her terrorizing the pit the way she does.”

I sighed, feeling tired and frustrated and so over this. I wanted nothing more than to get back to Cali, not to be wrapped up in pit fighter politics. “Why are you telling me all this?” I asked him.

“Because we were all kind of hoping that you might be our protector. It’s clear the faun is shaken by you, worried about your strength even though she’s not showing it. And I can tell you were the Alpha back home. You’re good at protecting people.”

*Yeah, just like I protected Rishika from getting impaled by the faun. Now that Rishika’s gone, the only person I need to worry about protecting is myself so that I can get out of here in one piece, get back to Cali, and get her the hell out of the Fae world.*

I sighed and shook my head. “I can’t do that. I won’t.”

The group looked dejected. A woman with a human head and spider body that I recognized as Dryder spoke up. “Is it because you think we’re too weak? Not worth protecting?” She sounded bitter. “Because if that’s what you’re thinking—”

“No, that’s not it,” I snapped. “I’m just not going to be here for long. No use pinning all your hopes on me and my protection when I’m going to be out of here soon. I plan to leave here tomorrow after my next fight.”

Clarence looked shocked. “What? You can’t leave us! We’ll die! Even if you beat the faun, her friends will take us all out one by one until there’s no one left!”

I was surprised at the wave of guilt I felt. I didn’t owe these people anything, but it wasn’t lost on me that they didn’t deserve to be here any more than I did. No one deserved to be trapped in a pit and forced to fight to the death for the entertainment of a bunch of awful Fae nobles.

“The deal has already been struck, but the good news is that I plan to get rid of our tormentor on my way out,” I said.

“And what if you do us one better and take us with you?” Clarence asked. He looked really excited, and the group began clamoring eagerly behind him.

“No, that’s too complicated, not sure if I can do that. The deal was only for my freedom, and while I’m sorry about your situation, I can’t risk ruining my chances of getting out of here.”

“Please!” Clarence begged. “It’s our only chance. If you don’t help us…” He leaned close. “…we’re all going to die horrible deaths out in that arena!”

I looked around at all the hopeful faces crowded around me. As much as I didn’t want to complicate my own escape, they reminded me of my pack. I could never turn my back on them, it wouldn’t be right. And Cali and Rishika would want me to help this group if I could.

“Fine!” I grumbled, feeling frustrated and determined at the same time. “We can use the fight as a distraction for the escape, but you all have to do *exactly* what I tell you.”

“We will,” Clarence and the others said.

“Now leave me alone and let me go back to sleep. I’ve got to be in top form tomorrow.”

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A short while later, I was up and ready and buzzing for the fight. There were a lot of other lives riding on this now, and I knew I was up for the challenge. I just had to be smart, and there was no room for mistakes.

I looked over at Clarence and the others. I’d instructed them to keep their distance from me this morning—to continue treating me like an outcast. I didn’t want to bring any suspicion on me until it was time to move. And it didn’t hurt that their leaving me alone allowed me some time to clear my head.

The guards came marching in, and I walked over to them obediently, not even needing to be told to hold out my hands for the silver shackles. The calmer I was, the easier this would be and the quicker I would get to the fight. My entire body was vibrating with anticipation. I couldn’t wait to lay eyes on Cali, and I was so close I could taste it.

The guards led me into the same holding room as before and gave me the same instructions. Once they were done, I got up and perused the walls of weapons. I was eerily calm as I picked out a lethal-looking trident. I’d never fought with one before, but it couldn’t be hard to use.

*Aim the pointy end at the thing you want to wound and jab away.*

“Ready?” one of the guards said, holding out the bowl with the strange-smelling concoction sloshing around in it.

“I don’t need to drink that today, I’m ready to fight without it,” I said. I didn’t want to leave anything to chance or risk having some sort of reaction to the drug that would get in the way of me leaving.

“You don’t have a choice,” the guard said. “Drink it, or we’ll *make* you drink it.”

I almost scoffed at that but didn’t want to do anything that might mess up my plan to get out of here after the fight.

With a sneer, I snatched the bowl from the guard and took a big mouthful. I waited, and as soon as the guards left me alone, I spit it out. I felt the familiar tingle of its effects, but only slightly. I hadn’t been able to avoid swallowing just a little. Hopefully I hadn’t ingested enough to matter. I wanted to be clear and present in the arena and hoped the little I’d drunk wouldn’t affect my judgment once it was time to fight.

I stood there waiting for the arena doors to open, ready to win this fight and get revenge for what they did to Rishika. I couldn’t wait to get out of here and back to my life, but instead the door behind me clanged open and the head guard walked in.

I glared at the guy, wondering if he knew I’d spit out the potion. But instead, he said, “Lord Cenwyn sends his regards,” then he pulled out a silver dagger and stabbed me in the ribs before I could stop him.

I held back a scream as the pain radiated through me, making my head swim. The guard leaned in close and whispered, “Did you really think Cenwyn was going to let you leave here alive? Not when you know all our secrets and can run and tell your half-Fae mate all about it.”

“Fuck you,” I rasped, both of my hands clamped to my ribs to stem the bleeding.

“I think you’re the one who’s fucked,” the guard said. “If you don’t die in the arena, that wound will kill you before you step a foot outside these walls.”

**Episode 5355**

I was shocked at how callous my grandmother was being. She was in no position to be making calls about my life right now—especially after the mess she’d pulled with almost poisoning me.

“You can’t do that!” I said as calmly as I could. “You told me you would allow Xavier to stay by my side, and that’s what he’s going to do!”

My breath was rushing in and out of my lungs as panic seized me. I couldn’t fathom the thought of being without Xavier in this place. Having him by my side was the only thing keeping me sane.

Hera was unmoved. “The situation has changed. You should have kept your mate in check and not let him shift and try to *kill* one of the most prominent Dark Fae in attendance. How can you blame them for wanting him gone? Truthfully, the Dark Fae want his head on a stake! This is the best compromise I could wring from the situation. And with my status on the line, I will not have a werewolf interfering in our affairs and ruining everything we’re working toward. We’ve allowed him here as a courtesy, and that courtesy has run its course!”

“That’s not fair!” I said, feeling like the world was closing in on me. First, I’d lost Greyson, and now I was losing Xavier, too? “You don’t even want the marriage alliance. Why not end these talks now, before they find out how you really feel about the marriage pact and things really go wrong? It’s not like Xavier leaving is going to magically fix everything!”

“That may be, but I’m committed to finding a way to at least try and make peace, and not make things worse—which is exactly what your wolf just did! Do you know how many will die if the war escalates? Or does that not matter to you, if the choice is between keeping your mate close or saving the entire Fae race?”

“Don’t do that. I’m here, aren’t I? I care about what happens to the Fae just as much as you do.”

“I want to believe that, but you’re not showing it, Cali. And I know you’re upset about this decision, but I’m sorry to say, that doesn’t matter right now. I will not be responsible for more Fae bloodshed,” Hera said. “If I have to choose between you getting to keep your mate around and doing what it takes to end the war, I’m sure you know what I’ll choose.”

I couldn’t help but notice the look in my grandmother’s eyes, which reflected how haunted she was by this war. My grandfather had been a general, and I wondered what sacrifices and choices my grandmother had had to make over the last few centuries to protect her family.

*Still, I can’t just let her march in here and tear Xavier and me apart like this!*

“And I’m not about to let you do this to me. You might be my family, but we’re practically strangers. I barely know you, and I need true allies at my side to look out for my well-being. That’s Xavier. That’s Artemis. People I know and who know me and who I can really trust.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t trust me?” Hera asked, her expression unreadable.

“I’m saying that you’ve nearly poisoned me and claimed that you’re not entertaining this marriage while failing to stand up to the other Fae and take it off the table. Your words and actions aren’t lining up, so, no, Xavier isn’t going anywhere. I need him in this hornet’s nest!”

Hera finally looked taken aback. “Can’t you see that everything I’ve done is for you, Orla?!”

We both went silent, staring at each other as we processed her slipup. My heart ached thinking of my mother.

*Did the two of them have a conversation just like this way back when? Is that why she’s so adamant about keeping me away from Xavier? Because she thinks I’ll be hurt somehow, like my mother was hurt all those years ago?*

Hera’s cool demeanor had finally cracked. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re letting your human emotions get the better of you.”

I wasn’t going to let her downplay my feelings. I was about to respond when behind me, I heard Xavier stand with a pained groan before shuffling over to stand beside me.

“Hera, I will apologize to the Dark Fae, I’ll do whatever the fuck I have to do, but I’m not leaving Cali,” he said.

Hera plied him with a cold look. “No, thank you. You’ve made things bad enough, and I’m not going to give you a chance to make them worse.”

My anger was growing by the second. “Grandma, you’re making a mistake! If you continue down this road, I may never trust you again.”

“I’ll have to take that risk. You may not see it now, Caliana, but I’m doing what’s best for you. I’m protecting the interests of the Light Fae while trying to protect you the best way I know how. If I don’t do this, the Dark Fae might retaliate. Then both you and your precious mates’ lives will be at risk. Is that what you want? Is having Xavier beside you more important than keeping you both alive?”

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if she was right. But even if she was, she wasn’t going about this the right way at all. And the idea of Xavier not being right here beside me made me feel so alone. Unsafe. There was so much uncertainty here that I wasn’t willing to let go of the one thing anchoring me down in the middle of it all.

I lifted my chin in defiance. “I understand your concerns, but Xavier is staying right here with me.”

Hera scowled. “I thought you might say that, but I was hoping you wouldn’t. If you insist on keeping this werewolf by your side, I’ll have no choice but to have him thrown out of Briarkeep. I was going to do it for Artemis’s sake, but I’ll do it for yours, too.”

Without another word, Hera turned and left without a look back.

Waves of frustration and anger were boiling under my skin. I wanted to scream. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I hated that Hera was drawing a line in the sand like this. I wanted to trust her, be allied with her, but how could I be?

I couldn’t read her very well, and she was doing so many things in secret…and then getting mad at me for somehow not knowing what she was up to.

I threw myself down onto the bed, my hands balled up at my sides. “This is all so messed up!” I cried out, tears flowing down my cheeks. “Hera’s not the grandmother I thought she was. I thought she would protect us, help us, not throw you out the first chance she gets for something that isn’t even your fault!”

Xavier held me as I cried, stroking my hair and trying to calm me down. “Don’t worry, Cali, don’t get so worked up. It might not be as bad as it seems.”

I looked up at him. “And how are you feeling? After all that—I’m sorry, I haven’t even asked.”

“Don’t worry about me, Cali. I feel better,” Xavier said.

“And you look better, too.”

“Thanks,” Xavier said with a lopsided grin. “You know, you don’t have to keep me around.” He opened his mouth to say more but looked uncertain.

“What? Of course I need you here with me. If I can’t trust my own grandmother, then who can I trust?” I shook my head. “But I have to admit that she has a point, too. Keeping you around isn’t in the best interest of the peace talks…even if it’s in *my* best interest. I don’t even know who to trust anymore.”

“I know, but we’ll figure this out together. Hera can’t separate us. Not without a fight. That’s just the reality of it.”

“I don’t think you understand. This is their world. We’re outnumbered. You heard her—the Dark Fae want you dead, and the Light Fae want to distance themselves from you. The Fae council might actually go through with throwing you out of here.”

“You know, on second thought, maybe we should actually go along with it,” Xavier said slowly. “Maybe it’s best if I leave.”

I leaned back to look at Xavier, surprised. “Go along with it? What? Why would you say something like that? You just said that we’ll fight to stay together, and now you’re saying that you’ll just leave? Willingly?”

“I don’t know, maybe Hera truly does believe she’s doing what’s best for you,” Xavier insisted.

I shook my head and pulled away from him, confused. “No, that’s not right, because being apart from you is never what’s best for me.”

We both froze as I realized what I’d just said.

Xavier laid a gentle hand on my cheek and asked, “Do you mean that?”

**Episode 5356**

**Artemis**

I was on the Dark Fae side of Briarkeep again, heading back from the infirmary, where I picked up bandages to wrap the scratches Xavier had given me. I wasn’t happy about him wounding me, but he hadn’t done it on purpose, and he and Cali had needed my help. The scratches were a small price to pay for getting him out of that meeting before the Fae made an example of him.

Cadhla spotted me and came rushing up, eyeing my wounds. “Oh my! He scratched you? This is awful! Does this mean…you’ll turn?” She whispered the last part with a bit of voyeuristic glee in her eyes.

I resisted rolling my eyes at her and said, “No, a scrape like this won’t turn someone into a werewolf. But don’t worry, if I did turn, you’d be the first person I’d visit.”

I lunged forward, and Cadhla let out a little scream as she jumped back, guarding her throat with her hands.

Dorphus was laughing as he came to join us. “Cadhla, stop being such a bore.” He turned to me. “Are you okay? Looks like that wolf did a number on you. I thought you two were friends.”

“We *are* friends, and I’m fine,” I said. “Just an accidental nick, nothing to worry about. I’ve had worse, believe me.”

I dropped my arm out of sight with hopes that that might stop everyone from talking about it. “So, what’s going on here? What’s happening now that the meeting was…ended unexpectedly,” I asked.

Dorphus shook his head. “The council is *pissed*!It was already a scandal having a werewolf at the peace talks, and then said werewolf went ahead and tried to attack a Dark Fae right out in the open!” Dorphus shook his head in disbelief. “It shouldn’t stand in any event, but an exception being made for Hera Wrenthorn? No, the Dark Fae aren’t about to let that go.”

“So…what are they planning to do about it?” I asked tentatively. Not only was I worried about Rishika and Greyson, but now I was going to have to worry about what they might do to Cali and Xavier as well.

“They’ve asked Hera to get rid of him, of course.”

I was shocked. “What? Get rid of him? Like kill him?”

Dorphus waved dismissively. “No, no, nothing as dramatic as that. Hera talked them out of that, anyway. Though a good old-fashioned execution is just what this boring summit needs.”

I waited for him to say that he was joking, but he looked like he was serious, and I was a bit disgusted, but not shocked.

There was a stir as Kastian came walking out into the courtyard. People rushed to crowd around him and fawn over him. I noticed that he had his arm in a sling, and I frowned.

*What’s he wearing a sling for? I don’t remember seeing Xavier even touch him! He’s clearly playing up his “injury” and reveling in the attention. Why am I not surprised?*

“Calm down, calm down, everyone, I’m fine,” Kastian announced. “I’m just glad that our Briarkeep guards jumped in to stop that wild beast before he could do any more damage. I would have hated to shed blood at this peace summit, but trust me, I was ready to put my life on the line if it meant that creature wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone else.”

Kastian heaved out a big sigh and hung his head.

“What’s the matter, Kastian?” someone asked.

“It’s just…a lot to process. It’s one thing to be attacked, but another thing to be attacked by your potential wife’s lover. I’m still in shock—I apologize.”

I rolled my eyes, wondering just how much more we were going to have to take of his histrionics.

“I can’t believe that the Light Fae would allow such an animal into the Briarkeep. This is supposed to be a sacred place!” Cadhla said.

“I heard that Caliana *lives* with wolves. Isn’t that peculiar?” Dorphus shuddered.

Cadhla’s eyes went wide. “Ugh, disgusting! How can a Fae choose to live with wolves like that? Isn’t she worried they might turn on her one day and tear her to shreds like that one almost did poor to Kastian?”

Philanthra butted in. “And she’s only half Fae, anyway. I don’t know if she’s even worthy of being a true marriage option. It’s disrespectful to all of us.”

Kastian waved a hand and said, “Despite my injuries, I do want to make it clear that none of Caliana’s werewolf friends are a threat anymore.”

A confused murmur settled over the crowd, and I had to admit that my interest was piqued, too.

*Could he be talking about Greyson and Rishika? Xavier was the only werewolf who was seen here at the peace talks, but that doesn’t mean Kastian doesn’t know about the others…*

“I think we should have pushed harder to get rid of that wolf. I won’t be able to sleep tonight knowing that he’s stalking around here with those dreadful claws!” Cadhla all but swooned against Dorphus, who held her close and fanned her.

Kastian shrugged. “Some people get very attached to their…companions. So much so that they choose not to admit to themselves how much of a threat they can be.” Kastian followed that up with a dramatic sigh and then excused himself. “Thank you all for your concern, but I must go rest my injuries so that I can be in tip-top shape for the rest of the peace talks.”

He was faking it, and I knew it. I slipped after him and followed him to his room, calling out to him just before he disappeared inside.

“Kastian, you surprised me back there.”

Kastian arched an eyebrow at me. “Oh?”

“I didn’t think you were one to be afraid of something like a werewolf.”

Kastian laughed. “Oh, Artemis, you don’t know me very well, but I’m flattered that you thought me fearless enough that I would underestimate the danger of a near-death strike from a werewolf—or any creature for that matter. But I admit I’m not particularly afraid of werewolves… Hell, I was fine with allowing a werewolf into my marriage.”

Kastian turned as if to go into his room, but I stopped him again.

“Maybe, or maybe that was just a misdirect.”

Kastian tilted his head at me. “A misdirect for what?” He turned around to face me. “What’s on your mind, Ari?”

I was about to snap at him to never call me that again when I heard Marius calling my name.

He came walking up, still in his glamoured form. “Lady Artemis, I’m here to fetch you.”

I wanted to ignore him so that I could finish hashing things out with Kastian, but he gave me a pointed look.

“Fine, yes, let’s go.”

Kastian smirked at me as I walked off with Marius. “See you later.”

“Why did you interrupt me like that? I was onto something,” I hissed at Marius as he led me away.

Marius shrugged. “If we really want to get proof that Kastian is guilty of something, we should go seek out the proof ourselves. I doubt very seriously that Kastian’s going to hand it to you on a silver platter.”

I didn’t like admitting that Marius was right, so I didn’t.

He leaned close and whispered, “I located Maira’s room. It’s not far. Would you like to accompany me on a little reconnaissance mission?”

Searching Maira’s room could very well give us the break we needed. Her sister had been abducted or possibly even killed by Kastian. I’d meant to follow up on Maira’s disappearance from Briarkeep just after I’d spoken to her about Kastian’s involvement, but things had gotten…busy.

*Maybe if I can prove that Kastian made Maira and her sister disappear, that’ll be all the evidence I need to bring him down.*

“Yes, that sounds like a great plan,” I finally said to Marius.

“I thought you’d be game,” Marius said with a self-satisfied grin that somehow transferred perfectly to the stranger’s face he was “wearing.”

We hurried to the servant’s quarters. One of the butler Fae nodded at Marius, who slipped him a coin. Without a word, the butler pointed to a room down the hall.

Marius and I rushed over to the door and slipped inside. Maira’s bedroom was totally empty, which wasn’t unexpected.

“Wow. Doesn’t look like she left even one thing behind,” I said, already feeling dejected.

“Yes, it’s almost like she planned to leave.”

I considered the possibility. “You’re right. If she’d left in a rush, she would’ve left something behind here, maybe even everything. But it’s like she was never here at all. The place is completely stripped.”

I opened the door to a small closet, but there was nothing inside but cobwebs.

*What’s going on here? Why did she just up and leave like that right after I questioned her?*

Finally, Marius called out to me. “Found something!”

Stuck between the mattress and the metal frame was a scrap of paper. It looked like part of a letter.

“Did you say her sister died?” Marius asked.

“Yes, that’s what Maira told me.”

Marius frowned down at the letter. “Well, if this scrap of paper is any indication, I don’t think that’s true.”

**Episode 5357**

**Greyson**

In excruciating pain from the silver wound, I half shifted and growled at the guard. I wanted to rip him apart, but I wasn’t in any shape to make sudden movements. I could feel the silver working its way through my system, and I had no idea how long I had. Silver poisoning was so unpredictable. It could kill you in seconds, minutes, hours—all I knew was that unless I got ahold of some Fae blood, it was a death sentence.

I eyed the guard, feeling feverish and delirious but still trying to calculate.

*I can get some blood. We’re in the Fae world for shit’s sake, there’s Fae blood everywhere. I just need to get it.*

The Fae guard watched me, laughing. “Have a good fight!” he called over his shoulder as he left.

*I’m so fucking stupid! Why did I ever think Cenwyn would strike a deal with me that was aboveboard with no strings attached?*

I grunted as my body began reacting to the silver poisoning and the building rage from the drink. That small bit of the drug I’d swallowed was definitely getting to me.

My head snapped toward the roar of the crowd just beyond my cell, and it stirred my anger and my blood. I stalked forward, my legs moving as if on their own accord. The only choice I really had was to get through this fight and hope I survived to see the end of it. I had two clear goals: get some Fae blood, and get the fuck out of here alive.

I had a sudden, clear memory of my fight with Xavier during the Lupo Finale. Xavier had been poisoned with the silver from the tips of Ryker’s claws and had fought well despite it. I could do the same…I was going to have to. I just had to pull through.

I could smell the faun’s scent, and something occurred to me. I wondered if her blood might work to counteract the silver poisoning since she was native to the Fae world, or if only blood from a Dark or Light Fae would work.

*I wouldn’t mind a gallon of Cenwyn’s blood right now.*

I raced through the tunnel, hyping myself up the entire way to keep from passing out in the dirt. I cleared the tunnel exit and had barely set foot in the arena when I had to duck to dodge an attack. I readied myself to strike back, but then I saw that it wasn’t the faun who’d tried to attack me—it was a giant wyrm.

I stumbled back, letting out a strangled shout of surprise when I saw that there was not one but *four* wyrms, massive and scaly and all teeth, chained up in the corners of the arena. I’d never seen one in real life, and my fuzzy thoughts were struggling to process how much worse my situation had just become.

*Fuck. I guess Cenwyn decided to up the ante, that bastard.*

Adrenaline, rage, and pain coursing through my body, I fully shifted and raced out into the center of the arena where the chained wyrms couldn’t reach. The faun was already there waiting for me, covered in war paint—no wait, it was blood.

The sight of her standing there like that stirred my already surging anger into a fever pitch. Now I was starting to feel relieved that I’d drunk some of the drug. It had left me clear enough and angry enough to give me a bit more of an edge. Silver poisoning or no silver poisoning, I was ready to tear the faun apart.

“Come at me if you can, wolf!” the faun taunted.

I pounced, and the faun raced forward, lowering her head to skewer me just like she’d skewered Rishika. I pivoted at the last second but hit the ground hard and rolled right into the reach of one of the wyrms. It strained against its chains and chomped at me, strings of slobber spattering the ground and my face as I rolled out of harm’s way just in time.

The faun was on me immediately, not giving me a second to rest. I avoided a few savage strikes from her horns, panting with exertion as I tried to fight through the effects of the silver poisoning. And worst yet, I could feel the anger that had been fueling me before starting to fade.

*I need to get my head on straight. I have to be logical about this, or I’m not going to make it.*

I looked over and spotted Clarence and the others pressed against the bars of the viewing cage, watching me. Clarence looked scared for me but gave me a knowing nod.

*I can’t die here. There’s too much for me to do. And I have to get back to Cali.*

I felt the weight of the fight wearing on me even more as the pain of my silver wound seemed to worsen. I didn’t know how much more I had in me, but Clarence and the others were counting on me to pull through. I didn’t even want to think about what would happen to Cali and the others without me.

*Fuck, I don’t know if I can do this. I’m worn down, the silver poisoning is sapping my energy, and now I don’t even have the luxury of anger to push me through.*

I took another glance at Clarence and the others. I didn’t want to let them down, but right now I wasn’t sure how I was going to avoid failing them.

*I’ve been a letdown ever since I stepped foot in the Fae world, haven’t I? I didn’t protect Rishika when she needed me most, so who the hell am I to think that I can protect them?*

Suddenly, I heard Cali’s voice. I was lucid enough to know that I was hallucinating, but I didn’t care. Hearing her voice, even if it wasn’t real, was a relief.

“You can do this, Greyson. Just hang on a little longer and don’t give up! I’m waiting for you!”

The faun was circling me, probably locating the perfect place to land her final, deadly strike, but I couldn’t let her. I had too much to live for, and people were depending on me.

I struggled to my feet and ran after the faun. She lashed out at me, and I leapt over her before she could make contact, landing almost gracefully behind her. Using every bit of my waning strength, I slashed her in the back with my claws, taking out a huge chunk of flesh.

She whirled on me, screaming in pain and rage. Her whip was at the ready in her hand, and she flicked it at my ankle. It caught me fast, and she yanked it so that I stumbled toward her, too weakened from the silver to resist. Then, with another flick of her wrist, she sent me reeling toward the nearest wyrm, and it wasted no time chomping down on my leg.

I kicked it with my other foot, trying to get free while hot stabs of pain coursed from my leg and all through my body. After a struggle that seemed to go on forever, I managed to claw the wyrm in the eye, and it finally released me.

I got to my feet and limped away, leaving a trail of blood behind me. Cheers of enjoyment rang out from the stands, and I realized that I was giving them a good show whether I liked it or not. I happened to glance up at the owner’s box and saw Cenwyn looking down on me with a grin. He lifted a wine glass to toast me.

White-hot rage tore through me again, and this time it wasn’t the drug’s effects; this was me, my own real, deadly fury. I used it to blot out the pain in my leg and set my sights on the faun.

The faun was watching me, waiting, sensing my renewed vigor. She struck out with her whip again, and it latched onto my wrist, but before she could yank me, I yanked her toward me instead.

“Fuck!” she exclaimed, shocked as she stumbled toward me. I half-shifted back to my human form, standing on my own two legs, my claws and snout and teeth still very much wolf, and very much ready to put an end to this fight.

I spotted my trident. picked it up, and, with a strong pull, yanked the faun right into the three-pointed prong of my weapon.

The faun froze and let out a gasp of pained surprise. She looked down at the trident jutting out of her chest as I let her go and watched her stumble back.

She coughed up a mouthful of blood. And gurgled out, “How?” before keeling over with a dying groan.

The crowd went wild, chanting, “Wolf King! Wolf King! Wolf King!”

Unsteady on my feet, my vision swimming, I looked up at Cenwyn, who was scowling as he turned to whisper something to the guard standing beside him.

I turned toward the faun, still wondering if her blood might be the key to helping my silver wound, but before I could make a move, the announcer’s voice spilled from the loudspeakers.

“Our wonderful benefactor has decided to give you another fight so that you can all see your champion Wolf King in action once more!”

“What? What the fuck is this? No! One fight!” I screamed at the owner’s box where Cenwyn stood looking down on me. “You said one fight, you fucking snake!”

I was about to signal to Clarence and the others until I caught a whiff of a familiar scent. I spun around just in time to see Rishika walking out of the opponents’ tunnel.

**Episode 5358**

I was staring so deeply in Xavier’s eyes, and there was so much desire in them, that I could feel the pulse of it echoing in my own body. But the closer we drew toward each other, the more I realized this was a mistake, and I immediately pulled away.

“This can’t be happening,” I said. “We can’t have a conversation like this right now in the middle of all this chaos.”

As much as I wanted to bring clarity to whatever was going on between Xavier and me, now wasn’t the time to dive into that and complicate our lives further.

Xavier reached for me. “Maybe things are out of control right now, but we can’t continue ignoring this!”

*That’s what he thinks, but I can and will go on ignoring what I feel for him. I have to, don’t I? It’s wrong not to. Greyson’s missing, the Dark Fae want Xavier’s head, we’re all mixed up in the destiny of the Fae people…*

I remembered what happened on Valentine’s Day and how I thought I’d kissed him. The *due destini* had been retaliating against me because we’d been keeping our distance, but now that Xavier was near, that wasn’t a problem anymore.

The problem now was the way he was looking at me, and what I’d just slipped up and said to him. It was the truth, but that hardly mattered right now.

And our current reality just wasn’t the same as it used to be between us. Wasn’t that why he was here in the first place? The only reason he was with me was because I asked him to come to stave off the hallucinations from the *due destini* by staying close. That was all, and now wasn’t the time to lose sight of that.

“Now’s not the time,” I said.

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “You keep saying that, but when is it going to be time? This isn’t exactly a script we’re following here, Cali.”

“The only thing you need to know right now is that I’m not ready to have this discussion.”

*Because I’m not prepared to discuss something this serious with you. I need time to really figure out what’s in my heart!*

“Xavier, can you please just understand that I need time? That I just can’t do this right now?”

Xavier nodded. “Yes, I get it. You don’t need to explain yourself.”

I looked down, realizing at that moment how close our hands were to touching. He looked, too, and slowly moved his hands over to reach for mine. Thankfully, we were interrupted by a knock on the door.

We both jumped apart and looked up. It was Artemis. She barged right in, obviously unaware of what she’d just interrupted.

“Marius and I found something!” She held out a torn piece of paper with writing on it.

I took it, my eyes quickly scanning it, before I asked, “What is this? If it’s a letter, it’s a pretty short one.” I read it aloud. “‘M, don’t worry about me. I’m all right.’ Is there more to it than that? It seems to have some code I don’t get, and it’s signed.”

“Yes, it’s signed by Maira’s sister,” Artemis explained.

Xavier took the letter from me and examined it. “So, this means she’s not missing?”

Artemis nodded. “And if she’s not missing, then that would mean she isn’t dead. Otherwise, who wrote the letter?”

“It’s something, but I’m not sure what it means in the grand scheme of things. Also doesn’t seem like enough evidence to let Kastian off the hook in the whole ‘missing girls’ thing,” I said. “I don’t know, I think I need to speak to him. Get more information.”

“No!” Xavier and Artemis blurted out at the same time.

“What? Why not? It’s not like he’s a maniac who’s going to kill me as soon as he’s within a foot of me. And talking to him is the only way we’re going to find out more information, right? It’s not going to just fall into our laps. You went looking for this information, and that’s how you found it. But if this is all we’ve uncovered up to this point—”

“Cali, you’re right. I don’t think Kastian is stupid enough to hurt you—there are too many eyes on you, on him. But that doesn’t mean he’s safe to be around,” Xavier said.

“Maybe not, but trust that I can take care of myself if he tries anything.”

I didn’t want to lay into Xavier again about how I needed him to trust me and let me take the lead here. Kastian didn’t scare me, and even if he was behind whatever was happening to these women, I was more than confident that I could handle myself against him.

“Say you go to talk to him. What’s your plan?” Artemis asked. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to go into a conversation with him if you don’t know how you’re going to approach it.”

“I’m going to pretend that I want to apologize for what happened at the meeting.” My gaze flicked to Xavier, who was standing with his arms crossed over his chest and his jaw set. “And I’m going now—no use waiting. And, Xavier, please, I don’t need you to follow me. I’ve got this.”

He sighed deeply. “*Cali*—”

“No, now isn’t the time for you to be visible. We don’t need my grandmother or any other Fae seeing you out and about after what happened, got it?”

“I agree with that,” Artemis said, looking at Xavier, whose scowl deepened. “I’m going to try to find out where Maira went.”

“Let’s go.”

I didn’t wait for Xavier to protest any more. I slipped away and hurried down the hallways, determined to get answers from Kastian. It wasn’t long before I caught a glimpse of him. I doubled back, and, sure enough, he was camped out in a small sitting room sipping from a tumbler of dark liquor.

“Caliana, here to see me?” he said before I realized he knew I was standing in the doorway.

“Yes, I am,” I said. “I was looking for you.”

Kastian nodded slightly but didn’t get up to greet me.

“I just wanted to come and say that I’m sorry for what happened earlier.”

“Good. You should be,” Kastian snapped. “After all the leeway I gave you and Xavier, even agreeing to let you keep him on as your plaything if we got married, he does this? Do you understand how bad and weak I would have looked in front of all those Fae council members if his little temper tantrum attack had landed?”

I gritted my teeth, biting back a sharp reply. I didn’t know what I would have thrown back at him exactly, but I wasn’t too keen on sitting here and letting him tongue lash me when he wasn’t as innocent as he was trying to make himself out to be.

“Anyway, you’re both lucky that I turned the narrative to make me look good. Otherwise, his little stunt could have cost me my reputation, and that wouldn’t have been good for any of us,” Kastian said darkly.

“I know that Xavier’s behavior was unacceptable, but you have to understand that it wasn’t his fault. Someone drugged him—”

Kastian raised a hand to stop me. “I don’t care why, I only care that it happened. And because it happened, you need to show me that you’re still committed to our alliance.”

I frowned. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“You need to set Xavier aside. I tried to play nice with the both of you, but it’s clear that’s not possible. Blame him for that. You need to show that you’re committed to peace between the Fae by agreeing to the marriage. It’s the only way.”

I knew it was going to come to this—the point where I would have to take a clear stance against moving forward with marrying him, but I’d hoped that it wouldn’t be now, when I had other things I wanted to speak with him about.

“I’m not going to do that, Kastian.”

Kastian’s expression was grim as he stood up. “I’ll go break the news to the Fae that the marriage isn’t happening.”

I felt relieved, but it was short-lived. I couldn’t let him do that—at least not now. News of my rejection of the marriage treaty might stop the peace talks in their tracks, and I needed everyone here so that we could find whoever had taken Greyson and Rishika.

“Don’t forget that I know who made that attempt on your life. And I’m the only one holding them back.”

*No matter that what I just said is a total lie. I have no control over Hera, but Kastian doesn’t need to know that. This is the one card I have to play, and now’s the time to use it.*

Kastian took a menacing step toward me. “Caliana, you’re charming, and your human wiles have amused me, I’ll admit.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “But I’m going to advise you to never threaten me again.”

**Episode 5359**

**Xavier**

*Frustrated* didn’t even begin to describe how I was feeling. I couldn’t believe that I’d somehow agreed to letting Cali go talk to Kastian alone *again*. How many times was she going to put herself in danger by talking to this guy? She was so convinced that she could handle herself, but anyone was vulnerable to being caught off guard, especially in this place.

But I had to admit that she was right to tell me to stay behind. If Hera saw me following Cali around right now, she might really make good on her promise to kick me out of the summit, and I couldn’t let her do that. Though, if I were caught and Hera was adamant about it, I wasn’t sure how I would be able to resist her without resorting to violent means that Cali would never forgive me for.

*I have to keep a low profile, but there are way too many bad players here for me to leave Cali alone unprotected. It’s better if I stay, so I have to do what I have to do to make that happen. And she seems to want to put a little distance between us anyway.*

Selfishly, I didn’t mind a break from the Fae and their never-ending meetings. Whatever I’d drunk to make me fly off the handle—it had to be the same as whatever had been given to Greyson when he’d attacked me. That strange, instantaneous rage I’d felt was so far out of the ordinary that I knew I wasn’t responsible for it.

I was hotheaded, yes, but I wasn’t a fool—at least not when it came to Cali’s well-being. And I was always in control of my anger—which meant that someone had seen to it that I lost that control.

I sighed, trying to shake off the last bits of weirdness from my body. Whatever Marius had given me had worked to counteract the drugging, but I still felt slightly out of sorts. Sluggish even.

I sat down, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes.

*Cali’s right. Things are getting out of control. No one’s safe, that’s obvious. I was slipped something, so was Greyson only a short time before, and now he and Rishika are missing. Cali’s on edge and forced to speak with that asshole Kastian over and over again, and Artemis is struggling to keep it together with Rishika missing. Add to that the fact that we’re all out of our element.*

But I had to figure out a way to protect Cali. I had to *do* something. I got up, deciding that I couldn’t just waste time hiding out in here. I was going to go find Marius. That Fae was annoying, but I had to admit that he was good at getting information. Information was just about the only weapon we would be able to use to our advantage in this place.

I left my bedroom, taking care to stay out of sight, since I needed to stay on the DL and far away from Hera and her people. I moved down the hallway and passed a group of servants who shrank away from me in fear.

*Great. Now I’m the boogeyman on campus. Of course they heard about me losing my shit in that meeting. I’m sure no one here missed that little gossip morsel.*

But I didn’t care. I couldn’t stand Kastian and wanted to kick his ass, but my outburst in that meeting wasn’t my fault, and it wasn’t like I really gave a shit what these Fae thought of me. It was probably good that they were afraid of me. Hopefully all the Fae felt that way and would stay out of my way.

I finally located Marius in the kitchens. It wasn’t mealtime, so the place was nearly empty except for a group of Fae huddled around a table in the back, drinking, Marius the loudest of the bunch.

I sidled up to the table, taking care not to make eye contact with any of the other Fae, even if most of them were way too drunk to care who I was. “We need to talk,” I said to Marius.

The Fae squinted up at me and shook his head. “What the hell—should you really be here right now?”

“Hello to you, too.” I said. “We need to talk. Let’s go.”

Marius frowned and said, “Wait just a second, is something bad happening right *now*?I literally just sat down.”

“No, not right this second, I guess,” I admitted.

Marius kicked out an empty seat and filled an empty glass for me. “Then sit down and drink! And after, we’ll talk.”

I hesitated for a moment before finally giving in and sitting down.

*I suppose one drink won’t hurt. And after the day I’ve had, maybe it’ll be nice to wind down for a bit…but only one drink…*

One drink quickly turned to a dozen, and I was starting to feel it. Normal alcohol barely gave me a buzz, but obviously Fae spirits were a little more intoxicating to werewolves.

Marius threw back yet another shot, slammed the glass on the table, and asked, “So what’s your deal with Cali, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…there’s an aura between the two of you. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. You’re mates, right? But then…isn’t Greyson her mate, too?”

I went stiff and looked away. I was in no mood to talk about the *due destini*, especially with Marius.

“Believe me, I know what it’s like to be into someone whose mind is elsewhere,” Marius continued wistfully.

“You’re talking about Artemis,” I said. “But things are a little different in my situation.”

Marius shrugged. “Whatever it is, I hope you figure it out. I know that relationship stuff can be so stressful, and I don’t wish heartache on anyone.”

I thought about Cali and how earlier, the only thing I wanted was to kiss her, to feel her body pressed against mine, finally, after so long of wanting that and more. Damn it, I missed her. And yes I’d spent almost every minute with her since we crossed over into the Fae world, but that wasn’t enough. I missed how things used to be, how close we were.

And earlier she’d been so damn close to me that I could easily have made my fantasies a reality and kissed her and held her close.

*Would she have kissed me back? Or would she have pushed me away because it wasn’t the right time?*

Her body language had indicated that she might have been open to it, but I also had to stick to what I’d said before. I wanted her to want it—want me. I’d made myself clear about how I felt about her, maybe to my detriment. At this point, there wasn’t really anything else for me to do but wait until the time was right.

*But when will that be? How long am I supposed to wait?*

I didn’t have an answer for that, and right now was the perfect time to forget about it and drown my sorrows in this Fae liquor.

I lifted my cup to my lips to take another long drink when a new Fae came to the table to drink.

“Wow, kind of peeved that you all started without me!” the Fae said.

“No need to worry, Ian, there’s plenty to go around!” Marius said, fully leaning into his new identity. It was kind of impressive.

Marius poured the Fae a drink. The Fae downed it in one swallow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and plopped down between me and Marius.

“Lord Cenwyn can be so demanding!” Ian complained.

“Yeah?” Marius said.

Ian nodded at Marius as he poured him another. “Yeah. He’s a real pain in the ass. I had to run another one of his errands today. I’m exhausted.”

*So, he works for Cenwyn? This could be just the guy I need to talk to…*

I poured myself another drink and held it up. “Cheers, or whatever you all say here!”

Ian smiled as we clinked glasses.

“Bottoms up,” I said good-naturedly, watching as the other Fae drained his glass. I quickly poured us all another. Then I leaned in and asked, “What kind of errands does Cenwyn ask his servants to do?”

Ian rolled his eyes and said, “Get this. I had to deliver a bunch of missives, and then the bastard made me wait in his sitting room for an hour with the lights on. I burned down two candles just sitting there!”

I frowned. “I don’t get it. Why would he ask you to do something so weird?”

“Yeah, does he have a weird kink no one knows about?” Marius quipped.

The Fae laughed and threw back another shot. “No, no, or maybe, yes.” The Fae chuckled. “How should I know if it was a kink or otherwise? Lord Cenwyn tells us nothing. But we all have theories, of course."

Marius leaned close. “Oh? And what theories are those?”

“The theory is that he’s not in the keep at all.”

**Episode 5360**

**Greyson**

I stared in shock, not sure if I could believe my eyes, being that I was under the influence of a lot of substances at the moment.

*Rishika? Is that really her?*

I shook my head, slapped my own cheeks, blinked my eyes a million times, but it was Rishika, all right, and she was walking right toward me. And not only that, but she looked completely fine—not injured in the least.

She was wearing shiny, ornate armor, her face was covered in war paint, and something was very wrong. Her eyes were completely dilated, and she was practically foaming at the mouth.

*Fuck, that’s not good. They drugged her up pretty good.*

I looked up at Cenwyn. He looked happy again, his eyes shining sadistically as he stared down at me.

*That bastard planned this.*

I winced against a particularly sharp wave of pain from the silver wound. I looked down and saw the black veins starting to weave across my skin. Fuck. It wouldn’t be long now; I had to do something.

In one swift motion, I went over to the faun and ran my hand through her blood and swiped it across my silver wound.

*It’s worth a fucking try, and desperate times call for desperate measures.*

Then I followed my momentum to Rishika, who was still stalking toward me.

“Rishika!” I called out. “I’m glad to see you in one piece!”

Rishika growled at me and stopped in her tracks. She hadn’t yet shifted to her wolf form, but that didn’t mean she didn’t look all wolf right now.

“Rishika?” I said slowly. “It’s me. Greyson. Your Alpha.”

If Rishika understood me, she gave no indication of it. Still growling, her eyes wild and unfocused, she lunged for me. I dodged out of the way but one of her fists grazed my silver wound, sending jolts of pain through my body. I went down hard, almost delirious from the agony of it. If the faun blood was working, it was taking its sweet time.

I only just rolled out of the way as she went in for another strike, one strong fist driving down hard into the ground where I’d been moments before.

“Snap out of this, Rishika!” I growled.

She didn’t register and came at me again like a zombie with only one mission: to kill me, and kill me good. I skittered out of her path only to find myself right near one of the wyrms who lunged at me.

I dodged the wyrm’s ringed mouth of razor-sharp teeth, shifted one hand, and swiped down its back, splitting it in half in a spray of disgusting green blood.

*One down.*

Suddenly, Cenwyn’s voice came booming over the loudspeaker, his voice gleeful as he said, “We’re all in for a special treat tonight—the Wolf King versus his wolf general, Rishika! And to make it really fun, we gave her a triple dose of our special rage potion!”

*I knew she was drugged, but they gave her so much that she’s out of her mind.*

“This wasn’t the deal!” I shouted at Cenwyn in vain. It was obvious that he didn’t care about our deal—he’d never had any plans to honor it in the first place.

“Deal?” Cenwyn said, laughing. “I’m sure you realize by now that that deal is as dead as you’re about to be!”

I was pissed, but I didn’t have time to argue with Cenwyn with Rishika breathing down my back. On any normal day, I would be able to take Rishika on with no problem. But this wasn’t just any day. I was drugged and poisoned, and Rishika was hopped up on rage potion, and her strength showed it.

She charged me again, her claws out now and her teeth bared. It was strange being in the arena face-to-face with her like this after spending hours thinking she’d died. I was happy she was fine after all, but I was deeply concerned about the woman I was seeing in front of me right now.

*This rage shit is potent, and they gave her three times the dose…I’d be surprised if Rishika’s actually even* in *there anymore. That much of the drug has to have obliterated her mind. And now she wants nothing more than to obliterate me.*

I was almost out of breath, dodging and ducking and rolling out of the way of her flurry of swipes, avoiding being eaten by the wyrms whenever she backed me into a corner, all the while pulling punches and avoiding counterattacks because I didn’t want to hurt her.

I caught her by the wrists just before she landed a strike that would have gouged my eyes out.

“Rishika, stop! This is a direct order from your Alpha. You must obey.”

Rishika was looking right at me, and she was so close—not even a foot away from me—but there wasn’t a hint of recognition in her eyes.

She shifted more, growling as her snout extended and her teeth grew into sharp points. I’d seen those teeth so many times before, but this was the first time I’d felt frightened of what they might do or what I might have to do to her to keep her from using them on me.

Snarling, she tried to go for my throat, her strong jaws snapping.

“Rishika, stop it!” I said before releasing her arms and rolling away to regroup.

Finally, she fully shifted into wolf form, and I followed suit. There was no way I was going to be able to go toe to toe with her while she was in wolf form and I was in human form. We were circling each other, and I decided to try to get into her head via mind link.

*Rishika, you have to listen to me. I know you’re in there somewhere, and I want you to realize that they slipped you this potion—some kind of Fae drug to make you uncontrollably angry. We’re friends and pack mates, and I know you don’t want to kill me. You have to fight this. You’re stronger than this, stronger than they are.*

Rishika growled and took a running leap at me. She missed again, but with every attempt she was getting closer, her attacks growing more ferocious.

*Rishika, you’re stronger than this. Please fight it! We’ve been through worse than this, and we got through it. Don’t let this be what takes us down. You hear my voice, so focus on it!*

Rishika growled, and then I heard her voice in my head.

*My Alpha? The man who drops every responsibility to his pack the moment his mate’s in trouble? Do you know how many times we were forced to fend for ourselves because you were nowhere to be found? I joined your pack because I thought you were a good leader, because I thought you were strong, but you’re just like every other Alpha out there—only interested in doing what’s best for you, everyone else be damned!*

Her words cut deep, and I felt my own anger start to rise. I knew that she didn’t mean any of it, but inside…I knew it was true. There had been plenty of those moments before.

She charged me, but I blocked her just in time to keep her from latching onto my neck. I could feel the power of her strength from the potion, but I could also feel that it was on the edge of giving out all at once, like it was pushing her to the edge of something that would destroy her without my help.

I reached out to her through mind link once again. *If you won’t respect me on your own, I’ll have to make you.*

She was all wolf right now, and if there was one thing a wolf respected, it was the Alpha. I just had to get through to her to make her remember who I was and remind her that even though I wasn’t the perfect Alpha, I was *her* Alpha, and I cared about her and the pack.

*You’re right, you did join the Redwood pack for a reason, Rishika*,I mind linked.

I went on the offensive, blocking strike after strike, rallying and parrying and doing my best not to do anything that might hurt her or to let her land any attacks that I would have to counter with a more ferocious attack that might hurt her badly.

Finally, I tackled her, driving her to the ground and holding her there while she snarled and kicked and champed at the bit, trying to get free. She wasn’t letting up, but I wasn’t going to, either.

Suddenly I felt a jolt of electricity—the guards.

“Keep the fight going!” the guard shouted.

I knew exactly what they meant. They wanted me to kill her or to be killed, they weren’t impressed by this stalemate we’d found ourselves in.

I growled at the guard, and Rishika used that opportunity to bite down on the silver wound in my side.

I howled in pain, my vision going red as pain blasted through me.

Suddenly, someone yelled. “It’s time!”

I looked and saw Clarence and the others bashing at the bars of the holding cage.

“What’s happening?” Cenwyn shouted. “Guards, stop them!”

But he was too late. Clarence and the other prisoners broke out of the cage and spilled out into the arena. I watched as Clarence let out a war cry and shifted into the biggest bear I’d ever seen.

**Episode 5361**

I blinked at Kastian, taking in his words, wondering if he was actually threatening me. He certainly looked menacing enough, but Kastian could be a tough read. Surely, I didn’t want to underestimate him, though—that would be a gross oversight if I did—so I knew I had to think fast. I only had a moment to decide what to do—if I was going to back off or push him even more.

I set my jaw. It was a risk, but I had a feeling a guy like him would only respond to strength.

So, I leaned toward him, trying to mirror the threatening glint in his eyes. “Maybe it’s you who should be afraid of me. You have no idea what I’m capable of, Kastian.”

His eyes were calculating. “Are you really going to go there, Caliana?

My heart thudded hard, but I didn’t blink. “Maybe I am.”

It was clear neither one of us was going to back down.

“If you really do know who was responsible for trying to poison me, then you should share that information,” he said. He raised an eyebrow. “If you choose to withhold that information, it could be seen as an act of war.”

I scoffed at that. “An *act of war*? Really? Come on, Kastian. Let’s not get dramatic.”

“I hardly think that’s getting dramatic. Why would it not be?” he asked. “Are you not complicit?”

“*Complicit?*” I repeated. “In what?”

“You have colluded in an assassination attempt against a high-ranking Dark Fae noble. What would you call it?”

“Um…” I twisted my fingers nervously. So maybe I’d been a tad hasty with that dramatic comment. Hearing it said like that, I had to admit that it did sound pretty bad. “Okay, so let’s just get one thing straight—I haven’t colluded in anything.” I said quickly. “I wasn’t the one who put the poison in the tea. I never said that. You’re twisting my words. And exposing the person who did do it would only make things worse. You’re going to have to trust me on that. What I’m doing is trying to protect you—”

Kastian let out a bark of laughter.

“Did I say something funny?” I asked angrily. This whole conversation was starting to drive me a little crazy.

“You did,” he said, still looking amused. “This is you *protecting* me? I see how you’re trying to spin this. And I have to say I’m impressed.”

I bit my lip, wondering if I was making a mistake here. I felt like I was making an enemy out of him, which could be very dangerous. I backed down. “Listen, we’re not getting anywhere like this. Can we just start over?”

Kastian narrowed his eyes, obviously suspicious. It was probably due to my sudden change in strategy, though I wondered if suspicious was just his natural state of being. He was probably trying to figure out if I was still manipulating him. I wondered if my course change would even work. I certainly wasn’t Hera. I was only just learning how to play these kinds of high-level games, and Fae games were so different from the ones played in the werewolf world. The fundamentals of power and survival might be the same, but the execution was very, very different.

I felt lost and a bit adrift, but I was trying my best. It was just so frustrating that—as hard as I was working—nothing I did seemed to be leading to anything. I still had no answers on the whereabouts of Greyson or Rishika. I’d been beating the bushes, asking and wheedling and manipulating, but there was just nothing.

I heaved a sigh. “Honestly, Kastian, I’m not trying to pull anything on you. I really do just want to talk.”

But before he could say yes or no to my plea, a Fae servant walked into the room and handed a small note to Kastian. He opened it, reading it silently. When he looked up, his expression was unreadable.

He tore the small sheet of paper in half and pushed it into his pocket. “Well, Caliana,” he said briskly, “this little mind game has been an amusing exercise, but it’s finished.”

“What?” I asked, startled.

“I’m needed elsewhere.”  
 “But—” I shook my head, “I—no. I mean, we’re not done here, Kastian—”

“I’m done,” Kastian said simply. He took a step toward the door.

I don’t know what came over me, but I took a step, too, right in front of him, blocking his path.

Stopping, he peered down at me, almost curiously, like he wasn’t quite sure what to make of this turn of events. The moment that followed was a strange one. But it was tense—very, very tense. It wasn’t until that moment that I appreciated just how tall and powerfully built Kastian really was. And—aside from his rather intimidating physical presence—I had literally no idea just what his Fae abilities were.

*Shit shit shit*, I repeated in my head. It was possible I might have made a very wrong move.

He leaned down slowly, his face nearing mine, and for one wild moment I thought he was going to kiss me.

He didn’t kiss me. “Move, Caliana,” he said in a low, deadly voice. “Or I will move you myself.”

I took a deep breath. I had come this far, so I figured I might as well stick it out. “I’m *not* moving.”

In one swift motion, he picked me up as though I weighed nothing and set me aside. For a moment I was so stunned I didn’t move. Then I hurried after him. I grabbed his wrist, trying to stop him. “Hey—”

He wrenched himself away from my grasp and spun around, glaring at me. “Do *not* follow me, little halfling,” he growled. His eyes flashed dangerously as he loomed over me.

I gasped and took a step back. For all the times Kastian had been rude to me, this was the first time he’d ever insulted my human side.

Then, as quickly as he’d said it, he strode away.

I stood for a moment, letting my racing heart slow down a little. I knew what I had just done had been very foolish. I had been alone with Kastian, playing a game of cat and mouse with him. I supposed I was lucky that him picking me up and moving me had been the worst that had happened.

I could practically hear Greyson’s voice in my head. *You shouldn’t have done that, love.*

Taking another deep breath, I tried to shake it off. There was nothing more for me to do here, so I turned to leave, but stopped when I saw a scrap of paper on the stone floor. It was a piece of the note Kastian had received. He must have dropped it.

Glancing quickly around and finding myself alone, I bent and picked it up.

*…meet me in the crypt.*

It was only half a message, written in fancy handwriting. I turned the scrap over, but there was nothing else, and there was no way to know if there had been a time mentioned for the meeting, or any other information, let alone who had sent the message.

But the crypt. That had to be where Kastian was going.

I stood for a long moment, thinking. I hadn’t even known there was a crypt here, but I wasn’t exactly surprised. It made sense. This fortress was ancient. The whole place seemed laden with history. I’d heard a few things in passing, but I’d imagine this place had more stories to tell than I could even comprehend. But going after Kastian into the crypt…

I weighed my options. I wanted more information, and going after Kastian to see who he was meeting, and why, did seem like a surefire way to gather some. But it was also a risk. A big one. If I was caught, things could get bad. I couldn’t help but think of the dangerous intensity of his eyes when he’d spun on me and called me a halfling. Not exactly friendly. And after that fumble-through of a conversation we’d just had, we weren’t exactly on good terms.

The hand clutching the paper began to sweat. I didn’t trust Kastian, and the idea of him finding me following him into some kind of underground lair didn’t bear thinking about.

But what about Greyson? If Kastian had even a hint about where I could start looking for Greyson, that would make any risk I had to take worth it, no matter how dangerous.

I took a deep breath and spoke into the mind link, knowing full well Greyson couldn’t hear me, *Greyson, I’m sorry. I know you wouldn’t want me to do what I’m about to do, but I have to find you. No matter what.*

My mind was made up. I turned on my heel and headed out the door. I was going after Kastian.

**Episode 5362**

**Xavier**

I’d been leaning over, resting my elbows on the table, but now I sat up straight, my senses tuned in. Had I heard that Fae right? Had he just said that Cenwyn might be coming and going between the keep? That wasn’t supposed to be possible, technically. Someone could leave easily, but my understanding that the Fae kept harping on about was that getting in was…difficult.

I thought hard—trying to remember the last time I’d seen the Light Fae noble. He’d been acting strangely, if I recalled correctly. And I had thought I’d smelled my brother on him. At the time I’d thought I was mistaken. I’d thought it had been some kind of phantom scent—but now my mind raced with possibilities.

I shot a glance at Marius, then at the new Fae. “What proof of this do you have?” I asked. “And how would you even know if someone was going back and forth?”

I knew that others had talked about how someone would need to be very powerful in order to go through the briar wall, and Cenwyn would fit the bill. He was on the Light Fae council alongside Hera, and if it wasn’t Hera herself, then Cenwyn was a very good alternative option.

The Fae set his drink on the table. “Well, I can tell you that he always comes back with mud on his boots.”

“Well, that doesn’t prove much. We *are* in a forest here,” Marius pointed out. “Mud isn’t exactly out of the ordinary. Mud on his boots doesn’t mean he’s going anywhere other than for a morning walk.”

“That’s true,” I grunted. I needed more proof than some muddy boots.

The Fae waved a hand in front of his face. “Maybe, but it reeks!”

“The mud?” Marius asked.

The Fae nodded emphatically, nearly knocking himself off his own chair. “Smells like animal shit the second Cenwyn walks into the room. It’s disgusting. Take my word for it—this isn’t mud from a walk in the forest. It’s like he’s been walking through animal blood and shit.”

I frowned. Okay, that was pretty weird. I wasn’t exactly a Briarkeep expert, but there weren’t any farm animals around here, as far as I knew. “So what happens to the boots?” Surely, I would have noticed if Cenwyn had been walking around this place in bloodstained boots.

The Fae shrugged. “What do you think? A noble like him. Gets ’em cleaned every night. And he has a few pairs. He rotates through them. I had to clean them one night. It was disgusting,” he said, taking another drink like the memory of it had just been reawakened in him.

“If you don’t mind,” he muttered as he leaned over and took the bottle from me. While he refilled his drink, I bent my head toward Marius.

“I think you know what we need to do here, right?” I said under my breath.

He nodded. “Way ahead of you.” Marius straightened and clapped the Fae on the shoulder. “Do you happen to know if Cenwyn is out right now?”

The Fae had been drinking steadily since the moment he’d sat down, and at this point, his eyes were at half-mast. When he spoke, his words slurred together. “Haven’t seen him all day.”

Marius grinned. “That’s great. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we both simultaneously remembered something we have to do at this very moment.”

“What?” the Fae asked clumsily. “What ya gotta do?”

“Journaling,” Marius said, getting to his feet. “We write in them daily. Both of us. You know what they say about introspection. Vital for growth.”

“That’s smart,” the guy slurred. “I should do that.”

“You absolutely should.” Marius nodded.

I stood up. “Keep the bottle.”

The Fae waved his hand at me. “You two are good,” he called out, but we were already out the door.

“This is the best lead we’ve gotten through the entire peace talks—no offense,” I muttered once we reached the hallway.

Marius looked grim. “I’ve heard things about Cenwyn—”

“You have?” I asked sharply.

“Just as a person, not being up to something like this,” he amended. “We’re just lucky that some of the other Fae have gotten fed up too.”

“Right place, right time. Sometimes that’s what wins that day. We’ve been preoccupied with Kastian,” I admitted. “Myself included. I thought he was the answer. Maybe that wasn’t the right call in the end, but I’ve been trying to keep him away from Cali—”

Fuck. My thoughts veered quickly back to Cali. I’d let her go off to talk to Kastian again. Alone.

*Fuck.*

That wasn’t the right call, either.

“Cenwyn’s room is this way,” Marius said, nodding to the left. “We should go check it while we know he’s not there.”

“Yeah, but we need to find Cali first,” I said. Apart from getting her away from Kastian, I knew that she would want to be a part of this.

Marius shook his head. “We don’t have time to go find her, Xavier. We know that Cenwyn isn’t in his room now, but we have no idea how long he’s going to be gone. By the time we track Cali down, wherever the hell she is, it might be too late.”

I ground my teeth. I hated to admit it, but Marius was right.

Some of the conflict I was feeling must have shown on my face, because Marius went on. “Listen, we’ll be fast. I swear it. In and out, and then we’ll be able to go find Cali right after. And hopefully we’ll have something good to tell her, right?”

I pushed a hand through my hair. “Hard to argue with that.”

“Exactly.” Marius clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go see what there is to see.”

I nodded, and we started quietly down the stone hallway. We were in the Light Fae side of the keep, and it was evident from the silent way we were moving that Marius and I were both well aware of that fact. It was important that I wasn’t seen here given the *incident* earlier with Kastian. Not that any of the Fae liked wolves all that much, but I was certainly not on anyone’s list of favorite werewolves at the moment, and I knew what would happen if I was caught—I’d be forced out of the keep by Hera, and then what would happen? What good would I be to Cali? How could I protect her?

I couldn’t even think about that, so I knew I just couldn’t get caught.

The stone passageway was long, and we were just about to round a corner when Marius held up his hand, signaling for us to stop. When we did, I heard voices.

“—yes, keep the stew warm. Lord Cenwyn will be hungry when he returns and will want some straight away.”

“He’s rather delayed today,” another voice said. “Are you sure we should keep it for so long? It won’t go bad?”

“No, no, it’ll be fine,” the first voice—a woman—said. “I’m sure it won’t be long now. You know how these meetings go.”

Marius turned to look at me, his eyebrows shooting up. *Perfect timing*, he mouthed silently.

I nodded and we waited until the two Fae women walked away. Then Marius led the way around the corner to an oak door.

I tried the handle, but it was locked, of course.

Marius began to pull out a series of small silver tools to pick the lock, but I didn’t have the patience for that. I partially shifted my hand and used one of my lethally sharp claws to cut through the iron.

Then I shifted my hand back and gave the door a push. It swung open.

I looked over at Marius with a shrug. “Done.”

He looked annoyed but slipped the tools back into his pocket and stepped into the room. “Looks empty,” he whispered, looking around.

I took a deep breath. “It’s empty,” I said. “I don’t smell anyone here.”

Marius nodded. “Good. Then let’s split up and look around.”

Marius went right while I went left, following my nose until I found Cenwyn’s wardrobe. I opened the wooden doors and found his clothes. The Fae scent was strong, and there was something else—something floral, like he bathed in some kind of herb. I flicked quickly through the clothes, looking for anything that might stand out, when a familiar scent wafted up to me.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I began to dig more determinedly, throwing tunics and robes from the wardrobe as I searched for the source of the familiar smell.

And then I found it. It was a pair of linen pants. They were at the very bottom of the wardrobe, balled up in the back corner, almost as if they were supposed to have been thrown away, but someone had forgotten them.

I shook them out, and the smell hit me like a punch in the face. It was strong, and it was absolutely unmistakable.

It was Rishika’s blood.

**Episode 5363**

My heart was racing as I followed after Kastian. I didn’t know exactly where he had gone, or where the crypts were—I hadn’t even known there were crypts in Briarkeep until I’d found that scrap of a note. But I had a sense of how to find them. They’d be in the lower reaches of the fortress, so I just went down. Down stairs and through hallways with downward slopes.

That more or less worked, but I stopped when I reached a kind of intersection. I looked around—there were four different directions to go, and who knew how many directions leading off those branches.

Crap. Sometimes I forgot how massive this place was.

I bit my lip, thinking hard. I wasn’t sure which way Kastian had gone, and it was possible I wasn’t going to be able to find him. I wished I had a werewolf’s sense of smell so I could just follow that.

Then, by chance, I caught sight of a Fae hurrying across one of the passages.

“Excuse me!” I called, jogging toward the woman.

The Fae yelped and spun around, her eyes wide as saucers. She hadn’t seen me, and I’d clearly scared the crap out of her.

“Sorry,” I said with an apologetic smile. “I thought you saw me.”

The woman was breathing hard and put her hand over her chest. “Aelwen,” she said, still looking a little pale.

I smiled. “Sorry again, Aelwen. I’m Cali—Caliana. I know we’re all new to this place—I mean, *I’m* new here.” I was rambling, I could hear it. “And I don’t know the keep all that well, so I wondered if you happened to know where the crypts were?”

Aelwen’s eyes had been wide from my jump scare, but they seemed to go even wider at my question. “Why would you want to go there?”  
 I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I wasn’t about to tell this stranger that I was following after a potentially dangerous Dark Fae noble, so I thought fast. “Oh, you know, just want to reconnect with my Fae roots,” I lied quickly. I cleared my throat. “You might have heard that I grew up in the human world.”

Aelwen frowned. She didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. “Well, the crypts are accessible from the courtyard, across the way from the stables,” she said, pointing to a passageway to the right. “There’s an old gnarly tree. Just behind it is a door leading to the cellars, and that leads to the—”

“Crypts?” I finished.

Aelwen nodded.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, then hurried off in the direction she had indicated.

When I made it outside into the courtyard, I slowed a little. I wondered if I should go back and find Xavier. Maybe I should tell him, or Artemis—or anyone—that I was going into the crypts after Kastian.

I felt heat rush into my cheeks at the thought. I’d been relying too much on Xavier. *No*—I gave my head a firm shake. I was going to be fine. And it wasn’t like I was unarmed. I had my Fae magic, after all.

Aelwen had made the entrance to the crypts sound extremely easy to find, as though I was going to walk into the courtyard and see a giant sign pointing to the door. But that didn’t turn out to be the case at all. The reality was that the keep was very old and very ancient, and nearly every tree on the grounds could be described as gnarly. So it took some careful looking before I found one with a door nearby.

But when I finally did find the door, I was certain it was the entrance I was looking for. Apart from its ancient appearance—heavy wood stained with time and a rusted iron lock—it was clear that someone had recently gone in. I was no expert tracker, but even I could see the footsteps in the dirt and the tracks from where the door had swung open and shut. I just hoped that person had been Kastian.

I glanced over my shoulder at the courtyard and was relieved to find that it was still empty. My stomach was one big knot of worry, and my heart was pounding in my chest. I took a deep breath, aware that this was my last chance to bail before I walked through that door. My last window of escape before diving in. I could still back out if I wanted to.

I knew that Greyson would want me to. He would want me to turn around and walk back into the fortress. To find Artemis or Xavier or…

But just thinking of Greyson wiped away any last traces of doubt.

I was going in.

Before I walked through the door, I picked up a sharp stone, and when I stepped through the door, I used the stone to scratch an X onto the wall, just in case I got lost and needed to find my way back to the door where I entered. It probably didn’t pay to take chances in a place called the crypt.

A torch burned on the wall, and I grabbed it before the door swung shut behind me.

When it did, the darkness was nearly complete. The light from my torch danced on the walls, and I looked around. It was just as creepy as I’d imagined. I was in a narrow stone passageway with a low ceiling. It was clearly rarely used, because there was dust and spiderwebs in every corner, and something mysterious crackled under my feet. I told myself it was beetle shells and refused to allow myself to consider any alternatives.

As I began to walk, I noticed a strange breeze blowing through the place. I couldn’t imagine where it came from, but it made odd noises as it sailed around corners, sometimes sounding almost like a human cry.

After about twenty minutes my heart was racing so much I wondered if I was going to have a panic attack. I hadn’t found a thing or seen even a trace of Kastian. I was frustrated and cold and completely terrified and was just about to turn back when I stepped onto what I thought was simply a jutting stone. But as I put my weight onto my foot, I heard a strangely metallic click that echoed in the darkness.

I frowned, and as I turned around, something large and very solid slammed into me, pushing me into the stone wall behind me just as an arrow *whizzed* by at a bullet’s speed.

Gasping, I looked up into Kastian’s face.

For a moment I could do nothing but stare. Then—

“Get off me,” I breathed, giving him a push.

He looked furious. “You are *very* welcome, Caliana, for saving your life!”

“I—I suppose you might have helped out,” I sputtered, trying to get my wits about me again.

He looked around, his face grim. “There are a great many booby traps in the crypt. It is not a safe place for anyone who doesn’t know their way around.”

“And you do, I suppose,” I snapped.

“Of course,” he said. Then he narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“I followed you. Our conversation wasn’t over.”

He gave me a long look, then shook his head in disbelief. “I really have never met anyone else like you, Caliana. I’ll say that.”

“I really think—”

“Stay close,” he said, cutting me off. “If you go back alone now, you might fall into another trap, and I’m already late to meet someone.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me after him. “Come on.”

I was too surprised to object, and too concerned with not tripping on the jutting stones to do anything but watch my feet as I followed after Kastian. But I did wonder about this meeting he had been called to, and if it *was* supposed to be a secret after all, since he was taking me with him.

Kastian didn’t seem to be exaggerating when he said that he knew his way around the crypt, because he didn’t even hesitate as he strode through the winding corridors and passageways. I tried to keep track of where we were going—right, right, left, right, two lefts, right—but gave up after a while. It was just too confusing. And the deeper we went, the more confusing it became. It was as though the crypts had been built like a labyrinth, to be intentionally maze-like.

But my confidence in him waned when we slowed and Kastian looked around.

“You’re not lost, are you?” I asked.

“No,” he snapped automatically, but I wasn’t so sure. For the first time, he did look confused, and he looked back the way we had come, which was never a good sign.

I gripped my torch tighter. “Come on, let’s just turn around and try to retrace our steps until something looks familiar to you. That’s what I do when I go to IKEA.”

But when I turned around, I heard another one of those metallic clicks.

Shit.

“Watch out!” Kastian yelled.

His arms encircled my waist, grabbing me just as the floor dropped out from under us.

**Episode 5364**

**Greyson**

*Rishika.*

I stared at the figure across the arena, but I couldn’t seem to get my brain to process what I was seeing. Pain from the silver wound was coursing through my body, everything ached, and the crowd was screaming for blood, but in that moment, none of that mattered. Rishika was there.

And then she wasn’t. The other fighters had broken from the cage and were flooding the battlefield. The doors of the arena opened, and guards poured in, wielding their energy spears as the fighters attacked. It was absolute chaos. Exhilarating, breathtaking chaos.

Maybe it was the pain of the silver poisoning, but everything seemed to be moving in slow motion as I looked around, taking everything in.

I watched as Clarence’s werebear surged forward, slashing at a pair of guards. They weren’t prepared for his size and strength, and he grabbed them in his massive paws, swinging them up, then flung them into the stands. The spectators screamed and scurried away.

I grunted with approval. Good. They should be afraid. All these Fae should all be afraid. They shouldn’t even be here. The arena was disgusting—fights like this should never happen at all, and people who came here *should* face consequences.

Rishika. I spun around, looking for her wolf in the crowd.

There she was. She was staggering, foaming at the mouth. I needed to get to her. I didn’t want to lose her again in the chaos of creatures and guards and spraying blood. And I didn’t want her captured by a guard. She was my pack member, and I was going to protect her—the way I couldn’t before.

I started forward, throwing myself to the ground as a guard lunged forward, his energy spear aiming straight for my chest. I rolled in the dirt and jumped back to my feet, rushing past him and leaving him behind.

And then I heard the unmistakable cry of the wyrms.

*Shit.*

A terrifying head appeared, bursting from the dirt right at my feet, making me jump back. I dove quickly aside, narrowly avoiding it. The wyrm struck blindly, and I watched as it bit the centaur just behind me cleanly in half.

The centaur gave a dying cry, and every creature in the arena looked over. Together, they let out a war cry and charged the wyrm. Clarence led the group, his light brown fur already drenched in blood.

I stepped aside as the group fell on the wyrm. But as many creatures fought against it, the terrifying creature continued to fight back.

My eyes scanned the arena, and I spotted Rishika on the far side, near the edge. She was surrounded by a group of guards, who had her boxed in with their energy spears.

The arena was a mess—every inch was a battlefield, and I had to fight my way over to her. The creatures were still going after the wyrm, but the wyrm was not going down without a fight. It was attacking everything and everyone—even the guards. There were screams of agony as people and creatures were being eaten alive. The creature had a long reach, and it was even going after the spectators who hadn’t run from the stands fast enough.

And with every step I took, I could feel the silver making its way through my body. The wound was still bleeding, and it burned like fire. I still didn’t know if the faun’s blood I’d put on it had helped to heal it, or just made it worse. But I did know that I needed to act fast. It didn’t feel as though it had gotten worse, but I couldn’t be sure that wasn’t because of the adrenaline pumping through me.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I charged across the arena, powering into the guards surrounding Rishika. I barreled into one guy like a battering ram, tossing him aside. The others turned their spears onto me, and now that Rishika had seen me, she turned on me, too.

*Rishika!* I pleaded with her through the mind link. *Snap out of this. Listen to me, please! You’re stronger than this.*

But she wasn’t listening. She lunged toward me, struggling against me and trying to claw my belly. I knew I needed to put an end to this. I hated to do it, but I was going to have to knock her out—just to subdue her. Then I could toss her on my back and get the fuck out of here.

But before I could do any of that, a wyrm burst out from the dirt at my feet.

*You have got to be kidding me.*

The guards froze, and then completely freaked out.

The wyrm dove blindly into the group of guards, its putrid mouth wide, and swallowed one completely. It was a shocking sight, and for a moment I just stared at the thing. But when another one of the heads turned toward Rishika, I jumped into action. I darted toward it and sank my teeth into the neck, just behind the head. The flesh was absolutely disgusting—like something already dead and decaying. But apparently still alive, the wyrm thrashed, and its spikes caught my shoulder, piercing all the way through.

*Fuck.*

Its tail whipped around and hit Rishika. The force sent her flying, and she hit the arena wall with a sickening thud.

There was a roar in the distance, and Clarence galloped over. He pushed the wyrm off me and slashed at the disgusting thing with his claws. There was a sickening sucking sound as the spike pulled itself out of my shoulder, and I staggered for a moment. I could feel my body wanting to shift back to its human form again, but that felt like a risk. There were too many guards, too many creatures.

Clarence roared, and a half dozen of our allies ran over, piling onto the wyrm, ripping the thing apart from all sides.

I tried to join in, but the effort made the wound in my side scream with pain, and I had to take a step back.

The creatures made quick work of the wyrm, and when it was done, Clarence turned to me. He was covered with the green sludge that was the wyrm’s blood, and he nodded at me. I nodded back at him.

That was all.

Clarence turned with a roar, still leading the charge, and the rest of the creatures followed after him.

The guards had fled, so I pushed myself toward Rishika, who was still out cold in a heap by the arena wall. I got my shoulder under her, and with a groan of effort, tossed her wolf form onto my back.

The weight of it hurt, but my mission was crystal clear—I had to get us both the fuck out of here.

When I got my feet beneath me, my eyes scanned the arena, then the stands. It was just habit, but as I did, I caught sight of Cenwyn. He was fleeing—of course he was. I could see as he ran down the flights of stairs from his special box. Apparently, his fancy little elevator had stopped working.

She was still out cold, but I wanted her to know, so I mind linked to Rishika, *I’ve got you. Don’t worry*.

And then I started to run

I jumped the stands, clearing the spectators who still remained. They screamed when they saw Rishika and me. Magic came flying at us, but I dodged it. It felt like I had armor on now. I only had one thing on my mind—get to Cenwyn.

I tracked his progress through the arena—watching him flee. There were footsteps, and I realized I had been surrounded by guards.

*Shit.*

I pressed on, pushing through them, ignoring the pain as they aimed their energy spears at me. I *had* to get to Cenwyn. Cenwyn was responsible for this—for all of this—and he had to pay. I couldn’t let him get away.

I rounded a corner of the arena, and there were more guards—a whole flank of them. I charged into them, ready to fight them all, but they hit me with a blast of magic. And then there was a rope. It came from nowhere and tightened around my neck. The pain from the silver wound burned as the rope tightened. They were trying to pull me down. I had to get to Cenwyn, but the guards were tangling me up.   
 I snarled and tore at the guard nearest me. He screamed and backed off, but there were more ropes and the silver burned. *Rishika! Cenwyn!* It felt like I was falling.

Suddenly, there was a flash of bright light. It knocked into the guards like a gust of strong wind, making them stumble backward. This gave me a moment’s opportunity, and I took it, finding the momentum to grasp the ropes binding me and tearing them from the guards’ hands.

The guards shouted in confusion as a hooded figure appeared, wielding energy whips. Clearly terrified, the guards took a step back. A few took off running.

As the figure pulled the energy ropes back to whip them again, the hood was thrown back by the force, and I saw the face.

*Adair.*

**Episode 5365**

**Xavier**

“What do you have there?” Marius walked over to me. “Xavier, I’m not here to make anyone feel bad for being into whatever they’re into, but you want to tell me why you’re sniffing those gross pants?”

My stomach was a knot of dread. “There’s blood on these.”

Marius frowned. “*Blood?* You’re sure?”

I nodded. “And I’m almost sure it’s Rishika’s.”

Marius gave me a long look. “Is there any chance you could be wrong?”

I scowled, irritated by Marius second-guessing me. “I’m sure.”

“Sorry,” he said, raising up his hands. “That’s just not—” he shook his head. “That’s not what I expected you to say, Xavier. So it’s blood, and we found it in here. What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say for sure, but whatever it is, it can’t be good,” I said darkly.

“No,” Marius said grimly, “I wouldn’t think so.”

I ran over the possibilities in my head. How could Rishika’s blood have found its way onto Cenwyn’s clothes? There were a few ways the story went, but no matter how I ran it, something happened that caused Rishika to lose a lot of blood. Because it wasn’t just a trickle I was smelling—her blood was *soaked* into the linen of these pants.

“Hey, Artemis told me that Rishika is a skilled fighter, right?” Marius said, clearly seeing the look of dread on my face.

I nodded tersely. “She is.”

“So maybe she was injured during a fight. It’s not hard to get scratched or cut while fighting, right?”

“Yeah,” I conceded.

“So that’s probably what it is,” he said, trying to convince me.

And I tried to let him. I wanted to believe him, and I could only hope he was right. But I was also thinking about before, when I’d thought I caught Greyson’s scent on Cenwyn. At the time I’d thought I was mistaken. I’d wondered if my senses had been affected by being in the Fae world, but given how sure I was about this blood belonging to Rishika, now I was convinced I had been right about Greyson, too.

Which couldn’t be good.

My gut told me then the same thing it was telling me now: Something bad happened to both Rishika and Greyson. I just didn’t know what—or to what end. And this uncertainty made me even more nervous for Cali.

I blew out a frustrated breath and turned to Marius. “What about you? Did you find anything useful?”

He shook his head as he glanced around Cenwyn’s rooms. “There’s not much here. The guy didn’t bring a lot with him, which was smart. I wouldn’t either, if I was up to shady shit. It would be a lot better if we could go back and search his home. Cenwyn is probably smart enough not to bring much with him that could incriminate him if anyone ran across it.”

“Well, we’re not back at the Fae court, so this is all we have to go on,” I muttered. “We’re just going to have to find something. Something else, that is,” I said, glancing down at the pants. I put those on a chair by the door and started looking around, this time more aggressively. I yanked down the sheets on his bed and pulled up the mattress, looking to see if he had hidden anything beneath it, but there was nothing. I rifled through drawers, though I tried to put everything back where I’d found it. I was tempted to shred the asshole’s clothes purely out of spite, but I resisted the temptation. I didn’t want him to know that anyone had been here—that would tip our hand that we were on to him, and I didn’t want that.

I had to be careful. If we were caught—hell, if we were even *suspected*—who knew what would become of Greyson and Rishika?

I glanced over at the bloody pants grimly as my mind spun out worst-case scenarios. What if we were already too late? My brother was competent, sure, but this world was brutal in unexpected ways.

The thought rolled over me like a massive, crashing wave, nearly drowning me. I respected the hell out of Rishika, and losing her would be a massive blow for the Redwood pack. But aside from that—maybe Greyson and I hadn’t always been on the best of terms, but that didn’t mean I wanted my own brother dead. And if anything happened to Greyson, Cali would be devastated, regardless of how things stood between them. I couldn’t even imagine how she would stand that loss. Or how I would.

“Hey, what about this?” Marius said, snapping me out of my dark thoughts, for which I was grateful.

I looked over as he pulled a travel bag from beneath the bed. He unclasped the bag and began to pull out a series of cloth bags and jars.

“Herbs, mostly,” he murmured, stacking everything on the bed.

I gave the contents of the jars a once-over. “That looks like the kind of stuff Big Mac uses for spells. That looks like ingredients.”

Marius uncorked a bottle and took a whiff. He made a horrible face. “Ugh. This one smells like old socks and bad cheese. It’s awful. Smell it!” he said, holding the bottle out to me.

“No, thanks,” I said. I pushed the bottle away, but the smell traveled toward me anyway. When I got a hint of it, it reminded me of something. I stopped and drew a deeper breath of the foul scent, and suddenly my body was rocked by spasms.

Head spinning, I dropped to my knees.

“Xavier?” Marius said, alarmed. “Xavier? Are you okay?” He tossed the bottle onto the bed and hurried toward me. Grabbing my arm, he tried to help me to my feet.

Rage coursed through me. Pure, white-hot *rage*. I shook with it, and it intensified like the fire of a million suns when Marius touched me.

I shoved him back, sending the Fae crashing into the dresser with the force of my push.

He collapsed to the floor, then looked up at me in shock. “What the hell is wrong with—”

But I didn’t give him a chance to answer. I went after him and slammed into him, hard, lifting him to his feet and driving him into the stone wall.

All I could think about was that Marius was a Fae, and Fae could *not* be trusted. We knew nothing about the guy before he showed up in the woods by the Vanguard palace, claiming he’d been sent by Artemis.

Even now, I knew next to nothing about him. Why the hell had any of us even believed him at all? We had followed him into the Fae world! All of this had happened because of him! Greyson and Rishika were missing because of him! Cali was in danger because of him! All because he had convinced us to come here. And drawing us here could be some elaborate plan to do who knew what.

Marius struggled against my grip. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “What has gotten into you, Xavier?”

“Just *shut up*,” I snarled.

I had him by the neck, and he was struggling to breathe. His face was turning red. I was focused on that, wondering how long it would be before he passed out, so I didn’t notice when he reached for the knife until he pulled it out and drove me a step back.

Silver.

Shit.

I took another step back.

“I don’t want to use this,” he said, eying me warily, “but if you don’t back the hell off, I will.”

Furious all over again, I snarled. I was ready to shift and finish the guy off once and for all.

Not taking his eyes off me, Marius nodded toward the contents of the traveling bag. “It’s some kind of rage potion. You don’t know what you’re doing. I’m on your side, Xavier. We’re working together. Remember. Remember yourself.”

I laughed, the sound hard and grating. It was nearly uncontrollable. The ploy was so obvious, I couldn’t even believe he was trying it. It was the oldest trick in the book, and it pissed me off all over again.

With a roar I charged at him, avoiding when he swiped the knife at me. I crashed into the guy and pinned him against the hard stone floor. I partially shifted and raised a claw, ready to rip Marius in half.

He tensed, preparing for the blow, but something made me hesitate. It was a strange pop, like a distant spark of memory. I had felt this way before—this kind of uncontrollable rage. I had been drugged.

Confused, I lowered my claw and felt some of the rage slipping away.

Then there were hands on me, pulling me off Marius.

I looked around to see a group of armed Fae had surrounded us.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” one announced, looking stern and official. He looked at the others. “Take them away!”

**Episode 5366**

I felt like Alice must have felt when she fell through the rabbit hole into Wonderland. She had fallen for a long time, and I did too as I plummeted next to Kastian, arms flailing, reaching out for anything to grab onto, trying to stop my fall. It felt like an eternity—long enough at least for me to think of Alice and start to look around. It was dark, but there was enough light that when I looked down, I could see that we were approaching the ground, which didn’t fill me with hope. Something glinted as we sped downward, and there was just enough time for me to realize that the glints were coming from metallic spikes.

“Are you *kidding* me!” I half-screamed in disbelief. What was up with this place?

Kastian reached out for me, grabbing me and pulling me to him.

I stared at him in wonder. Was he trying to save me?

But then he spun me around so that I was beneath him.

“Oh my god,” I groaned. I gritted my teeth and, using all my effort, conjured up my shield—just in time—and we slammed into the ground.

The impact rattled my bones and made my head ring. Gasping, I tried to roll off my shield, but I realized that Kastian was lying on top of me, crushing me.

“Get off of me!” I managed to say, shoving him off.

He rolled off, and I recovered enough to sit up and glare at him.

“You used me to *cushion your fall*?” I asked in disbelief.

He shrugged, looking completely unapologetic. “I only did what was best for the Dark Fae court.”

He was near enough that I landed a swift kick, right in the nuts. “You would have let me *die*?”

He doubled over, groaning. “But you didn’t,” he managed to say.

I climbed off my shield, still pissed. I looked around, surveying the damage. There was a dip in the ground, and a dozen spikes had been leveled flat by the shield.

I glared at him again. “Did you even know I could use my shield?”

“No,” he admitted, recovered now, “but since neither of us was really hurt, it all worked out, didn’t it?”

I stared at him in absolute shock. I couldn’t believe it. I had known Kastian wasn’t exactly a stand-up guy, but I hadn’t known what a self-centered, cowardly asshole he really was. Now I knew. Greyson and Xavier would never have even considered doing anything like that to me. Was this what marriage to Kastian would be like? Always watching my back? Not that I needed any additional reasons to not go through with it, but this was too much.

“I’ve had enough of this—and you.” I shook my head. “How the hell do we get out of here?” I demanded.

Kastian sighed and dusted himself off. “You seem very put out for someone who wasn’t even invited to follow me. And you haven’t even explained to me *why* you were following me to begin with. Would you care to?”

“I—I wasn’t following you!” I sputtered. “Like I said, our conversation wasn’t over, so when I *happened* to run into you down here, I was glad to have a chance to continue it.”

Kastian gave me a long look, and it was clear he didn’t believe me. “Come now, Caliana. Why else would you have been in the crypt if not to follow me?”

“Okay, fine, I was following you,” I admitted. “But what were *you* doing in the crypt?”

“It’s none of your business,” he said shortly.

I rolled my eyes, imagining what a joke of a marriage he and I would have. “And what about this?” I asked, pointing to the barbed pit we had almost been skewered on. “Was *this* a coincidence, or did someone lure you down here because they want you dead?”

He scoffed. “I told you. The crypt has all kinds of booby traps to keep people away.”

I eyed him skeptically. “But if that’s true, then why did you risk coming down here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, there had to be a pretty good reason,” I pointed out.

Kastian hesitated, apparently trying to decide how honest he was going to be. “I was supposed to meet someone here.”

“Who?” I asked, narrowing my eyes suspiciously.

“That’s not important,” he said, waving an airy hand.

“Are you kidding me? What could *be* more important?” I asked. I wasn’t about to let him blow me off. Not now, when there was so much at stake. I stepped in front of him, trying to look intimidating. “You know, I can conjure more than just a shield, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Kastian looked at me for a long moment. Then he gave in. “I was meeting a girl, if you must know.”

I frowned, thinking immediately of the missing girls—more accurately, the girls who had gone missing supposedly because of him. The crypt would be a perfect place to murder someone and hide a body. But I kept that grim thought to myself, unnerved by the sudden realization that I was now trapped in this place with a potential killer.

Looking around, I searched for a way out. My eyes scanned the space above us. There was nothing, which meant the trap door over our heads must have closed. Even if it hadn’t, we had fallen a long way, so it would have been too far up, and there was no way to climb back.

Kastian was looking around too. “There are tunnels.”

“What?”

“Tunnels,” he repeated. He gestured around. “In here. They crisscross beneath the crypts. One of them has to lead to an exit. Let’s try to find one.”

I didn’t have a better suggestion, so I nodded. “Okay.”

We started looking around the pit, which turned out to be a kind of large cavern. We walked along the walls, looking for openings to passageways.

“Hey, what about this?” I asked, pointing to a lever. “Maybe this will open a secret passageway?” I reached for it and was about to pull it when Kastian grabbed my hand, stopping me. “What are you doing?”

“The booby traps,” he reminded me. “They’re all over this place. Maybe it opens a passageway, maybe it releases a dozen poisonous snakes onto your head.”

I pulled my hand back from the lever like it was burning hot. Then I took a deep breath, conjured up my shield, held it over my head, and pulled the lever.

My heart thudded as the ground rumbled beneath my feet. Dust shook free from the walls, and pebbles rained down from the ceiling. And then, before our eyes, the wall creaked open to reveal a dark, narrow tunnel.

I glanced at Kastian, who looked surprised that had worked. He tipped his chin, indicating that I should lead the way.

I rolled my eyes but stepped forward. I’d lost my torch in the fall, obviously, so I dug my cell phone out of my pocket and turned on the flashlight.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, pointing to my phone.

“Part of my Fae magic,” I muttered, feeling my way carefully across the uneven ground.

We walked slowly, and for a moment Kastian was quiet. Then he said, “You know, I have to admit I’m a little impressed with your magic. You’re not bad for a half Light Fae—”

“You sure talk a lot for someone who hasn’t shown one hint of his own magic,” I growled. “I can’t help but notice you haven’t used a bit of it to help us, and I’m doing all the work here. Which is yet another revealing glimpse into what a marriage to you would look like.”

The passage was growing narrower and narrower as we continued. The ceiling was getting lower, so Kastian had to stoop, then so did I.

Suddenly, he reached out and grabbed hold of my arm. “Hold on.”

“What?” I asked, twisting to look at him.

He pointed to the walls, which were glistening, as though they were wet.

“What is that?” I wondered, reaching out a finger to touch it.

“Don’t!” he snapped.

“Why?”

“It’s poison,” he whispered, bending close to examine it. “If you touch it, you’ll become paralyzed. Immediately.”

“Oh my god,” I breathed. The passage was so narrow. I turned sideways, but even then, it was everything I could do to not even brush the walls with my hips. I gulped, and we just managed to slip by.

We continued on until we reached a dead end.

“This is it,” I said, stopping. But I couldn’t help but notice the air was different. Cooler and noticeably fresher.

Kastian must have noticed too, because we both looked up. There was a shaft above us that led to an opening, way above us. It was rimmed by moonlight, and through it I could see trees, swaying gently in the moonlight, silhouetted against the night sky.

I heaved a gusty sigh. “How are we ever going to reach it?” I wondered.

And then, to my surprise, Kastian grabbed hold of me. “Stand back, Caliana.”

**Episode 5367**

**Greyson**

For a wild moment, I thought I was hallucinating. I had to be. Adair couldn’t really be there. But when I blinked hard and shook my head and he didn’t disappear, I realized what I was seeing was the real deal—it was Adair.

I had so many questions—and the primary one was how in the hell had Adair found us?

*Cali.* It had to have been Cali. She must have asked Adair to come looking for us. I was certain this was what happened, and how Adair now stood with us, wielding his energy whips against Cenwyn’s guards. The thought of her looking out for me from afar filled me with hope and renewed strength.

But a moment later that hope crashed into an equally terrifying thought—had Cali come with Adair? Was she really looking out for me from afar, or was she close?

I prayed that she was nowhere nearby, but I also knew her, and it was a distinct possibility that she had insisted on coming with him. The thought of her being so near was exhilarating, but I reminded myself not to get too excited. As much as I wanted to see her—as much as I *longed* to see her—I couldn’t bear the thought of her in this kind of danger.

This flurry of thoughts was interrupted by an explosion of pain when a guard reached around Adair and lunged for me, striking me with his energy spear. The pain rocketed through me, and I roared and jerked back, the movement making Rishika slip from my back to the ground.

I snarled, and together, Adair and I worked to dispose of the remaining guards. I bit and tore, Adair worked with his whips, knocking them out and dispatching them one by one until he and I were surrounded by a pile of bodies.

I got Rishika back onto my shoulders with a groan, but there was no time to shift back to my human form and explain everything—that would take too long—so I just tipped my head, indicating for Adair to follow. I took off in the direction I’d seen Cenwyn go, following the trail of his scent. I was more determined now than I’d ever been—I was going to catch that terrible Fae if it was the last thing I ever did.

Sprinting through the arena, it was clear that chaos still reigned. Escaped prisoners and creatures were running every which way, spectators were trying to flee, but in their terrified state they were running deeper into the bowels of the stadium. The guards were a formless mess, trying to corral both the spectators and creatures—and failing.

But I didn’t care about any of that. I was going after Cenwyn. The silver wound in my side still hurt like hell—silver burned, and this felt like someone was holding a branding iron against my skin—but I fought against the pain and pushed onward.

Behind me, I could hear Adair yelling something at me, but I wasn’t listening. I had caught a strong whiff of Cenwyn’s scent, and I wasn’t going to lose it. I couldn’t even think of the risks—I had no idea what kind of magic Cenwyn could use against me, but I didn’t care. All I knew was that I was going to get Cenwyn, then get Rishika and me the fuck out of this place.

I rounded a corner and found myself in a low stone tunnel with rounded sides. I knew the place—it led out of the arena. When it veered to the right, I followed it. There were more people running, and I wove between them, trying not to run into them, but it was nearly impossible.

A guard running toward me yelled, “STOP!” He slowed down and tried to grab Rishika, trying to pull her limp form from my back, but Adair was right behind me and brandished his whips, driving the guard back with a flash of bright energy.

I silently thanked him and pushed onward. But there were more people. So many people. Fae and creatures, all trying to get out of the place. There was a crush of them, and the narrow tunnel turned into a bottleneck. I couldn’t move forward at all. I tried to push, but everyone was freaking out and trying to do the same thing. There was nowhere to go.

I tried to hold onto Cenwyn’s scent, but there were too many people, and it was overwhelmed by the scents all around me.

Furious, I stood on my back legs and looked over the heads of the crowd. And that’s when I saw the reason for the traffic jam—guards had gated up the mouth of the tunnel, preventing anyone from getting out. I supposed it was to prevent the creatures from escaping, but it was also keeping the Fae spectators in, and they were all panicking.

Frustration rose up in my chest like bile. This couldn’t be how this ended. Not after everything I had done and been through to get here. Pain throbbed through me, but I wasn’t ready to give up, so with a roar that cleared my path, I pushed my way forward until I got to the gate. And then I pushed against it. It was iron, but I was an Alpha, and an angry one at that, and I pushed with all I had.

As I worked on it, I felt Rishika stir. Then she groaned, and my stomach sank. The last thing I needed right now was another complication, and if she woke up still wild on the Fae drugs in the middle of this crowd, things were going to get complicated.

I could feel the pressure of the crowd behind me. They didn’t even feel like individuals anymore, just like a single, pulsing mass, loud and hot, screaming into my ears. I was running only on fumes now. The silver was coursing through me, pain throbbing with every beat of my heart, and I wasn’t sure how much fight I had left in me.

But then Rishika stirred again. I thought of her, and how I was supposed to protect her. I thought of Cali, and of getting to Cenwyn, and I felt power flowing into my body again.

I gave a roar that drew gasps from the crowd behind me, and with one powerful blow, I broke the iron hinges and crashed through the gate.

Instantly there was a massive flood of people. Everyone surged forward, and I was swept out along with them. Before I could even process what was happening, we were outside. I looked around, trying to orient myself again. Now that I was finally out of that fucking arena, I could see where I was. And I was shocked to find that we were in the woods. I stared around, surprised. The arena had felt like such a desolate, hellish place, I just never associated it with anything living. I wouldn’t have guessed it would be surrounded by trees.

Adair rushed to my side. “Greyson, stop!” he called breathlessly.

I ignored him and kept running. I was glad that Adair had shown up—and that there seemed to be no sign of Cali with him—but I was still going after Cenwyn. I couldn’t give up, and I had just found his scent again—a trace of it on the forest floor. I followed it doggedly, and as the scent got stronger, I knew I was going in the right direction.

And then Rishika began to move on my back.

*Dammit.*

She rolled to one side, and I cantered left, keeping her from falling. She thrashed, and I went right. She moaned and howled, and then she was off my back.

*Shit.* Had she woken up?

Just as I turned to check, she lunged at me. In an instant I could see that her eyes were still wild, and she was still foaming at the mouth.

Great. Still rabid.

I caught her by the shoulders, fighting off her bite, and got her to the ground. I tried to pin her down, but that was easier said than done. She was wild and fought back, hard.

*Rishika, wake up! I know you’re in there.*

But it was hard. I was so tired from the silver and the wyrm and all the other injuries I’d sustained in the arena. And Rishika was a fierce fighter. She always had been, and now, the drugs made her unstoppable.

I pressed my front paw against her throat, trying to subdue her. I didn’t want to hurt her—she was my friend, my pack mate, my second—but when she wrenched away, I knew I was going to have to tackle her. I was just rearing back when a searing pain from my side shot through me like a spear. I roared as my legs gave way, and I collapsed to the ground.

I looked up just in time to see Rishika above me, her teeth baring down…

**Episode 5368**

I pulled myself free of Kastian’s grip. Stand back? Stand back from what? I wasn’t sure if I trusted him—not after he tried to use me as a safety cushion. But I was curious about his plan.

“What are you going to do?” I asked. I glanced at the smooth rock walls. “Try to climb up? It’s impossible. Unless you have claws I don’t know about.”

He made a face. “You really should stand back,” he warned.

I crossed my arms over my chest, but I didn’t move. “I have to be honest, Kastian. Given what I’ve seen you do so far, I’m not convinced you’re going to be putting yourself in danger here, so I’m not all that worried.”

He gave me a long look, then shrugged. “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He looked up toward the opening and held up his hands.

I could feel the change in the air around us, and I knew he was conjuring magic, aiming it at the opening. I heard a low rumbling sound, and then dirt and small rocks began to rain down from the ceiling onto my face.

I yelped and closed my eyes, quickly wiping them to try to clear my vision.

“I told you so,” Kastian said with a chuckle.

I resisted the urge to smack him. When I had wiped away the dust and could finally see again, I looked around. My heart seemed to stop when I saw something shadowy slithering toward us.

I blinked, not sure if I was seeing correctly. But there it was, and it was coming closer.

What the *hell* was that? Some kind of snake creature? A shadow snake or something? *That* was Kastian’s magic?

I stepped away with a gasp. “I *knew* I shouldn’t have trusted you,” I hissed. I held up my hands, ready to blast the thing when Kastian put his hands over mine.

“It’s a vine,” he said evenly.

“A…*vine*?” I repeated. I stared in shock as the shadow came to a stop. It hung in front of us, just inches from the ground. Now that it was close, I could clearly see that it was, indeed, a vine. I shifted my gaze to Kastian. “You have plant magic?”

He shrugged.

“Just like my—” I stopped myself before I finished the sentence. *Just like my mother*. I didn’t know if I should tell Kastian that my mom also had plant magic. There was no way to know what he might do with that knowledge. And I had to consider how it might affect Artemis to have Kastian know.

Kastian narrowed his eyes. “Just like your *who*?”

“Uh—like a friend,” I sputtered. “A girl I know here. She has plant magic, too.”

Kastian looked at me for a moment, his eyes scanning my face. “I think you’re lying.”

“I’m not—”

“But I don’t care.” He looked at his vine and gave it a tug to test its strength. More dirt fell as he pulled, but the vine held strong. He gestured to me. “After you, Caliana.”

I shot him a glare, automatically suspicious.

“What?” he asked.

“Why do you want me to go first?” I demanded.

He heaved a sigh. “I was simply trying to be a gentleman.”

I scoffed. “Give me a break. You’re *not* a gentleman, Kastian, so you can drop the nobleman act with me. You’re just using me because…” I thought for a moment, trying to figure out what nefarious reason he might have. “You’re either worried that the vine will break, or that there’s someone—or some*thing*—waiting for you on the other end.”

He looked almost amused. “I assure you that’s not the case, Caliana,” he said smoothly. “I was merely thinking that if you slipped, I would be here to catch you.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” I muttered. I looked up the vine at the shaft of light—trying to weigh out my options: I didn’t trust Kastian, but I did want to get out of here. I didn’t want him below me, staring at my ass while I climbed, but I didn’t want to spend any more time with him, considering he was a liar and might actually be a murderer.

“What the hell,” I finally muttered, and grabbed onto the vine. I started to hoist my way up, using the leafy nodules as handholds. It was hard climbing, and my arms began to burn almost immediately. I had to stop every few moments to rest.

“You could try not kicking down quite so much dirt,” Kastian called from below. “It’s getting in my eyes!”

I ignored him and wiped the sweat from my forehead onto my shoulder. I was almost at the top. My shoulders were screaming with pain, but I felt like I could do the last bit in one big push if I just ignored every instinct my body had to give up.

I took a deep breath, wiggled my foot so it shook down some extra dirt onto Kastian, and started again. I was almost there. Three more feet. One more foot. I was—

“There!” I gasped as I pulled myself out of the shaftway and into the moonlight.

All I wanted to do was collapse on the ground, but I hadn’t been joking about my fears. I was concerned that there might be someone waiting for Kastian here, so I conjured my sword and swung around, looking in all directions, but everything seemed quiet.

After a moment Kastian pulled himself up out of the shaft and got to his feet. “Caliana!” he said, looking uncharacteristically impressed. “You have a sword!”

“Yes, I do,” I snapped, pivoting on him, “and I won’t hesitate to use it on you.”

He sighed, looking aggrieved. “What is it, may I ask, that you have against me? I understand that you’re not so in favor of our marriage, and that I’m a Dark Fae, but there seems to be something more. You treat me like I’m some kind of monster.”

I was still out of breath from the climb, and my shoulders ached, but I kept my sword up, leveled at him. “I suppose it’s because I have reason to think that you are.”

This seemed to surprise Kastian. He raised an eyebrow. “You do? And what is it that I’ve done?”

“I—I’m not exactly sure,” I admitted, “but there are rumors.”

“Rumors about what?”

“Girls.”

He frowned. “Girls?”

“Girls that have gone missing. Under mysterious circumstances. Girls whom you knew,” I said accusingly.

His face darkened, and I noticed that his eye twitched. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, what about Greyson and Rishika?”

“Who?”

I rolled my eyes. “Greyson and Rishika. Two of the werewolves I came here with. They’ve both gone missing too. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Kastian scoffed at this. “No, I wouldn’t. You think I have something to do with that? Is that why you were following me? You thought I was going to lead you to where I’ve been keeping them chained up or something?” He frowned. “Is that why you’ve been asking me so many weird questions?”

“I don’t know!” I exclaimed, shaking my head, feeling thoroughly confused now. “But what about the girls? Isn’t that why you were coming down here? To meet another one? So you could make *her* disappear too?”

He stared at me in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

I stared back. “What are *you* talking about?”

He looked incredulous. “I don’t have that kind of magic, Caliana. And I think you’re letting your wild imagination and your Dark Fae prejudice fill in a lot of gaps about my character. Whatever your problem is with me, it has very little to do with me. This isn’t about *me* at all, this is about *you*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“I can assure you that I didn’t kill anyone,” Kastian went on, not letting me finish. “And I haven’t made anyone disappear, Fae or werewolf. I said I was coming to the crypt to meet a girl. Not one I hoped to make disappear—it was a girl I was interested in, if you must know.”

He looked offended. Angry and defensive and offended. And strangely genuine.

I studied him, trying to decide if I believed him. Could he be telling the truth?

I cleared my throat. “Okay, so I’m not saying that I believe you, but just supposing I did, that would mean that whoever sent you that note wanted to lure you down here. Which would mean that they might be responsible for the trap that almost killed us.”

Kastian looked sardonic. “I’m glad you’re finally starting to understand. Now would you please put your sword away?”

I looked down at the sword still clasped in my hand. I had forgotten it was there.

“If we’re going to figure this out, we’re going to need to work together, I think.” Kastian raised a questioning eyebrow. “Well, Caliana? What do you say?”

**Episode 5369**

**Greyson**

Everything around me was white, as though I was in the middle of a blizzard. But it wasn’t cold, and it wasn’t loud. It was quiet and peaceful. It felt like I was in bed. Next to me, someone stirred. They called my name.

When I opened my eyes, I found Maren beside me.

She smiled at me. She was beautiful. She looked radiant, like she was glowing from the inside out. She ran a gentle hand through my hair, her touch light. “Good, you’re awake.”

“I’m awake,” I mumbled, feeling groggy. I struggled to remember where I was. “What’s going on?”

“It’s okay, Greyson, you don’t have to worry. You’re safe now.” Her voice was low and soft as velvet. It wrapped around me like a blanket.

“Safe,” I repeated, the words feeling strange in my mouth. I tried to sit up, but pain exploded inside me, white-hot and blinding. It was horrible, and I shut my eyes against it. When I opened them again, Kendall was there, beneath me, her purple eyes looking up at me.

I hovered over her, and she had her arms slung around my neck. She arched against me, and the pressure of her hips against mine made me feel like my body had been lit on fire—but this time the fire burned low. It crackled and sang, filling me with pleasure.

“I know you’re still angry with me for being part of the MIB,” she said, her voice a husky purr.

“Angry is one way of putting it,” I said, though my voice didn’t sound quite like my own. It was low and sensual, almost teasing.

She smiled and bit her lip, dropping her head back. This exposed her neck, and her scent filled my nose. It was sensual and filled with want. I could *smell* her arousal, even before she looked back at me, her eyes flashing wickedly.

“Then show me how much you hate me, Alpha,” she panted.

I growled and lowered myself to kiss her neck, but when she started to moan, it wasn’t Kendall’s voice gasping my name—it was Cali’s.

Cali’s hand ran up the length of my chest. “I’ve missed you so much, Greyson,” she breathed.

“I’ve missed you, too,” I said, kissing her neck. Kissing her, smelling her, tasting her, *having* her—it felt like a homecoming. There was no other feeling like having Cali in my arms.

“I need to be with you again,” she said, wrapping her arms around me. “I need to see you again.”

I pulled back to look down at her, confused. “What are you saying, love? We’re together right now, aren’t we?”

But then I blinked, and we weren’t together. I wasn’t with her; our bodies were no longer entwined. She was below me, and I was above her, as though I was suspended. It was as though I was looking down on her. Like I was…dead.

Below me, Cali was crying.

“Please, Greyson!” she cried. “Please! Just be okay! *Please*!”

I frowned. I didn’t know what she was talking about. What could she be saying?

Then a pain like fire went through me, and I cried out. I heard a voice—a woman’s voice—speak.

“He’s awake!”

“Good. Stand back, now!” another voice, a man’s voice, said. Then, “Stay with us, Greyson.”

My eyes blinked open. My vision was blurry, but it was Adair, and he was talking to me. Then it came back to me. Rishika had attacked me. Not because she had wanted to or meant to—I hoped—but because of that rage drug Cenwyn and his Fae had given her.

I swallowed. “*Blood*,” I managed, just as a bolt of pain went through me again. I didn’t know if it was because Rishika had done more damage, but I knew that damn silver wound was still a problem, because I could feel that my body wasn’t healing as it should. I needed Fae blood to heal.

Understanding immediately, Adair nodded. Moving quickly, he reached for a knife and slashed his own forearm. Holding it over me, he let his blood drip onto my torso, where the silver wound still festered.

I could feel the blood drip across my skin, and when it hit the wound, I roared as pain ripped through me.

I was growling, partially shifting, and thrashing on the table as a hot intensity took over my body. It was terrifying, and I no longer felt fully in control of myself.

“Tabitha!” The male voice from before was sharp. “Get away!”

I felt a sudden bolt of rage. What had this Fae done to me? I looked up at the man above me as he pushed a girl out of the way. I recognized the girl. Was it Cali? I was confused. Why would Cali be helping this Fae to hurt me? Didn’t she know that he was trying to kill me?

The Fae grabbed onto me, trying to hold me down. “Greyson! GREYSON!”

Suddenly I recognized the voice, and then—an instant later—the face. “Adair?” I gasped.

Adair’s face loomed above me, his bloody arm outstretched. “You need more of my blood!”

I tried to twist away from him. I had a sudden memory of the faun. The faun’s blood had helped me. Why did I need more? I shook my head.

“You’ve been poisoned with silver! And drugged,” Adair explained. “Great combination it seems.”

“The faun’s blood—” I muttered.

“The faun’s blood wasn’t strong enough,” he insisted, cutting me off. “You need more of mine.”

I shook my head again, fighting back, but Adair’s arms were strong, and he held me tightly.

“You’ll take it, unless you want to go mad and die,” he said firmly.

This stopped me. I could barely get my arms around a thought, but I tried to calm my body. I had to fight myself, but I managed to keep still enough to let Adair drip more of his Fae blood into my wound. It burned again. My body shook until I fell back, exhausted. The pain and confusion began to slowly ebb away, and my thoughts slowed.

It came back to me, slowly. I closed my eyes and tried to put my thoughts in order as they came. I remembered being drugged, and then stabbed with a silver knife by one of Cenwyn’s sadistic guards.

I struggled to sit up. “What happened to Rishika?” I asked, looking around.

Adair shot a glance at Tabitha.

“What?” I asked again, unnerved by their silence. “Where is she?”

“I had to subdue her,” he admitted.

“Subdue? What does that mean? What did you do to her?” I asked, alarmed.

“She is unharmed,” Adair assured me. “But she’s not an Alpha, as you are, Greyson, and she had consumed more of the drug. You saw for yourself what she was like. She was extremely dangerous. I had to knock her out, or she would’ve attacked us all.”

My body ached like I had just been hit by a bus, but I tried to push myself to standing. “I need to see her.”

“She’s fine—”

“I need to see her,” I insisted. “I am her Alpha. I failed her once, I need to make sure she is okay—”

“She’s okay,” Tabitha said. She stepped aside. Rishika lay on the ground behind her. She appeared to be asleep, though deeply. She was breathing, however, and looked unharmed.

Relief washed over me, and I nodded. “Good.” I thought for another moment. “What about Cenwyn? What happened to him?”

Adair shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“You didn’t see—”

“You saw for yourself, Greyson, how powerful Cenwyn is. He got away for now, but what’s important is that you will recover. Though, I’m afraid you’re going to have a rather nasty scar,” he said, giving my side a critical look. He shook his head. “Not even my blood is going to make that go away. That wound was left untreated for entirely too long.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered. I took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand down my face. I was pissed that Cenwyn had gotten away, but Adair was probably right—he was powerful, and there wasn’t anything more I could have done about it. What was important was that I had gotten Rishika and me out of there alive, which had been my objective from the start.

And now for the next part.

“What are you doing?” Adair asked, startled when I got to my feet.

“What does it look like?” I asked, testing out my arm on my wounded side, making sure I had full range of motion.

“Greyson,” he said severely. “You need to lie back down. “You need to rest.”

I shook my head. “I’ve had enough rest.”

“Aren’t you in pain?” Tabitha asked quietly, eyeing the wound at my side.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug. “We have to get back.”

“Back?” Adair asked in disbelief. “Back where?”

“To Briarkeep.” I looked at both of them. “I’m going to get Cali.”

**Episode 5370**

**Artemis**

When I looked around, I could see that the banquet was finally starting to wind down. The last dregs of wine had been drunk, and some of the Fae were starting to stumble off to their rooms, looking sleepy.

Casually, I stepped apart from the group and into the shadows, waiting for the party to drift away. I didn’t want Celeste to spot me. I knew that if she did, she would read me the riot act about how I’d barely been around during the peace talks, and I didn’t have time to hear it. I couldn’t let myself get derailed from my real goal here.

Marius and I had found the letter that Maira’s sister, Owena, had sent her. And if Maira wasn’t dead, then there was one person who might know something about it.

Gripping my goblet, I sipped the last of the wine I’d snagged earlier. I’d picked it up in the hopes it would calm me down, but it didn’t seem to be having that effect—I was just as wound up as ever. And then I spotted the Fae I was looking for, just as she bid goodnight to some of her companions.

Lady Brychan, the Fae for whom Maira had been a maid. I watched as Lady Brychan kissed the air in the direction of her friends, and then, as she walked out of the hall in the direction of her own rooms, I slipped into the hallway and started after her.

I stayed in the shadows as I followed her, grateful as I always was for the skills I’d learned as a bounty hunter. They came in handy in the real world more often than I could have imagined, and Lady Brychan was unaware that she was being followed. I kept it that way until she rounded a corner to a quiet passageway, and I was certain we were truly alone. Then I stepped into the light.

“I have some questions for you, Lady Brychan.”

The Fae noblewoman startled and spun around, her eyes wide, but when she saw it was me, she relaxed somewhat. “Oh, Lady Artemis. I hadn’t seen you there. Where did you—” She stopped herself and cleared her throat. “To what do I owe the pleasure of speaking with the House of Mauvais this evening?”

“I want to talk to you about your maid,” I said coolly.

She looked confused. “My…my what?”

“Your maid. Maira.”

Lady Brychan faltered. This was not what she had expected me to say, and she looked unnerved. Unnerved enough, in fact, that I wondered if I could finally be getting somewhere. She cleared her throat again. “I’m sure I don’t know why you would want to speak to me about a *maid*, Lady—”

“A maid whom you no longer employ, isn’t that right?” I cut in.

Her eyes widened, but just for a moment. I smiled and stepped forward, linking arms with Lady Brychan.

“I just want to know if Maira is okay. I got to know the little Fae a day or so ago, and I’ve noticed she hasn’t been around lately. I wanted to know if everything was all right,” I said conversationally.

Lady Brychan seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, and—this close to her—I could feel her whole body relax. “Oh, yes, of course. We take great care with our staff, you see.”

“So, where is she?” I pressed.

Lady Brychan glanced around, looking nervous again. She shook her head. “Not here. I’ll tell you somewhere else, but not here.”

Pleasantly surprised, I followed Lady Brychan back toward her room. This was going to be easier than I’d thought.

Lady Brychan opened the door and waved me in, then looked up and down the corridor before she closed the door after us.

She turned to look at me. “What do you want to know about Maira?” she asked.

“Where is she?” I asked again. “Is she missing?”

Lady Brychan looked surprised by the question. “*Missing?* No. No, of course she’s not missing. She had to leave for a…personal matter.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Was it her sister?”

Lady Brychan’s mouth fell open in surprise. “However did you know that?”

“I found a letter Maira had received from her. Her sister Owena was thought to be missing, wasn’t she? And what do you know about that?” I asked.

Lady Brychan looked down at her hands. “Yes, I—I did hear about that. And all I can really say is that Maira is all right. And thank you for your concern, Lady Artemis. It’s very generous, and I’m sure our Maira will be very gratified that you took an interest, but she really has gone to be with her sister after a great deal of time apart. I know Maira missed her sister dearly.”

I took this in, considering whether I believed any of it, and if so, which parts.

“I know Owena was pregnant,” I said flatly.

Lady Brychan gasped.

“I don’t know who the father is, or who prevented Maira and Owena from communicating for so long, but I’d like to know both those things,” I said.

Lady Brychan gave me a startled look and shook her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Why?” I pressed. I had balled my hands into fists, but I tucked them into the folds of my dress, trying to hide my frustrations. I hated getting so close to the truth, only to walk away with nothing over and over again. I was sick of playing these games. I wanted the truth this time.

Lady Brychan looked grave, and her lips pressed into a thin line as she shook her head. “The father is someone very powerful. If I could offer a word of advice, it would be more prudent for you not to get involved, Lady Artemis.

I narrowed my eyes. “Is it Kastian?” I asked, voicing my first guess.

Her eyes darted away from mine. “Powerful people have the ability to make problems disappear. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, I certainly do,” I assured her. I did understand that, and her response to my question was all but the confirmation I was looking for. Kastian was the father, and he had made Owena leave. Kastian was bad news, and now he was connected to my sister. “Thank you for your help, Lady Brychan. Have a good night.”

“Thank you,” she said, still watching me nervously as I left the room.

My mind was spinning with possibilities as I walked into the hallway. Kastian had gotten Owena pregnant, and then made her all but disappear. But why? There were plenty of options, but what was his game? And how could Cali get roped into it without her consent?

My thoughts were miles away as I walked back toward my own rooms, but they were brought sharply back to the moment when I heard someone snap my name.

I knew who it was before I turned.

Celeste.

“You’re coming with me,” she hissed, grabbing me tightly by the arm.

Surprised by the strength of her grip, I tried to pull my arm from her grasp, but she snatched at me again.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You have been *severely* neglecting all of your duties as the Mauvais heir, Artemis. You have barely attended any of the peace talks. Instead I hear you’ve been running around doing gods know what. All that ends here and now.”

Gritting my teeth, I pulled my arm away again, but Celeste didn’t give up without a fight, leaving nail scratches up and down the flesh of my arm.

My arm burned, but I ignored it. “This might surprise you, but I do understand what’s at stake here,” I told her.

She glared at me. “Your actions tell me that you do not, which is why I’m putting my foot down.”

“Putting your foot down? What does that mean?” I asked.

“You will now be under surveillance by my guards. If you try to escape them, I promise it will only get worse for you,” Celeste said menacingly.

“*Worse?*” I repeated.

She nodded. “I will lock you in your room at night. And if you try to leave, there will be even more dire consequences.”

I stared at her in astonishment. She was going to treat me like a child? “You can’t just lock me in like that.”

“Watch me,” she snapped.

“No one cares that I’m Kadmos’s daughter,” I shot back. “You wanted them to care, but it hasn’t made any difference. Everyone here is more interested in the marriage between Cali and Kastian.”

Celeste’s nostrils flared, and I knew I’d hit on the issue she was most furious about. “And that is exactly the problem. They don’t see what I do.”

“And what is that?” I asked warily.

“It’s you,” she said, her eyes flashing.

“What’s me?

“You’re the solution.”

I was struggling to follow her train of thought. “The solution to what?”

Celeste’s eyes flashed, making her look nearly unhinged. “Don’t you see, Artemis? You’re the solution to everything. And I’ll show them.”

**Episode 5371**

I hesitated for a long moment, wondering what Kastian could be up to. I didn’t trust him. I had no reason to. Not yet anyway. He was asking me to work with him so he could figure out who was trying to kill him, and possibly trying to kill me too. It actually kind of reminded me of Lucian when he had first appeared. Nobody had trusted Lucian then—with good reason—but we’d worked together and ended up as allies, even if he was occasionally insufferable.

“So?” Kastian asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked over at him. “So what?”

He raised an eyebrow. “*Are* we going to be allies?”

I thought fast. “I am willing to help you,” I conceded, “but there’s no way I’m willing to do it through marriage. That’s off the table. So what’s another option?”

Kastian considered this. “We can discuss the marriage issue later. If I don’t figure out who is trying to kill me, marriage won’t be an option at all. Which would mean no truce, and the Fae war will continue—maybe forever. So, for right now, I’ll just take you up on the offer for help.”

I set my jaw. I didn’t like the way this guy was talking—like he was the one who was calling all the shots. That was how it had been since I’d stepped foot into the Fae world—everyone else had been telling me what to do. If it wasn’t Kastian, then it was Hera, and I was sick of it.

“Listen, Kastian,” I snapped, “I’m not throwing my life away to marry you and end some war that—when you get right down to it—doesn’t have much to do with me. I want to help the Fae, but this really isn’t my battle to fight, and I’m not going to sacrifice myself for something that might not even work. And I’m *definitely* not going to help you until you come clean.”

“Come clean about what?” Kastian said, eyeing me keenly.

“You said that you didn’t kill anyone, so what’s up with the rumors?” I demanded.

“The rumors about the girls?” he asked, his expression going dark again.

I nodded. “Yeah, exactly. If you didn’t have anything to do with anything, then why is your name associated with all these girls who have disappeared? Why’s there all this smoke if there’s no fire? Are you a magician or something? Are you the Houdini of the Fae world?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know who this *Houdini* is, Caliana. I have never heard of a Fae who goes by that name, but I can tell you that my name is associated with the disappearance of these girls because there are people in the Fae world who want nothing more than to muddy my reputation.”

Frustration shot through me. “Are you kidding me with this?”

“What?”

“I need you to stop answering my questions without actually answering them.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I took a deep breath and tried to speak as calmly as I could. “Either you tell me what’s really going here, or I am going to turn around and walk away.”

Kastian gave me a long look. And then he started to laugh. “And where, exactly, will you go, Caliana?” he wondered.

I looked around, confused. “What do you mean?”

“We’re outside the briar wall. I don’t know if you’ve thought this far ahead, but if you want to go back, you’re going to need my help.”

I opened my mouth to answer but closed it again when I realized that he was right. Briarkeep was a fortress. I doubted I was going to be able to break back through the wall, even using my Fae magic. But I also realized that—while I did need Kastian—he needed me too. Maybe even more than I needed him.

He knew it too. I could see it in his eyes.

I narrowed mine. “I want answers.”

He sighed. “If you must know, the girls were pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” I blinked, shocked. I hadn’t even thought of that as one of the scenarios, but it made sense. Too much sense. “Because of you. You’re the father.”

He nodded. “I arranged for them to leave—”

“Why?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why do you think, Caliana?”

“I don’t know,” I ground out. “Explain it to me.”

“To avoid the scandal. And the shame—”

“*Your* shame,” I snarled. “*Your* scandal.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes. It wouldn’t have been good for them either.”

I shook my head, disgusted. “You’re a coward. A selfish coward.”

“You don’t understand,” he snapped back. “You are not of the Fae world. It’s easy for you to pass judgment, but this is not your world, as you say. I’m destined to become the leader of the Dark Fae. There are expectations I must live up to—”

“What expectations?” I cut in.

He ignored me. “And by marrying you—an heir of the Light Fae—it will cement my place in history.”

“You can forget that,” I shot back. “I’m not about to give myself to you. There has to be another way.”

His eyes flashed with intensity. “Do you want the war to end or not?”

“Of course I do—” I said.

“Because I am the only one who can do it.”

I stared at him, wondering if he was serious. Kastian was an ass, that much I knew for sure, but I’d never heard him say anything like this before. “Are you for real?”

“Of course,” he said gruffly.

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you really think you’re *that* important?”  
 He pressed his lips together for a moment, then shook his head, looking annoyed. “You don’t have to believe me, Caliana. Not now. We can discuss all the reasons later.”

I considered this and wondered how hard to push back. I knew that I was going to need him to get back through the briar wall, but I needed something else from him now.

“I need proof.”

He had turned, but now he looked back at me, surprised. “I beg your pardon?”

“Proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“Proof that those missing girls are actually okay.”

He took a long-suffering breath. “And what kind of proof do you expect me to have out here?” he asked, gesturing around at the expanse of woods in which we found ourselves.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “That sounds to me like another excuse.”

He thought for a moment. “I can provide you proof, but you’ll have to wait until later, when we’re back in the Fae court.”

I gave him a skeptical look. I wasn’t sure what I believed, and I still didn’t know if he had anything to do with Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance.

He made an irritated noise. “As much as I would love to stand here watching you weigh your options, I do have to remind you that we need to hurry. Someone is after me and wants me dead.”

“I know that, but—”

“Or I suppose it could *not* be me,” he reasoned, cutting me off. “Maybe it’s *you* they want dead.”

Annoyed, I was about to tell him to just forget about working together at all when something made me pause. Maybe he was right—maybe there was some truth to what he’d just said. What if someone was actually trying to kill me?

I swallowed hard.

Whether someone was trying to kill Kastian or me, someone was trying to do *something*, and he and I did need each other, at least for now.

“Fine,” I finally said.

Kastian nodded, looking pleased.

“So…” I looked around. “Where are we?”

“Not precisely sure,” Kastian murmured, looking around as well, “but I don’t think we can be far from the wall. Let’s take a look around.”

We started walking, looking carefully around. The night was dark, but there was just enough moon to see by. Kastian led the way until we came to a row of tall, thick hedges. There seemed to be some kind of a path alongside the hedges, which wound and turned.

We walked for a long time, and when we passed a familiar-looking rock formation for what felt like the third time, I stopped.

“I think we’ve come right back to where we started,” I exclaimed.

“I’m sure we haven’t,” Kastian said.

“And I’m sure we have. Are we lost?”

Kastian scoffed, like I’d just asked the most ridiculous question in the world. “*Lost?* Caliana, what a question. Of course we’re not lost.”

But then he turned and headed left, in a completely different direction.

I rolled my eyes and followed him. And rolled them again five minutes later when we hit a dead end.

“Okay, so that’s not great,” I muttered.

And to my horror, Kastian didn’t immediately disagree. He turned around, scanning the hedges, and I saw something I’d not yet seen in his eyes: fear.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my stomach sinking.

“Well, nothing much,” he said, though his voice shook slightly. “It’s just that we’re stuck in a maze.”

**Episode 5372**

**Xavier**

Fury coursed through me as the guard shoved Marius and me down the passageway. I could feel that some of it was left over from Cenwyn’s drugs, but some of it was in response to the rough handling of the Fae guards.

“Keep moving!” the guard behind me barked.

Marius and I were hauled across a courtyard and toward a large wood structure that looked like stables. Then the guard at my back gave me a shove toward the wooden building, and the scent of animals grew stronger.

I ground my teeth. That we were going to be held like animals really pissed me off, but I was trying to keep it together. I had a feeling I was on pretty thin ice here in the Fae world, considering I’d almost throat-punched Kastian earlier. No one in either Fae court was fond of me at the moment.

I shot a look around, sizing up the guards escorting Marius and me. There were only two, so I figured I could probably take them down pretty easily—they were only Fae, after all—but I shook my head. It went against my instinct, but I was going to try to use fighting my way out of here only as a last resort. It felt foreign to just wait like this, but I had to think of Cali—I didn’t want the consequences of my actions to reflect on her, and I knew they easily could.

When we got to the barn, the guard at my side pushed the door open. I looked inside, and—sure enough—the stalls had been made into makeshift cells. When we got closer, I could see that they’d even been fitted with iron shackles.

Marius twisted to look at the guards. “Listen, this has all been just a big misunderstanding. Lord Cenwyn is waiting for us now. He’s probably wondering where we are—”

“Why?” the guard behind him asked. “What business do you have with a lord?”

I kept my mouth shut, but Marius affected a lofty sneer.

“What business do *you* have asking what business a lord has? Suffice to say that it is *personal*, and you had no right to take us from it. And let me tell you that Lord Cenwyn will be made aware of this, make no mistake.”

I wasn’t really falling for Marius’s fancy-guy act, but I couldn’t help but notice that the guards seemed a bit wary. That was interesting. Were they afraid of Cenwyn? Or was it just the general threat of someone from the Fae noble class being pissed at them?

Silent but loaded looks passed between the guards.

The one holding Marius shrugged. “Best to let Lord Cenwyn answer this for himself, then. We’ll keep you here for now. If it’s a mistake, then fine. We’ll let you go.”

And they pushed us into one of the cells and started to shackle us up.

The metal was iron—I could tell by the smell of it, like old blood. The guard who handled the iron had pulled on thick leather gloves, and when he closed them over my wrists, the metal felt cold. But when the iron clasped over Marius’s flesh, he let out a muffled grunt of pain.

I looked over just in time to see a flash of his real face.

Shit.

“Wait! He—he’s glamoured!” one of the guards shouted.

“That’s our cue,” I shrugged ruefully. And in one swift motion, I tore the bolted shackles from the wall. My hands shifted to my wolf and burst from the iron encircling my wrists—the iron was no match for my werewolf strength. I swung it around like a mace toward the guards.

They shouted out as it hit them, the iron burning their skin on contact.

Marius pried his wrist from the one shackle he was in, but it looked as though the iron had stopped the glamour that had been concealing him, and he was back to looking like himself again.

“It’s Marius Raistlin!” one of the guards shouted, looking up at him from beneath a fast-swelling eye.

Marius shot the guy a winning smile. “In the flesh. Very nice to meet you.” Then he kicked the guard’s legs out from under him, taking him to the ground, and pulled out a knife.

The other guard lunged, but I was ready for him and batted him away easily with my hand, which was still a werewolf paw. This left bloody gouge marks down the right side of the guard’s face. He bellowed and came at me again.

Even as I crouched low, ready for another attack, it occurred to me that we were making a shit-ton of noise, and it was possible that it was going to draw other guards to investigate. I could only hope the stables were remote enough that no one would hear us.

The guard with the swollen eye had gotten to his feet and punched Marius in the face. “*That’s* for my sister!”

I yanked the guard off Marius and threw him to the ground, but when I looked back at Marius, he only shrugged.

“I probably deserved that.”

I rolled my eyes. The other guard charged me, but I was able to knock him out with a quick uppercut. This left both guards unconscious, but alive, on the floor of the stables.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, and Marius nodded.

But we hadn’t even stepped toward the door when it swung open, and in walked another six guards, and with them, Hera.

*Shit.*

The woman looked around, shocked. “What in *blazes* is this?!”

I stepped over the guards at my own feet and looked at the guards flanking Hera. I did some quick math in my head, trying to determine whether I should keep fighting my way out.

One of the guards with Hera stepped in front of her and pointed to Marius. “My lady! I regret to inform you that this is the notorious rake, *Marius Raistlin*!”

Hera waved an airy hand. “Yes, I know who he is.”

The guard looked momentarily confused. “But—you are not safe. He’s quite the dangerous bounty hunter. And he’s with the wolf!”

“It is all right. I’m quite safe here.” She gave me a pointed look, then she glanced down at the unconscious Fae guards on the ground and back at her own guards. “Take these two to the healers. Leave now, and pretend as though none of this has happened.”

Her guards didn’t hesitate to follow her orders. They walked forward, picked up the guards, and hustled out of the stable, leaving Marius and me alone with Hera.

I looked at the tall, dignified woman, who looked back with a closed expression. I had no idea what she was going to do or say. What I did know was that I was done fighting. I had known that the moment she sent the guards away. I wasn’t going to hurt Cali’s grandmother, no matter what tension existed between us. That would be a bridge too far, even for me.

“Thanks for helping us out of a jam,” I said dryly. “I know you haven’t been my biggest fan. Especially after earlier. All that stuff about staying away from Cali and everything.”  
 Hera made an irritated noise. “But you found a way to get into something else, didn’t you? Both of you boys did. I know what brought you here. It’s why I came. You were in Cenwyn’s room. Why?”

This surprised me. I hadn’t expected her to know so much, or to be so straightforward. I glanced over at Marius, and he looked back, just as surprised. We both hesitated. I didn’t know if I could trust Hera with the information we had. Even Cali thought her grandmother might have been involved in Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance, and that she’d accidentally almost poisoned Cali.

“I’m waiting,” Hera said pointedly.

“It’s on a need-to-know basis,” I told her.

Hera didn’t look pleased. She pressed her lips into a thin line. “Fine. As long as you’re doing *something* to protect my granddaughters, carry on. And stay out of trouble,” she added stonily.

Marius’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“That’s…it?” he asked, like he couldn’t believe it.

She huffed, like her patience was growing thin. “That’s it. But you should really be more careful from now on, shouldn’t you? Your pretty face is a bit exposed.” She turned to me. “As for you, it’s probably for the best if you continue to stay away from Cali. I can keep this quiet, but only for so long. Don’t make it worse for yourself, or for anyone else in the meantime. Do you understand?”

I nodded, taking this in. Then I added, because I couldn’t help it, “And don’t try to poison anyone again.”

Hera’s face flushed. “Make yourself scarce,” she snapped testily. Then she turned on her heel and stormed out of the stable.

For a moment, neither Marius nor I said a word. We just looked at each other.

“What now?” he asked.

“It’s simple. We keep going with our plan.”

Marius raised an eyebrow. “Cenwyn?”

I nodded. “Let’s kill the bastard.”

**Episode 5373**

“A *maze*?” I repeated. “We’re stuck in a maze?!”

“Don’t panic—”

“Don’t *panic*?! Why shouldn’t I panic? Panicking seems like a very reasonable thing to do here, Kastian. I trusted you! I took a leap, and the first thing you managed to do is get us trapped in a maze!”

Kastian looked offended. “I did not *trap* us in here,” he snapped back. “Have you conveniently forgotten the shaft that we just used to escape the crypt?! *That’s* how we got here! I didn’t choose to come out here. This isn’t my fault!”

“So what are we going to do?” I demanded.

“Just give me a moment to think,” Kastian said quietly, looking around.

“Think about what?”

“I need to get my bearings.”

I eyed him, anger and frustration raging through me. “You know, a question occurs to me, Kastian. How can you be the vital link to achieving peace when you can’t even find your way out of a *freaking bush*?!”

Kastian glared at me. “Follow me, Caliana. Just try to keep up.”

He started walking back, leading the way. I huffed angrily, but—because there didn’t seem to be any other options—I followed.

We walked along the tall hedges, and Kastian took the next possible turn. We followed the path between the hedges. I looked up as we walked—the growth loomed over us, tall enough to dwarf us—and as we kept on, I got the sense that we were walking in ever narrowing circles. The path grew more and more narrow. Kastian and I were walking side by side, and as we went on, we moved closer and closer to each other. First our shoulders were touching, then our arms, then practically our whole bodies were pressed against each other. We were practically embracing, and it was way too close for my comfort.

I was about to ask him how much longer this was going to go on when he finally stopped.

“Well, clearly this is not the right way.”

“You think,” I muttered.

“I appreciate all the support,” he said icily.

“Maybe I should try to navigate for a while,” I said, glancing around.

Kastian managed to look insulted. “I assure you that I can get you out, Caliana.” And with that he pushed past me and stormed onward, taking a direction I could have sworn we’d already tried.

I followed, but ten minutes later—as I could have predicted—we ended up at yet another dead end.

“Okay, that’s it!” I announced.

“What’s it?” Kastian snapped. His usually tidy hair looked mussed, and his face was flushed. It was clear we were both reaching the ends of our ropes.

“I’ve had it. We are trying something else.”

“What?”

“Me.”

“*You?*”

“Yeah, me.” I said, looking around with an assessing glance. “I lived in Minnesota and have been in enough corn mazes to know when it’s time to admit defeat.”

“What in blazes is a corn maze—” Kastian started, but I didn’t let him finish.

I pulled him back so that he was well behind me, held up my hands, summoned my magic, and threw a blast straight at the dead end.

When the smoke from the blast cleared, there was a hole in the hedge just big enough to walk through. Through it, I could see that it opened to yet another wall of hedges.

Kastian raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed to see you wield such power, Caliana. You and I will make a formidable team.”

“Yeah, we’re *never* going to be a team,” I muttered, but kept it under my breath as I stepped through the hole and blasted the next wall of shrubs.

I kept this up, blasting the next wall, then the next, until I finally stepped out of the maze and back into the forest, with Kastian at my heels.

It had been exhausting, and, weakened by my efforts, I stumbled on the uneven ground.

Kastian was at my side in an instant, his arm around my waist, holding me up. “Caliana, are you all right?”  
 I pulled myself free from his arm. “Yeah, I’m okay.” I had exercised much more magic than I usually used in one go, but I wasn’t about to admit that to Kastian. “I’m fine.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he stepped away.

We both looked around to see that we were in a wooded area, but nothing looked familiar. I had no idea where we were, or which way the keep was. It was dark, and a bolt of fear shot through me. What if whoever had tried to kill Kastian was still looking for us out here? What defenses did we have against them out here in the dark?

“Do you know where we are?” I asked quietly.

Kastian nodded, looking certain. “Yes.”

“You’re sure? Not like the maze?”  
 He didn’t look happy about this dig. “I know where the wall is.”

“You’re not going to lead us into another trap?”

“Caliana, I will not—”

“Because I’ve followed you before and ended up falling into the bowels of a booby-trapped crypt where we were nearly skewered, and then we just got into an endless maze—and who the hell builds a maze like that in the middle of nowhere? What *is* this place, anyway—”

Suddenly Kastian took a step toward me and clapped a hand over my mouth.

“*Shh!*” he hissed.

Annoyed as hell, I was about to bite down on his hand when he glared at me, and there was something about the look in his eyes that made me pause.

“What?” I muttered, though the question was muffled against his hand.

He managed to gesture with his eyes, then pushed me down, so we were both crouching.

My heart was racing, and I wished I could kick myself. I had been so stupid—how could I let myself trust this guy? I should have listened to my gut and gotten the hell away from him when I’d had the chance. But if thought he was going to be able to make me disappear like the other girls, he had another thing coming. If he even tried, I was going to fight back. I was going to blast him into a million pieces.

I was glaring at him, but Kastian’s eyes were focused on something ahead.

Begrudgingly, I followed his gaze, but the woods were dark, and it was hard to make anything out. It was probably just Kastian being Kastian, trying to make himself seem more important after the embarrassing misadventure of the maze.

But then I saw something out of the corner of my eye, and I drew in a breath. I focused my eyes, peering hard into the darkness, and saw a shape. And then several shapes.

And they were headed in our direction.

What were they?

My heart felt as though it was going to beat out of my chest, and I was sure whatever the shapes were could surely hear its frantic pounding. Which only made my heart beat even harder.

Slowly, carefully, Kastian pulled both of us to standing and backed us up. We walked backward, not taking our wide, terrified eyes off the moving shapes until we reached the maze again. He felt his way back into the maze through the hold I’d just blasted, and we stepped behind the hedge.

I held my breath, and I felt Kastian do the same. We listened as footsteps approached.

Someone murmured. Someone else murmured back. A conversation. Then the footsteps came to a halt.

I swallowed hard and flexed my fingers, readying them to summon my sword, or my shield, whichever I would need.

Behind me, Kastian moved slightly, and I wished more than anything that it was Greyson with me instead of Kastian, whom I had not yet learned to trust. I was so terrified, and I would have given anything to be with someone I truly trusted.

I peeked around the hedge—the shapes had materialized into a group of guards. I watched them, and after a tense moment, there was the sound of laughter. Then they began to move, and I ducked behind the hedge again.

There were footsteps again, but they retreated. I listened until they faded completely. When they were gone, Kastian released his hold on me, and I took a step away.

Without a word, he and I stepped out of the maze again. He gestured, and, moving in the opposite direction the guards had taken, led us back through the woods.

We walked in silence until I could make out the shape of the impenetrable briar wall.

Kastian glanced back at me. “I told you I knew the way.”

I rolled my eyes. Even after everything, it was almost like he couldn’t stop himself from saying it. But I didn’t care.

“Can you get us in?” *That* was the only thing I cared about.

But before Kastian could answer my question, we heard voices in the distance. It was the guards. They were coming back, and there was nowhere to hide.

I reached for Kastian’s arm. “We have to run!”

But Kastian shook himself free of my grip. An instant later he had disappeared into the briar wall, leaving me behind.

**Episode 5374**

**Artemis**

I swallowed hard, feeling uncomfortable. I didn’t like the intensity of Celeste’s tone, and I didn’t like the fervent way she was looking at me. I knew she had been waiting a long time for Adair to come back, and then to have me just fall into her lap had to have been some of the best news she could have gotten. But…what had she meant by I’m *the solution*?

I was already walking and talking like the Mauvais heir. I’d been announced to everyone in both Fae courts, and absolutely no one seemed to care. So what more was there to do?

“What do you mean, *I’m* the solution?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure if I was ready to hear her answer.

“The marriage idea has taken over the peace talks completely, and it’s despicable. Everyone seems to have forgotten that we’ve been through this once before, and that marriage didn’t end well. So why would this one?” Celeste asked irritably.

“I don’t know…” I started, but Celeste didn’t seem to be waiting for answers, and she kept talking.

“Everyone thought you were dead, but you’re not.” She began to pace the width of the hallway. “You were always meant to be a symbol of peace and hope. They should care that you’ve returned, and that we’ve been able to confirm who you are.”  
 I stared at her for a moment, waiting for her to make some sense. “And yet they don’t.”

She rounded on me. “But I’m going to *make* them.”

“Celeste—” I started.

“*You* are the Mauvais heir,” she said, her eyes flashing dangerously as she advanced on me. “*You* are Kadmos’s daughter. *You* are the one who should be the most important figure at this moment. *You* represent everything we’ve been trying to achieve and haven’t been able to for centuries. I will not let them take that from us because there is some shiny new scandal afoot!”

I stared at her, struck by how much Celeste seemed to believe in me—if that was what I was going to call how she spoke about me. It was strange, for sure, but it was something. And she did make some good points. The way she talked made me feel as though my life had so much purpose—that my very existence was one of destiny. This felt especially significant, because at the moment, I felt so flat and directionless. Like I didn’t have much purpose or destiny of my own. So her words felt strangely flattering. Almost hopeful. And the idea of following in the footsteps of my father *did* appeal to me. To see things as he saw them, to do the things he’d wanted to do. But I also just wanted to find him.

Right now, though, it didn’t seem like that was an option. Unless I got out of here. And the only reason I was here was because of Celeste and the Fae promise she was holding me to.

I felt a hot flash of anger as I looked at the woman.

I shot a glance down the hallway, which was still empty, then grabbed hold of her wrist. She tried to pull away, but I held tight and pulled her into my room, slamming the door behind us. “And what do you want me to do?” I demanded. “After you install me as the leader here? Be some kind of figurehead? Do I actually get to have opinions of my own, or just be your little puppet?”

“Artemis, whatever do you—” she started, but it was my turn to talk over her.

“You’re the one forcing me to be here,” I went on. “It’s not my choice, remember? The Fae promise?”

“Don’t you understand?” she said urgently. “Can’t you see? I’m helping you reach your full potential. If your father is out there, do you really think you’re going to be able to find him with no resources? If you do this, you will have the ability to tap into things you could only dream of.”

I gritted my teeth. Celeste was talking a big game, and it was hard not to fall for it, but I tried not to let myself get carried away. I was used to doing a lot with a little. That was what I knew, I reminded myself.

“And what’s in this for you?” I asked her shortly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What’s in this for you?” I repeated. “You’re married to my uncle, but I don’t see him. Do you? Why are you so set on the Mauvais thing? Because you want the prestige of the name? Because you want power? Or because you want Adair? What is it?”

Celeste glared at me. “How dare you!”

It was intimidating, but I withstood the wave of anger.

“That’s not an answer.”

She took a deep, dignified breath. “What I want is my world restored to how it once was. Yes, perhaps that includes my husband, my married house, but it also includes the Fae world. One Fae world. There is a way this world is *supposed* to operate—a better way—and we are not doing it.”

“And why are you against the marriage?” I asked. “It’s what my father and mother did. Why wouldn’t it work again?”

Celeste shook her head emphatically. “No.”

“Why not?” I pressed.

“You don’t understand.”

“So explain it to me.”

“If Kastian marries Caliana, it will only make the Haseneau family more powerful,” she said.

I nodded, taking this in. “And you don’t want that.”

Celeste lifted her chin. “Absolutely not.”

This was finally making some sense to me. “So it’s not necessarily the marriage that you object to, it’s just Kastian as part of the marriage.”

Celeste narrowed her eyes. “Do you have any idea what they would do if they had power?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do you think this war would actually end?” She shook her head. “They would only start a new one.”

I stared at her, shocked. “How?”

“Kastian Haseneau wants the same thing everyone else in his family has always wanted—power. Absolute power. The Haseneau family has never made any secret of the fact that they would like one person in charge of both the Light Fae and the Dark Fae.”

“So, they want a king?” I asked.

Celeste nodded. “Absolutely. They are single-minded. They will do anything to gain power and influence, no matter who they have to step on to get it. When Adair left, instead of supporting me, they tried to exploit my loss, tried to use it to show how the Mauvais family had lost its power, and only *they* could step in to fill the vacuum. And so, ever since, I’ve been doing everything I can to restore power to the Mauvais family. But without Adair, it’s very difficult.”

I nodded as it slowly dawned on me. “So that’s why you’re looking for him.”

“I had hoped that bringing Adair back would restore order, but he made his choice.” Her expression darkened for a moment, then it lightened, and she nearly smiled. “But then you came, and you are even better. You have something that the Haseneaus do not have—a legitimate claim to power. Kadmos was as close as we ever had to having one potential ruler.”

“Right,” I said, as the weight of what she was saying set in.

Celeste bit the corner of her lip, and as she spoke, her eyes looked slightly brighter than usual. “Adair chose to leave, and I’ve asked you to stay, I know that. The Fae promise keeps you here, but you truly don’t grasp what you are capable of, Artemis. You have been destined for this role since you were born.”

I stared at her, trying to wrap my brain around what she was saying to me. It was a lot—nearly overwhelming, and I took a shaking breath. I tried to hear what she was saying; I hoped I was taking it in.

I thought I understood Celeste’s reservations about Kastian and his family gaining more power, and what they might do with it if they had that power. Given that I was already concerned about Kastian’s shady dealings, imagining what he might do as a king was pretty alarming. And what would he do with *Cali* once he had the power of a king? My sister was in danger while she was close to Kastian—that much I knew.

I looked at Celeste. “So what would you have me do?” I asked her. “Go to more meetings?”

Celeste reached out, grasping my hand tightly in hers. “The meetings are not the answer, Artemis.”

There was something about the look in her eyes that made my stomach drop. “Then what is?”

“What I am going to ask you to do is something only you can do.”

“What?” I asked.

“You are a bounty hunter, Artemis. You spent years tracking prey, yes?”

“Yes,” I said slowly.

She squeezed my hands tightly. “You must kill Kastian Haseneau.”

**Episode 5375**

Shocked, I stared at the closed wall in front of which Kastian had just stood—right before he’d *abandoned* me. The thorn-covered briar vines were undisturbed. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed anyone had just passed through it. But I *had* seen it, and I knew Kastian had just gone through—and left me behind.

“That little *bastard*,” I hissed. I couldn’t believe it.

Actually, that wasn’t true. I absolutely *could* believe it. I shook my head, furious with myself. I should have seen this coming from a mile away. I never should have trusted him. My gut had been telling me to stay far away from him from the moment I first met him. Xavier had been telling me the same thing. I just hadn’t listened.

Everything he had told me was probably a lie. Not only had he probably murdered those missing girls, but he’d probably done the same to Greyson and Rishika. He was not only a murderer, but a coward, too.

“Damn it,” I muttered, anger rising up the back of my throat like bile. If I caught up to him, he was going to live to regret this moment.

But that wasn’t going to do me any good—not right now. Right now, I needed to not get caught by the guards who were getting closer and closer. I was tired from using so much magic getting Kastian and me out of the maze, but I could hear the guards closing in, so I conjured my sword and gripped it tightly. I was ready to use it, I just wasn’t sure how. I eyed the wall, wondering if I could slice through it—or if I was going to have to use the sword on the guards.

I must have been more drained than I’d thought, because I could feel myself trembling as I tried to decide what I was going to do. Their voices were getting louder, and I figured that I was only going to have time to do one or the other before they attacked or captured me.

*Xavier! Are you there?!*

If only I could reach him. I knew he would be angry that I had managed to get trapped outside the wall, but he also wouldn’t hesitate to try to help me. Maybe he could pass through the wall, shift, and then we could race away together with me on his back. Maybe we could escape the guards that way.

*Xavier?!*

But there was no response.

I shook my head. I didn’t know why I was surprised. The keep was nearly impenetrable. There was no way the mind link worked through it.

With a shaking breath, I turned to the wall and raised my sword. I had just started to swing it downward when a hand broke through, grabbed me tightly, and dragged me into the briars.

In an instant I was surrounded by sharp, thorny branches. They scraped at me, pulling at my skin and my clothes. I tumbled to the ground, rolled, then jumped to my feet and slashed with my sword before I even had a chance to look around.

“It’s me!” a voice barked angrily. “It’s Kastian! Open your damn eyes, Caliana!”

I did look at him, glaring. “You *left* me!” I snapped. “Alone! I could have been captured! Or killed!”

He didn’t offer an apology, or an explanation. “I was only looking out for your safety. You should be thanking me!”

“Why should I *thank* you?” I asked, advancing on him, my sword still raised.

He held up his hands, as if to ward off my attack. “Think about it. What if we both came through together? *Blindly?* We would have had no idea what we might’ve stumbled into.”

I aimed the point of my sword at him. “Something like this?”

He pushed the point away from his face. “Put that away.”

“Why should I?” I asked.

He sighed. “Don’t you understand that I never would have abandoned you?”

I gaped at him, baffled. “What are you talking about? That’s literally what you did, you coward! You abandoned me!”

“I wouldn’t have abandoned you because you are too important,” he explained, like I was a child.

I glared. “And what? Is that supposed to impress me? Make me swoon? You need me to make your dreams come true? Your dreams are gaining power, Kastian, nothing more.”

He shook his head. “You know what I mean. We need each other.”

I lowered my sword with a huff. My anger wasn’t going away, but maintaining it at eye level was hard, and I was exhausted.

He smiled. “I’m glad we’ve agreed to work together, Caliana. You won’t regret it.”

I snorted. “Please. I regret it already.”

Ignoring me, he turned and started walking, heading through the trees toward the courtyard.

I watched him for a moment. “You’re leaving me? *Again?*”

He turned to look back at me. “While I’m touched that you’ll miss me, I have some things to take care of. I will be in touch.”

I rolled my eyes. This guy was impossible. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d met someone who was so freaking full of themselves.

Well—maybe Xavier. And Greyson. But that was different. They had reason to be. Kastian was handsome, but he wasn’t Greyson or Xavier.

“Hang on,” I called after him. “I have some questions for you.”

“*More* questions?” he asked, turning to look at me with a long-suffering sigh. “Haven’t I answered enough of your questions for one evening?”

“Obviously not,” I said shortly, walking over to him.

He sighed as I drew near. “What more can I do for you?”

I tipped my head back toward the wall. “I want to know how you were able to breach the wall.”

He smiled. “Oh, I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“A Fae never reveals his secrets.”

“What?”

He leaned toward me. “And let’s just keep the fact that I can do that little trick between us, shall we?” He winked and walked quickly away before I could call him back.

I watched him go, feeling both relieved to see him leave and also anxious. No matter how Kastian justified it after the fact, he had abandoned me twice now, and both times were very treacherous. Though he did pull me through the briar wall at the last moment, and apparently with little effort—though he didn’t want to tell me how.

I thought that over. That was interesting, because that was something not everyone could do, which meant that he could still be the one responsible for Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance.

I pushed a hand through my hair as my stomach clenched anxiously. Thinking about this made me even less willing to trust him. I had seen his plant magic, but who knew what other magic he had that he hadn’t yet revealed to me?

I chewed my lip nervously, thinking it all through. It made sense to continue to at least pretend to be his ally.

Just above me, a bird lifted off a tree branch with a loud cry, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. My heart thudded in my chest as I looked around. Kastian was long gone, and I appeared to be alone among the trees. Weighing out my options, it seemed clear that I probably shouldn’t just stand out here alone. Xavier was probably looking for me. He was not going to be happy that I had gone after Kastian.

I started toward the courtyard, hoping I was going to be able to get back to my room without running into any more guards. I knew that I was allowed to be in the courtyards, but I just didn’t want to have to explain myself to anyone tonight.

I had almost made it, but just as I reached the spot where the woods met the courtyard, I sensed—rather than heard—something behind me.

My senses suddenly on high alert, I slipped behind a tree. Hidden in the shadow of the thick oak, I looked back the way I’d come, toward the dark wall. There was an eerie light coming from it, and it grew brighter and brighter. I gasped as Cenwyn walked into view, emerging through a gap in the wall.

Almost immediately after he passed through it, the gap closed behind him, and the light vanished.

I clapped my hand over my mouth, terrified he might walk close enough to hear my rapid breathing. My heart was pounding, and I was thinking fast. If Cenwyn could pass through the wall, then *he* might have been the one responsible for taking Greyson and Rishika.

Hell, even if he hadn’t been the one, why was he passing through? He was a Light Fae noble! What business did he have outside the fortress? Something about this felt off. He had to be up to something—I could feel it.

When I was certain he was gone, I stepped out from behind the tree and hurried across the courtyard with only one thought in mind:

I had to find Xavier—immediately.

**Episode 5376**

**Xavier**

As I headed out of the stables, Marius was hot on my heels.

“Taking the back route?” he asked as I turned left into the dark night.

I nodded. “Hera was right about one thing—you can’t be seen around here. You saw how fast the guards recognized you. If everyone around here knows who you are, it’s going to make things a lot more complicated.”

Marius was quiet for a moment as we moved through the night. Then, “Listen, I want you to know that I’m fully supportive of this plan, but how exactly are you planning to kill someone who’s not even here right now?”

“Easy,” I said with a shrug. “He’s going to come back eventually, so we just wait.”

“How proactive of you,” he said with a chuckle. “Might I suggest something?”

“You might,” I said with a warning growl in my voice.

“I’m a bounty hunter, and you’re a werewolf, right?”  
 “Right.”

“So I think between the two of us, we can probably find him, don’t you think?” he asked.

“Whatever, sure. As long as we get Cenwyn, that’s all that matters to me.” But as I said it, my thoughts went to Cali. She mattered to me, and she had all this Fae peace talk stuff to think about, too. What if she ran into Cenwyn? She needed to know what was going on, too. “Listen, I think we should find Cali first.”

Marius nodded. “Yeah, probably a good idea. And Artemis. They should know what’s going on.”

I just had to hope that Cali wasn’t going to be too difficult to find. The last I’d heard, she was going after Kastian, which made my stomach feel like lead whenever I thought of it. I pushed a hand through my hair—she could be anywhere within the walls of this gigantic fortress. But that didn’t matter. I gave my head a shake. Wherever she was, I was going to find her. I had to. I had to protect her.

“Let’s go,” I muttered.

We started toward the keep, keeping a low profile and staying close to the shadows. This worked fine until a slight breeze blew up around me and I caught a scent on the wind that stopped me in my tracks.

“Cali,” I murmured.

“What?” Marius asked.

I held up a hand, signaling for him to stop. “Follow me.” I started off, all but running as I followed the scent. I didn’t want to lose it when the wind changed direction.

I veered left, sprinting now, when I saw her, and my breath caught. She was a complete mess—there were scratches on her face and arms, dust smudged across her cheeks and shoulders, and her hair was mussed.

I ran toward her. *Cali!*

Hearing me call her through the mind link, she spun toward me, her eyes going wide. “Xavier?!”

“What the hell happened to you?” I demanded. “Are you okay?” She was in my arms before I’d even thought about it, and I ran my hands over her, checking every inch of her.

“I’m okay—I’m fine,” she said, but I wasn’t convinced.

“You don’t look fine.”

“I am, I swear,” she said. “Really.”

“You heard the lady,” Marius said mildly, stepping toward us.

I glared at him, but Cali used the moment to step out of my arms.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she said.

“Yeah, there’s something I need to tell you, too.”

“I know who did it!”

Having spoken at the same time, we stared at each other in surprise.

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“You go first, what do *you* mean?” Cali said.

“I know who took Greyson and Rishika! It was Cenwyn, that prick,” I snarled.

Cali’s eyes went wide with shock, and she looked between Marius and me for a moment. “You know that for sure?”

I nodded. “Marius and I found Rishika’s blood in Cenwyn’s room, and I’d smelled Greyson’s scent on him before. There’s no way he’d have anything with Rishika’s blood on it if he wasn’t the one responsible for their disappearance. There’s just no way.”

“It’s true,” Marius confirmed. “I mean, it would be pretty impossible to explain any other way.”

“But what did *you* mean when you said you knew who did it?” I asked Cali.

“Cenwyn,” Cali said.

“How did *you* know?” I asked her, surprised.

“Remember we thought someone was coming and going through the briar wall? Well, I just came through with Kastian—”

I took a moment to react to that news, but Cali went on.

“—but when we came back in, I saw Cenwyn coming in too.”

“Where is he?” I asked, very interested in this development.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I was coming to find you to tell you. I didn’t want him to see me, because—as we both know—I’m a pretty bad liar.”

I nodded, relieved to know that Cali hadn’t made the more reckless choice and tried to follow him by herself. “Well, at least we know he’s inside the wall now.”

“So it could be either of them,” Marius said. “Kastian or Cenwyn. Now we know they can both pass through the wall.”

I shook my head. “No way. It has to be Cenwyn. We didn’t find anything with Kastian, and we looked. He’s been a red herring the whole time.”

“What the hell’s a red herring?” Marius asked, looking baffled.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not Kastian.”

“I have to agree,” Cali said. “But I’m worried about Artemis. We have to tell her.”

“Yeah, I think so too. I can go find her, tell her what’s going on,” Marius offered.

“Will you?” Cali asked. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Marius said. And with a quick look around, he slipped into the shadows, disappearing from sight.

“You should go back to your room,” I told Cali.

“What are you going to do?” Cali asked me.

“I’m going to find Cenwyn and take care of him.”

She gave me a long look. “You mean kill him.”

“What other option do we have?” I asked her.

She thought for a moment. “But we don’t know where Greyson and Rishika are, Xavier. If we kill him, how will we find them? It’s too big a risk.”

I shook my head. “Come on, he’s got to have people working for him.” I thought about the Fae Marius and I had spoken to, the guy who had been in charge of cleaning the blood and shit off of Cenwyn’s boots. He had known something weird was up. “Other people know something. Guys like Cenwyn don’t get their own hands dirty.”

Cali chewed her lip, the way she did when she was nervous. “I don’t know. I’m just not sure killing him is the best option, Xavier.”

“It’s not up to you,” I growled. “This asshole’s taken my brother, and that’s enough for me.”

I didn’t want to say much more about that, but it was true. I knew I gave Greyson a lot of shit and always had. But he was *my* brother, so that was *my* job. No one else’s.

“I’m taking you back to your room,” I said firmly, taking hold of her arm.

“Xavier, I don’t want to just go sit on my hands in my room,” she said, sounding irritated. “If you’re going to find Cenwyn, then I’m going to go with you. I’m in this with you.”

“Forget it,” I muttered.

She was quiet for a moment, but I could tell she was just mounting a new defense. I knew I was right when she pulled her arm from my grasp.

“Besides, you shouldn’t be seen with me right now, anyway,” she said.

I didn’t mention the conversation I’d just had with Hera, and that I’d only made the whole situation even worse.

I shook my head. “I’m not going to let you get involved with this. You can’t come along.”

“Xavier—” she started, but I put my arm around her shoulders and started steering her into the keep.

As we moved along the passageways toward her room, I was on edge. I felt as though Cenwyn was going to pop around a corner at any moment, but I knew he wasn’t. I didn’t smell him anywhere.

I had almost made it back to Cali’s room when I heard voices. I listened hard. One sounded like Zenas, a member of the Light Fae court. The voices were low, but they were growing louder, which meant they were getting closer.

Shit.

I didn’t want to be caught with Cali and have it be a whole thing. My focus right now was finding Cenwyn.

“Come here,” I whispered to Cali, and pulled her into an alcove.

“What are we doing?” she asked, a little too loudly.

I put a gentle hand over her mouth. “Hiding,” I mouthed.

It was then I realized how narrow the alcove was. Cali was sandwiched between me and the stone wall behind her, my body boxing her in. Being this close to her…kind of sucked. My body was strongly reacting to being so close, and my wolf was…*interested*. Bad timing didn’t begin to cover it.

Cali looked up at me, her eyes wide. Her breath caught.

“Xavier,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

**Episode 5377**

Xavier looked at me, dazed, like he wasn’t sure he’d heard me right. He moved toward me, almost unconsciously. Our bodies were already close, but when he closed the tiny amount of remaining space, I felt a thrill race through me, all the way down to my toes.

“What did you say?” he asked, his voice deep and husky.

He seemed so confused, I quickly started to wonder if I shouldn’t have suggested it. It was a bad idea. It brought up too many questions—too many feelings that neither of us was in a place to deal with at the moment.

But what else could I do? I couldn’t let him get caught here, and I couldn’t think of any other way of hiding him. We were in the alcove, and there was nothing to obscure us from view of anyone walking by. The approaching voices were getting closer, and I was getting nervous.

If anyone saw Xavier lurking here, it was going to be bad news. I knew Hera would be angry—she had already warned me to stay away from him. But she also knew that Xavier was my mate—she couldn’t ignore that. So as long as I made it seem like Xavier being here with me was my idea, she could only direct her anger at me.

So I said it again, speaking over the pounding of my heart. “Kiss me.”

His frown deepened. “Cali, I—”

“We need them to think you’re here because I asked you to be here—that I needed you,” I added quickly, blushing furiously. “Not because you sought me out.” The words felt strange in my mouth as I said them, but they felt true, too, even though I knew they shouldn’t. But I couldn’t dwell too long on that feeling. Not now. “I need to protect you, Xavier. I’ll take the blame if we’re caught.”

“Cali, stop, I won’t let you—”

“Xavier, think about it. They won’t be able to do much to me, but after what happened earlier with Kastian, we can’t risk what might happen to you.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what they do to me.”

“Yes, it *does* matter—”

“I don’t care what they do,” he insisted. “I’ll take whatever blame they try to throw at me.”

I was growing frustrated, and the voices were getting even closer now. They were practically on top of us. “Would you stop arguing with me and just kiss me!”

Luckily, I didn’t have to tell him again. His lips were on mine in a moment. He crushed his body against mine, pinning me to the wall of the small alcove.

I had asked for him to kiss me—insisted on it, actually—but it happened so fast I still made a small, surprised sound in the back of my throat. But that turned to a low moan as he pushed himself against me and deepened the kiss. His hands were everywhere suddenly—threading through my hair one second, circling my waist the next. Then they dropped down and grabbed my thighs, lifting me easily off the ground.

I yelped as he pushed me against the wall. Instinctively, my legs wrapped around him, so I was molded to him. He grabbed my ass, a hungry growl low in his throat as he pushed his hips against mine. His tongue plunged into my mouth, rasping against mine, hot and demanding. Everything about this kiss was electric, and I felt it jolt through me like bolts of lightning in a summer storm.

“I missed you so fucking much, baby,” he said, using his hands to make my hips grind against his.

I gasped, running a hand through his hair as he kissed me again. Every thought was wiped from my head—I could think of nothing but Xavier. His mouth, his biceps, his hair, his tongue, his hands, his chest. I was completely consumed by him, the feeling strange and out-of-body.

Somewhere, in the far reaches of my brain where I was still capable of rational thought, I realized this was indeed a terrible idea. My plan had been rushed at best, but there had to have been a better way to hide Xavier from whoever was walking past. Hell, it might have been better to just push him out the window.

Because this kiss—okay, the kiss that had now turned into a fiery-hot make-out session that was teetering too close to the edge—had a mind of its own. It felt as though he and I were two fires that had been banked for months, and now that we had finally come back together, we’d ignited with the force of a supernova.

This kiss felt different than any we had shared since everything that had happened with Adéluce. We had shared a few between us in those weeks—stolen kisses in strained moments—but this was something else. This felt like a new beginning, or a homecoming. Or both, somehow. To describe it as sparks flying would be an understatement. It felt as though we were making a brand-new star.

I dropped my head back against the stone wall with a sigh as Xavier kissed his way down my neck, taking his time just above my collarbone, in the spot that always made my toes curl. It was amazing to be kissed by someone who felt so new to me, but who knew me so well.

Then he moved back up to kiss me again, his tongue parting my lips. He was all over me, pulling me closer, murmuring my name against my lips. My head spun as wave after wave of feelings crashed over me. It felt as though all the love I’d been holding back was rushing back to me, all at once. I could barely breathe, and I had to pull away from Xavier’s lips to drag in a ragged breath. The world seemed to be spinning around me, so I held on tightly to Xavier, who felt like my safe harbor.

“*Caliana!*”

The high, shrill voice cut through the moment like a knife. I pushed Xavier away, and, clearly stunned himself, he looked around. The spell was broken, but I could feel that my face was flushed and my lips were kiss-swollen. I was just grateful no one could tell that my body was still pulsing in somewhat inconvenient places.

When I looked out of the alcove, I could see that it was my grandmother who had called my name. She was glaring at me, flanked by a unit of Fae guards and both Light and Dark Fae nobles. No one looked happy.

I managed to flush an even darker shade of red. “Grandma!” I squeaked. “What are you doing here?”

I was still wrapped around Xavier, and under the watchful eyes of my grandmother and her glaring entourage, he carefully put me down on the floor, where I tried to not stumble. My legs felt like Jell-O. By the time we finally managed it, Hera looked absolutely furious.

“I think a better question would be what is *he* doing here?” she said, glowering at Xavier. “I thought I was very clear when I told you to stay away.”

I swallowed hard, my heart beating fast. I didn’t know what my grandmother was planning to do, but this was *definitely* creating a scene. Of course I had known the risk of being caught this way with Xavier, but I had thought the voices we’d heard were guards, or at worst some minor Fae nobles who would giggle and run away to spread some gossip. I’d hardly expected to be caught by my grandmother and half the Fae court.

But I tried to rally. “You can’t keep Xavier away from me; he’s my mate.” I sounded weak, even to my own ears, but I wasn’t sure what else I was supposed to say. I’d already taken this further than it should’ve gone.

Someone in Hera’s entourage gave a derisive snort. “Well, it’s clear she’s not taking the marriage proposal seriously.” It was one of the Dark Fae, and she looked disgusted.

“Absolutely not,” another one said, leaning in. “How are we meant to really consider the alliance an option when she’s clearly doing *this* with a werewolf?”

“And she’s half *human*,” the first one added, shaking her head.

I burned with shame. I didn’t know what to do, so I just stood there, humiliated.

Hera shot the two Fae a dark look. “My granddaughter was clearly being foolish, but she is young. I see no reason why this should have any impact on the peace talks.”

“That’s true enough,” Zenas said bracingly. “The younger Fae always have trysts. That’s nothing new.”

There was an outburst of murmurs from the other Fae.

“That is not true—”

“Even if it was, we cannot *condone* such actions—”

“This clearly shows the marriage will not work!”

“How could it? Not if this girl is all in with a *dirty* wolf!”

I felt my hackles rise, and Hera’s expression darkened.

The Dark Fae woman who had first spoken shook her head. “That’s it!” she announced, throwing up her hands. “The peace talks are over!”

“What are you saying?” Zenas exclaimed. “You cannot—”

“We can, and we will!” the woman said firmly. “The Dark Fae are leaving.”

**Episode 5378**

Pissed, I shouted, “How dare you call my mate a dirty wolf?!”

The nobles reacted in shock at my outburst, rearing back as if I’d struck them. “*This* is who we’re depending on to usher in peace to the Fae world? How impertinent,” one of them muttered. “This summit becomes more of a joke by the second.”

“She’s half human—what do you expect?” another added. “She has no idea how things work here, and she doesn’t respect any of us.”

Hera shot me a warning glare, but I didn’t care. I was tired of having to pretend to be something I wasn’t, tired of all these Fae expectations and rules. I was tired of being watched like a hawk and judged at every turn.

I saw Xavier’s jaw tighten, his hands curling into fists as the nobles continued talking amongst themselves, leveling insults at us both. I couldn’t blame him. I would love nothing more than to smack the bunch of these stuffy nobles with my shield. But I knew that if I did that, things would get really ugly, really quickly.

I laid a hand on Xavier’s arm, hoping to calm him, but that only won me another disapproving look from Hera.

Xavier barely seemed to notice my touch anyway as he started toward the group of nobles. Their eyes wide with fear, they backed away from him, but that didn’t stop them from insulting him.

“Look at the way he snarls! Hera, you’ve allowed a wild animal into our sacred Briarkeep!”

“He’d just as soon kill us all as look at us, but we’re supposed to be hospitable to him and his half-Fae lover? The Light Fae are asking too much of us!”

I reached out to Xavier via mind link. *Xavier, don’t take their bait. Let me handle this. We don’t want things to get out of hand. Let’s let cooler heads prevail, show them that you aren’t who or what they think you are.*

At my words, Xavier finally paused and backed off, but he remained sharp and focused. I knew the hard look on his face well: like he would lunge in a second’s notice if the nobles didn’t let up. He was a fraction of a second away from doing something that we would all regret. I had to defuse things—and fast—if only the nobles would stop making matters worse.

“Give me a moment alone with my granddaughter, please,” Hera asked the nobles. Then she grabbed me firmly by the arm and dragged me into a nearby room. She moved to slam the door behind us, only to have Xavier block it and push himself inside.

“I’m not letting Cali out of my sight in this place,” he said. “You heard those bastards out there. They don’t give a damn about Cali, so *I* will stay close to protect her.”

Hera gave him a long look, and there was a tense moment between them before Hera finally said, “Fine. It’s good you’re here, anyway. You need to hear this too.”

I could tell that she was about to lecture us, and it angered me. There was nothing I wanted more than for everyone to stop meddling in my life. Xavier and I were adults. It was maddening that we were being treated like a couple of unruly teenagers.

Hera turned away and walked over to a window in silence, stared out of it, her expression pinched and troubled.

*This is frustrating for me, but it’s rough on her too. She’s trying to keep things from spiraling out of control…but I can’t take all the blame for the state of things. I only just got here!*

Xavier put a hand on my arm. It felt so right, but also not, since Hera had caught us making out—the very act that had kicked off a near showdown with the Dark Fae nobles. And then, right on cue, my guilt came rushing in.

*What am I doing kissing Xavier when Greyson and Rishika are missing? How could I be so selfish? What came over me? It was like an out-of-body experience…*

As soon as the kiss had started, I hadn’t been able to stop it. Rational thinking had been thrown out the window. My cheeks burned hot with humiliation, but I didn’t have time to beat myself up for long before Hera spoke again.

“What about your other mate? Greyson?”

My guilt increased, and my heart squeezed. “What about him?”

Hera whirled to face me. “You came here to the Fae world and brought not one, but both of your werewolf mates.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Do you think that was wise?”

“I brought them both because I needed their help to rescue Artemis. I thought—”

Hera raised a hand to silence me. “Despite being born and raised in the human world, Cali, you are still Fae, and you can’t pretend otherwise.”

“I’m not pretending!” I huffed. “I know who and what I am.”

“I’m not sure you do. You need to think very carefully about what will happen if you continue to act so recklessly when so much is at stake.” Hera glanced at Xavier. “I told you to stay away from her. Why is it that no one respects me enough to listen, even when I’m saving them from being thrown into a Fae dungeon?”

Xavier growled, but Hera ignored him.

“And your little reunion out there, or whatever that was, has just thrown peace talks into chaos. Assuming I’m even able to bring everyone back to the table, you’re going to have to be more careful.” Hera shook her head. “Although at this point, it’s silly for me to believe that you two will ever listen to any request I make of you.”

“Cali isn’t safe here!” Xavier interrupted. “You and I both know that.” He stepped close to me. “And that’s why I will not leave her side again.”

Hera sighed. “I agree with you…to a point. But if you want to be her bodyguard, act like one, and keep your lips to yourself. Is that so much to ask? For you both to exercise even a shred of self-control?”

My cheeks burned. It was one thing to be lectured, and another to be lectured by your grandmother for making out with someone. And for her to be right about it.

“I know about the *due destini*, Cali, but you both are going to have to rise above it. You need to see that what’s at stake is bigger than your so-called bond.”

I bristled at that. Was she really playing down something that literally ruled our lives? “The *due destini* and our bond are real. And how can you ever understand what it’s like?”

“I don’t need to. I only need to know what has to be done to stop the war,” Hera snapped. “I’m tired of all this drama. I have much more to worry about than my granddaughter traipsing around the keep with her lovers.”

“I’m doing what I can!” I snapped. “I’ve agreed to work with Kastian. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“What?” Xavier and Hera both shouted.

“We need all the allies we can get, right? I don’t trust him either, but I’m also convinced that the real trouble, the real threat, lies with Cenwyn.”

Hera’s eyes hardened. “You aren’t wrong—and whatever you do, don’t turn your back to Cenwyn. He can’t be trusted.”

I gulped. It only reinforced what Xavier and I already believed. Now, I was more certain than ever that Cenwyn was behind Greyson and Rishika’s disappearance.

“Do you understand me?” Hera pressed. “Watch yourself around him. I can’t be everywhere at once to protect you.” Hera looked at Xavier. “And if you want to protect her, I suggest you keep an eye on Cenwyn at all times.”

Xavier grunted, and I nodded.

Hera looked tired all of a sudden. “Now, let me go clean up this mess you two made with the nobles before they make good on their threat to pull out of the summit.”

As Hera made her way out of the room, I tagged along. I knew that we were the reason for this latest trouble, and I wanted to do my part to fix things.

“Grandma, I should talk to them. They need to hear from me. Maybe it will help them understand.”

Hera hesitated for a moment before gesturing for me to go ahead. “Fine.”

Xavier fell in behind me, and we returned to where the nobles were waiting. They were huddled up, probably lighting each other’s ears up with insults and gossip about me. Xavier hung back as we approached, trying to keep from riling them up again, but he was watching.

The nobles interrupted Hera before she could say a word. “Hera, we’ve had enough, and we’ve all agreed—we’re pulling out of the talks. There’s no reason for us to stay here and be made fools of, threatened by one of your granddaughter’s wild beasts,” one of the nobles said, gesturing to Xavier.

“I understand why you’re blaming me,” I said. “I know you don’t believe in my commitment to peace.” I took a deep breath. “But to prove that I’m one hundred percent in support of peace, I have made up my mind. I will do it. I will marry Kastian.”

**Episode 5379**

**Artemis**

True to her threats, Celeste was keeping me locked in my room with two guards posted outside. I was right back to where I was when I first arrived—Celeste’s prisoner yet again.

“It’s best that you remain here for the time being. Get some sleep and wake up with a better attitude and a plan,” Celeste said before marching off down the hall without another word.

The idea of sleeping now was laughable. Did she really think I was going to be able to get even a moment of rest after she asked me to use my bounty hunting skills to kill Kastian?

It was clear that Celeste knew nothing about what bounty hunters actually did for a living. We weren’t assassins. We didn’t just go around killing people…unless we were forced to. We certainly weren’t in the business of drawing attention to ourselves by killing members of the Fae court, either. It was best to keep a low profile, and murdering Kastian would be the opposite of that.

Not to mention that bounty hunters were typically hired to capture someone *alive* for a bounty. I knew some bounty hunters blurred the lines more than others—anything for money—but not even Marius would take an assignment like the one Celeste had just thrown out to me like it was nothing.

*What kind of person does Celeste think I am? She’s treating me like one of her thugs, and that’s not who I am. I don’t have to do her bidding—especially when her bidding involves taking someone’s life!*

And even if I agreed to what Celeste had asked of me, who knew what else she had planned? She could always hold it against me in the future—the woman seemed to be the type who thrived on blackmail and extortion—anything to get what she wanted. If I killed Kastian, she’d be able to hold her knowledge of it over my head forever. Did I really want to be in that position?

And what would people do if they discovered that the Mauvais heir killed Kastian Haseneau? It wouldn’t be good for me. What was to stop them from sending assassins after *me* in retaliation? Or from hurting my family because of their connection to me? Was Celeste prepared to protect me *and* those close to me, or would she wash her hands of me once I did her bidding?

I flopped down on my bed, overwhelmed. How had I even ended up here? All I’d wanted was to find my father. I’d had no intention of ever getting involved in the politics of war, the manipulations of the court. And now, my quest had spiraled completely out of control, and in the process, I’d drawn my sister, Xavier, Greyson, Adair, Tabitha, Marius, and Rishika into the chaos.

There was a rap at my window. I paused, listened, wondering if I’d imagined it. But then it happened again. I grabbed one of my daggers and approached the window cautiously. Someone was definitely knocking on my windowpane; the only question was, were they friend or foe? In this place, there was equal chance of either one.

Keenly aware of the guards posted outside my door, I leaned close to the glass and whispered, “Who is it? I have daggers!”

Marius’s husky voice answered. “It’s me. Put your blades away and let me in.”

I was taken aback. What the hell was Marius doing here? I quickly opened the window and helped him through the almost too-small opening. He immediately bent at the waist, sucking in gulps of air as if he’d just run a marathon.

“How did you get here?” I asked him.

He didn’t answer right away, was still bent over, gasping. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to climb that wall?” He shook his head. “I nearly slipped to my death like ten times!”

I yanked him upright and gasped. “What the hell? You’re not glamoured anymore?” He was once again the Marius I remembered. Seeing his face in its familiar glory stirred something in me, and I did my best to ignore it.

He smiled. “Glad to see me?”

I was so glad I could kiss him—but there was no way I was going to do that. Instead, I pulled him into a tight hug, jarred a bit by how good it felt to be so close to him, to touch him. It had to be because I was overwhelmed, feeling trapped. It felt good to have a friend close at a moment like this.

Marius wrapped his arms around me, and my breath caught in my throat when I noticed his wrists. They were scratched and raw.

I pulled back. “What happened to you? Are you hurt?”

“Xavier and I ran into a little trouble, but we handled it.” He looked at his wrists. “These are just your typical iron burns, and they take forever to heal. Hurt like hell, too.”

I realized that he was still holding me. I gulped and pushed away any tender thoughts about him. Now wasn’t the time to deal with that—and I felt extra guilty about having any reaction to him with Rishika still missing.

“Let me examine your wounds,” I said, which was really just an excuse to put a little distance between us and disentangle myself from our intimate embrace.

I pulled him into the bathroom, ran some water on a clean rag and began tending to his wounds. They looked a little better the more I cleaned them, but the iron had done a number on him.

Marius grinned at me. “Wow. You really do care about me, don’t you? Never in a million years would I have imagined you playing nursemaid to little old me.”

“What?” I scoffed. “You’re still a pompous ass, I see.”

Marius’s annoying grin only widened. “You sure do talk about my ass a lot…not that I blame you. It’s a good one, and you love it.”

“Shut up!” I warned, pushing the rag against his wounds a little too hard and making him wince.

“Ouch, Ari. Hurting me doesn’t distract from the truth—you know that, right?” he teased.

“Really, Marius, shut your mouth before I shut it for you.”

Marius’s smile only widened. “Whatever you say.”

I finished cleaning and dressing his wounds. When he was all bandaged, Marius filled me in on what happened with Xavier and the Fae who accosted them.

“I’m just happy you got out of that alive,” I said. “Cenwyn’s guards could have killed you! I swear, the Fae world is a viper’s nest.”

“I know. Hera came to our rescue, luckily.”

“Good…and I should say that things haven’t been all that great on my end. Celeste has me locked in here with guards out front. And she asked me to kill Kastian! Can you believe it?”

“And what did you say when she asked you to do that?”

“I can’t believe you’re even asking me that! Of course I told her that there’s no way in hell I was going to kill someone for her. Do you know how big of a target would be on my back if I murdered a high-ranking Dark Fae? And who’s to say that Celeste would do anything to protect me once I did? Too much of a risk.”

“What I know about you, Artemis, is that you’re smart. And we both know that Kastian is bad news. I heard about his connection to the missing girls just like you. Sounds like the guy’s a killer.”

I was thrown. “Wait, so what are you saying? That I *should* kill him?”

Marius shrugged. “What I’m saying is that you reap what you sow. From what I’ve gathered from talking to people around the court, the guy isn’t well liked. He’s smug, power hungry, slimy, a womanizer, and to top all that off, he’s trying to force your sister into a marriage so he can claim power. Don’t think for one second that once that marriage is official, he’ll have any use for Cali.”

My stomach tightened, and my blood went cold as I took that in, knowing Marius was right. “If that bastard even thinks of laying a hand on Cali…”

“There’s no way to know what he’ll do if he gets what he wants. But what we do know is that he can’t be trusted. We have no idea what his plans will be for your sister once he finally gains the power he craves through marrying her.”

I didn’t want my sister to be linked to the guy in any way—least of all through some political marriage that was nothing more to him than a power move. I was willing to do just about anything to protect Cali, and if I could get Celeste off my back in the process, then all the better.

I grabbed Marius, pulled him close. “I think I know what I have to do,” I whispered. “Marius, will you help me kill Kastian?”

**Episode 5380**

Xavier looked up in shock and anger and started toward me. He didn’t need to say anything at all; I could read everything in his eyes. He was livid, hurt, and shocked, all at the same time.

Hera looked stunned, and then confusion flooded across her face. The nobles were reacting—most in favor, some opposed.

“This marriage is necessary to bring the two sides together, and I want to do that for us,” I continued. “Hopefully this will stop all the chatter about whether I truly care about the fate of the Fae world once and for all.”

*What the fuck?* Xavier mind linked angrily. *What the hell are you doing, Cali? Did you just tell these people that you’re going to get married? Were you even going to tell me about this? Warn me? Marrying Kastian, really? The guy is an asshole—*

*I will explain later*, I replied. *For now, just follow my lead. Please.*

I turned back to the yammering nobles. “You can all feel free to discuss this amongst yourselves.” Then I turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Hera asked me, grabbing my arm to stop me. She leaned in close. “Caliana, I will not let you throw your life away! This isn’t the way to secure peace. I’ve already told you that!”

“You just told me that peace between the Light and Dark Fae was more important than anything I feel, anything I do, so you should be happy!” I pulled away, fighting the anxiety I was feeling. Maybe what I’d done was rash, but it made perfect sense.

Hera whispered a warning. “This isn’t over, Caliana. Not by a long shot. I’m not going to allow my granddaughter to marry that repulsive, narcissistic—”

I wasn’t listening anymore. I couldn’t. I knew what kind of person Kastian was, and that didn’t matter. Not right now. I turned to Xavier. “I’m going to my room.”

Xavier followed me, and as soon as we were out of earshot of the others, he burst out, “Tell me what the hell is going on, and tell me now!”

“I couldn’t let the peace talks fall apart, could I? Not after what Hera said. And without the peace talks, Cenwyn would leave before we have a chance to catch him. I did what I had to do to save Greyson and Rishika.”

“We don’t have to catch him. I’ll kill him!” Xavier snarled. “He’s here somewhere. I’ll sniff him out and make him tell me everything, and then I’ll rip out—”

“Please, Xavier—don’t do anything rash. Not right now. We both know that Cenwyn deserves whatever you want to do to him, but he’s also extremely powerful and well connected. If you kill him, who knows what storm that could trigger? We have no idea who might come after us or what his death could do to the peace talks. It makes more sense to *catch* Cenwyn—we’re so close.”

“To hell with Cenwyn!” Xavier shouted. “What about marrying Kastian? Is that really what you plan to do?”

“Xavier—”

“Fuck this place,” Xavier spat. “From the moment we arrived in the wonderful Fae world, we’ve been attacked, drugged, insulted, nearly killed—and we lost Greyson and Rishika. All because we came here to rescue Artemis, not to fight a war, *not* to get involved in Fae politics. This isn’t what we came here for!”

“Xavier, *please*—”

“No, Cali. Let’s find my brother and Rishika, grab Artemis, and get the hell out of here. *That* was the plan. The rest of this shit has nothing to do with us. And as the nobles just pointed out, we don’t belong here. That’s the one thing I agree with them on. We aren’t cut out for this place, and no one here deserves your help. Let’s go back to our real lives and the real world. I’m tired of this.”

Xavier was fired up, and I couldn’t blame him. I couldn’t help but think about what had driven us here in the first place, and what had happened since. I initially asked Xavier to come with me not only because I thought he would be a big help in rescuing Artemis, but because it would curb my hallucinations so that I could focus on helping my sister.

But those weren’t the only reasons.

My guilt started to creep in again as I thought about the kiss that had gotten out of hand. Xavier was talking about leaving the Fae world and going back to our real lives, but what did that mean now? As it stood, our real lives involved him serving as the Samara Alpha with Ava as his Luna, while I continued my life with the Redwood pack. Was that what he was rushing back to?

I was confused.

We hadn’t even talked about the kiss—not after we’d been ambushed because of it. We were all but ignoring our feelings, the elephant in the room planted between us. And when we had a chance to discuss it, to figure things out once and for all, what would we even have to say to each other?

The one thing I’d noticed was that ever since we’d left for the Fae world, I’d had no hallucinations, and I didn’t think Xavier was getting those headaches, either. His coming with me was the right decision, even if it was complicating things between us even more.

“Cali, I don’t mean to be so bullish about this, but I want out of this place.” Xavier took my hand. “Let me get you out of here. Please.”

I tried to ignore the warm feeling his touch brought, but how could I? Not with the memories of our kiss still haunting my mind—how good and right and all-consuming it had felt. I wanted more. I knew that. I wanted his kisses and his caresses and everything else.

But I couldn’t get drawn into that right now. Of all the things I needed to confront, my feelings for Xavier were going to have to take a back seat for now. This wasn’t the time or the place to figure out what there was between us—not with Greyson and Rishika still missing.

I put a hand on Xavier’s chest.

*God that feels good. The effect he has on me hasn’t changed, hasn’t lessened even a little…*

“You have to trust me, Xavier. I know that things have been…hard…here, but things aren’t as simple as they were when we first arrived. We’re involved now. I can’t just leave my grandmother hanging, I can’t just pick up and run back to the human world.”

I thought about Hera’s comment about how even though I was from the human world, I was still Fae. That meant I needed to treat these Fae problems as *my* problems, even though just running home would be so much easier.

“So, what does that mean, Cali? That you’re going to marry him?” Xavier asked, is voice softer now. “I won’t allow it. I can’t. Even hearing you say that—you don’t know what that did to me.”

“Xavier, I’m not planning to really go through with it. I’m just going to pretend long enough to get everything we need—to give us time to track down Cenwyn and to keep the peace talks alive.”

Xavier nodded, his expression skeptical. “Okay, and what if your plan goes wrong? What if you end up at a wedding ceremony standing across from that asshole at the altar? What then?”

“If that happens, I’ll deal with it then. But I brought you here to help me, Xavier, so if you want to help me, you have to let me do this my way.”

Xavier was so close and looking down at me with those eyes that I’d missed for so long when he was away with the Samaras—with Ava.

“Fine. Whatever you need, whatever you decide, I’m with you,” Xavier finally said.

I was staring at his lips before I caught myself. I forced my eyes back up to meet his. “We can’t get caught again. Not if anyone’s going to believe that I truly intend to marry Kastian.”

Xavier looked like he wanted to kiss me right here right now, but he nodded and pulled back. “You’re right. I’m going to go find Marius, see if he’s had any luck finding your sister. I’ll be back soon.”

He went off, and I finally made my way back to my room. There, I was surprised to find my door wide open.

*That’s weird, I could have sworn I closed it when I left…*

I didn’t want to take any chances. Summoning my sword, I pushed the door open, ready for anything. I was willing to do whatever it took to keep the peace, but I was also going to do that on my own terms. I wasn’t going to let anyone push me around here anymore.

My heart nearly exploded when I saw who was standing in my room.

“*Greyson?!*”

**Episode 5381**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t believe I was here and I had Cali in my arms again. It felt too good to be true. I pulled her to me, holding her so tightly that there was nothing else between us. Without another thought, I tilted her chin up and kissed her hard on the lips.

The kiss was everything I’d imagined it would be, everything I’d dreamed of while imprisoned and thinking about her. Cali went liquid in my arms, and I held her up as I pushed my tongue into the sweet, warm cavern of her mouth, eager to taste her and show her how much I’d longed for her.

I walked Cali back against the wall, pressing my naked body against hers. She moaned, arching her back so I could feel her breasts through her shirt. Unable to help myself, I reached up and squeezed one, marveling at its delicious softness. She sucked in a breath as I brushed my thumb over her hardened nipple, and the whimper she made was too much. Eager to hear it again, I threaded my other hand through her hair and pulled her head back so I had full access to her neck and throat and kissed her there.

“Greyson, I’m so happy you’re safe,” Cali said, breathless.

I didn’t say anything. It was like I couldn’t speak, too consumed with reacquainting myself with my love. I hadn’t even been apart from her for that long, but it easily felt like an eternity. And now that I had her back, now that I was kissing her again, now that I had her with me, right where she belonged, nothing else mattered.

I gasped when Cali’s warm hand closed around me. “You’re so hard,” she breathed against my lips once they found their way to hers again.

“That’s you, that’s all you, Cali. I missed you so fucking much, love.”

“I missed you too,” Cali said. She stroked me once, then twice, and my knees nearly gave out from the pleasure of feeling her hands there again.

When I’d been trapped in that cell with all those other creatures, the thought had crossed my mind more than once that I might never see Cali again, might never feel her body against mine or make love to her ever again. Now that I was here with her, I couldn’t get enough of her. I never wanted to let her go. It was like I wanted to devour her, take in everything I’d missed while I was away to convince myself that this was real, that we were really together again.

I picked her up and pinned her against the door. She ran her hands through my hair, moaned my name. She was taking over now, kissing me hard, her tongue dancing against mine.

“You were all I thought about when I was away, Cali,” I said. “I didn’t know if I would ever see you again.”

“I know. I’m here now, and I’m not going anywhere. Neither are you. I’m not letting you out of my sight again,” Cali said. “I’m going to do everything in my power to protect you and make sure nothing like that happens again.”

Then we went quiet, our lips busy, our bodies still pressed tightly together, my erection sandwiched between us. She moved her body against it, slowly, knowing exactly what she was doing. I squeezed her ass and lifted her, and Cali, knowing exactly what I wanted, raised her shirt so I was treated to the sight of her amazing breasts heaving in the soft white lace of her bra.

I buried my face in her cleavage, inhaling her scent while I covered her breasts with kisses, my lips dragging across her soft, supple skin. My breath gasped out of my mouth as I fantasized about laying her on her back and burying myself deep inside of her. There was nothing I wanted more than to make love to Cali, prove just how much I wanted and needed her.

My mouth on hers, I walked her back to the bed, ready to make good on my fantasy. She moaned as I peeled her tight pants off her. I didn’t even have a chance to pull her panties down—she did away with them herself before I crawled on top of her.

“I missed you so fucking much, love,” I said, palming her breasts. “God, I want you so badly.”

“Y-yes,” she stuttered.

She reached between us, lining my cock up with her. Fuck, she was so wet. My vision blurred for a moment when I slipped inside her. She arched her back into me and I began to pump in and out of her. It was rough, fast, and I loved the way she dug her nails into my back, crying out my name.

There was nothing but her. No one but her.

“Greyson, I’m, *ah*—” she started, but she began tightening around me.

I pumped even faster, finding her clit with my hand, loving the sound of her as she came underneath me. I groaned as I followed, admiring the sheen of sweat on her skin.

When we were both spent, I kissed her once more. Leisurely, like I had all the time in the world. After a moment, I eased up, looking down at her. We were both breathing heavily, smiles playing on our lips. It was as if we both knew there was so much at stake right now that we couldn’t take things any further—at least not yet.

For a small beat, we just stayed there holding each other.

“I love you, Cali,” I said, my voice raspy, thick with desire. “I love you so much.” I kissed her on the forehead, and Cali began to cry.

“I love you too, Greyson. So much. I’m so sorry. I wanted to go looking for you, and I tried, but—”

I shushed her gently, not wanting her to beat herself up. I cupped her face in my hands and rubbed away the tears rolling down her cheeks. “You don’t need to worry about any of that. Not right now. I know you sent Adair and Tabitha after me. I know what’s been at stake during the peace talks and all the pressure you’ve been under.”

“We never stopped trying to figure out who did this to you. Xavier, too. We were fighting for you and Rishika both. We never stopped.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I know, love.” I hugged her again, and she shuddered as she relaxed into me.

Cali suddenly pushed me away and said, “And we found out who did it. Cenwyn.”

“It was him,” I confirmed. “The bastard has an entire fighting arena set up where he pits supernatural and Fae creatures against each other. But after the revolt I caused when I escaped, I think the place will be out of commission for a while, if not forever.”

Cali glanced up at me, and I could tell she was really looking me over now. I loved the way she always worried about me. It made me feel so loved.

“So what happened there? What did you have to do?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“Greyson,” Cali whispered sadly.

“It’s okay, Cali. I’m safe now. I’m back here with you, and that’s all I ever wanted.”

Her hands were flat against my chest, and she slowly dragged them down toward my stomach. She gasped. “Greyson, how did you get this scar?”

I looked down at it, too. “Silver wound from one of Cenwyn’s men. If you hadn’t sent Adair…” I winced at the puckered flesh. “I know it’s pretty ugly.”

Cali shook her head. “You could never be ugly.”

I gave her a tender kiss, still so grateful to have her standing right here in front of me, beautiful and safe and sweet as always.

“And Rishika? Where is she? Is she okay?”

I frowned. “I don’t know if *okay* is the right word to use, but we’ve got her here, and she’s starting to recover, I hope.”

“I want to see her. Does Artemis know she’s back?”

“I’m not sure yet. We’ll tell her in time, but I’m not sure Artemis would want to see her like this. I should actually get back to check on her myself.”

Cali looked alarmed. “Okay, then let’s go to her.”

In no time, we were out in the woods. It felt so good to have Cali by my side. I was still in awe of just how much her presence was enough to help suppress memories of all I’d been through over the last day.

We quickly found Adair, Tabitha, and Rishika, who was resting on a makeshift bed. Cali rushed up to them, and she and Tabitha hugged.

“How’s Rishika doing?” Cali asked.

“The same, I’m afraid. She hasn’t woken up since we brought her back through the briar wall,” Tabitha explained.

Cali nodded, her expression concerned. She passed a glance between Adair and Tabitha. “Thank you both so much for what you did—risking your lives to save Greyson and Rishika.”

“It worked out,” Adair said. His eyes met mine, and he nodded.

I went over to Rishika and knelt beside her. She wasn’t foaming at the mouth anymore at least, so that was a plus.

Cali knelt beside me and pushed a tendril of hair out of Rishika’s face. “She’s so hot, like she has a fever.”

“She does, but it’s going down as time passes,” Tabitha assured Cali.

“We’re going to find the Fae that did this to you,” I whispered to Rishika, even though I wasn’t sure she could hear me. “Mark my words. He’ll pay.”

“You’re safe now, Rishika,” Cali added.

At Cali’s words, Rishika’s eyes fluttered open.

Cali leaned forward. “Rishika! You’re awake. Can you hear us?”

I was a little worried about Cali getting so close. Rishika seemed like she was on the mend, but I couldn’t shake the memory of how ferociously she came at me when she was still under the influence of that rage drug.

I grabbed Cali’s arm. “Cali, maybe you shouldn’t—”

The words were barely out of my mouth before Rishika propped herself up on an elbow, grabbed Cali, and pulled her into a kiss.

**Episode 5382**

*Oh my god, Rishika is kissing me! What should I do?*

I was so shocked that I stayed right where I was without breaking the kiss. It was a pleasant pressure, but I knew this was likely a mistake…

Greyson tensed beside me. “Whoa, Rishika! Wait a second—”

I held up a hand, silencing him.

Only a moment later, Rishika finally broke the kiss. She was behaving feverishly now, practically shaking. “Artemis, I knew I’d find you again,” she said, her voice thick and dreamy. “I missed you so much. I fought tooth and nail just to see your face one more time.”

My heart sank, my suspicions confirmed. Rishika thought I was Artemis, which obviously explained a lot. I just felt bad that I *wasn’t* Artemis. Rishika needed my sister right now.

Realizing that Rishika was staring at me, waiting for a response, I said, “You did a really good job…finding me…and I’m so glad you’re all right. But you should get some rest now, Rishika. We’re right here taking care of you. A lot has happened to you, but you’re safe now.”

“Don’t leave my side,” Rishika said. “Please stay with me.”

I gripped her hand. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re safe. I promise.”

Rishika’s eyes fluttered closed, and her breathing slowed, as if she were sleeping.

I looked at the other three, and no one seemed to know what to say. It was a solemn mood with a little awkwardness thrown in since I’d just kissed my sister’s ex-girlfriend.

“I have to find Artemis,” I said, breaking the silence. “It’s important that she knows what’s going on with Rishika and that she’s back.”

Greyson still looked shocked at what had just happened. “Well, at least she didn’t try to kill you.”

“Is that supposed to be a bonus?” I asked.

“Since she tried to rip my face off not long ago, yes, I’d say so.”

I took another glance at Rishika, who seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. To see Rishika—one of the strongest werewolves I knew—down for the count like this renewed my anger and hate for Cenwyn. I hated that he’d bested them, had somehow managed to put them in such a deadly situation.

*He hurt not only my mate, but my friend too. I can’t believe he targeted them—drove them near death for his entertainment in his little circus.*

I thought about Greyson’s scar—proof how close to death Cenwyn had brought him. I wanted Cenwyn to pay—and maybe I wasn’t as murderous as Xavier, but I was getting there. He’d had it out for Greyson, Xavier, and Rishika since the moment they stepped foot in the Fae world.

“Greyson, we have to let Xavier know you’re back!” I said. “He was so worried, and like I said, we were both doing everything we could to track you down.”

“We should try to regroup with the others as soon as we can—Artemis, Marius, and Xavier,” Adair suggested.

“I’ll handle finding Artemis and filling her in. I think it’s best if this comes from me. And I’m the only one who can move around freely in the keep anyway,” I said.

I looked at Greyson, realizing I wasn’t in any rush to leave his side so soon after being reunited with him, but I had to do this.

*Artemis and Rishika may not be together anymore officially, but my sister loves her, and she needs to know she’s back. It’s important.*

“It’s starting to rain,” Greyson said as soon as a few drops hit the ground. “We should move Rishika somewhere where she’s better protected from getting wet.”

“Okay, and I’m going back to the keep to find Artemis,” I said. “I shouldn’t be long.”

Greyson pulled me into a hug. “Be careful, and come back as soon as you tell Artemis, okay? Don’t talk to anyone or let anyone take you anywhere. We have to be even more careful from here on out.”

Greyson, Adair, and Tabitha got to work moving Rishika, and I took off through the woods, excited to find my sister and tell her the news I knew she’d been longing for from the moment Rishika disappeared. I hadn’t gotten far before Xavier came stalking toward me.

“What the hell are you doing out here, Cali?”

“Xavier—”

Xavier kept talking as if I hadn’t said a word. “I got back to your room to let you know I found Artemis, and you were nowhere to be found. I didn’t know what happened to you! For all I knew, someone had kidnapped you like they did my brother and Rishika.” Xavier arched an eyebrow. “Wait, why do I smell Greyson?”

“Xavier, calm down. I should have told you that I was leaving, but…Greyson’s here.”

Xavier looked at me in shock like I’d just spoken another language. “What? Greyson’s here? Where?”

On cue, Greyson appeared, his eyes on Xavier. “I thought I heard your loud mouth, little brother.”

“Whoa, where the *fuck* have you been? Cali and I have been going crazy searching for you.”

For a moment, it seemed like the two of them might hug, but they didn’t, and the moment passed quickly. Honestly, I would’ve been shocked to see them show how much they actually cared about each other. It was much easier for them to act aloof, even at tender moments like this.

“You need to get to Artemis,” Greyson said to me. “Rishika needs her here.”

Xavier nodded, but he was still looking between Greyson and me as if he were trying to figure out how long we’d been together since Greyson’s return. Finally, he shook his head as if letting whatever was on his mind go and said, “Cali, come on. Let’s go find her.” And to Greyson, he said, “Good to see you. For once.”

Greyson gave a small smile. “Likewise. And, Cali, please get some rest after this. I can tell just by looking at you that you haven’t been taking care of yourself—too worried about everyone else and not worried enough about your own state.”

“I don’t need rest, I’m fine,” I said.

“He’s right, Cali,” Xavier cut in. “I know you haven’t gotten as much sleep as you should have since Greyson and Rishika disappeared.”

“And you have another day of peace talks to get through. I’ll handle things here,” Greyson said.

I hugged him. “I wish you could come with us.” I pulled away so I could look him in the eye. It felt almost painful to be leaving him again.

“Me too, but I’ll be here waiting for you, don’t worry.”

Xavier seemed a little bitter when I rejoined him, and he was quiet as we set off. We walked a bit in a heavy silence before I asked, “So, how did you find Artemis?”

“Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?” Xavier said, completely ignoring my question.

I was touched that he was so concerned, but my stomach twisted uncomfortably. I knew I was going to have to tell Greyson about the kiss Xavier and I shared, but it had been such a whirlwind since Greyson got back, and I didn’t even know how to begin to broach the subject with him.

For now, I wasn’t going to worry about anything but Artemis. I had to get to her and tell her the good news.

Xavier led me to a courtyard where Artemis and Marius waited. Artemis stood when she saw me, and, unable to help myself, I just blurted everything out.

“Greyson and Rishika are back, but Rishika isn’t doing very well.”

A range of emotions passed across Artemis’s face. Then she uttered a steely, “Where is she?”

“She’s in the woods just near the edge of the briar wall,” Xavier replied.

Artemis immediately went to leave, and I could see how frantic she was, eager to get to Rishika’s side.

“How did this happen?” Marius asked. “They’re really back?”

“Yes, they’re back in one piece, more or less. They got free of Cenwyn somehow. Greyson mentioned something about ambushing Cenwyn’s guards and escaping some kind of supernatural fight club place he had going on.”

“So Greyson confirmed that Cenwyn is the one who kidnapped him and Rishika,” Marius said.

“Yes. Just as we thought.”

Marius turned to hurry after Artemis. I was about to follow when Xavier spoke up.

“Give your sister some space.”

I ignored him and left the courtyard, going back the way we’d come. Xavier was right on my heels.

“Cali, wait! I just meant that maybe they’d like some time alone, and that you don’t need to—”

Both Xavier and I stopped short when we rounded the next corner only to come face-to-face with Cenwyn.

The man smiled at me as if he hadn’t just held my friend and mate captive. “Caliana, how wonderful to see you.”

**Episode 5382**

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Both Xavier and I stopped short when we rounded the next corner only to come face-to-face with Cenwyn.

The man smiled at me as if he hadn’t just held my friend and mate captive. “Caliana, how wonderful to see you.”

**Episode 5384**

**Xavier**

I was immediately on the defensive, and for good reason. Cenwyn was a snake—maybe worse than a snake, that felt too kind—and I didn’t even want him breathing the same air as Cali. I was mad at myself for not smelling Cenwyn coming, but I was perpetually out of sorts here in the Fae world. I was certain that if we were still in the human world, I would have sniffed him out in seconds and reacted accordingly.

Cali looked too surprised to speak. I put an arm around her and pulled her to my side. I gave Cenwyn a look, hoping he would read the threat in my eyes.

“Oh, hi, Cenwyn…um, we didn’t realize that was you at first,” Cali stammered. “How are you?”

“Cenwyn, yes, haven’t seen you around much lately, have we?” I added. I meant for it to be a pointed comment, but I didn’t want to overplay my hand either. It was better that he not know we were on to him—at least for the time being.

But it was all I could do to keep my composure around the guy. There was nothing I wanted more than to kill him right then and there for what he’d done to Greyson and Rishika. He didn’t deserve to be walking around here like he wasn’t some sadistic asshole hell-bent on terrorizing anyone he didn’t like.

*Getting rid of Cenwyn would take care of one big problem and rid the Fae world of a truly awful person, but Cali’s right. I can’t kill him and expect it to not have a ripple effect. For now, we must keep things calm.*

Cenwyn smiled at us, dripping with charm. “No, I haven’t been around much. Some business came up back at home that I needed to take care of. Payments, crops, personnel issues…but I won’t bore you with the details. It’s taken up a lot more of my time than I wanted it to, I’m afraid.” He shifted his attention entirely to Cali, and that alone made me want to wring his neck. “Oh, Caliana, I heard the good news!”

Cali tensed, and I tightened my hold on her. She needed reassurance, and I was more than willing to give it. I was used to being Cali’s rock—at least one of them—and it was all too easy for me to fall right back into that role.

*And if things go back to the way they were, it’ll be all I do again. Supporting Cali and being there for her whenever she needs me.*

“What news?” Cali squeaked out.

“News of your nuptials, of course,” Cenwyn declared with a smile that never reached his eyes. “Congratulations! Excited to learn that you and Kastian will be the Fae world’s newest royal couple.”

“Word sure spreads fast around here,” I mumbled.

“You know Fae like to gossip,” Cenwyn said, giving me a sharp look.

“Thank you, Cenwyn,” Cali said. “It took me a little time to reach that decision, but marrying Kastian is the right thing to do. I’m excited, too.”

There was an obvious dark edge in Cenwyn’s eyes—shocker—as he said, “Yes, we could all use something to celebrate.”

“And an end to the war is definitely that,” Cali replied.

*I don’t give two shits about this war or the people who think it’s Cali’s responsibility to end it. That wedding will happen over my dead body. It’s like the Fae have no knowledge of their own history. A wedding didn’t end the war before, and Cali’s marriage to Kastian won’t end their beef now. But I guess they don’t care about the truth.*

Cenwyn’s icy smile widened. “I should get back to my chambers, but I look forward to the celebrations tomorrow.” With that, he left us staring after him.

Cali pulled out of my hold and wrapped her arms around her middle, shaken by that encounter. I wanted nothing more but to hold her and comfort her, but somehow, I knew she wouldn’t want that.

“I want to go to my sister, I need to see her,” she said. “Can you believe that guy? Smiling in our faces after everything he’s done? I have to talk to Artemis.”

“Remember what Greyson said, Cali. You need to rest. It wasn’t a command, but a strong suggestion—one I support. You’re running on fumes. I can see the fatigue written all over your face. I’m starting to think that’s why you agreed to this marriage with Kastian—because you’re exhausted and not thinking straight.”

Anger flashed in her eyes. “What? But my friends—”

“Will be waiting for you outside in the morning. They’re all going to rest themselves. You have to be at all sorts of long, boring Fae meetings tomorrow and then at who knows what celebrations. You need to sleep.”

Cali shook her head, looking conflicted. I knew that look well. She knew I was right but didn’t want to admit it.

“Come on, Cali. Let’s get out of here,” I said. “A little rest won’t hurt, and I promise you won’t miss a thing.”

We went back to her room, and I went inside with her. Cali didn’t move far from the door, and I sighed, taking off my shirt.

Cali’s eyes widened. “What the hell are you doing?”

“About to get some sleep. What’s it look like?”

I sat on the bed and watched Cali, fully aware that she might try to make a break for the door—but luckily, she stayed put. We had adjoining rooms, of course, and she’d seen me shirtless so many times, I didn’t know why it was suddenly different.

With a sigh, she went into the other room and changed into her nightgown. She came back, and my eyes grazed over her body as I took in what the nightgown barely hid. My entire body flushed with heat, and I couldn’t help but picture how she would look wearing nothing at all.

“Off my bed,” Cali barked. “Now.”

“What? Really? Come on, Cali.” I’d already sunk into the soft mattress and wasn’t looking forward to getting out. “This one is way better than mine. Besides, I’m not letting you out of my sight. Sorry about it.”

“Fine!” Cali grumbled. The bed sank as she crawled in beside me. “But stay on your side, okay?”

That irked me a little, but I let it go.

“Since it’s just the two of us right now, maybe we should talk about the kiss?”

Cali didn’t say a word.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it. She’s tired, I’m tired, and we’ve both been through a lot. Maybe now isn’t the time to discuss this.*

I closed my eyes, and almost immediately, memories of the kiss replayed in my mind. Having Cali in my arms again felt so right, and the thought of her body pressed against mine in that alcove was making me semi-hard again.

It was best for me to back up and not go that route. It was just going to leave me with blue balls, and I’d had enough of those through my close calls with Cali. I wasn’t naïve about the nature of that kiss, and I didn’t think Cali was either. I’d hesitated at first, not wanting to overstep, but once our lips met, I’d taken full advantage of it.

*It never would have happened if she hadn’t asked me to do it…and thank god she did.*

Kissing her again had ignited something in me that I hadn’t felt in a long time…or at least since the last time we’d kissed. If I could have—and if not for those squawking nobles and Cali’s grandmother interrupting us, I would’ve fucked her right there against that wall. I wouldn’t have cared who saw or if it ignited another full-on Fae war.

Cali’s voice snapped me back to focus. “There’s nothing to talk about, Xavier.”

I sighed. “Cali, let’s not do this. Let’s not pretend that we both don’t know how good that kiss felt. I know it was a cover, but just…let’s not pretend, okay? Let’s at least not do that.”

Cali was quiet for a few beats before finally uttering a small, “Okay.”

I didn’t push for more. That was good enough for now. Cali curled up on the bed with her back to me, and all I could think about was how long I was going to have to wait to sleep with her in my arms again.

\*\*\*

I woke up confused, not knowing exactly when I’d finally drifted off to sleep. I was comfortable, happy, and then I realized why. I was *spooning Cali*.

She was clinging to me, too, her body soft and warm against mine. I remembered wanting this, needing her to be close, and now that it was a reality…I didn’t even want to move just in case I woke her and she pulled away.

I closed my eyes for a moment, content to stay just like this. My wolf was stirring, reacting to how good this felt, and Cali shifted against me.

I looked down at her. She was so fucking beautiful. So damn perfect.

And then, just like that, a knock on the door blew the moment.

# **Episode 5385**

**Ava**

I checked my reflection in my bedroom’s full-length mirror for what felt like the hundredth time.

*I look good. I still look good.*

I practiced my sultry expression, dragging my gaze over the reflection of my lingerie-wrapped body in the mirror. I’d picked it up at the mall with Marissa and loved how it showed just the right amount of skin. Xavier was out on his daily run, and I couldn’t wait to surprise him when he got back.

Not that I *needed* to entice my mate. Xavier would want me even if I traded out the expensive lace lingerie for an old flour sack.

But the lingerie wasn’t just for Xavier. It was for me too. It made me feel sexy, powerful, and desirable. Who didn’t love that?

Xavier wouldn’t be able to control himself when he saw me like this—and that was everything I wanted. To make him lose all control and just *take me*. I couldn’t wait to feel him, to kiss him.

Excitement thrummed in my veins; I could barely contain myself. I adjusted my position, powered by anticipation, shifting from one alluring pose to another. On my belly, with my legs crossed behind me, giving off a fantastic view of my breasts. *No, not quite*. Then I shifted to my side, showing off the long length of bare leg and the way the lace hugged my curves. I mussed my hair a little, staring at the door with hooded eyes as the sound of footsteps neared the bedroom door.

The door swung open, and my lips curved into a sultry smile—then twisted into a grimace of horror as Xavier stumbled into the bedroom *with Caliana fucking Hart in his arms.* Their lips were locked together, moving furiously—and loudly.

They must not have seen me lying in the middle of the bed, because they didn’t slow down the least bit, groping at each other, tearing off each other’s clothes, crashing from the dresser to the wall, to the full-length mirror, leaving a trail of discarded clothing behind them. The mirror shifted sideways, and I caught the reflection of my shock and disgust.

And then Xavier adjusted Cali in his arms—her legs locking around his hips—and stumbled *toward the bed.*

The bed I was still on.

I had to scramble out of the way to avoid Cali’s body colliding with mine when Xavier tossed her onto the mattress. My ass hit the floor with a thud. *Seriously? How the fuck could they not notice me?*

When I looked up at them, Xavier was kissing his way down Cali’s body. It was like I wasn’t even there.

I sat upright, every ounce of desire burned to a crisp. “What the fuck is going on?”

*That* finally made them pause, but Xavier didn’t look the least bit worried or guilty when he lifted his head from between Cali’s legs and caught my gaze. He smiled, his lips slick and shiny. “Oh, Ava. I was hoping you’d be here,” he said, his voice still sending a wave of desire through me, despite myself. “Join us.”

I bolted up in bed with a shriek. I looked around in horror, searching for Cali and Xavier’s naked forms. I was alone in the dark bedroom, dressed in pajamas instead of lingerie.

*Oh shit.*

*It was a dream*, I realized. My heart was banging against my ribs like a caged animal. *It was just a dream. No—a fucking horrible nightmare.*

I rubbed my face with a groan. What would it take for me to forget all about that awful dream? It felt like the images were seared into my brain. I’d do anything to never conjure the image of Xavier staring up at me from between Cali’s legs—ever again.

The recollection of that horrible moment had me launching out of bed. There was no way in hell I was going back to sleep anytime soon. I needed something to wash away the bad taste the dream had left in my mouth.

*Maybe if I drink enough, I’ll forget all about that shitshow of a dream.*

I stomped downstairs and rifled through the liquor cabinet for Xavier’s strongest whiskey. It was also his most expensive, but I couldn’t care less about price as I grabbed the bottle and chugged, not bothering to find a glass.

The whiskey burned its way down my throat, but I forced myself to swallow a few more mouthfuls—until I felt it hit my empty stomach. I tried to push away the memory of the nightmare, but even with the whiskey warm in my belly, all I could do was picture Xavier’s smile as he looked up at me.

“Hey, save a shot for me.”

I sat the bottle down and turned to see Marissa standing in the doorway.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “I had a nightmare.”

Marissa frowned. “Must’ve been a bad one if it’s got you drinking like a fish. Good god, girl.”

“In my dream, Xavier wanted me to join him and Cali in a threesome,” I said flatly.

Marissa’s brow rose, and she sauntered in, grabbed the bottle, and took a swig. “That’s fucked. No wonder you took it straight up.”

It was then I noticed Marissa’s hair was mussed, and it looked like her clothes had been hastily pulled on. Her pajama top was on backward.

Then Ravi of all people appeared behind her, looking similarly disheveled.

*Huh. He must have spent the night. At least one of us is having a good time.*

Marissa glanced at him over her shoulder. “We need some privacy.”

He nodded and, moments later, his footsteps sounded on the staircase, probably heading back up to her room.

“Well, at least one of us has a man who listens to us,” I said, my brows high.

Marissa snorted. “I don’t know about that, but he’s sweet. Even if he is a Redwood. But let’s talk about you. I know you’ve been having a hard time with Xavier being gone for so long.”

At that, I snatched the bottle back from her and took another gulp. “And here I thought I was handling his absence so well.”

“I’m sure it’s easy to make yourself think that everything is okay, but the mind has a mind of its own.”

I scoffed at her attempt at wisdom, but even I had to admit there was a twisted logic in what she’d said. And out of everyone in this pack, I knew I could trust Marissa not to bullshit me.

I took one more gulp for bravery then looked at her head-on. “Do you think I was a fool to allow Xavier to go with Cali to the Fae world?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” she asked, eyeing me with thinly veiled skepticism.

I groaned in response. “Okay, I know, I know. It *was* a mistake, but what else was I supposed to do? At the end of the day, Xavier’s an Alpha. He’s gonna do whatever the hell he wants.”

*Especially where Cali’s concerned.* I couldn’t quite bring myself to say that part out loud.

“Besides,” I continued, “if I didn’t allow him to go, it just would’ve made things worse, and Xavier would think that not only does his Luna and mate not trust him, but she’s also jealous of Cali.”

Marissa narrowed her eyes. “*Are* you jealous of her?”

I bit my lip so hard the coppery tang of blood hit my tongue. “Fine. I am. Cali’s still his mate, after all, and they have that fucking *due destini* curse between them and their own history together.” At the pity in Marissa’s eyes, I squared my shoulders. “But you know what? It doesn’t matter. Xavier might have been confused about his feelings for Cali, and things might not have been great between us when I left, but I am Xavier’s first love, and they say you never forget your first.”

Her brows rose. “That also implies that there can be a second, or even a third love.”

“He told me he would come home,” I snapped. “He told me he loved me. And I’m certain he meant it. He didn’t say any of it just to save face. Xavier’s not like that. His feelings are closely guarded secrets.”

“Then it sounds like there’s nothing to worry about. Your nightmare is probably a mixture of your past insecurities and the fact that you miss him. It wouldn’t be normal if you didn’t.”

I thought about that. I wanted to believe that Marissa was right, that the whole thing was based on the very tough reality that my mate was a world away, facing god only knew what. That I didn’t know when he’d be back. I’d missed Xavier since the moment he left me.

*What if Marissa’s right? What if missing him is all this is?*

“I’m going to check on Ravi. Try not to drink any more, okay?” Marissa said. “Come get me if you need anything.”

She left me alone with the bottle in hand, her words echoing in my mind. She’d said exactly what I needed to hear. But if Marissa was right, then why was I still worried?

# **Episode 5386**

**Xavier**

I was frozen in bed, still holding tightly to Cali. I listened with all my might.

*Did I imagine that knock?* I wanted to believe I had because all I wanted in the world was for this moment with Cali to last a little longer. Plus, if there was someone on the other side of that door, then there was a good chance I’d have to hold myself back from ripping their arms off after they’d interrupted us.

Another light knock sounded.

*Fuck.* There was no imagining that. And if I didn’t address it soon, there was no telling whether or not the person would storm in without bothering to knock a third time.

Cali twisted in my arm then nuzzled closer to my chest. I shifted ever so slightly beneath her, trying to figure out how I could slip away and answer the door. But then she let out a sleepy groan, and I swear to god it went straight to my cock.

I glanced down at her. She was still asleep, but I could feel myself flush with how close we were. My mind knew I had to answer that door, that there were other things at stake here, but my body had an entirely different agenda in mind. Fuck, I didn’t want to be the one to wake her. She needed the rest, and she felt so damn good in my arms, but I had no choice.

“Cali,” I forced myself to whisper. “There’s someone at the door.”

She mumbled sleepily, and her eyes fluttered open. The moment she realized how close we were, she blushed fiercely and scooted away from me, rubbing her eyes. “What? At the door?”

She moved to answer the door, but I rushed in front of her to answer it. Someone had already made an attempt on her life. I wasn’t going to make it easy for them to make another one.

“Xavier, wait!” she blurted. “You’re shirtless! You can’t answer the door looking like that.”

I shrugged. “And you’re in a nightgown. What does it matter?”

*A nightgown that does* not *leave much to my imagination.* Maybe it was for the best that we’d been interrupted. Cali had made it more than clear that she didn’t want to get back together with me. At least, not now, while we were here in the Fae world, trying to broker peace and avoid Cali having to make good on this whole marriage treaty nonsense, and save Artemis and the rest of our crew before we ended up as the next casualties in this never-ending war.

*Wow. I’ve never strung them all together like that before.* Jesus. Our outlook was pretty fucking grim, even by our standards. But I refused to let it sway me. I couldn’t lose my edge, my focus. I had to get Cali out of here in one piece—along with Artemis and the others. The Fae world could burn itself to cinders for all I cared.

If only Cali felt the same way. Maybe then all of this wouldn’t be so damn hard.

I went to the door and wrenched it open. “What?”

The servant Fae standing outside jumped back a little. “Ah, um…” He cleared his throat. “This is Caliana Wrenthorn’s room, yes?”

“It’s Caliana Hart,” I said flatly. “What do you want?”

The Fae held out a box. “It’s for this evening’s banquet.”

My shoulders slumped. “Another banquet?”

“I’m just delivering it, sir.”

He all but shoved the box in my arms before bowing and scuttling away.

*I see the Fae aren’t warming up to having a werewolf around.*

I took it back into Cali’s room, shoving the door shut behind me.

Cali had pulled on a day dress, somewhat to my dismay. *Fucking servants. Fucking banquets. Fucking Fae world ruining my time with Cali.*

“What’s in the box?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, but it’s for you.”

She moved to take the box from me, but I pulled it out of her reach. “No, I’ll open it. There’s no telling what could be in this thing. There are both Light and Dark Fae who don’t like that you said you’d marry Kastian, and honestly, I can’t disagree with them.”

Her expression flattened. “Let’s not get into that right now. But I suppose you’re right about the box—someone could have sent it with an agenda. But if it’s some kind of weapon, like the box that was sent earlier, doesn’t that mean you shouldn’t open it either?”

I shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

I set the box on the bed, and Cali stood back.

We stared down at the package, and for a moment it was like we were trying to defuse a bomb, which wasn’t unlike the last package Cali had received. It was hard to imagine someone sending the exact same threat, but I knew from my mercenary work that it didn’t always matter if you were clever. Persistence could be just as dangerous.

I pulled in a deep breath and carefully opened the box to reveal…

“It’s a dress,” I said, frowning.

Cali stepped forward, peering down into the box, and laughed. “We were so scared of this?” She picked it up, examining the dress that sparkled in an otherworldly way.

I couldn’t help but imagine Cali in the dress. She’d look fucking to die for in something like this. Like a real-life fairy-tale princess.

A note fluttered down from the dress, landing on the floor at my feet. I picked it up and scowled.

“‘For my bride, from Kastian,’” I practically snarled, crumpling the note in my fist. Suddenly, I sort of wished there *had* been a bomb in the box. “Let’s burn it.”

Cali smacked my shoulder. “We can’t do that!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s a gift! It would be rude to destroy it.”

“I’m not seeing the problem here…”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” I relented, “keep it. But you’re wearing that dress over my dead body.”

Fucking Kastian. I couldn’t believe the balls on that guy. And yet, some part of me wasn’t surprised at all. The spoiled prick had everything given to him on a gold platter—why wouldn’t he think he could have Cali that easily too?

Cali tucked the dress safely back inside the box and speared me with a look. “We should go check on Rishika and the others.”

“Right.”

*Anything to get out of this room and away from that fucking nightmare dress and constantly being in close quarters with Cali.*

A few minutes later, we were ducking down one hallway after another, making sure the coast was clear before continuing on our way to the woods where the others would be waiting for us. It was slow going, and we had to double back a couple times when we passed servants and random nobles that had come to the summit, but we eventually made it to the others.

Greyson, of course, greeted Cali first.

She raced up to him and threw herself into his arms. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. It wasn’t all that long ago that the two of them had been locking lips. Could they have really missed each other so much in such a short time?

Ignoring the romantic spectacle, I made my way to Marius, who looked exhausted sitting next to Adair and Tabitha.

“How’s Rishika doing?” I asked.

“She slept through the night,” Tabitha said.

I nodded. I glanced to where Artemis was curled up on the ground next to Rishika. It looked like Artemis had slept by Rishika’s side and hadn’t left yet. Hopefully nobody had gone looking for her. She was needed just as much at the summit as Cali was.

Cali made her way to Artemis and squatted next to her, talking softly.

Greyson came up to me and slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Can we talk? Privately?”

I peeled my eyes away from Cali. “Sure.”

We walked a few feet from the rest of the group in silence before Greyson turned to me and looked me over thoughtfully. If he could smell Cali on me, he didn’t say anything. I could certainly smell Cali on him.

“What are we going to do about Cenwyn?” he asked.

Relief coursed through me. *This*, I was happy to discuss. “Thought you’d never ask. What did he do to you?”

“Oh, you know, just abducted me, drugged me, and made me fight to the death for funsies every night,” he said, his tone caustic.

Fury coursed through me. *That is beyond fucked up. Like the Kollector’s zoo. Is the Fae world just like this? Do they think other supernatural creatures are just playthings?*

“Glad you made it out of that,” I said after a beat. “I was going to come after you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. I’m glad you stuck with Cali.”

I snorted. “More like I had to keep her from going.”

He nodded. “Sounds about right.” Silence settled between us for a moment before he added, “I want to get rid of Cenwyn.”

“Agreed. But we need to be smart about it. There could be a bunch of political shit we don’t need Cali roped into further.”

“I get that. But he can’t just go free. Not after what he’s done. We agree on that, yes?”

I nodded. “One hundred percent. So, what do you have in mind?”

# **Episode 5387**

I squatted next to my sister, whose pale and bedraggled appearance told me she probably hadn’t left Rishika’s side since last night. It couldn’t have been comfortable to stay on the ground, exposed to the elements like this. And I was sure she barely allowed herself to sleep. Knowing Artemis, she wouldn’t want to risk falling asleep if Rishika awoke and needed her.

“Artemis?” I said gently. “Do you want to go back to your room and get some sleep? I can stay with Rishika. I promise I’ll let you know if her condition changes at all.”

Artemis shook her head, looking pained. “I’m not leaving. Rishika came all this way for me. Staying here is the least I can do.”

My heart fell. I had a feeling that would be her response, but I’d still hoped she’d allow herself to get some rest. Rishika might be her primary concern right now, but she couldn’t stay out here forever. Sooner or later, Celeste or someone else would wonder where Kadmos’s heir had wandered off to. The peace summit was still underway, and that peace seemed no closer than it had been when we’d all arrived.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Rishika would want you to rest.”

Her expression flattened out. “I’m sure.”

“Okay.” I stole a glance at Marius, who was talking with Tabitha. *This must all be difficult for him.* I didn’t know, exactly, what his relationship with Artemis was. Or what it wasn’t. But I had a nagging feeling that he didn’t do all of this for Artemis just because he was a nice guy.

But none of that mattered right now. And I certainly wasn’t about to interrogate Artemis about it while she lay at Rishika’s side.

I turned my attention back to Artemis. “Um, how are you holding up? I… I had no idea how complicated all of this would be when Marius first showed up at the pack house and conveyed your message.”

She sat upright with a sigh. “Yeah, it’s a fucking mess, isn’t it? I’m sorry you got caught up in it.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “It’s kind of hard to avoid—we’re sisters.”

Artemis managed the ghost of a smile, and I added, “Celeste is trying to use you; Hera’s trying to use me. One way or another, we would’ve gotten caught up in all this anyway. Besides, you know there’s nowhere else I’d rather be—mess or not. I could never leave you to face this on your own.”

Artemis’s smile brightened, then her expression turned pensive, and she was quiet for a moment. “Adair thinks my father would want peace.”

My heart twinged for my sister. I knew how badly she wanted to find her father, to fill in those missing pieces of her family, her history. From what I could tell, she was no closer to finding him now than she’d been when she’d left the human world and embarked on her journey.

“It would be great if I could make that happen, wouldn’t it?” Artemis asked.

I hesitated. A knot formed in my throat, but I forced my words past it. “What if I could bring peace to the Fae world?”

Artemis’s brows knit together. “What do you mean?”

I kept my voice low. I didn’t want anyone else getting involved in this conversation, especially not Xavier and Greyson. “I agreed to marry Kastian.”

My sister’s frown deepened. “You can’t do that.”

“But—”

She shook her head. “No. You made a deal with Celeste, remember?”

“Yeah, I made a *deal*. Not a Fae promise,” I reminded her. “I’m not stuck to my word like you are.” I regretted the words as soon as I said them. It almost sounded like I blamed Artemis for the situation she was trapped in. “I just mean, when I made that deal, it seemed like the best option. Now, things have changed. Besides, doesn’t Celeste want peace too?”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “I’m not worried about you getting cursed from a Fae deal. Celeste doesn’t need that kind of magic working in her favor. She’s plenty dangerous without it. Do you have any idea just how ruthless she can be? If you marry Kastian, she’ll skewer you in your wedding dress—or she’ll have some of her lackeys do it.”

I gulped. That wasn’t my idea of fun either. “I know Celeste will be upset, but in my defense, I didn’t agree to this lightly. I don’t *want* to marry Kastian—I just didn’t see any other options. What was I supposed to do? If I have the power to end this war, to protect other people from being hurt by it like you and I have, then how can I refuse?”

Artemis slumped over with a sigh, resting her head in her hands. “Why and when did this become such a mess?” she asked, groaning.

“I think it began as soon as Celeste realized who you were and trapped you.”

Artemis huffed, shaking her head. “I never should have sent for you.”

“Hey, no. Don’t do that.” I squeezed her hand. “You sent Marius because you knew you couldn’t do this alone.”

“Yeah, and I sent him to get *you*.”

I smiled. “Because you know I can help you,” I said earnestly. “And I will. I’m not going to give up. I won’t rest until you’re free and safe—all of you.”

“Okay, but not if it means marrying Kastian.”

I wished it were that simple. I couldn’t argue this point with her any longer. For one, I’d already gone ten rounds with Xavier about it, and I was physically unable to keep having this conversation. For two, Artemis had enough on her plate without worrying about me marrying one of her enemies.

All I could do was hug her tight. And as shitty as this situation was, I didn’t regret it a bit. I was with my sister, and we were closer than ever. No matter how things turned out, I knew coming here was the right call. She knew as well as I did that I never would’ve left her here alone to deal with all of this.

“We’ll figure something out,” I told her. “There’s no stopping us when we work together.”

My sister swiped the tears from her eyes and pulled me into her arms. Then she pulled back, her expression brightening. “Enough about me.” She lowered her voice. “How’re things with you, Xavier, and Greyson?”

I nearly choked. *Maybe talking about marrying Kastian some more wouldn’t be so bad after all.* “Um, why do you ask?”

“I just… I imagine things are probably kind of… awkward? All of you forced together in this crazy Fae crap. And Xavier being your escort, and Greyson being caught up in his whole thing and…” She grimaced. “It’s just another mess, isn’t it?”

I sighed. “Understatement. But we’re managing. And Greyson’s back now, and he’s safe. We’ll be okay.”

I didn’t tell her that I couldn’t stop thinking about the kiss and all the guilt that came with it. *Should I tell her what happened with Xavier? Who better to talk to about the kiss than my sister?*

Then I realized with a lurch of horror that there *was* someone better to tell: Greyson. He still didn’t know about it. How could I tell anyone else before telling him? Not that I actually *wanted* to tell him. The mere thought made me a little ill.

After all, the only reason he’d even come to the Fae world was to help me, to be with me. And look where that had led him. Now, I felt like I’d betrayed him, even if that wasn’t my intention. I couldn’t blame anyone but myself. I was the one who’d initiated the kiss—admittedly, as camouflage at first. But it would be a lie to say that was all it was. The kiss had gone on for too long and for all the wrong reasons.

A soft moan sounded next to me. It was Rishika.

All other thoughts left my mind as my sister turned her full attention to Rishika and took her hand.

Rishika’s eyes fluttered open, and she looked around, her gaze unfocused, her face scrunched up in confusion.

Artemis’s eyes brimmed with tears as she lifted Rishika’s hand to her lips. My heart swelled. I knew how much this meant to Artemis, how desperate she’d been for Rishika to wake up, how determined she’d been to make sure Rishika was safe and sound. Maybe things would be better now. We had Rishika back. And Greyson too. We’d keep them safe, and we’d sort out this peace summit mess. Together.

Greyson, Adair, Tabitha, and Marius all crowded around as Rishika tried to sit up.

“Take it easy,” Artemis said gently. “You’ve been through a lot.”

Rishika took in the group of smiling faces staring back at her. “Where am I?” Her voice was hoarse, barely audible.

“You’re safe now,” Artemis said, a smile stretching her face. “You’re here with me.”

Rishika’s round eyes turned back to Artemis. “I’m sorry… Who are you?”

# **Episode 5388**

**Greyson**

I watched the shock and concern play out across Cali’s face as Rishika’s words sank into my brain.

*Did I just hear her correctly?* I frowned, looking from Rishika’s confused expression to Artemis’s surprisingly calm one. If the tables were turned, and Cali had just asked me who I was, I would sure as shit not look back at her calmly. *Doesn’t Rishika see Artemis is right in front of her? Shit. Did that potion and all that fighting mess with her vision or something?*

“What do you mean?” Artemis asked gently. “It’s me. Artemis. You know me.”

Judging by Rishika’s expression, the name didn’t register. She just slowly shook her head. In all my life, I’d never seen Rishika look so helpless.

Cali turned to me, her eyes wide. “What’s wrong?”

I knelt on Artemis’s other side, my gaze on Rishika. She watched me warily. I had to play this right so I didn’t spook her.

“Do you know who you are?” I asked as calmly and gently as I could.

Rishika frowned. “Of course I do. I’m Rishika.”

Relief rushed through me so fast it made my head spin. And then my stomach bottomed out when she added, “Who are you? I don’t know *any* of you!”

She yanked her hand out of Artemis’s and scrambled to her feet, backing away. Artemis was right behind her. She took a step toward Rishika, the anguish now clear on her face. “Rishika, do you really not know who I am?”

Rishika held her hands up in front of her. “Just—get away from me!”

I wanted to pull Artemis back, to give Rishika the space she seemed to need so clearly, but Marius beat me to it. He stepped close and put a hand on Artemis’s arm.

“It might just be the aftereffects of the drug,” he said quietly.

Anxiety gnawed at my gut. Marius could be right—but what did any of us actually know about this drug? What if Rishika’s memory loss wasn’t an aftereffect? What if it was the intended purpose of the drug itself?

I thought back to how she hadn’t known me in the fighting ring. How I’d had to completely dominate her and assert myself as her Alpha—and she’d never really seemed to understand who I was even after I got her out. If she hadn’t been so sick and weak from the drug, who knew what would have happened? Would she have tried to keep fighting me? Would she have tried to go back to the fighting ring? Or tried to run away from me after I got her out of there?

The knot of anxiety in my belly tightened. If that was the case, Rishika could attack us at any moment. Hell, the drug rage could come back and make her all the more dangerous. I looked at the group clustered around with new eyes. What Cali and Artemis might see as comfort, Rishika could very well see as a threat. See just how outnumbered she was among this group of strangers.

“Artemis,” I said sharply. “Do as Rishika says. Step back. Don’t threaten her.”

The authority in my voice had everyone stepping back, whether they were in my pack or not. Cali peered from around Artemis’s shoulder.

“Please, Rishika,” Cali begged. “We want to help you. Let us help you.”

“Stay the fuck away!” Rishika snarled.

I pulled Cali back even farther. “Please, be careful. She’s not herself,” I whispered.

“What’s wrong with her?” Artemis asked, her voice low, her eyes still locked on Rishika. “Why doesn’t she know who I am?”

“It could be the drug,” Marius repeated. “Maybe it just needs to burn out of her system.”

Then, before we could do anything else, Rishika broke into a run, her body a blur that shot deeper into the woods.

“Fuck,” I swore. I didn’t hesitate. “I’ll bring her back,” I told Cali over my shoulder as I shifted and raced after her.

“We’ll catch up!” Cali called back to me.

I was already hot in pursuit. I knew I could catch up with her. She was fast—and maybe under the influence of some kind of crazy drug—but I was an Alpha. Even if whatever was causing her to react like this was the drug, and it gave her some kind of physical enhancement *while* screwing up her memory, I was faster. I’d always be faster.

Of course, catching her would be the easy part. The last time I’d caught her, she’d tried—and made a pretty impressive fucking effort—to kill me. At this point, I wasn’t worried about her killing me anymore, even if she was one of the best fighters I’d ever encountered. I was rested and healed and back with my mate. Rishika was in much worse shape. My biggest concern was that I’d be the one to hurt her while trying to stop her. Even without the drug, she was fierce. With the drug, she was feral to the point of recklessness.

I reached the briar wall, following her scent—only to hit the end of it. Her scent stopped at the wall. She must have gone through it. *Shit, she’s even faster than she was before.* My confidence took a bit of a hit at how she’d eluded me so easily. Maybe it’d be a little harder than I thought to keep up with her.

I shifted my weight from paw to paw as I considered my next move. Rishika had gone rogue in the Fae world. She didn’t remember the people who cared about her, and for all we knew, she was a danger to herself and everyone around her. I had to go after her and bring her back.

But if I followed her through the wall, how would I get Rishika and myself back inside?

*Fuck. But do I really have a choice? I can’t let her run wild out there with no backup—even if she doesn’t want it.*

I plowed through the wall and looked around. I couldn’t see any sign of her, but I’d picked up her scent again. I burst off after her. It was an easy trail to follow now that the magic of Briarkeep wasn’t disrupting it.

As I chased her trail, my senses picked up another scent. Something harsh. Something that reminded me of…something. But what? I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Whatever it was, I didn’t have time to figure it out. My speed had finally paid off because I saw Rishika up ahead, darting through the trees.

I tried to mind link with her. *Rishika, stop! I know this must all be confusing, but we’re only trying to help you!*

She didn’t respond. Honestly, with the state she was in, I had no idea if she was even capable of receiving my message. So I kept following her—until she stopped suddenly as she came upon a thick copse of gnarly trees.

I slowed as I approached her. There was nothing more dangerous than a cornered animal, and I didn’t want to put Rishika in that position. She moved along the trees, probably searching for an opening, but she kept her eyes on me as she prowled up and down the tree line, snarling and baring her teeth, her hackles raised.

Slowly, I moved closer. She stopped completely, and we locked eyes. Hers looked absolutely wild.

I paused and tried to mind link again. *Rishika, I’m your Alpha. Please, let me help you.*

For a split second, it seemed like I might’ve gotten through to her, then her eyes shifted to something behind me, and she suddenly backed away from me with a snarl.

I tensed. *What is she reacting to?* I wasn’t crazy about the concept of turning my back to look. For all I knew, it could be a trick to give her a chance to attack me. That harsh scent hit my nose again, and suddenly I knew where I remembered it from.

That scent was present when I was being held with the others in the arena.

Rishika’s growl intensified, and I heard something approaching from behind me. *I really, really hope it’s Xavier…*

But when I finally turned around, it wasn’t Xavier. It was a fierce creature I recognized from the arena. Several feet taller than me, the creature had long, razor-sharp talons and a barbed tail. It was the one creature of all my potential opponents that I hoped I’d never have to face. But here it was.

The creature growled, spewing saliva as it said, “You killed my friend.”

I wasn’t about to shift back to my human form to explain to the creature that the faun would have killed them both without a second thought. She had no friends—in the end, we all would have had to kill each other to survive.

I backed away, but Rishika’s sharp growl behind me reminded me I couldn’t retreat.

I was trapped between them. One was out to kill me in revenge, and the other would probably try to kill me because she thought I was trying to kill her.

*Where the hell are Xavier and the others?*

# **Episode 5389**

I held tightly to Xavier’s fur as we raced after Greyson. Xavier had shifted immediately after Greyson went after Rishika, and we were in pursuit. Adair, Marius, Artemis, and Tabitha were following after us on foot.

I knew I shouldn’t be thinking about how comfortable and achingly familiar I felt on Xavier’s back. Like some puzzle piece I was missing for so long had finally notched into place. We were chasing after Rishika and Greyson. Rishika, who clearly wasn’t well and could possibly be a danger to herself and those around her.

*And Greyson…*

My mate. I’d been so worried about him, and now he was back and putting himself in danger chasing after Rishika. It shouldn’t even occur to me to think about being close to Xavier. Hadn’t I told myself already that I needed to focus on putting distance between us? Not literally the opposite thing?

But being this close to him, I couldn’t stop thinking about our kiss. How it had taken on a life of its own and just how confused I felt by the whole thing. How much part of me wanted to pick up where we’d left off. How, for a split second, waking up in Xavier’s arms had felt like the only right thing in the world.

Xavier hadn’t said or mind linked anything to me since he’d warned me to hold on for dear life a split second before sprinting after Greyson. Was he thinking the same thing I was? Did he notice how amazing it felt to be so close again?

*You need to stop thinking about it. It’s not fair to Greyson.*

As we reached the briar wall, Xavier broke his silence.

*Their scents end here. Greyson must have followed Rishika outside of the wall*.

My eyes scanned up and down the wall. There was no sign of Rishika or Greyson.

*Why don’t you get off me and I’ll pass through the wall and go after them?*

“But—”

*I’m the only one who can catch up with them quickly. Don’t worry about me. I’ll find a way back in.*

He started to lower me to the ground, his mind clearly made up, but I clutched tighter to his fur.

“No, don’t! Keep going. I’m coming with you. I don’t want to lose track of Greyson.”

He tensed, and I could practically hear his argument before he even mind linked.

“Marius, Artemis, and Adair can’t be far behind!” I added. “They’re all amazing trackers. They’ll know to follow us, and Tabitha will be able to use her magic to get us back in.”

*Fine. Hold on tight and keep low*, Xavier said seconds before he pushed through the wall.

I ducked my face against his fur as branches scratched at my hands and arms. Not for the first time, I wished I could shift into a wolf. It didn’t seem like the branches bothered Xavier in the least bit.

When we emerged on the other side of the wall, I barely had time to look around and get my bearings before Xavier dashed off again.

*He must’ve picked up their scent.*

As tight as I was holding on to Xavier’s fur, I still almost fell off as he bounded ahead. It wasn’t easy to stay on his back when he was pushing himself so hard. Our surroundings blurred past, and each jostle of Xavier’s loping gait had my breath hitching. Still, I’d hang on as long as I needed to, no matter how rough the road got, if it meant we caught up with Greyson and Rishika before things got any worse.

I just hoped we could get Rishika to calm down once we found her. Greyson had warned me to be careful around her. It was such a strange concept to act like Rishika was dangerous. I struggled to wrap my head around it.

But Greyson wasn’t usually wrong about these kinds of things.

As long as I lived, I’d never forget the anguished look on my sister’s face when Rishika confessed that she couldn’t remember her.

*How are we going to help Rishika remember who everyone is? What the hell did those Fae do to her? Why doesn’t she remember us? And how can we fix this if we don’t even fully understand what’s wrong with her?*

Suddenly, Xavier lurched to a stop, and I had to grip his fur to not tumble headfirst over him and onto the ground.

*Get off!* he snapped.

I held on tight. *No! I told you. I’m not letting go until we find—*

But before I could finish, a terrifying roar echoed through the air.

Xavier dropped down so his belly brushed the ground. *Please, get off.*

I was so shocked by the monstrous roar that it was all I could do to stumble off of him. The second my feet hit the ground, Xavier lunged ahead.

“Xavier! Wait!” I chased after him as fast as my woefully slow feet could carry me. “What’s going on? What was that—”

I stopped short near a copse of trees and suddenly understood exactly why he didn’t want me to ride further.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

Up ahead, Greyson and Rishika were facing off against a…a fierce and monstrous creature. Something I’d never seen before. Something I’d never even imagined could exist—even in the Fae world.

Xavier didn’t hesitate to join the fray. He lunged onto the monster’s back, barely avoiding its barbed tail.

I swallowed my fear. I probably wasn’t any kind of match for whatever the hell that creature was, but my two mates and Rishika needed all the help they could get.

I summoned my sword, and, with a determined scream, I charged at the monster. Its tail swung at me as I approached like it was a cow swatting an annoying fly. I sliced through the tail with my sword.

*Take that, you horrible beast!*

The monster threw back its head and roared in pain, tossing Xavier from his back. Then, to my complete horror, the writhing, cut-off tail on the ground transformed into a snake-like creature that hissed and slithered toward me.

*What fresh hell is this?*

I stumbled back, summoning my shield to fend it off as it lunged toward me. It bounced off my shield, and I blasted it with the full force of my magic.

The snake was torn to bits—which then turned into even more snake creatures that slithered toward me.

“Come on!” I groaned, readying my shield and sword for another bout.

Nearby, Greyson, Xavier, and Rishika fought the actual creature. Greyson sank his sharp teeth into the creature’s arm and ripped it clean off. Just like the tail, however, the severed arm writhed on the ground and then transformed into another slithering creature that tried to join in on the fight.

*What the hell am I supposed to do?* I backed up, parrying each of the snake creatures that attacked me. *I can’t cut them up or blast them. That’ll just make more of them.*

I continued backing up, totally unsure of what to do. I wanted to help fight this beast, but as long as I was actually making it multiply, I was being the opposite of helpful.

“Oof!” I backed right up into something solid, and a pair of hands caught my arms to steady me.

“Careful, there,” I heard Marius’s voice say over my shoulder. He sidestepped around me as Adair, Artemis, and Tabitha rushed onto the scene.

Adair approached the monster, his whip held out for an attack, when Marius called out, “Don’t hurt it! It’s a Tiplimilla. It will only multiply.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I retorted. “How do we stop it?”

Artemis stepped forward, her dagger in hand. “You have to sever its head.”

I gulped. “How can we even get close enough to do that?”

“I’ll distract it!” Marius said. He pushed past us and raced toward the creature. “Hey, ugly!” He clapped his hands together. “Feeling snacky? I’ve got just the thing for you!”

Meanwhile, Xavier was attacking the monster’s legs, and Greyson tried to go for the other arm, but the beast had already regrown a new arm from where he’d torn off the other one and slashed at him. Rishika lunged for the monster’s belly but was swatted back by the new tail it had grown.

“Hey! Beastie!” Adair joined in, snapping his whip to get the monster’s attention. “Come here, you ugly motherfucker!”

Marius and Adair’s combined efforts seemed to do the trick, and the monster snarled as it turned toward them. Tabitha rushed forward to help, but I caught her arm and pulled her back.

“They’ve got it!” I swung my shield out in front of us to protect against the snakes swarming toward us.

While the monster was distracted, Artemis circled around and jumped on the creature’s back. She slashed at its neck with her dagger, but the creature grabbed her in its claws before she could do much damage. Her dagger fell to the ground.

Just like that, I forgot all about staying back.

“Artemis!” I screamed and rushed forward, jumping to avoid the snakes that tried to bite me with every step.

Rishika let out a vicious howl and lunged at the creature, sinking her teeth into the arm that held Artemis. She hung from the arm, refusing to let go, and the monster let out a shriek of pain before releasing Artemis.

At that moment, Greyson and Xavier both charged the beast, and it lost its footing and fell onto its back. I leapt out of the way as it slammed into the ground, its teeth snapping at me.

I raised my sword—*I’ve got one shot at this. I can’t mess this up—*and brought it down with all my might across the creature’s neck, severing its head from its body. Hot, dark blood gushed everywhere, and the creature stopped moving. The snakes turned to dust.

*I did it.*

Artemis lurched to her feet, moving toward Rishika. “Are you—” She stopped suddenly, grimacing as she clutched her side, where a rapidly spreading bloodstain was soaking through her tunic. Artemis collapsed to the ground.

# **Episode 5390**

**Artemis**

“Oh…fuck,” I gritted out. I was lying on the dirt, curled up on my side, clutching my *other* side, which seemed to be hemorrhaging. You know, as Tiplimilla wounds did. I groaned at the pain that lanced up and down my side. Its claws had dug when it had ripped me off its back, and it felt like it had shredded my insides.

At least Tiplimillas weren’t poisonous. Still, a severe enough injury could kill a person—poison or not.

*At least it’s dead.* How the fuck it ended up here was a question for another time. I had a feeling it had something to do with Cenwyn—but I wasn’t exactly in the shape to investigate right now. I tried to sit up, clutching my side, and spots appeared in my vision.

“Easy, champ.” Marius’s voice washed over me. His hands settled on my shoulders as he gently eased me back down against him. “Lie still. I need to see the wound.”

My head rested against his warm chest as he peeled my hand away from the wound.

“Shit, Ari,” he whispered, gently prodding the wound. “Why’d you have to try and be a hero?”

“Try?” I joked feebly. “There was no ‘trying.’ I’m a bonafide her—ow!”

“Sorry.” He tore off a long piece of his shirt and began to wrap the wound. “I’m sure the healers at Briarkeep will have better tools, but this will help until we get back.”

I relaxed against him as he wrapped the wound. It was nice, being in his arms, with his body against mine. Even though he was patching me up, it still felt like old times, in a way. Familiar. Safe. Kind of lovely, honestly.

He tightened the knot, fastening the bandage, and another bolt of pain shot down my side. I cried out, and this time he barely got the beginning of an apology out before Rishika rushed forward with a growl.

Still bracing an arm around me, Marius held up a hand. “I’m just trying to help.”

“It’s okay, Rishika,” I said, forcing a weak smile as I sat up. *Does Rishika remember me now?* The fact that she was acting protective had to be a good sign, didn’t it? I carefully eased out of Marius’s arms, and Rishika stopped, looking from me to Marius. Pain still gnawed at my side, but I did my best to ignore it.

Rishika wasn’t running. This might be my only chance to talk to her, to tell her that everything would be okay.”

“Rishika,” I managed through the pain. “I know this…is a lot. But you can trust us. We’re not going to hurt you. We care about you.”

Xavier shifted back to his human form. “I hate to interrupt, but we need to get back to the keep. Who knows what will happen if anyone finds you and Cali gone.”

“I know,” I said, but I didn’t move. I needed to find out if Rishika remembered me. I tried to take a step toward Rishika, but my legs couldn't support me.

Marius caught me before I hit the ground. “I’ve got you.”

With his support, I slowly approached Rishika.

I swallowed back the pain, the anxiety, the fear that my worst nightmare was going to come true: that I was going to lose Rishika. That I’d already lost her.

“Do you…remember me?” I asked.

Rishika didn’t back away, but she stayed in her wolf form, watching me warily. I wanted to take that as a good sign, but it was such a far cry from the reunion I’d been imagining with her.

I tried again. “You must remember me. You saved my life, remember? With the Tiplimilla. You attacked it when it was going to kill me. Why would you do that if you don’t remember me?”

I reached out for her, and her hackles rose as she let out another growl.

My heart shattered. “Rishika…please.” My voice broke.

A warm hand landed gently on my shoulder, and I turned to see Adair standing behind me.

“Don’t push it,” he said gently. “If it’s the drug that’s causing her memory loss, it might wear off.”

I forced myself to ask the question that had been haunting me from the moment Rishika asked who I was. “What if it doesn’t wear off? What if…what if she never remembers me?”

“We have to go back inside,” Xavier pressed. “For all we know, there could be more of those beasts running around here.”

Marius squeezed my shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you back to the keep and patch you up, okay?”

I dug my heels into the bloodstained dirt. “I’m not going anywhere without Rishika.”

“Artemis, please,” Marius said. “The wound could get infected if we don’t take care of it fast enough.”

“I don’t care!” I snapped. I tried to jerk away from his embrace—the only thing that was keeping me upright—and nearly collapsed all over again. Marius caught me again, his expression pained.

Cali rushed forward. “Artemis, please. Marius is right. You’re badly hurt. We can’t just ignore it.”

Greyson shifted back to his human form. “I’ll walk back with Rishika.” He looked at Rishika. “If that’s all right with you?”

At his request, she shifted back to her human form. “Fine.” She avoided my gaze.

“It’s settled then!” Cali declared.

With that, we slowly made our way back. Xavier led the way, with Marius practically carrying me while Greyson, Cali, and Rishika walked behind us. Adair and Tabitha brought up the rear in our sad little rescue team.

“How are you holding up?” Marius asked. “We can stop if you need a break.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. Xavier’s right. We need to get back.” The wound hurt, of course. Pain throbbed up my side with every step, but I’d been through worse. The thing that bothered me far more than my wound was my worry about Rishika. What if she never remembered me? What if she refused to stay with us?

As we reached the briar wall, Marius handed me my dagger. “You dropped this.”

“Thanks,” I said hollowly, sliding the dagger into its sheath on my thigh.

“You’re not okay,” he said.

I gave him a grim smile. “Not even a little bit. The fact that Cenwyn did this to Rishika makes my blood boil. I want to give him what he has coming. A knife in the gut seems about right.”

“Mm. A painful, slow way to die,” Marius mused. “How very insidious of you.”

“I don’t care. He thinks he can do this to people I care about, and he’s going to find out the hard way that he can’t.”

“Oh, I’m all in favor of insidious, by the way.” He smirked. “Who knows how long Cenwyn has been getting away with all of this and who he’s hurt. I’m behind you, no matter what you want to do.”

Tabitha stepped forward to neutralize the wall’s magic, and Adair—ever at her side—warned, “Be ready. We don’t know who might be waiting for us on the other side.”

I slipped my dagger out of its holster. The Tiplimilla’s blood and my own still stained the blade. Good.

*I hope Cenwyn is waiting to meet us.*

We journeyed through the wall, and Marius was careful to keep the branches from scraping me. I appreciated his gesture, but I couldn’t focus on it. Every cell in my body was screaming at me to turn around, throw my arms around Rishika, and never let go.

*She came all this way to help free me, only to lose her memory.* Hot rage lashed at my belly. *Maybe it’s best if we don’t run into Cenwyn. I might actually kill him before I can make his death worth something.*

We emerged from the other side to find an empty forest clearing. It didn’t seem like anyone was looking for us. A rare stroke of luck.

“We’ll take it from here,” Xavier told Marius. “Only Cali, Artemis, and I can go back to the keep.”

“Sure, in normal circumstances,” Marius said, “but Artemis is badly hurt. If that wound isn’t cleaned properly—”

Cali put a hand on his arm. “We’ll take good care of her. I promise.”

Reluctantly, Marius stepped back and nodded. “Be careful, Ari. That place is crawling with deceit and treachery. You don’t know who you can trust.”

I knew that all too well.

Before I disappeared back into the keep, I approached Rishika. She watched me warily.

“I just… I want you to know that you’re safe with Greyson and the others. They will take care of you.”

She seemed to take this in, then nodded. “Even if I don’t remember you, something tells me that you can be trusted. I’ll…I’ll take your word for it.”

A lump formed in my throat. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help her,” Marius said to me.

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“We should go,” Xavier said.

I took one long, last look at Rishika before Cali, Xavier, and I headed back toward the keep.

Cali supported me most of the way there, her arm wrapped around me. “I’m sorry about Rishika. I promise we’ll figure it out, okay?”

I nodded. There was only one thing I was sure of: I *would* make Cenwyn pay for what he’d done.

As we approached the keep, Xavier put out a hand. “We have a problem.”

Cali and I looked up to see Celeste approaching. She looked *pissed*.

*Great. What now?*

“Leave us,” Celeste snapped at Cali and Xavier, who both hesitated. She practically snarled, “That wasn’t a request.”

**Episode 5391**

I glanced nervously at Artemis, then back to Celeste, who was glowering at us. It was intimidating, but I wasn’t going to let her spook me, I wasn’t about to leave my sister alone with this woman.

“It’s okay, Cali,” Artemis said quietly. “I’m fine.”

I didn’t believe that, but Celeste didn’t hesitate. Taking Artemis by the arm, she led her briskly toward the keep, though she stopped at the entrance to throw a disdainful look back at Xavier.

“We wear *clothes* here,” she said coldly.

Xavier snarled and I could feel him tense, but I shook my head.

“Stop,” I said quietly. “Don’t make things worse for Artemis.”

Celeste and Artemis had disappeared, but Xavier was still glaring after them. “I don’t think things *could* get much worse around here.”

I sighed. “Maybe we should get back in too. It would probably help if you put some clothes on.” I looked deliberately away from Xavier’s naked body. Celeste might not approve of him walking around like that, but I found the sight dangerously distracting. Much like the kiss we’d shared the night before. I cleared my throat. “Remember, we’re in the Fae world, and we both know what the general feeling is toward werewolves.”

Xavier shook his head. “I can’t wait to get the hell out of this place,” he muttered, but led us back toward the keep. Inside, as we walked toward my room, I noticed that while Celeste hadn’t been impressed by Xavier’s lack of clothing, she seemed to be in the minority. Because almost every Fae on the way through the keep gave Xavier more than just a passing glance.

Xavier looked down at himself as we got to my room, eyeing his muddy arms. “I should probably wash up. Come in and wait for me, okay?” He glanced down the hallway, then back at me, and when he spoke, he kept his voice low. “I don’t want you wandering around. We have to watch out for Cenwyn.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promised. “Anyway, I doubt he’d try anything out in the open.”

Xavier pushed my door open, but we both stood at the entrance, neither of us walking in.

He gave me a curious look. “Well, go ahead. You’ll wait while I clean up.”

Clean up. That meant he was going to go take a shower. I was *not* going to think of him in the shower. I was *not* going to think of him in the shower. I was *not* going to think of him in the shower.

Shit. I was thinking of him in the shower.

That made me think of his body, and the way it had felt pressed against mine. That made me think of the kiss, and I felt my face growing hot.

Xavier eyed me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “Nothing. I’m fine. You go ahead.”

He frowned. “And where are you going?”

“Nowhere. I’ll just wait here.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Out here in the hall?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I just want to give you some privacy,” I hastily explained.

He stared at me for a moment longer, then burst out laughing. “Are you serious?”

I was starting to get flustered. I knew what he was saying, and why he was laughing. I had seen Xavier naked about a million times. He was standing naked right in front of me now. Why he would need privacy to take a shower was absurd, but it just felt…*unwise* for me to walk into that room with him. What was happening between us anymore?

My face was already hot and getting hotter. I put a hand on his chest and pushed him into the room. “Go,” I snapped. I was annoyed, but it was impossible to ignore how good it felt to touch him.

“Is this about the kiss?” he asked.

I pulled the door shut, slamming it in his face. It wasn’t about the kiss…but it was also about the kiss.

“Cali!” he called through the closed door.

“Just…get dressed,” I called back.

He paused for a moment. “Fine,” he finally grunted.

I leaned against the door, fanning myself with my hand. I was trying to keep it together, but despite my very best efforts, I just couldn’t stop picturing Xavier on the other side of the door. And that only made matters worse.

Taking a deep breath, I stood straight. I had told Xavier I would wait outside the room, but I thought it would probably be better if I just took a little walk and removed myself from temptation. So I started off, walking briskly down the passageway.

But I stopped, frozen in my tracks, when I saw Kastian coming out of a room.

I tried to step back and slip away unnoticed, but it was too late. He caught sight of me and smiled.

“Caliana, my betrothed. I was just coming to see you.”

“Were you?” I asked suspiciously. I was learning to be suspicious of basically everything Kastian said to me.

He stepped to my side. “I wanted to discuss the wedding. What an exciting event that will be.”

“Hmm,” I said vaguely. I glanced at my own door. I hadn’t walked very far, and I really hoped Xavier wasn’t overhearing this conversation. There was no telling what he might do if he heard Kastian talking like this.

Figuring it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious, I moved down the passageway, farther from my room. Kastian fell into step beside me. He was still talking about something wedding-related—flowers or how long the ceremony would last. I wasn’t paying any attention to him.

Until he turned to me and asked, “And are you familiar with Fae nuptial traditions, my love?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Of course,” I lied. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, but I was anxious for this conversation to be over. I really needed to get rid of him before Xavier came looking for me, or we were going to have trouble.

Kastian grinned at me, the expression unsettling. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m looking forward to seeing you at the conjunctio.”

“Sure, yeah, whatever.” I frowned. “Wait, the *what*?”

But Kastian was already walking away, striding down the passageway. What the hell was the conjunctio? What had I just gotten myself into? My stomach felt tight with nerves. I really hoped I hadn’t just agreed to something I knew nothing about. Moves like that had gotten me into trouble before, and I’d resolved to avoid that kind of thing if I could help it.

I chewed my lip. I wished my mother was here. She had grown up here. She would be able to explain Fae wedding traditions to me.

A wave of anxiety washed over me. I looked around. I wondered if I would be able to find Artemis. I could ask her. She had lived most of her life in the Fae world as a bounty hunter, but she might know. It was possible, but somehow I doubted I was going to be able to find her.

The only other Fae I knew here were Adair and Marius. I could ask them what they knew about a conjunctio, and I could also tell Greyson that I had told Kastian I’d agreed to the marriage. I sighed—I needed to talk to him anyway.

I headed back to my room and knocked on the door.

“Yeah?” Xavier’s voice came from inside.

“Hurry up,” I called. “I want to go back to the others.”

There were footsteps, and a second later the door opened. Xavier stood in the doorway, drying his hair with one of the rough linen towels. He wasn’t wearing a shirt.

My eyes drifted down to his chest, scanning across the articulation of his muscles. Then—catching myself—I snapped my gaze away.

“Are you ready?” I asked, my voice higher than normal.

“I’m going to need a few more minutes,” he said.

I nodded. “Fine. I’m going to head over now. Just come when you’re done.”

“Hang on,” he said, grasping my hand as I started to turn. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Cali—”

“I’ll be careful,” I promised. “And it’s not like I’m unarmed. I have my magic weapons. And Greyson is there.”

Xavier’s jaw tightened, but he let go of my hand. “Fine.”

I could see that he wasn’t pleased, but there was nothing I could do about that. I turned and started off, hurrying to find Adair.

I left the keep and strode into the woods. I found Adair in a small clearing. He was standing with Marius and Tabitha, who smiled when she saw me. Behind them was a small cavern in the rocks, and inside I could see Rishika, resting on a narrow cot. I didn’t see Greyson, and was about to ask where he was when Adair spoke:

“I’m surprised to see you, Cali,” he said. “Is everything okay?”

“Kind of. I wanted to ask you a question, Adair. You’re from this world. Have you ever heard of the wedding tradition of conjunctio?”

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“What is it?” I pressed.

“It’s a ceremony that signifies the joining of two families through magic,” he said matter-of-factly.

Marius chuckled darkly. “Well, that’s one way to put it.”

I looked over at him, my heart starting to thud. “What is it?”

**Episode 5392**

**Artemis**

Celeste kept a firm hold on my arm as she led me away from Cali and Xavier and into the keep. Inside, she marched me down the long passageway toward her room. Her grip on me was tight, and I ground my teeth in frustration, fighting not to yank my arm away. I was over this whole song and dance with Celeste, but I kept my mouth shut and let the Fae do what she wanted. If Celeste wanted to keep policing me because it gave her an illusion of control over her life, fine. Whatever.

When we reached her room, she pushed me inside and slammed the door shut.

“What is it this time?” I asked shortly.

She narrowed her eyes. “I think you know,” she snapped. Still holding onto me, she yanked my arm back in a way that made pain shoot from my back.

I sucked in a breath. My back was still tender from the fight, and I closed my eyes against the sharp throb that echoed through my body.

Her eyes sharpened. “What happened?” she demanded.

“Do you really care?” I asked, finally pulling my arm from her grasp.

“Of course I care,” she shot back. “How can you ask me that? Have you been injured?”

I shook my head. “It’s just a scratch.”

Celeste looked thunderous. “I’m trying to do everything I can to elevate your prominence, and here you are, trying to get yourself killed. Was this something to do with Kastian?”

I shook my head. “No. And anyway, I probably couldn’t even get near Kastian if I wanted to, could I?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Celeste asked.

I looked at her, then gestured to the closed door. “What do you think it’s supposed to mean? You’re keeping me under lock and key—”

“Because you are acting like a *child*, Artemis. Sneaking out of your window—a child behaves like that!” she exploded. “I would like to know what you would have me do?”

I shook my head, feeling mutinous.

Celeste’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “If you are going to do something useful with your time, you should work on a plan to get your sister *out* of marrying Kastian. Or you could do the job I’ve asked you to do.”

I scowled at her. “How?”

“What?”

“How exactly would I do that? Tracking someone isn’t something I can do while I’m being tracked myself, you know,” I pointed out. “You’re keeping so many tabs on me it’s kind of hard to find the time to go kill someone.”

We were alone in the room, but when I spoke, Celeste looked quickly around, as though making sure there was no one listening. “You don’t have to say that so loudly,” she hissed.

“Well, it was your idea,” I reminded her. I shook my head. “You just don’t want to be caught, do you? Want it done, but don’t want to be seen having anything to do with it.”

“Artemis—”

“So which is it?” I asked, cutting her off. “Do you want me to do your dirty work or not?”

Celeste glowered at me, but I held her gaze. I wasn’t going to be the one to blink first—not this time. This Fae had been way too hands-on when it came to me, and I was sick of it. I was tired of getting into trouble for every single thing I did. Nothing I ever did was good enough for Celeste.

“You keep going on and on about how I’m the Mauvais heir, but you’re not treating me like the heir apparent. You’re treating me like a prisoner. You know what I think, Celeste?” I didn’t wait for her to answer. “I think you want the power you think I can get you.”

She shifted a little on her feet. She looked uneasy, and I wondered if I’d hit a nerve.

“For the record, I don’t think wanting power makes you evil, but I think you’ve been scorned since Adair left you, and I think you want a little revenge.” I narrowed my eyes. “You want to be the one on top again, and you think *I’m* the one who can get you there.”

She didn’t answer, and the silence hung heavy in the room.

“Just admit it,” I said quietly.

Her gaze on me was cold as ice. “Those are some very strong accusations, Artemis.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you deny them?” Still no answer. I took a step toward her. “If you want my help, then you are going to have to back off. Do you understand? I can’t *think* with you breathing down my neck all the time. If you want this done, this is going to have to be out of your hands, and in mine. Deal?”

She held my gaze for a moment longer. “Fine,” she snapped. “If you want to play it this way, then go right ahead. I’ll have the guards ease up, but I only put them in place for your protection, Artemis.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“Believe me or not, it doesn’t change the facts,” she said sharply. “Yes, you were once a bounty hunter and are better equipped to defend yourself than most. Yes, I’ve asked you to do certain…*things*,” she said delicately. “But you are still the Mauvais heir, and there are still those who do not wish you well. And even some who would like to see you dead—”

“Let them try,” I said with a shrug. “This is the last time I’m going to have this conversation with you. If you want me in your corner, Celeste, the guards are gone.”

And without waiting for a response, I turned and strode out of her room, ignoring when she called after me.

I walked quickly, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I didn’t have a destination in mind, but I headed back out of the keep and was halfway to where Rishika and the others were hiding before I’d even realized where I was going.

The wind kicked up, cool and clean, scuttling the leaves across the forest floor. I took a deep breath, glad to have some air after the heaviness of Celeste’s room. It felt good to be outside, but when my thoughts went to Rishika, my stomach gave an anxious turn. I wondered if she was doing any better than the last time I had seen her.

When I got to the little clearing in the woods, Adair and Tabitha were sitting just outside the mouth of the stone cavern, before a small fire. They rose when they saw me approaching.

“Artemis, hello,” Adair said, nodding. “You missed your sister. She was just here.”

I glanced over and saw Xavier off to the left. He was near the tree line, sitting on a log, looking stormy. I’d seen Xavier brood often enough to recognize that he was in a mood when I saw it.

“How is Rishika?” I asked, turning back to Adair.

“She slept well,” Adair said. “Peacefully, which is good. Marius kept watch.”

I nodded, feeling my heart do a little flip at his words, though I tried not to think too much about it.

“She’s awake,” Tabitha said with a small smile.

“Thank you,” I said, and stepped into the rock cavern. It was dim inside, but when my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see Rishika sitting up on her makeshift cot. Marius was next to her, and he seemed to be telling a story.

It looked like a classic Marius story, he was gesturing wildly, so it was probably all lies, but Rishika was laughing, and I stood for a moment, letting the sound wash over me. It was a beautiful sound. Like a song. I could become addicted to that sound. I could still remember what it had felt like to hear her laugh when we’d first met, back at the Redwood pack house, when we raced to the tops of trees while we trained.

I shook my head. Things had felt so much simpler back then.

“Ari, hey. When did you get here?” Finished with his story, Marius had turned and was looking at me in the doorway.

“Just now.” I looked at Rishika. “How are you doing?”

“Good,” she said. “I’ve just been hearing about some bounty hunting job of Marius’s that went totally wrong.”

“Or totally *right*, depending on how you look at it,” Marius said with a shrug.

“Something about a tree spirit who fell in love?” Rishika laughed, looking at Marius for confirmation.

He nodded. “But the woodsman was a jealous oaf. Launched me into a lake for talking to his girlfriend. You wouldn’t believe the size of the canoe that Fae tried to send me off in. This big,” he said, making a tiny box in the air.

Rishika and Marius laughed, but I wasn’t in a laughing mood.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” I told Rishika. “You look better too.”

“Thanks.” She adjusted herself on the cot. “I’ve been thinking about my memory. I thought I might want to try to do some things that might bring it back.”

“That would be great,” I said hopefully. “Like what?”

“I’m not sure,” Rishika admitted.

“I have an idea,” Marius offered.

“What?” I asked.

He looked between us. “What if you kiss?”

**Episode 5393**

**Greyson**

I threw my head back and let the cold, clear water from the waterfall crash over me. It was icy cold, and it felt great—refreshing and cleansing. It had been a hell of a time in the arena, but I felt fine now. Fully recovered from the effects of Cenwyn’s drugs and the silver poisoning.

Now I was just worried about Rishika. More worried than I had admitted to Cali. It was terrifying to see her like this—with no memory of anything. I had to hope that Marius was right, and that it would all come back to her once the drugs were fully out of her system.

I scrubbed a savage hand through my hair. Thinking of the drugs—and the havoc they’d caused—only made me angrier. It made me want to kill Cenwyn even more. One way or the other, we had to do something about that menace.

I needed to talk to Xavier about it. I knew I could trust my brother—I knew we both wanted what was best for Cali. And as far as I was concerned, what was best for Cali—and frankly for everyone—was to get back to the human world.

The thought of exactly how I was going to extract everyone from the Fae world occupied my mind while I scrubbed my chest, but I stopped when I felt the back of my neck prickle. I had the sudden sense that I was being watched.

I felt my pulse kick up—if it was Cenwyn or one of his minions, I wasn’t going to hold back. I was done screwing around with that guy.

Turning casually, I scanned the trees surrounding the waterfall.

And then I saw her.

“Cali,” I said aloud.

She was standing near the edge of the trees, watching me. It had been Cali I’d sensed.

I stepped out of the water, happy to see her, but also worried. “Love, what are you doing here? Why are you back so soon? Did something happen?”

She stepped toward me and wrapped her arms around me.

“I’m soaking wet,” I laughed, but she shook her head.

“I don’t care,” she murmured, clinging tightly to me.

I bent and kissed her, loving the feeling of her warm skin against my cold body. As I slid my tongue into her mouth, I thought about how easy it would be to get carried away with her out here, but I stopped myself. There was tension in Cali’s shoulders—something was wrong.

I pulled back and looked down at her. “What is it?”

Cali looked up into my eyes. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“What?” I asked. “You can tell me anything.’’

She bit her lip. “These peace talks I’ve been attending, well, they’ve included some plans. Plans that I’m involved in.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “How involved?”

“Really involved.” She took a shaking breath. “I told the Dark Fae Kastian that I would marry him.”

Shock rocketed through me, and I pulled back. “*What?*”

“Greyson—”

“Why would you do that?” I demanded. I shook my head. “You must have been forced into it, right? Was Cenwyn behind it? That bastard. Just another reason to—”

“No, Greyson, listen to me,” Cali said quickly. “I told him I would because doing so offers the chance to bring peace to the Fae world.”

I stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I am the Light Fae heir because of my mom, and Kastian is from a prominent Dark Fae family. He’s one of their nobles.”

“*So?*” I asked, still not getting what she was saying.

“Us getting married would unite the two opposing sides,” she went on. “The Light Fae and the Dark Fae.”

I shook my head. “I don’t like this, Cali. I don’t like this at all.”

“I know how this sounds, Greyson. I do. And I’m not loving this…conjunctio that I might have to take. Adair said it signifies a joining, but Marius implied there’s more to it. He said they could try to twist it somehow… I don’t know if I can prevent that, but I have to do it—”

“I know you want peace, Cali, and I’m all for it—but what are we talking about here?” My heart was racing. My whole body felt hot now, like I’d been lit on fire. The icy water of the waterfall was just a distant memory now. “There’s no fucking way I’m going to let you sacrifice your life by marrying that prick to *maybe* bring peace to a world that’s not even your own! What about us?” I demanded. “You’re my *mate*. What about us? What about our future? In what universe would you think that I’d ever agree to such a thing?”

Cali wasn’t answering. She seemed to be waiting for me to stop.

Breathing hard, I did stop, finally.

“What about you?” I asked.

She tipped her head. “What do you mean?”

I stepped toward her and cupped her chin in my hand. “What about *you*, love? I know you love the Fae people, but this isn’t your world. Your world is back home, with me. With your pack. Not here.” I tipped my chin into the forest in the direction of the keep. “Not with Kastian.”

“Greyson—” she started quietly.

But I didn’t let her go on. I bent and pressed my lips to hers. “You belong with me,” I said quietly, speaking against her lips.

She was quiet for a moment. Her hands gripped my arms tightly.

“It would be easy,” she started slowly, “for me to leave this all behind. To go back to the Redwood house with you.”

“Exactly—”

“But there is nothing *easy* about this war,” she went on, her voice growing stronger. She looked up at me. “People on both sides are being killed. I can’t pretend I don’t know that. I can’t pretend I don’t care. I could turn my back, yes, but wouldn’t it be selfish of me to ignore that kind of suffering?”

“Cali—” I started gently, but she shook her head.

“If marrying Kastian could stop all the senseless killing, then how can I not? How can I just walk away?”

Her eyes were bright with tears. I knew Cali too well to think she’d make any other choice. I wanted to be supportive of her, but…how could I? I loved her, but how could I support her in this when I had also vowed to protect her?

I shook my head. “There has to be another way. You can’t marry that guy, Cali. I’m never going to agree to it.”

“What you have to understand—”

I put up my hand to stop her argument. “It’s not going to do any good,” I said firmly. “Nothing you say is going to change my mind.”

She shook her head. “I don’t *want* to marry him, Greyson, but if it could bring peace, would it be so bad?”

I looked at her—at her wide, innocent eyes. I knew she wanted this to be true, but I didn’t know how to answer her question without exploding with all the anger I had built up inside of me. It wasn’t anger directed at Cali, but at all the circumstances that had led us to this moment.

“What does Xavier think of this?” I asked. I suspected my brother’s reaction to these batshit plans wasn’t much different than mine.

Cali hesitated for a moment. “Xavier is against it too.”

*Xavier is against it too*. That meant Xavier already knew. Which meant Cali had told Xavier her plans before she’d told me.

That stung, but I kept that thought to myself. Whatever else this was, it wasn’t the time for jealousy. I was aware that Cali and Xavier had become closer since we’d come to the Fae world. The *due destini* didn’t seem to care where in the worlds we were. But it was still hard to hear.

“At first, I only agreed to marry Kastian because it would extend the peace talks,” Cali explained. “I hoped it would keep Cenwyn around long enough for us to gather the evidence we needed to expose him. But then the more I’ve thought about it, the more it makes sense. And I’ve started to think that it would be wrong to *not* go through with it.” She shook her head. “There’s too much at stake to back out now.”

She looked miserable. Conflicted and tense, and I hated this. I hated that we were here, and that she was in this position where she felt so trapped, and that so much responsibility rested on her shoulders.

Bitterly, I thought of Xavier. He was against this too. However else we disagreed, I knew on this point, he and I were always of the same mind.

“Greyson, I hope you’ll forgive me,” Cali murmured. She took a step toward me, but the rocks near the water were slick with moss and her foot slipped out from under her and she went tumbling down.

I lunged for her, but only caught her after she’d been submerged in the icy stream.

“Love,” I breathed, lifting her from the water and into my arms.

“I’m okay,” she said, though she was completely soaked. The wind kicked up and her teeth started to chatter.

I held her close, warming her with the heat from my own body. “I love you, Cali, no matter what. There’s nothing you need to be forgiven for.”

Her face was damp when she looked up at me, though I wasn’t sure if it was water from the stream or her tears. It didn’t matter. I pulled her even closer and kissed her.

**Episode 5394**

I was startled by the touch of Greyson’s warm lips on mine. I hadn’t been expecting it—but I wasn’t objecting to it either. And after the way his gray eyes took me in, how could I *not* give in to him?

My clothes were soaked through, and I knew I should be freezing, but I didn’t feel cold. Greyson’s body was too near, and he was blazing like a furnace. As he kissed me, the only thing that didn’t feel warm and right was the memory of the look on his face when I’d told him I had agreed to marry Kastian. When he had asked, *What about us?*

I slid my hands around his neck and threaded my fingers in his damp hair. I wasn’t going to think of that—not now. Not when there were so many other things to think about. Like Greyson’s lips and how they were parting and the way his tongue felt as it slid along mine. Or the strength of his arms as he held me, and the way his fingers dug into the flesh of my hips as he pulled me even closer.

I’d been so worried about Greyson when he was missing, I hadn’t given myself a chance to think about how much I missed him. But between our steamy reunion and now, I realized how much I’d missed this—missed him. I loved being in his arms, feeling the intensity of his kiss. I melted into him.

He made a low growling sound in the back of his throat, and I felt my body flame to life.

There was so much I didn’t know about this marriage agreement I’d made with Kastian, but the one thing I did know without any doubt was how much I loved Greyson, and how much he loved me.

There was so much waiting for us—Rishika’s missing memory, the threat of Cenwyn, Xavier, Artemis, the peace talks, both Fae courts—but that all seemed to disappear as Greyson and I consumed each other. We had missed each other, and I kissed him greedily, drinking him in.

I could feel the thrum of desire throbbing through me, so it was with an ache I finally pulled away from him. “I should probably get back to the keep,” I said, breathless.

Greyson looked dazed for a moment. I could see a look of disappointment dawning in his stormy eyes, and I knew he had been hoping we might find a private place in the woods to be together, but he nodded and set me carefully on my feet again.

He reached for his clothes, suspended on a tree branch, and handed me his shirt. “Here,” he said. “You’re soaking wet. This will keep you warm.”

I took the shirt and had to force myself to tear my eyes away from Greyson’s body as he slipped his pants on. It was clear he was as aroused as I was, but I didn’t want to torture myself.

My cheeks felt hot as I turned back the way I had come, grateful at least that the cold water on my clothes and hair was cooling me down. I didn’t even realize that the warmth I felt on my hand was because Greyson was holding it. Not until we got back to the clearing and I saw Xavier standing with Adair and Tabitha in front of the small fire.

Xavier spotted me, then his eyes went immediately to where Greyson was clasping my hand.

My stomach dropped, and I had to resist the impulse to pull my hand away. If I did, it would be so obvious why, and Greyson would be hurt.

I forced myself to smile, but the look of anger on Xavier’s face made my smile fade.

“There you are,” he snapped. “I shouldn’t have let you leave without me, but I agreed, and then I come out here and you’re not where you said you’d be—”

“It’s okay,” Greyson interrupted. “She was with me.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed angrily to his brother. “Yeah. I can see that.”

My stomach knotted anxiously. I didn’t want my mates to get into a fight, especially not now.

“We should get back,” Xavier said tightly. “Before anyone starts looking for you.”

I nodded. Xavier was probably right. Besides, I would have done almost anything to get out of this tense situation.

Greyson turned to me. “Xavier’s right; you should get back. I’ll see you later, yes?’

“Yes,” I promised.

Greyson bent and kissed me. I kissed him back, very aware of Xavier watching. I could practically feel his eyes burning into me.

When I stepped away, Xavier gestured sharply and started toward the keep.

I was about to follow when I noticed something odd. “Where are Marius and Artemis?” I asked, looking around the small clearing.

“They’re with Rishika,” Adair told me. “They’re working with her, hoping to restore her memory.”

I took that in. “What will they do to try to bring it back?” I wondered.

Adair shrugged. “One can only guess.”

“Cali!”

Xavier’s voice came through the trees.

“Coming!” I called back, and I hurried after him.

He started walking again when I’d caught up with him and was quiet for most of the walk back to the keep. The only sound was the bird song from the trees above us and the crunch of underbrush as we strode through the forest.

I liked walking through the woods, but the silence between us wasn’t easy. Xavier was still annoyed, whether it was from not finding me where I’d said I would be, or from finding me holding Greyson’s hand—or both—I couldn’t tell.

I wondered if I should talk to him about what happened with Greyson. But that didn’t seem fair. He didn’t want to talk about our own kiss, so why should I talk about my kiss with Greyson?

Looking up at the sky stretching above me, I heaved a quiet sigh. Even after all this time, everything with Xavier was still so unsettled. There was still something between us—I couldn’t deny that—but we just couldn’t seem to talk to each other. And there were so many things that we should be talking about.

The wind hadn’t bothered me before, but my clothes were still wet from my unexpected dip in the stream, so by the time we’d reached the keep, I was shivering.

Xavier looked over at me as we walked in, his eyes lingering on Greyson’s shirt. “You should get into some dry clothes,” he said, his voice stiff.

I looked down at my wet dress. “Oh, yeah, probably. I was standing near the stream, and I slipped on a rock. I fell in, and then Greyson—”

Xavier put up a hand, stopping me. “I don’t need to know what Greyson did, Cali.”

I could see that he was upset. I thought of how Greyson had picked me up, and the kiss that we’d shared. I hadn’t said anything aloud, but it was almost as though Xavier knew exactly what Greyson had done. My cheeks flushed hot, but I wasn’t going to apologize to him. It had just *happened*, and that was that.

I lifted my chin in defiance as we walked through the stone passageways of the keep toward my room.

When we reached my door, Xavier turned to me. “Are you planning on running off again anytime soon?”

“I wasn’t planning to,” I retorted. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m going to leave you alone, and I want to know if you’re going to be here when I get back.”

“Where are *you* going?” I wondered.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I need to talk to my brother.”

I felt my heart thud. It was a crazy thought, but I wondered if he was going to bring up the kiss to Greyson just to get back at him. Because—given how angry he was—I was now convinced that Xavier had somehow seen Greyson and me by the waterfall.

I pushed a lock of wet hair out of my face. “I guess I should clean up and get into dry clothes before I freeze to death.”

He nodded. “I suppose that would be a good idea.”

I gave him a long look. “I hope at some point we can talk about what happened, Xavier.”

He didn’t answer for a moment, as though he was deciding. Then he nodded, once. “I suppose that would be a good idea, too.”

Then, without another word, he turned and strode away, going back the way we had come.

I watched him walk away, my eyes on his purposeful, confident stride. He didn’t look back, but I watched him until he disappeared around the corner. Then I opened the door and stepped into my room.

Celeste was waiting for me.

“Oh god.” I gasped, jumping back a step. “Celeste. You scared me. What’s wrong?”

She was sitting in a chair, but when I came in, she rose and stepped toward me.

“You’re going to *marry* that miscreant?” she snapped, her voice cold and menacing. Her eyes flashed dangerously. “I thought we had a deal.”

**Episode 5395**

**Artemis**

I stared at Marius, shocked. What if we *kissed*? I was so taken aback by Marius’s suggestion that I didn’t speak. I didn’t even know what to do for a moment. I felt frozen, though not completely. Even the suggestion of kissing Rishika again made my whole body feel warm and tingly.

I cleared my throat and found my voice again. “W-Why would you suggest that?” I stammered. “What good would that do?”

I didn’t dare look at Rishika’s face. I was curious what she thought about the idea, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to bear it if she looked confused by the idea. Or—worse—disgusted.

“Do you think that might help?” she asked quietly.

I looked quickly at her, astonished.

Marius’s skin looked a little flushed, but he shrugged his shoulder. “I don’t know for sure, but given your history—whether you remember it or not—there are a lot of…*emotions* there. From what I’ve gathered, at least. I’m not sure whether that’s right…” He trailed off and looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded, feeling my cheeks growing hot. “You’re not wrong.”

Rishika looked surprised. “We do? Me and you? Have a lot of history, I mean?”

My face felt like lava. I wished the conversation were over, or at least that it was not happening in front of Marius.

My throat felt dry as a desert, and I swallowed. “Yeah, we, um, dated. We were together. For a while.” This was excruciating.

“Right, so if you kissed, maybe that would jog some of that memory,” Marius went on. “That’s the theory anyway…”

Rishika’s eyes widened as she took this information in.

No one spoke for an awkward moment, then Marius got to his feet.

“Well, it’s worth a shot, anyway, right?”

“Do you think?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Why not? I’ve heard that memories can be triggered by all kinds of different things. Just the other day I was in the kitchen and smelled this curried stew that brought me back to my early days on the bounty hunter trails. There was this widow who used to make it for me all the time when I was just a young lad—”

“Okay, okay,” I said, cutting him off. Marius had started to get a gleam in his eye that told me he was about to launch into a story about his sexual exploits, and that was the one thing that would make this situation even more awkward, so I really couldn’t handle it. “We don’t need a walk down your memory lane, Marius.”

Rishika stood from her cot and stepped toward me. “I think I would like to try to, um, kiss.”

I stared at her, shocked. “You *would*?”

She looked nervous. “If that’s okay with you.” She took a deep breath and spoke quickly. “If it’s true there was something between us and that I simply can’t remember what it is, then I want to see if this could work. And I don’t have any other ideas. Even if this doesn’t bring all my memory back, maybe it could be a stepping stone? And you’re really…beautiful.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I shot a look over at Marius. I glared. He smiled.

“Well,” he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet, “I guess you don’t need me for anything. I’ll leave you to it.”

I was going to murder him.

He walked out, leaving Rishika and me alone. She looked at me. I looked at her. Neither of us spoke. She didn’t look nervous, but my head was spinning.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I asked.

Rishika nodded. “Sure.”

We stepped out of the shade of the cavern and into the woods. Adair and Tabitha were nowhere to be seen, and Rishika and I started into the trees. We walked quietly through the woods, not speaking. I really hoped no one was going to try to sneak up on us, because the only thing I could hear was the pounding of my pulse in my ears.

I was feeling as nervous about this walk—and this kiss—as I had about any date I’d ever been on. Rishika and I had never really done anything like this. Our relationship had grown so naturally, I’d never had time to feel awkward. But between not seeing her after we broke up, and now with her losing her memory, it was hard to know where I stood with her.

There was so much to tell her, but I didn’t want to unload on her when she didn’t even remember who I was. I glanced down at her hand, which swung next to mine. I longed to hold it—for some contact—but I didn’t want to cross her boundaries when she was still healing.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady the rhythm of my heart. All of this just felt so unfair.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” I wondered, looking over at her. “Maybe that could help unlock something. You know, like you could follow the trail backward.”

Rishika frowned. “Not very much. Is it true I was in the Redwood pack?”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“I was talking to that werewolf Greyson about it. That’s what he told me.” She shook her head. “The main memory I have is of being a fitness trainer and being with my ex-girlfriend.”

My stomach sank. So she remembered her other ex, but not me. I gave my head a shake, trying to rid myself of the thought. “Anything else?”

Rishika thought for a moment. “I remember my mom. I remember my childhood—being a kid. I remember my mom’s cooking.” She smiled. “I don’t remember where I lived, but I somehow still remember the secret to my mom’s samosas.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She looked at me out of the corner of her eyes. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

She laughed, and after a moment, I did too.

We walked for a while longer, and when we reached a little brook within the trees, Rishika sat down. She looked tired. I sat next to her, and we both looked at the water, which bubbled up from what had to be an underground spring. It washed over the rocks, flowing away, in the direction of the keep.

I looked over at Rishika, catching sight of her face in profile. The sun lit her skin, making it glow like burnished gold. I took in her high cheekbones and the straight, proud line of her nose. She was so beautiful, it nearly hurt me to look at her.

As though she could feel my gaze on her, Rishika turned, and her dark eyes met mine. I felt my stomach drop. I loved Rishika so much. It suddenly occurred to me how painful this all was. The separation we’d gone through, the break-up, how it had felt when she was missing, and now this.

Rishika leaned toward me. “May I?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I breathed, my voice barely audible.

Then Rishika closed the space between us and kissed me.

I hesitated for a split second, then melted into her. I hadn’t kissed Rishika in what felt like forever, and I hadn’t realized how much I missed her. But kissing her again—it felt like my mind had been cleared. I stopped thinking about the distance between us and everything that we had to say and the importance of boundaries. What boundaries? I moved closer to her, my hand tangling into her dark hair as I deepened the kiss, pushing my tongue into her mouth.

She wasn’t holding back either—arms went around me, her hands sliding up to cup my cheeks. My heart thudded, and my body thrummed with heat and desire. We had broken up? How? *Why?* How could I have ever walked away from this? From her?

Rishika’s hand was on my back, and her touch sent me spiraling. I wanted more—*more*. I wanted all of it. I was ready for our bodies to be intertwined, and I moved over her, straddling her. She put her hands on my hips, her fingers digging into my flesh, pulling me closer.

Everything about Rishika felt magnetic and electric, both familiar and brand new, and I couldn’t get enough of her. I plunged my tongue into her mouth as I ran my hands down the sides of her ribs, feeling the curve of her breasts with my fingertips. She moaned and pulled me closer, grabbing my hair tightly as she bit down on my bottom lip. I was starting to throb in a variety of places, but there was an annoying little voice in the back of my head reminding me that we hadn’t come out into the woods for a quickie.

I pulled away from her, panting, and looked into her eyes. “Well?”

Her face was flushed, and her lips were kiss-swollen. “Well what?”

“Did it work?” I asked breathlessly. “Do you remember me now?”

**Episode 5396**

**Xavier**

I headed out of the keep, which I was fucking sick of. I was even sick of the woods surrounding it, which was wild. I didn’t think it was possible to get sick of trees. But I missed the woods back home, and I missed the people. I wished Gabe were here with me. It would be like old times. And I could use my buddy’s skill set right now, because I currently had exactly two things on my mind, and they both involved murder.

Top of the list was Cenwyn, closely followed by Kastian.

The idea of Cali marrying that pompous Dark Fae prick was just too much.

I ground my teeth. On second thought, maybe Kastian should be at the top of my list.

There was no way I was going to stand by and allow that marriage to happen. That was why I was going back out to talk to Greyson. He was fine, and I knew he would have my back on this, but I would rather have Colton by my side. I knew Colton better, and working with him didn’t come with the weird-ass baggage that working with Greyson did.

I pushed my hair back as I walked, wondering just how weird things would be between Greyson and me when I saw him. I knew Cali had wanted to tell me what I already suspected—that something had happened between her and Greyson out in the woods. I had picked up on it right away. I’d seen it in the way they’d been holding hands, and in the almost guilty look in her eyes. I hated that she had to feel any guilt at all. It was the *due destini* that was at fault, but I knew it tore her up anyway—she was Cali, after all.

And it wasn’t like I was blind. Besides holding hands, she’d come back soaking wet, wearing Greyson’s shirt.

I wished I could get that cursed image out of my head, but it seemed to be burned in there. Maybe it was punishment for not wanting to talk to Cali about that kiss. That kiss never should have happened—I was willing to admit as much—but I wasn’t sorry about it, and I wasn’t going to apologize for it. Why should I? It had been the most honest thing I’d done since I’d embarked on this shitshow of a mission.

And hadn’t Carlson Greene told me a million times how important it was to be honest about my feelings? It was why the headaches had finally stopped, wasn’t it? Because of my honest fucking *feelings*.

“Xavier!”

I looked around and spotted Marius walking through the trees toward me. “Hey, man. What are you doing out here?”

“Mostly making myself scarce,” he said with a shrug.

“How’s Rishika doing?” I asked.

“She seems to be better physically. She’s up and getting around. But she’s still having memory issues. Artemis is with her right now,” he told me.

I nodded, thinking how weird that must be for Marius. It was obvious the guy had more than just a passing interest in Artemis. It had to feel kind of shitty for him to see her with her girlfriend, even if Rishika didn’t remember her.

When Marius had set out for the human world to find Cali and bring her here, he probably hadn’t planned on having Rishika join the search party, but he seemed like he was trying to be a good sport. I almost felt bad for the guy.

“How would you feel if Rishika did remember again? Like, everything?” I asked.

Marius smiled ruefully. “I get why you might think I wouldn’t be that into it, but I hope Rishika does get better. I really just want Artemis to be happy. And I can see how she feels about Rishika—pretending like there was never anything between the two of them would be cruel.”

I nodded. “Well, good luck, man.”

“Sure. You too. Catch you later,” Marius said, continuing on.

He walked away, and I kept going, thinking that Marius was a better man than I was. As I continued on through the woods, I realized that Marius’s situation with Artemis was a version of what I was going through with Cali and Greyson. It would be nice to pretend that the *due destini* didn’t exist. More convenient, for sure. But pretending wouldn’t make it go away. And, like Marius felt about Artemis, I really did just want Cali to be happy. It was just that I believed she could only be truly happy with me.

And none of that changed the complicated, messy, and occasionally explosive feelings I had toward my own brother.

I shook my head. When the hell had everything gotten so damn complicated?

When I made it to the small clearing near the cavern, I found Greyson there, talking to Adair and Tabitha. They all looked over as I strode into the clearing.

I nodded to Greyson, then tipped my chin toward the woods. “We need to talk.”

Greyson followed me into the trees. “Is everything okay with Cali?” he asked as soon as we were alone.

“She’s fine,” I said. “But she is the reason I wanted to talk to you.”

“Is this about what happened at the waterfall—”

“Fuck no,” I snapped. “I don’t give a fuck about any of that.” That was a lie. I *did* give a fuck, and Greyson’s question only confirmed my suspicions about what had happened, but I didn’t want to linger on it. “We both know Cali isn’t safe here. None of us are. And the sooner we get out of the Fae world, the better.”

Greyson nodded. “Agreed. So what do you have in mind?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I think we both have the same things in mind. We take down Cenwyn, and we take down Kastian.”

A grin broke across Greyson’s face. “In that order?”

I returned his grin with a grim smile of my own. “Glad to see we’re on the same page. And there’s no way in hell we’re letting Cali marry that preening asshole.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I hate that guy, and I’ve never even met him.”

“I’ve met him, and believe me when I say that whatever you’re imagining, he’s worse,” I promised.

“How did she get herself into this?” Greyson muttered, pushing a hand through his hair.

“She’s Cali,” I said with a shrug. “She got it into her head that she could help people, and that was that.”

“I guess,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “And now we have to get her out of it.”

“Listen, what we need to do is keep it really simple. Once we settle the score with Cenwyn and the blushing bridegroom, we get Cali and Artemis out of that place, gather up our people, and get our asses back to our world.”

Greyson nodded. “Cali needs to leave, that’s for sure. I think Artemis should too, but I don’t know if she’s going to go.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why wouldn’t she? She’s all mixed up in all this peace talks nonsense too. Fae politics is one big mess if you ask me.”

Greyson shrugged. “She came out here to look for her father. I don’t know if she’s going to give up on the search.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Well, that’s her choice. She can come back with us if she wants to.”

Greyson considered this. “I hate to point out the obvious, but Cali came here to get Artemis. Do we know if she’s going to be willing to leave without her?”

I blew out a frustrated breath. As much as I hated to admit it, Greyson had a point. “Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it. In the meantime, we have our targets. Let’s take those two bastards out.”

Greyson rocked back on his heels. He looked up at the treetops, thinking. “I don’t know,” he finally said, shaking his head. “I don’t think we can do this by ourselves.”

“What are you talking about?” I snapped.

“I was in the arena, and it was harder to fight my way out than I thought. I don’t want to underestimate this. I’m thinking of how Cenwyn is going to be protected, and I’m thinking there are just going to be too many Fae. And we both know from dealing with the Dark Fae mafia that fighting Fae is a whole other ballgame.”

I nodded. “That’s true,” I admitted. “I was planning on talking to Adair and Marius. See if they have any ideas.”

“That’s a start, but I still don’t think it’s enough,” Greyson said. He shook his head, looking worried. “Even if we manage to take Cenwyn and Kastian out, which is going to take some planning, we’re going to struggle to get everyone out of here safely. The Dark Fae will swarm us as soon as we try to escape.”

He was right—this was going to take some planning. “Maybe we should talk to Adair and Marius now. Ask them if they have any suggestions.”

“Yeah, we probably should,” Greyson agreed. “It’s a good place to start, at least.”

We walked back into the clearing. Adair and Tabitha were still by the fire, and Marius had joined them while Greyson and I spoke.

“Hey, listen, we have some questions about security within the keep—” I started, but Greyson broke in, speaking over me.

“Can I borrow Tabitha?”

Adair eyed Greyson warily. “What for?”

Greyson looked at the woman. “She and I are taking a trip.”

**Episode 5397**

**Greyson**

It happened in an instant. Adair stepped toward me, getting right up into my face. “You’re not going anywhere with Tabitha.”

We were all on edge here, so I understood the intensity of Adair’s reaction, but I didn’t back down. “If you’ll just let me explain—”

“I’d also like to hear this,” Xavier added. “Where exactly are you going with Tabitha?”

I shot a look at my brother, then looked over at Tabitha. “If she’ll go with me, I’d need her help to get back through the briar wall.”

Adair’s eyes widened. “You want to take her *outside* the wall?” he demanded. “Why?”

“I know people out there. The fighters from the arena. I’m going to ask them if they’d be interested in scoring some payback for what happened to them,” I explained.

Adair stared at me for a moment, incredulous. Then he shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

Xavier laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

I glared at my brother. “I’m dead serious. Those fighters are our best chance to get Cenwyn. Every one of them was held against their will by that bastard. They were kidnapped and held in a pit. Forced to kill or be killed. If anyone has it out for that Fae, it’s them,” I snarled. “And I’m sure they would all be interested in getting some revenge.”

Xavier’s expression changed as he took this in. After a moment he shrugged a shoulder. “I guess it’s not a bad idea,” he admitted. “We could use some backup.”

“Forget it. It’s not safe out there,” Adair countered. “And those fighters are uncontrollable. You said it yourself—they’re used to ‘kill or be killed.’ They can’t be trusted. They could turn against you, Greyson. You can’t take Tabitha out there.”

“I really think this is our only shot if we want—” I started, but Adair was clearly done listening.

He conjured up his energy whip. There was a loud bang as it cracked through the air. “Don’t even think about it,” he snarled.

I groaned. This wasn’t how I wanted this to go. I didn’t want to make an enemy of Adair. “If you know of another way of passing through the wall—”

“I’ll do it.”

We all looked over at Tabitha, who had spoken for the first time.

Adair turned to her, dropping his whip. “What?”

She shook her head, looking irritated. “I don’t know why you’re all talking about me like I’m not even here. You can speak directly to me.”

“But you can’t—” Adair started.

“I know you’re worried about me,” she said, her expression slightly softened, “but shouldn’t I have a say in this?”

Adair sighed. “Yes, but…”

Xavier opened his mouth, like he was about to add something to the conversation, but I shot him a warning look. This was about Tabitha and Adair. We needed to let them settle this.

To his credit, Xavier picked up on my meaning right away. He nodded and shut his mouth, saying nothing.

“I want to help,” Tabitha went on. “Especially if it can help Cali. She’s been good to me. They all have. I’m going to go.” She turned to me. “I’ll go whenever you’re ready.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s great.” I turned to Adair. “Listen, I understand your concern about the arena fighters, but you don’t know them like I do. I really don’t think they would turn on me. Why would they? I helped them escape. I saved their lives. Even if they did want to kill me, I think whatever hard feelings they harbor against me are going to be vastly overshadowed by a desire to get revenge on Cenwyn. They all *really* hate that guy.”

I didn’t mention that there could be a few of the faun’s supporters who might be less than enthusiastic to see me. That was a difficulty I was going to figure out when—and if—I was faced with it.

Adair nodded, then stepped toward Tabitha, speaking quietly to her. When he was done, she turned back to me. She looked nervous but determined.

“Thank you for agreeing to do this,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

She smiled at me. “What are friends for?”

I looked over at Adair. “I’ll keep her safe. You have my word.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said darkly.

I turned to Xavier. “Stay with Cali. Take care of her.”

His expression was stony. “You never need to tell me that.”

I took a deep breath. Fire shot through me, and the small clearing echoed with the sharp crack of bones as I shifted to my wolf form. Once I was transformed, I gave myself a shake, then lowered my head so Tabitha could climb on.

Adair helped her, and once she was seated, I took off, heading for the wall. Tabitha clung tightly to my fur. I could feel her tense up, and I prayed she wasn’t getting too scratched up as we passed through what appeared to be the impenetrable wall of thorny briars. If the branches were bothering her, she didn’t complain. She rarely did. It was one of the things I respected most about her.

Then we were through it, and I was running through the woods. I picked up my pace, sprinting through the trees. A moment later I caught a scent on the wind I recognized. It had the familiar smell of the arena. Then I realized it was more than just one scent. The scent trails were all over the place, and I had a moment of indecision. The creatures could be anywhere, and I didn’t know which path to follow. I kept running, and after a while I realized that the scents were converging. It was as if the creatures had realized at some point that they would be stronger if they stuck together.

That was ironic. When they were prisoners, they had all been waiting to kill each other. But now it looked as though they might actually be working together to save each other.

I rounded a group of dead oaks and ran along a bubbling stream. It made sense the group would stick by the water, and I felt like I was getting closer to finding them.

But then I caught another scent, and I slowed my pace as a knot of figures came into view in the trees ahead of me. It only took a moment for me to recognize their uniforms. I had seen them in the arena, which meant they weren’t just Fae guards—they were Cenwyn’s guards.

“HEY! STOP!”

“HALT!”

“He’s the one from the arena!” another guard shouted.

“The one who escaped!”

“He freed the others!”

As one, the guards surged toward Tabitha and me. I pawed the ground, growling. I wasn’t keen on the idea of taking them all on, and certainly not with Tabitha clinging to my back. She was holding on tightly, and I could tell she was scared. I wished I could talk to her, but that would mean I would have to shift to my human form, which I wasn’t about to do.

“Surrender, *wolf*!” a guard shouted. “We’re hunting down and capturing all the creatures that escaped. Why make it harder on yourself? You’re outnumbered.”

I wasn’t surprised Cenwyn had sent hunters out to round up the fighters. I looked at the guards, then scanned the trees, wondering if I could just run past them.

But my moment of thought cost me, and a blast of magic landed just feet away from my front paws.

Tabitha’s hands tightened on my fur. She leaned down, speaking into my ear. “Keep going. I can stop their magic.”

There didn’t seem to be much choice other than to take her word for it, so I charged forward.

“HEY!”

“STOP!”

“What are you doing?!”

I could see the guards raising their energy spears, but nothing happened when they tried to blast me. There were no explosions and no jolts of pain.

I powered through the guards, knocking them aside like bowling pins, and within seconds I had cleared the whole flank. Past them, I dropped my head and sprinted into the trees, going as fast as I could. I had picked up the scent of the creatures again, and I was following it.

I felt great. I wished I could hug Tabitha—she had been amazing.

The scent grew as I ran, and I knew I was getting close. I charged up a hill, and when I came to the other side, I saw them. A group of mismatched figures gathered around a fire in a small clearing up ahead.

I slowed to a stop and lowered my head so Tabitha could dismount. When she slid to the ground, I shifted back to my human form.

“Stay close to me,” I muttered. She nodded, and I led the way into the clearing.

The creatures all turned as we approached, and I paused, looking around.

After a silent moment, one of the creatures got to their feet, black eyes flashing angrily, and pointed accusingly at me.

“You’re the fucking wolf who killed the faun!”

**Episode 5398**

Celeste was in my room. She was in my room, and she was glaring at me. I was freaked out by this turn of events, but I tried not to show it. I wasn’t going to let her intimidate me.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” I demanded, firmly standing my ground.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked. She took another step toward me. “You and I had a deal, Caliana. You said that you wouldn’t marry Kastian, and yet—here we are, on the eve of your wedding.”

I was having my own very complicated feelings about this wedding arrangement, and I was *not* in the mood to deal with Celeste’s shit. I narrowed my eyes. “You want peace, don’t you, Celeste?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, it seems like the only thing that’s going to keep the Fae world from continuing this endless war and destroying itself completely is maybe—possibly—this marriage.” I shook my head. “You know, I didn’t ask this when we made our deal, but why are you so adamant about all of this anyway? What’s your game here?”

“Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me, *girl*,” she hissed, her eyes flashing menacingly. “You made the deal—you admit to it yourself—and now you’ve gone back on what you agreed to do.”

“Yeah, because there’s a chance to make peace between the Light and Dark Fae!” I cried, exasperated. I threw up my hands. “Come *on*. Do you really think I *want* to marry that asshole? He’s a cocky, pompous Fae who thinks he’s god’s gift to women. In almost everything, you and I are on the same side of this issue, Celeste! I don’t want to marry him for probably just as many reasons as you don’t want me to. But what would you have me do? Be selfish? Deny the prospect of peace for a whole population because I’d just rather not?” I shook my head. “I can’t do that, and I’m sorry you don’t seem to understand that.”

Celeste gave me a long look. “It’s astounding, really. How much you sound like your grandmother.”

I didn’t think that was a compliment. “I guess it runs in the family.”

Celeste’s expression darkened. “You listen to me, Caliana—this is how it’s going to be: you are going to fulfill your end of our deal. You will *not* marry Kastian, and if you chose to do otherwise, well…” She shrugged. “Then maybe you just won’t be around to see what happens next.”

Her words—her threat—fell like a grenade between us. I stared at her, shocked. Had she *really* just said that to me? Was she really threatening my life? It wouldn’t be the first time, but it was the first time I actually felt the weight of the threat.

It probably shouldn’t have come as such a shock—and I supposed it wasn’t—but she did it so blatantly. Without even any subtlety or nuance. And in my own room. It was bold, I’d have to give Celeste that much.

I shook my head. “And who are you to order me around?” I asked, scoffing.

It was Celeste’s turn to be shocked. The blood drained from her face, and she swelled like a blowfish, ready to attack, but I wasn’t going to give her a chance.

“You just can’t stand it when people don’t do exactly what you tell them to do, can you?” I said, taking a step toward her. “That’s why you forced my sister into a Fae promise, isn’t it? And now you have her exactly where you want her. To use her for whatever you’re planning, and whatever it is that me marrying Kastian would fuck up for you.” I took another step. “I bet that you can’t get anyone to listen to you, Celeste. Who respects the wife of Adair, now that he’s left her?”

This was too far. “That’s quite enough from you, *halfling*!” she bellowed.

I opened my mouth to respond, but Celeste muttered something under her breath, and before I could say anything, my mouth snapped shut, tightly, like magnets had bonded my lips together.

My heart began to thump, and though I struggled to pry my lips apart, I couldn’t.

I stared in horror at Celeste. This had to be her magic, but I had never before met a Fae who could do anything like this. This seemed less like Fae magic and more like witch magic. Although, I was still pretty new to the Fae world, and there was still so much I didn’t know.

But Celeste looked terrifying, and using her magic against me like this, while we were alone, was really scary.

I wasn’t sure where this was going next, but I had a very strong sense that I needed to be on the defensive. I watched as she stepped toward me.

“You and your sister are too much alike, Caliana. You are both impulsive to a fault, and I am afraid it will lead you into trouble one of these days. Think of what your mother would say if she could see the two of you.” Her voice took on a mocking quality as she stepped closer to me. “She was a good little Fae daughter. She did just as she was told. So why can’t you do the same?”

Celeste was scary as hell, but hearing her talk about my mother like this—like she was some kind of Goody Two-shoes—really pissed me off. It wasn’t in my nature to use my magic unless I was truly threatened, but why was I holding back now? Celeste had already used her magic against me, and if she could, then so could I.

I raised my hands and, focusing my energy as she neared me, blasted the ground right in front of Celeste’s feet.

The Fae yelped and jumped back. She looked shocked but recovered quickly and glowered at me. She lifted her own hands and muttered something again. This time it felt as though huge, strong hands had shoved me, hard, and I flew backward, slamming into the wall.

I struggled, but it was no use. I couldn’t move. I was pinned and totally immobilized. A thread of fear ran through me.

Satisfied that she’d caught me, Celeste started toward me again.

*Shit*.

I tried to push against the magical hold the Fae had on me, but I couldn’t get my body to move. It was as though I’d been swaddled in plastic wrap. My heart thudded hard, and I closed my eyes for a moment, terrified of what might be coming next.

I had no idea what game Celeste was playing, or even what she might be capable of. I didn’t want to be killed like this, while I was unable to defend myself. I thought of my mom and dad. Would my parents know what happened to me? Would they even know I died if it happened here in the Fae world? Would someone tell them I had died without even fighting back?

And what about Greyson? And Xavier?

I swallowed hard, steeling myself. No. I opened my eyes. I wasn’t going to let Celeste get away with this. She wasn’t going to bully me—not anymore.

Fear was coursing through me, but I focused my energy and summoned my sword. I was filled with relief when I felt it in my hand. Using every ounce of strength I had, I moved my arm. It was only an inch or so, but it was a start, and my sword cut through whatever hold Celeste had on me. And once it started, it cut through like butter and the hold disappeared.

I stepped away from the wall, brandishing my sword with one hand.

Celeste froze in her tracks, her eyes wide.

I opened my mouth, glad to feel that it was working again. Then I smiled. “Didn’t know I could do that, did you?”

Celeste’s look of shock fell away. She sneered and began to mumble again, but I wasn’t going to let her. I gritted my teeth and shot another energy blast, this time aiming right for her.

My aim was true, and I made contact, hitting the Fae in the stomach. She went flying back, landing hard in the chair she’d been sitting in when I came in. The chair caught her, teetered dangerously for a moment, then rightened itself again, slamming all four legs onto the stone floor.

Celeste looked murderous now, but before she could make another move, my door swung open, and Xavier burst into the room. He stared around in shock.

I could only imagine the picture that met his eyes. Celeste and I were both worse for wear, I was holding my sword, Celeste was sitting slightly askew in a tilting chair, and we were both mussed and breathing heavily. We both looked—accurately—like we’d been in a fight.

Xavier eyed us. “What the fuck is going on here?”

**Episode 5399**

**Artemis**

Inches away from her, I looked into Rishika’s dark eyes. I was searching, trying to spot any sign of recognition in them. If her memory was back, would I know it? Would it manifest itself somehow? A look maybe? A shudder that I could feel while I held her?

Rishika frowned. “What?”

Her eyes were unfocused. She looked confused and seemed kind of out of it. I wondered if that was a good thing.

She shook her head like she was trying to clear it. “Sorry, what did you say? That kiss…it kind of distracted me.”

I felt my face flush, and a jolt of happiness shot through me. She had liked the kiss. That was *something.*

“But do you remember anything?” I asked.

“Oh…” Rishika dropped her eyes and shook her head. “No, I don’t.”

My stomach dropped. “Oh.”

“Sorry,” she murmured.

“Don’t apologize,” I said quickly. “Come on. There’s nothing for you to feel sorry about—”

“I do, though.” She darted a glance up at me, but then didn’t look away. “I really wish I knew what was between us. I wish I knew some of what was behind that kiss. I don’t remember, but I could *feel* it, you know? I felt…everything.”

I nodded, feeling a little dizzy. “Yeah, I did too.” My eyes drifted down to her lips. I wanted to kiss her again, but I didn’t. I knew I shouldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair when she was still so confused.

I still didn’t know what was going on, but—weirdly—I felt better. That kiss, and knowing that she’d felt what I felt, gave me a boost. I hadn’t even known I needed it—it was like I hadn’t been able to admit to myself that I was really floundering—but I had been, and kissing Rishika had been a jolt to my senses.

Getting to my feet, I brushed myself off and held out a hand to help Rishika up. “We should head back.”

When we got back, Adair and Marius were the only two standing at the fire.

Marius looked over as we entered the clearing. “How’d it go?”

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked, dodging his question.

“Off on some mission.” Marius shrugged.

Behind him, I noticed Adair glowered at this, and I wondered where Tabitha had gone without him, and if that was why he looked so pissed.

Marius was still looking excitedly expectant, so I took him by the arm.

“I need to talk to you. Excuse us for a minute, will you,” I said to Rishika, then towed Marius into the trees.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

When I was sure we were out of earshot, I shoved him against a pine and held him there, glaring. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“A variety of things,” he joked. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“*Marius*.”

“What?” he asked, looking genuinely confused. “What did I do?”

“How could you suggest that to Rishika? With me right there?” I snapped.

Marius frowned. “I’m confused. It seemed like a good idea. And she was willing to give it a try, so I’m failing to see why this was a good reason for you to rough me up in the woods.”

I poked a finger into his chest. “You did it on purpose. You’re just messing with me.”

He gaped at me. “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. Because you’re a dick?”

He gave me a long look. He seemed hurt, and his look seemed to ask, *Don’t you know me better than that?*

And the annoying thing was—I did know him better than that. That was the scary part. It was easier and much more comfortable to believe that Marius would have suggested the kiss just to toy with me.

“Maybe you did it out of spite. Or maybe because you’re a carefree asshole bounty hunter who doesn’t give a shit about anyone,” I snapped.

He sighed. “Ari,” he said quietly, “I told you I would do everything I could to help you and Rishika, and I meant it. I suggested the kiss because I really did think it might help. If it didn’t, I’m sorry. She’s a good person. I can tell. I can see why you care about her, and I can see that you still love her. Why would you think I’d do something like that out of spite?” He gave me a searching look. “Why would you think I’d want to hurt you?”

I kept my mouth shut tight, fighting back the thoughts running through my mind. That he might want to hurt me because of our feelings for each other. Or that he might want to hurt me because I felt so strongly about someone else, even though he knew I cared for him, too. I thought he might want to hurt me because—at another point in my life, if the situation were reversed—I might want to hurt someone like this too.

He leaned forward and cradled my cheek in his hand, his touch gentle. “Hey, Ari, relax, okay? You don’t have to be so guarded around me. I’m on your side. I’m here for you. Don’t get stuff twisted in your head. Got it?”

I looked up at him, then nodded. My throat was tight, so I didn’t say anything.

We were close—so, so, *so* close—and for a moment, it seemed as though Marius was going to kiss me. His eyes did flick down to my mouth, but the moment passed, and he dropped his hands from my face.

He leaned back against the tree with a sigh and crossed his arms over his chest. “So.”

“So,” I repeated, hoping he hadn’t noticed my face flushing.

“What are we doing about Kastian?” he asked.

*Right. Kastian. Shit*.

I sighed. “I don’t know,” I admitted, pushing a hand through my hair. “Celeste wants me to kill him, but I’ve been so wrapped up in everything that’s been going on with Rishika that I haven’t had a chance to come up with a real plan for anything. I don’t even have any information beyond what you found out earlier.”

Marius took this in. “Well, it’s not like you can just waltz into the keep and kill him, that’s for sure. Not with everyone talking about his engagement to your sister. He’s going to be surrounded by half the Fae court.”

“That’s true,” I said thoughtfully. “It’s going to be harder to get to him than ever.” I shook my head, angry with myself. “I should have done it last night. Fuck.”

“There’s still plenty of time.”

I paced away, feeling frustrated. “But is it even the right thing to do?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Killing Kastian,” I clarified.

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want to? You going soft on me, Ari?”

“Shut up. It’s not that. It’s—if I did this, I’d be killing a prominent person from a Dark Fae family—and I’d be doing it for Celeste.” I chewed the inside of my cheek, thinking hard. “I don’t know if that’s the right move. I know she’s technically family, but I don’t know if I want to see her gain more power.”

Marius thought this over for a moment. “Well, we could always do the usual thing.”

I frowned at him. “The usual thing? What’s the usual thing?”

“You know.” Marius shrugged. “*Our* usual thing—kill first, ask questions later.”

I glared at him again. “Somehow that doesn’t seem like it’s going to work in this situation.”

He pushed himself to standing again and started walking back toward the clearing. “Fine, have it your way. But I think we can both agree that we need to act. Sooner rather than later.”

“Don’t remind me,” I groaned. I looked down at my feet as I followed him back toward the clearing. “I can go back to the keep and find Kastian. I should try to talk to him alone. I haven’t done that in a while. Maybe he’ll be willing to hear me out, and then I can strike.”

Marius gave me a sideways look. “You’re just going to ask to talk to him alone? And that’s it?”

“What?” I asked defensively. “What’s wrong with that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Sounds like kind of a basic plan.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You come up with a better one, then.”

He stopped and turned to me, grinning. His hair was falling into his eyes and the look on his face was his most roguish—his most sexy.

*Shit*.

I tried to ignore the sudden tide of feelings crashing over me as I looked at him. There were too many thoughts in my brain—too many conflicted, confusing emotions to process. I didn’t need to add a sudden and intense desire for Marius to the mix.

“What?” I snapped, more sharply than necessary.

“I think I actually might have one.”

“Have one what?” I asked.

“A *plan*, Ari.” Marius looked positively delighted with himself. “And I already know where Kastian is.”

**Episode 5400**

Xavier looked between Celeste and me expectantly, waiting for an answer to his question.

I spoke first. “Celeste was just leaving,” I said pointedly.

Her mouth pressed into a thin, angry line, but she gathered herself and rose from the chair. “Yes, I was.”

She strode toward the door, and I didn’t protest when Xavier angled himself so he stood between us as she walked out. I was just grateful that he was here. I had been holding my own, but I had no idea how much longer that fight might have gone if he hadn’t shown up.

Celeste’s magic had been completely unknown to me, but I guess now I knew. I supposed that was a silver lining.

The Fae stopped at the door and turned to me. “This conversation *isn’t* over, Caliana. If you screw this up, there will be war.”

I stepped out from behind Xavier. “This conversation *is* over, Celeste.” I grabbed the door and slammed it shut, right in her face.

I leaned back against it, breathing hard.

“Hey,” Xavier said, stepping next to me. His hand went to my back, warm and comforting. “What the hell was *that*?”

I held up my hand to stop him. “Can you just give me a second?”

He looked around the room, then back at me. “Were you just fighting with Celeste?” He shook his head. “Fucking hell, Cali. I’m gone for two minutes, and I come back to find you using magic to fight some Dark Fae?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I protested. “We were arguing, and it just…escalated.”

Xavier’s eyebrows shot up. “Arguing about what?”

I rubbed my eyes, feeling exhausted from using so much of my magic. “About Artemis, my mom—everything, really. She started it, though.”

“Why?” he pressed.

“She’s pissed off that I’m still planning to marry Kastian—”

“She can join the club then,” Xavier growled.

I pushed myself away from the door with a sigh and walked over to my bed, where I dropped down onto the mattress. “You *know* why I’m doing it. I don’t know what else to do, Xavier. I really don’t, and listening to you and Greyson and literally everyone else telling me why I shouldn’t do it is so damn hard. I can’t just *not* do it because you don’t want me to. I can’t just leave everyone here with a war still raging. Millions of Fae have died. Millions more *will* die if I don’t—” My throat felt tight, and my eyes were burning. Before I could stop myself, I started to cry.

I dropped my head and covered my face with my hands.

“I just feel so overwhelmed,” I sobbed. “I came here to try to find my sister, but it’s become so much more than that.”

Xavier didn’t say anything, but after a moment I felt him sit beside me. This only made me cry harder. I thought of the kiss we’d shared—how good it had felt and how I had completely betrayed Greyson by doing it. I needed to tell Greyson about it, but I was terrified of what he was going to say. I had just gotten him back, but now I was going to lose him again because of the mate bond I had with Xavier, and all the confusing feelings I was having.

I just wanted to disappear. Everyone would probably be happier if I was gone anyway.

I felt Xavier’s hand on my back, rubbing gently in small circles.

“Everything’s going to be okay. I promise,” he said quietly. “Listen, I know I’ve been kind of intense about the whole Kastian thing, but you know why, right?”

I groaned and shook my head. I wanted to cover my ears—I didn’t want to hear it, but the pressure of his hand was comforting. Everything about the moment was a total mindfuck.

“I just hate feeling powerless. And all of this Fae world shit makes me feel that way. In the human world, I’m an Alpha. Whatever I say goes. But it’s not like that here. I’m not involved in Fae politics—and I sure as shit don’t want to be—but I hate that you’re a part of all of this. It feels like there’s nothing I can do to help you except steal you away. I just want to take you back home, where you belong. With me.”

My heart gave a painful throb. I leaned toward him and looked up. He was looking down at me, his blue eyes smoldering, and I felt my stomach twist.

“Do you mean that?” I asked through tears. “You think home is with me?”

Xavier cupped my cheek in his hand. He wiped away a falling tear with the pad of his thumb. “Yes.”

It was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. I couldn’t breathe, and for a wild moment I wondered if it was Celeste’s magic at work again. There was so much between us as we looked at each other. So much unsaid—even at this moment.

There was too much.

I stood up, and his hands fell away. That felt better. I felt free.

“I—I think I need some air,” I stammered, then I looked up quickly when I heard a knock at the door.

Xavier got to his feet, but I shook my head.

“Let me get it,” I said quietly.

His face darkened. “I’ll get it,” he said. “It better not be Celeste again.”

“I hope not,” I muttered. I wiped away the rest of my tears with the back of my hand while Xavier opened the door.

It wasn’t Celeste, which was a relief. It was a Fae servant, who handed Xavier a letter. He shut the door and turned, handing it to me.

“It’s addressed to you.”

I looked down at the envelope, which was thick and cream colored. My name was written on it in expressive calligraphy. I ripped it open and looked at it. “It’s from Hera.”

*My beloved granddaughter,*

*I know we disagreed yesterday, so please allow me to make it up to you. I wish to speak to you and make things right with you and your sister.*

*Please meet me at the greenhouse in the north garden near the well.*

*Your devoted grandmother*

I looked up at Xavier, who was watching me closely. “It seems like Hera feels bad for what happened in front of the other Fae.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking wary. “You mean when you announced you were marrying Kastian without mentioning it to her, and then she found the two of us—”

“Yeah, exactly,” I said, cutting him off before he could mention the kiss we still weren’t talking about. My face flushed, and I turned back to the letter for somewhere to look other than at Xavier. I cleared my throat. “Anyway, I should go meet her.”

“I’m coming with you,” Xavier said.

“Fine, whatever, let’s just go,” I said, striding into the hallway. I couldn’t get out of that room fast enough. It was all just becoming a bit too much with Xavier, and I needed some breathing room.

We headed through the passageways of the keep to the courtyard on the north side. There were several greenhouses, but the north side courtyard also had a well, so I led the way there.

I thought of the letter my grandmother had sent as we walked. She had sounded sincere, and I was hoping we were going to be able to have a productive conversation—for once. Finding common ground with Hera would be nice, as well as helpful. It would be easier if we could work together. But it was challenging, and as nice as her note had been, I tried not to get my hopes up too high.

We reached the north courtyard, and I walked into the greenhouse. It was large, and the air was close and humid. It was kind of an odd place for a conversation, and I wondered why we hadn’t just met in her quarters.

“Grandma!” I called out, looking around.

There was no answer. But it was a large structure, and there were a great many plants to absorb sound, so I started down a row lined with orchids, looking for the figure of Hera.

“Are you sure this is where she wanted to meet you? Is there another greenhouse she might have meant?” Xavier asked, also looking around.

“I don’t think so,” I murmured, frowning. “She did say she wanted to meet in the one by the well, and there’s a well just over—*what the hell*?!”

Just as we rounded a corner, three Fae guards leapt out from behind a tall palm. They lunged toward Xavier and grabbed him, holding him fast.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. I summoned my magic and shot a blast at the guards. That worked for a second, and they let Xavier go, but an instant later six more guards appeared. Four of them grabbed Xavier, and the other two descended on me, pinning my arms so I couldn’t blast again.

“Stop! What is this?!” I demanded, struggling against them. “Xavier! Let him go! *Xavier!*”

Over my yells and Xavier’s snarls, I heard footsteps and the sound of someone clapping slowly, ironically.

“You really do put up a fight, don’t you, Caliana? A Wrenthorn through and through.”

Heart pounding, I looked up, and when I saw who was speaking, it felt as though the ground had fallen out from beneath my feet.

It was Cenwyn. He was smiling, and I understood in an instant: my grandmother wasn’t here. This was a trap.

**Episode 5401**

**Artemis**

Marius led me to a room filled with raucous voices and blaring music. There was clearly some kind of party going on in there, so I wasn’t surprised to see the lavish spread—lots of alcohol, food, and a three-piece band in the corner playing music and dancing.

Philantha, Dorphus, and Cadhla were all in attendance, laughing and drinking and whispering to each other. Cadhla spotted me and gave me a wink and a wave, which I returned before breaking eye contact. I wasn’t here to be social. I just wanted to do what I had to do and get the hell out of here.

“What does being here have to do with my goal to get Kastian?” I asked Marius. “You didn’t bring me here to party, did you?” Marius didn’t always have the best timing, and I was hoping he wasn’t trying to cheer me up or something.

“Ari, I know you better than that. Look.” Marius gestured, and I zeroed in on Kastian.

*So that’s why he brought me here. Marius is really shaping up to be a great asset; he always comes through for me.*

Kastian was seated on a couch at the far end of the room with two female Fae dancing in front of him. He was sitting back, enjoying the show, and drinking out of a large goblet. A group of his friends was crowded around, cheering him on and ogling the dancers right along with him. I wasn’t surprised in the least to see him here doing this. I would’ve been more surprised if he *weren’t* surrounded by women.

I walked over to Kastian and had to clear my throat to get his attention. “Can we talk?”

Kastian frowned and leaned forward a bit, touching a finger to his ear as if he hadn’t heard me.

A second later, Dorphus came walking over. “Ari! Join us. This is Kastian’s bachelor party! I hear they’re a big thing in the human world. Come on, show us how it’s done!”

Dorphus tried to grab my hand and pull me into a dance, but I scowled and shook him off.

*I don’t have time for this. I just need to speak to Kastian and do what I have to do.*

I turned to look for Marius and realized he wasn’t by my side anymore. That made sense. He wasn’t glamoured any longer and probably didn’t feel safe walking around with his true face in a room full of Fae. I was fine on my own, but I wouldn’t have minded his moral support.

*So, I guess it’s up to me to convince Kastian to go somewhere more private with me. A few days ago, Kastian would have been the one trying to get me alone.* I cringed at the thought. *Funny how quickly things change.*

I leaned toward Kastian and raised my voice so there would be no confusion this time about what I wanted.

“I need you to come with me!”

Suspicion passed across his face. “Come with you? Why?”

I didn’t have a good reason, so I had to make one up.

“Because Cali needs to talk to you,” I lied. “It’s really important. Something about the wedding, I think. You know how brides get before the big event.”

I didn’t even know how brides acted before a wedding, but I assumed that might be something Kastian would understand. It was the only thing I could come up with on the spot, and I held my breath, hoping it was enough.

He waved that away and sat back in his seat, his eyes already back on the Fae dancers who hadn’t missed a step since I interrupted. “I’ll talk to her after the party. I’m busy now. Or, better yet, tell your sister to come join. She can even bring her little wolf if she wants. I’m feeling generous.” He angled his body away from me and grabbed one of the Fae’s hands as she danced closer, wiggling her hips. Kastian was in heaven and had already forgotten I was standing there.

*Shit, I’m losing him!*

“Cali’s having second thoughts!” I blurted. “If you want her to go through with this wedding, you need to come with me, now.”

That got his attention, and he finally stood, shoving his goblet at Dorphus with a, “Hold this, I won’t be long.” Then he gestured for me to lead the way.

I started toward the crypts, walking at a fast clip and hoping no one spotted us on the way. The plan was coming together. I just needed to get him down to the crypts and then I would make my move.

“What are we doing down here?”

I shrugged. “This is where Cali wanted to meet. Maybe she wants some privacy?”

I had no desire to enter the crypts myself, but it was the best place to do what I had to do without being discovered.

As soon as we reached the entrance to the crypt, Kastian stopped short. “Sorry, but there’s no way in hell I’m going down there again. If Cali wants to talk, she can come out and speak to me here, *away* from all the dead things and booby traps.”

I nodded. “Fine.”

Then I struck quickly, trying to catch Kastian unaware. I threw a dagger strike right at his heart, but he dodged it easily so the blade only glanced across his upper arm—didn’t even draw any blood.

“Shit!” Kastian spat, reacting quickly and striking out with his own dagger, narrowly missing my own heart. I twisted out of the way and pulled out my second knife, holding it at the ready. He circled me, his eyes flitting between the daggers in my hands and me, trying to find the right opening to strike.

“I should have known,” he snapped. “What, are you jealous that what we had didn’t work out? Is that why you’re trying to kill me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself!” I shouted.

I lunged at him, hoping to catch him in the gut. That would take him down quickly, and then I would be able to go in for the kill. I went for it and missed, but at the same time, Kastian struck out again with his dagger and in a flash, I holstered one of my blades, grabbed his wrist and wrenched his arm behind his back until he cried out in pain and the knife dropped from his hands.

*Got him right where I want him. Now I just have to finish him off!*

I pulled my dagger out again and tried to jab it into his throat, but at the last second, he spun out of my hold and grabbed my wrists, stopping me from plunging the blade home.

“Why *are* you doing this?” Kastian asked. He was out of breath and straining to keep me from stabbing him.

“To save my sister from being trapped! I’ll never let you marry her!”

I grunted as I fought against him, trying my damnedest to overpower him and dig my blade into his body anywhere at this point, but it wasn’t easy. I hated to admit it, but he was strong, and I didn’t know if I would be able to overtake him.

Kastian’s eyes widened, and then out of the corner of my eye, I saw vines rising from the dirt. He was using his plant magic. Before I could react, the vines were wrapping around my wrists and tearing my hands away from Kastian, who stumbled back.

“Get these off of me!” I screamed, fighting against the vines. But every time I managed to tear one off, another took its place, shooting out of the dirt and constricting around my wrist with lightning speed. They were so tight they hurt, and both of my daggers dropped to the ground.

“Do you really think killing me is a solution?” he asked, breathing hard but obviously enjoying his upper hand.

“Seems like the best one,” I said through gritted teeth. “Anything to make sure you don’t get what you want.”

“Oh, that hurts, Ari,” he said with an exaggerated wince. “And here I thought we were friends.”

I scowled, wishing I could wipe that smug look off his face, but his vines were strong and more were coming, binding around my legs and arms, holding me in place.

*If I can just get to the knife in my sleeve, I can end this right here and now!*

I always kept backup blades, but they weren’t of any use if I couldn’t even get my hands on them.

Kastian stepped close. “I can tell you’re looking for a way out of your little predicament, and I get it…but what if I told you I actually have another solution—one where we both get what we want. Do you want to hear it?”

**Episode 5402**

**Greyson**

I turned to get a better look at the creature and size it up. It looked like a centaur and was large enough that if it wanted to attack me, I would have a hard time winning. And aside from possibly being outmatched, I needed to focus on getting rid of Cenwyn. I didn’t have time to fight this beast.

*Might as well try diplomacy first; see if I get anywhere by playing nice.*

“I did kill the faun, but what choice did I have? We all had to kill to survive in that place,” I said to him. “Tell me, if the faun had tried to kill you, would you have just stood there and let her do it?”

I didn’t mention that the faun had nearly killed my friend—I doubted the centaur would care. As it was, he didn’t look convinced. In fact, he looked really pissed off and like he might lash out at any moment. Great, so it was like that, was it?

“You must have cheated,” the centaur spat. “The faun was the champion of the area for a long time before you showed up. Hard to believe a little shrimp like you could best her without playing dirty. What, did you stab her in the back? Throw dirt in her eyes?”

*I’m sorry, a* shrimp*?* Was he fucking serious?

I bit back a less calculated response. “I did what I had to do to survive. I never like killing anyone if it’s not necessary, but killing the faun was as necessary as it gets.” I was speaking through clenched teeth now, tired of having to defend myself to this asshole who didn’t know what he was talking about.

The centaur took a step forward and got in my face. “Maybe we should see how well you do out here where there aren’t any guards to step in and stop the fight.” He flexed his muscles, pawed the ground with his massive, hooved feet. “I have a feeling things might turn out a little differently for you.”

I stood my ground and balled my hands into fists, ready to shift at a moment’s notice if this guy attacked. He was bigger and stronger than me, but I’d taken down people like him before, and I could again.

“Whoa, whoa there, let’s calm down and not fight,” Clarence said, stepping between us. “Didn’t we escape the arena so we wouldn’t have to do this anymore?”

The centaur backed off but crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me. “Fine. But he better watch himself and not make any moves I don’t like.”

Clarence turned and pulled me out of the centaur’s reach before giving me a hug. “Good to see you…despite the frosty greeting from the others.”

I hugged my friend back, thankful he’d stepped in to defuse the situation.

“Good to see you all in one piece.” I glared back at the centaur. “Well, good to see most of you, anyway. How did you and the others avoid Cenwyn’s hunters? The woods—and everywhere else, for that matter—are crawling with them.”

“Lucky for us, our group has plenty of experts at most things. They’re good at finding hiding spots and foraging food as long as we stay together. Those of us who are a little less accustomed to being out here in the elements do our part by protecting the ones that know their way around. Teamwork.”

Clarence gave the centaur a pointed look. It seemed he’d already caused trouble for the group before getting in my face and picking a fight.

I patted my friend on the shoulder. “Glad you’ve come into your own as a leader. I always knew you had it in you.”

Clarence looked surprised. “Oh no, that’s too formal a role to apply to me. I just figure out how to keep us all together and make sure we’re all using our advantages to help each other out.”

I smiled. “That’s what I do as an Alpha, aka, leader.”

Clarence ducked his head and blushed, clearly liking that comparison. “So, what brings you here? I thought you would have hurried back to your mate by now.”

“I found her, but Cenwyn is there, too. That’s why I’m here, to find backup.”

At the mention of Cenwyn’s name, others in the group began sharing frightened glances and shifting uncomfortably. I couldn’t blame them for not wanting anything to do with Cenwyn. He’d imprisoned and drugged most of them and had planned for all of them to die grisly deaths for his viewing pleasure. And it wasn’t like they were out from under his influence yet. His hunters were on the prowl looking to recoup what Cenwyn had lost. Their lives were still very much in danger.

*I know they’re afraid, but I need backup. And if Cenwyn is taken out, their lives will be better, too. I just have to make them see that, because I’m not sure we’ll be able to take Cenwyn down without them.*

“I know your people are scared of him—and they have reason to be. But that’s all the more reason that we need to take care of Cenwyn once and for all. The bad thing is, we don’t have many options. Cenwyn is still too powerful among the Fae. He has a lot of supporters, and that means it’ll be next to impossible to get him prosecuted since I don’t have any proof about what he did to us.”

“Then kill him!” one of the fighters shouted. “You killed the faun, Cenwyn should be a piece of cake for you!”

The others began to say the same thing, and that made the centaur even angrier.

“Obviously he can’t kill Cenwyn, or he would have already. Probably afraid to go toe to toe with him,” the centaur taunted.

I gave him a long look as I aimed my reply at Clarence. “I would kill him myself in a second if doing so wouldn’t cause really bad political ramifications for my mate. I have to wait until Cenwyn makes a mistake in front of witnesses, and when that happens, I want to be prepared with a plan to go after him.”

“And what is your plan?” Clarence asked.

“I’m forming one, but I can’t do it without help. One thing I’ve realized is that Cenwyn pays his guards well, and they’re fiercely loyal to him because of it. Even if we get the tide of public opinion to turn against him and reveal him as a traitor, that doesn’t mean his guards will just abandon him. He takes too good of care of them for that. With him as insulated as he is with all his men, it will be difficult to capture him.”

“Agreed. But I don’t hear a plan in all that, and that makes me nervous. I wish I could help, but I haven’t been as focused on taking the fight right to Cenwyn with all the work we’re doing just to survive out here and stay one step ahead of his hunters,” Clarence said.

“Right now, I have friends looking for evidence that we’ll use to expose him at a big wedding ceremony where all the most important Fae will be in attendance. I want you and the others to be there to help subdue Cenwyn’s forces. That’s my plan.”

Clarence frowned and shook his head. “I don’t know about this. We’re trying to get *away* from Cenwyn, not get closer to him. And who’s to say his forces won’t overpower us and throw us back into those cells? There’s no way we’ll escape a second time. This is too much of a risk.”

“I get that, but as long as Cenwyn is around, you’ll always be running. How long do you think you’ll be able to evade him? He has ears and eyes everywhere. He’ll catch up to you sooner or later, and he won’t be merciful.”

“We have trackers who can make sure we stay out of Cenwyn’s way forever,” the centaur grumbled. “Cenwyn is your problem, not ours.”

Ignoring the centaur, I kept my eyes on Clarence. “If this works, Clarence, if you help us and we get rid of Cenwyn once and for all, you’ll never have to run again. You’ll be able to live full lives without fear of Cenwyn coming at any second to snatch it away. Don’t you think that’s worth the risk?”

Clarence still looked skeptical. He glanced around at his people who were crowded in close, listening. I still saw nervousness, fear, and uncertainty in their eyes, but some of them seemed to be considering it. But I knew that Clarence would have to be the one to give the final word. Whether he wanted to believe it or not, he was their leader, and they were looking to him for guidance.

“Come on, Clarence, let’s do this. Let’s take away his power and pay him back for what he did to us. What do you say? Do you want revenge?”

**Episode 5403**

I quickly realized this was obviously an ambush, and if we didn’t react fast, we would be overtaken by Cenwyn’s guards in a matter of seconds. “We need to fight!” I shouted at Xavier.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Xavier shifted and tore into a cluster of Cenwyn’s guards as I conjured up my energy sword and fought off a bunch of others who were crowding around and trying to grab me.

Xavier and I were side by side, battling in sync with each other. We were so connected that it felt like we were moving as one as we fought off the onslaught of attacks and countered ferociously, knocking them back until we were no longer boxed in.

*I’ll get that one*, I mind linked as one of Cenwyn’s men started stalking Xavier from the back. *Cover me!*

*Got it, and be careful*, Xavier replied.

I made quick work of the guard, swiping my sword at his feet so he had to jump back to avoid the blade. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. He struck his head when he landed and let out a loud moan before curling up and rolling out of the way of my sword strikes.

I turned when I heard Xavier’s growls. He was facing off with another guard who was circling him with his blade raised. I moved toward them, but Xavier’s mind link came through fierce and clear.

*Stay back, Cali. I’ve got him.*

I watched as Xavier took a running leap and latched onto the guard’s arm, bringing him to the ground and then pouncing on his midsection and knocking the wind out of him. Xavier was about to go in for the kill when another guard came running at him, his sword raised.

*Got him!* I shouted.

I vaulted forward and pierced the guard’s side. He went down hard, and Xavier rushed over to stand beside me.

*Good one, Cali. You’re a lifesaver.*

I felt proud that Xavier and I were fighting as equals, watching each other’s backs and taking out Cenwyn’s men one by one. We were both out of breath but holding our own, slashing and biting and tearing into anyone who got too close.

It was starting to look like we might have the upper hand, but then a Fae rushed me from behind and injected something into my neck. Only a second later, my vision blurred.

*Cali! Cali!* Xavier’s mind link echoed in my head, but it sounded muffled and far away.

*Xavier—* I tried to mind link, but I couldn’t tell if I’d sent my cry to Xavier or if I’d only just thought his name, but in the end, it didn’t matter because I passed out before I could utter another word.

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I came to in thick darkness. My neck was burning, and I felt like I was going to be sick. I groaned as I rolled onto my side and bumped into something warm.

My eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness, and I could only just make out the outline of Xavier’s face.

“Xavier?” I shook his shoulder to wake him.

He groaned, and his eyes fluttered open as he came to. “Where the hell are we?”

“I don’t know, but it’s dark and small, and we’re definitely on the move,” I said.

Xavier sat up, striking his head on the low ceiling. “We have to get out of here.”

“I know. I have a feeling we might be outside of the briar wall by now, and we have no idea where the other Fae might be.”

“Not to worry, I’ll protect you,” Xavier said. “Whatever they drugged us with, the effects don’t seem to be lingering, so I can fight if I need to.”

I ran my hands along the wall, searching for a handle, a seam, anything that might be the key to escaping, but I didn’t find anything—the walls were smooth and solid.

“Watch out, I’m going to try to blast our way out,” I said to Xavier. I raised my hands and let loose a charge of bright blue energy, but my magic was absorbed by some sort of magical shield.

“Damn. I don’t know what to do. Not even my magic is powerful enough to break through.”

“Let me check, too,” Xavier said. I heard him rustling around as he smoothed his hands along the walls, and then the floor. “Wait, I think I found a door!” he said before suddenly letting out a hiss of pain and jumping back, bumping his head against the ceiling again.

“Xavier, are you okay?”

“Yes, but shit! There’s silver on the latch.” He sighed, rubbed his head. “This place is well fortified. I’m not sure we’re going to be able to get out of here.”

“Oh no,” I said, my voice small.

“It’s okay, we’ll figure something out. We always do, right?” Xavier hugged me, stroking his fingers through my hair.

“What are we going to do? Where could he be taking us?”

I couldn’t help but think of what Greyson had told us about where Cenwyn had taken him and Rishika—some sort of arena where supernaturals were drugged and forced to fight. I had no idea if that was where we were headed, only that whatever Cenwyn had planned for us, it wasn’t going to be good.

“What if he’s not taking us anywhere? What if he’s just going to stop on a deserted road somewhere and kill us?” I said, my panic growing.

“Shh, Cali, it’s okay. You heard what I said before, right? That I’m going to protect you? I meant that. I’m not going to let Cenwyn or any of his lackeys lay a finger on you.”

I snuggled into Xavier’s chest and closed my eyes against the depressing darkness, trying to let his confidence seep in.

“Besides, the others are going to realize we’re gone. Greyson went to get help from those fighters—Cenwyn’s former prisoners that he met in the arena. Wherever Cenwyn is taking us, they’ll find us, and we’ll get out and finally make Cenwyn pay for what he’s done.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice a strained whisper. His touch and words were comforting, though my mind kept drifting to the worst-case scenario no matter how hard I tried to stop it.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Xavier pulled away to look at me, and I could see his eyes glinting in the darkness. “Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I got us into this mess. I asked you to come to the Fae world with me, and I’m the one who got entangled in the politics of Light and Dark Fae. You kept begging me to just leave it all alone and get the hell out of here, and I wouldn’t do it. If it weren’t for me—if I’d just listened to you, we would be safe right now.”

“Cali, you can’t think that way. You know things couldn’t have turned out any differently because I’m always going to go wherever you go. I love you.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, I lifted my face to his. Before I knew it, I was kissing him. Xavier went rigid at first, as if surprised and hesitant to give in just in case I changed my mind, but that didn’t last long. Soon, his arms were around me, and he was kissing me back, and it was the best feeling in the world.

We had no idea what was going to happen to us, but right then, all that mattered was that we were together. We’d been through so much—tonight during our fight with Cenwyn and ever since we’d laid eyes on each other—and our connection never wavered even though we tried to ignore it for the sake of the people we cared about. But to be broken apart and unable to express our love for so long had been torture.

But none of that mattered now. It was just me and Xavier, the feel of his tongue in my mouth claiming me again, his arms wrapped tightly around me, my breasts pressed against the solid ridges of his bare chest. It was all I needed, all I wanted. I didn’t know how I’d survived so long without his touch, without being able to act on how I felt about him.

Xavier lay down and pulled me on top of him, our lips not losing contact for even a second. I ran my hands through his hair as he explored my body, and I couldn’t help noticing how well we fit together, my body slotted between his legs, our mouths joined, our breath panting out between us.

Finally giving in to Xavier like this wasn’t easy for all the reasons I’d kept my distance—Ava, Greyson, the hurt I’d suffered while he was away. But as much as I tried to tell myself that this wasn’t right, that we should stop, I wasn’t going to.

I couldn’t.

The kiss grew hungry, savage, and soon we were writhing against each other, fear and longing and our desperate need for each other taking over and blotting everything else out. Despite the trouble we were in and everything else we’d been through, Xavier was the only thing on my mind.

**Episode 5404**

**Greyson**

Clarence held out his hand for a shake and said, “I’m in. I never was too keen on living on the fringes and hiding from a jerk like Cenwyn anyway. He deserves everything he has coming to him. And I’d like to be part of it.”

I shook Clarence’s hand and then turned to the others. Their uneasiness hadn’t quite broken with Clarence’s agreement, and I wanted them to know I understood their hesitation. They didn’t know me other than what they’d seen of me in the arena, and I was asking them to risk their lives and their freedom to help me. I wanted them to know I understood what they were sacrificing.

“You are all free now, so that means every one of you can choose for yourselves whether or not you want to help us defeat Cenwyn. I can’t and won’t force anyone to come along—I know he made you do things that many of us wouldn’t wish on our worst enemies. But for us to have even a chance of taking down Cenwyn, I need as many fighters as I can get.”

I paused, wondering if I was getting through to them. No one had left yet, which was a plus, and even the centaur was listening—even if his glare had only grown more intense when I started talking.

“But I want you all to know that I truly believe we can beat Cenwyn, and that means you won’t have to live in the wild just scraping by, living in fear of the moment Cenwyn finds you again. We can make sure he’s never able to do anything like the arena again.”

The group began talking amongst themselves, and I stood off to the side, waiting to see how things would shake out. There were fierce fighters in this group—otherwise Cenwyn wouldn’t have been interested in pitting them against each other in his arena—but they were also normal folks who didn’t want to spend their time fighting battles for other people.

*This could go either way. Maybe all of them will join up with me, maybe none of them will. Either way, I tried my best…and I’ll at least have Clarence on my side.*

The centaur was the first to speak. “I’m not risking my life for the likes of you. Clarence can suck up to you all he wants, but I have my own mind, and I’d rather die than fight at your side.”

His words caused a few of the others to step back from the group and join him, and I was starting to worry.

What if no one said yes? I’d really have to put my mind to a solid plan B.

Or C.

“I’m with you!” said another fighter, a Tiplimilla. “I’m not afraid of Cenwyn, but I am afraid of having to live the rest of my life with his people breathing down my neck. We won’t really be free until he loses his power and can’t hurt us anymore.”

“And I’m in, too!” said another fighter. “At least now I’m putting my life on the line for something that’s actually worth it.”

“Me too!” said another, stepping forward to join the others. She was heavily scarred, and I couldn’t immediately tell what kind of shifter she was, since she was in human form. But either way, it didn’t matter. She looked fierce and was willing to fight on our side, and that was all I cared about.

Soon, a dozen had stepped forward to volunteer their help. I smiled at each of them, grateful that they trusted and believed in me enough to fight beside me. “Thank you, all of you, I promise you won’t regret this. I may sound like I’m being overconfident, but I truly think that with all of you fighting with me, we’ll be able to overcome Cenwyn and make sure he can never do what he did to us to anybody else.”

The ones who’d declined to help moved off, grumbling as they left, the centaur leading the charge. I was happy to see him go. If the centaur had stepped forward and volunteered, I would have had to keep an eye on him the entire time we were facing off with Cenwyn. I didn’t think for one second that he would hesitate to pay me back for killing the faun the first chance he got, so it was for the best that he was leaving.

I turned to the ones left behind and announced, “Let’s head for Briarkeep. I’ll fill you all in on the details on the way.”

As we began our journey through the woods back to the keep, Clarence smiled at Tabitha, who’d been quiet the entire time. I’d watched her while I rallied Clarence’s people, and as always, she’d been standing off to the side observing. I was just happy to have her quiet support there with me.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Clarence—werebear extraordinaire.”

Tabitha giggled and took the hand Clarence offered. “Nice to meet you, Clarence. I’m Tabitha.”

“Tabitha, that’s a pretty name. Are you a werewolf, too?”

“Oh no, I’m a witch. Well…kind of.” She laughed. “I have something like anti-magic, if that makes sense.”

“That’s neat!” Clarence said excitedly. “With you on our side, Greyson’s strength, and my people’s brawn and heart, I think we have a real chance of teaching Cenwyn a lesson. Don’t you think, Greyson?”

I nodded, happy for Clarence’s congenial personality. I could tell that his people were relaxed around him, and they were going to need clear heads for what was ahead of us.

Clarence’s disposition was much brighter than mine had ever been, and I respected that about him. It was a feat for someone who’d been through what Clarence had been through to be so cheery. His positive attitude was the reason I was free right now, since I knew how much his energy had contributed to our escape from Cenwyn’s arena.

*I bet Xavier would hate him. He never gets along with anyone who’s too bright and sunny like Clarence, though maybe I’m wrong about that. Clarence is a likable guy, and Xavier surprises me sometimes.*

We were about halfway to Briarkeep when I caught a familiar scent on the breeze. I stopped in and motioned for everyone else to stop, too.

“It’s Cali,” I said to myself. “And she’s close.” I looked around frantically, wondering if she’d somehow snuck after me to keep an eye on me and make sure I was okay. But that was impossible. We were still miles from the keep.

*I need to keep it together. I miss Cali, and wish I were with her, but I can’t start imagining things that aren’t there. Now, not only do I have myself and Cali and my friends to worry about, but I’ve got to watch out for Clarence’s people, too.*

One of the fighters broke away from the rest and went to whisper something in Clarence’s ear. A concerned look passed across his face before he hurried to catch up with me.

“We need to change our route. Barend just spotted one of Cenwyn’s prisoner carts on the road, and that means his guards aren’t far behind—his hunters, either. I know another route to Briarkeep. It’ll take longer, but it’ll keep us away from Cenwyn’s goons.”

I was about to agree when I caught Cali’s scent again. It was even stronger now—too strong to deny it. I wasn’t imagining things. Cali was close.

*But where the hell is she? And what’s she doing out here?*

“Are you okay?” Tabitha asked, obviously sensing the shift in my mood.

“I don’t know…it’s the weirdest thing. I think I smell Cali, and she’s close.” Then I caught another scent. “Xavier.”

I put two and two together, realizing what this must mean. I went over to Clarence, where he stood speaking with the others and discussing taking the new route.

“Clarence, the prisoner cart you mentioned, is it the same kind they used to transport us to the arena? I think someone I know might be in the one Barend saw.”

Clarence turned to Barend. “Was it the same kind?”

Barend nodded. “Yes, the exact one.”

The concerned look on Clarence’s face deepened. “That’s not good. Those things are nearly impenetrable from the inside, built to withstand anything you can throw at it—few weak spots. The one opening is typically equipped with silver and iron, and then there’s the steel walls covered in layers of thick, enchanted wood.” Clarence frowned. “I talked to a lot of supes when I was imprisoned in Cenwyn’s arena, and as far as I knew, no one had ever managed to escape one.”

I looked toward the road, the exact place the scent was drifting from. “I think Cenwyn has captured my mate and my brother. In fact, I’m sure of it.” I addressed Cenwyn’s people who were watching me and Clarence closely. “I need to rescue them. Will you help me?”

**Episode 5405**

I was naked from the waist down, and for the first time since we’d started kissing here in this prison we’d found ourselves in, Xavier’s lips left mine. He slid down my body, his hands holding me tightly against him while his lips and tongue lavished my breasts with kisses.

I slowed my breathing and concentrated on the rough scrape of the stubble on his chin grazing the sensitive skin of my breasts, driving me wild and reminding me of feeling that same sensation on my thighs when Xavier’s face was buried between them.

God, it had been so long since Xavier and I had taken things this far, and I wanted it now more than ever. The kiss in the hallway had felt like kindling—we’d sparked our mate connection, and now it was a roaring fire. I could feel it surging through my veins, reminding me of the connection we had, the connection I’d been fighting against ever since Adéluce forced him to break up with me.

My mind grew fuzzy. I arched into him, moaning when his mouth found my nipples. I clung to him as he began gently licking and sucking them.

“Fuck, Cali, you taste so good,” Xavier said. He brought his mouth to mine again and kissed me slowly, gently. “I missed you so much, baby.” Then he kissed me hard, pushing his tongue deep into my mouth before pulling away again. “I’m not going to let them touch you, you know that, right? I’ll die before I let them hurt you. Wherever they’re taking us, whatever they’re trying to do, I won’t let them.”

“I know,” I whispered. It was so strange, us behaving this way while trapped in this—whatever it was—and possibly being taken to our deaths. We certainly couldn’t rule it out. But if these were my last moments, at least I was spending them in the arms of one of the men I loved while his mouth devoured every piece of exposed flesh it could find.

Suddenly, Xavier pulled away, and his body tensed as he said, “Greyson.”

It was like water was dumped over my head. The mate bond stopped surging under my skin. I backed up, pulling my shirt back down over my breasts. Guilt washed over me. “Oh my god. I can’t do this with Greyson out there somewhere.”

Selfish. That’s what I was. That’s what I always fucking was when the mate bond overtook me, when it overshadowed any ounce of logic and rationale I had. It wasn’t my fault that Xavier and I were trapped together in a dark place with our nerves going haywire and all the sexual tension bubbling between us, but it was definitely my fault for acting on it, for kissing him and wanting him to do so much more.

*Fuck.*

Xavier shook his head. “No, he’s *here*.”

Confusion swept through me. “Greyson’s here? How? What are you talking about?”

A second later, a crescendo of battle cries rang through the air. I rose to my knees in surprise and smacked my head against the ceiling again. I shouted in frustration. I didn’t know what the cries were about, but hopefully they meant I was going to be out of this tight place sooner than later.

The vehicle we were in stopped moving, and I heard unfamiliar voices shouting, “We’re under attack! Fight! Fight!”

Screams and shouts tore through the air, reaching us even through the thick walls of the cell.

“We’re in here!” Xavier shouted. He started banging on the walls. “Help, we’re in here!”

Something slammed against the cart, shaking it so hard that I was thrown against the wall. I winced in pain.

*That’s definitely going to leave a bruise!*

I quickly pulled my discarded clothes back on. A second later, the door was flung open from the outside, and Xavier and I squinted against the sudden flood of light.

*What the hell is that?*

A strange creature had pulled the door open. I recoiled, unable to make sense of it and unsure of whether this was a captor or someone here to save us…and then I spotted Greyson.

He reached in and held out a hand. I scrambled to take it, and he yanked me out of the cell and into his arms, hugging me tightly.

“You’re safe now, Cali. I’ve got you, love.”

“Greyson! You don’t know how happy I am to see you! I can’t believe you found us.”

Xavier climbed out after me, still squinting a bit in the light. He was still naked—and I noticed Greyson registering that—though that on its own wasn’t strange. He didn’t have time to react before Xavier slapped him hard on the back.

“How did you figure out someone had taken us, brother? You got here faster than I expected.” Xavier looked genuinely happy to see Greyson, and I realized I’d only maybe seen that look on his Xavier’s maybe once or twice when it came to his brother.

“It was pure luck,” Greyson said. “We happened to be on our way back to the keep when I smelled you both on the breeze. One of the members of our little crew here spotted the prison cart on the road, and I put two and two together…and here we are.”

I looked around and realized we were surrounded by all kinds of mythical creatures—the kinds of wondrous beings I’d read about in books as a child.

I bowed my head in their direction. “Thank you for your help!”

Tabitha rushed forward to hug me. “Cali! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

I was happy to see my friend—and happy that she, Greyson, and the others had saved us from having to learn what Cenwyn had planned for us.

“Come on, we need to head back before backup arrives. There’s no way Cenwyn is going to let us attack one of his carts without retaliating,” Greyson said.

He shifted to wolf form, and I climbed on his back, but not before I turned to look at Xavier, who was watching me, his expression unreadable.

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We made it back to Briarkeep in record time, or maybe it just felt like it was fast because of how relieved I was to be out of the cramped cell Cenwyn’s men had thrown us into.

We crowded around just before crossing through to the other side, and Greyson, back in human form, addressed the small militia he’d gathered.

“We should station ourselves around the back of the keep. It’s the safest place to be out of sight while still making sure you’re on hand and ready to strike. And once the time comes, I’ll either send someone to get you or give some other signal to let you know it’s time.”

Clarence nodded. “We’ll lie low in the woods and wait for your signal. We’ve gotten good at blending into the woods. We won’t be seen.”

Xavier, Greyson, and I broke away from the rest and snuck back into the keep.

“Xavier, you should get washed, rested, and dressed after your ordeal,” Greyson suggested. “We’ll regroup later.”

Xavier gave Greyson a slight nod but seemed reluctant to leave me.

I nodded at him. “Greyson’s right, Xavier. You should go and get some rest. I’ll talk to you later.”

Our eyes were locked, and I was thinking about what had happened in the cart. I had a feeling he was, too. How could he not be? It was everything both of us had wanted for so long…

I wanted so badly to be with him then, and I felt the same now. I wanted that familiar feeling of being protected and dominated by Xavier, who knew my body so well.

Guilt flooded me. I shouldn’t be thinking about that with Greyson standing right beside me.

“Okay, I’ll see you two soon,” Xavier said before he left us.

Back in my room, Greyson started fussing over me. “Are you okay, love? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine, really. Just a little bruised, but I’ll heal. I would’ve been in a lot worse shape if you and the others hadn’t found us when you did.”

“I know. I was sick with worry when I realized you were in that cart.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. “And I’m so grateful you were there.”

Greyson pulled me in closer to hug me tighter.

*I feel like I don’t deserve this—Greyson’s comfort, his concern just makes me feel so bad after what Xavier and I were doing in that cart… The way the mate bond took over…*

“This is all happening because of the marriage treaty,” Greyson said.

I nodded. “I know, but I have no choice but to do this if we want peace.”

“We’ll find another way. We have to. There’s no way I’m going to let you marry Kastian.”

I shook my head. “As much as I want to find another solution…there’s a chance I may have to go through with it, Greyson, and I think we all have to come to terms with that. I want the Fae world to see peace, and I believe this is the only way. I wish you and Xavier didn’t have to sit back and watch me marry another man, but what other choice do I have?”

Greyson pulled away, shaking his head. Anger rolled off him in waves. “No, I’m not going to let this happen. We can find another way, and we will. You don’t have to marry him. You do understand how crazy this is, Cali, right? That you’re even really considering this?”

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. It was a messenger from Hera.

“Sorry to interrupt, Caliana,” the messenger said, acknowledging Greyson with a small bow. “But I must inform you that the wedding preparations have begun, and your presence is needed for the all-important pre-conjunctio ceremony.”

**Episode 5406**

I looked back toward Greyson, who seemed like he was itching to interject, but he kept quiet.

“I’ll be there, but I have to change first,” I told the messenger, my heart beating fast.

I closed the door and took a deep breath before facing Greyson again. “You should go while I get ready for the ceremony,” I said before he could speak.

Greyson frowned. “No. We should ask Hera—no, *tell* her to wait. This is too fast.”

I shook my head. I knew that was what he’d say. “I know, Greyson, but I can’t. If the Dark Fae get any inkling that I might be pulling out of this, they’ll end the peace talks. This is something I have to do, Greyson. I know it’s not ideal, and it’s not what I want…but this is the path I have to follow for now.”

Greyson looked upset and almost like he wanted to say something, but then he left without another word.

I threw myself on the bed, anger and sadness mixing in the pit of my stomach. I hated that I was putting him through this. He had always been so loyal to me and stuck by my side through so much, and what was I doing? Breaking his heart over and over again.

*I wish I could send him away so he doesn’t have to see this…but it’s not like he would go. And anyway, I need him close. I’m not strong enough to do this without him.*

That thought made me feel even guiltier. Selfishly, I was fine with the pain he would suffer seeing me marry another man just because I needed him by my side while I did it.

*I can’t believe I’m really considering this. Greyson is right. This is wild.*

I dragged myself off the bed and into the bathroom. I avoided my own eyes in the mirror’s reflection, afraid of what I might see there. It was almost as if I were white-knuckling my way through this, keeping my head down and going through the motions to get this marriage with Kastian over with.

I washed up in a hurry and threw on a simple white dress before rushing down to the banquet hall where the messenger had indicated the ceremony was to take place.

When I walked in, I saw that all the major players were here—Hera, Celeste, Artemis, Xavier, and of course, Kastian. And where else would they be but here? This was what the peace talks had culminated in—my marriage to Kastian. And this ceremony was the beginning of it.

*And how did Xavier know to come? Greyson must have told him. It might have been better if he’d stayed far away—Greyson seems to have. I can’t believe I’m putting them through this.*

I suddenly felt sick to my stomach and had to take a few deep breaths to calm down.

I caught Xavier’s eye. He was scowling, obviously angered and unhappy about this. I looked away from him. I couldn’t deal with seeing how upset he was with my choice. I hoped he and Greyson understood that I was only doing this because there was no other alternative, at least not one I’d been able to come up with so far. I didn’t see any other options.

I looked around for Cenwyn, but he was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he was still unaware that Xavier and I had escaped him. Good. The less involved he was, the better. I didn’t want him here making a scene, or worse yet, pretending to support me in my decision when he’d just held me prisoner in a cramped cart.

Celeste was glaring at me and making no secret of her distaste with the whole affair—yet another person who was angered by my decision.

Hera drifted to my side. “Hello, Caliana. We’ll begin as soon as the master of ceremony arrives.”

I looked in my grandmother’s eyes to see if there was anything there—distaste, happiness—anything—but I saw nothing but resignation. She was going along with this because like me, she had no other idea how to fix the rift between the Dark and Light Fae.

“Okay…and what is this, exactly?” I asked Hera.

“Didn’t the messenger inform you? It’s the pre-conjunctio. It’s where a magical promise is made between the betrothed.”

My stomach dropped at Hera’s use of the word *betrothed*. I’d always thought that if that word ever applied to me, it would be with Xavier or Greyson standing by my side. I didn’t dare look at my mate who had shown up right now. I didn’t trust myself to keep my composure. As each minute passed, I grew more and more nervous and unsure.

“And what does this all mean?” I asked, my uneasiness growing. “This isn’t the marriage ceremony, right?”

“No, but it’s just as important. They’re going to mix a drop of your blood with Kastian’s blood and put it in a ceremonial goblet. Once that happens, it’s considered the start of the magical bonding spell that will tie the two bloodlines together in matrimony and peace.”

“Matrimony and peace,” I repeated, my mind reeling with the implications of all this. That was why I was going through with this, to bring peace to the Fae…but I was really starting to wonder if it was worth upending my life.

It was ridiculous that everything was falling to me—a half-human, half-Fae who had spent all of her life in the human world. But that was the reality of this, and there was no turning back now.

“This ceremony will assure the Dark and Light Fae that both you and Kastian understand the power of this union and are serious about forming this bond. It will show your intent to get married and bring peace to the Fae lands. And once your blood is mixed with Kastian’s, it starts a process that cannot be undone. It is a version of a Fae promise.”

I was surprised to hear that, even though I suppose I shouldn’t have been. Marriage was a serious commitment in almost every culture, so why wouldn’t it be the same in the Fae world with all its rigid rules and customs? But not every culture required a blood bond, and I wasn’t at all prepared to make good on something so binding.

“This all sounds very serious,” I said, looking at Xavier. His frown had deepened, which meant that he, and probably the others, had heard every word my grandmother said to me, and he wasn’t happy about it.

It was one thing for them to hear me promise to marry Kastian, and quite another to learn that there was no going back on this once it was done.

“And what, exactly, am I promising?”

“You’re promising to join your bloodline with Kastian’s. This ceremony has been performed for centuries for marriages of great importance, and it’s the only way the Dark Fae will agree to the treaty. You and Kastian must be magically bound during this ceremony for your marriage to mean anything as it pertains to fostering peace.”

I was nervous. This all seemed so heavy and serious—and unexpected. I knew the marriage ceremony might be inevitable, but this ceremony put a finality to it that might get in the way of me bailing on Kastian at the last moment…

Everyone turned as an elderly Fae walked into the room. He was dressed in a silk ceremonial gown and had a large, gold goblet in his hands. Members of both the Dark and Light Fae councils trailed in after him, breaking away from him once he went to stand on a dais.

“We can begin!” he announced. “Kastian, Caliana, please join me here at the dais.”

I did as he asked, though my legs were shaking so badly I was surprised I could even walk.

The Fae’s voice rang out loud and clear in the hall. “With this mixing of Caliana and Kastian’s blood, they will be honor bound to join hands in marriage. If either refuse to engage in this ceremony, it will bring dire consequences down on their entire bloodline!”

My eyes shot to Artemis and Hera.

Hera nodded solemnly. “It is okay; we understand this risk.”

Artemis raised a brow at me and just shrugged.

I frowned, unsure of whether that was support or resignation.

The elder held out a knife, and Kastian took it. He pricked his finger and let a drop of blood fall into the goblet. “Here you are,” Kastian said almost matter-of-factly as he handed me the knife.

I took it but hesitated, looking back toward Xavier. The anger was gone from his face now, replaced by pure panic and something else: fear. He was afraid—afraid that I was about to make a massive mistake.

I tore my gaze from his and looked down at the knife blade glinting in the light. Once I did this—once I pricked my finger and my blood mingled with Kastian’s in that goblet—there would be no going back.

**Episode 5407**

**Xavier**

I was convinced that Cali was going to back out and refuse to go through with the ceremony. As far as I was concerned, there was no other way this could go. This was yet another manipulation by the Fae—springing some intense ceremony on Cali and not giving her time to decide whether this was what she really wanted to do.

*There’s no way Cali’s going to go through with this. She’s going to find a way to stall or break off this engagement right now before things go too far—something.*

But as I watched, Cali pricked her finger and let a drop of her blood fall. A glow radiated from the goblet as her blood mixed with Kastian’s.

“It is done!” the elder announced. “The conjunctio has been set in motion and cannot be broken. There is no stopping it now.”

I was in total disbelief.

*That couldn’t have really happened. There’s no way. How could Cali have voluntarily participated in something that magically bonds her to someone else? Someone who isn’t her mate? Someone she can’t possibly love?*

My head and my heart couldn’t come to a good enough conclusion. The only thing I knew was I needed to talk to her. I started to take a step toward her, but Hera got there first and embraced Cali. She kissed her on the cheek, looking every bit the proud grandmother. That angered me even more. How could she allow her granddaughter to make a sacrifice like this?

“Oh, Caliana. This is historic. We’re one step closer to peace.” Hera turned to address the rest of us. “We will have a celebration now as we all take this step together toward everlasting harmony between the Light and Dark Fae.”

There was a smattering of applause—and I could see that many people didn’t look pleased. At least I wasn’t alone in thinking this whole thing was complete bullshit.

As soon as Hera stepped away from Cali, I hurried to her and grabbed the hand she’d pricked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Cali said, not meeting my eyes as she gently pulled her hand out of my hold and wrapped her finger in a handkerchief Hera had given her.

I shook my head, still in shock. “Don’t lie to me, Cali. I know you felt forced to do that. I can’t believe they’ve trapped you this way.”

Cali shook her head at me. “Don’t talk like that. I’m not a child—I knew what I was getting into, and no one forced me. I’m the one who agreed to this, remember? You were there when I told the Dark Fae that I was willing to go through with this marriage.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Cali was still defending the Fae when they’d taken over her life and were doing their absolute damnedest to ruin it. I bit back any sharp replies about how much I was starting to hate the Fae that had roped Cali into this. It would probably only annoy Cali, and that was the last thing I wanted.

“You’re a good person for staying loyal to the Fae when they’ve never done anything for you or your family,” I said. “They’ve sat here insulated in their Fae world fighting amongst each other for eons, and then as soon as you get here, they throw the entire fate of their world on your back. I can’t believe it.”

I was trying to hold back, but I felt so angry and bitter toward them that I couldn’t help myself. Werewolves weren’t perfect, but Fae society was giving new meaning to the word *dysfunction*. Why were they allowing this? And why were they hinging the peace of the entire Fae world on Cali’s marriage to a power-hungry Dark Fae?

Cali shook her head again and finally met my eyes. “I know what it looks like, and I know it’s not what we want, but I don’t want you to think that way.”

“I can’t help it, Cali. This is all moving too fast. You can’t tell me that you’re okay with how this has all turned out.” I was practically shouting and drawing stares. I lowered my voice. “Maybe we should speak in private. Especially after what happened earlier—”

“Xavier,” Cali said sharply, cutting me off. She took a nervous look around and pulled me a few more steps away from the others so they couldn’t listen in. “Now is not the time. I can’t discuss anything too serious right now. I’m emotionally exhausted after everything that just happened. This ceremony was…unexpected, and it doesn’t help that it took place right after our whole ordeal.”

*I hate that she’s calling it an “ordeal.” It was more than that for me—something way better than that. It’s what I’ve wanted since I told Cali that I didn’t want to be friends with her anymore and that I want—need—to be more.*

I knew she felt what I did too during that kiss. That it was the beginning, not the end. That we were connected beyond a shadow of a doubt.

But if now wasn’t the time to discuss it, I was just going to have to go along with what she wanted. I didn’t want to push her. “Yes, I get it. I’m sorry. I think I’m just trying to wrap my head around all this, so maybe I’m not doing the best job of being supportive.”

Maybe I was being selfish, but all I could think about was that Kastian was getting to do the one thing I’d wanted to do with Cali for so long—marry her. It was a political marriage, and I knew that, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept.

“Thanks. Let’s hold off on talking about what happened between us, okay? There’s no use rehashing it right now.”

I was a little shocked, but I agreed. What else could I do? Push the issue after she’d just entered a blood bond with a raging asshole? I realized Cali needed a second to decompress, and if I was having a hard time processing everything that had just happened, I could only imagine what was going on in her head.

Hera came over with Zeras, the Light Fae councilperson, along with Dorphus, and Cadhla.

“We’re so happy for you both!” Cadhla exclaimed, pulling Cali into a hug. Cali was stiff and seemed caught off guard by the contact.

“You and Kastian are the best-looking Fae couple the court has seen in years,” Dorphus added.

“Yes, congratulations are in order, Caliana,” Zeras said with a tight smile. “We have much to discuss.”

I couldn’t take much more. I left Cali to hobnob with the Fae brass and made a beeline straight for her sister. She was standing on the edge of celebration. If anyone understood an ounce of how unfair all of this was, it had to be her.

“I had a bad feeling about this from the beginning, and the feeling’s only getting worse,” Artemis grumbled. “Something bad is definitely going to happen.”

“Something bad *already* happened,” I remarked, casting a bitter glance around at all the gleeful Fae.

“Right, and I don’t trust either side,” Artemis said. “I’ll do whatever I can to protect Cali.”

“Why don’t we protect her by grabbing her and getting the hell out of here? Why can’t we just leave tonight? Run away and leave the Fae world altogether? What does Cali have to lose? A grandmother she barely knows and barely sees and a fiancé who doesn’t give a shit about her?”

“I would be on board with that, Xavier, but it’s not a possibility anymore. The conjunctio is too powerful once it’s in place. It could even rival the power of the *due destini*,” Artemis said.

I hated the sound of that. I knew how strong and powerful the *due destini* was, and it was frightening to think that the conjunctio held even a fraction of that intensity. It was like adding Mentos to fucking Coke.

“The conjunctio is like a Fae promise but worse. It is large enough to ruin the entire Wrenthorn bloodline if the marriage doesn’t take place,” Artemis explained.

The more Artemis revealed about the ceremony we’d just witnessed, the more worried I became. Part of me wanted to argue with Artemis, somehow prove that we could save Cali from this anyway, but I knew better. The consequences sounded dangerous, and I didn’t want to test it.

“So this means that the people who don’t want peace might come at Cali even harder now,” I said. “Artemis, are you sure there’s no way we can get around the blood bond somehow? Can’t we just end the conjunctio by taking Cali out of the Fae world?” I asked.

“No, the only way to break the ties of the blood bond now is to kill one or both of the parties involved.”

“Wait, really? Killing them will end it?” I looked over her shoulder at all of the other Fae. “Then it’s simple. We kill Kastian.”

**Episode 5408**

**Artemis**

Xavier’s suggestion didn’t surprise me in the least. After all, I’d literally just tried to kill Kastian to protect Cali from him, and that was before the conjunctio. If I didn’t know what I knew about the ceremony that had just taken place, getting rid of Kastian would be the perfect plan. With him dead and out of the way and the blood bond broken, Greyson, Xavier, and I could then work together to get my sister out of here.

But that couldn’t happen; the conjunctio had made sure of that. I was going to have to dash Xavier’s hopes.

“I’m sorry, Xavier, but that’s too dangerous to even consider. If you kill Kastian, everyone here will assume you and Greyson are behind it—and they’d be right. The Dark Fae would never let you leave. And do you know how much more danger Cali would be in if they thought for even a second that her werewolf lovers were part of some plot to kill Kastian? They’d think it was a power grab and send every Fae in Briarkeep after you—and Cali too.”

Xavier cursed under his breath. “Shit, you’re right. There’s really nothing we can do.”

I shook my head. “We need to stick to the plans we have.”

Xavier snorted, clearly losing hope in the plans we did have. I couldn’t blame him. It did feel like there was nothing we could do, that everything was rolling down a steep hill with no way of stopping it. Without meaning to, I thought back to the offer Kastian made and dismissed the idea just as quickly. I hadn’t even really allowed myself to consider it when he’d brought it up—that’s how outlandish it was—at least I’d thought so when he first presented it to me.

*Kastian’s proposition isn’t an option, right? It would never work…*

“I need to go find my brother and tell him about all of this,” Xavier said. “He’ll want to know.”

Celeste came up beside me and grabbed my arm. “We need to talk. *Now.*”

She dragged me away, gripping my arm so tightly that I cried out. “Ow! That hurts!” I pulled out of her grip and had to hold back from popping her one. I was tired of her manhandling me, and even more tired of feeling like I was trapped under her thumb. I couldn’t remember ever feeling so out of control—at least not since I’d worked for the Kollector.

“This is a disaster! You should never have let your sister go through with this ceremony. The conjunctio demands a marriage, and that means I’m going to have to kill her, and it’s all your fault!”

*Is Celeste really threatening to kill my sister right in front of me? Has she lost it?*

“You’re not touching Cali!” I hissed. “You’d have to go through me first.”

I almost wished Celeste would try to cross me. It would give me the perfect excuse to let out all the pent-up anger I’d had since she’d essentially been holding me hostage since shortly after I arrived in the Fae world.

Celeste narrowed her eyes. “So be it, Artemis. If it comes to that, it comes to that. It’s not like I haven’t warned you time and time again about what the consequences would be if your sister went through with this marriage to Kastian.”

I wanted to scream at her that Cali hadn’t been given much of a choice, that my sister was being selfless and trying to help people like Celeste if she could only stop to see it from Cali’s point of view. I didn’t want my sister to marry Kastian any more than Celeste did, but that didn’t mean I didn’t understand why she’d agreed to it.

“Don’t worry about the marriage. It’ll never happen. I’m going to come up with a plan to get Cali out of this, but you have to give me time.”

Celeste pondered that, and I almost thought she was going to tell me no and throw me back into my room under lock and key, but then she let out an exasperated sigh and threw her hands in the air.

“Fine! You have until the day of the wedding, Artemis, but there’s no way I’m going to let this ceremony happen. It’ll be stopped one way or another.”

I watched Celeste storm off, clenching and unclenching my fists. I was angry and frustrated and tired of all this Fae drama, but more than that, I was starting to worry.

I’d told Celeste that I had a plan, but the truth was, I had no idea how to fix this. I knew all too well how strong these Fae spells could be, and Cali had just gotten herself bound by one of the most powerful Fae spells there was.

*Cali may have gotten herself into a mess that’s not easily fixed. Why did she have to make it so easy for them to push her into this wedding with Kastian? Why didn’t she fight it?*

I knew why. She thought she was helping to bring the Fae world together, so she was willing to do anything to make that happen. I only wished she hadn’t thrown herself in the middle of the never-ending conflict between the Light and Dark Fae without understanding just what she stood to lose.

I started back to my room, needing to get away from the crowds so I could think straight. I didn’t get far before I ran into Rishika.

“Why did you risk sneaking back in? Were you coming to see me?” I asked, hopeful she’d finally regained her memory. That hope was quickly dashed.

“No,” Rishika replied. “I was trying to find something to eat and got turned around. This place is huge and super hard to navigate.”

My heart dropped at seeing the clear apathy on Rishika’s face as she looked at me. Was this how things were going to be from now on? Rishika treating me like a stranger? What would happen if she never regained her memories of me?

“Has anything else come back to you yet?” I asked her.

Rishika’s expression brightened. “Oh, yeah, I think so!”

That gave me hope. “Really? What?”

“I ate this really delicious biscuit a few hours ago, and I think I remembered that it’s one of my favorite snacks. Isn’t that great?”

“Yes, that’s amazing,” I said, my heart breaking again.

*A fucking biscuit? Really? After everything we’ve been through and how much we’ve meant to each other, she remembers the taste of a biscuit before she remembers me?*

“Well, maybe I can help you go find something to eat, and we can talk more on the way? Maybe being with someone you know well will help bring back some of your memories.”

“Thanks, but no, thanks. I met this cool maid in the kitchens, and she promised to teach me this fun card game. I was actually looking for a snack for us to eat while we get to know each other better.” Rishika gave me a look like we were best friends discussing a crush, and I felt like she was pounding my heart under her boot.

“Oh, that sounds…great. Like a lot of fun,” I squeaked out.

My heart was in pieces. Every word Rishika said seemed to drive home the very stark reality that she didn’t know the first thing about me anymore and didn’t care who I was at all.

“I’ll see you later,” Rishika said with a halfhearted wave, already heading off.

I watched her go, feeling dejected, rejected, and lost. It was one thing to break up with your girlfriend, and quite another for her to lose all memory of you and treat you like little more than a stranger. In fact, Rishika didn’t even seem all that interested in *trying* to remember me. How was that supposed to make me feel?

*Could it be that deep down, Rishika’s still mad at me for abandoning her and coming to the Fae world in the first place? Maybe she’s blocking me out for a reason—because I hurt her, and she doesn’t want to give me a second chance. Maybe her brain is protecting her from me…*

*This is all temporary. It has to be.*

I would make sure Rishika got her memory back—for better or worse. This couldn’t be about me and her, it had to be about her alone. I needed to keep that perspective, no matter how difficult it might be to be unbiased.

With a heavy sigh, I kept on toward my room, craving quiet and solitude even more now. I shouted in surprise when I bumped into someone. I started to apologize when I realized it was Kastian. I promptly shut my mouth.

“What do you want?” I sneered. He was the last person I wanted to see.

Kastian grinned. “Ari, so good to see you. I wanted to talk to you about our little conversation earlier. You still haven’t given me an answer, and it’s time.”

**Episode 5409**

I was exhausted from shaking so many hands and talking to so many Fae councilmembers. Everyone wanted to know how I felt about the conjunctio ceremony—especially since they knew I wasn’t familiar with it—and were curious to know what plans Kastian and I had for after we were married.

It was hard to answer those questions, and even harder to pretend like I wasn’t still reeling from the ceremony and absolutely disgusted by the idea that I might one day soon have to call Kastian my husband.

It was strange to me how easily the Fae accepted my impending marriage to Kastian. Most of them knew I’d come here with my werewolf mates, and it didn’t matter to them. They knew this marriage was simply an arrangement to broker peace between the two Fae factions, and they were all okay with that as long as I went through with it and the bloodlines were joined.

*They’re treating it like it’s no big deal, so maybe that’s what I should do, too. But it’s hard to pretend like this marriage won’t change things between me and my mates. I know they’re both busy trying to figure out a way to get me out of it, and meanwhile, I’m trying to make peace with the possibility that I’m going to have to marry Kastian.*

I was almost grateful when Cadhla and Dorphus pulled me out of a circle of Fae elders who were questioning me about my plans to leave the human world for good in favor of settling in the Fae world with my new husband.

“So, there’s an after-after-party, of course,” Cadhla said excitedly. “Everyone’s going to be there—even your husband-to-be. You have to come!”

“Yes, you’d be one of the guests of honor, of course,” Dorphus said.

I tried to keep my face from showing that the idea of partying with them and Kastian was an absolute nightmare. “Sorry, but I’ll have to pass tonight. I’m still so tired from the ceremony and everything.”

Cadhla gave me an understanding pat on the back. “I get it. Well, we’ll miss you. And don’t worry, there’ll be plenty more parties where that came from.”

“Great,” I deadpanned.

They scuttled off with a bunch of other young Fae, all of them eager to keep the celebration going. Meanwhile, the only thing I wanted was to go back to my room and nurse my recent wounds. I wouldn’t mind getting to sleep a little early, either. I was so drained that it was getting harder to think straight.

I couldn’t believe how fast this was moving. A few days ago, I’d been a firm supporter of *not* going through with the marriage. I still didn’t *want* to, but I’d agreed for the sake of the Fae. Still, even after agreeing to it, I thought I’d have at least some time to process it.

But no, the Fae never did anything slow it seemed. I’d already done some kind of blood bond with a manipulative, cocky Dark Fae. On top of that, Xavier and Greyson must hate me, and if they don’t, their trust is hanging by a thread. And that was because of *me*, nothing else.

How the hell did it get to this point?

Suddenly, as if hearing my inner turmoil, Hera appeared at my side and offered me a glass of water. I drank it but stumbled as I went to set down the empty glass.

“Oh, Caliana, you look so worn out. Could be that the spell took a lot out of you.”

“Yes, maybe,” I said. There were a million reasons that I was so tired I could barely walk, and I wasn’t in the mood to discuss them with her. I just wanted to be alone.

“Go back to your room, and I’ll send you some food. You need to keep your strength up. You have a long couple of days ahead of you.”

A pit formed in my stomach at the thought of the other wedding festivities I might have to deal with, including the wedding itself, but I managed a smile anyway. “Thank you, Grandma. See you in the morning.”

Without waiting for her—or anyone else—to say another word, I made my escape.

*I wonder if I should have one of the Fae maids draw me a bath. Could be nice to soak and relax.*

But I decided against that. I was desperate to steal a few moments all to myself. Besides, I was so tired that I would probably fall asleep in the bath immediately.

I hurried up to my room, keeping my head down so I didn’t invite any more questions, well wishes, or conversation. I slipped inside and closed the door firmly behind me. I let out a breath, excited to finally be alone.

I heard a shuffle of movement and spun around in surprise. “Greyson! You scared me! I thought you’d left the keep.”

“I’m sorry, didn’t mean to,” he said.

“It’s fine. I’m just so on edge after that ceremony. I thought you were another councilperson waiting in the wings to congratulate me,” I said, only half joking. I’d spoken to so many of them—more than I even knew existed—that I wouldn’t have been surprised to find one lying in wait in my bedroom.

“I’m sorry, I know all that was rough on you, having to talk to all those people and pretend this is something you want,” he said. “I tried to come, but they wouldn’t let me inside.”

I nodded. “It’s okay. It was…difficult,” I said. I eyed my bed, wanting nothing more than to jump in and tunnel under the covers. I was happy to see Greyson—I always was—but I was so tired that resting was about all I could think about. Part of me was selfishly glad he hadn’t seen the ceremony. I wished I could make him feel better about the whole thing, but I knew it wasn’t that easy.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you since the ceremony was over, but I didn’t want to bother you—you were already so busy with all your Fae duties—so I decided to sneak here to wait for you.”

“I’m exhausted, Greyson. Do you think we can talk later?”

Xavier and Greyson were both so attuned to my needs, and I always appreciated their presence and concerns, but this was one of those times that it would have been nice just to come to my room and clear my head all by myself.

“Are you still hurt from the kidnapping?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head, but my denial was ruined when I winced while trying to reach around to unbutton my dress.

“Here, let me help you.”

I started to wave him away but thought better of it. I was tired, and it would be nice to have someone help me out of my clothes.

Greyson slowly unbuttoned the dress, his fingers brushing along my skin. I closed my eyes and sighed, liking the sensation of his fingers dancing across my tired flesh. The contact made shivers run up and down my spine, and I leaned into him, realizing I needed this as much as I needed sleep.

When he was done unfastening the buttons, I stripped down to my slip and turned around to see Greyson staring at me with hungry eyes. Part of me wanted to leap into his arms and kiss him…maybe even do more than that…but that wasn’t what we needed right now. Besides, I was too tired to do any leaping—or anything else that required any exertion.

I moved past him and slipped into my robe. “I’m guessing you’re pretty tired from your day too. After all, you spent the day searching the wilds for Clarence and the others. Maybe you should go get something to eat and get some rest yourself. I’m sure I’ll be ready to talk tomorrow.”

Greyson shook his head. “No, I think I need to stick close to you right now. With how the council keeps springing things on you, I don’t trust them at all—not that I ever really did. Xavier and I talked about it and decided we have to keep a closer eye on you. For all we know, someone else is just waiting for the right time to hurt or kidnap you.”

“I have the protection of my grandmother and everyone on the Light Fae council,” I said around a yawn. “They know I’m the only one who can bring true peace.”

“That can’t be true. There’s another way out of this, Cali. I know it. I won’t let you be used as a political pawn. This isn’t right—”

“Greyson, that’s not something you need to be worrying about right now.”

Greyson looked shocked, hurt. “What do you mean, Cali? How can I not worry about you? You may be blood bound to Kastian now because of that stupid ceremony, but that doesn’t change anything between us. You’re my *mate*, and there’s no way I’m going to stand by and watch you marry that Fae asshole.”

“That’s exactly my point, Greyson. Mate or not, I’ve now agreed to marry another man. I know how much that must hurt you. I don’t want you to have to stand by and watch it happen—I couldn’t bear it.”

“Cali, I don’t get where you’re going with this. What are you saying?”

I looked up at him, knowing this was one of the hardest things I would ever have to say. “Maybe you should go home, Greyson. Without me.”

**Episode 5410**

Greyson stood frozen in front of me, his mouth open in shock. “*What?* How can you ask me to leave you? Your life is in danger, Caliana. There’s no way I’m just going to go back home and leave you here all on your own.”

Everything was catching up to me, and I felt like I was about to cry. This was all just too much.

“Greyson, every time I drag you into one of my problems, you get hurt. You were taken by Cenwyn and forced to fight! You almost had to kill Rishika! I won’t risk you! I want you to leave. This is my fight now. I’m the one who agreed to marry Kastian.”

Greyson crossed the space between us and took my hands in his. “Whatever battles you have ahead of you, Cali, I’ll be right there beside you to fight them, too. You’re my mate, and no matter what, I’ll love you forever. And that means I’m not leaving you. My love for you isn’t just something I can forget.”

“But, Greyson, this was my decision, and I’m willing to deal with the consequences. The Fae council truly know that without me, any chance at peace will fall apart. They have an incentive to protect me against anyone who doesn’t agree with what I’m doing. That means if you leave, you won’t have to worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Cali, I’ve already told you I’m not leaving, so drop it. We’ll get through this together. We can use my militia. There’s got to be a way that they can help free you somehow. The Fae will listen to me if their lives are on the line.”

“It’s too late now, don’t you get it? The conjunctio has sealed my fate. I’ve got to marry Kastian. I know enough about Fae promises to understand just how strong that spell was. I’m not about to toy with something that could blow up in all our faces.”

I turned away from him, suddenly finding it hard to see all that pain and sadness on his face.

“I can feel it in me, Greyson. The moment Kastian’s blood joined with mine, something changed. There’s a threat of pain—or worse—if I don’t keep the promise. It’s done, okay? There’s nothing you or anyone else can do to reverse things.”

“Fuck the Fae and their magic!” Greyson growled. “I hate that they’re doing this to you. I won’t let it continue.”

“It may not be fair, Greyson, but remember, I’m Fae too. I walked into this with my eyes wide open. No one is forcing me to marry Kastian. It’s not the decision any of you wanted me to make, but it was *my* decision to make.”

“But you only walked into it because the Fae have made you believe there’s no other way. I spoke to Artemis about the conjunctio, and she compared its power to the *due destini*. Maybe there’s some way we can use the power of the *due destini* to break what the conjunctio has set in motion.”

“Greyson, do you really think it makes sense to intwine two volatile pieces of magic? Magic that can kill us if we don’t treat it with respect?”

“I think the *due destini* is just the right amount of power to undo the conjunctio, Cali. The *due destini* has brought us so much pain, doesn’t it owe us some help now?”

*He doesn’t get it. He’s grasping at straws. Why won’t anyone pay attention to the fact that I’ve made these choices every step of the way? I decided to marry Kastian, and I decided to go through with the conjunctio. No one forced my hand.*

“Greyson, magic doesn’t care if we’re hurting or not. And I’m so sorry that I’m hurting you. This isn’t about you—it’s about me doing what I can to help my people. I know you forget because I’m so immersed in the human world and so immersed in your world and the pack house and the werewolf way of life, but I’m Fae. I’m doing what I have to do as a Fae.”

“But, love…”

I’d never seen Greyson look so helpless before. I kissed him softly, the only thing I could think to do that might wipe away even some of his pain. I moved to pull away, but Greyson kept his arms around me and pulled me in closer so I was pressed against him.

I kissed him again, deeper this time, pouring every ounce of love I felt into the kiss. I knew it might be a mistake, but I was overwhelmed by my love for Greyson in that moment, and nothing else mattered.

I realized I was already mourning losing him because I knew my marriage to Kastian would change everything.

If this was all we were going to get, if this was our last moment to enjoy each other, then I was going to take it.

I opened my robe and let it drop to the floor. Greyson pulled away and watched as I slid the straps of my slip down and over my shoulders and let it drop to the floor. I stood naked before him, my exhaustion at bay, and my mind on nothing but Greyson.

“I can’t let you go, love,” Greyson said, his eyes taking a slow lap from my feet and dragging all the way up until he was looking me in the eyes. “Please don’t do this. Help me figure out a way to fix this. Help me find another way to bring the Fae peace other than you marrying Kastian.”

I pressed a finger to his lips to quiet him and then kissed him again. My hands went to work undressing him, and I took my time, relishing the way his skin felt against my fingertips, enjoying the tautness of his muscles and inhaling his scent, committing it all to memory. I loved how burning hot he was, his werewolf heat radiating against my skin, the heat intensifying once he was completely naked and pressed against me.

I reached down between us and found him hard and insistent in my hand. I stroked him slowly, still kissing him, still caressing him. He fell back onto the bed, and I crawled on top of him, a dull ache inside of me pushing me to take control and show him that even though I was about to marry another man, my feelings for him and my attraction to him hadn’t dulled even a little.

I straddled him and sat up, ran my hands over his chest, caressed his face, and ran my fingers through his hair. He was watching my every move, love and adoration shining in his eyes. And that familiar hunger was there too—a clear indication that despite how he felt about the choices I’d made, he still wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Wanting to feel him inside of me, needing it, I rose to my knees and notched him at my opening, and then, slowly, I lowered, his erection pressing against my wetness before finally breaking through and pushing inside.

“Greyson,” I breathed, shocks of pleasure running through me. I rolled my hips, enjoying the sensation of Greyson pulsing in my depths.

“Just like that, love,” Greyson groaned.

He grabbed my hips, taking back control and slowly guiding my hips up and down his shaft. He closed his eyes and licked his lips, enjoying me just the way he always had. A deep longing welled inside of me, and I started feeling like this might truly be the last time I would get to make love to him.

I held back the sadness, choosing instead to enjoy this moment. I’d made the decision to marry another man for the good of Fae everywhere, and I had to hold onto that so I didn’t slip into misery and regret.

This was goodbye, and I knew that, but I also wanted this to be a happy moment between us—a reminder of why we loved each other so much.

Greyson pulled me down, and our lips connected, crashed together as our lovemaking grew faster, more feverish. Greyson’s hips began jerking up hard to meet mine until my entire body was rolling and jolting on top of his.

I couldn’t catch my breath, but I wasn’t thinking about that. All I cared about was bringing Greyson pleasure, watching him climax, and finding my own pleasure after that. It would be yet another thing to commit to memory and reminisce about on the nights when he wasn’t lying beside me.

“Fuck, Cali, you feel so good.”

I bucked my hips against his, rising and falling fast on his rigid shaft until he was sweating and moaning and reaching up to palm and squeeze my breasts, my entire body vibrating as his hips rocked up from the bed to slam into me. His hands reached for my face and pulled me down into another fierce, ferocious kiss that we didn’t break.

And even then, I could tell we weren’t anywhere near finished.

# **Episode 5411**

**Artemis**

I raised a brow at Kastian. Had he really come to corner me about this? “I didn’t give you an answer because your suggestion was so foolish it’s not worth thinking about.” I tried to move past him, but he stepped in my path.

“What’s so foolish about it?” he pressed.

“For starters, it would never work out.”

“Says who?”

I ground my teeth together. “Says me. And anyone with half an ounce of sense.” I’d hoped that straight up insulting his intelligence would send him scampering away, but I should’ve known better. Kastian was nothing if not persistent when it served him.

I brushed past him, but, again, he got in my way. *Maybe I’ll have to teach him what happens to people who get in my way…*

“Move!” I snapped.

“It was an honest suggestion,” he said, holding his hands up in front of him. “It’s not ideal, of course, but I think we’d both like it better than the current situation, don’t you agree?”

I narrowed my eyes. He was saying all the right things, but that meant nothing. Every Fae alive knew from the cradle how to weave together a persuasive phrase. I searched his face for the smallest sign of trickery, but he looked genuine.

*That’s probably an act too.*

I shook my head. “There are far too many mysteries around you for me to ever trust you.”

Kastian shrugged. “Fine, I will give you one minute, and you can ask me anything, and I will tell you the full and honest truth. No tricks.”

It was an intriguing proposition. And so, so tempting. Which, of course, was probably why he’d even offered it in the first place.

*Why is every conversation with him a game of chess? Why can’t he just leave me alone? It’s exhausting. And annoying.* There were a hundred ways I’d rather be spending my time, and besides, was there even anything he *could* say that would make me agree to his plan?

I shook my head again, crossing my arms over my chest. “Nice try, but any man who could abandon a woman who is pregnant with his child is not someone I can trust. Ever. Under any circumstances.”

No, I could never trust Kastian because anyone who was that deeply selfish—so selfish that they’d abandon their own child to this cruel world—could never be counted on when things got hard. It said more about his character than anything else. Whatever it was he wanted, I wouldn’t give it to him.

Kastian frowned, looking at me thoughtfully, like he could see inside my mind. Like he was privy to all my deepest, darkest insecurities. “Those maids knew they could never have a life by my side,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “They knew the limitations of what I could offer them when they got involved with me, and I never led them to believe otherwise. They knew their children would always be looked down upon as the bastards of a noble, that my own family would never accept them and would likely even resent their existence.

“I did what I did to protect those children—*my* children—from that hatred. And, Ari, let’s be clear: hatred would be the best thing my family could offer them. I wouldn’t put it past certain members of my family to go so far as to kill any of my illegitimate offspring, to ‘prune the family tree,’ so to speak. With all of that against them, don’t you agree that those children will be happier growing up without the burden of knowing who their father is?”

“Don’t call me that,” I said reflexively, though it lacked any heat. My mind was whirring with everything he’d said. It all made sense. I knew the Fae world to be cruel to orphans, but the only reason I’d been orphaned in the first place was because of who my parents were. Family ties were dangerous things in this world, and Kastian’s logic wasn’t wrong.

*Could he actually be telling the truth?* I certainly wouldn’t put it past some of the noble families to kill a child if it threatened their power or status. My own father was allegedly killed as part of a power ploy—and I was ripped away from my mother at birth. I knew how cruel the Fae could be, there was no one better. So I couldn’t quite believe that someone as selfish as Kastian was actually capable of *caring* for his unborn children in the first place.

Still, I couldn’t see any duplicity in his face. I sighed. “Fine, I will take you at your word about that. It’s a moot point anyway. The maids are all alive, so congratulations—you’re not a serial killer. You’ve passed the test of not being a complete sociopathic scumbag.”

His lips quirked into a little grin. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Ari. What a lovely compliment.”

“Don’t ‘Ari’ me.” I scowled. “There’s only one person who can call me that, and we both know it isn’t you.” I turned on my heel to storm away—if he wanted to keep me here, he’d have to catch me—but stopped short when I saw someone darting toward the back courtyard. My heart tripped over itself.

It was Rishika. She was carrying a little bundle of food and laughing with Tabitha as they hurried to sneak back out of the keep.

*So Rishika trusts Tabitha. Just not me.* I tried to shake the thought off. I had to keep perspective, I knew that.

Kastian sidled up to me. “I’m sorry about that,” he said, nodding toward Rishika just as she and Tabitha disappeared.

I shrugged. “It’s fine.”

It didn’t sound even the least bit convincing.

He put a hand on my shoulder. “It’s not fine. You don’t have to try to hide it. And I understand that I’m not the one you want by your side when you’re feeling this way, but I truly do hope you don’t hurt for too long, for what it’s worth. I’m not a monster, Ari.”

I scoffed but didn’t say anything.

His hand dropped from my shoulder as he took a step back. “I’ll leave you alone as that’s clearly what you want right now.”

He turned and started walking away, and I watched him go with no small amount of shock. Not that he was leaving, though I was somewhat surprised that he wasn’t still haranguing me about his proposition. No, what was shocking was how *kind* he’d been.

After my identity as Kadmos’s heir had been revealed, I’d assumed Kastian would never have so much as a polite gesture for me ever again. And that moment of empathy, it just seemed so uncharacteristic for him. And yet, it felt like he’d really meant it?

*Is he just putting on an act to get me to agree to his plan? Or is he really just being a nice guy?*

I shook myself. *It doesn’t matter. I’ll never go along with any plan he comes up with.* Maybe Kastian didn’t go so far as to blight his own children’s futures, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a sneaky, self-serving, overly ambitious noble. I’d take the Kollector any day over someone like Kastian. At least with the Kollector, you always knew where you stood, and he never tried to make you believe he was anything but a monster.

Kastian, on the other hand, had the potential to be more dangerous to me than the Kollector ever was.

I hurried back to my room. Between Kastian messing with my head and this ongoing battle with Rishika’s memory, I needed to regroup. I needed alone time.

I stepped into my room with a sigh—and found my grandmother sitting at the bedside table waiting for me.

Instantly, my mental guards went back up. *So much for alone time.*

“Hera? What are you doing here?”

“I wondered if we could call a truce to any animosity that has built between us the last few days,” she said stiffly.

I raised an eyebrow. “You mean trying to kick me out of Briarkeep?”

“Yes that,” Hera said, waving a hand. “I’m just…I’m worried for Cali. I never wanted this marriage to actually come to fruition. I was hoping that getting both councils in one place would spur them on to find another path to peace. But they focused so wholly on the idea of a marriage treaty and nothing else, despite all of my attempts to convince them otherwise.”

I cautiously took a seat across from her. Hera and I never had the relationship she seemed to have with Cali, despite the fact that I was just as much her granddaughter as Cali was. But we both loved my sister—that was one thing we could agree on. And maybe that was all that mattered.

“Is this really the only way toward peace?” I asked.

She nodded. “There’s no going back, not for Cali. Not for any of us. All either of us can do is be by Cali’s side to support her in her role.”

“What does that mean?”

Hera looked grave. “Artemis, will you commit to staying in the Fae world for as long as it takes to help Cali with her marriage?”

# **Episode 5412**

**Greyson**

I kissed Cali like we’d been separated for months. There was a desperation that drove her movements as her hips worked against mine, our bodies moving in tandem. Her hands slid over my skin like she was trying to memorize every inch of me.

“Love,” I murmured, breaking away from her mouth. “Slow down. We’ve got all night. There’s no need to rush.”

She responded by pulling me in for another deep kiss, her teeth nipping at my lips in a challenge. I tried to rein in my hunger for her—something that was always a struggle—but it was like she was trying to push me to that same place of hungry desperation she seemed to be in. Her hips rolled against mine; her kisses were demanding. One hand moved up to my hair, tugging it a little as she kissed me, and the other slid down to my ass, pushing me into her even harder.

And fuck if this passionate, dominant side of Cali wasn’t doing it for me. If she wanted fast and hungry, my mate would get what she wanted—and so much more.

I pulled out of her and broke away from her mouth.

“Greys—oh!” Her whine turned into a gasp when I flipped her onto her belly and pulled her up by her hips. I slid back inside her, the angle deeper now, each thrust pushing a desperate cry from her lips. The filthy sounds she was making were enough to drive me over the edge all on their own, much less combined with the feeling of her wrapped tight around me and the sight of her bent over for me, but I held myself back.

I wasn’t ready for this to be over.

I slowed my thrusts just long enough to grip her arms and pull her upright so her back was against my sweat-slicked chest. I held her there with one arm wrapped around her chest. Her head fell back against my shoulder, and she moaned as I picked up the pace again, her hands clutching my arm, her nails biting into my skin.

My free hand snaked down, down, down to the apex of her thighs and found her swollen clit. She was so wet for me it was intoxicating. Slowly, I traced her clit with my finger. Her body clenched around me.

She moaned, canting her hips into my hand—then rocking back onto my cock. “*Greyson*.”

Fuck. She was insatiable, totally shameless in her pursuit of pleasure. I wasn’t going to be able to hold back much longer. I kissed her hairline, my hand working her clit in time with my hips thrusting into her. Each of her cries grew in pitch, got breathier, as her walls tightened around me.

“Don’t hold back, love,” I said. “Come for me.”

With one hand, I cupped her breast, twisting her nipple between my fingers as my other hand continued to circle her clit. I didn’t stop—I kept chasing our pleasure, thrusting hard into her. Then she was falling over the edge. The blissed-out way she screamed my name, combined with her inner muscles rippling around me, pulled me over the edge with her.

After, we collapsed onto her bed in a heap of tangled limbs, our chests rising and falling as we tried to catch our breath. Cali just nuzzled into my side, her breathing slowing. It seemed she still couldn’t get enough of me.

I glanced at the window. The sun’s dying light casted Cali’s room in an orange glow, and regret ached in my chest. Our time, short as it had been, was already up. Not that I’d ever be content with any amount of time with Cali. Anything short of forever would never be enough.

“I should leave the keep before it gets dark,” I murmured into her hair. “There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you here alone. You know that, right?”

She snuggled into me, tightening her arms around my waist. “I know, but I don’t want you to leave the keep either.”

I sighed, savoring the feeling of her pressed against my chest. “I know. I don’t want to.” I thought through the variables—could I get away with staying the night and sneaking out in the morning? I could be out before sunrise.

But even as I thought through a way to keep me here at Cali’s side where I belonged, I knew it wouldn’t work. The keep would be bustling in the morning. Certainly the servants, if not the nobles. And the servants were up long before sunrise.

“I’m sorry.” I kissed her forehead. “I’ll come back when I can, love.”

“Spoilsport,” she murmured sleepily.

I slipped out of her arms and started pulling on my clothes. When I turned back to look at her, she was already dozing off. She hadn’t even been able to stay awake long enough to send me off. She had to be exhausted after everything that had happened. I sighed. I hated that she was in this position. That she had so much resting on her shoulders when she should be back home in Oregon, with her pack and worrying about nothing more serious than her next crew race and what to wear to Lucian and Elle’s wedding. It was for the best that I was leaving now. She needed to rest.

I kissed her forehead one last time and crept out of her room. The hallways were mostly empty, thankfully. Most of the Fae were probably down in the banquet hall, eating supper or serving it. Either way, I wasn’t going to press my luck. I hurried out the back door of the keep and onto the surrounding grounds.

When I got back to the campsite, I found Tabitha, Adair, Marius, and Rishika eating together. A small blanket with bread, cheeses, fruits, and nuts was laid out in front of them, along with a bottle of what looked like wine that they were passing around.

“Where did you guys get that?” I asked.

Tabitha and Rishika exchanged a grin before turning to me.

“We have a contact in the kitchens who’s willing to set aside some food for us if we’re discreet,” Tabitha explained.

Adair scowled as he plucked a grape from its stem. “I don’t understand why the two of you insist on sneaking in and out of the keep like this. I could just as easily hunt for our dinner—without putting you two in danger.”

Tabitha shrugged. “We all have our methods of survival in this tough world.” She kissed Adair on the cheek, erasing the frown from his face. “Besides, it’s good for reconnaissance too.”

“Reconnaissance?” I asked.

She nodded. “The servants gossip amongst each other, and if you take the time to listen, you know, *discreetly*, you can put together a pretty good picture of what’s going on. Like tonight, there was a lot of chatter in the kitchen about a conjunctivitis spell or something?”

Rishika frowned. “Yeah, it sounds gross. That’s a hard pass from me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not *conjunctivitis*. It’s *conjunctio*,” I said. “The ceremony took place earlier. The council pressured her into it. They sort of sprung it on her, and Cali felt she had no choice but to go through with it.”

Adair and Marius shared a solemn look, and my stomach twisted. What the hell did they know that I didn’t?

“Um, what was that?” Tabitha asked.

Adair blew out a breath. “I didn’t think they would really do it. It’s just as binding as a Fae promise, if not more so, because Fae promises don’t tend to curse an entire lineage. And now that it’s enacted, there’s no turning back.”

My heart sank. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe Cali, but all this time I’d hoped there was some solution to this spell. Some way for us to escape this damned world and go back home—together—without suffering any more than we already had. And hearing Adair say it was hopeless so plainly, it nearly knocked the air out of me. It seemed there really was no solution to this spell. Not that I’d ever accept that. Cali’s words from earlier, her suggestion that I go back to the human world without her, still rang in my ears.

I would die before I’d leave my mate here alone to live the rest of her life married to some Fae noble dipshit. Cali deserved so much better than the role she was willing to pay for her Fae heritage. And, as far as I was concerned, her so-called people here in the Fae world could never even hope to deserve someone like her.

“Greyson?”

I turned, ready for a fight. “What the hell? Who’s out there?”

Clarence popped out from the bushes.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, exasperated. “You should be hiding out with the others. You know what will happen if we get caught!”

“I was hiding out, but I was hoping to find you. We have a problem. One of the fighters snuck off to get revenge against Cenwyn on their own.”

**Episode 5413**

Everything was perfect.

I stood on the front porch of the pack house as the evening sun cast us in its warm rays. In the distance I could hear Lola arguing with Torin and Jay mediating between them, so, in other words, everything was normal. I tuned the others out, focusing on Greyson’s arms wrapped around me. He tilted my head up to his, kissing me like we had all the time in the world. Like he’d take as long as necessary to memorize the taste of my mouth, the shape of my lips on his. We had nothing else to do all day long—except be with each other.

I sank into his embrace, savoring the feeling of his lips on mine, of his strong arms around me. Warmth and safety and belonging. That was how Greyson made me feel. Like I was the most important person in the universe. Like there was nowhere else I was meant to be—

*Bang, bang, bang!*

“Miss Wrenthorn!”

Greyson pulled back, looking around with creased brows. “What was that?”

“Nothing.” I cupped his face, pulling him in for another kiss. “Just ignore it.”

His lips grazed mine, and I relaxed again into our kiss. Everything was fine. It was better than fine. Perfect, even. And nothing was going to mess that—

“Lady Caliana! Please! We have a message for you!”

I lurched upright with a gasp, my chest heaving, my eyes blearily darting around my room…at the keep.

*Oh, that’s right.* All the warmth and joy and contentment inside me snuffed out. *I’m at Briarkeep.*

I looked at the empty space in my bed that still had Greyson’s shape. I shivered, clutching my blankets tighter around me. *And Greyson can’t be here. He left already.*

The banging that had woken me continued, and with a deep sigh, I wrapped myself in my robe before answering the door.

A messenger stood on my doorstep, and I frowned. “What do you need?”

“I’ve got an invitation for you, milady.” The messenger held out a cream-colored enveloped sealed shut with wax.

“What now?” I muttered as I accepted the envelope. “Another banquet? Do you guys need a pint of blood this time?”

I ripped open the envelope, not bothering with the seal. The invitation wasn’t from the council or my grandmother. It was from Kastian. An invitation to meet him for tea.

The messenger bowed. “If I may be so bold, milady, Lord Kastian requested you hurry.”

“The message has been received. Thank you.” I stepped back and shut the door in the messenger’s face. I had less than zero intention of hurrying. If Kastian thought I would be at his beck and call just because we were supposed to be married soon, he had another thing coming.

I took my sweet time washing up, getting dressed, and choosing an outfit for the day. My grandmother’s servants had ensured I had a month’s worth of unique dresses for a variety of occasions, but I was sick of the formal gowns everyone had been picking out for me. And god, did I miss my denim jeans.

I opted for a simple tunic and some leggings—the Fae world version of the kind of casual way I would’ve dressed if I were back home in the human world. If Kastian and I really did end up getting married, he’d have to get used to the real Cali.

And the real Cali didn’t wear corsets seven days a week.

By the time I finally made it to the small drawing room Kastian had invited me to, more than two hours had passed. He was sitting on a couch, sipping tea and looking over a stack of papers.

“Um, hi,” I said as I walked in.

He looked up with a bright smile, seemingly not at all upset that I’d kept him waiting for so long. That only made me more nervous. What was his angle?

“Ah! My lovely bride-to-be! Would you like some tea?”

I eyed the empty cup sitting next to the teapot on the table. “Last time I drank tea with you, someone tried to poison us.”

He laughed. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ve hired a taster. This tea is perfectly safe!”

I blinked. *So someone* else *will drop dead the next time someone tries to poison Kastian. Great.*

I took a seat at the edge of the couch but didn’t accept the tea. “What is this all about?”

“The wedding, of course!” If possible, his grin only brightened. “We have much to prepare.”

Kastian clapped his hands, and a dozen Fae servants rushed in holding different flower arrangements, cardstock, linen samples, and even some small plates with what looked like different kinds of cake.

I just stared for a moment, taking in the crush of people and choices in front of me. *It’s really happening. Oh my god. It’s really happening.* I cleared my throat, turning my attention back to Kastian. “Um, why all of this so fast?”

“Well, both councils don’t want to waste any time, so we will have to squeeze quite a lot of wedding prep into a very short period of time. Good thing you have me!” Another megawatt smile. “I’m amazing at throwing parties.”

“Right.” I glanced at the dizzying array of choices, and each one of them suddenly felt like a weight around my neck. “I don’t care what the wedding looks like.”

That seemed to spark some surprise among the servants, and Kastian leaned in and said quietly, “I know you’re still conflicted about the marriage. But it’s going to be your only wedding. It might as well be amazing, right?”

His words hit me like a punch to the stomach. All the air stuttered out of my lungs. *He’s right. I won’t ever be with anyone else after I marry him. This is it. My one wedding.*

All my dreams of a future with Xavier and Greyson—they were going up in smoke right before my eyes.

*This is my life now. My future. My forever.*

Tears blurred my vision, and I blinked hard to clear them.

“Oh, shit.” Kastian patted my arm. “I must have said something wrong. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I shook my head, wiping my eyes. “It’s not you. Not really. It’s just…everything else.”

“We’re done for now. Thank you,” Kastian said to the servants, waving them away. They all shuffled out, and I found I could breathe a little easier without them.

“Why don’t I take care of the arrangements for now?” Kastian suggested. “You should go conserve your energy.”

Numbly, I nodded and left the room without another word. I headed back to my bedroom, desperate to crawl under my blankets and disappear, but before I could get far, my grandmother stepped into my path.

“Caliana, there you are! I was just looking for you, but you weren’t in your room. Did something happen?” she asked, frowning. My misery must’ve been written all over my face.

“Kastian wanted to meet to discuss the wedding plans.”

“Oh.” Her features smoothed into something resolute. “Good. So do I.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Come with me.” She led me out to a small courtyard where a variety of training equipment had been set up. I looked around. “Is this where the guards train or something?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s where you’ll be training.”

“Training for what?”

“You will have to prove your strength in front of the witnesses at the wedding ceremony.”

I blinked. None of this made sense. Witnesses? A test of strength? “Wait, so it’s not just going to be us and the council members?”

“Unfortunately not. The more powerful Fae families will not acknowledge the wedding unless they’re allowed to be here to witness it,” she explained. “There will be guests attending the wedding through a small, controlled opening in the briar wall. We’ll post guards, of course, to increase security, but as part of the ceremony, you will need to impress our guests with your power.”

I sighed, my shoulders hunching forward. This was beyond ridiculous. I’d only come out here to help my sister, and now I’d gotten looped into some desperate bid for peace and was marrying some guy I hardly knew. And the Fae nobility *still* wanted me to prove myself to them? “Is it not enough that I’m marrying this guy? Why do I have to prove anything to anyone?”

“Cali—”

I cut her off. “Did they require this demonstration for my mom and Kadmos?”

Hera frowned again. “No, it’s a new stipulation for trying a marriage treaty.”

“So they know whether I’m worthy or not?”

My grandmother didn’t say anything. Of course. Did they not think I was powerful because I was half human? It was so insulting I didn’t know what to do. Here I was bending to their rules and everything they were imposing on me, and they still wanted me to prove myself.

It seemed that I always had to prove myself—in the human world, in the werewolf world, and in the Fae world. This was just another roadblock, exactly like the others.

*If they want to think I’m frail and incapable, fine. Let them. But I shouldn’t have to prove a damn thing to anyone…*

After a moment, I spoke instead. “What exactly is going to happen if I don’t marry Kastian?”

“Death,” Hera said. “But not just yours. The entire Wrenthorn line will wither and die.”

# **Episode 5414**

**Greyson**

“What the fuck?” I snapped at Clarence. “What do you mean they left to get revenge on Cenwyn by themselves?”

Clarence paused, cocking his head to the side. “Um, I sort of thought that was self-explanatory.”

I bit back a curse. “I thought everyone was on board with waiting for the right time! That’s why they’re all here. We only get one shot at the element of surprise, and we don’t want to blow it!”

Clarence shrugged. “Kayin was on board with the plan, but he sort of got tired of waiting.”

“Clearly,” Adair snarked.

I started pacing in the small grove we’d camped out in, trying to figure out the best approach.

“This is not good,” Adair said, stating the fucking obvious. “If this guy gets to Cenwyn, it could cause an uproar.”

*Yeah, no shit. And ruin any chance we have at hitting Cenwyn and the rest of the nobles when they least expect it.* How were we going to take out Cenwyn *and* get Cali, Artemis, and Xavier out of there unscathed—and without this stupid marriage curse spell wrecking everything—if Kayin just snuck himself into the keep?

“I get that,” I gritted out, glaring at Adair. “But I can’t very well charge into the keep myself, can I?”

A wave of unexpected bitterness hit me. I was so careful about not getting caught that I’d left Cali alone when all she’d wanted was for me to stay the night, and yet this Kayin guy apparently had no compunction about putting all of the rest of us at risk for his own vendetta.

*Selfish prick. He’s not the only one Cenwyn fucked with. And now could have doomed us all.*

“For what it’s worth, Kayin is a púca,” Clarence offered.

I stopped. “What is that?”

“A shapeshifter,” Adair said.

Clarence nodded. “Kayin’s preferred form is a small cat, so at least it’s unlikely he’d be caught by anyone. I’m sure if anyone saw a little cat running around, they’d just assume it was a mouser that lived at the keep.”

“Sure,” I said, my tone dripping with sarcasm. “He’ll pass as a small cat. What happens if that small cat tries to kill Cenwyn? Do you think someone might catch on then?”

“Oh, um, yeah. Probably,” Clarence said, rubbing the back of his neck.

I shook my head and resumed my pacing. “Fuck!”

Rishika stood. “I’ve gotten pretty good at sneaking into the keep. I can go find him.”

“I’m not letting you go in there alone,” I said. Rishika had already paid a price for coming to the Fae world to help Artemis, and it had been a pretty fucking steep one. I wasn’t going to let her go in after some revenge-motivated idiot—at least, not without backup. “I’m coming with you. But we have to be quick about it.”

With that, Rishika and I headed back to the keep. I’d gotten to know the place pretty well from all of my sneaking in to see Cali, but I was surprised to see how comfortable Rishika was with the winding halls of the ancient castle as well.

It seemed like she’d spent a lot of time wandering the keep. We turned down another hallway and stopped short at the rhythmic clinking sound coming from around the corner. I knew that sound all too well. It was the guards patrolling the halls.

My eyes met Rishika’s, and she grabbed my arm. “This way,” she whispered.

She pulled down a torch set into the wall, and the entire wall panel clicked open and slid back, revealing a passageway. She pulled me into the small passage, and the panel slid back into place just as the clinking sounds of the guards moved closer. Close enough that if we’d still been standing in the hallway, they definitely would’ve seen us.

“How did you know about the torch?” I asked once the guards had moved on.

She shrugged. “My and Tabitha’s contact is a servant, remember? Nobody knows their way around like the servants.”

My brows rose. *She and Tabitha weren’t kidding about making friends with the servants.*

“In that case, lead the way,” I said.

With Rishika’s guidance, the journey to Cenwyn’s room was a smooth one. We didn’t encounter any servants, guards, or nobles. The keep seemed just as quiet as it had been when I’d snuck out of Cali’s room.

When we reached Cenwyn’s room, we found the door locked from the inside.

“Maybe Kayin hasn’t made it up here yet?” I asked.

As soon as the words left my mouth, a crash sounded from inside the room, and I knew that, as usual, I was a fucking idiot to even hope that things might be easy.

“Goddamn it,” I muttered. I shifted and slammed into the door, knocking it askew on its hinges. Thousand-year-old doors had nothing on an Alpha werewolf.

Inside, the room was a complete mess. It looked like the place had been ransacked by thieves. A man was racing around the large space, smashing everything in sight.

“You ruined my life!” Kayin screeched as he raised an ancient-looking vase over his head. He sent it crashing to the floor before upending the side table it had been resting on. “You killed my brother! You made him fight to the death! And you almost killed me too! You fucking perverse son of a bitch!”

“Kayin!” I whisper-yelled. I didn’t know why I was even bothering trying to be quiet. He clearly wasn’t worried about it. I rushed over and caught his arm as he knocked a stack of papers off Cenwyn’s desk. “You need to stop! You’re going to compromise all of us!”

“You think I care about any of that? What’s he going to do to me? I have nothing left to lose!”

My lips curled back in a snarl. “Then think about someone else for a fucking change, huh? Some of us still have something to fight for!”

Rishika examined the open window before glancing back at me. “This must be how he got in. He snuck in as a cat.”

I nodded, then turned back to Kayin. “Listen, I get that you’re angry. But this isn’t the way to get justice for yourself or your brother. I promise we’ll make Cenwyn pay for what he’s done and everything he took from us, but we have to be smart about it. He’s too connected and too powerful. We can’t just be running around ruining his shit and making wild attempts to assassinate him. At best, you’ll end up dead. At worst, you’ll be tortured into giving up the rest of us and thrown back in the fight rings. Is that what you want?”

I half-expected Kayin to argue some more, but instead he burst into tears and all but collapsed against me. I caught him before he could crumple to the ground. I was the only thing keeping him upright.

I glanced at Rishika as Kayin sobbed into my chest. “A little help?”

She smirked. “Seems like you’ve got it handled.” She riffled through the papers scattered on the desk and on the ground around it. “Hey, some of these documents look important. Maybe there will be evidence of the fights or his black-market deals.”

I eased Kayin off of me and patted his arm before turning back to Rishika. “Grab as much as you can. We need to get the hell out of here.”

Just then, footsteps sounded outside the door and a voice shouted, “Hey! What the hell happened to the door?”

“We have to get out of here—now!” I snapped. “Kayin, shift back into a cat and go out the way you came in.” I scanned the room. “Rishika, we’ll take the back door out of the suite.” If the rooms were laid out anything like Cali’s were, we could get back out into the hallway without having to fight our way past the broken door.

Rishika nodded and gathered as many papers as she could fit into her arms before we raced to the other side of the suite. A guard rushed in just as we reached the back door.

“Hey!” the guard shouted, pointing at us. “Trespassers! Get them!”

Rishika and I ran like hell through the keep, darting down hallways, ducking into service corridors, and sprinting through the gate onto the grounds before hiding out in the tall grass of a nearby bog. The guards rushed past us completely, and we waited a while before emerging and carefully making our way back to the campsite.

When we got back, Kayin and Clarence were talking quietly near the tree line. Clarence pulled a sobbing Kayin in for a hug.

“Phew! You two smell awful!”

I turned to Marius, who was fanning the air in front of his nose.

“Yeah, well, you try hiding in a bog for ten minutes and see how you like it,” I growled.

Rishika pulled the bundle of papers out of her shirt where she’d stuffed them for safekeeping. She grimaced. “Sorry, I think I got bog water on them.”

“I’ll help you lay them out to dry,” Tabitha offered.

“Did the guards identify either of you?” Adair asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe, but what can they do to me? I’ve already been Cenwyn’s dog once and gotten free.”

“Fair point,” he said. “It’s possible that Cenwyn might not even report it since it could expose the underhanded stuff he’s been doing.”

“Um, guys?” Tabitha called out. “I think you should see this.” She held up a damp piece of paper. “It looks like Cenwyn is going to try to sabotage the wedding.”

# **Episode 5415**

My jaw dropped. “Wait, what?” *Did Hera just say our entire bloodline will* die *if I don’t go through with this wedding? Please tell me that’s an exaggeration!* “Grandma, what are you talking about?”

She sighed. “I understand you’re under a lot of pressure right now, and I certainly don’t want to give you another thing to worry about, but I do think it’s important for you to understand what’s at stake here. The last time a conjunctio was broken was hundreds of years ago. It’s a story that has turned into a folktale of sorts. Two noble families were joining their bloodlines and enacted the spell, but the bride was in love with a stable hand, and they ran away together before the marriage,” she explained. “Unfortunately, the conjunctio blood ceremony was already complete, and it enacted a terrible price. The bride was dead within a day. Her parents and siblings all died horrific deaths within two days. And then slowly, over the course of the next month, every cousin and distant relative slowly died, horrible, painful deaths. The entire bloodline was gone by the next full moon, Cali.”

I slowly shook my head, unable to believe what I was hearing. This was…so far beyond my worst nightmares surrounding this marriage. For a moment, I couldn’t even speak. The weight of not only peace in the Fae world was on my shoulders, but now the lives of countless relatives—including my sister, my mother, and my grandmother—were all depending on me to see this marriage through?

Finally, I managed to force the words to my lips. “So…if I break this blood bond, you, and my mom, and Artemis, and all of these Fae I’ve never even met will die. Because of me.”

Hera nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. And, it probably goes without saying, but you will obviously die too. And that’s why this wedding has to happen. Why the Wrenthorn and Haseneau bloodlines must join now. And why you must get the approval of the Fae nobles coming here to witness your nuptials. There’s no turning back, Cali.”

My mouth went dry, and for a moment, amidst the oppressive weight of what I had to do and everyone who was counting on me to do it, I felt nothing but white-hot rage. I hadn’t known about any of this. How could Hera have let me make the conjunctio promise without telling me what was at stake if I broke the pact? How could she have just let me walk into this blindly?

*And what about the other Fae nobles? What about Kastian? Adair? Hell, even Celeste. She doesn’t want this marriage to happen either. Why didn’t anyone explain what the consequences could be before I was forced to do it?*

Maybe it wouldn’t have even mattered if they did…

I’d struggled with the feeling of being trapped since I agreed to marry Kastian, but now I felt like I’d been *lured* in. Like from the moment I’d shown up in the Fae world to help Artemis, all anyone had done was look at me as the means to an end. An asset to be leveraged to the best of their ability. And now, even Hera was guilty of it.

*It’s not fair. It’s just…not fucking fair!*

I ground my teeth together. And maybe the worst part was that even though I hated this, even though I was sick with fury over it, I was going to go through with it anyway—if only to keep the Wrenthorn line alive.

“Fine.” I huffed. “What do I need to do to make sure this marriage goes forward smoothly?”

Hera cracked a weak smile. “There’s my strong granddaughter.”

I didn’t smile back. I didn’t feel strong, and I sure as hell wasn’t feeling particularly warm about my grandmother. After a beat, she schooled her expression and cleared her throat. “The nobles who are coming will demand a display of your power to ensure you’re strong enough to be the linchpin of the treaty.”

“Okay, and how do I do that?”

“I understand you can use energy magic. I think that will be the best strength to focus on. Perhaps you could create some sort of display for the witnesses with your magic?”

“A display,” I repeated flatly. It wasn’t enough that I was here, that I was marrying some guy I hardly knew. Now I had to prove myself to a bunch of spoiled Fae who couldn’t care less about me as a person, all as some kind of spectacle for their entertainment.

“Yes,” Hera said, sounding weary. I had no pity for her. “You could, for instance, shape your energy magic into a magical menagerie. I think that’d be quite a compelling show of your abilities.”

I just sighed, shaking my head. As obnoxious as it was to even be asked to debase myself and my magic like this, the kicker was that I doubted I could even pull it off if I wanted to. “I can make a shield and a sword using my magic, but I’ve never made more than two things at once and held them steady before. You’re asking for multiple, stable, moving energy projections. I can’t do that.”

“Not yet, you can’t,” she corrected me. “That’s why we’re here to practice.”

“Yeah, *we*,” I muttered.

If she heard me, she didn’t let on. “Create an energy ball.”

I could do that easily enough. I held it out in front of me for her inspection.

“Another,” she said. “Hold them both.”

I did as she asked, and then added another energy ball at her request, and then another. But as I held four glowing orbs simultaneously, the whole set wavered, like an old TV with patchy reception.

“Steady them, Caliana,” Hera said.

“I…I can’t…” I grunted with the effort. Suddenly, they all burst like bubbles. I blew out a breath and sighed.

Hera just nodded. “That was a decent start. Now, let’s go again.”

I trained with Hera for what felt like hours. Finally, I managed to hold four energy balls steadily over my head simultaneously, even though my arms wavered with the effort, and my head throbbed with every heartbeat. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d expended so much effort on my magic. My well felt beyond dry.

“Good. You can release them,” Hera said.

My arms dropped to my sides, and the orbs disappeared. I wasn’t surprised to find I was panting.

“That was a productive session,” she continued, “but you’ve got a long way to go and a short time to do so. I want you to practice this every hour, on the hour. And try to add another energy ball with each session.”

“’Kay,” I managed, stumbling out of the courtyard toward my room. I didn’t even have the energy to argue. I’d follow her advice—after all, the entire fate of the Wrenthorn line depended on me being the light Fae court’s trick pony—but in between those hourly practice sessions, I’d be lying in my bed.

I found Xavier waiting for me outside my room.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I wanted to check on you, but you weren’t here earlier.”

“Oh, I was…busy.” I waved vaguely, my arm aching with the effort. “Come in.”

As soon as I stepped into my room, I realized my mistake. The bed was still unmade from this morning. I glanced at Xavier. He had to have picked up Greyson’s smell—there was no way around it.

But he didn’t say anything about the wrinkled sheets.

“I’ve been thinking about your situation,” he said instead.

I nodded, unable to look at him. The reality of everything was hitting me again, only this time, I didn’t have Hera expecting me to keep a stiff upper lip.

“I wish none of this had happened,” he continued.

“I understand.” I sighed. “I also understand if you hate me now that I’ve made these choices that affect all of us.”

Xavier moved closer, gently taking me by the arms. Despite myself, my body responded to his touch. “I could never hate you. I’ll always love you, Cali. You know I’ve been fighting to find my way back to you… I know things between us are…complicated. And maybe I don’t even have a right to have an opinion about your choices after everything I’ve put you through and all the shit I did back in the human world. But I want you to know that I always want to be there for you.”

I shook my head, tears stinging my eyes. “I’m sorry, but you can’t be.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “You’re going to have to go back to the human world eventually, right? I mean, you’re probably staying for the wedding to support me, but I know you’ll have to go back to your real life eventually, and I understand.”

Xavier shook his head. “That’s the thing. I’ve come to a decision, and you’re not going to change my mind.”

# **Episode 5416**

**Artemis**

I was going stir-crazy. How could Hera have asked that of me? Did she really expect me to stay in the Fae world forever? I mean, assuming this marriage *did* happen—which I hadn’t yet accepted—was I supposed to just stay at Cali’s side until she was safe and happy in her political marriage to Kastian?

*Yeah, right. That’s never going to happen. Look at how well that worked out for our mother.*

Even if, by some miracle, Cali was actually happy living the rest of her life with Kastian, and they had kids together, and nobody kidnapped them like they had me, she would never be safe. I would spend the rest of *my* life trying to protect her and make her happy, and not only did *I* not want that for myself, but I couldn’t imagine that Cali would ever want that for me either. That she would accept me just giving up the rest of my life like she was, even though I wasn’t the one getting married.

*It’s a terrible idea, and an even worse thing to have asked of me.* If anything had sealed the deal in my mind of Hera caring for Cali more than she cared for me, this was it.

*Maybe I should just team up with Kastian after all…*

It was proof of how dire things really were that his suggestion was sounding more and more…plausible. Obviously, he was crazy. And it would never work, and he was still an idiot for even suggesting it, but my gods, the more suggestions I heard from *other* people, the more I wondered if his might actually be the best solution anyone had come up with so far.

*Now there’s a grim thought.*

And the kicker was—both plans would cost me my old life. The one I’d built for myself and had been living more or less happily before I’d ever come to this godsforsaken world.

Maybe this was a sign. Between the promise I’d made to Celeste and this seemingly impossible political trap Cali had fallen into, maybe there was no going back to the human world. At least, not for me.

Maybe no matter what happened, the best thing for me to do was say goodbye to everything that was keeping me tied to the human world. If I broke those ties, whatever came next would be easier, right? After all, I’d lived in the Fae world longer than I’d been in the human world. I should’ve had more of a connection here anyway.

The twist in my stomach told me what I wasn’t ready to admit: nothing could make any of this easy. Restlessness and confusion pulled me from my room and sent me wandering the halls and out onto the grounds. My mind had been whirring since Hera had come in and dropped her little bomb about me giving up the rest of my life to try to make Cali’s easier. Ruminating about it in my room hadn’t helped. Maybe a change of scenery would help me make sense of things? It was a long shot, but it was worth a try. I’d never been the type to solve things by sitting and doing nothing anyway.

Without quite being aware of it, my feet had carried me to the back gate that led to the outer grounds of the keep. Where Rishika was now.

*Oh. I get it.*

I pushed open the gate and strode onto the outer grounds with a renewed purpose driving my steps. I headed for where the others had made their campsite and heard voices as I approached.

Greyson, Rishika, Marius, Tabitha, and Adair were conversing, and when they saw me approach, Tabitha’s head shot up.

“Artemis, is everything okay?” Greyson’s deep voice was laced with concern.

“Yeah, Ari, you good?” Marius asked, stepping toward me.

Confusion hit me for a moment before I realized my expression was probably just as grim as my thoughts. I fixed my face into something more neutral. “Everything’s fine. I just came to see Rishika, but you look like you’re in the middle of something.”

My eyes met Marius’s first, but I couldn’t read his expression. Quickly, I shifted to look at Rishika. Her expression was similar—it was clear she had her guard back up. The guard she hadn’t been using when I’d first approached. My heart cracked.

Maybe this was a mistake…

“Go,” Greyson said to Rishika. “I need to read this. I’ll let you know our next move.”

“You got it,” she said.

Her eyes met mine again, and she walked over to me. I didn’t know what to say, but she beat me to the punch.

“Come on. Let’s leave them for now.” She brushed the dirt off her legs. “I was going to go to this small lake nearby. I set up some lures for fish, just in case.”

I nodded and followed her to the lake. It was a quiet, peaceful walk. The woods gave way to tall grasses that flanked us on either side as we reached the lakeshore. Neither of us spoke on the way there, and I watched quietly as Rishika checked the lines on her lures.

“How do you remember how to fish?” I asked.

Her shoulders curled forward. “Some things I do remember. Like, you know, basic stuff. Shifting. Fighting. It’s instinctive.” She blew out a breath and then stood straight, turning to give me her full attention. “That doesn’t mean I’ll remember everything, though. I know you keep wanting me to remember, but I just can’t. I don’t know how to change that, or if it even can be changed.”

“I understand,” I said quickly, guilt gnawing at my insides. “I’m sorry if I’ve been pressuring you. I won’t do it anymore. Can I just…sit here with you? Just for a little while?”

“Um, sure.”

I plopped down in the tall grass, my eyes locked on the lake ahead, and to my surprise, Rishika sat next to me.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You seem…I don’t know. Sad?”

I shook my head. “Everything is a mess right now, and I can’t help feeling like it’s my fault for coming to the Fae world in the first place. Everyone came here to help me, and now all of you are paying the price for my mistakes.”

She was quiet for a moment. The silence chafed. I knew it was selfish, but part of me had wanted to hear her say this wasn’t all my fault.

“I heard you came here to find your long-lost father,” she finally said.

“I did.” I scoffed. “And I’m still no closer to finding him. And look where that’s brought all of us.”

She reached out and took my hand. “Everyone came here because they love you. I’d do the same thing for someone I loved.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

We sat like that for a moment. The wind blew by, and Rishika’s hair brushed against my shoulder. We were sitting so close together it ached. If I moved even just my pinky finger, I could touch her.

Fuck. I missed her so much. Having her here made my love for her come crashing back full force—not that it had left, but it was easier to push it away so it hurt less with her in the human world and me here.

“You have it wrong,” Rishika said suddenly.

I looked up. “About what?”

“That you’re pressuring me.” She tipped her chin toward me, but her eyes were on the river in front of us.

"I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, forcing the words out.

“I want to remember you. If anything, I’m pressuring myself. I look at you, and I feel…*everything*.” She looked up now, her eyes meeting mine. “I don’t understand why, and I desperately want to.”

My chest felt tight. “What exactly do you, ah, feel?”

“Like I know you. Deeply. Unequivocally. It’s like you’re part of me.” She looked away. “And you’re, well, beautiful.”

I didn’t know when I’d stopped breathing. I couldn’t bring myself to break this spell between us. After a moment, Rishika turned back to me, her beautiful brown eyes glistening.

“You have no idea how badly I wish that kiss had worked.”

“Maybe it doesn’t take just one?” I asked, my voice coming out raspy. I couldn’t stop my gaze from falling to her lips.

“Maybe not…” she said slowly. Then her hand was on my arm, turning me toward her. “Can I?”

My stomach twisted. *Does she mean what I think she means? Will another kiss help Rishika? It will help me.*

Everything hit me at once. The guilt. The despair. The desperate feeling of a noose tightening around my neck whenever I tried to think about the future. Rishika—who I loved—looking at me now with such gentleness. Rishika so close, so close that I could taste—

*No*. It was selfish to think about her like this. Wasn’t it?

But I stopped caring when she leaned in and kissed me.

**Episode 5417**

Xavier held my gaze, unrelenting. “I’m going to stay here in the Fae world, by your side.”

My eyes went wide. “No. You can’t do that,” I said quickly. “You cannot stay here with me. That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard.”

The words left my mouth before I’d really had the chance to think about them, but that didn’t make them any less true. Xavier could *not* give up his life—his real life and all the people he cared about—to what? Stay with me in the Fae world and be my werewolf side piece? No, it couldn’t happen. I wouldn’t allow it.

Xavier shook his head, still holding me gently by my arms. “It’s not, though. I want to be able to protect you, and Kastian already said he’s okay with you keeping me at your side. This is the best solution for all of us, don’t you think? Cali, I can’t leave you here alone all by yourself.”

“What about the Samara pack?” I demanded. “You’re their Alpha! And you’re the first good, reliable one they’ve had in far too long. You can’t abandon them. And what about all your friends in the Redwood pack? What about Colton and Maya and the babies? Xavier, you have people who love you back home. You have *family* to go home to. You have responsibilities to return to—you’ve probably already been gone too long.”

I almost brought up Ava’s name, the fact that he had another mate waiting for him back in the human world. His *Luna*. A mate he could actually have a future with instead of being relegated to the shadows in a world that would never accept him or our bond.

But I wasn’t *quite* that good of a person. Xavier’s place was in the human world, much as it pained me to admit, but I wasn’t about to advocate for him to go running back to Ava.

Xavier shrugged. “They can find another Alpha. They’ve done it before. Hell, Ava could be their next Alpha. She’s the one who’s held them together for this long. If she’d stop being so stubborn—”

I shook my head. “Xavier, you’re not listening to me. You can’t make this sacrifice for me. I can’t let you. I care about you too much to let you throw your life away for me.”

He released my arms, and I immediately missed the warmth of his touch as he stepped back. “Is that what this is really about? Or are you just pushing me away?”

I blinked, shocked at the sudden change in his temperament. “Pushing you away? Why would you say that?”

“Because no matter how much you say you’ve forgiven me for the Adéluce fiasco and everything that happened with Ava, I know it isn’t true. Deep down, I know you haven’t forgiven me. That’s why you’re pushing me away. Because you don’t want to be stuck with me—even now.”

I slowly shook my head again. “No… No, Xavier, that’s not what this is about at all. I’m just trying to do my duty—”

“You can lie to yourself, but you can’t lie to me. I know the reason there’s so much tension between us is because things still aren’t completely right between us. And goddammit, Cali, I’m not leaving until this is fixed!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Xavier wanted to talk about this *now*? I’d just agreed to marry another man, and had consented to a powerful binding spell that would kill me and my entire family if I didn’t follow through with it, and Xavier wanted to pick at old wounds and “fix” our relationship?

*What relationship? We might have a mate bond, but we have no future together. Not anymore. Not for a long time now.*

A thousand different responses rushed to the tip of my tongue, but I finally just shook my head again. “I can’t talk about this right now.”

“See!” he snapped. “You’re doing it now! You’re pushing me out!” He turned on his heel and started for the door. As he reached for the handle, he looked back at me over his shoulder, his expression steely. “Cali, you need to ask yourself how you really feel about us. And come find me when you figure it out.”

And with that, he stormed out of my room, slamming the door behind him.

I dropped to my bed in some disabling mix of exhaustion and despair.

*What is happening? Everything is falling apart!*

Even though Xavier was still physically here with me in the Fae world, I felt like I’d already lost him. Grief pressed in on my chest. Was it selfish to feel this way, to mourn this connection when I knew we didn’t have a future?

*God, what am I going to do?*

All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry myself to sleep, but I couldn’t even do that. Hera had impressed upon me that I had to present a perfect front. I couldn’t show weakness or flaws. I was being watched by both sides, and all of them were just waiting for me to fail.

So instead of giving in to my despair, I crawled out of bed, washed my face, forced a smile, and went to dinner. Hera and the others were sitting around the banquet table, and I took my seat between her and Kastian.

The dinner was semi-formal, but it seemed nobody around here ever missed an opportunity to dress up. I suddenly felt self-conscious in my casual clothes.

*Another mark against me.*

Overly casual dress or not, nobody missed an opportunity to congratulate me and shower me in empty compliments. *You’ll be such a gorgeous bride! What a handsome groom Kastian will be! It’s a perfect union between our peoples!*

I was certain that not a single person who spoke to me meant a word they’d said.

*This is my life now*, I thought glumly. *Huzzah for me.*

A new wave of tears pricked at my eyes as homesickness slammed into me. I missed my friends, my house, my old clothes, even my crew team. I had a whole life back in the human world. A future. Choices.

Here, I had none of those things.

“Are you okay?” Cadhla asked in a low voice, leaning toward me. “Do you need more wine?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine.”

“I know this must be hard for you.”

*That* caught my attention. I didn’t expect any of the other Fae to consider my feelings. *Didn’t Artemis say Cadhla was the nicest of Kastian’s friends?*

I managed a weak—but genuine—smile. “Thanks for caring, but I chose this, and I intend to follow through.”

“You’re so brave to give up so much for the Fae,” she continued as if she hadn’t heard me. “It’s got to be so painful. It’s too bad you can’t just forget that you love your mates so much. It’d make your marriage to Kastian a lot easier.” She glanced at Kastian with a smirk. “After all, he’s not so bad on the eyes, is he? And he can be charming when he puts his mind to it.”

I laughed. “Do you have a crush on him or something?”

*She can have him.*

Her eyes widened. “Oh, definitely not! We’re just friends. But I do think he uses his harsh exterior as a shield against being vulnerable. I’m glad he’s going to have someone as kind and caring as you at his side. Who knows? Maybe you will even come to love Kastian, in a way, after a few years?”

My smile dimmed. “Only if that forgetting spell actually exists.”

“Well, there’s not a spell, but there *is* a potion.”

I shook my head. “It was just a joke. That’s not something I’m interested in right now.”

Dinner passed without much fanfare, and I was finally able to head back to my room and reunite with my bed. I’d promised Hera I’d keep practicing; but I was so exhausted, I doubted I could conjure even one energy ball right now, much less five.

I rounded a corner and nearly collided with Xavier. “Oh, sorry.”

He scowled. “Oh, are you finally going to talk to me now that you’re done catering to your Fae masters?”

My jaw dropped. Sure, we’d fought earlier, this but vitriol seemed totally unnecessary. “I’m sorry about our fight—”

“I’m not.”

“You’re not?” I asked hopefully.

He shook his head. “I’m glad it happened. Now I can let go of you completely. I’m glad Adéluce stepped in so I could set things right with Ava, my true mate. I can’t wait to leave you here and go back to my real family and my real life.”

There was no stopping the tears that slipped down my cheeks. Each word was like a knife to my heart. “Does this mean you’re not staying for the wedding?”

“Why should I? There’s nothing and no one to keep me here anymore.”

And with that, Xavier stalked away, leaving me in pieces. I fell to the ground sobbing uncontrollably.

“Cali? Are you okay?”

I looked up to see Cadhla standing in front of me. “I saw Xavier walk away…”

I reached out and grabbed her hand. “You said there’s a forgetting potion? Where can I get some?”

**Episode 5418**

**Artemis**

I completely lost myself in the kiss. All I could focus on was the fact that Rishika’s mouth was on mine. Our lips moved in tandem, in that old rhythm we’d had back when things were simpler. It was nothing short of intoxicating. I’d been lost in a dark sea, treading water, and Rishika had just thrown me a lifeline.

I kissed her with abandon, drinking her in. Gods, I’d missed her so fucking much. Threading my fingers through her hair, I deepened the kiss. Her tongue slid over mine, and she let out a little gasp that set my blood on fire. She met me for every beat, every brush of our mouths, every nibble on her full bottom lip. Her hands slipped over my hair, my shoulders, and down my back, pulling me against her with heated urgency.

I wasn’t sure who initiated it, but soon we found ourselves lying side by side, the tall grass cushioning us as we kissed. Suddenly, her fingers found their way under my shirt, grasping at my skin. Gasping, I broke the kiss, an incessant whine escaping my lips. I needed her to touch me everywhere. I was burning for her.

I dragged her lips back to mine, pulling her on top of me. The weight of her on me was so, *so* good. My hands found her hips, greedily grabbing at them and pushing at her clothes. Snaking one hand up, I cupped her breast. I moaned into her mouth—I’d missed how fucking perfect her breasts were.

“You feel so good,” I practically sobbed.

“You do too.”

Rishika nipped at my neck, her fingertips sliding under my leggings. My hips pressed into her hand, begging for her to keep going. She did. Her fingers traveled lower, lower, lower until they reached my center. I was slick and ready for her as she pushed a finger inside me. Swallowing my moan with a kiss, she worked her fingers moved with deftness—and familiarity.

*Unequivocal*. I fought back a gasp as she curled her finger inside me before adding another. My eyes fluttered shut as my hands found their way under her clothes. Skin to skin felt unreal, like it was the first time I’d touched her. Her thumb found my clit, and I broke away from the kiss, panting as pleasure built inside me.

“Rishika…” I moaned.

She brought me over the edge. Stars dotted my vision as I clenched my eyes shut. When I opened my eyes, Rishika was right there, her lips parted. Hungry, I snaked my arm around her neck, pulling her back into a kiss. Gently, I pushed her onto her back, pulling away her clothes as I kissed a hot line down her stomach.

Kneeling between her legs, I glanced up at her, desperately trying to sear every detail into my mind. “Please say yes,” I said huskily. “I might die if I can’t taste you right now.”

“*Yes*,” Rishika said, her fingers threading through my hair, pulling it deliciously taut.

Relieved, I dropped my head between her legs and licked her. I lost myself in the taste of her, the sounds of her moans, the desperate way she held me. I licked and sucked her until her legs started to shake.

“Come for me,” I said to her. “I want to feel you.”

“Artemis.”

Hearing her moan my name was almost too much. I reached my hand between her legs, dipping them into her wetness.

“Say my name again.” It wasn’t a demand; I was begging. On my knees for her in so many ways.

“*Artemis*.”

Moaning against her skin, I swirled my tongue around her clit, finding a rhythm with my fingers. Her legs spasmed, and her thighs clenched around my head. I didn’t stop until I heard a cry come from her lips and she came apart on my tongue.

Sure, everything was still a mess. But in that moment, I didn’t mind.

When the shocks of her orgasm subsided, I slid up her body and kissed her. It was sweet, tender, and for a moment it was just us. Like it used to be.

But it wasn’t like before.  
 The silence stretched on, almost to a point that it became awkward. I played with her fingers, uncertain of how she felt about what we’d just done. I wanted to believe that it had changed something, brought her memories back, brought something back, but…wouldn’t that have become clear already?

“That was nice,” Rishika said finally, turning to look at me. “It felt…new and old all at once.”

I sat up, blushing with embarrassment. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she said quickly. “My body…um, remembers. Somehow.”

“Oh.”

Rishika sat up, reaching for my hand and squeezing hard. “This was good—it felt right,” she said. “Figuring things…out together.”

The expression on her face was almost enough to break me. This was good for her—maybe her underlying feelings for me would be enough to bring her memory back… as cocky as that was. And kissing her and touching her like that…I’d needed it.

I wanted this, but it was selfish. The reality of that hadn’t changed. I hadn’t nearly accomplished why I’d come to the Fae world, and eventually she would likely head back to the human world. It was *her world*, after all. There was one truth staring me in the face.

We would have to leave each other again.

“What is it?” she asked, breaking my thoughts.

“Nothing,” I said, smiling. “I’m glad that it was a step in the right direction. I’m glad you’re remembering something.”

Then I did the only thing I could—kiss her. I let it linger, unsure of when I’d have the chance to do this again. Unsure of when she’d be in my arms again.

Rishika broke the kiss, lifting her hand to stroke my cheek. “I want to stay here with you,” she started.

“But?”

She sighed. “I should go back to Greyson. We found something from that asshole Cenwyn. I’m not sure if it has anything to do with your sister being kidnapped.”

“Wait, *what*?” I asked, immediately alarmed. “What do you mean? Where the fuck is Cali?”

“No, she’s okay,” Rishika said, trying to reassure me. “We found Cali and Xavier and got them out. They’re safe now…unless they’ve gotten into something else since then.”

Quickly, I stood up, gathering my clothes and haphazardly pulling them on. My mind was spinning. What the fuck did Cenwyn do? He’d tried to kidnap Cali? To take her where? And to what end? I couldn’t let that Fae keep breathing.

No, I needed to get Cali out of here.

*Why not do both?*

“I need to get back to the keep,” I said, finishing pulling my leggings on.

“Stay with us,” Rishika said as she got dressed too. “Greyson might have a plan. Together we can—”

“I need to do this myself,” I said, maybe too forcefully. Her eyes went wide, and I swore. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, there’s just things I have better access to and…”

“It’s okay, I’m just trying to help,” she said.

“I know. I’m sorry,” I said. “I just know I need to go protect Cali—she’s my sister and—”

“You have to protect the people you love,” Rishika said. She smiled, though it didn’t quite meet her eyes. “I get it. Go.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Of course she got it. It was why she told me to leave to the Fae world in the first place. She was selfless, and I wasn’t.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?” I said.

*I can’t lose you again.*

Then I turned and ran. I knew that if I looked back I’d lose my resolve, so I put my head down and ran. As the keep came closer, I knew I had to figure out a way to find Cenwyn. How he’d managed to take Cali and Xavier without me knowing was infuriating. If I were honest with myself, I knew I’d been neglecting everything because of my feelings for Rishika.

If Cenwyn had failed at the kidnapping attempt, it just meant that he had something else up his sleeve. I had to head him off. Stop him.

I needed help, and I knew where to go.

Once inside the keep, I headed to my grandmother’s room. I knocked once, then again after no response. I was about to knock a third time when the door opened.

“Artemis? What are you doing here?” Hera asked, her eyebrows raised. She looked me up and down, then her expression fell. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

I took a deep breath and met her eyes. “Are you serious about having a truce between us?”

Hera looked around the hallway before pulling me inside the room. “Yes, of course. You’re my granddaughter.”

I pushed the door shut behind me. “If you want the truce—if you want me to trust you again—then I need you to do exactly what I’m going to tell you.”

# **Episode 5419**

**Greyson**

I reread the paper I’d taken from Tabitha again. The looping cursive handwriting had made it difficult to read one time through, but I felt confident about what it was now.

“It’s Cali’s whole pre-wedding social schedule,” I said, trying to keep the horror I felt at bay. I handed it back to Tabitha and Adair and Marius leaned over to look. “This has got it all laid out—all the plans, everywhere she’ll be and the best places to grab her.” I looked up from the sheet. “Cenwyn can’t seriously be planning to kidnap her again, can he? I never took him for that much of a fool.”

“He’s not a fool,” Marius said.

Adair frowned. “I’d agree with that. And that’s exactly what makes him so dangerous. If he’s planning to make a similar move, he must have good reason for it. And he must be confident that he’ll succeed.”

I looked down at the schedule again. *Cenwyn, what the hell are you up to now? Why kidnap Cali again?* I’d already foiled that plan once.

But then again, it was just a lucky coincidence that I found the prison wagon before it whisked Cali away to wherever Cenwyn had been trying to stash her. Surely, he’d learned a few things from the first failed attempt, but not what we’d hoped he would. From the look of the schedule he’d laid out, he wasn’t deterred by his earlier failure. If anything, the fact that I’d stopped him the first time around had only forced him to be even smarter about it.

A new wave of realization slammed into me. *Fuck. With the conjunctio in place, if he kidnaps her again, the consequences could be dire.*

I looked up at Adair. “How soon does a marriage have to take place after the conjunctio is enacted? How long does Cali have before the consequences of the spell set in if she doesn’t marry Kastian as planned?”

His brows rose. “The conjunctio spell, once started, must be completed under the next full moon, or everyone in that bloodline—Cali included—will die.”

Had I seriously heard that right?

“And when is that?” I asked. “How the fuck does the moon work here?”

“It’s tomorrow,” Marius supplied gravely.

Fear and horror hit my gut and heart simultaneously. Tomorrow, Cali would be married to another man. And if she wasn’t, she’d die along with her entire family. Once I’d learned Cali had gone through with the conjunctio, I’d been dead set on finding a way to keep the wedding from happening and freeing her from the consequences of that terrible spell, but now Cenwyn was trying to keep the wedding from happening too. He was trying to kill them all. So by stopping him from kidnapping her, I was keeping her alive—so she could marry another man.

“*Fuck!*” I tossed the papers to the ground and began to pace. “If Cenwyn kidnaps Cali and keeps her away past the next full moon, then she and all of her family will die! This cannot happen!”

*But can I really let her marry someone else? There’s no way to win this. I can’t stop the marriage and keep Cali safe—no matter what I try.*

“But we don’t know *how* he’s planning to kidnap her,” Tabitha said as she gathered up the papers I’d thrown on the ground. “This is only a partial plan. You and Rishika didn’t get all of the papers in the mad dash, and even these are a mess. It’ll take us some time to go through all of them and try to piece together his plan—assuming we have all the information we need here.”

I nodded. “You and Rishika focus on that. Find her and fill her in. Artemis, too. I’m going to find Cali and let her know what we’ve discovered.” I rushed back to the keep.

Cali’s exhausted expression flashed into my mind. God, she’d been through so much already, and now I was rushing back to give her more to worry about. But I didn’t know what else to do. Tabitha was right—we might know *what* Cenwyn was planning, but we didn’t know anything about the particulars. And it wasn’t like we were in a position to plant ourselves at Cali’s side for the remainder of the marriage proceedings. Hera surely wouldn’t let me anywhere near the ceremony, and nobody was supposed to know Rishika, Tabitha, Marius, and Adair were even here. Much less the small army I’d put together.

Cenwyn really had us backed into a corner. If we didn’t play this right, we’d throw everything into chaos, destroy the peace summit, and then make his job even easier if Cali’s wedding fell through. Until we had a clear picture of what he was planning and how to stop him, keeping Cali informed of his intentions was the next best thing. It might not change much—she still had a very important role to play under threat of death, and who knew how many of those wedding plans were requirements for the marriage to go through—but it couldn’t hurt.

I had to get to Cali as fast as I could, to make sure she was okay. To hold her in my arms. To never fucking leave her side like this ever again.

A new wave of guilt crashed into me, thinking about how she’d asked me to stay with her. And how I hadn’t been willing to risk getting caught. Maybe it was for the best. Maybe if I hadn’t left, I never would’ve learned about Cenwyn’s latest scheme. But I couldn’t let myself off the hook that easily. Because I’d still left Cali alone and vulnerable while a mad Fae was out to kidnap her, killing both her and her entire bloodline.

I raced down the halls of the keep, beelining for Cali’s room. An all too familiar clanking sound echoed through the stone hallways, and I was so caught up in my worry for Cali that I didn’t realize the keep’s guards had boxed me in until they were surrounding me on all sides, blocking any chance of escape.

“Goddamn, I don’t have time for this!” I roared.

The head guard seemed unfazed by my anger. “You’re no longer a welcome guest at Briarkeep. You’ve been banished. Now we have no choice but to detain you.”

“Listen to me; there’s a plot to kidnap Caliana Hart, and I have to get to her! I have to make sure she’s safe. You should all come too! We need help!”

But the guards either didn’t believe me or didn’t care what I was telling them. The head guard held out his halberd, the blade pointed toward me. “If you submit and come quietly, we try not to harm you.”

“Fuck that!” I snarled. I’d never trust the word of a Fae, especially not ones as mincing as those. I shifted and lunged at the guards lined up in front of me. The rest of the guards rushed in. I was a strong Alpha wolf, but there was no overpowering so many Fae by myself.

I slammed into one Fae guard, knocking him to the ground, and leapt at another, my jaws wide.

I stopped in midair—then slammed into the ground so hard it knocked the wind out of me.

When I looked up, Celeste was standing over me, her hand outstretched. She’d subdued me with her magic. She tightened her hand into a fist, and white-hot pain burst through my body. I shifted back to human on instinct, but there was no stopping the sensation that my skin was on fire.

I was only dimly aware of the guards lifting my prone form as I twitched and gasped and bit back my cries. I hit a cold, stone floor, and the pain lifted just as a set of bars slammed shut behind me. They’d taken me to a holding cell.

Celeste stood on the other side of the bars, looking unimpressed. “Breaking your banishment already? You know, the consequences of breaking our laws can be quite painful.”

I didn’t give a shit about the Fae and their laws—or their cruel punishments. I scrambled to my feet, my muscles still aching from her spell, and grabbed the bars. Fire licked up my palms, and I jumped back. The bars were silver.

“You’re making a mistake!” I blurted. “Cenwyn is trying to kidnap Cali! I came back to warn her.”

Celeste laughed. “Why would he do that? She’s a Light Fae like him.”

“It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t care about that. He’s trying to stop the wedding.”

She shrugged. “Fine. I don’t care. I don’t want it to happen either. Plus…” Her eyes narrowed. “Why should I believe you?” She turned toward the door.

“Wait!” I cried. “Please, listen to me. I’m not lying. Cali’s in grave danger!”

Celeste didn’t stop, and she didn’t listen. The door slammed shut behind her, leaving me alone in the holding cell.

“Someone, please!” I screamed, stopping just short of rattling the bars. “Please just listen to me. Someone is trying to hurt Caliana Wrenthorn! Doesn’t anyone care? If this wedding doesn’t happen, she and her entire bloodline will die. Does that sound like peace to you?”

I screamed and shouted and begged until long after my voice turned hoarse.

Finally, the door to the holding cells opened, letting in a small shaft of light.

I lifted my hand to shield my eyes. “Thank god you’re here. You have to believe me.”

The Fae stepped into the light, and my stomach sank when I saw Cenwyn standing just outside the bars of my prison.

He smirked. “Of course I believe you.”

**Episode 5420**

Cadhla’s eyes widened, an expression of genuine shock. “Wait, are you being serious? You really want to take this potion?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” I asked.

“No, it’s just…” She winced. “It’s kind of a dangerous potion. I was mostly joking when I brought it up, you know? Because we thought it would be kind of funny the idea you’d want to fully forget about Kastian… Or maybe it was just wishful musings…either way, I don’t think you really want to do this, do you?”

So what, she was just being mean or bored? A bored Fae was nothing. A Fae admitting to it was something else, but I didn’t have time for that.

I gripped her hand tighter. “I need to. This is the only way. The only *kind* way.” My voice broke. I couldn’t do this anymore. I’d thought things were bad back in the human world when I was torn between my two mates and all the complications that came with each of them. But now? This was pure torture. I was marrying another man, and my heart wasn’t the only one breaking.

“Cali—”

“You’re the one who brought it up! Are you really backing out now? Don’t you see? The longer I delay all of this, the more I’m hurting both of my mates! If I sever ties now, then they’ll be free to be happy again. They can return to their old lives without me.”

Cadhla glanced around nervously. “Okay. I can see you mean this. I’ll take you to someone who would know more about this than I do, but please be careful, Cali. This kind of magic shouldn’t be used lightly.”

She really did look unsettled with this turn of events. Was she breaking some kind of Fae rule by telling me about this potion? Was there a law against using it?

It didn’t matter, of course. I was going to drink this potion. I was going to forget Xavier and Greyson. And then, maybe we’d all finally have a chance at being happy. At freedom.

*At least, Greyson and Xavier will.*

I let Cadhla help me to my feet and took both of her hands in mine. “You don’t know what this means to me. To have someone here who actually cares. Thank you for helping me.”

Cadhla’s smile was razor thin. “You can’t tell anyone it was me. This is illegal.”

“I won’t. I won’t bring up your name.”

“Okay.” She blew out a breath and nodded. “Come on. We have to go now then.”

I half-expected her to lead me to the servants’ passageways, since this was obviously something we wanted to keep discreet. Instead, Cadhla led me to large, grand rooms that were reserved for the upper crust nobility in the keep.

“Who—” I began.

Cadhla shushed me and knocked on an ornate door. A maid answered.

*Is this the maid who can give me the potion?*

But the maid stepped aside to let us in, and across the room behind her, an elderly female Fae stood from a settee. She looked even older than my grandmother and was dressed like a queen. I’d never met her, and now that I thought about it, I didn’t remember seeing her at any of the banquets or other events.

*Is this lady one of the council members? Is she a noble?*

“Ah, Cadhla. Welcome.” The old woman smiled, the creases in her face deepening. “Are you back for one of my beauty creams?”

Cadhla shook her head. “Not this time. Cali, I’d like to introduce you to Lucretia. Lucretia, this is Caliana Wrenthorn. Lucretia is a well-respected beauty consultant—her patrons include the wealthiest Fae families.”

“Oh. It’s nice to meet you,” I said automatically, but I couldn’t hide my confusion. “Um, sorry, why are we going to a beautician for this potion?” I asked Cadhla.

Lucretia chuckled. “Oh, my methods of enhancing my clients’ beauty…well, let’s just say they’re very unique. And *very* expensive. It’s how I’ve amassed quite a fortune. That, and my ability to keep mum about my client list.” She winked conspiratorially at me. “No one wants to be exposed for using illegal potions to stay young and beautiful.”

“I see,” I said, though I wasn’t totally sure I did. *Who has Cadhla brought me to? Is this like a black-market business?*

I guess it made sense. Cadhla had said the potion was illegal and that I could never tell anyone she’d made the connection for me. But still, something about this seemed shady, even by Fae standards. For the first time since Xavier had stomped all over my heart, I was beginning to have second thoughts.

Lucretia opened a cabinet on the wall to reveal dozens of small vials and jars. She plucked one off the shelf and approached me.

“May I offer a demonstration?” she asked.

“Um, sure?”

She held out her own wrinkled hand and rubbed a tiny pearl of the cream over her skin. To my shock, the wrinkled, spotted skin on her hands immediately became smooth and flawless. *Oh my god. That hand could belong to a teenager!*

Lucretia smiled knowingly. “I’m sure you’re going to ask why I look like this if I can make potions like this? It’s simple. There’s a bit of an addiction factor, so I rarely sample my own wares.”

I was still speechless, so Cadhla leaned in and said, “Lady Caliana is looking for something beyond beauty. More of a potion to help settle her mind.”

Lucretia’s eyes brightened. “Oh, well that’s delightful to hear. Rarely am I given the chance to use some of my more experimental potions. Most of my clients want to stay eternally young and beautiful. But a potion that can alter your emotions? Or perhaps your memories?” She looked me over like she was seeing inside my mind. “Well, that is certainly a powerful magic, indeed. What can I do for you, Lady Caliana?”

My mouth went dry, and I licked my lips. “I’m hoping to forget my love for my mates,” I confessed. “Or maybe just to dampen my feelings so it doesn’t hurt so much?”

Now that I was here, with this old lady who was clearly capable of all kinds of powerful magic, I found myself waffling. Lucretia had proven herself capable, but did I really want to forget everything about Xavier and Greyson? The thought made my stomach twist, but I didn’t know if only dampening my feelings would work either. How could I only half-love either of my mates? Surely the simplest solution would be to forget them.

Lucretia turned to Cadhla. “You’ve brought me a complicated case.”

Cadhla nodded, and the old woman rifled through her cabinets for a moment before returning to me with a blood red vial in hand.

“Now, this is a very dangerous potion, Lady Caliana,” she warned as she held it out to me. “You must only drink one drop. Do you understand?”

I nodded, and she continued, “Once consumed, this potion will allow you to forget your past great loves, but there will be no reversing it.”

I took the vial with trembling hands. I started to reach into my pocket to pay her, but Lucretia caught my arm.

“No charge.”

My brows rose. *Didn’t she just have some speech about how expensive she is?*

“Why not?” I asked.

“I would like to be owed a favor by the Wrenthorn heir,” she said simply.

I nodded. It was a price worth more than money. *She’s a shrewd businesswoman.*

Our business ended, Cadhla and I said goodbye and returned to my rooms.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” she asked, standing on the threshold to my room.

“I will be,” I said. “Thank you for all your help.”

She grabbed my hand, and I realized her fingers were trembling. Her eyes darted around, and she looked terrified. “Maybe this was a mistake.”

“I won’t tell anyone you helped me. You’ll be safe.”

She nodded and smiled weakly. “But maybe you should know—”

Just then, a couple of guards marched past on their evening patrol. Cadhla shook her head. “Never mind. Just be careful, okay? And good luck.” She turned and hurried down the hallway.

I closed the door and pulled the vial out of my pocket.

*Is this really a good idea? Maybe I should talk to the others about it first.*

But no. I couldn’t do that. If any of my friends found out I wanted to erase my memories of loving Greyson and Xavier, they’d definitely try to stop me.

The thought alone of being trapped with those feelings—and that grief—brought tears to my eyes and broke my heart all over again. This was the only way to be free. To allow Greyson and Xavier to move on. To, hopefully, find some tiny shred of happiness myself.

I looked down at the vial in my hand. Was this really a good idea? *Should I really try to forget Greyson and Xavier?*

**Episode 5421**

I stared down at the vial of forgetting potion Lucretia had given me, turning it slightly, so it rolled across my palm.

With a racing heart, I walked over to my bedside table and poured a glass of water from the carafe. My hands were shaking as I uncorked the vial and held it over the water.

Then I paused. Somehow, I couldn’t seem to get my hand to pour the drop of potion in. I was so close—and I wanted to do it—but I couldn’t bring myself to pour the potion into the glass.

*What am I* doing*?*

My mind reeled as I thought about what I was really considering. Was I actually contemplating making myself *forget* about Greyson and Xavier? Was I really entertaining the idea of wiping them completely from my mind and my memory? It was hard to even imagine what that might mean.

I looked at the bottle, wondering if it was possible. After everything we had been to each other, could a drop of this potion really take them away from me?

It wasn’t as though I’d never considered something like this before. Of course I had. I had been heartbroken when Xavier had broken up with me and left the Redwood pack. I couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t eat. I had felt like a zombie for weeks after he’d gone. I’d been so desperate for relief I’d even gone so far as to ask Artemis to use her manipulation magic on me. I’d wanted her to clear the memories of him from my mind. But that didn’t feel like the same thing. The magic Artemis did was more malleable. More able to pick and choose what someone wanted to forget.

And maybe that was part of what I was struggling to understand—I just couldn’t believe there was anything in this world powerful enough to break the ties that bound me to my mates.

My stomach twisted at the thought of them. Dread was creeping in. Dread and sorrow. I was scared, but this was still the right thing to do. It had to be. Forgetting about Greyson and Xavier would make it easier for everyone…wouldn’t it?

I gripped the glass of water. My palms had grown slick with sweat, and the glass began to slip in my hand.

I wondered if the *due destini* would still be an issue for us if I couldn’t even remember the people I was supposed to choose between. My thoughts went to Cassandra. Had she considered this option? Just forgetting? Would I still lose my mind as she had? Would forgetting protect me from that fate?

Maybe it would. I couldn’t pretend there wouldn’t be an upside to forgetting. I certainly wouldn’t miss the terrifying hallucinations that had been haunting me, thanks to the *due destini*. And I wouldn’t miss the feeling of being completely out of control.

I took a shaking breath and tipped the vial gently, watching as one drop fell into the water. The drop was bright blue, and I expected it to tinge the water, but it disappeared the instant it hit the liquid, as though the water had simply enveloped it. It barely even rippled as the drop hit the surface.

It looked like a completely normal glass of water, but I knew better, and my hand began to shake in earnest.

I knew that if I drank from that cup, that would be it. It was like Lucretia had said—there was no reversing the power of the potion. Once I drank, Greyson and Xavier would be gone—erased from my mind. And with them, a huge part of my life would be gone forever.

I set down the vial of potion on the bedside table. I looked at the glass in my hand, but I wasn’t really seeing it. My mind was so far away, thinking of so many things.

They would be gone from my mind, but what about the rest of me? Would I still miss them in my heart? Even if I didn’t know why, would I recognize that my soul was yearning for them? Would I feel the hollow space in my heart where they had lived for so long? Would it hurt?

I tapped my fingers on the glass and walked to the window to look out at the Fae world beyond.

I wished there was some way I could choose a few moments that I could keep with me, even afterward. Like snapshots I could hold on to and tuck away to keep. I thought of the moment when I’d met Xavier Evers for the first time, and the thrill of fear and passion I’d felt when I’d first looked into his blue eyes. I thought of what it had felt like when he’d kissed me for the first time, and when he’d told me that he loved me. I would hold on to that. As embarrassing and charged as it was, I would choose to remember that moment that I’d kissed Greyson at the Lupo Finale, and the powerful shock of electricity I’d felt between us. I’d known it the moment I’d kissed him—there was no going back.

I would hold on to the memory of going to the Fae world with Greyson for the first time, and the sheer relief I’d felt when Xavier had appeared there to rescue me. But mostly I’d remember the simple things. Walks together. Holding hands. Going to the mall with Xavier to shop for jeans, pretending we were just a normal couple out for a normal date. I’d remember the feeling of riding atop Greyson’s back as he sprinted through the woods, of snuggling up with him on a cold night, and feeling the warmth from his body sinking into mine. I would remember the feeling of Xavier’s touch, and the sound of Greyson’s voice. I would remember what it would be like to be loved by each of these wonderful, frustrating, magnetic, flawed, powerful men.

Tears filled my eyes as I let the memories wash over me. I sifted through them like I was looking through a scrapbook, lingering over the feel and the warmth of each of them. If I was going to lose them after just a drink from the glass in my hand, then I was in no hurry.

A knock on my door pulled me from the depths of my thoughts and I looked up, startled. I didn’t know how long I’d been standing at the window, but I suspected it had been a while.

I gave my head a small shake and set the glass down on the bedside table before I stepped to the door.

Opening it, I found a servant in the doorway, holding a garment bag.

“Yes?” I asked politely.

The young girl smiled nervously. “Hello, miss. Lady Hera has sent your wedding dress. She said to tell you a tailor will be by later to make the adjustments, so it fits properly.”

“Oh, right. The dress,” I said without enthusiasm. I took the heavy bag from her hands. “Thanks.”

The girl dipped a curtsey and hurried away, looking relieved her errand was completed.

I shut the door and hung the garment bag on a hook on the back of the door. I took a step back, thinking hard. I considered uncovering the dress but thought better of it. What was the hurry? This was the dress I was going to wear when I married Kastian, which was going to happen. Everything was in place, and there would be consequences large and small if I didn’t go through with it.

I took a deep breath and gave the covered dress a short nod. Then I turned briskly back to the glass on the table.

“I’m going to do this,” I said aloud to myself. I was going to go through with this. Why shouldn’t I? There was no good reason not to. It was the best course of action. It made sense and would allow everything else to go smoothly. I would be able to focus on the life in front of me, instead of the one I was leaving behind.

I wondered if I should tell the others what I had planned…

“No,” I said to myself. I shook my head. That would never work. There was no way they would let me go through with it. If anyone found out that I was trying to erase my memories of loving Greyson and Xavier, they would try to talk me out of it. Or just straight-up stop me. And not just Greyson and Xavier. Artemis, Adair, Rishika—even Tabitha. I never knew about Marius, but it was better to just do this on my own. They wouldn’t understand. This was hard enough already; I didn’t want to have to try to explain it to anyone else.

My throat felt tight again as tears crowded at the corners of my eyes. This was so hard. Just thinking about Greyson and Xavier—and how much I loved them—made me feel like my heart was breaking.

Gritting my teeth, I strode purposefully across the room and picked up the glass.

My decision was made.

**Episode 5422**

**Greyson**

Rage flooded through me at the sight of Cenwyn, and I charged at the bars. Pain exploded as the silver sizzled against my skin, and I was forced to let go, but I glowered at the bastard as I backed up.

“I’m onto your little plan,” I snarled, “and I’m not going to let you hurt Cali.”

Cenwyn laughed mirthlessly. “Can’t you see that you’re already too late, werewolf?”

“What are you talking about?” I spat.

His eyes glittered menacingly. “As we stand here speaking, my plan is being enacted.”

There was something about his easy confidence that scared the shit out of me. The smug look on his face told me everything I didn’t want to know—this wasn’t a bluff.

“What’s happening?” I demanded.

“Well, I wasn’t going to tell you, but…” Cenwyn shrugged theatrically. “I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, since there’s no way you can stop me, and I do have some time to kill.” He crossed his arms across his barrel chest. “I’ve used a few strategically placed Fae to lead your Caliana toward a solution to her broken heart.”

“Her what?”

He grinned. “Come now. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. After all, she must be in such despair, now that she knows she cannot be with her mates after her marriage to Kastian. She’s so sad—anyone can see it. And I’m nothing if not sympathetic, so I had a little birdie whisper into her ear that there’s a solution to all her pain.”

“What kind of a solution?” I growled, my stomach sinking.

“A simple potion,” Cenwyn said with a dark smile. “An elixir that will make her forget her great loves before she moves forward to the next part of her life.”

Fury bubbled up within me, and I grabbed at the bars again, trying to break them, but the silver burned me, setting my skin on fire, and I released them with a roar of agony.

“That’s never going to work!” I growled. “You could never convince Cali to take a forgetting spell.”

“Maybe *I* couldn’t, but Xavier could,” Cenwyn said lightly.

“You’re talking nonsense,” I spat. “Xavier would never help you. He’d die first.”

“No need for that,” Cenwyn laughed. “You’re forgetting where you are and what we’re capable of.”

“What you’re capable of?” I asked dubiously.

“I glamoured one of my loyal Fae to look like Xavier and had him go to Cali. I told him to say something to her to push her into taking the potion. Something so cruel, she would be only too happy to forget.”

“You *bastard*,” I snarled, but that just made Cenwyn laugh.

Fear flooded through me. Cenwyn *was* a bastard, but he had managed to craft a good plan. How was this happening?

“Nothing could make Cali forget me,” I said, more for my own benefit than for Cenwyn’s.

He shook his head, still looking amused. “Come now, Greyson. You have been in the Fae world for some time now. Surely you must know better than that by now. There are some very powerful Fae gathered in this keep for the summit. And one of them is in my pocket, willing to do anything I ask. And what I asked was that she provide Caliana with a forgetting potion.”

“A forgetting potion?” I repeated. I was staring at the fucker, trying to wrap my brain around the words he was saying. How was this actually happening? And how was I behind bars, unable to stop it? Anger raced through my bloodstream like poison, and my breath began to come in short, painful gasps.

Cenwyn laughed. “Of course, Caliana will not know that the potion will do much more than erase her memories of you and your brother.”

“What *will* it do?” I asked, though I really didn’t want to know the answer.

His evil eyes narrowed. “The potion will erase *everything*. She will remember nothing. Sweet Caliana will be left a beautiful blank slate. A vulnerable pawn that I will then pluck up and whisk away.”

“*What?*” I asked, horrified.

“That’s right,” he said, his eyes glittering now as he recounted his plan with pleasure. “I will keep her hidden in a little cottage in the woods. Just until after the next full moon. Long enough for the conjunctio and the treaty to both be broken.”

I shook my head as the pieces began to fall into place. “You’d do all this—poison, kidnap, kill—just to continue your stupid war?”

Cenwyn managed to look offended. “*Stupid war?* Greyson, really. The war between the Dark Fae and the Light Fae has been good to me. *Very* lucrative. It’s allowed me to build my empire. I’ve spent time and money establishing weapons trading deals with both sides. I cannot lose that. Not after all I’ve worked for. For—you see—money is power, Greyson, no matter what world you live in. Surely I don’t need to explain that to you.”

“An entire bloodline will die!”

Cenwyn looked at me like I was speaking a different language. “Yes? And?”

“*What?*” I hissed. “What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing whatsoever.” He shrugged easily. “It’s only that I’ve always hated the Wrenthorns. Didn’t you know? How could I not? They always thought they were so much better than everyone else. Always shoving their status as a noble family in everyone’s face.”

“*You’re* a noble,” I pointed out, outraged at his hypocrisy.

“But I have not always been,” he amended. “My family started off as lower nobles. We gained power because of the money I made on the black market. I worked my way to the top,” he said with a clear sense of pride, “and I am not going to lose the power that I’ve gained. And with the Wrenthorns gone once and for all, I will gain even more power. An added bonus.”

Anger rocketed through me like bolts of lightning. I shifted to my werewolf form and attacked the bars, ignoring the burning pain the silver caused.

Cenwyn laughed as he watched me. “Greyson, please, spare yourself this indignity. There is no way you’ll be able to succeed. There’s no getting through the bars.”

Suddenly, behind him, the door burst open.

Astonished, Cenwyn whipped around to see Adair, Marius, Clarence, and Rishika running in.

“How did you—” he started, but he didn’t get a chance to finish before Clarence attacked, taking him to the ground and pinning him down.

Adair summoned his energy whip, and it cracked through the air, then down onto the cell lock, which shattered. The door swung open, and—not wasting a second—I rushed out.

Cenwyn’s eyes were wide. He clearly realized the peril he had just found himself in, and began screaming:

“Guards! Guards! Come quickly! HELP!”

He squirmed away from Clarence and slipped out of the holding cell just as six Fae guards rushed into the room wielding energy spears.

“Watch out for the spears!” I yelled, shifting back to my human form and dodging as a guard thrust a spear at me.

Rishika dropped two guards with a roundhouse kick, and Adair took out three with his energy whip. Marius punched the one coming after me in the face and then turned to me.

“Where to now?” he asked.

“We have to get Cali!” I said breathlessly. “She’s in danger.”

They didn’t need any more explanation. We left the unconscious guards behind and sprinted away, heading toward the keep. We didn’t bother trying to stay quiet or sticking to the shadows as we ran. We just needed to get there—fast.

When we got closer, Xavier appeared, looking confused.

“Where have you been?” he demanded.

I shook my head. There wasn’t time for explanations. “It’s Cali!”

“What?” he asked.

“She’s in danger. Cenwyn tricked her into taking some kind of forgetting potion!” I gasped.

“*What?*” Xavier joined us as we ran, running shoulder to shoulder with me. “What are you talking about? How did he do that?”

“I don’t know—he said he had some Fae glamoured to look like you say something cruel to her. Mean enough she’d want to forget it all. Actually—” I looked over. “How do I know you’re really you at all?”

“What are you talking about?” Xavier asked, looking surprised.

“How do I know you’re not some random Fae glamoured to look like Xavier?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “You’re a dick. Is that good enough for you?”

“Yeah, that’s really you,” I admitted. I looked toward the keep, which was coming closer and closer. I half shifted toward my werewolf form, feeling anger and fear clawing its way up in my chest. “Let’s go get that bastard!”

“Fine by me,” Xavier agreed.

We arrived at the keep and charged through the halls. When we got to Cali’s room, I barreled through the door without even bothering to knock—there was no time for formalities.

“*Cali!*” I shouted, bursting into the room.

Cali turned to look at me, a glass at her lips.

**Episode 5423**

**Xavier**

I’d only understood about half of what Greyson had just told me and wasn’t sure if the glass Cali was holding was the potion Cenwyn had given her, but if she was in danger, I wasn’t about to take any chances.

“*No!*” I yelled, launching forward and knocking the glass from her hand. It went flying across the room and hit the opposite wall with the force of a bullet. The glass shattered on impact, the water spraying everywhere.

Cali turned to me, wide-eyed with shock. “W-What are you doing here?” she sputtered. “Where did you even come from? Why did you do that?”

“What was in that glass?” I demanded, ignoring her questions.

“What?” she asked, wringing her hands.

“Was that the potion to forget us?” I asked, pointing accusingly at the shards of glass on the stone floor.

Her wide eyes went even wider, taking up half her face, and I could see a flash of shock in them.

“Were you really just going to cut us out of your head?” I asked. Fury and fear rose up in my chest, mingled so closely together I couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began.

But if I was hoping for an answer to my question, I was disappointed, because none came. Cali didn’t respond, just turned away, unable to meet my eyes.

My stomach sank, and I just stared at her, my eyes scanning over her brown hair as it fell over her shoulders. Everything about her looked so familiar, but somehow so strange. How could this be real? I hadn’t believed Greyson when he’d sketched out the basics of Cenwyn’s crazy plan. Why would I?

I didn’t think Cali would actually want to just forget me. Even when I was going through the worst of the shit with Adéluce—when I’d broken up with Cali and left the Redwood, the worst pain I’d ever experienced—I’d never even *considered* anything like that. I’d considered leaving, sure, but I would never have wanted to forget Cali and everything she’d meant to me. No matter how agonizing it was to see her or be around her.

Greyson stepped forward. He came next to Cali, putting a hand on her shoulder and gently moving her, so she turned toward us. “Love?” he said quietly.

When she turned back to look at us, I could see the tear tracks down her face.

“Cali,” Greyson said, so softly I could barely hear him, “tell me what you’re thinking.”

Cali’s eyes were down on the floor, and when she looked up, meeting Greyson’s gaze, I was surprised to see that she looked furious. She was crying, but they were tears of anger, and her eyes flashed as she took a step back from him and glared at both of us. “What am I *thinking*?” she snapped. “I’m wondering why it’s *so* terrible to want to save all of us from this kind of pain!”

“Cali—” I started, but she turned her furious gaze onto me.

“*You’re* the one who told me you were glad we were ending things, so that you could go back to Ava and be happy!” she said viciously.

This hit me like a punch in the gut. I growled and took a step toward her. How could she *ever* think I would say such a thing to her?

Greyson stepped between us, a warning look on his face, but I didn’t care.

Ignoring him, I shoved past him toward Cali, who was still glaring at me.

“You think I would ever say something like that to you?” I shot back. “That I would ever hurt you like that? *Me?*”

Cali stared at me in shocked silence for a moment. She blinked, then laughed, the sound dry and bitter. “Of course I do. You already have, Xavier. Why wouldn’t I believe it was you? This wasn’t the first time, remember?”

I ground my teeth so hard my head began to ache. I needed to get out of here. The room was starting to close in, and I was feeling overwhelmed. It was like I couldn’t breathe. Cali choosing to forget me, Cali not being able to tell when someone else was pretending to be me—it was all so much, and it all came back to my worst fear. That I’d lost her. That—even dead—Adéluce had succeeded after all.

“I have to get out of here,” I muttered, taking a step toward the door. “I just…need a minute.”

As I stepped into the hall and dragged in a breath, I heard Greyson in the room, speaking to Cali.

“I’m going after him.”

I frowned. I didn’t want Greyson coming after me. I didn’t want to talk to my brother right now. Why would I? She wasn’t angry with him. Cali and Greyson were clearly fine, and seeing him would just remind me of everything that had gone wrong in my life.

I started down the hall, hoping to avoid him, but a moment later Greyson’s footsteps followed me.

Dammit.

I hesitated for just an instant. *Fuck it*, I thought. I wasn’t going to run from him. So I turned to face him.

“What?” I shrugged. “You want to fix this? Why? Isn’t it better for you if she doesn’t love me? Doesn’t it clear the way for you?”

Greyson looked at me for a long moment. Then he took a deep breath, like he was fighting to stay calm.

My heart was racing, my head was pounding, and everything in my body ached like I’d been beaten, but seeing him do this gave me a slight beat of satisfaction. It was familiar, at least, if nothing more. Pissing my brother off was something that felt normal in a world where everything else felt strange and unknowable.

But when he spoke, Greyson didn’t sound angry. He sounded weary. “You know she still loves you,” he said quietly. “I don’t really know what happened between you two, and”—he held up his hands—“I don’t *want* to know, as long as she’s not hurt. But…I do know her. And I can see that she loves you.”

Greyson’s face was pained, like every word cost him. I knew the feeling. I’d been in his shoes before, talking to him about Cali, admitting that she felt something for him. I knew that none of this was anything Greyson would say just to make me feel better. There was no way he’d be saying any of this if he didn’t mean it—if it wasn’t true.

But…that still didn’t make any sense.

I shook my head. “No, no way. You heard her in there. She *wanted* to take that potion. She wanted to forget.”

“She wanted to forget about both of us,” Greyson reminded me.

“But she was going to take it because of what she thought I said to her.” I leaned a hand on the wall of the passageway, feeling the cold stone of the keep beneath my palm. “She believed I’d say those terrible things to her.”

Greyson pushed a hand through his hair. His eyes had dark circles beneath them. The time we’d spent in the Fae world had been hard on all of us. I could see it in Greyson’s face, but I knew I looked the same.

He nodded back the way we’d come. “Why don’t we just go talk to her?”

“I don’t know,” I said uncertainly, remembering the claustrophobic feeling I’d had in that room.

“Come on,” he urged. “You’ll see I’m right.”

I shrugged. Greyson did the same, then turned and walked back toward the room. I watched him for a moment, uncertain about what I was going to do.

But what were my choices? Cali was in that room. She might have been willing to drink that potion—to cut me out of her life—but I wasn’t. She was a part of my life—and my heart—and she always would be. No matter what, I knew I was going to walk back into that room at some point.

“I guess it might as well be now,” I muttered to myself.

I took a step toward her door. I didn’t know what I was going to say to her, but I did know that we were going to need to figure something out. She needed to know the truth at least. The truth about what I did—and especially what I didn’t—say.

Greyson was a step ahead of me down the passageway, so he reached the door first. And when he pushed open the door and froze, I wasn’t sure what was happening.

“What?” I asked quickly, stepping to his side.

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. I could see in an instant—the room was empty.

Cali was gone.

My stomach clenched as I looked around, but there was no sign of her. Nothing other than—

“You smell him, too, don’t you?” Greyson asked, looking over at me.

I nodded, my eyes narrowing. “Cenwyn.”

**Episode 5424**

Cenwyn’s hand was wrapped tightly around my arm, his fingers digging into my flesh as he yanked me along the passageway.

“Let go of me,” I muttered, fighting to get away from him. I pulled my arm, trying to free myself, but he tightened his grip further, bruising my skin. He was too strong.

I flexed my fingers, trying to summon my magic into them, but nothing happened. Dammit. That same magical shield was in place, blocking me from calling forth my magic to use against him. He’d thought of everything. He’d sneaked into my room through a secret passageway that let him through one of the wooden panels next to my bed. When he’d appeared, I’d been shocked—I hadn’t even known there was a secret passageway into my room. How could I have known?

I suppose I should have checked—we were in an ancient Fae keep, after all. It had crypts, for crying out loud. It probably wasn’t the weirdest thing in the world that it also had secret passageways. But it just hadn’t occurred to me to be worried about it—until it was too late.

I’d been so shocked that he’d been about to grab me and pull me back through the passageway before I’d even been able to call out for Greyson or Xavier.

I pushed at Cenwyn again, trying to get him to let go of me, but nothing worked. He didn’t even look at me as he pulled me along. He hadn’t said a word to me. He’d only been muttering to himself:

“—just can’t rely on anyone these days,” he was saying. “Have to do everything yourself.”

“What do you even want with me?” I demanded.

He ignored that, too.

I took a deep breath. “*Help!*” I shouted. “Help me! Someone help me!”

I wasn’t sure where we were and I couldn’t see anyone around, but the keep was filled with Fae here for the peace talks, and now the wedding. There had to be *someone* who could hear me.

Finally, Cenwyn looked at me. “I wouldn’t bother if I were you,” he said, looking annoyed.

“What does *that* mean?”

“I’ve made sure no one will be able to hear you scream, so you can keep doing that if you want, but all you’ll do is hurt your throat with all that yelling. And—of course—annoy me,” he added.

I glared at him. “Are you going to tell me what the hell you want with me?”

Turning away from me again, he went back to ignoring me. He tightened his grip on me, and we continued along the passageway.

When we finally stopped, it was in front of a narrow, wooden door. He pulled it open and shoved me inside.

I stumbled from the push and tripped, landing hard with a cry of pain. When I pushed myself up, I felt pain radiating from my elbow, where I’d landed hard.

Cenwyn came into the room and stood above me, looming over me, but it didn’t seem like he was looking at me.

I gritted my teeth, both against the pain in my elbow and my anger at the situation. “*Why* are you doing this?” I asked again. “This is the second time you’ve tried to kidnap me today.”

And then—to my surprise—Cenwyn laughed. Well, the sound was laughter, but there was no smile on his face and no joy in his eyes. “Caliana, do you know how hard it is to find good help these days?”

I blinked at him in confusion. “What?”

“Nearly impossible. You ask for the simplest thing, and it’s like pulling teeth to try to get it.” He shook his head. “I just can’t understand what the world is coming to.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, baffled.

“I have tried to get to you more times than I can count,” he said, glowering at me, “and continue to be met with incompetence. So this time I had to take care of you myself. You cannot begin to understand how many wonderful plans have been laid to waste due to the ineptitude of my help.”

He was spiraling again, doing that stupid soliloquy shit he did, and I didn’t want to listen.

“Why are you bothering with any of this?” I pushed. “This seems like so much work for you, all over a little wedding. What’s in it for you?”

“Money,” he said simply. “I’m a war profiteer. I make money from the war. Money. Power. That’s what everything comes down to, dear. And your absurd marriage has the potential to bring peace, which will very unfortunately dry up my income, so I have to stop it, no matter what.”

I stared at him, shocked by the candor and simplicity of his words. He sounded so matter-of-fact, like he didn’t even care that he needed to get rid of me to make his plans work. It was disconcerting hearing anyone speak like that.

And it was the way he was looking at me, too. Not like he was mad at me, or he hated me, just like I was annoying him. Like I was a minor inconvenience. Something in his way that he needed to take care of. As though I wasn’t a real person.

It was chilling how he behaved, and how quickly he shifted between modes.

As if to illustrate this, his eyes focused on me again, turning cold and menacing, and he grinned. “And now I have you right where I want you. I’ll finally be able to be rid of you, once and for all. And the wedding will not happen.”

My stomach twisted with fear. He was standing over me, and I felt very vulnerable lying below him on the floor. Forget about magic—he could squash me like a bug if he wanted to.

My elbow was still aching, but I pushed back, as far away from him as I could get. I didn’t like the look in his eyes as he looked at me. I tried to get to my feet, but he stepped toward me and shoved me back down. He kept one hand on my shoulder, holding me down, and I felt something press against the back of my neck.

Whatever it was felt cool for a moment, then it exploded with fire, burning my skin.

I screamed and twisted, trying to squirm out of his grip, away from whatever he was holding against me, but he was strong and held me fast.

Twisting slightly, I could see that he was holding a long iron rod against my neck.

“I don’t understand,” I gasped, fighting through the pain. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why not?” he laughed, looking almost happy.

“Why are you hurting me?!” I screamed, my nails digging into his hand on my shoulder. The pain was nearly overwhelming. “Why are you torturing me? Why not just kill me? None of this makes any sense!”

Cenwyn shook his head. “Caliana, I might have agreed with you just a few short hours ago, but that was before.”

“Before what?” I panted.

He pressed the rod harder into my neck, making me scream again. The pain was blinding, and I closed my eyes.

“Before you thwarted all my plans,” he hissed, hatred threading through his voice. “Before you were just a nuisance. Now I want you to *suffer*.”

“Stop! Let me *go*!” I screamed.

“You’ll die anyway, won’t you,” he goaded me. “Of course you will. Your stupid dogs ruined everything for me. Everything has been worse since you came along, Caliana *Wrenthorn*. You and your terrible name. So why should you get an easy death when you have caused me nothing but trouble?”

I kicked at him blindly. He wasn’t expecting this, and the blow landed. I heard him grunt. This might have been a mistake, though, because he pressed the rod harder into my neck and pushed me down to the cold stone floor. He knelt on me, so his knee was pressed against my sternum, all his weight centered on my chest, pressing me into the flagstone.

I could feel the air being pushed from my lungs. I couldn’t take a breath, but I could hardly think about it. Pain did such strange things to the brain. It seemed to hijack every other sense, so all I could think about was the agonizing sting from the iron rod on my neck. The pain of that emanated out like radiating lightning.

Dimly, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I thought of Greyson and Xavier. They had only been in the hallway when Cenwyn snatched me. They must have come back to the room. They had to know I was missing. Were they looking for me?

I opened my mouth, wanting to cry out for them, but I didn’t have the breath. No sound came out. I couldn’t speak.

Cenwyn laughed again. “Oh,” he said, his voice filled with mock sympathy, “are you calling out for your mates? Are you hoping they’ll come along to save you, just in the nick of time, Caliana? Well don’t count on it,” he said, his voice hardening again. “Your little wolves won’t be coming to save you this time. Not after what I’ve done to them.”

**Episode 5425**

**Greyson**

I could hear the pounding in my pulse in my ears as I stared around Cali’s room in shock. It was empty. Cali was nowhere to be seen. She had just been here—I’d *just* been speaking to her. Xavier and I had been only feet away in the passageway outside. No one had come in or out of the door.

There didn’t even seem to be signs of a struggle in the room. I looked around, quickly scanning for anything that looked amiss. The remains of the broken glass were still there, but they looked undisturbed.

But there was Cenwyn’s stench—*that* was everywhere, so I knew he had been here.

Frustration swept through me as my hands curled into fists. If only I hadn’t gone after Xavier, I would have been there. I would have been with Cali. I could have stopped…whatever the hell had just happened.

Xavier was looking around the room. He moved to the window, testing it, but it was closed and locked. He walked over toward the bed, and when he reached the far side, he stopped short.

“Greyson,” he said sharply. “Come look at this.”

I walked over to where he was standing and looked where he was pointing. One of the wooden panels on the wall had been pushed aside.

“I didn’t even know it did that,” I muttered, staring at the darkness beyond the panel in shock. It was clearly some kind of secret passage.

“You didn’t know this was here?” Xavier asked hotly.

“No, of course not.”

“Dammit,” he growled. “That must be how that asshole got in here—”

“Which he was able to do because you were busy throwing a tantrum instead of dealing with your problems,” I snapped, before I could stop myself.

Xavier wheeled around, looking furious. He stepped right up into my face. “What the hell did you just say to me?”

I shouldn’t have said anything. I knew I shouldn’t have. I was pissed and terrified, and it had just slipped out. Xavier clearly wasn’t in the right mind to hear any of this—but, to be honest, I was sick of this shit. I was sick of Xavier’s shit, I was sick of Cenwyn’s shit, and I was sick of the Fae world’s shit. I didn’t even know why we were still in this fucking place. I just wanted to be back home—in the mortal world, on Redwood land, with Cali. Not stuck here in the Fae world, dealing with these stupid politics that I didn’t even care about.

And not dealing with my brother’s never-ending emotional issues.

“What did you say to me?” Xavier repeated, biting out every word.

I gritted my teeth. “I *said* that you should have kept your shit together. But you didn’t, and because of that, Cenwyn came in here and took Cali.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I need to know if I’m fucking hearing you right, man. Are you actually saying that this is all *my* fault?”

I opened my mouth—to tell him that yeah, maybe this was his fault—but I never got a chance. A sudden feeling of intense coldness swept over me, like someone had flung open a window and a blast of arctic air had blown in. It wrapped around me in an instant, and a second later there was a strange, tightening sensation, all over my body. My heart leapt into my throat as fear overtook me.

I had only a split-second to look at my brother and see that his eyes had gone wide with shock and fear. That’s when I knew he was feeling it, too, and that something was very, very wrong.

Then Xavier’s eyes rolled back into his head. I tried to say his name, but all at once everything went black. The darkness was immediate and complete, and I remembered no more.

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When I opened my eyes again, it was slow—and strange. I didn’t know how much time had gone by. It felt like I’d only blinked, but I had a nagging feeling that time had passed. I opened my eyes and looked around, squinting into the low light. I didn’t immediately recognize where I was, but it was dim, lit only by the light of a few burning candles.

I braced myself, remembering the strange cold and the tightening sensation, and readied myself for pain, but nothing came. I was relieved by this. I had woken up more times than I cared to remember in unimaginable agony, so I was glad there was no sensation of pain.

I blinked once more and tried to figure out what the hell was going on. Something was strange—it felt like I was missing something vitally important, I just couldn’t figure out what it was.

And then it hit me…

I wasn’t feeling any sensations of pain, but I wasn’t feeling *any* sensations at all. I couldn’t feel anything, and when I tried, I found I couldn’t move. I could blink and swallow and breathe, but I couldn’t turn my head or move my body.

Shit. This wasn’t good.

I opened my mouth experimentally. “Xavier?” I tried, and was relieved to find I could still speak. My voice was a rasp, but at least I had one.

I heard a grunt next to me, and I felt a second wave of relief that—wherever the fuck I was—at least I hadn’t been separated from my brother. That was something at least. It felt like we stood more of a chance of getting out of this together than by ourselves. Whatever *this* was.

“Xavier, can you hear me?” I asked quietly. I didn’t know if there was anyone else nearby who could hear me, too, so I wanted to be careful.

“Yeah,” Xavier grunted.

“Can you move?” I asked.

“No,” he said, his voice tight. “Not at all.” He let out a growl of frustration that sounded like it was coming from the soles of his feet. “I am so fucking over this whole Fae magic thing.”

“No arguments here,” I muttered, remembering how I’d been thinking something very similar just before everything had gone black. “Fucking Fae.”

Xavier was quiet for a moment. “Any idea where we are?”

“Nope. You?”

“None at all.”

He sighed. “Well. What the hell are we going to do now? We can’t move, we can’t fight. We can’t even see where we’re trapped. And it’s all my goddamned fault.”

I could hear the absolute misery in his voice. It was the same thing I’d heard when he’d been terrorized by Adéluce, and it brought back some bad memories.

It was my turn to sigh. I was still angry with my brother, but I knew that whatever was going on had way more to do with Cenwyn’s bullshit than it did with Xavier’s.

“Listen,” I said, trying to sound reasonable, “we don’t have time for that right now. We need to think, so save the pity party for later, okay. We’re conscious, even if we can’t move. There has to be a way out of this.” I looked around, as far as my eyes would let me scan the room, but there was nothing illuminating. Just a stone wall and the flickering light of candles. Nothing that gave me any useful information. “We have to get to Cali.”

“How?” Xavier asked. He sounded angry, but I could hear the fear in his voice as well. I felt it, too.

I thought hard, trying to fight back the panic that was rising up in me. “Okay, yeah, we can’t move. Because there’s some kind of spell, maybe?”

“Like from a witch?” Xavier asked.

“That’s not likely,” I admitted. “But Fae magic is.”

“Right,” Xavier agreed. “This place is lousy with that shit.”

“Okay, so it’s a magical issue,” I said. Talking it out was helping me think. “That’s a supernatural phenomenon, right?”

“Okay,” Xavier agreed dubiously, clearly not sure where I was going.

“So maybe if we tried to override that magic with our *own* supernatural powers, we could break whatever the magic is that’s binding us.”

“We try to shift?” Xavier asked, understanding at once.

“Yeah, exactly,” I said.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“We gotta try something,” I said. “Come on.”

Focusing all my energy, I tried to shift to my wolf form. For a moment, nothing happened, and my stomach sank. This was my only plan, and if it didn’t work…

But wait—I felt my hands tingling.

Then my feet.

It was my claws trying to push their way out of my skin. It was working.

I was about to say so to Xavier when I heard the sound of the door behind us slamming open, and I tensed.

Shit. What if it was someone coming back to finish us off?

I gritted my teeth, trying to shift faster. My arms were tingling now, but everything was moving very slowly. *Too* slowly.

My heart was racing—there was no way we’d be able to fight back.

Then a familiar voice spoke:

“There you are!”

**Episode 5426**

The shock of something cold and wet startled me awake, and I opened my eyes with a terrified gasp. I looked around wildly, my heart beating in my throat. I didn’t even know when I had fallen asleep, but as I looked into the dimness around me, I realized with a sinking feeling nothing had changed. I was still in the same tiny stone room Cenwyn had pushed me into. And worse—he was still there, too, standing over me.

My mind was a muddled mess, and I looked up at him in confusion. How long had I been asleep? Had he been there the whole time? Just staring down at me? There was seriously something wrong with this guy.

He caught my gaze and sneered. “Good morning, dear. Did you get all the beauty sleep you needed, Caliana?” he asked in a mocking tone.

My whole body ached, and my neck still stung like fire, but I bit my lip, fighting to keep from saying something smart back. I wasn’t broken—not yet anyway—but I needed Cenwyn to believe I was. I needed him to think he’d worn me down, so he might let his own guard down. Maybe then I’d be able to find a way out of this place.

I chewed my lip nervously as I thought. It wasn’t that I wasn’t terrified—I was, completely—but Cenwyn had said he’d done something to Xavier and Greyson. He hadn’t said what, but he’d implied it was something that would prevent them from finding and helping me. That meant I couldn’t just sit around, waiting to be rescued.

I shot a glance around the tiny room. I needed to get out of here and find my mates myself.

I let my head drop so my chin was resting on my chest and made a small, distressed sound in the back of my throat.

This made Cenwyn laugh.

“Well, it certainly is gratifying to see you reacting exactly as I thought you would. I just wanted to make sure you were in the right state before I went to go greet and make apologies for the wedding that, sadly, won’t be happening today after all.”

I lifted my head slightly as he stepped toward the door, so I could see when he opened it. There was a single guard on the other side, standing just to the left.

Cenwyn stepped through and dropped a hand heavily onto the guard’s shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he muttered, just loud enough for me to overhear, “she’s a barely functioning halfling. You won’t have any trouble with her.”

The door closed.

“That asshole,” I growled. “That fucking asshole.”

I supposed I should be grateful that he thought so little of me, because he hadn’t even bothered with chains. That meant my hands and legs were free. I got slowly and carefully to my feet, flinching as everything gave a powerful throb.

I stood straight and stretched, then looked at the door. The first thing I was going to need to do was get the guard to open the door.

I looked around the room, wondering if there was anything I was going to be able to use, but the room was empty. It looked like some kind of unused closet. It was small and held nothing. The only thing Cenwyn had left behind was the iron rod he’d used to torture me.

I looked at it with a groan. I didn’t want to, but if it was the only thing I had available to me, I was going to use it.

Gritting my teeth, I took a deep breath before I picked it up. The iron began to burn my skin immediately, but I had braced for it and tried to breathe through it. But I didn’t know how long I could stand it, so I needed to work fast.

I began to hit the wall beside the door as hard as I could, over and over again.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” a deep voice boomed indignantly.

I ignored the anger in the voice and kept hitting the wall, trying not to notice that my arm was going numb from the pain. I hammered hard at the wall, again and again and again.

“Oi! Stop that!” the voice called again.

I kept going.

I wondered how long the guard would put up with it—and how long I was going to be able to keep going—but I was rewarded just a moment later when I heard the unmistakable scratch of the lock turning.

Dropping the iron rod, I turned to the door and faced the guard with a grin.

“What do you think you’re doing—” the guard started, but I didn’t let him finish before I reached for my magic, feeling it tingle in my fingers.

I thought about the energy balls that Hera had taught me. Would I be able to conjure one outside where the shield was? I wasn’t sure. It felt like a longshot knowing me, but…if it would *work*…

I took a deep breath and conjured one up in my palm. I let it float as quickly as I could, so it began to orbit directly in front of the guard’s face.

In its light I saw his eyes go wide with fear and surprise.

“Wait—”

And then I let the ball burst. The blast of concentrated magic hit the guard directly in the face, and he went down like a sack of potatoes.

For one shocked moment, I stared down at him.

“I did it,” I whispered to myself. I don’t know why that surprised me so much, but it did. “I did it!” I said louder and clapped my hands together in excitement.

Then I stopped clapping, and the smile slid off of my face. I looked at the guard, who lay on the ground at my feet. His eyes were closed, and he was very still. I just hoped I’d only hurt him—and not killed him.

I held my breath for a moment as I watched him, willing him to breathe.

Then he let out a groan. I was both relieved and freaked out to hear it. It reminded me that I didn’t have much time.

I stepped quickly over the guard’s body and pushed him into the tiny room with my foot. Then I shut the door tightly, leaving him in the makeshift prison.

Looking down the hall, I checked right and left, but both directions were just long tunnels of darkness, with no illumination but pockmarks of light where there were sconces along the stone wall.

I chewed my lip as I thought. I knew if I went backward, I would end up at my rooms again. That seemed like the natural place to go to start looking for Greyson and Xavier, but I didn’t know if Cenwyn had stationed guards there, and I didn’t want anyone to know that I was roaming free, in case word got back to Cenwyn and he came after me.

*Greyson?* I called through the mind link. *Can you hear me? Xavier? Anyone? Is anyone there?*

Nothing. There was no response.

I took a shaking breath and tried not to panic. Why weren’t they answering me? Were they no longer in the keep? Had Cenwyn taken them somewhere outside this place?

I struggled against the worst of all possibilities, but it kept pushing its way into my thoughts—what if Cenwyn had killed them? He’d said they wouldn’t be able to come after me after what he’d done to them, so what had he done to them?

Had he put them back into the arena, the way he had to Greyson and Rishika? What kind of revenge would he try to enact on them? Clearly, Cenwyn was way more unstable than I’d ever considered. And he kept getting worse with each plan of his that we foiled.

My hands balled into fists as I squinted into the darkness down the passageway. I *had* to find my mates. If today was the day of the wedding, it hadn’t been long enough for them to have been taken too far away. And if Cenwyn was scrambling after another plan failed, that meant he wasn’t working off a well-designed strategy. He’d said I’d ruined his plans, which meant that this was all last minute—he was panicking. That was good.

I started moving through the halls, away from my rooms. I couldn’t risk anyone finding me there. I was listening hard, anxious to not be discovered by anyone walking the passageways. And as I moved farther away from the little prison room, the silence of the keep was broken by a series of dull thuds.

My pulse quickened, and I hugged the wall. I hoped that if anyone came by, maybe I could stay hidden in the shadows.

Then I heard voices, and they were growing louder.

I looked around desperately, hoping I could find a room or an alcove where I could hide.

But before I could find either, I realized that those weren’t just any voices—I recognized those deep tones.

My eyes went wide, and I broke into a run as I sprinted toward the sound of their voices.

“*Greyson?*” I gasped. “*Xavier?*”

**Episode 5427**

**Xavier**

I lunged forward, my jaws open wide and ready to clamp down on the throat of the guard in front of me.

After that bear shifter—Greyson’s friend, I supposed—busted us out of whatever little dungeon Cenwyn had left us in, we’d been fighting our way through the keep. The fighting had kept the first group of Fae guards we’d encountered from reupping the magical paralysis spell—though they’d continued to try. We’d fought that group off and had kept going.

Finding Cali was my only objective, but now we’d run into yet *another* knot of Fae guards. This fucking place was filled with them, and I was getting sick of it. I was quickly losing my patience, but just as my teeth closed around the guard’s neck, I looked up to see a familiar figure sprint around the corner of the passageway.

It was Cali, and she looked a lot rougher than she had when we’d left her alone in her room. Her hair was mussed, and her dress was torn. Her eyes were wide, and she had a red welt circling her neck. She stopped when she saw me, her eyes wide, taking in the wild scene before her.

*Get the hell out of here*, I told her without hesitation.

Behind me, I heard Greyson and the rest of the arena creatures Clarence had brought with him fighting hard against the Fae guards. I hoped to hell they were doing okay, but the last thing I wanted was for Cali to get swept up in any of this.

The welts on her neck looked fresh and angry, and she had deep shadows beneath her eyes. She looked exhausted, like she might collapse at any moment. The sight of her looking so injured and weak filled me with fury. What the hell had happened to her? Was it Cenwyn who had hurt her like that?

My hold on the guard tightened until I felt his spine snap like a twig in my jaws.

When I looked back at Cali, hoping she’d be heading away, I saw that she had conjured her sword and shield and was moving in to help. I shook my head. I didn’t know why I was even surprised.

*Cali, no. Get out of here!* I told her.

She ignored me, and she still hadn’t answered, so I jumped in front of her, blocking her way.

“Move,” she growled, still not looking at me. She was looking past me, at the fighting happening over my shoulder. “Move *now.*”

There was something in her voice, and I turned to see what had caught her attention. And in an instant, I saw what it was:

Two Fae guards stood before Greyson, each of them holding a silver-tipped spear, pointed right at him.

Clarence was still fighting, and as I looked, he swung his massive bear paw, swiping four of the guards out of the way. They jostled against each other as they were thrown violently into the stone wall of the passageway.

Kayin the púca was standing atop a guard, and had his razor-sharp claws dug into the skin of the prone guard’s face. The guard was screaming and batting at him, but it didn’t seem to be doing any good.

I turned back to Cali. *Stop!* I told her again as she tried to push past me.

She still didn’t answer, just switched sides and tried to step around me as she raised her sword to fight.

Frustration pulsed through me. Talking to her felt like talking to a brick wall. Why wasn’t she answering me? She could barely stay on her feet, she had welts laddered up and down her neck, and the hand holding the sword seemed to be shaking with fear or exhaustion—or both. So why the hell was she being so fucking stubborn?

*What’s your problem?* I demanded, stepping in front of her again. *Open your eyes, Cali. We’re handling this. We don’t need you.*

She finally looked at me, but it was a glaring, angry look, her brown eyes cold. *I guess that’s a feeling that’s been going around lately.*

I stared back at her for a moment, stunned by her icy, furious tone. I didn’t know how to respond to that.

She must have read some of that on my face, because her own expression softened. *I’m sorry, Xavier, I—* She shook her head*. I didn’t mean to snap like that. It’s been a really long night.*

*Yeah, for everyone*, I muttered.

She set her jaw. *Clearly. And you really need to let me help*. She looked up and her eyes went wide with fear. “Greyson!”

I spun around just in time to see the guard in front of Greyson—the last guard standing from the looks of it—lunge toward him, catching him in the face with the silver-tipped spear.

For one hopeful moment, I prayed the guard had missed Greyson completely, but then I saw the blood begin to stain his grey fur, and my stomach tightened. He’d been hit, and an instant later, he dropped to the ground.

I bounded toward him and swiped at the guard, knocking him to the ground. Clarence was at my back, and boxed at the guard’s head, knocking it sideways. The guard’s eyes crossed, then closed, and he went limp.

It was over, and I rushed over to where Greyson lay.

When I got to his side, he had already shifted back to his human form. Cali hurried over and leaned toward Greyson. We could both see where the spear had pierced his skin. There was a long, angry slash mark across his cheekbone, and though bloody, the skin around already showed signs of silver poisoning—the veins were starting to turn black. I could see it spreading as I watched.

I flinched involuntarily, knowing how the spread felt like fire beneath the skin.

Cali looked quickly around. “I need something sharp. Anything. Someone give me something sharp!”

I knelt next to her and partially shifted so just my hand became a werewolf paw. I extended a claw and used it to prick Cali’s finger.

A drop of bright red blood appeared on her finger, and she looked up, giving me a grateful look, before turning back to Greyson. She held her hand over Greyson’s wound and squeezed her finger. I watched as the blood dripped from her finger and fell directly into the gash on his face.

It seemed to sizzle for just a moment. The black veins stopped their spread, and then the wound began to heal. The skin around it lost its bright red, shiny texture as the poison was neutralized, and slowly, the skin began to knit itself back together. Now that Cali’s blood had eradicated the poison, Greyson’s werewolf body could heal itself quickly.

When his skin looked normal again, his eyes began to flutter. They opened, turning immediately to Cali.

She smiled softly and rested a gentle hand on his cheek. “Hi,” she whispered.

There was a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I looked quickly away. I was glad Greyson wasn’t hurt from the silver, but there was no reason I needed to watch that—I didn’t need to be reminded that Cali and my brother were still so closely connected. Especially now, when Cali couldn’t even tell whether she was talking to the real Xavier or a fucking Fae fake.

I gritted my teeth as anger and frustration and jealousy coursed through me. It had been a long fucking night, and this wasn’t helping one bit.

Greyson groaned and moved, trying to push himself to sitting. The poison was out of his system, but he was clearly still in some pain, and he grimaced as he pulled himself up.

“We need to get out of here,” he rasped at Cali. “We need to get you somewhere safe, love.”

I nodded. “Yeah, agreed.”

“Where?” Clarence asked.

“Out of this place, that’s for damn sure,” I muttered, looking at the Fae guards arrayed around us. We had taken this group down, but I knew there could be more coming. “Maybe we should head to the forest. Is there somewhere out there where we can hide her?” I asked, tipping my chin at Cali.

“There could be,” Greyson said, thinking. “Maybe the cave where Rishika recovered. She might be hidden enough out there—”

“I don’t know if that’s going to be secure enough—” I started, but Cali cleared her throat meaningfully, interrupting us.

We both looked over at her, and she raised her eyebrows.

“What?” I asked, feeling immediately defensive.

“I can’t go anywhere,” she said.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“The wedding is today.”

“The *what*?” I asked, flabbergasted.

“I have to get to the wedding,” she said. “It’s the safest place for me, or we’re all dead. All the Wrenthorns—”

“Cali, you have to think—” Greyson started.

“Including *me*,” she added pointedly.

I was just gearing up to tell her that I thought this was a shit idea when a voice spoke—a voice so familiar and unwelcome, it rattled me to my bones:

“I thought I told you,” Cenwyn’s cold voice cut in, “*no one* is getting married today.”

**Episode 5428**

I looked up at Cenwyn, who stared menacingly down at us. I wasn’t even surprised to see him. I knew it was only a matter of time before he found us. And with all the fighting with the guards, it probably hadn’t been that hard to track us down.

I got slowly to my feet and faced him directly. I noticed he had changed his clothes—he was wearing his formal Fae robes now. He must have gotten dressed for the wedding, which seemed particularly perverse, considering his actual plan.

He smiled at me, the expression cold and empty. I tipped my head as I looked at him. I’d never noticed it before, but his teeth were sharp and pointed, almost like a vampire. He wasn’t one—the werewolves would have been able to sniff him out if he had been—but he had their soulless, predatory nature.

I took a deep breath. I needed to focus. I needed to stay in control of this situation, so I spoke before he could.

“How do we end this?” I asked him coolly. “Your traps didn’t work, and your torture didn’t work. Whatever you do, we find a way out of it. So let’s try a different way.”

Cenwyn’s expression changed. He looked frankly surprised, like this was the last thing he’d expected me to say.

“I have to admit, Caliana, I never thought I’d hear something like that from you,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose you never struck me as particularly strong. Or smart.”

I tensed, and I could feel Greyson and Xavier—who were standing at my sides—do the same. It felt as though they were crouching, ready to jump and attack. Ready to tear Cenwyn’s throat out if I said the word. I wasn’t sure what the ramifications would be if they did that.

“What would happen if I let them attack you?” I said conversationally.

Cenwyn looked a little surprised. “I beg your pardon?”

I gestured to Greyson and Xavier on either side of me. “They would, if I let them. But I’m just not quite sure what would happen if I was responsible for your death.” I shrugged. “I’m still trying to figure out the complicated politics of this world. So I’m asking—what happens if you die? Does it matter? Does anyone care? I mean, you were willing to kill *me*, right?”

Cenwyn took a step toward me, and I held up my hand, stopping him.

Next to me I could feel Xavier quiver—whether it was with rage or anticipation, I couldn’t tell.

Surprised again, Cenwyn stopped moving and smiled at me. This seemed almost sincere, and somehow that was even creepier than his evil grin.

“Do you know, I think I owe you an apology after all, Caliana,” he said. He gave me an assessing look. “I think you might be more useful to me alive than dead after all.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but I supposed it was better than the alternative—which was what he’d been pretty clearly pursuing just a moment ago. Cenwyn was very powerful. I’d been right about how we’d been able to foil his plans over and over, but the fact remained that he continued to be able to trap us in this place like rats. Greyson and Xavier were at my side, and I knew we had Greyson’s friends from the arena as backup, but I still wasn’t sure if even all of us together would be able to take him on.

“What do you mean, more useful alive?” I asked warily.

“I mean that if you go through with this marriage to Kastian, that will put you in a very powerful position, Caliana. Very powerful, indeed. And you’ll be very well positioned to help me further grow my business.” He smiled.

I fought back a smile at his words. Cenwyn wanted to involve me in his plans? Fine. That was perfect. I would happily agree to anything he wanted…for now. And then I would deal with Cenwyn later, after I got married, and when the Wrenthorn bloodline was secure and no longer in danger of being killed off because of an ancient oath I’d accidentally taken.

*You need to be careful, love*, Greyson said through the mind link.

I heard him, but I didn’t react.

Instead, I nodded at Cenwyn. “Fine. I agree. If you want an ally in me, you’ve got one. I’ll work with you after I get married.”

Cenwyn laughed. “That’s very sweet of you, Caliana, to think I’d be willing to take your word for it.”

My heart thudded in my chest as he took a step toward me, moving so he was directly in front of me, forcing me to look right into his face.

“An agreement like this requires a Fae promise, I think,” he said quietly. “And that’s what I’ll get. A Fae promise that you will obey me once you and Kastian are married.”

I felt the blood drain from my face even as I fought to keep my expression neutral. What the hell was I going to do? My palms were sweating, but I didn’t dare try to wipe them dry. There was no way in hell I could give this bastard a Fae promise like that.

My mind was racing, searching for a way out.

But maybe there wasn’t one.

Maybe this was something I had to do, despite not wanting to… But we outnumbered him, didn’t we? And yet he approached all the same.

Maybe Cenwyn could see some of what was happening behind my eyes, because he was watching me with an expression of deep amusement. “Answer me. If you don’t, that’s answer enough.” He waved an airy hand. “I don’t know why you need that much time,” he said. “It’s a very simple question, isn’t it? Yes or no. So”—he raised an eyebrow—“will you give me your Fae promise?”

I was racking my brain but coming up with nothing. There were no answers—and I couldn’t see any way to negotiate my way out of this. As I looked into his beady eyes, I knew there was no mercy there. He wasn’t going to relent. He wanted what he wanted, and he wasn’t going to be willing to settle for anything less than my full and complete cooperation.

And what were my options? I couldn’t live like that. I couldn’t promise to *obey* Cenwyn. I could never.

I swallowed hard.

“Caliana?” Cenwyn asked. “My patience is growing thin. What is your answer?”

I didn’t have an answer. So I conjured my blade and stabbed forward, straight at him.

Cenwyn stepped quickly back, and it was close, but I missed him, my blade whispering past his dress robes.

He laughed. “I knew it!” he crowed. “I knew you were too pathetic to see real opportunity when it was staring you in the face. I knew it, you disgusting halfling! I was just giving you a chance!”

Still walking backward away from me, he raised his hands, and an instant later I was disgusted to feel something slimy crawling up my leg.

I shuddered and tried to jump away, but when I looked down to see what it was, I was horrified to see that there didn’t seem to be anything there. There was nothing but shadows.

Cenwyn laughed, and the sound was so terrifying I looked down again. And that’s when I realized—the thing crawling up my leg *was* the shadows. It was some kind of darkness, oozing from the walls and creeping toward me.

I screamed, and with the sharp cracking of bones, Greyson and Xavier shifted to their wolf forms. As one, they lunged forward to attack, their jaws snapping at Cenwyn’s neck.

But before they could reach him, he flung out another arm, and some kind of dark sludge seemed to erupt from the shadows like a geyser. It sprayed upward and wrapped around Greyson and Xavier in an instant, pulling them down to the stone floor. It immediately began to creep across their fur, threatening to cover them completely.

“What are you doing?!” I screamed.

Then, from behind me, I heard a low, agonized growl. I spun around and saw the bear shifter and the púca covered in sludge as well. They’d gotten a more thorough coating than Greyson and Xavier, and the sludge was moving quickly over them. It had nearly covered them completely.

My heart was hammering in my chest as I looked around. I had been right to wonder if we could take on Cenwyn—I hadn’t yet known the extent of his powers, and I was right to be afraid. What the hell was I going to do?

The bear gave a terrified gurgle as the sludge moved across his muzzle. He wasn’t going to be able to breathe.

I looked quickly down at Greyson and Xavier, who were trying to fight against the sludge but were only managing to make it spread faster.

“Oh god,” I whispered.

“You can save them,” Cenwyn said, his voice a taunt. “Just give me your Fae promise, Caliana, and I will let them all go.”

**Episode 5429**

I felt like my brain was about to explode. What the hell was I going to do?

Next to me, Greyson and Xavier were struggling in the muck. Greyson’s friends were doing the same behind me. None of them could move, and I was frozen in place. The sliminess was wrapping itself around my leg again.

I shrieked and pulled, trying to fight myself free, but it wasn’t working. Whatever weird shadow sludge magic Cenwyn had only tightened around me.

He was watching me struggle—watching all of us struggle—with a look of unhinged amusement on his face. He gestured around, at the muck creeping across Greyson’s and Xavier’s faces now. “It’ll be over their noses soon. Then they won’t be able to breathe. Poor, poor little puppies.”

“Stop it!” I demanded. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. “Let them go! Stop this!”

“I won’t!” he snapped viciously. He took a step forward. “Not until I get your Fae promise!”

I could feel my pulse pounding in my ears, and—in absolute desperation—I swung my sword downward, trying to cut myself free of the muck creeping up my leg.

And—to my immense surprise—the second my sword touched it, the entire shadow slime vine disappeared, vanishing in a poof, leaving my legs completely free.

Cenwyn gasped, and his eyes went wide with sudden panic. “What did you do? How—why—that’s not supposed to happen!” he sputtered.

Maybe not, but it did happen, and I had a feel for it now. I rushed toward where Greyson and Xavier lay in front of me and sliced my sword through the sludge. Like the slime vine on my leg, the sludge immediately disappeared, leaving them free and clean, as though the gross stuff had never been there at all.

They jumped to their feet and leapt toward Cenwyn.

He waved his arms, pulling up more muck from the shadows while Greyson and Xavier dodged and danced around his blasts. Cenwyn’s magic certainly slowed them down, but they were persistent and drew closer and closer to him.

He was distracted, trying to hold off Greyson and Xavier and their snapping jaws, so after I released Greyson’s other two friends, I took advantage of the opportunity. I remembered how I had gotten rid of the guard who’d been blocking my way out of my cell, and I got an idea. I let the sword disappear and conjured four energy balls. I didn’t know if I’d need that many, but I didn’t want to leave anything to chance.

Keeping them suspended in the air, I navigated them around Greyson and Xavier, who were still trying to inch closer to Cenwyn, and toward the bastard himself. I moved slowly, trying not to draw attention to myself, but keeping close to my mates for protection.

When we were only about a foot away from the Fae, Cenwyn finally seemed to notice me. He paled at the sight of the energy balls. It was clear he hadn’t been expecting this.

“No!” he yelled, stricken.

I glared at him. “Did you think I was just going to *die*? That I was just going to give up? Did you think that you could actually win this?!” I demanded.

Then, without waiting for an answer, I pushed the balls forward, releasing the magic. The energy exploded like an atomic bomb, but I funneled it toward Cenwyn, and it hit him hard in the chest, rocketing through his body like a shot.

It was a direct hit, and he went down, heavy and hard.

The sound of his body hitting the floor was sickening, and in the stillness that followed, all I could hear was my own labored breathing. After a moment, I realized Greyson and Xavier had moved to my side. Cenwyn was down, but they were both close enough their fur brushed my hands. They weren’t taking any chances.

I stepped closer to Cenwyn’s limp body. My mates followed me, and together we all stood over his still form, looking down.

It wasn’t a pretty sight.

His face was covered in harsh red burns from my magic. I flinched to see that his skin was still sizzling.

I knelt beside him and looked closely at his chest. “He’s still breathing,” I said quietly.

*Unfortunately*, Xavier added through the mind link. It was so good to hear his voice in my head that I nearly smiled.

There was an odd shuffling sound, followed by cracking, and Greyson and Xavier each shifted back to their human forms.

Greyson looked down at Cenwyn, then over at me. “Well, he is breathing, but he’s out. What now?”

“The wedding,” I said without hesitation. Then, to forestall their protests, I started in on my list of reasons why I needed this to happen. “Peace between the Dark Fae and Light Fae. The safety of the Wrenthorn bloodline. Oh, and to save my literal life. Besides,” I added wryly, “they have no idea my mind actually has an expiration date thanks to the *due destini*. Maybe this stupid curse can finally work in my favor.”

“Cali—” Greyson started, but I shook my head.

“It’s not like this is a choice I can make or not make,” I said firmly. “It’s not really a choice at all. It’s a necessity. I can’t just let my whole family die—”

“We know,” Greyson said, cutting in. “I wasn’t going to argue with you. I mean, I don’t want to speak for Xavier here, but—I get why you feel like you have to do this.” He paused and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “I hate it, but I get it.”

I let out a breath. “Oh. Okay. Good. Thanks,” I said, giving him a smile. Well, it was *supposed* to be a smile, but I think it ended up being kind of sad.

Greyson nodded. “I’m just going to see if Clarence is okay,” he said, and stepped back to check on his friends.

I looked at Xavier, bracing for him to say something. But…he didn’t. He just stood there, angled away so he wasn’t looking at me. I couldn’t bear that he wasn’t looking at me, so I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder. He tensed.

“I’m with Greyson,” he said, his voice tight. He still didn’t look at me. “I hate this, but I understand.”

I nodded, though he couldn’t see me. “I know we have a lot to talk about. I wished we had more time—”

“But we don’t,” he said shortly.

I didn’t answer.

“You three can go,” Clarence said, stepping toward us. He looked over at Kayin, who nodded. “Kayin and I will stay here and deal with Cenwyn.”

I raised my eyebrows. *Deal with Cenwyn* sounded ominous, and I didn’t want to stick around to find out what exactly they meant by that.

“Thanks,” Greyson said, clapping Clarence on the shoulder. He nodded at me. “Let’s go.”

Greyson, Xavier, and I walked back to my rooms. The walk was quiet—awkwardly so. There were so many thoughts racing through my head, but no words in my mouth. What could I say to these two men that I loved so much, now that I was on the verge of marrying someone else entirely?

When I opened the door to my room, Hera stood inside, and she looked furious.

“Where have you been?” she demanded. “And why do you look like you’ve been caged and tortured for the last three days?”

*Because I’ve been caged and tortured*, I was tempted to respond. But I knew I should tell her.

“Look, a lot has happened—"

She cut me off. “I don’t care! You are beyond late, Caliana.” She looked stressed, so I shut my mouth. I knew we only had a short time to get ready before the wedding. I’d tell her later.

Greyson cleared his throat. “We’ll see you as soon as you’re finished,” he said quietly. “Before you go to the wedding hall.”

I nodded. I looked at Xavier, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t even look at me as he followed Greyson out the door, closing it behind him.

I looked at the closed door for a moment. All I wanted to do was collapse onto my bed, curl up, and cry, but I knew that wasn’t anywhere close to an option. So I took a shaking breath and turned to Hera, ready for whatever was coming next.

A lot, as it turned out. Hera had brought a team, and they attacked, bathing, dressing, and readying me. I spent the hour trying to focus on getting ready, rather than on my mates. And it almost worked. It felt as though I had only blinked, and I was suddenly dressed, my hair was done, and Hera was guiding me out of my room and into the passageway.

“This way,” she said, her voice edged with tension. I could feel it radiating off her body like heat.

We made our way through the keep, and when we reached the large hall where the wedding was to be held, we stopped. Greyson and Xavier were waiting outside, and they both looked at me in shock as I drew near.

I pulled my arm from my grandmother’s grasp. “I need some time,” I said to her.

She gave each of my mates a wary look. “You have a few moments for a *very* quick goodbye, but that is *it*, Caliana. Our time is growing short, and the wedding must happen soon.”

I nodded. That was fine with me. I didn’t want to draw this out.

It felt as though my whole body was trembling as I turned to look at my mates, who were looking back at me as though they’d just seen a ghost.

I took a shaking breath. “When this happens, I don’t want either of you there.”

**Episode 5430**

Greyson’s eyes widened, and he shook his head. “What are you talking about?” he started. “How could you ask us not to be there—”

I raised my hand to stop his protests. “I want you to listen to me,” I said as firmly as I could manage. “Both of you.” I took a deep breath, trying to call up as much inner strength as I had left. “I have to go in there and marry someone I don’t love—someone I barely know. And I know I won’t be able to go through with it at all if I know you’re in there watching me. And I *have* to go through with it. You know that.”

Greyson looked at me for a long moment. His expression was dark and his eyes stormy, and after a moment he reached for me, pulling me to him. He hugged me tightly, and I could feel the rapid beat of his heart. “I don’t know if I can just let you go,” he said roughly.

I pulled away and looked up into his face. All I wanted to do was reach up and kiss him. All I wanted to do was tell him that I was going to be with him forever. But that wasn’t true, and if I gave in now—if I let myself hold him for even a moment longer—I didn’t think I’d be able to do what I knew I needed to do.

So I pulled myself from his embrace. “I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

Looking stricken, Greyson’s arms dropped to his side. He nodded once, then turned away.

My heart ached, as though it had ripped in two.

I turned to Xavier. He was watching me, and I could see the pain in his blue eyes. Pain that *I* had put there. I bit my lip. I wanted to tell him everything—how sorry I was for not knowing immediately that it wasn’t him talking to me. How could I have ever thought he’d say those things to me? I wanted to tell him how sorry I was for kissing him and then fighting him. And for all the reasons we hadn’t been able to be together. But I suddenly found that I couldn’t seem to say any of it.

I wanted to do something, so I reached for him, but Xavier took a step back, away from me.

He shook his head. “I—can’t,” he said haltingly.

I nodded. I understood what he meant. It was all just so much. But before I could say or do anything, he turned and strode away.

Greyson looked after his brother for a moment, then back at me. He started to reach for me, then stopped himself. He shook his head, then turned and followed after Xavier.

My chest burned like someone was reaching inside and pulling out my still-beating heart.

The doors to the hall opened, and Hera’s face appeared. She looked tense and gestured me tersely inside.

I looked over and caught the very last glimpse of Xavier and Greyson, just before they disappeared around the corner.

Then I turned to the open door of the hall. Steeling myself, I took a step into the room.

The room was a round space, with curved walls. Fae nobility sat in a full circle, all facing an open space right at the center of the room. There was a spiral walkway starting at the door where I stood, leading through the crowd of Fae in ever decreasing concentric circles, until I would reach the officiant, who stood in the center of the open space.

The gathered crowd had been murmuring, but everyone fell silent when I stepped in.

I looked around. The room was filled with faces I didn’t recognize, and I clenched my jaw, willing myself not to cry.

Hera was next to me, and she gave my elbow a squeeze. It wasn’t painful, but the message was clear. “Start walking,” she ordered in a whisper. “The music will begin when you do.”

I nodded and stepped forward, moving along the spiral. As I looked into the space, I could see Kastian. He was standing in the center space next to the officiant. He was wearing some kind of dark blue Fae garb. Like robes, but more fitted. He looked handsome as ever, and he wore a golden chain around his neck and had diamonds dripping down his shoulders.

As I neared the center of the room, I saw that the officiant was not a Fae, but actually a large, anthropomorphic frog. The frog stood on its hind legs, almost like a person. I’d thought it was a person, which was an easy mistake to make, as it was wearing a large, white wig and had a tiny pair of gold spectacles perched on its nose.

I stared at the frog, fascinated. If I hadn’t been feeling so anxious, I would have been enchanted. The frog looked like a being straight out of the kind of bedtime stories I had loved as a child. I used to beg for stories with animals doing normal things—shopping, going to work, throwing parties for friends. Looking at the distinguished frog, I could almost hear my mother’s voice as she read aloud to me.

I really wished she was here with me now—

But no. That was an unkind thought. My mother had been through something like this herself. It would be cruel to put her through it again. Though she, at least, had some love for Kadmos.

No, it was probably better that she wasn’t here to see me give up my life like this.

My chest was still aching from saying goodbye to Greyson and Xavier, but when I thought of my mother—and my father—it gave another painful throb. When would I see them again? Would I *ever* see them again?

I blinked fast and made a mental note to ask Artemis to tell them everything, so I wouldn’t have to. I didn’t think I could stand to see how disappointed they’d be.

Now that I thought of Artemis, where was she?

I looked around the crowd again, scanning for her face, but I didn’t see her in the crowd of people staring up at me. Where was she? Of all people, I did expect that she’d be here. Though maybe it was like Greyson and Xavier. Maybe the three of them were somewhere together, trying to figure out a way to get me out of this.

Maybe they would burst through the doors at any moment to rescue me. To whisk me away from this horrifying choice.

I kept walking but shot a hopeful glance at the doors.

The doors stayed firmly closed. No one was coming to save me. This was happening.

Heart pounding, I looked forward. I was only a few feet from Kastian now. The diamonds on his shoulders shone, nearly blinding me as he shifted between his feet.

Every eye in the place was on me. I was walking, but it felt as though I was moving through quicksand. Every step cost me.

Kastian and the officiant stood upon a raised platform, and there were three steps leading up to it. I was going to have to walk up.

I paused at the base of the steps, my heart thudding. It was only three steps, but it felt like the hardest thing I’d ever done in my life.

I was about to get married. To Kastian. And once I did that, everything would change. Nothing about my life would be the same. I would never be able to go home again—not really. Cenwyn had said that I’d be in a powerful position, but I didn’t believe that. I knew I would just be a cog in the Fae political machine. No matter what, there would always be a wall between me and my old life. Everything about my old life.

That meant no more college, no more Lola, and no more Greyson or Xavier.

I looked down at the steps. There were only three. I was three steps away from throwing my life away. Forever.

I stepped up. One step. Two steps.

My hands felt slick with sweat.

Kastian put his hand out, reaching for mine.

I was doing this to save my family. I had to remember that. I was saving lives. My own included. I had to focus.

I stretched my hand out to grasp his, but before I could reach him, another hand cut into my view, taking Kastian’s hand.

I looked up, surprised, then gasped when I saw who stood in front of me.

“Artemis?!”

I stared at her, shocked. She was wearing a beautiful white dress. It was airy as a cloud, which was in sharp contrast to the look in her eyes, which was steely and determined. She held onto Kastian’s hand tightly, but her eyes were on me.

“What are you doing?” I asked quietly.

“Don’t worry, Cali. I’ve got this from here.”

“What?” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

Artemis gave me a half smile. “This is *my* wedding now.”

**Episode 5431**

Wait, this was Artemis’s wedding? Since when?

I stared at my sister in shock, my mouth literally hanging open. Artemis was staring right back at me, her expression unreadable. She was behaving as if she hadn’t just appeared in a beautiful white gown and taken my place as Kastian’s bride to be.

This couldn’t be real.

Part of me was thinking that she was going to burst into laughter and tell me she was joking…or that this was just a ruse to create a distraction so that one of my mates would appear and whisk me away—but neither of those things happened. Instead, Artemis was looking at Kastian, and he was looking right back at her like this was the most normal thing in the world.

Once the shock wore off, I finally found my voice. “Artemis, you can’t be serious, you’re *not* doing this—”

“Take a step back, Cali,” Artemis interrupted. “Thank you for acting as a witness, but I’ll take it from here.”

I glanced around at the crowd. The anticipatory energy had shifted into something else…confusion mostly. There were murmurs, some bewildered protests, whispered conversations. I could see dark looks on some of the faces out there as well. Some people weren’t happy that this was turning into a spectacle.

I knew I needed to tread carefully, so I did as Artemis said and took a step aside to stand just behind Artemis and Kastian. There was no use making any more of a scene than Artemis already had. I had more questions, but I could tell by the look on Artemis’s face that she wasn’t going to answer them.

The frog officiant was obviously hard to surprise. He’d barely flinched when Artemis joined us on the altar and he had already started up again, speaking in a clear, loud tone. “Artemis and Kastian, you are to repeat your vows after me.”

Kastian and Artemis nodded, and to me, they looked at ease, like they’d planned this from the beginning. And if that was the case, why the hell did Artemis keep her plan a secret from me?

The officiant turned to Kastian first. “Kastian of House Haseneau, do you promise to honor, cherish, respect, and pledge your devotion to your new bride for as long as you may live?”

“I do,” Kastian said. He flashed his annoyingly charming trademark smile of his. He obviously wasn’t surprised by this either, which meant that my suspicions about him and Artemis being in on this together were probably correct.

The officiant turned to Artemis. “And do you, Artemis, Heir to the Wrenthorn and Mauvais—”

A loud cry of anger from the back of the room interrupted the officiant. Everyone spun around to see who’d cried out at the mention of Artemis’s name.

“We have been deceived!” someone was shouting. “We’re being made fools of by the Wrenthorns, the Haseneaus, the Mauvaises, the whole lot of them! This is not what we were promised!”

An older Fae broke free of the crowd and strode forward, his features marred by fury. I didn’t recognize him, but he seemed important.

“This was meant to be a union between the Light and Dark Fae, not whatever this is.” He gave Artemis a dismissive wave. “We don’t even know if she’s who she says she is!”

I frowned and stepped forward, intending to tell the man not to insult my sister, but then someone else started yelling.

“We know who she is, and at least Artemis is a full Fae and not some half human!”

Cheers of agreement rose from the crowd. “Exactly! At least she’s a full, pure Fae!”

“Hey!” I shouted. It was interesting how quickly so many of the Fae had turned on me, finally admitting that they didn’t consider me Fae enough for this union in the first place.

Artemis turned to address the crowd, a charming smile not unlike Kastian’s plastered on her face. She put a hand on my wrist and gave me a quick grin before she started to speak. “I knew that in doing this, I would cause some surprise and frustration, but we should all think about what this means. With me on this altar and making my vows to Kastian, you have a Fae-born personification of the connection between Light and Dark. The blood of both runs through my veins. Is that not the point of this wedding?”

Again, a rush of conversation whipped through the crowd as people mulled over this newest idea. I could tell that the section who wasn’t too keen on my being part human were already sold on the idea.

“The wedding should continue!” someone shouted.

“She is a true Fae, and she’s right, her Light and Dark Fae heritage is a boon to this union!” This was from one of the Light Fae elders.

The older Fae man looked irritated, annoyed that not everyone shared his outrage. But he seemed to sense that this wasn’t the time or place to fight.

I was impressed with my sister. I’d seen a lot of sides to Artemis, but I’d never seen my sister play an entire room like this. It was amazing to watch.

While some people still didn’t look convinced, the majority looked like they were ready to accept this change in plans. Most of them were probably as tired of this war and this summit as I was and eager to fix a halfway decent ending onto the whole thing.

The old man grumbled but turned around and returned to his spot in the crowd. Most of the murmurs had stopped, and now everyone was looking straight ahead, their eyes on Kastian and Artemis.

I watched as my sister took Kastian’s hand again and indicated for the officiant to continue with the ceremony.

“Go ahead, sir, I think we got all the objections out of the way. Let’s end this war and bring these families together,” Artemis said with a smirk.

*This is so out of left field! How did this happen? When did Artemis decide to do this? Why wouldn’t she have told me this was her plan? It would have saved me a lot of stress and heartache… And I can’t just stand by and let my sister take my place, force her to exist as a pawn in a political game, can I?*

Although now that I’d seen how Artemis handled this crowd, I wasn’t sure how much of a pawn Artemis would be. She would stand up for herself no matter what, and she wasn’t about to let anyone push her around. If anything, the Fae people would need to fear Artemis’s new station when and if she really went through with marrying Kastian.

The loud sound of a gong pulled me out of my thoughts, and then the officiant was shouting, “The houses are joined!”

I’d been so wrapped up in my panic about this sudden and crazy change of plans that I’d missed the end of the ceremony. I watched, flinching, as Artemis and Kastian kissed. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was real—that they truly cared about each other.

Together, they turned to face the crowd. Kastian lifted his arms, prompting a slew of vines to shoot up from the ground in intricate patterns, bright pink and red and white roses blooming among them. I had to admit that it was beautiful, and I wondered how often Kastian had used his powers for good like he did today.

Even Artemis seemed wowed by it. While she and Kastian weren’t exactly behaving like excited newlyweds, they weren’t acting like they hated each other’s guts, either.

*I can’t get over this. Kastian looks genuinely happy! Knowing him, it’s because he just secured the power he’s been seeking. But this is still so strange!*

I had to admit that I was overcome with relief. I didn’t want my sister trapped in a loveless, sham, political marriage any more than I wanted to be in one, but I *was* happy to have dodged that bullet.

The crowd *oohed* and *aahed* when Artemis conjured up her bow and shot several arrows in quick succession. They arched up into the sky and pierced through Kastian’s flowers, which were now over a story high. On contact, the arrows exploded in a shower of petals and bright sparkling magic. I’d never seen anything like it.

Despite the earlier tension, the spectacle moved the crowd, and there was a loud cheer. People were shaking hands, Light and Dark Fae literally reaching across the aisle to congratulate each other on the war being over.

*I guess it’s hard even for pissed-off Fae to stay angry at a wedding—especially a wedding that means this much for the Fae.*

I took the opportunity to step to my sister’s side. I leaned over to whisper in her ear, even though the place was so loud with merrymaking that no one would have heard me anyway.

“Artemis, why the *hell* did you take my place?”

**Episode 5432**

**Xavier**

Greyson and I were on the other side of the keep, wishing we were anywhere else. We’d tried to stay near the wedding hall itself, but the guards had come along and ushered us away. It seemed that not only was our mate about to marry someone she barely knew for reasons I still didn’t support, but we weren’t even allowed to be there to witness it.

That was probably smart on the guards’ part. If they’d allowed me in there, I would have done everything in my power to stop the ceremony.

It was all so fucking maddening. I didn’t want to listen to the guards and was more than willing to tear them apart if it meant I could at least be near Cali, if it meant that I could make one last-ditch effort to convince her that this was a mistake, but Greyson wasn’t having it.

“We have to respect Cali’s decision, Xavier, even if we don’t like it,” he said as we paced up and down the deserted hallway. “We can’t screw this up for her. It’s important to her, and we need to support it.”

I bit back a snide remark, wondering why he was being all Zen about this when he had to be as pissed about how things had turned out as I was. Maybe he thought he’d win extra points with Cali if he went along with it, while I didn’t want Cali to think that I supported this for even a minute. And what did he think would happen to him and Cali once she married the Fae? Was he content to be her side plaything like Kastian had suggested?

*There’s no way in hell I’m on board with that. I’m her mate, I’m not going to be playing second fiddle to a guy she doesn’t even love.*

I was going through it all in my head, wondering how the hell we’d ended up here. Cali was really about to marry some other guy—some Fae—all to save a world she didn’t even belong in! The Fae reminded her at every step that she wasn’t really one of them, even though they thought she was suitable enough to repair their broken society. It was such a mess that my head was spinning from how absolutely absurd this whole thing was.

I’d spent so much time worrying that one day, Cali would marry Greyson and I would be left out in the cold, when the entire time I should have been worried about Cali coming back to the Fae world and getting roped into a political marriage.

I’d thought we were finally making our way back to who—and what—we used to be. I’d hoped that the relationship we used to have would become a reality again, and then she’d gone and brought up my duty to the Samara pack and Ava, and I’d gotten so upset with her.

But maybe I got so upset about her mentioning it because she wasn’t wrong. I did have responsibilities back home—both to the Samaras and to my Luna, but as far as I was concerned, that could be worked out once Cali and I recommitted ourselves. All I needed was to know that she was willing to give things another shot, but I wasn’t going to get that reassurance by standing idly by while she committed herself to someone else.

Getting Cali back was the only thing that mattered to me, and now I had to contend with her getting married?! I lifted my hands to my face and groaned into them in frustration.

“Why are we just going along with this stupid plan? This is bullshit, Greyson, and you know it. Cut the diplomatic act, brother. We can’t let this happen. Let’s blow through those guards and stop this before it’s too late!” If I could get Greyson to see things my way, maybe there was still a chance that we could stop this.

Greyson nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it, too. I think we may have agreed with Cali too easily. I was just trying to do the right thing and be on her side, but the more I think about it, the more it tears me up.” Greyson shook his head and looked back down the hall the way we had come. I could tell he was itching to get back to the wedding, same as I was.

“Of course it tears you up! She’s getting *married* in there, Greyson. This isn’t a false alarm. There’s no way I can leave her. I have to get in there.”

Greyson was nodding now. “I think you’re right. We should try to stop this. We can’t let her sacrifice her life for these Fae. We’ll find another way. We always do.”

Together, we rushed back toward the hall where the wedding was taking place. I was a little worried that we were too late, but it hadn’t been that long—it couldn’t have ended yet. Still, I picked up speed, pushing myself to move as fast as I could. Now that Greyson and I were on the same page I knew we could turn things around, we just needed to get in there and interrupt the ceremony.

*I need to make things right with Cali. How can I do that if she’s stuck in some Fae marriage? I want her to remember who we were together. I need her to understand that I’ll do anything to get back to where we were before. Sure, my life is different now, but we’ll find a way to be together—there’s no other option.*

*I can’t live without her.*

Suddenly, the smell of smoke hit my nose, and I stopped short. Greyson stopped, too, and he had his head cocked to the side like he was listening to something. “Do you hear that?”

I listened and could hear an angry voice, though I couldn’t make out what was being said.

“I think I smell…” Greyson trailed off and started moving in a different direction. I followed, and we turned the corner to find the centaur holding a flaming torch while talking to a small group of creatures.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” Greyson called out. “You’re not supposed to be in here!”

The centaur spun around to look at us, and his face immediately folded into a scowl. “You? What are you two doing here? This doesn’t concern you, *wolves*! This is about us taking down the disgusting Fae aristocracy once and for all! I wouldn’t expect outsiders to understand that, nor do we need you here getting in our way!”

I had no idea what was going on, but I didn’t need much to understand that the centaur wanted to do something violent to a room full of Fae—which wouldn’t have irked me that badly if Cali weren’t in that room, too. We were only a few feet away from our goal, but time was ticking down, and I didn’t have time for this. If I needed to go through this centaur to get to Cali, I would.

I bared my teeth and stepped forward. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, horse guy. Put down the torch and get the hell out of here. And take your little friends here with you, or I’m going to get very…reactive.”

Greyson put a hand on my shoulder to try to calm me down. “I think we may be able to talk them down instead of fighting,” he said under his breath. “Wait.”

Greyson took a step toward the group. “I get your frustrations—they’re more than fair,” he said to the group. “I have no love for the nobility in that room.” He focused on the centaur, the obvious leader, the one who had the others riled up and ready to go. “But do you really think that this is the way to do things? The Fae nobility have vast numbers—and this is a big event for them, so there are a hell of a lot of them in there right now. Do you really think that such a small number of you can take on all of them?”

A loud gong sounded, and one of the creatures behind the centaur yelled out, “That’s it! We have to move now! The wedding’s over, and we can’t let them leave the room. Forget the wolves, it’s time to take back what’s ours!”

A buzzing sound filled my ears.

*The wedding is over? It’s really done? Cali did it. She went through with it. I can’t believe it.*

Next to me, Greyson’s face was ashen, and he frowned. He opened his mouth to say something, but then the centaur was on the move, his torch held high as he bounded toward the wedding hall. The other creatures were right on his heels, letting out a battle cry as they charged the double doors.

The centaur was out for blood—he was going to set the whole room on fire and kill everyone.

**Episode 5433**

**Artemis**

Standing beside Kastian and looking out at all the cheering Fae, I couldn’t help but flash back to all that had brought me to this moment.

*Hera stood watching me with her arms crossed. She looked like she was seconds from telling me to get out, but she didn’t, and I plowed ahead with what was on my mind, hoping that I hadn’t come to see her for nothing, and that she would at least try to see things my way.*

*“Hera, I was doing some thinking and…I think that I should be the one to marry Kastian. I’ve already talked to him about it, and he’s on board with it… I mean, it was actually his idea in the first place.”*

*Hera was already shaking her head. “Absolutely not! There’s no way I can allow that.”*

*I pushed back. “But why not? I’m a better candidate than Cali, and I know this world better than she ever could. And if anyone could come out of this arrangement relatively unscathed, it’s me. I understand Fae politics and society in a way that Cali doesn’t. And I’m more equipped and more willing to play the game.”*

*Hera was still unconvinced, but at least now it seemed like she was listening. She sighed and turned away from me. “I wish there was any other way to stop this war. I almost can’t believe we’re here again after the debacle with Kadmos and Orla’s marriage, but alas, here we are.” Then she turned back around and gave me an appraising look. “I wonder if you should try to use your manipulation magic, just make everyone think that you married Kastian, when that’s not really the case.”*

*“No, I don’t think it’s worth the risk. That’s the reason Kadmos was so feared, and I don’t want that. No, I’m willing to do it, and I think it’s our best shot at getting Cali out of this while achieving the peace the Fae world needs. I will marry Kastian. It’s the easiest and safest choice.”*

*Hera still looked skeptical, but I pushed forward.*

*“All I need is for you to go along with it. Your support will mean everything, both during the ceremony and in the aftermath. There are going to be a lot of confused people, some angry, and you’re so good at making people see things your way, so maybe you can do that for my marriage to Kastian?”*

*Here let out a heavy sigh. “Fine. I’ve expressed my doubts, but if you want to do this, I won’t stop you. Do you think we should tell Cali? I imagine she’ll be very surprised at first, but I think she’ll be relieved, too.”*

*“No. If I tell Cali, there’s no way she’ll let me go through with it. It has to be a surprise. I’ll have plenty of time to give her the reasons why after the ceremony is over.”*

*“I’m considering stopping you same as Cali would. As your grandmother, as someone who cares about you, I don’t want this for your future, Artemis. But if you’re insisting…”*

*“I am.”*

*“And if you’ll be staying here, I’ll do everything in my power to find Kadmos. You deserve at least that much for the sacrifices you’re making for the Wrenthorns.”*

And now, with only a few words, the wedding was done. I couldn’t believe how fast it had all gone. One minute I was nudging Cali to the side so I could take my place beside Kastian, and the next he and I were bonded for life. Hera had backed me like she’d agreed to, hadn’t thrown herself between Kastian and me to stop it, and now we were officially married.

*This is not how I saw my life going, and he is most definitely not the person I envisioned sharing this moment with. I can’t believe I just married a Fae noble I can barely stand.*

My mind couldn’t help but go to Rishika, but my heart clenched as it did. It hurt too much to think of her. If she regained her memories, this was going to be difficult to explain.

*It’s easier to block my feelings for her out.*

We weren’t on the dais anymore, but Cali was still standing close, glaring at me. I was avoiding her gaze, just like I’d avoided answering her question. I knew that no matter what I said in explanation for marrying Kastian in her place, Cali was going to disagree. She hated being cut out of a plan and left in the dark, and I’d really done that this time around.

Kastian’s hand was gripping mine tightly, and I turned to look at my…*husband*?

*What the hell. This is so weird.*

He muttered something out of the corner of his mouth, and I leaned closer to hear better.

“I said, *smile*!” he hissed. “At least pretend like you’re happy about this.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I snapped back to reality and smiled wide like Kastian as we walked through the spiral of guests toward an exit to the room where we would change for the reception. Unsurprisingly, Cali was right on our heels. I knew she wasn’t going to let up until we finally had a conversation.

The second we made it into the room, I dropped Kastian’s hand, and Cali exploded.

“Artemis, what did you just do?!” She was beside herself, just like I knew she would be. “Did you really just go up there and *marry* Kastian right out from under me?”

“As much as I’d love to enjoy this battle royale between siblings, I’m going to excuse myself to freshen up and get dressed for the coming festivities. You two have a good chat, okay?” Then Kastian added to Artemis, “And don’t forget our agreement. We have to present a united front; I’m not going to be doing all the work on my own. That was our plan all along, right?”

Without another word, he slipped out through an adjoining door, leaving Cali and me alone. I almost wished that he’d stayed to help protect me from Cali’s simmering wrath. All I could think was that if I were Cali, I’d be happy that I saved her ass. Also, there was no doubt in my mind that Greyson and Xavier were somewhere close by flipping out about all this, and now I’d saved their mate from getting married while making a move I hoped would help the Fae world.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I said. Cali looked like I’d just stabbed her in the back instead of just saved her from a wedding to a man she truly didn’t want to be with.

“Because I can’t believe you would do this without talking to me!”

I sighed. “I did this for you, Cali. Isn’t that obvious? I did it so that you can go back home to your life. I know the Fae world. It makes more sense for me to fully immerse myself in it. And I need to stay and find Kadmos, anyway.”

“There are much better ways to get immersed in the Fae world while looking for your father without marrying someone you barely know! Is there a way we can get you out of this?”

“I expected nothing less from you, sis, and I’m happy for you to try…but not here. You need to go home while you still can.”

Celeste came walking in without knocking, interrupting us. She was pissed, but before she started talking, I turned back to Cali.

“Cali, you need to go. You don’t need to be here for this.”

“I’m not leaving! We still need to talk about this—how to fix this!”

“Cali, now’s not the time. Just go. Please.”

Cali looked hurt, but she finally turned and left through one of the side doors.

Celeste barely waited for the door to close before she lit into me. “How could you go behind my back and pull this?! You did the wrong thing, Artemis. I didn’t want Kastian’s family to gain more power, and what did you do? You handed it to them on a silver platter!”

“Calm down, Celeste. Now that we’re married, we’ll have a direct hand in what he does. And he doesn’t have that power without me, right?”

Celeste nodded, calming a little. “I suppose you’re right about that, but I don’t like that you acted on your own. You didn’t even give me the courtesy of a heads-up, just so I wasn’t shocked out of my mind when I saw you go up there.” Celeste shook her head. “Years of careful work down the drain. I was working on getting out of this whole thing completely, and now one of my own is tied to that family forever!”

I tried not to let the irritation show on my face. Apparently, I was the only one who understood why my marrying Kastian was so much better than the alternative. I wasn’t like Cali—I didn’t have two mates I was tied to, I didn’t have ties to the human world, and I wasn’t afraid of being stuck here. I did what I had to do, and I really couldn’t see what the big deal was.

Celeste was still ranting, and I was about to push back when one of the doors flew open and Adair stepped through.

He was furious.

“Artemis, what did you do?”

**Episode 5434**

**Greyson**

I rushed forward, shifting into wolf form as I moved. I wasn’t about to let this attack happen—Cali was in there.

*Cali is* married. *I can’t believe it. My Cali is married to another man. A man who isn’t me.*

All I’d wanted for so long was to make things official between Cali and me. For her to choose me against all odds so that we could embark on the next step together: married life. But now that had all been snatched away. She was another man’s wife, now.

I cleared all the bad thoughts out of my head. It wasn’t helpful to get wrapped up in any of that right now. I needed to focus on stopping this centaur and his minions from hurting anyone. If I did that, I would take everything else in stride and figure out what to do about Cali once I saw her face.

I approached the centaur cautiously, knowing that he might strike out at any second. I had no love for the centaur, but I truly did understand where he was coming from in wanting to attack the Fae aristocracy.

Having spent more time than I ever would have wanted amongst the Fae nobility, I could see how insufferable they were. It was probably a nightmare having them in power, having to live by their rules and be subjugated by them. But Cali mattered more than these creatures’ activism. I couldn’t let them get near her.

“Stop the wolves from interrupting us!” the centaur shouted. “Don’t let anything stand in our way! Take them out!”

Behind me, I heard Xavier fighting with the creatures. I couldn’t tell whether he was winning or losing, but there weren’t many of them, and I knew my brother could hold his own.

I focused on the centaur, knowing that if I took him out, the others would probably disperse without their leader—that and he was the one holding the torch. That fire in his hand was the one thing that could level the playing field and give them a fighting chance against the Fae, and he knew it.

I lunged, locking my jaws on the centaur’s hind legs, trying to trip him up. The centaur seemed unfazed and kicked me off, then with speed and efficiency, he used his hind legs to kick out and drive me away, all the while edging closer to the wedding hall.

I avoided the powerful strikes and put a little distance between us. I wasn’t going to be much use to anyone if he managed to knock me out cold with those hooves of his. Still, I couldn’t give up. I needed to put an end to this before something happened, before all this political unrest spilled over and caught Cali up in the confusion and she was hurt by it. She was already wrapped up in marrying someone over it; I wasn’t going to allow her to lose her life, too.

Trying a different tactic, I jumped up and closed my jaws around the torch in the centaur’s hand. I landed several feet away from the livid centaur with the flaming torch clasped safely between my teeth.

*Without his fire, he’s lost his advantage.*

The centaur screamed in anger, and I dropped the torch to the ground, stamping out the fire with my paws before shifting back to human form.

“Let it go—now is not the time for this fight!” I said to him. “There are innocent people in there, too, and I won’t let you hurt them.”

The centaur glared at me. “This isn’t over. You’ll regret this, I promise you that.”

I couldn’t bring myself to care if I would regret it or not. The only thing that mattered to me was keeping Cali safe.

Xavier had run off the rest of the centaur’s crew, and he shifted as he came to stand beside me. The centaur looked between us with hate in his eyes before turning and galloping off.

“This place blows,” Xavier said. “Come on, let’s go find Cali.”

My heart swelled with excitement knowing that we were going to go see Cali—but the excitement was short-lived. When I really thought about it, I had no idea what to expect now. This was all so strange…so unprecedented. But I was surprised that despite knowing the wedding was over and that Cali was married…

“You know, I thought I’d feel different once all this was said and done,” I said. “I thought that when and if Cali ever married someone other than me, I’d feel some pull in the mate bond.” I stopped, tried to sense if something did feel different, and I just hadn’t noticed.

*No. I feel the same. I can feel Cali in me same as always. Nothing has changed.*

Xavier gave me a look, but I had no idea what he was thinking.

“You know, I thought that might happen when Ava became my Luna, but it didn’t,” he said.

I hadn’t even thought about that. “Interesting. I definitely would think that you having another Luna would have changed your mate bond with Cali…”

But then I realized something. “If Cali is really married to someone else now, if she’s actually going to make a life here now without me…what am I going to do? You’ll be fine, you have Ava, but who do *I* have?”

A crushing sadness was starting to flood into me. What was I going to do now? Just go back to my world without Cali with my tail between my legs?

Xavier let out a surprised laugh, but there was no humor in it. “I have Ava? Do you really think that makes this hurt any less? Ava is… She’s not Cali.”

I didn’t say it, but I couldn’t agree with my brother on this one. He was downplaying his relationship in a major way. As much as he wanted to pretend otherwise, he did have someone else. He had an entire life and another pack to go back to. I had the Redwoods, and I missed them and cared about them, but being back with them in the Redwood pack house would be a constant reminder of what I had lost. I had no one else, and I never would. Cali was it.

We ducked into a room and found some clothes and then finally made our way toward the hall. The doors were open now, and the people were streaming out. There were so many people around that try as I might, I couldn’t pick up Cali’s scent.

Xavier and I pushed our way through the crowd, not speaking, not looking at each other, both of us tense and probably trying to mentally prepare ourselves for what we were about to witness.

But then I noticed that there was also a strangeness in the air that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I would have expected some excitement, happiness, relief even, from the others that the war was over and the wedding they’d been so hell-bent on forcing had finally occurred, but the energy was weird.

There were some people who seemed happy, excitedly talking amongst themselves as they gathered in the halls, but for the most part, there was just…strangeness.

Xavier and I walked by groups of people who were muttering amongst themselves, looking around shiftily as if they expected something to happen.

As I looked, I even noticed that there remained a distinct separation between the Dark and the Light Fae. I would have thought they’d be mingling more, enjoying their newfound unity. What was the point of Cali marrying Kastian if it didn’t really make any difference? Shouldn’t there have been a lightness in the air? Excitement at the very least?

“Something’s wrong,” Xavier said, giving voice to my thoughts. “Something happened in there, but hell if I know what.”

I started to push my way against the crowd and into the room, ignoring the irritated looks and exclamations of disgust from the Fae. I even ignored the snide remarks some of them made about wanting these wolves out of the Fae world for good—I didn’t care. They had never been welcoming before, so why would they be now, especially since the person we were here for was now married into their ranks—and linked to one of their nobles?

I’d almost made it in when a few guards cut through to stand between Xavier and me and the interior of the wedding hall. I stood up tall and peeked over their heads, but I didn’t see Cali, or even Kastian for that matter, anywhere. There were only hordes of Fae and their strange moods and expressions.

One of the guards pointed a sword at my chest. “Move along, wolf, this is for Fae only. Per the head of the family, you’re no longer allowed to be in the presence of the Haseneau family. Don’t make us call in reinforcements.”

I turned to Xavier, who was baring his teeth at the guard, though he was refraining from attacking.

“This is bullshit,” Xavier hissed.

“It’s Kastian,” I replied. “He’s cutting us out.”

**Episode 5435**

**Artemis**

I was shocked but so glad to see Adair again. I needed advice and help from someone I could actually trust, especially now. He was angry—like pretty much everyone else was—about being blindsided by my marriage to Kastian, but I knew that he would be there for me anyway. And it wasn’t like Adair was ever really in a good mood, so his anger wasn’t that much of a shocker.

“Adair, where did you come from? Did you see the wedding? Have you been here the whole time?”

But Celeste interrupted. “A-Adair? What the *hell* are you doing here? *How* are you even here? Why would you just show up now after I’ve been looking for you for so long? I’ve had to do everything on my own…”

I could tell from the way Adair was looking at Celeste that he was in no mood to deal with her right now, but still, he turned to her and gestured between them. “I’m not sure why you think I owe you any answers, Celeste. This was never a real marriage. I never wanted any of this. And now Artemis is in the same mess because of your machinations.”

*Are any marriages in the Fae world what they seem? Does anyone marry for love here? I’m starting to think that they don’t.*

“Those machinations are the only reason the Mauvais name survives to this day, no thanks to you,” Celeste shot back. “So don’t you dare come in here and judge me when you have no idea the lengths I’ve had to go to to keep things together here while you went running off doing who knows what!”

“I was avoiding being dragged back here by the Dark Fae court!” Adair shouted. “Don’t act like I’ve been on vacation.”

I understood Adair’s frustration, but I couldn’t argue with Celeste about what she’d done here in the Fae world. As much as Celeste has pissed me off, she’s done everything in her power to do right by the family. I understood why Adair had been away, but that didn’t mean that Celeste was automatically in the wrong for sticking around and dealing with things the best she could.

Adair shook his head. “I came here both to get Artemis and to tell you that being married is no longer an advantage for me and hasn’t been for a long time. We need to dissolve this marriage. It’s not like you ever needed me for any of this. And now that Artemis has found herself in this new…position…she can use you as her advisor if that’s what she wants.”

Celeste seemed shocked by Adair’s last admission, but it actually sounded pretty good to me. Before either Adair or Celeste could say anything else, I cut in.

“I actually need both of you. I know that neither of you are happy about my marriage to Kastian, but I know that I’ll need the benefit of both your knowledge and care if I’m going to survive all this.”

As each moment passed I was feeling a little more panicked about what my life was going to be like now as Kastian’s wife. There were no illusions between Kastian and me, at least. This marriage was for show only, and we both knew that. I wasn’t expected to perform all the wifely duties—unless we were in public and needed to put up a proper front—but that still didn’t mean that things were just going to go back to normal for me.

My entire life had changed. Hopefully Adair and Celeste could soften the blow of that.

Adair was frowning, but he was nodding, too. “I’ll help any way I can, Artemis. You know that.”

“And now that you’ve returned, Adair, are you going to tell people that you’re here?” I asked him. “Can you stop running?”

“Provided the divorce goes through, I see no reason why I can’t. Now that you’re married to Kastian, you officially outrank me, and I no longer have to deal with the responsibilities of being the sole heir. I can come out into the open again. And if you do need me, I can be here to help you.”

Celeste turned to glare at Adair. “Even if we do divorce, it’s still a reality that I’ve been here working in the system, making connections, performing these machinations. I’m *sure* that Artemis will need me as well.”

“And like I said, I have no problem with that,” Adair said. “As long as we operate as associates and you respect me, there’ll be no problems…but I know that giving respect is hard for you.”

The tension was so thick, I could almost see it hovering between them. I wondered if this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Would the two of them even be able to work together? Or would they be at each other’s throats the entire time and bringing me into their disagreements and drama? They had history, and from the looks of it, none of it was the good kind.

“I need a moment to think. Can you leave me?” I asked them. Their role in my new life could be figured out later. Right now, I just needed to clear my head—though I doubted that was going to happen anytime soon.

Adair and Celeste agreed, and finally I had a moment to myself.

Now that I had time to process it all, the events of the day washed over me. It was overwhelming—shocking—how much things had changed in such a short time. I was actually *married.* Not for one second did I think that my journey back home to the Fae world would end up like this.

I fell back on the couch and wondered if I’d really thought all this through the way that I should have. I was so concerned with saving Cali and how marrying Kastian was the only possible way to do that, but was it?

*Of course I didn’t think this through. I was desperate to save Cali, and I did the only thing I could think of. Kastian suggested it, and I rejected the idea at first…until it seemed like the only solution.*

But was there anything else I could have done? Something short of *marrying*?

Now that I was married to Kastian—someone I didn’t even really like, let alone love—what was I going to do? What did this mean for me? Just how much was my life going to change?

What about Rishika? What about getting her memories back? What about what we were? I wanted that back one day…didn’t I? How was I going to now?

A knock on the door interrupted me, and I called for whoever it was to come in.

I was shocked to see Marius standing in the doorway.

“Should you really just be going around knocking on doors?” I asked him.

Marius grinned. “It’s not like anyone’s looking at me right now. They’re all pretty preoccupied with the wedding of the century. Between the bride switcheroo that happened at the eleventh hour and everyone trying to figure out if they should all still be fighting each other in the middle of all this confusion, I’m moving around with freedom, and no one’s batting an eye.”

I threw a pillow at him. “Shut up! But good point.”

“I know!” Marius laughed, but it didn’t sound real. I could tell that he wasn’t as okay as he was pretending to be. I stood up and took his hand.

“Tell me what you’re thinking right now, and don’t lie.”

I was afraid to hear it but wanted to know at the same time. Marius was someone I cared about and trusted, and other than Cali, one of the few people who I was worried about in the aftermath of this.

Marius smiled sadly. “I’d never lie to you.” He sighed. “So, I would be lying if I told you I was having a good day. But I understand why you did what you did. You sacrificed yourself for the greater good—the good of your sister and of the Fae world.” He looked away and then back at me. “But…as long as I can still be near you, I guess I’ll take what I can get.”

My stomach twisted, but I ignored it. I had enough going on without thinking about how this new marriage of mine was going to affect all the people I *actually* cared about.

*Why is the thought of Marius hurting over this giving me even more anxiety? Did I think about him when I agreed to marry Kastian? No, I didn’t think of him or Rishika. I was thinking about Cali only.*

I stepped away to compose myself, not willing or able to get into a conversation with him right now about where we stood. I was still trying to figure out where I stood as a person in this world with a *husband*.

“What did you need, anyway?” I asked him. “Why did you come to see me?”

Marius’s face grew even more serious. “You need to come with me. It’s Rishika—her memory’s coming back.”

**Episode 5436**

I stared at the closed door in front of me, my mouth ajar.

*Did Artemis seriously just…make me leave? What the hell?*

I didn’t know what was worse—that Artemis had pretty much just kicked me out, or that I still hadn’t gotten any real answers. I still couldn’t wrap my head around how and when Artemis had decided this for me. Or the fact that she felt she *could* decide this for me, and act accordingly.

*And now my sister is married to Kastian, and I’m stuck here.*

*Yeah.* That *is the worst part of all of this.*

Artemis did this *for* me. She made this incredible, selfless sacrifice so I wouldn’t have to. Which meant this whole thing was basically my fault. I’d failed her. *I* should be the one married to Kastian, and *she* should be the one with her freedom. This was all totally backward!

Since I couldn’t very well stand in front of a closed door all day long, I stormed off around the corner and ran directly into my grandmother. If anything, my fury doubled upon seeing her. “Grandma!” I snapped. “Did you know about this?! Did you know Artemis was going to do this?”

Hera gave me a long look, like she was trying to decide the best way to respond, and my stomach sank. I’d come to understand my grandmother well enough by now to recognize when her Fae mind was at work—and that usually happened to be when she was about to tell me something she knew I wasn’t going to like to hear.

*She knew. She absolutely knew!*

She nodded, confirming what *I* already knew. “I did.”

*Did everyone in this stupid keep know about this plan but me? Were they all in cahoots and content with keeping me in the dark until the very last moment?!*

Anger coursed through me, so fast and powerful I could barely speak. I was practically shaking with fury where I stood. “*How* could you let this happen? You just doomed Artemis to a lifelong sentence as Kastian’s wife!” I shook my head. “What could she have been thinking? What were *you* thinking?!”

Despite my fury and the stern talking-to I’d given her—surely the strongest way I’d ever spoken to my grandmother—Hera just shrugged. For a moment, my vision went red. *Does nobody care about Artemis but me?!*

Hera frowned, and I realized I’d spoken aloud. Shouted, actually.

“Caliana, please. You’re making a scene.”

My eyes widened. “Are you shitting me?”

My grandmother’s frown deepened. “I know you’re worried about your sister, but Artemis did make the strongest argument in favor of this plan. I don’t like it either, for the record. When we embarked upon these peace talks, it was never my intention to send one of my granddaughters off to be married—”

I cut her off. “So how did you let this happen then? If you hate this so much, how is Artemis married to Kastian right now?”

“She’s a better option than you were for this kind of thing. She knows it. I know it. There was no arguing with her. Artemis knows and understands the Fae world far better than you ever could. She is much more likely to learn to thrive in this situation than you would.” She got a wistful look on her face and lifted her hand to gently tuck a lock of loose hair behind my ear. “And now I can at least send one daughter back to Orla, even if she’ll still never forgive me for this. Maybe this will even get Orla to come back and see me, if only to give me hell for letting Artemis go through with this.”

The sudden realization hit me so hard it nearly knocked the wind out of me. *Oh my god. I’m going to have to tell Mom that Artemis got married.*

I gasped. “She’s going to be so furious! I can’t go back home to that!”

For just a moment, a tiny bit of envy flashed inside me. Artemis was the one who’d married Kastian. Now *I* was the one who had to give our mother some of the worst news of her life. There was a whole new reason that we never should have switched roles.

My grandmother, ever helpful and empathetic, just shrugged again. “What’s done is done. Now our only path is to move forward, and that’s what I’m going to do. Just as I’ve always done.”

“How comforting,” I said flatly.

“Caliana, whether you like this or not, we only have one path, and that’s moving forward with our lives. That’s what Artemis will be doing, and that’s what I’m going to do as well. Just as I’ve always done. And, if we’re lucky, in the end, this may truly end the war, and Artemis’s sacrifice will be worth it.” A small smile curved her lips. “I am glad it wasn’t you, though.”

And with that, Hera walked past me and disappeared into the wedding crowd. I watched her go, my stomach twisting.

My grandmother wasn’t wrong—about anything she’d said. Artemis truly was better suited for this task. She knew more about this world, and she was a better fit to play the game of Fae politics. She knew better than anyone just how cutthroat the Fae could be. But…it wasn’t Artemis’s role to play. Not without talking to me about it first.

“Cali!”

I turned to see Greyson running toward me. Before I could fully process it, he scooped me up in his arms, wrapping them tightly around me. My heart started pounding in anticipation, and I pressed my face into his shoulder, breathing in deeply. This was the comfort I needed right now, when my world had suddenly been turned upside down.

“Are you okay, love?” He pulled back so he could look me in the eyes. “What happened? Did something go wrong?”

I swallowed back the emotion clogging my throat. “I’m so glad you’re here. Nothing went like it was supposed to.”

His brow tightened. “What does that mean?”

“Artemis took my place,” I blurted, a few tears slipping from my eyes, from relief or despair, I wasn’t sure. “She married Kastian.”

His jaw dropped. “Wait. So, you’re *not* married? I’m not losing you?”

Despite everything, a smile tugged at my lips. “I’m still yours.”

Several emotions rushed across his face before he dipped down, his lips descending onto mine. He kissed me like he was trying to brand his mouth onto mine. Like, having faced the very real prospect of losing me, he was making up for lost time, making certain that I could never be taken from him again.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned into it, savoring the feel of him against me, his lips moving with mine. I was still absolutely horrified that Artemis had gone through with the marriage, but I couldn’t help feeling thankful to be here with Greyson. It was a huge silver lining to everything going so horribly wrong. I still had my mate. I could still be with Greyson. This awful world wasn’t taking me away from him. I could still kiss and touch him whenever I wanted, however I wanted.

After a while, we broke apart, our lips swollen. Greyson pressed his forehead against mine. “I love you so much. I’m sure you’re feeling a lot of things right now, but I’m just so happy that we can still have each other.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

“So what actually happened?” he asked.

I told him everything: how I made it to the dais only to find Artemis dressed to the nines and waiting to take my place. How she’d taken control of the wedding and had married Kastian instead of me.

Greyson huffed out a breath. “Why didn’t anyone tell us about this plan? Why did we have to go through all of that agony? Why put you through that?”

My heart ached hearing how hurt he was. “I wish I knew. Maybe they were worried about the rest of the Fae not wanting Artemis. Maybe they thought if they switched at the last second, it would minimize the unrest? Hera knew, and I’m pretty sure Kastian knew too.”

“That bastard.” Greyson growled. “We thought he was trying to keep us from you. Xavier’s looking for you, too. We thought we’d split up to cover more ground. What do you think we should do now? Does this mean the peace talks and everything are over? We can go home? I’d love to just get the hell out of here—”

I cut him off. “I can’t go home. Not yet. I can’t let this marriage stand. Artemis isn’t safe here. She can barely control her own life. There are so many people who will be trying to control her—Kastian, Celeste. Oh!” A lightbulb flicked on in my mind. “That’s what we need to do. We need to go back to the beginning. We need to find a way to break Artemis’s Fae promise to Celeste.”

# **Episode 5437**

**Artemis**

I didn’t bother asking questions. “Take me to Rishika,” I told Marius.

He didn’t move.

“Well? Let’s go,” I demanded.

“I just want to make sure you understand this might take a minute because the werewolves aren’t exactly allowed in here. Do you have time to wait while we coordinate? I know you’re…” His eyes flashed around the room. “Important.”

I felt self-conscious. “I’m still me,” I said weakly. “But I guess you’re right; I don’t have a lot of time to be away from things. But I need to talk to her. I’ll make it work. Just…let’s hurry, okay?”

Marius gave me a strange look, one I couldn’t quite suss out, but in the end he nodded. “Okay.”

He led the way, and I glanced at his profile as we walked alongside each other. We might be on the way to a reunion with Rishika, but I couldn’t deny I was glad when Marius had walked through the door. There was just something about him… I felt better whenever he was near me. And with the wedding ceremony still fresh in my mind, and the incredibly huge task I had ahead of me, and the weight of the future of the Fae world on my shoulders, I’d take all the comfort I could get.

Marius led me to a small courtyard, the entrance to which we’d accessed through an unobtrusive door tucked into an alcove. I’d probably passed by this place a hundred times during my stay at the keep and had never noticed it was here. If there was any place within the boundaries of the keep that was safe to meet Rishika, it was here.

He stopped just short of the threshold and looked down at me. Suddenly, his words from a few moments earlier echoed back to me. *I just want to be near you.*

I liked being near him too.

I tilted my head up and he cupped my cheek, caressing it softly. The air between us grew heavy with anticipation, and I found myself tipping my head back the slightest bit in invitation. Then, to my shock, Marius stepped back and gestured to the courtyard ahead.

“As much as I want this, you have someone waiting for you,” he said, his voice low. Regret seasoned his tone, but there was a gentleness in it too. Like he couldn’t bring himself to be bitter, even if he wasn’t getting what he truly wanted in this moment.

My cheeks heated, but I forced myself to nod. I turned toward the courtyard, took one step, and then turned back to Marius.

“Thank you,” I said. Those two words had never seemed so inadequate for all the meaning I hoped to imbue into them.

Marius just nodded. “Go.”

I turned back to the courtyard and walked inside.

Rishika stood at the far edge of the courtyard, her back to me. She glanced over her shoulder at my approach, then turned her back again. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, and she didn’t say anything as I took a few steps farther into the courtyard.

Everything about Rishika’s posture and mannerisms screamed pissed off and closed off. I’d become a little more used to the latter—losing her memory had put her at odds with me and my own selfish desires more often than I liked to admit. But hadn’t Marius said she’d asked for me?

I straightened my shoulders and cleared my throat. “Um, hi.”

She didn’t say anything. Didn’t so much as twitch. I thought I might have seen her shoulders tighten imperceptibly, but otherwise, it was like speaking to a stone. Even the air in the courtyard felt awkward. Heavy.

*Okay, so basic greetings are off the table. That can’t bode well.* I sighed. Clearly, I needed to take the lead here, but I had no idea what I should say. *I’m here? I came as soon as Marius told me? What do you remember? Do you still love me?*

*I still love you.*

The silence lingered between us still, and Marius’s concern about me not having time for this took on a new meaning. I shook myself. *It doesn’t matter. None of the Fae* *nobility bullshit matters right now. Not as much as Rishika.*

“So you remembered everything?” I forced myself to spit the words out. They were probably wrong. Probably not the right balance of curious and supportive. But anything was better than that heavy silence.

Rishika finally turned to face me and shook her head, her arms still crossed tightly over her chest. “I remembered *something*. It’s about that guy, Cenwyn. Back from when I was in the arena. There was a fight; Greyson was there, and a fawn. It was brutal.” She seemed to shiver. “There was so much violence. I’m usually good in a fight, but I couldn’t even hold my own in this one. And then Cenwyn took me—”

“I knew you could handle it. You’re a survivor—” I tried to tell her, but she cut me off, holding a hand up.

“I’m not looking for affirmations or pity. I just wanted to tell you all of this because it seemed important.”

“Oh.” I deflated a bit. “Right.”

“I remember him keeping me in some dark place,” she continued. “But while I was there, I heard Cenwyn having a conversation with someone about the Dark Fae mafia. About Hans being murdered.”

My brows rose. “Hans? He said that name?”

She nodded. “You know it?”

“Unfortunately.” I sighed. I remembered speaking with Greyson about Hans. He was a Dark Fae mafia member in the human world.

*Fuck. Cenwyn’s reach is even longer than I anticipated.*

“And…that’s all,” Rishika said, clearly taking my silence to mean I was expecting her to have remembered other things.

I nodded, my mind still spinning with what she’d said. Clearly, Cenwyn’s connections to the Dark Fae mafia were the important part—that made him an even more formidable foe than any of us could have imagined. And yet…that wasn’t the part my mind was stuck on. The mere idea of Cenwyn hurting Rishika, of making her fight for his own fucking entertainment, was enough to make me see red.

*That fucker is going to pay for what he’s done.*

“It’s not much,” Rishika continued. Now she seemed to be the one looking to fill the silence. “But I knew it was still important, even if it might interrupt your *big day.*”

The snark in her voice pulled me out of my thoughts. *She looks pissed off.* And she sure as hell sounded pissed off. *Why is she angry?* A thousand possible reasons rushed to my mind, and most of them were my fault.

I reached for her hand. “I’m glad you’re starting to remember more things,” I said gently, squeezing her fingers. “I just wish the memories that seem to be coming back now weren’t so painful.”

She snatched her hand back with a glare.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “If you’re worried about Cenwyn—”

“You think I’m worried about him?” She scoffed. “That asshole will get what’s coming to him. He’s got enough enemies now that I’m sure it’s only a matter of time.”

“Then what are you so angry about?”

“I can’t believe you would just up and marry someone without talking to anyone about it first!” she roared.

“Oh.”

Hope bubbled up inside me, despite the thousand reasons I knew better. *Is she…jealous?*

I snuffed out the thought, and all those warm little bursts of hope with it. Rishika didn’t remember us. Why would she be jealous? And sure, we’d hooked up here in the Fae world since she’d lost her memory, but we weren’t together. At the rate things were going, Rishika and I would never be together again. So she couldn’t possibly be jealous.

I pushed all those tempting thoughts away. “I know—it’s…a lot. It’s a big change in the plan. But not having a large group involved was crucial for the plan to succeed. The more people who knew, the more opportunities there would be for the whole thing to fail and for Cali to end up married to Kastian.”

“You talk about that like it’s some awful thing, but you’re the one who chose to butt in and marry him. If it’s so awful, how could you do that? And without telling anyone?”

I sighed. “It was just something I had to do.”

Rishika stilled, and her expression crumpled.

Warning bells went off in my head. “What is it?”

“We’ve done this before. You’ve done this before.”

I frowned. “Um…I’ve never married anyone before. Maybe you should lie down? I can have Marius take you back to the camp to get some rest. I’m sure it’s a lot for all these memories to come rushing back…”

But Rishika wasn’t listening. She shook her head and let out a shaky breath. “You’re *leaving* me. I came all this way to help you, and it’s like you’re saying goodbye to me *again*.”

# **Episode 5438**

**Xavier**

I raced through the west side of the keep, trying to find Cali. Anxiety gnawed at my gut. Something had gone terribly wrong in that ceremony room, and now Kastian was cutting Greyson and me out. Just what the fuck had happened in there? And where the fuck was Cali?

I’d tried several times to reach out to her through the mind link, but there was no answer. I didn’t know if she was just ignoring me, or if there was some kind of magical Fae block connected to the marriage ceremony, or— Fuck, I had no clue, which was the problem! I didn’t have the first idea where Cali might be. I hadn’t seen her in the room where she was married, and I hadn’t seen her milling about with the wedding crowd after the fact.

*Cali, where are you?*

I rounded a corner and slammed into Artemis’s bounty hunter friend, Marius.

“Oof!” He caught himself before hitting the floor. “You pack quite a punch, you know that?”

I eyed him. He was standing outside a small door that seemed to lead back inside the main ceremony chamber. He looked strangely put out. His joke fell flat, even to him, and he didn’t seem the slightest bit annoyed that I’d pretty much plowed into him.

Curiosity nagged at me, but I didn’t actually care enough to ask. Not while Cali was missing. After all, I barely knew this guy. “Have you seen Cali?” I asked. “Do you know where I can find her?”

Marius shook his head. “I lost track of her in the excitement of the wedding. I saw her for a second, but then they announced the bride and groom and houses joined, and who knows where she went after that.”

Strangely enough, Marius’s already forlorn expression seemed to darken when he mentioned the “bride and groom.”

*This Marius guy doesn’t seem too pleased about the wedding either. That’s funny—I didn’t think Marius even knew Cali all that well. When would they have had time to become friends?*

I shook off the thought, and the small flare of jealousy that accompanied it. “What happened in that room?” I asked. “Greyson and I weren’t allowed in. They wouldn’t let any non-Fae through the doors.” I bit back a snarl. *Fucking Fae.* I couldn’t believe Cali had signed up to spend the rest of her life amongst them.

Marius straightened, his eyes widening. “Wait…you couldn’t get in? So you don’t know?”

“Know what?” I snapped. My anxiety was through the roof, and Marius was only stalling my search. If he didn’t tell me what the fuck was going on—and soon—he was going to have bigger problems than being sad about Cali’s wedding.

“Cali didn’t marry Kastian,” Marius said. “Artemis took her place and married him instead.”

Shock rattled through my body, followed by sweet, sweet relief. “Cali’s…not married?”

Marius shook his head. “Not to Kastian or anyone else in that room.”

“I—” I cut myself off. I wanted to shout, *scream* in excitement. If Cali and Kastian hadn’t married after all, that meant that my relationship with Cali wasn’t over. We still had a future. We still had everything.

And I really, *really* needed to find her.

I clapped Marius on the shoulder, probably a little too hard, but I was too excited to contain myself. “Thanks for telling me.”

With that, I ran off to continue my search. My mind raced in time with my footsteps through the keep. *Where the hell could Cali be?* Now that I knew she hadn’t gotten married, the entire keep—save for that damn ceremony room—was a possibility.

*Maybe she went back to her room to rest? Or would she be with Artemis?*

Then again, if Artemis had been the one to take the bullet and marry Kastian, she was probably with him and the rest of his family behind closed doors, wasn’t she? In the end, I decided to try Cali’s room first and expand my search from there. The fact that I didn’t know where Artemis’s room was in the first place made my decision for me.

I veered away and hurried to Cali’s room. It took me a few minutes to make my way through the winding halls of the keep, but I eventually arrived at that familiar door. I was out of breath when I knocked, and all the air sputtered out of my lungs when the door swung open and Cali stood there in front of me, unmarried.

*She’s mine. She’s mine. She’s mine. She’s mine. She’s mine.*

The words ran on a loop through my mind as I pulled her into an embrace. My arms wrapped tightly around her, and I took a beat to simply press my face into her hair and breathe her in. I couldn’t believe I’d nearly lost her to that asshat Kastian. But she was here, and she was safe, and she was mine again.

And nothing in the world had ever felt so right as having her there in my arms.

*This is how it should always be. Me and Cali. Together.*

The weight of her against my chest was the most soothing thing in the world, and I felt my heartbeat slow. That tight knot of anxiety loosened and dissipated completely.

Someone cleared their throat—loudly—behind Cali. I stepped back to find Greyson there. *Of fucking course he’d already be here.*

I didn’t miss the fact that he’d failed to mind link me that he’d found Cali. The selfish bastard had let me run around the keep in a frenzy just so he could have Cali all to himself.

Greyson wasn’t quite glaring at me, but he didn’t look pleased to find me wrapped around Cali. *Too fucking bad.*

“I’ll give you two a few minutes,” he finally said. He gently brushed Cali’s arm as he moved past us out the door. “I’ll be just outside.”

I pushed the door shut on him and turned to pull Cali into another hug. *Good fucking riddance.*

“I just heard the news,” I said, still holding onto her. “You’re free. I’m so glad you’re not going to be stuck here after all.”

Cali stiffened and pulled away from my embrace. She stopped a few feet away, her expression pained. “*I’m* not happy about it. All this means is that Artemis now has to go through everything in my place.”

I didn’t know what bothered me more: that Cali had just stomped all over my relief, that she’d pulled away, or that she was looking at me like I’d confessed some horrible sin. It all bubbled up, and I blurted out, “Can we not even take a single fucking moment to be relieved that you didn’t marry that asshole? Can we not at least have that?”

She glared, which only pissed me off more. “How could you even say that? Don’t you understand what Artemis just signed up for?”

I couldn’t help myself. I was still aching from our earlier fight, and now Cali couldn’t spend a single second with me, just happy that she could still live in the same world I did? She wanted to act like I was some monster for being happy that she was free, even if it meant her sister wasn’t.

Hell, maybe that did make me a monster. But I couldn’t find it in me to care. Which was probably another strike against me. So the hell with it all.

“I shouldn’t be surprised you want to focus on Artemis and ignore all the shit going on between us, should I?” I said. “This is just another way of avoiding the real problem. This isn’t about you getting married or not getting married. Or whatever the hell Artemis chose to do. This is about you and me and your inability to deal with your feelings.”

She stared at me, gobsmacked. “And what the hell do you mean by that?”

“Come on, Cali. You know exactly what I mean. You’ve been avoiding me and avoiding dealing with our issues, avoiding dealing with the fact that *you couldn’t even tell that someone was pretending to be me*. All that shit that guy said to you, you were so ready to accept that I’d said it.” I shook my head. “And I get that this isn’t a good time, but will there ever be a good time to talk about it? I don’t think so. And, more than anything else, it’s just because you don’t want to.”

She frowned. “That’s not fair.”

I shrugged. “I just miss when things were good between us, and I want to try and have that again.”

“Think about just how long it’s been since things were actually good between us, Xavier. Can you really blame me?”

“I thought things were getting better. I thought we’d started trusting each other.”

She shook her head. “But that trust is tenuous. It’s not strong.” She sighed. “I’m not blaming you for the choices you made because of Adéluce, but the fact is: I got the rug pulled out from under me once already. I have to be prepared now, because I don’t know if I can survive another betrayal.”

**Episode 5439**

Hurt flashed across Xavier’s face, and I immediately regretted my words.

“I mean, it’s not that I *blame* you,” I rushed to add. “I know you were in an impossible situation, and you did the very best you could. I understand all of that logically. It’s just…my mind is ready for it to happen again, you know? I can’t help it. As much as I want to trust you and move on, I keep finding myself waiting for the other shoe to drop. It’s just a survival tactic, I guess. A defense mechanism.” I waited a beat to see if he had any response to this terrible confession, but he just stared at me with that same brokenlook. Like *I* was the one who had betrayed *him*.

“For what it’s worth, this isn’t easy to admit to you,” I said, desperate to ease his pain in any small way I could. “I never want to hurt you, Xavier. And I don’t want any of what I said to be true…but it is. And there’s Ava. She’s your mate. Your Luna. How am I supposed to reconcile that?”

“Fuck, Cali.” He ran a hand through his hair, frustration radiating off him in waves. “I’m not gonna lie and say that I’m okay with anything you’ve just said, but I can’t say I don’t understand where you’re coming from either.”

Some of the anxiety knotting my stomach loosened. “Really? You— you’re not mad?”

“At you? Never.” His hands twitched like all he wanted was to reach for me, to close the distance between us, but he held his ground. “At Adéluce? That fucking witch didn’t suffer enough.” He blew out a breath. “This is the reality that she created for us, and she did exactly what she set out to do. She…she broke us.”

I flinched at his words, but again, there was no arguing with the truth.

“That was what she wanted—to break me. *Us*. But,” he added, “that doesn’t mean we can’t be fixed. I know it won’t be an easy journey to fully regain your trust, but it’s something I’m still determined to do. It’s what I’ve been trying to prove to you. Is that—” He sighed. “Is trusting me again something you think might be possible?”

Slowly, I nodded.

His shoulders slumped in what looked like relief. “Okay, then. Good. Then that’s what I’m going to do, no matter how long it takes. I’m not giving up on us.”

My chest warmed at his words. Even though the deck was stacked against us, even if, at times, I couldn’t see a way out of what Adéluce had done to us, it still felt good to hear him admit all this.

“I do want to trust you again,” I said. “And it means a lot to me that we can talk about it like this.”

He looked so disappointed, even though it was encouraging to me that we’d come to an understanding. I wanted to hug him, to comfort him, but I held myself back. I’d just spent all this time putting up boundaries. I couldn’t set them aside just to make him feel better. I knew he wanted to be more than friends with me. He’d said as much. It would be selfish to seem like I’m giving into that side of things…

“I hope we can get back to where we were,” I said. “But I know it will take time. And until we do, we should work on staying friends instead of anything more… Is that okay?”

I watched my words hit him. He looked like they physically pained him, but after a beat, he nodded. “Okay.”

Greyson’s voice slipped through my mind. *Can I come back in?* Relief rushed through me. Here was my escape from this tense and painful moment with Xavier.

“I don’t think there’s anything more we can say about this,” I said as gently as I could. “And I do want to talk to you both about what happened today.”

Xavier huffed. “Greyson’s already wanting to come back in, huh?”

I nodded. I could understand his frustration, but I wasn’t going to take the bait and argue. I mind linked back to Greyson. *It’s all good. Come on in.*

Greyson came back in a few minutes later, and I took those few minutes to fill Xavier in on everything that had happened—and hadn’t happened—at the wedding.

Xavier’s expression was solemn and closed off when Greyson came in. Greyson glanced at me, his brows lifting. *Everything okay?*

I gave him a weak smile. *As okay as it can be.*

Xavier cleared his throat. “I think we’re all on the same page now. As great as it is that Cali didn’t end up marrying that asshat, it’s not great that Artemis took her place. So…” He looked at me. “If you want to break this Fae promise, where do we start? Do we need to talk to Celeste? Or maybe Adair might know how to break it?”

I’d thought about this a bit during my frantic ruminations. “Actually, I think we need to start with Artemis and get her on board with this plan. She’s got this idea in her head that all I have to do now is head back to the human world and pick up with my life, but I obviously can’t do that.”

“Obviously,” Xavier said dryly, exchanging a look with Greyson.

I glared at both of them, and Greyson glanced back at me with a *Who, me?* expression. I shook my head. “Anyway, I need Artemis to understand that I can’t just leave her here to deal with all of this alone. So let’s go find her, and hopefully we can come up with a way to break the promise from there.”

Together, we walked silently to the large courtyard where the reception was being held. I could feel both my mates’ eyes on me during our journey, but I tried not to think about it. I had more important things to worry about than my mates’ desire to take me back to the human world. They would just have to deal with it.

Two guards flanked the entrance to the courtyard, and they stepped in our way as we tried to enter.

“Only Fae are allowed to attend the reception,” one of them said. “Lady Caliana, you may enter, but your…*companions* will have to wait outside.”

I scowled. “That’s not going to happen. As the heir to the Wrenthorn family, I demand that you allow my companions to enter the party with me. If you don’t, I will personally make sure to tell my sister who was responsible for keeping my companions away from her celebration.”

The guards exchanged a look, then seemed to decide it wasn’t worth the potential headache to keep us out. They stepped aside, and we continued into the party. We’d only made it a few feet into the courtyard when I spotted Artemis across the way. I turned to make my way toward her—

And was stopped by Kastian stepping into my path.

Behind me, Xavier growled at my ex-fiancé. I mind linked to him. *I can handle this.*

I straightened, looking down my nose at Kastian, even though he was a couple inches taller than me. “I hope you’re not getting too used to this. I’m going to get Artemis out of this sham wedding.”

Kastian just smiled. It was so fucking irritating.

“Did you not hear me?” I asked. “I’m going to make sure this marriage doesn’t last.”

“Oh, I heard you,” he said simply. His smile didn’t fade a bit.

I frowned. “How can you not care? Why would you keep Artemis in a fake marriage if you don’t even care if you’re with her or not?”

He shrugged. “It never much mattered to me who I ended up with, so long as she was powerful, a Wrenthorn, and easy on the eyes.”

Greyson and Xavier stepped up on either side of me, towering over Kastian and growling low in their chests.

“Ah.” He raised a hand. “My apologies.”

And with that half-assed apology, he disappeared into the crowd. I glared at his retreating form before continuing my way toward Artemis. It took a while to find her again—she must have gone elsewhere while I was busy with Kastian.

Finally, I found her on the edge of the party, looking shaken.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, alarm bells ringing in my head. “Did Kastian do something to you?”

“What? No.” She shook her head. “I just spoke with Rishika. She’s starting to remember things, and she told me something about Cenwyn being connected to the Dark Fae mafia in the human world. It’s…concerning. That’s all.”

I could tell Artemis was keeping some things close to her chest, but I didn’t press her for more details. “Well, about that. Greyson, Xavier, and I already handled Cenwyn.”

Artemis’s eyes widened. “You what? Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

I gave her a dry look. “Are you really asking me why *I* didn’t tell *you* something?”

“Fair point.” She sighed. “But I’m asking now: Tell me everything.”

So I did. I told her about the arena creatures and the fights. I tried to skim over the violence, but Artemis immediately zeroed in on me. “Wait, are you telling me that you were tortured under my nose? By Cenwyn?”

“Yes?”

“You’re going back to the human world—it’s not up for debate.” She raised her voice to call out, “Someone to bring Cenwyn to the keep *immediately*!”

# **Episode 5440**

**Artemis**

I was almost vibrating with fury. *How could Cenwyn have just taken Cali? Again?!* That bastard had taken her from right under my nose—just like he’d taken Rishika—and tortured her. And all for some petty desire to retain his riches.

Money. Power. That was all he cared about. It was all half the Fae nobility seemed to care about. Cenwyn had already done the unforgivable by taking Rishika and putting her through hell for his own perverse entertainment. He’d warped her mind and ruined her memories of me, maybe permanently. He’d taken Rishika from me in more ways than one.

And now, he’d proven himself too dangerous, too reckless and arrogant, to be allowed to remain as he was. Cenwyn thought he was above the rules, but he was about to learn that he was nothing special.

We’d paused the wedding reception to move to a massive receiving hall within the keep. The partygoers hadn’t been summoned to the hall, but none of them were foolish enough to pass up the chance to watch one of their own receive an audience. Which was fine. Perhaps it was even for the best that Cenwyn’s peers would see what happened if they crossed me.

I stood at the head of the hall on a large dais. Cali, Greyson, and Xavier stood just a few steps down. This time, I did share my plan with them, and to my surprise, Cali had approved of it.

*Perhaps my sister has more of a vengeance streak in her than I thought.*

Or maybe she and I saw eye to eye on this: Where Cenwyn was concerned, no punishment was too dire.

*I just hope this all doesn’t end with a revolt.*

I’d left Celeste and Adair waiting in the wings—almost literally and figuratively. I’d wanted to deal with Cenwyn quickly, before anyone could talk me out of it. And, most importantly, I wanted to make it crystal clear to everyone at the keep that they couldn’t hurt the people who were most important to me. Cenwyn would make one hell of an example of the consequences.

People milled about the room, looking around with thinly veiled curiosity. The room was filling up quickly. Soon, everyone at the keep would learn of Cenwyn’s fate, and I had no doubt that the news would filter throughout the Fae world from there.

Kastian put a hand on my arm, and I tilted my head toward him as he leaned down to speak in my ear.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he whispered. “This is a highly unusual turn of events on a wedding day. But don’t worry. I trust my lady wife.” He gave me one of his trademark roguish grins, and I ignored him and straightened.

I stepped forward, “Hear me, those who are gathered here!”

To my surprise, the room immediately quieted. For the first time since I’d taken Cali’s place in the wedding ceremony, it struck me just how much power I truly held. A child of the Wrenthorn and Mauvais lines, now joined to the Haseneau family through marriage—three of the oldest and strongest familial lines in the Fae world—and as the heir to both the Light and Dark Fae courts, I stood above everyone else.

I cleared my throat, and it seemed to echo in the now perfectly silent room. “Guards! Bring in the prisoner!”

Two guards led in Cenwyn, who was bound in chains. Gasps rippled throughout the audience as the guards bought him to stand before the dais. He walked upright, his posture surprisingly relaxed, despite the fact that he was chained and about to stand trial.

*He doesn’t understand the position he’s in*, I realized as our eyes met. He raised a brow at me, a clear challenge. *But that doesn’t matter. He’ll understand soon enough.*

“Cenwyn,” I began, my voice filling the hall, “you stand accused of kidnapping, conspiracy, treason, and working against the interest of all Fae in order to build your personal fortune and power by artificially continuing this war. Do you have anything to say in your own defense? Will anyone speak for you?”

The room was so quiet, I could hear Kastian’s slow, measured breaths behind me. It didn’t seem as if anyone was willing to speak up, though I was certain Cenwyn still had allies among the Fae nobility.

Cenwyn smirked. “This is all very quaint, but I’m afraid there’s no proof of any of the crimes of which I’ve been accused.” He turned to face the audience. “This *child* is going to besmirch my name in a crude power play—and on her own wedding day? It’s very gauche, don’t you think?”

Uncertainty seemed to ripple through the crowd. I could feel their favor shifting away from me and back to Cenwyn. I licked my lips, ready to argue, but Kastian stepped up beside me and took my hand. “Lord Cenwyn, that is not how one should refer to his better.”

Cenwyn glanced at Kastian over his shoulder. “My *better*?”

Kastian didn’t so much as blink. “Yes. As you well know, Artemis is now the highest ranked among the Fae, with the backing of the Wrenthorn, Mauvais, and Hasenau lines—in addition to the support of the Light and Dark Fae councils. You call her a child, but in truth, she is a queen, and you would do well to remember that.”

The crowd immediately stilled and quieted, their eyes glued to Kastian—and me. My husband was already proving his usefulness.

I squeezed Kastian’s hand, only partly for show. “Thank you, but I can handle someone like Cenwyn.” I turned back to the crowd. “I have proof of his crimes: witnesses who will testify to the truth of these accusations.”

I gestured first to Cali, Greyson, and Xavier standing at the base of the dais, then to the crew of arena fighters—Clarence, Kayin the púca, and a few others—who stood at the edge of the room.

“All of these witnesses are more than happy to share their accounts, but as Cenwyn did aptly mention, it’s my wedding day, and we do have more happy matters to attend to. So, if Cenwyn has nothing more to say in his own defense, I’ll begin with the sentencing.”

At this Cenwyn’s face began to pale. He turned to face the crowd again, desperation rolling off him in waves. “Will no one stand for me?”

He was met with silence.

“Hera!” he shrieked. “Hera Wrenthorn! You’ve known me for years! Will you not defend my character?”

My gaze snapped over to my grandmother, who stood among the nobles in the crowd. But Hera just ignored Cenwyn, and I couldn’t hide my grin.

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t look like any of your friends are going to be helping you out today,” I said. “So why don’t we get started?”

“No!” Cenwyn dropped to his knees. “I’m innocent!”

“Cenwyn,” I said, speaking over him, “you are officially stripped of all of your titles—along with your fortune.”

A gasp rolled through the crowd. Whether Celeste believed it or not, I had paid attention during my Fae studies. On the rare occasions that the Fae created punishments for their own, it usually involved physical torture, or a magical curse. It wasn’t uncommon for death to be a punishment for those Fae who committed treason.

Never in history had a Fae been left alive but stripped of everything they held dear. And, looking around this room at the most powerful people in the Fae world, I knew deep in my soul that they would consider no punishment worse than this.

It was a sentencing worse than death.

“That’s a rather strong punishment,” Kastian murmured. “The nobles won’t like it.”

But I ignored him. *Fuck the nobles.* All they’d ever done was help themselves—and make this poisonous world a little more toxic. They were lucky I wasn’t punishing them too. And it was nothing less than Cenwyn deserved.

“In addition to the removal of your titles and the seizure of your fortune, you will be imprisoned for your crimes against the Wrenthorns for the remainder of your life. As you should be.”

“You’ll regret this!” Cenwyn snarled, his face purpling with fury.

I barely heard him amidst the murmuring of the crowd and the intoxicating sense of power that rolled through me. The feeling was heady.

*I can do anything I want. I am the most powerful Fae in the world.*

I couldn’t help the smile that slowly stretched across my face. Then, I froze as a chilling realization shuddered through me.

*Wait. There’s something familiar about this.* Something terribly, horribly familiar.

I couldn’t quite place it, but something in the back of my head nagged at me…a thought…a sound…a feeling.

And then it hit me square in the chest. The last time I felt this powerful, I was high on the power that Letifer gave me.

I gulped, my smile fading.

*Will having this power poison me too?*

**Episode 5441**

As I looked up at Artemis on the dais, I saw something flash across her face. It was a strange expression in her eyes, like a flash of sudden lightning. There one moment, gone the next. As though she had just realized something terrible.

But it was gone too quickly to fully identify, and a moment later my sister’s features had rearranged themselves into a neutral expression again.

“Take him away,” she called to the guards, gesturing toward Cenwyn, who stood bound before her. “Greyson the werewolf will accompany you to ensure that he is properly detained,” she added cannily. “It is clear the guards in this keep can use a wolf’s strength.”

There was a rumble from the crowd at these words, and I could see the Fae guards looked annoyed by this. No one seemed happy to be doubted, but I appreciated her caution. The guards had been under Cenwyn’s thumb this whole time—who knew what could happen if he was left alone with them.

I turned to Greyson before he started forward. “Be quick about it,” I whispered. “And be careful.”

He looked down at me with a comforting smile. “I will,” he said quietly, giving my hand a squeeze. Then he followed the guards as they led Cenwyn out of the audience hall.

The doors closed behind them with a crack, then a loud voice boomed out:

“The wedding guests may now proceed to the western ballroom for drinks and refreshments. The bride and groom will join shortly for the traditional Gavrottee!”

There had been some strange vibes around the condemnation of Cenwyn, but they disappeared at the promise of drinks and whatever the hell a *Gavrottee* was, and the crowd cheered in response.

I ignored the push of the crowd toward the western doors, and started toward the east doors, the direction in which I saw Artemis walking.

“Where are you going?” Xavier asked.

“I’ll meet you in the ballroom,” I told him, then threaded through the crowd.

It felt like swimming upstream, but I managed to make it through the east doors, and when I walked into the small lounge off the audience hall, I was relieved to find my sister alone. “Where’s Kastian?” I asked, looking around.

Artemis shrugged. “I think he went back to his quarters to change into a new reception outfit. He’s got about a dozen.”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her down onto one of the tufted couches. “Okay, we’re alone. Now tell me everything. It’s time for an explanation.”

Artemis opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, an attendant walked into the room, holding a heavy gown of rich scarlet. Artemis looked over and rolled her eyes. “Would you mind waiting outside?” she asked the attendant. “I just need a moment.”

The attendant looked a little uncertain but clearly wasn’t going to argue. She bobbed a curtsey and backed out the door.

Once the attendant was gone, Artemis turned to me again. “What do you want to know?”

I goggled at her. “What do you *think*? Why did you do this?”

She shrugged. “Why do *you* think? I wanted to make sure you would never have to be stuck here.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” I demanded.

“Come on, Cali,” Artemis said. “I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d try to talk me out of it. You’d see it as me trying to sacrifice myself—”

“Which it is—”

“But that’s *not* what it is,” Artemis said firmly.

“Well, I’d like to know what you’d call this,” I said, gesturing toward her. “Between this marriage to Kastian and the Fae promise to Celeste… How the hell are you ever going to come back to the human world? Because I have no intention of ever leaving the Fae world until I know you are free to do what you want. That very much includes not being in a sham marriage to some douchebag.”

“Cali—” Artemis started, but I was pretty worked up and talked over her.

“You can say whatever you want, but I’m not leaving until we can figure out a way to get you out of this Fae promise,” I went on.

“I’m not that worried about it,” she said.

This stopped me. “What?”

She shrugged again. “I’m not actually that worried about the Fae promise. Not now that you’re here. The hardest part was getting you here. The wording in the promise was deliberately phrased so I could get around it.” She cleared her throat and recited, “*I promise I will not try to escape on my own if you grant Marius complete freedom*.”

I stared at her. “I’m not hearing it. Where’s the loophole?”

“I just can’t leave on my *own*, Cali,” she pointed out. “As long as I’m leaving *with* someone else, there won’t be an issue.”

“*Ohhhh*,” I said, seeing her point. “That’s pretty smart.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a little bow. “I thought so.”

“But the marriage—”

“The marriage is just a stepping stone to get me going on my search for Kadmos,” she went on.

I frowned. “But how are you planning on getting out of the role you’re in now?” I wondered. “I mean, yeah, you have more power, but do you really have the freedom to go after him?”

She spread her hands and looked around. “Um, who’s going to tell me no?” She smiled. “I’m suddenly the highest ranked person here.”

There was something slightly unnerving about her smile when she spoke about her rank. It reminded me of something, and my stomach twisted nervously.

“Why are you talking about your rank like that?” I asked warily.

The look in her eyes disappeared again and she frowned. “What are you—”

“*Artemis!*” Celeste interrupted, bursting into the room. “We need to speak! Before the dancing begins.”

I looked over, surprised by both the interruption and the suggestion of dancing. “*Dancing?* What dancing?”

Celeste gave me a beady look. “The Gavrottee.”

“Oh. *Oh*. That’s *dancing*?” I asked.

Celeste rolled her eyes. “Yes. The Gavrottee is a traditional dance. It is the Fae tradition for all couples to join in the new beginning and dance for the wedded union. But first,” she said, turning to Artemis, “we need to talk about what just happened with Cenwyn.”

“Why?” Artemis asked shortly.

“Cenwyn won’t be the only threat we face,” Celeste said. Then she added begrudgingly, “Though, I suppose it is a good thing that you dealt with him so decisively in front of everyone. It is always wise to establish dominance, and you did just that.”

There was a quiet knock on the door and the attendant with the red dress peeked back into the room. “Pardon me…”

“Yes,” Artemis said, getting to her feet. “Yes, come in,” she said, waving the woman in. “Cali, you should go. I need to get dressed…again. We can talk more later, okay?”

Nodding, I stood up. I didn’t want to go, but it was clear this wasn’t the time to talk. The conversation wasn’t over, but I did feel a *little* better than I had before I’d come in. At least I had some answers, and I felt better about the Fae promise Artemis had made to Celeste. It was smart of her to build in an escape clause.

I headed out of the lounge and toward the western ballroom, where everyone else was gathering. I hoped that Greyson would be back from delivering Cenwyn from wherever he was being held. If I was going to participate in this Fae wedding dance, it should be with him.

When I arrived in the ballroom, the place was packed. All the nobles were milling around, holding crystal glasses filled with bubbly alcohol. It looked kind of like Fae champagne, but it was a soft pink color. Someone handed me a glass, and I took a small sip. It was nice. It tasted a little like strawberries, and the bubbles tickled my nose.

After only a few moments there was a blast of flutes, and the double doors opened. I looked over to see Kastian and Artemis standing framed in the doorway. Artemis was wearing the red dress, and Kastian was wearing golden robes. They looked exceptionally royal.

Kastian was holding Artemis’s fingertips, and as he whispered something to her, she plastered a smile on her face.

They walked into the room to more trumpeting, and the crowd began to split into pairs. It was clearly time for the Gavrottee.

I looked around, but Greyson was nowhere to be seen. He hadn’t yet returned.

I bit my lip, and started to drift back as the music began, played by a stringed band on a stage in the corner. I was clearly going to have to play a wallflower for this dance, but I looked up, surprised, when someone took my hand.

“Xavier,” I gasped.

I hadn’t noticed him before that moment, but he appeared at my side, and holding my hand firmly, he led me to the center of the dance floor.

**Episode 5442**

**Xavier**

The band in the corner played traditional Fae music. It was all flutes and drums and not my style at all, but I didn’t care. As I led Cali around the dance floor, all I cared about was how incredible it felt to have her in my arms. How completely right it felt to hold her so close. I drank in the feeling of her body against mine, the feel of her hair brushing against my arm, and the perfume of her scent.

“Xavier,” she started, “I really don’t think we should be—”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to talk about anything right now,” I said, interrupting her protests. “We’re here, everyone’s dancing. Can’t we just dance this weird Fae wedding dance and spend the next few minutes together without stressing over everything else in our lives?”

Cali’s eyes widened, as though she wasn’t expecting me to be so blunt. She hesitated for a beat, then nodded. “Okay. Yeah. We can do that.”

The Gavrottee—whatever the hell it was—wasn’t super hard to do. We kept our eyes on the people around us, but all we had to do was waltz in large circles across the floor. We’d waltzed plenty of times at Lucian’s weird balls, so that was no problem, and I pulled Cali a little closer as we crossed the polished stone floor of the ballroom. The music was unfamiliar, but it was actually kind of nice. The Fae flutes had a way of floating through the air. The sound swelled around me, and for a moment I actually let myself do what I’d asked Cali to do—forget about all the stress in my life. I lost myself in the moment, pretending that this moment—with Cali—was all there was. Just Cali and me, together. I knew it wasn’t true, but I let myself pretend.

I looked down at her, watching her cheeks flush as she danced. My eyes traveled down to her lips, and I thought about how much I wanted to kiss her. How much I wanted to tell her again that I loved her. How much I wanted to hear her tell me the same thing.

Far too soon, the Fae music came to a trilling end and the dancers stopped circling. We stopped dancing, and Cali stepped out of my arms, her gaze on a distant spot over my shoulder.

I didn’t want the moment to end, and I opened my mouth to say something—anything—to her, but I was interrupted when a Fae walked over to us and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sure you’re relieved that you get to keep her after all,” the man said.

I recognized him from some of the peace talks I’d attended. The man was short, and his cheeks and nose were red. He looked as though he’d had a few glasses of the fizzy wine the Fae servants were passing, and he winked at me good-naturedly. It was the nicest anyone had been to me in the Fae world, and he was right, so I started to nod back at him, but Cali spoke before I could—

“No, it’s really not like that,” she said quickly.

I looked sharply at her. What about us wasn’t like that? It was like that for me, anyway. But before I could correct the record for this random Fae guy, a Fae servant approached Cali.

“Lady Hera wishes to speak to you,” the girl said quietly. “Immediately, she said,” the girl added, blushing.

Cali nodded. She looked over at me with an apologetic smile but followed the girl without saying anything else to me.

I stared after her. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help but be stung by how quickly she cut me off.

“Well, that sucked, huh?”

I turned, surprised, and found Marius standing behind me. He was holding a goblet and was looking over my shoulder, watching Cali’s retreating figure. He’d witnessed the whole scene.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He held up the goblet. It didn’t hold the fizzy wine everyone else was drinking, but something darker—and probably stronger. He grinned. “Just filling up on the good stuff. Count on Fae nobles to serve the strong shit.”

There was the pounding of a drum from the Fae band at the front, and an amplified voice spoke over the noise of the crowd:

“It is time for the bride and groom to dance!”

Everyone applauded at this, but Marius flinched.

“And I’m trying to get the image of the bride and groom kissing out of my head,” he added, taking a giant swig from his goblet.

I frowned at the abject misery on his face. “Aren’t you supposed to be in hiding?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

He shrugged, looking unconcerned. “Maybe, but whatever. I couldn’t pass up the chance to see Ari, you know? Even if it was just to see her marry someone else. Anyway,” he added with a sigh, “it’s not like I didn’t know that I was going to have to share her. Or give her up. I mean, I just spent twenty minutes being her wingman so she could talk to her girlfriend.” He took another drink.

I eyed him carefully. His easy acceptance of his fucked-up circumstances made me a little uncomfortable.

He turned to me, eyeing me right back. “Anyway, I heard your situation is even more complicated than mine.”

I bristled. “What do you mean by that?”

Marius shrugged, taking another drink. I wondered how much he’d had to drink. He didn’t look drunk, but something told me the guy had a hollow leg. He could probably be half liquor before he started slurring his speech.

“I heard a rumor,” he said vaguely.

I narrowed my eyes. “What kind of a rumor?”

“That you have a mate back in the human world, and a mate in this world too,” he said. “Like I said—complicated.”

I pushed my hand through my hair with a sigh. “Yeah, that’s not just a rumor,” I admitted. I looked out at the ballroom, where the Fae nobility were drinking and mingling. The music had started again, but I didn’t hear or see anything. I was thinking about what Marius had said. I couldn’t deny that my situation—as he’d put it—was complicated. I did have a mate in the human world, and I loved Ava. I knew that. She was part of my life. But I knew that I couldn’t be without Cali anymore either.

There was just the very small matter of Ava hating Cali.

And I didn’t think Cali was too fond of Ava either.

I glanced over at Marius, who was drinking steadily as he watched the dancing. I thought of how he felt about Artemis—he clearly cared about her and was willing to put up with a lot to be around her. Maybe that was what I needed to do with Cali and Ava.

It wasn’t exactly foreign to me. It was what I had managed to do under the *due destini*, with Greyson. It wasn’t my favorite thing, of course. If I’d had it my way, I would have cut Greyson out of that equation long ago, but we’d found a way to make it work…for the most part.

And if it meant that Cali and I could have some kind of happiness together, then it was certainly worth a try.

But was that possible with Ava? How would she feel about it? I needed to consider her in all this as well.

I remembered all too well how she had reacted before I’d left for the Fae world, when she’d discovered I was still in love with Cali.

I blew out a breath as I snagged a glass of wine from a passing waiter and downed the whole thing in one gulp. There was so much to consider. But what I couldn’t ignore was how I felt. Or that the blinding headaches I’d been getting had stopped when I’d acknowledged that I was still in love with Cali. It was like they had been there one minute, and then once I’d finally been honest with myself, they were gone the next. There was a lot I didn’t know, but that just didn’t feel like a coincidence.

“That’s not going to do shit for you,” Marius muttered, eyeing my empty glass.

I ignored him. If I could just stay the course and be true to my own feelings—admit that I was truly in love with both Ava *and* Cali—then that might be all I needed to do. Maybe it was possible that I wasn’t going to have to pretend anything different.

After all the mental gymnastics I’d been practicing over the last few months, my mind reeled at the possibility of such simplicity. Was it possible it could be so fucking straightforward? If I could just be honest with myself and do what my therapist said, and *honor my feelings*, was that all I had to do to finally be happy?

**Episode 5443**

**Artemis**

The wedding reception was in full swing. Music was playing, wine was flowing, and people were dancing.

Kastian and I were moving through our first—and what I deeply hoped was our *final*—dance. He’d been surprisingly unobtrusive since the wedding ceremony. He stayed close to me, but not too close. He made sure I had a drink and seemed to be enjoying the party without pulling me into any new machinations.

It was a low bar to clear, but after the day I’d had, I was grateful for him.

The music floated over the crowd. People were talking and laughing. There was the clinking of glasses. Normal party noises. So I barely noticed when the crowd began to murmur.

But as the sound grew louder and louder, and then seemed to turn almost angry, my eyes darted anxiously around, trying to find the source of the crowd’s frustration.

I was already edgy as hell, but I didn’t see anything that looked amiss. There was nothing that stood out until I finally heard someone yell:

“What the hell are *you* doing here?!”

That was when I spied Adair in the crowd.

He held his chin up and the set of his shoulders was proud as he moved through the staring crowd. He walked straight to the dais where I stood with Kastian.

“Artemis,” he said, with a slight bow of his head.

“Adair?”

“May I address the assembled Fae?” he asked quietly.

I was a little confused by his request, but I could feel the eyes of the crowd on me, and I didn’t want to show them my puzzlement, so I just nodded. “Of course.”

Adair turned to the Fae court and spoke loudly. The music had stopped, and his voice traveled across the ballroom. “I wanted to inform you all that I am staying because it is time I made up for past sins. I left this world, and now my niece is a leader among the Fae. So my place is here. I will stay to help her. That is what my brother Kadmos would have wanted.”

Celeste had stepped out of the crowd, and she scoffed at this. “That’s *convenient*,” she muttered. “Now that you now longer have any responsibility to the Fae, you show up, willing to stick around.”

Celeste was speaking quietly, but enough people heard her—or guessed at her words—that the murmurs began again.

I looked around and knew at once that I needed to get control of the room. The energy had turned again, and it was angry now. There were people here who were clearly upset about the return of Adair—and I knew why. He’d disappeared, and in his absence, he’d been hated for a long time.

“He’s not wanted here!” someone yelled, causing a chorus of agreement.

“That’s not for you to say!” someone else cried.

“It’s for *me* to say!”

“Keep your opinions to yourself!”

Shit. The ballroom was crowded, and Fae began to push and shove. For a moment it looked like it might come to blows.

Before things could escalate any further, I stepped quickly to the front of the dais.

“I am so pleased to welcome my Uncle Adair back to the family!” I proclaimed loudly. “He will stay on as an advisor to me, at *my* request.”

There was a stunned silence from the crowd at my words. The pushing stopped as they looked up at me. For a moment no one moved, and my stomach tightened. I wondered if the crowd was going to turn on me. Then, finally, someone began to clap. It caught on, and the assembled Fae court applauded my announcement politely.

Out in the crowd, I was surprised to catch sight of Hera smiling up at me. Even more surprised to see she actually looked vaguely approving. Cali stood next to her, looking a little surprised herself.

Hera stepped forward, holding up her glass. “I believe this calls for a toast! To family, old and new!”

It wasn’t clear that everyone assembled in the ballroom agreed with Hera’s sentiment, but as I looked around, everyone raised their glass and drank to Hera’s toast.

“Take note of who looks angriest in the crowd,” I muttered, leaning down to speak to Celeste. “I’m sure they’ll be trouble later.”

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The reception went on for hours. I was exhausted, and when Celeste stepped toward me, asking if I was ready to go, I jumped at the chance.

“Yes!” I breathed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Ready?” Kastian asked, stepping beside me.

My stomach sank. Of course we were going together. We were to be heading up to our new, *shared* quarters.

Great.

As we walked across the ballroom, the Fae nobles bowed politely. I nodded as I walked, but when I caught Cali’s eyes, I saw that she looked worried.

“What is it?” I asked quietly.

She walked over to me, stepping beside me as I strode across the ballroom. “Greyson’s not back yet,” she said tensely.

I looked around. “Really? What’s taking so long?”

Cali shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I didn’t know either, and I felt my stomach twist. I really hoped nothing had gone wrong, and that my first act hadn’t just blown up horribly in my face. “He’ll be back soon,” I assured her. “I’m sure of it.”

Cali forced herself to smile. “Yeah, I’m sure you’re right.” She stopped at the door and waved goodbye.

Kastian and I continued on as a Fae attendant led the way through the keep. When we reached the large oak doors of our quarters, the attendant opened the door, bowed, and stepped back.

When we stepped inside, he shut the door behind us, and I collapsed onto the tufted couch with a sigh and closed my eyes. I felt the couch dip down next to me as Kastian sat down. When I felt his finger trail softly along my arm, my eyes shot open.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded, jerking my arm away.

He grinned at me. “I’m simply taking the next natural step in our wedding day—”

“Absolutely not,” I said firmly, shoving him away from me.

Pushed back against the arm of the couch, he put up both hands in surrender. “All right, all right. I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did,” I snapped, not believing him for a second. “But I need you to understand that this is *not* going to happen. This”—I gestured between us—“is *never* going to happen. In fact, let’s lay down some ground rules right now. We need to discuss what this relationship is actually going to look like. It’s not going to be romantic in nature at all. Just business, okay? We’ll work together. That’s it. The political moves we make will benefit both our families, but that will be the extent of our relationship.”

Kastian got to his feet with a yawn. “Fine by me.”

I eyed him warily. “Fine?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, Artemis, I don’t really care either way. I wouldn’t have turned down a night with you, but I’m certainly not going to beg. You’re free to be with whomever you want, and I will do the same. As long as we’re both discrete, I don’t see a problem. I’ve gotten what I need out of this deal. Anything more”—he raised his eyebrows suggestively—“would simply be a bonus.”

I groaned. “Get out,” I said, pointing toward the door. “There have got to be other bedrooms around here. Go find one.”

Kastian chuckled to himself as he let himself out.

Now that I was finally alone, I considered my options. I wanted to find Rishika. I wanted to continue the conversation we’d been having earlier and make it clear that I didn’t want to leave her.

I went to my door, fully intending to wander around the keep until I found Rishika, but when I pulled it open, Marius was standing in the doorway.

He had his hand up like he was about to knock, and when he saw me, he grinned. His gaze was a little unsteady, and I figured he’d been drinking.

“I saw you kicked the groom out of your room, so you haven’t taken complete leave of your senses as a married woman,” he said, winking.

I laughed, surprised—and glad—to see him.

“Were you going somewhere?” he asked. “Do you need my help with Rishika again?”

I looked at him for a moment. “Why are you always so willing to help me? It can’t be easy for you.”

He shrugged. “Well, obviously, I owe you. You did give me that pardon I needed.”

I rolled my eyes and shoved his shoulder. “Come on. It was a serious question.”

The smirk slid from his face faster than I’d been expecting, and when his gaze met mine, he looked uncharacteristically serious. “Come on, Ari. Isn’t it obvious?”

My breath caught in my throat. Because it was obvious. I could see it in his eyes—he cared for me. Deeply.

And the truth was that I cared for him, too. I was worried about losing Rishika, but—as I looked at Marius standing in front of me—I realized I didn’t want to lose him either.

He smiled at me, but this smile was without his usual joking. This smile was honest and open. Almost vulnerable. In it, I could see how far he was willing to go for me. How much he was willing to do.

How much I cared about him, despite myself.

My heart contracted, and I reached up on tiptoe and kissed him.

**Episode 5444**

**Greyson**

I walked behind the guards as they led Cenwyn through the keep. The bastard was in front of me, his hands tightly bound behind his back. Artemis was no fool, and she’d taken no chances, so the bands around his hands were connected to chains at his middle. He wasn’t getting out of this—at least not easily.

“Can’t you hurry?” Cenwyn asked the guards in a loud voice, managing to sound bored and annoyed despite the fact he was manacled and being led to prison. “I can smell the stench of *animal* behind me, and I’m worried I’m about to be sick.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut the hell up,” I snapped. “You lost, Cenwyn, and you just need to deal with it. So why don’t you stop talking and accept your fate.”

Cenwyn made an annoyed sound in the back of his throat, but did shut up, which pleased me.

We kept walking, the only sound the footfalls of the guards and the rattling of Cenwyn’s chains.

“So,” I started casually, “how does it feel to walk to prison, knowing that it was the shifters you tried to enslave who put you there?”

Cenwyn didn’t answer right away. I could see his jaw working, like he was grinding his teeth. But when he spoke, he was clearly fighting to match my casual tone. “Oh, I’m not quite finished yet. You’ll see,” he said ominously.

We walked down staircase after staircase, deeper and deeper into the keep. The place was huge, and we were going lower and lower. We finally made it to a huge iron door, and one of the guards pulled it open. Another shoved Cenwyn inside.

“What about the chains?” Cenwyn complained, but we all ignored him.

“Is this going to be secure enough?” I wondered as two guards heaved the iron door shut and pushed the lock fast.

The oldest guard—he looked in charge—nodded. “The door is solid iron, as is the lock. And the room will be enchanted to hold him safe.”

“Enchanted how?” I asked.

“All his magic will be neutralized in there,” the guard said, nodding to the door. “There are no secret passages. The cell’s tight as a drum. He’s stuck in there until Artemis or Kastian chooses to release him. It’s just going to take a little time for the magic to kick in, so we’re going to wait here. You don’t have to.”

I looked at the iron door. There was a small square window, just big enough to see Cenwyn standing inside the dark room.

I shook my head. “I’ll wait,” I said. I knew Cali was expecting me back, and she’d be waiting for me, but I also knew I’d just feel better knowing that all the security measures were in place before I left.

So I leaned against the wall to wait, hoping the enchantments were going to be enough. But I wasn’t sure what else we could do beyond what the Fae had planned.

Besides, I did want to get back to Cali. None of this was really my problem, I reminded myself. Cenwyn was a bastard, but he was a Fae, and he belonged here in the Fae world. I just wanted to go to Cali and take her back to the human world as soon as I could. And now that it was confirmed that she didn’t have to get married to anyone here, I didn’t want to let her out of my sight.

I crossed my arms over my chest with a sigh as I let myself think about the marriage that almost was. It was hard to even imagine what was supposed to have happened earlier today. Cali was supposed to have gotten married to Kastian. *Married*.

It was hard to wrap my brain around it.

I guess I had accepted it on some level, but I think I must have been disassociating or something, because—even now, only a few hours later—I couldn’t imagine myself dealing with Cali being married to someone else. If she had gone through with it, I probably never would have left the Fae world again—not without her, anyway.

I pushed a hand through my hair. My heart beat a little faster as I considered the bullet we had all just dodged, and I settled back to wait.

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It seemed like we had been there for ages, but finally the guard in charge stepped forward and rested his hand on the door. I knew it must have hurt him—with the door being iron—but he didn’t flinch. He spoke a few quiet words under his breath, then turned and nodded.

“It is done,” he said, “the enchantments are in place. You can all go back to your quarters, men. The wedding party is over by now.” He looked over at me. “Thank you for your help.”

“Thank you,” I said with a grateful nod.

We parted ways, and I headed back up the many staircases toward Cali’s room. It took a while, and I had even more time to think. The wedding reception for Artemis and Kastian was over, and I hadn’t rejoined Cali, so she had been there alone—with Xavier.

I thought about what that might have been like, and what might have happened between them. I wondered what they had talked about when I’d left them alone.

I wasn’t an idiot, and I had eyes—I knew Xavier was still in love with Cali. How could he not be? I was less sure of what Cali’s feelings were for Xavier. The *due destini* was still in place, which told me she was still in love with him, but there was no way she could ever trust him again. Not yet anyway. Not after everything that had happened.

When I finally got to Cali’s room, I knocked, and Cali opened the door. Her face brightened as she smiled with relief.

“I’m so glad to see you,” she said, throwing herself into my arms.

“Me too,” I said. “Sorry that took so long. And I’m glad you’re alone.”

She pulled back and looked up at me quizzically. “Alone? Why wouldn’t I be? Did you think Xavier would be here?”

I shrugged. “I honestly wasn’t sure, but I hoped not.”

Cali stepped back, frowning. She took my hand and pulled me into her room, shutting the door behind me. “I’m sorry, Greyson.”

“Sorry for what?” I asked.

“For everything,” she said, gesturing vaguely. “This hasn’t been fair to you. At all.” She paused for a moment, and I could see she was thinking about something. Then she seemed to come to a decision. “And that’s why I have to tell you—”

I stepped toward her and kissed her, cutting off whatever it was she was about to say. I pressed my lips against hers, hungry for her, and pulled her close.

I didn’t want to hear what she had to say to me. Part of me knew it was short-sighted, and maybe even selfish not to listen, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I understood that Cali had a whole different relationship with my brother. And I knew they’d been growing closer to each other again. I had seen it happening.

But I didn’t want to think about it. Not now. I knew that Xavier taking off had been hard on Cali, but I had loved having her all to myself. It had been amazing to enjoy the time together—just the two of us. And I wanted to keep it that way for just a little longer. For as long as I possibly could.

Cali had been surprised by my kiss and hesitated, but only for a moment before she responded, kissing me back, just as eagerly. Her encouragement encouraged me, and I deepened the kiss, pushing my tongue between her full lips, feeling it slide along hers, intertwining in her warm mouth.

I walked her backward, slowly, until I felt her stop as the back of her legs hit the bed. I almost couldn’t believe we were doing this. Cali—here, in my arms. I was kissing her—and if I was reading the room correctly—about to make love to her. Had it just been earlier today that I’d almost given her up to someone else?

The thought made my head spin, and I pulled her close, then lifted her off her feet and tossed her onto the bed. I crawled after her, feeling my whole body alight with heat and fire as I looked at her shining eyes and kiss-swollen lips.

I crawled onto the bed after her, my hands tracing up her legs as I moved, then her hips, then her ribs. I felt the gentle curve of her breasts and then I dropped my head again, kissing her hard, pushing her down into the mattress.

“*Greyson*,” she panted, arching against me.

I had almost lost her. The thought took my breath away. I had almost lost *Cali.*

My hands roamed her body, cupping and pressing and grasping. I needed her more than I could ever remember needing her before. I had almost lost her, and I needed to remind myself that I had her now.

I had almost lost her, and I would never, ever make that mistake again.

**Episode 5445**

It was like Greyson was worshiping me. The way he touched me, the way he looked at me, the way he kissed me. He moved slowly and deliberately, and his eyes were a winter storm as he looked down at me beneath him.

He’d taken my dress off and thrown it to the floor. Now he was between my legs, tracing a finger up the side of my inner thigh, so slowly I felt as though I was going to fly to pieces at any moment.

“*Greyson*,” I breathed again, grasping for his hand.

He locked eyes with me as he slid a finger through my folds to find my clit. I gasped as he swirled his finger around in lazy circles, watching me wriggle beneath him. It was already too much.

“I’m never going to let you out of my sight,” he rumbled. He let go of my hand and cupped my breast, grasping it hard, fingering the nipple so hard I mewled.

I shook my head. “I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “No more engagements.”

It was supposed to be a joke, sort of, but Greyson didn’t smile. He slipped another finger into me, stretching me deliciously. I was slick with want, and I spread my legs wide.

“Please,” I begged. “I want *you*.”

“Say it again,” he commanded.

“I want you,” I repeated.

“Louder, love.”

“*I want you!*”

He pulled his fingers out and pushed his cock in, filling me in one stroke. I cried out and grasped the headboard, bracing myself.

“You’re *mine*,” he growled. “You’re mine completely.”

I nodded in full agreement. It wasn’t as though I had forgotten. I knew why I had agreed to marry Kastian. I was trying to save my family—and myself. I was sacrificing myself to keep people safe, but now I was here, in Greyson’s arms, being consumed by him. There was a huge part of me that felt relieved to be here—it was *right* to be here. But another part of me that worried about Artemis, and what she had sacrificed.

I shook my head, trying to breathe that feeling out of me. I didn’t want to feel guilty about that. Not now. I was here, and I wanted to lose myself in this. In him.

“I’m yours,” I breathed.

“Say it again,” he said, dropping his arms so he boxed me in as he drove himself into me.

“I’m yours, Greyson!”

His head dipped to my ear, his tongue tracing the shape of it. “Good girl,” he said as he pounded into me, rocking into me so hard the headboard banged against the stone wall.

Quickly, I was nearing orgasm. I could feel it happening. I had wanted to lose myself, and I had finally lost myself. I screamed and bucked against Greyson as fireworks exploded behind my eyes. The pressure of Greyson’s body inside of me was getting me closer and closer, and the dominance in his voice pushed me over the edge.

“You’re mine, love,” he growled. “Let me hear you fucking say it.”

“I’m yours!” I screamed as I climaxed. I wrapped my legs around him as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me. I couldn’t breathe. “Oh god, Greyson, I’m yours.”

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When I woke up the next morning, I took my time. I was wrapped up in Greyson, and I didn’t see any reason to disentangle myself from the strong arms that held me tightly. He was still asleep, and I twisted a little so I could look at him.

The sunlight coming in through the window hit the planes of his face, and I gazed at the line of his nose and his high cheekbones. I loved him so much. I loved being with him. It was so easy and uncomplicated with him. There was no one else I had to think about when I was with him—I could just love him.

I couldn’t help but wish that was what it was like when I was with Xavier, too. I didn’t think it was wrong to keep my distance from him—to go back to just being friends. But the memory of the feeling of his hand on my waist as we danced last night was still with me. The pressure of his touch wasn’t forgotten, and I couldn’t ignore how it felt to be in his arms.

He hadn’t been wrong to be upset that I’d mistaken the imposter for him—and thought it was him saying those awful things to me about wanting to go back to Ava. But I *had* thought it was him. It hadn’t been hard to believe that Xavier could say those words to me—that he could hurt me like that—because he’d done it before.

I frowned as I shifted my gaze to the bright winter morning outside. It wasn’t as though I wanted to mistrust him. But I couldn’t deny what I had experienced, and my experience was that I felt like I needed to get to know Xavier again.

We had tried before—being friends—but it was Xavier who had pushed back at it. He hadn’t wanted that, he’d tried to push our relationship further, faster than I was ready for. I felt a wave of anger as I remembered that. Couldn’t he see that this was hard for me, too? Couldn’t he see that I was struggling, trying to reconcile my feelings for him and my feelings about the situation?

But he kept pushing me, bringing up topics that I wasn’t ready to discuss yet. And it just wasn’t fair.

I bit my lip as I turned these thoughts over in my mind. There was a part of me that saw a future for us again, and I wished I could just fast forward to that future. To Xavier and me being okay again. To a future when I could trust him implicitly. To a future when I could be with him, and Ava wouldn’t be there anymore.

I frowned. I wasn’t even quite sure what I meant by that. Ava was Xavier’s mate, but she was an added complication to an already very complicated relationship. I knew Xavier cared about her, but it just might be easier if she wasn’t a variable.

Next to me, Greyson shifted and opened his eyes. Seeing me awake, he smiled softly, then leaned over and pressed a kiss to my lips.

I kissed him back. and things were just starting to heat up again when there was a loud knock on the door, interrupting what might have been a *very* promising morning.

“*Ugh*,” I groaned. When I pulled away, I saw Greyson looked annoyed, but he shot me a rueful grin. “I’ll get it,” I said, standing up.

I grabbed my robe from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around myself before I pulled open the door.

“Marius,” I said, surprised to find him standing in the hallway first thing in the morning. “What are you doing here?”

“Running errands,” he said with a grin.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Ari is asking for you,” he said. “She wants you to leave the keep with her.”

I stared at him, trying to make sense of his errand. “And she sent…you? To get me? It’s pretty early. Were you two…*together*?”

Marius wasn’t shy, but when I asked this, his eyes shifted away from mine. “Artemis is waiting for you,” he said, dodging my question. “She’s at the door near the briar wall. The one at the south gate.”

He was obviously evading my question about the night before, but I didn’t push for an answer. It wasn’t exactly my business, and Marius didn’t want to talk about it.

I nodded. “Okay. I just need to get dressed.”

Marius glanced quickly down, taking in my robe. For a moment his eyes regained their usual smirk. He winked, then turned and strode quickly away.

I let Greyson know what I was doing, and we both dressed quickly.

“I’m coming with you,” he insisted when I told him, and I didn’t argue. Cenwyn was locked up, but it still didn’t hurt to be careful.

The two of us headed into the passageway and started toward the south gate. We found Artemis waiting at the briar wall.

Greyson stopped before we reached her. “I’ll be right here, no matter what happens,” he said, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze before he stepped back.

I nodded, then stepped toward my sister. “Good morning.”

Artemis looked over. She didn’t look remotely worried, but I didn’t feel the same. I looked at the briar wall and the gate that led out of the keep. I knew Artemis wasn’t worried about breaking her Fae promise to Celeste, but I was. I remembered when she had lost all her magic, when she’d broken a Fae promise to our mother. It had been awful and had taken months to get her magic back.

I took Artemis’s hand. “Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I know you worded the promise carefully, but wording can be tricky. I just want you to be sure you know what you’re doing.”

She nodded. “I’m sure. *I’m* the one who worded the promise, Cali,” she assured me. “I know just how to get around it.”

I chewed my lip as my stomach contracted nervously. “Okay. But is it worth the risk that you could be wrong? What if…” I shook my head. “What if you lose your magic again?”

**Episode 5446**

Artemis looked at me for a moment. Then she shrugged. “If I’m wrong and I didn’t word it right, then we’ll just deal with it like we did before.”

“Artemis—” I started, but she grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Besides,” she added, cutting me off, “I trust you, and I trust your magic. We’re going to get through this together, right? It’s all going to work out.”

She was so positive and so certain, she almost made my doubts disappear too, and I gave her what I hoped was a smile, though it felt a little strained.

But it must have looked okay, because she returned it. Then she turned to the briar wall. “It’s all in the promise. I told Celeste I wouldn’t *try* to escape *on my own*. So if we leave *together* with the intent to *really leave*, it should work fine. No problems. I just have to really intend to leave this place—and escape from Celeste. That’s who I’m really tied to with this promise,” she added. “Not the keep, and not the Fae court.”

“Right,” I said. “Celeste. What’s up with that?”

Artemis was quiet for a moment, thinking. “I think I get now why she did it.”

“What do you mean?”

Artemis turned to me. “Adair kept running from her.”

I nodded, then looked at the briar wall. It was thick and brambly. I remembered what it had felt like when Kastian had pulled me through. Like being pulled through cement. Cement with thorns. I thought about what Artemis had said about the promise and chewed my lip. “I just have this sense that this feels easier than it should. How can you be sure about this? *Are* you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Artemis said firmly. “I can feel it. Besides, this was my plan all along. That’s why I phrased the promise the way I did.”

My stomach felt fluttery with nerves. I was trying, but I just couldn’t be as certain as Artemis seemed to be. I had no idea how my sister could be so sure this was going to work. Fae magic was so unpredictable. And I couldn’t stop thinking about how awful it had been the last time Artemis had lost her magic. It had been devastating. But I kept my mouth shut. Artemis didn’t need to be reminded of that. I doubted she had forgotten, and we didn’t need to introduce those memories into this situation.

Artemis looked over at me. “We should head back inside. We need to get ready to leave for real. We’ll get out of this place, break the hold Celeste has on me, then I’ll send you on your way back to the human world and out of all the Fae court politics, once and for all.”

We met Greyson where he was waiting for me.

“We need to go get ready,” Artemis said.

“How long do we have?” I asked.

She tipped her head back and forth for a moment, thinking. “I think I’ll be ready to leave within the hour. You should, too, okay?”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, wondering what I should spend my hour getting ready.

“Make sure everything’s packed. You two should get everything you want to take with you and make sure everyone who’s going back to the human world is ready to go,” Artemis said.

Greyson looked startled. “Wait, already? The human world? *Today?*”

She grinned at him. “Yeah, it’s time for you to leave. Unless you want to stick around,” she added, before turning and starting quickly down the passageway.

Greyson and I followed her at a slower pace. He still looked a little shocked, but when he looked over at me, he frowned.

“You look worried,” he said quietly.

“I am,” I admitted.

“What’s up?”

I shook my head. “I guess it all feels too easy. Artemis is certain she’s got the Fae promise figured out, but how can this be all that it takes?”

Greyson considered my question for a moment. “Well, if anything goes wrong, we’ll be there for her. That’s all we can do, right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I agreed.

We walked for a moment longer.

“I’m surprised this is happening today,” Greyson said, “but I’m glad. I’m glad to be getting the hell out of the Fae world and putting all this behind us.”

I nodded slowly. “I agree, but I still don’t feel like I can leave without making sure Artemis is okay.”

“We won’t,” he said, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder.

Artemis had hurried away to do whatever it was she was going to do to get ready to leave, and we’d lost track of her. When we reached my door, Greyson turned to me.

“You gather up whatever you want to take and get ready to go,” he said.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to round up Rishika, Xavier, and Tabitha,” he said. “Make sure they’re ready to go. They’ll be happy to know we’re getting out of here.”

“I’m sure they will,” I admitted.

“And I want to say my goodbyes to the arena fighters who helped us,” he said. “I’ll meet you back at the south gate by the briar wall.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll meet you there in an hour. Tell Clarence bye for me. And thank him.”

Greyson smiled. “I will.”

I watched him walk away, then went into my room. I shut the door and looked around. I had an hour to get ready to go, but what was there to do? Artemis had told me to gather up anything I wanted to take with me, but *was* there anything I wanted to take with me back to the human world?

I didn’t think so. It wasn’t like I was going to be using any of this Fae stuff when I got back to the pack house.

My stomach felt tight with nerves. I was worried about Artemis, but I tried to channel some of her certainty. And Greyson was right—we would be there with her if she needed our help.

And if everything was okay with her and we were able to get through the briar wall without problems, then I could admit that I was ready to get back to the human world and see everyone at the Redwood pack house again. I missed having Lola around to talk to. And Torin. I missed his food, and his company.

I walked through my Briarkeep rooms, giving them a quick once-over, checking to see if there was anything I was missing. It wasn’t like these rooms had any particular meaning for me. They had been as impersonal as hotel rooms—and sometimes had felt more like prison cells.

So, when I was finished, I didn’t give it a backward glance before I walked out and slammed the door shut behind me.

I strode quickly to the gate where we’d agreed to meet, and when I drew near, I found a procession of people walking toward it. I looked around, confused, and I felt my heart rate kick up when I saw that it was Kastian and Artemis leading the procession out of the briar wall.

It was a huge group of Fae, and now that the wedding was over, it was clear that everyone was leaving, their business done. They were all moving slowly toward the gate. Hera was walking on one side of the newlyweds, and Celeste walked on the other side. Everyone looked stately and orderly, but they slowed to a stop as they approached the gate.

“Which direction?” one of the guards called out.

Kastian glanced over at Artemis, but she didn’t return his look. She kept her eyes steady out the door as she responded, her voice clear and certain: “We will be going to the Wrenthorn lands. Follow Lady Hera’s directions.”

My grandmother nodded in approval at this, but this was apparently news to Celeste, who went red in the face.

“What?!” she shrieked. “No! Absolutely not. The *Wrenthorn* lands? *No*. I won’t be a party to this!” She rounded on Artemis accusingly. “You will be coming back to the *Mauvais* stronghold!”

I twisted my fingers as I watched this play out. This was *exactly* what I had been worried about. If Celeste still had a hold on Artemis because of the Fae promise, who knew what could happen?

But Artemis still didn’t look worried. She smiled in the face of Celeste’s rage and shook her head.

“I won’t be long,” she said calmly to Celeste. “And I will need you to be near for future advisement. But for now, I’ll be going to see my sister off. She’s heading back to the human world, you know.” She turned her back on Celeste.

Celeste swelled alarmingly. “I’d like to see how *that* will work out for you.”

Artemis shook her head. I waited for her to say something snarky in return, but Artemis said nothing.

Instead, to my horror, Artemis collapsed to the ground.

**Episode 5447**

**Artemis**

I opened my eyes slowly. Someone was patting my cheek. I was in a big bed, though I had no recollection of how I had ended up there. The last thing I remembered was walking toward the gate, Celeste yelling, and then darkness…

I smiled as I looked around. I couldn’t help it. It was over now. The promise was done.

I didn’t know whether my actions had brought on any other consequences, but it seemed like I was finally free of Celeste’s hold over me. The effect had shocked me, and my body had reacted. I could feel it even now as I lay in the bed—the freedom from the Fae promise.

There was a looseness in my shoulders that hadn’t been there before. It was finished, and I was no longer beholden to the promise, or to Celeste. I’d gotten out of the promise without actually breaking it. I had felt the weight of it easing off me as we had moved toward the gates, and now—I shrugged my shoulders, testing it—it wasn’t there at all.

“Artemis?”

I looked up to see Cali beside me. It was her who had been patting my cheek, and now she looked down at me curiously.

“Why are you smiling?” she wondered. She shook her head. “I knew this was a mistake. I should never have let you—”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” I said quickly. “I’m fine. I’m free. I can feel it, Cali.”

Cali looked surprised. “So…it’s over? It’s safe for you?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s over. Celeste isn’t my keeper anymore. I can make my own choices now.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” I was sure. *Almost* sure. As I spoke, I did feel a moment of sudden doubt. It was hard to not think of the last time I’d broken a Fae promise.

I conjured my magic, just to prove to myself I could. When I felt my magic humming warmly in my hands, I let out a relieved breath. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how scared I’d been that I might be wrong. I’d been telling myself—and Cali—how certain I was that I’d done everything right. It had felt important to be confident for my sister’s sake, but I’d have been lying to myself if I didn’t admit that there was *some* fear there too.

“How long was I out?” I asked, shifting a little in the bed.

“A while,” Cali said.

“Where are we?” I asked, looking around. The room didn’t look familiar.

“We’re at the Wrenthorn palace,” Cali said quietly.

“*What?*” I gasped.

She nodded.

“Celeste?” I asked.

“She’s long gone. And pretty pissed at you. She said you deserved whatever happened to you since you’d broken your promise. You know how she is,” Cali said.

“I know,” I admitted.

Cali passed a hand over her eyes. She looked tired, and I could see that she’d been worried. “Let’s agree to not make any more Fae promises.”

“I won’t promise it, but I’m definitely not interested in making any more,” I agreed with a chuckle.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, putting a cool hand to my forehead.

“Fine,” I said, truthfully. “Really,” I added, because Cali didn’t look like she believed me.

And to prove it, I sat up slowly. I felt a little dizzy, but by the time I got to my feet, I felt completely normal. I walked around the small room. I looked out the window at the grey winter day, and that’s when it hit me.

I was out. I was out of the keep, out from under Celeste’s thumb. The promise was over. I didn’t feel the way I had after breaking my mother’s promise—that had to be good, right? And now that I had gone through with the wedding, and the Wrenthorn bloodline was no longer in mortal peril, there was nothing holding me back from going out to search for my father.

I didn’t have to hide anymore, and I was the highest ranked Fae in both the Light and Dark Fae kingdoms. I could use this newfound status to aid in my search. It was so exciting, and I felt my heart thrill at the thought.

I turned to Cali, who was watching me closely. “Where is everyone?”

“Here,” she said.

“Everyone?”

She nodded. “Do you want to see them?”

“Yes!”

She led me out of the bedroom and into a sitting room, where Greyson, Xavier, Adair, Tabitha, Rishika, and Marius were sitting around a fireplace. They had been speaking quietly, but they stopped when I walked in.

They all looked up at me, and I felt Rishika’s gaze on me in particular. It felt a little awkward, but given how upset Rishika had been about the idea of leaving me behind—now that her old memories were starting to come back—I supposed I would take a little awkward.

“Artemis, how are you?” Tabitha asked.

“Fine,” I said, smiling at her. “I’m fine. It was just a little shock.”

Adair nodded. “The ending of a Fae promise will do that.”

“Exactly.” I looked around. The group looked relaxed, but they hadn’t settled in. They were clearly ready to go, and the realization that they would soon be leaving made my heart contract.

I looked over at Rishika again. There was so much I still wanted to say to her. I stepped toward her, but before I could say her name, I heard someone calling mine—

“Lady Artemis?”

I turned to see a small Fae servant standing in the doorway to the parlor. She bobbed a small curtsey.

“Yes?” I asked.

“If you please, you are requested in your rooms,” she said.

I sighed but nodded and followed her back the way I’d come.

Back in my room, a door opened, and when Kastian stepped inside, I realized that our rooms adjoined each other.

“Artemis. I know you were with your friends—apologies for calling your back,” he started, though it was clear he didn’t mean it. “But I wanted to know what your plans are.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What plans? Plans for what?”

He leaned against the stone fireplace. “We both need to set up and maintain the peace. It’s no longer two separate governments, is it? We need to create a council of Light and Dark Fae. And you and I will, of course, be the heads.”

I frowned at him. I didn’t love the sound of that. “The heads of the council? I thought we’d just sort of delegate that kind of stuff.”

Kastian laughed at first, but when he saw I wasn’t laughing with him, the smile slid off his face. “Oh, you’re not joking, are you? You really didn’t realize it?”  
 “What do you mean?” I asked, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. “Realize what?”

He gave me a long look, his gaze boring into me. “Artemis, we actually have to govern our people.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what do *you* know about governing anyone? I can’t imagine there’s a lot of handing out drinks to partygoers, which is what you seem to be best at.”

He pulled himself up, looking offended. “Well, unlike *some* people, *I* knew what I was signing up for when I agreed to this marriage. *I* am deeper than you might think, Artemis.”

I scoffed at this. “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

He ignored this dig. “I will put together a list of potential names from the Dark Fae who could sit on the new council. People I trust. I’m sure Hera will be able to provide a list of names from the Light Fae.”

I nodded. I felt a little numb, but he had some ideas at least. And I was sort of pleasantly surprised at how decent he was being.

But then he ruined it.

“And now I’ll leave you alone. I imagine you would like some moments to yourself so you can spend more time with that outlaw Fae you saw last night,” he said with a smirk as he headed toward the door.

Outraged, I grabbed the closest thing I could find—a pillow, disappointingly—and hurled it at his retreating back. Unfortunately, he was already back in his room, so it just hit the closed door before it fell to the floor.

Annoyed, I dropped into a chair with a huff.

The thing was, Kastian wasn’t exactly wrong. I had been with Marius the night before—at least for a little while. I liked kissing him, which really wasn’t such a big deal. And Marius had been there for me lately. More than he needed to be. When I really thought about it, all of this had been possible *because* of Marius. He had brought Cali into the Fae world. Without him, I would still be stuck under Celeste’s thumb.

I chewed the inside of my cheek as I considered this, weighing my thoughts. If this was how I was thinking and feeling about Marius, then what did that mean for me and Rishika?

Before I could venture any further down that very thorny path, I was interrupted by a knock at my door. When I opened it, I found a guard waiting for me.

“Yes?” I asked.

He nodded. “Your grandmother has a message for you,” he said.

“What is it?”

“She says that it’s time for the wolves to go home.”

**Episode 5448**

Greyson, Xavier, Rishika, Tabitha, and I were standing outside the Wrenthorn palace when Hera came and pulled me aside.

“I hope you understand why we’re not preparing rooms for you and why you need to get back to the human world as soon as possible,” Hera remarked.

I shrugged. “I assume it’s because we’re not needed for whatever’s coming next. I get it.”

As soon as Artemis took my place in marrying Kastian, I’d been effectively pushed out of all things Fae politics. I wasn’t needed anymore. But that didn’t bother me in the least. While I was still adjusting to the idea of my sister being married, I was also excited to get back to my life—though I couldn’t stop thinking about how much my sister’s life had changed in an instant.

“Not only that, but having outsiders here might make any further peace talks more complicated than they have to be. But I don’t want you to leave without talking some things through, first.” Hera, somewhat ironically, said, “I know we haven’t had the smoothest relationship since you got here, but I want you to know that I’m proud of you.”

“Of everything I might have expected to hear from you today, you being proud of me wasn’t one of them.”

“But it’s true,” Hera insisted. “I’m proud of what you were willing to do and what you were willing to sacrifice for a world that you don’t really know all that well. It speaks to how strong you are and how strong the Wrenthorn blood runs inside of you. I’m proud of the person you’re becoming, Caliana. I needed you to know that.”

I blushed. “I just did what anyone would do.”

*Or, apparently, what only Artemis was willing to do. We’re both brave and selfless when it comes to doing whatever is necessary to protect the Fae.*

Hera shook her head. “Caliana, you know that’s not true. You have a lot of Orla inside you. I can see your mother’s influence all over you.” Hera paused. “I wonder if you might be willing to put in a good word for me when you see Orla again… I miss my daughter. I want things to be good between us again.”

“Of course, I will.”

I wanted my grandmother and my mother to have a strong relationship and mend anything that remained broken between them, and if I could be part of making that happen, I would do it. Like Hera had said, things didn’t start off great between us when I first arrived, but now I understood that my grandmother had to do whatever she could to secure the longevity and security of the Fae kingdom. There was no way I could hold a grudge against her for that, and I didn’t think my mother would, either.

Hera walked me back over to rejoin the others. To my surprise, she addressed Xavier and Greyson next.

“Thank you for keeping Cali safe. You’ve protected the Wrenthorn line, and for as long as that continues, you’re always welcome in our family’s home.”

Hera gave them a small bow, and Xavier and Greyson exchanged a surprised look before bowing back. I never thought I’d see the day when the three of them would reach a truce of sorts.

We were interrupted by Artemis and Adair coming to join us. A few feet behind them, I was surprised to see Marius walking around in the open, un-glamoured.

Marius grinned at me. “Your beautiful grandmother told me that I’ll be safe here for the time being, and I’m trusting her to keep her word. Once I leave, of course, it’ll be another story, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Hera snorted at that, but otherwise ignored him.

Together, our small party made the quick walk back to the portal rock. Tabitha placed a hand on my arm. “I want you to know that I’m not going back with the rest of you.”

I paused, shocked. “What? What do you mean?”

Tabitha nodded in Adair’s direction. “I’m staying with Adair. He’s going to need me by his side for this new chapter.”

“Of course,” I said quickly. There was no way Tabitha was going to leave Adair here in the Fae world, but I was still sad to know she wasn’t coming back with us. “But are you sure you’ll be okay? You’re more of a fish out of water here than I am.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be with Adair,” Tabitha said. “You know him—he’ll protect me with his life. And besides, now that the Dark and Light Fae are on better terms, this might not be such a bad place to put down roots—at least for a while.”

Greyson and Xavier were standing near the rock, clearly antsy to get the hell out of the Fae world. I couldn’t blame them. Things might have ended up okay, but to say that it had been a stressful stay was an understatement. I was proud of them for giving me the space to figure everything out…even if I’d had to fight their uncertainty the whole way. None of this had been easy on them.

Rishika was standing a few feet away. She looked particularly sad, but it made sense. She was leaving Artemis behind again. She and I were probably feeling a similar sense of loss.

I stepped aside with my sister and took both her hands in mine. “I don’t know if I can just leave you here, Artemis—to be what? A part of the Fae world forever? What about your life in the human world? Are you really ready to say goodbye to all of that?”

When Artemis ran off back here to the Fae world, I always knew—or at least hoped—that she would come back to the pack house as soon as she found what she was looking for. But now she’d made it so that her life was intertwined with the Fae world in ways I never could have predicted.

Artemis sighed. “I know, it’s a lot. But it’s not like you can’t visit, or like I can’t, or like we can’t send messages whenever we need to. But I need to be here now more than ever. I still haven’t found Kadmos, and that’s why I came here in the first place. I must see that through. Now I have power—respect—and that’s going to help me get to Kadmos fast—much faster than if I was in the human world.”

I looked away, holding back tears. “What do you want me to tell Mom?”

My mother was going to be heartbroken when she learned that I’d left Artemis behind here. I already felt guilty about it, even though there wasn’t anything I could really do to change it.

It was Artemis’s turn to look away. I could tell this was hard for her even though she was trying her best to pretend it wasn’t a big deal. “I wonder if we really need to tell Mom anything at all.”

“What? Of course we have to tell her what’s happened here! We can’t keep something like this from her! You got *married*, Artemis! That’s a big deal. And if this is such a good plan, why don’t you want our mother to know about it?”

Artemis scowled at me. “It’s not because the plan is bad, it’s because she’ll probably overreact like you always do and try to come here and do something on her own. I need her to trust me, and maybe that’ll be easier if she doesn’t know all the details.” Artemis sighed. “But you’re right. She deserves to know. Just try to deliver the news with a positive spin if you can?”

I couldn’t promise her that. The thought of leaving Artemis behind was making me want to do something, anything, to change this outcome, so I could only imagine what my mother was going to do when I told her what happened here.

The tears were falling now. “I just don’t want to say goodbye. It doesn’t feel right. I feel like I just got you, Artemis, this sister I’ve wanted my whole life. What if I just stay—”

Artemis put up a hand, stopping me. “You can’t stay here, Cali. Even if you say it’s for one day, it’ll never be just for one day. You know that, and I know that. There will always be a reason you can find to stick around, and I can’t have that.” She sighed. “Things will calm down here soon, and then I’ll be back. Until then, I swear to send a message a week.”

I sniffed but nodded. What else could I do? This was happening whether I wanted it to or not. “You better stick to that. If you miss even one week, I’ll be right back here.”

Artemis laughed. “I believe that.” Then she gave me a gentle push in Xavier and Greyson’s direction. “Now go. It’s time. You need to leave.”

I stepped up to the rock and then turned back to look at my sister. Could I really do this? Could I really leave Artemis—the only sister I had—behind?

**Episode 5449**

“Go!” Artemis shouted at me.

She obviously could see me hesitating, and she wasn’t about to let me try to change her mind. She probably saw on my face how tempted I was to try—ready and willing to come up with any excuse as to why she needed me by her side while she adjusted to her new role in the Fae world.

“I’ll be okay, Cali, but you need to get back to your life. You’ve been gone long enough!” she pressed.

“Okay, okay, I’m going. Don’t forget the messages!” I called out to her. If we stayed in contact like she promised, I supposed it wouldn’t be all that bad being away from each other—at least temporarily. I was trying hard not to feel like I’d failed somehow. We’d come here to bring Artemis back to the human world with us, and that wasn’t what was happening. But at least she was here on her own terms.

“I already said I would, didn’t I?” Artemis snapped. “And don’t say goodbye, because that’s not what this is.”

I could hear the emotion in her voice, and so I didn’t turn around to answer, deciding instead just to rip the Band-Aid off and get back home where we belonged. Greyson was on one side of me, Xavier on the other. It was finally time.

“Are you ready?” Xavier asked me.

I nodded, too choked up and overwhelmed to speak.

“You go first. We’ll be right behind you,” Greyson said.

“Don’t forget, don’t go through together. Make sure it’s one at a time, okay? This portal can cause weird things to happen, and I don’t want you two attacking each other again,” I said.

I didn’t want to kick off our return to the human world with Greyson and Xavier suffering some negative effect of the portal. I wanted to relax when we got home. I’d had enough excitement in the Fae world to last me a year.

“And you make sure you hold onto who you are,” Greyson warned. “Just focus on keeping your memories straight. We’re right behind you, and we’ll be with you on the other side in no time.”

I nodded again, and then took a deep breath and stepped into the portal. My vision immediately went fuzzy, and a strange feeling overtook me. I tried to keep thinking about who I was, holding tight to my identity and that of Xavier and Greyson, trying to keep their relationship straight in my head. It was more difficult than I expected, and I fought hard to maintain total clarity in my mind as I felt the pull of shifting from one world to another.

It took me a few moments before I’d finally made it through the portal and stumbled out of Haystack Rock, into the familiarity of the human world. I was standing on the shore, water rushing around my feet. For a split second my mind went completely blank, and I panicked.

*Where am I?* Who *am I?*

I looked around, disoriented, wondering for a split second why my feet were wet until I reminded myself of where I’d crossed back over. And then it all came rushing back. I let out a relieved sigh. I seemed to be okay. I scurried out of reach of the waves and waited.

A moment later, both Xavier and Greyson stumbled out of the rock together and tumbled into the water. They stood up and immediately checked themselves over as if to reassure themselves that they’d come back in one piece. From where I was standing, they certainly looked like themselves, but I couldn’t be sure.

“What happened?” I asked them. “Why did you come through together? Do you feel…aggressive?”

The last time we passed through the portal at Haystack Rock, Xavier and Greyson began fighting as soon as they were out of the portal. I didn’t want that to happen again. It wasn’t like the stay in the Fae world had magically resolved all the issues they had with each other, so if there were any problems caused by the crossover, I could easily see a fight breaking out.

I was never one to expect Xavier and Greyson to get along—they were born fighting each other tooth and nail, and the complicated relationship with me had only given more fuel to their inability to get along. But I saw nothing of the way they went at each other when there were other forces at play driving them to treat each other with even more hostility than normal.

Greyson and Xavier stepped apart, eyeing each other in the moonlit darkness.

“I think I’m fine,” Greyson said. “I don’t feel any more irritated with Xavier than usual,” he added. “And that’s a win in my book.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “I feel the same. We were coming through separately at first, but then we thought we heard you cry out for help, and then we both just rushed in together.” Xavier shook his head. “Did something happen to you as you passed through? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I don’t know what you thought you heard, but I didn’t cry out…at least I don’t think I did. I felt a little weird right after I stepped back into the human world, but that’s not that out of the ordinary. And I remember everything, thankfully.”

Greyson winced. “I do have a bit of a headache, though, right behind my eyes.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and winced. “It wasn’t there when I first came through, but it’s certainly here now. Wow. It’s kind of intense.”

“My head isn’t hurting, but I do feel a little weird. Like a little nauseous, maybe?” Xavier said. “Maybe really nauseous. Did this happen last time?”

“I’m not sure… I can’t remember. But it’s probably just the aftereffects of the portal magic,” Greyson said. “It’ll probably fade with time. No big deal. We’ve been through all this before. We just need to stay vigilant, make sure that if anything weird happens from here on out we share it with each other in case it’s more than a normal reaction from crossing through worlds.”

Xavier turned away from us to face the rock.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“Where’s Rishika? She was right behind us. She should have been through already,” he said. “It only took us a minute to pass through, right?”

“Right,” Greyson said.

I felt a twinge of guilt. I’d been so concerned about getting through unscathed and about my mates not getting turned around by passing through the portal that I’d forgotten all about Rishika. I felt a twist of worry in my stomach. I could only hope that she was lingering in the Fae world and that nothing had happened to her as she crossed over.

Greyson was shaking his head. “I have a feeling that Rishika isn’t coming.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“Call it a hunch.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said to him. “And I would hate for Rishika to come through and be alone, especially with all her memory issues. Maybe we should wait? Just in case she *is* coming and just got tied up saying goodbye to Artemis or something?”

We waited a few minutes, but Rishika still didn’t come through.

“I think my hunch was right,” Greyson said. “Are you ready to head home?”

I tried not to look at Xavier, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn away. I understood their desire to get moving. I was looking forward to being in my own bed tonight, that was for sure.

“I’ve got to get back to the Samaras, too. I’ve been gone long enough.” He tore his eyes away from the rock, finally as convinced as Greyson, obviously, that Rishika wasn’t coming. “We’ll talk again soon,” he said to me. “I promise.”

My heart stuttered in my chest at the suggestion in his words. That would give me some time to sort through my own thoughts and emotions now that we were home again. In the Fae world, it had been easy to push it all off, to tell him that we would discuss it when things calmed down. But now that we were back, that time would come sooner than later.

Even now I was slipping into wondering, hoping, ideas popping up in my mind about how he and I could get back to how we used to be after all this time. So many things had changed. I’d changed, he’d changed. My relationship with Greyson had only grown stronger, and I didn’t want to lose any ground there, and I knew he would agree. But I wasn’t about to figure out any of that tonight. I was exhausted, so I would save all that rumination for another time.

I nodded at Xavier and told Greyson, “I’m ready. Let’s go home.”

Both Greyson and Xavier shifted, and I gasped. “What in the world? What happened?”

I stumbled back in confusion. Greyson had shifted into a *black* wolf, and where Xavier had been a moment ago, there now stood a *grey* wolf.